JUST PAST THE TRESTLE

by

GENTRY CHANCE TURNER

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A THESIS

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The fall of the Old South is the backdrop for this chronicle of one family’s
descent and resurrection throughout the violent upheaval of the twenty-first century.
Several generations of Turner men are examined in this tale of power, hatred and the
collateral damage of arrested development. The following chapters give a truncated
vision of a lifetime of competing forces and the pain of escaping from “loved” ones.
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Dixie

Faceless men in black metal hoods with cyclopean eye slits poured liquid metal from giant caldrons. Two thousand pound urns suspended from the ceiling by cranes carried the molten cargo across the factory floor. Bronze melts at 950 degrees Celsius, which is roughly 2100 degrees Fahrenheit. Add to that figure the broiling fury of Oneonta, Alabama in August then enclose the damn thing in corrugated metal sheets. Whatever the final tally, hell can’t be far behind. Working conditions in the ‘plant’ at the Dixie Bronze Company, Inc. weren’t for the feint hearted. Out of the magma, everything from ashtrays to anchors emerged in shimmering casts. Dixie is the reason Sunday school never scared me. The accounts of hell I heard there were remarkably similar to the plant. I assumed the preacher’s wife went by Dixie looking for source material.

The floor supervisor, my dad, my grandfather or Clyde, always glared downward from the observation platform. It didn’t matter which one of them it was, the safety goggles and clipboards kept the faceless men moving. Sparks were a constant. I never understood why the place didn’t catch fire.

A safety violation at Dixie meant your job and probably someone’s limb. I remember operating the cranes at age seven or eight. The system was engaged by giant paddles with three colored buttons on them. They looked like small traffic lights dangling from a long rubber cord, forward, back and stop were the only commands. The controls wouldn’t allow you to change directions without stopping. The inertia of the caldrons was too great.
The ‘front office’ was considerably cooler but no more comfortable. It also had a barnish construction, like the newspaper office in Superman comics. There were no cubicles or partitions. All the desks were in tight, straight rows, and fifty people talked on the phone at once. The typewriters clicked away like crickets until they ‘BINGed’ at the end of each row. Front office employees got a half or a fourth of a secretary, which was shared with your desk mates, unless you were Al. Founder, President and CEO, Al Turner ran Dixie like a naval base.

His office also resembled the Daily Planet, all glass so he could survey the office like he did the plant. There was no roof, so any serious commotion would be heard, but the chit-chat was muted. His desk was either chaos or pristine depending on the time of day. The dark brown wood under the glass top was impressive until about 9:30. By then, four hours of paperwork amassed until the desk was subsumed. Every night his secretary, Claudia, would re-file the forms and distribute the work orders. The only things left on the desk at sundown were the cheap ass name plate I gave him, a desk pad and some business cards embossed with the logo:

*Introducing the Son of a Bitch from the Home Office*

The next morning started all over. He came in at 5:30, locked his pistol in his desk and signed the checks Claudia left for him. Al was tough, but had an immeasurable sense of responsibility to his employees. They were like his children, although many did not care for being treated as such. Every once in a while someone got squirrely about something, a lost finger, a lost job or a lost wife. After said squirrelliness, the perpetrator was invited to a ‘prayer meeting’ with Al. One of two things followed a prayer meeting, a severance check or an attitude adjustment. You got with the program or got out. No
yelling or carrying on. He didn’t even press charges on the knucklehead who tried to shoot up the place. He took his gun, but he didn’t call the law. The law was already there.

Al amused himself redesigning electrode heads out of bronze for greater conductivity and longevity. He had a pile of patents and met two or three times a year with a guy they called ‘the German.’ The German was some sort of metallurgic guru. He looked like an alchemist from one of my comic books. Dressed in a grey suit with a Peter Sellers laugh, he wore metal rimmed glasses which were more like two monocles than glasses. The bridge of the lens would disappear when he laughed. They enjoyed each other more than most enemy combatants. These men were less than thirty years removed from mortal combat. It didn’t matter to them. What mattered was the product.

To Al, and men of his age, second place was losing, it was kissing your sister, no good came from it. He had to be the best, so he largely ignored politics at work. Despite incredible personal animosity, he hired minorities when others didn’t. They couldn’t come up front without permission, but they got paid every Friday same as my cousins.

Dixie was incestuous. Everyone was someone’s cousin or husband or a friend of Clyde’s. Clyde was one these people I was never sure about. With his greased hair and sharp sideburns, he looked like a sideline protestor on the March to Selma. Thick black glasses sat on his thin nose, and he sucked his teeth when he talked, but he knew his metal. He came in at the beginning of Dixie and never seemed too worried about Al. Either he had something on him, or they were related. I don’t know if Clyde was my great uncle or just someone who worked at Dixie. I do remember standing outside Ollie’s Barbecue watching him clean his fingernails with a knife. I thought that was cool
and tried it at home. My mother gently instructed me on ‘trash,’ and I discontinued the practice as swiftly as her hand hit my butt.

We went to Ollie’s quite a bit. At least once a month Dixie had administrative meetings there. Oneonta is a good hour from downtown Birmingham, but the meetings were held there anyway. We could say the Bar-B-Q drew us there, but that was a lie.

Ollie’s was the last segregated restaurant in the United States. In 1964, the acting Attorney General, Katzenbach, sued the McClungs, who owned Ollie’s, under the brand new Civil Rights Act of 1964. The federal government was of the position that Ollie’s could no longer discriminate against colored people. The McClungs were of the opinion they could. Since the McClungs did business exclusively in Alabama and bought all their supplies locally, then they believed the federal government lacked the authority to regulate them. According to the United States Constitution, the McClungs were right, and the appeals courts said so. Without touching the ‘stream’ of interstate commerce they did not trigger the federal regulatory authority, and the ‘Ollie’s question’ was a local issue subject only to local authority, i.e. the Alabama Supreme Court. Well, not to be outsmarted by a bunch of pork slingers, the U.S. Supreme Court jumped into the fray. They abandoned years of legal precedent and created a standard based on the new statute. The final ruling stated that, although the McClungs never engaged the stream of interstate commerce, the mere presence of a segregated restaurant had an effect of inhibiting commerce and, according to Justice Clark, a “direct and highly restrictive effect upon interstate travel by Negroes.”

The McClungs cried ‘Uncle,’ and nothing changed for twenty years. It was 1985 before I saw a black patron in Ollie’s. The staff remained 99% black (the cashier was
white), and the clientele remained 100% lily. Best staff in the city. The waitresses could cover two eight tops without a pad or pen. I wasn’t totally aware of the history at the time, but I wasn’t entirely innocent either. I knew what everyone at my table thought of blacks, and I did notice the lack of color, but I didn’t know the genesis of Ollie’s popularity. It explained quite a bit. The food was never that good. I usually got the burger. Think what you will about us, about me. I miss it. I miss the days when someone else was in charge. Ollie’s sauce makes me feel good. It reminds me of before the wall fell.

Ollie’s witnessed a lot of my family’s dirty laundry. I sat there while Sandy Veters, a Dixie secretary whose son played football for my dad, told my mom about contracting breast cancer. Sandy, pouring the entire contents of a giant glass flip-top sugar bottle into her coffee, telling her best friend about a possible mastectomy while I colored on a placemat. She sat there crying. Her tears streaked through the thick foundation on her cheeks. My mom, Karen, who would help that bitch through every treatment, every exercise, even babysitting her boys and cooking for her husband, sat listening to her friend cry. Sandy sat there crying and never once mentioned she was fucking my dad.

Dixie is gone now, replaced by a custom van shop and a Sheriff’s department substation. In the same industrial park where Al met his last girlfriend, the one that pushed my grandmother over the edge, and the same place where my mother was betrayed, the red clay still sticks to your shoes.
I was just ten the first time I saw a murder weapon. I don’t know with absolute certainty the weapon was involved in a murder, although it seemed likely, but the weapon had only one purpose. It was a folding knife; the blade was about as long as my hand, clean and shiny from recent honing, emitting a vaguely automotive smell, like industrial cleaner mixed with sandalwood. The smooth handle was white ivory, inlaid with three embossed red K’s. Burnt orange flames lapped off the letters. Imperial White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights Templar, etc. etc. etc. A ceremonial piece not meant for outsiders, and I understood the implication of “outsider.” Was I now an insider?

“Can I touch it?”

“Don’t ever tell.”

“Yes sir.”

It was hot in my hand as I flicked my thumb over the blade.

“Careful, son. You could shave with that one.”

I folded the flat blade back into itself and held it up to him. He rubbed the knife down with his white handkerchief. His solemn glare eased into a smile and he winked at me.

“Grab your coat, hot shot. Let’s get over to the plant and make sure somebody’s working.”

That’s the way it goes with secrets. You don’t ask to hear them. You’re just told, and you decide what to do with them. So I stood there in my grandfather’s bedroom as he returned the knife to his sock drawer. I didn’t say or do anything, except follow him
out of the room. I’d like to say I had some sort of moral dilemma at this point, but that wouldn’t be honest. I just accepted it. I wondered what that meant for my teacher, Miss Stanberry, a young black woman who was bright and caring and very nice to me, but I’m sure I didn’t love my Papaw any less. I put the information on file and closed the drawer.

I don’t know what it says about me that everyone tells me their secrets, but it wasn’t an accident when I became a defense attorney. I’m as tight lipped as a submarine. No one ever asked me if I would be offended before they told an ethnic joke. Quite the contrary, my presence alone seems to make people say things they wouldn’t tell their in-laws. That afternoon in 1981, my Papaw showed me a knife. I never asked, he just opened the drawer and gave me a secret. Somehow he knew. He knew I wouldn’t say shit, to anyone. Even though he’s been dead for more than a decade, it’s still a betrayal, and I’m likely to lose what little family I have left because of it, but I can’t carry it inside forever. Hate festers.

After my father passed on in ’77, I looked to my Papaw and my brother for guidance. This was often problematic, since those opinions were often at odds. I wasn’t a big, tough, self-reliant killer, nor was I a creative type who understood art house movies and science fiction, but I could listen and I could learn. Learning was my sweet spot. When I saw Papaw, he always gave me a lecture. He explained capital gain taxes and the John Birch Society, he taught me to hunt squirrel (because there’s always squirrel) and he taught me to, “work hard in school, because you’ll never get ahead without it.” Generally, it was just practical advice in marginally criminal activity.

“Never run with a half-full keg. If it’s not full, leave it.”

I asked him, “Wouldn’t you take a loss on the product?”
“It’s better than getting caught. The sloshing whiskey will knock you off your feet, and you’ll get caught.”

Whatever it was, I took it as gospel. I’ve never known anyone who commanded simultaneous fear and respect from everyone. Cautiously was how people approached him. I would sometimes be in the office on Fridays when his foremen came in to report.

“There’s no way we can finish the molds by Monday, Mr. Turner,” the poor bastard said while he fidgeted under his greasy hard hat. Al didn’t say anything. He just kept looking at him.

“Unless me and Michael-Earl come in on Saturday and finish up,” the man exhaled.

“Claudia. Draw out overtime slips for Robert and Michael-Earl and date them for tomorrow.” He turned and gave me a wink which said ‘while we’re at the football game.’

“I’m typing them up right now, Mr. Turner,” Claudia said through her ever-present Benson and Hedges 100. More smoke poured out of that woman than the Tarrant coke plant.

Al was the matinee cowboy. He rode a white horse named Comanche, and carried his pistol outside his pants. He was lawfully deputized and deeply involved in criminal enterprise. There are still caches of whiskey buried off of HWY-75 near his Palmerdale house.

Palmerdale is a funny little town in northern Jefferson County, Alabama where my mamaw, his ex-wife Ardell, still lives. The thing about Palmerdale, for those who aren’t from around here, is the genesis of the name. There was an area formerly known
as Palmer, located about twenty-five miles north of Birmingham, where rolling green fields in the shadow of Pine Mountain house a generous supply of white tail deer, and streams full of Crappie carve trails through the hickory nuts. The crickets are often louder than the evening television sets. Back in the thirties, this booming metropolis was largely divided into two areas, east and west. This was the result of the New Deal, FDR’s federal aid program no one in Alabama likes to acknowledge we benefitted from. The pointy-heads in Washington created the “Palmerdale Homestead” project, through which urban poor were relocated to farm government subsidized land. Relocated to Palmer. Pre-New Deal residents obviously did not want to be lumped in with their unsuccessful urban counterparts, so a rift developed between the townspeople.

When the State came in and bisected the town with the Jefferson and Blount County line, the rift became a valley. Both areas wanted to be the City of Palmer, or more specifically, the Township of Palmer, but neither would acquiesce. Both areas built and sanctioned town halls. Both declared their respective town halls valid to the exclusion of all others. The State of Alabama, in its infinite wisdom, not wanting to map two adjacent towns named Palmer in two adjacent counties, and desiring to preempt any major traffic flare-ups in the newly formed mega-towns of Palmer, issued an edict from the Governor’s mansion. *There shall only be one town of Palmer.* Only which shall survive?

The elders of the town(s) gathered for a conference (I can only imagine a hillbilly Camp David) to end the controversy. The braintrust devised a mutually satisfactory solution. No one will be Palmer. There will be two towns (because, really, who can live amongst those eastern Palmerites) with two distinct names. One shall be Palmerdale and
the other shall be Remlap, which, of course, is Palmer spelled backwards. As of the time of this publication, neither town has incorporated, and townsfolk of both places still sit on their porches at two o’clock in the afternoon, on their same U.S. issued plot of forty acres growing hay behind them, lamenting the welfare state America has become.

Al would have stayed there until his dying day if Ardell hadn’t thrown him out with a little help from S.W.A.T. Palmerdale suited my Papaw well. He was like the town in many ways, stubborn, mean and full of pleasant company. Papaw, or “Al” as his friends called him, was a fun person, but he and the town had a tacit agreement to stagnate and make no move toward modernity under any circumstances. ‘Take me as I am,’ I imagined him saying. ‘I’ll die before I change or make apologies for who I am.’ He meant it.

My Papaw was a relic, a hold-over from the previous century. He wore neckties on short sleeved shirts, safety glasses and a hard hat. When he wasn’t at work, he was over-alls and ‘Dickies,’ muddy boots and spurs. He loved horses and bottles in equal measures. Think of him what you will, but reserve your judgment until the end of the story.

Al was a great man, but, like all of us, Al had his weakness. He enjoyed the company of women who were not his wife, and his personal choices cost him his land, most of his family and all his money. He died penniless and alone on his kitchen floor in Blountsville. I helped the coroner pick him up from the grimy linoleum. Dead weight was a term I didn’t fully understand until I lifted a corpse. I was like a Chinese finger trap. I couldn’t grasp it, literally. My fingers didn’t spread out far enough to exert any leverage, and I seemed to only pick up part of a limb or a handful of stomach. That’s
why I had to help in the first place. Al was near three hundred pounds at the end. It took three grown men to lift him. Well, two grown men and me.

On the way to his funeral in 2003, which not coincidentally occurred on Robert E. Lee Day, a State holiday which not coincidentally falls on the same Monday as Martin Luther King Day, I saw the locals dressed in their Confederate uniforms on the Blount County Courthouse steps. They even fired cannon. I heard it from the funeral parlor.
Okra tastes best right out of the pan. Steaming hot and dripping with Crisco, my Mamaw’s okra was as good as anything I’ve ever had. She never let us eat from the pan, so we played a dangerous game of sneak thief while dodging her wooden spoon. Sometimes you made it, sometimes not, but worth it either way. Just off the tiny kitchen, where my grandmother, Ardell, made squash casserole and corn sticks was the dinette set where my Papaw taught me to deal stud poker. The table hasn’t moved since ‘93, because nothing ever changed in that house. I haven’t been inside since then, but I imagine Al’s empty recliner waits for him in the living room. It probably gets scolded.

But that was Mamaw. She looked like a snapshot from the nineteen forties. Her archaic glasses and permanent hair gave her the look of the movie waitress who said, “We don’t serve darkies here.” Thin from a life of marginal utility, she was conventionally attractive by Alabama standards. Her slender face and tight figure cut quite a silhouette at the Shiner’s parade. Pretty, but she held a grudge longer than most people live. I guess that’s what her Jones blood brings to my table. That, and an ability to stick in the knife.

Mamaw was the best cook I ever knew. Her mastery of the cast iron skillet was unparalleled. You’d think her fried pies came down the mountain on stone plates. Dinner was the thing in Palmerdale, and everyone respected it. It was the epicenter of the family unit, and she held complete control. No one other than her baby, my uncle Ike, could extract food from the kitchen/vault. Sometimes I snuck a graham cracker out of the pantry under the pretense of throwing out “burn trash.” She kept a trash bin in the pantry to store any burnable refuse, basically a compost heap in a paper sack.
“There’s no sense in paying someone to haul it away.”

Why pay someone when you have grandchildren to haul rotting garbage to a flaming pit?

Children did double work on Cyndell Drive. I chopped wood with the men and prepped vegetables with the women. I must have snapped a hundred thousand beans. Mamaw worked too. She wasn’t slacking or dishing off her chores. It was division of labor.

She ran the checkbook, the house and the children with equal rigidity. When the Tom cat scratched my ears, she broke off an aloe leaf, rubbed salve on me, wiped my tears and sent me outside to feed the cat. She rode horses and cut cane poles better than I could. When we came in from the woods, she started the “tick check.” I held my head over the sink while she lit a match and blew it out. If a tick was detected, which was always, the match head was applied to the intruder, and the tick “jumped off.”

“Oww!”

“Hold still. I’m helping you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sometimes, during a break in the work cycle, she let me play with the bag of toys. The sole bag of children’s frivolity which Mamaw believed adequate for the playtime needs of all children for all time. The brown grocery sack held a couple of plastic horses and some Cavalry men, Cavalry men with General Custer hats and gloves, not “army men” with machine guns and jeeps. The horses were an odd choice considering there were actual horses out in the pasture, but I wasn’t the type to question my elders.
I loved my Mamaw. I thought she was normal. I brought her dandelions from the yard, and she pushed me on the rusted fifty-year-old swing set until I needed a tetanus shot. She pulled clothes off the line while I fed grass to the horses. She had a dryer. I saw it right beside the washer, but I never heard it. The clothes are line dried out there, so I guess she got the dryer for looks.

“How’s your new school, Chance?” She asked without looking up from washing the lunch dishes.

“I don’t like it as much as Franklin. All my friends were there.”

“How many nigger children are in your class?”

“I don’t know, some.”

“What about your teacher?”

“She’s black too.”

“Hmm. You know if you lived out here, I’d take you to Franklin.”

“Really, that would be great. I’ve had about enough changes lately.”

“Ask your mother,” she said causally.

My mother dropped her spatula when I mentioned it.

“She said what?”

“She said I could go back to Franklin if I stayed out there.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“But what about my friends?”

“Chance, you already have a bunch of new friends. I’m sorry we had to move, but you’re with us, always.”

“But”
“No. Now please don’t mention it again. And tell your Mamaw to ask me next time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I didn’t understand why Mom’s face tightened, because I was oblivious to my grandmother’s hostility. My mother never said an unkind word about her until I was in college, but Ardell was less restrained. I was too young to understand what was happened in real time, but some of the events became legend.

My parents married in 1966, and Ardell gave them a piano. My mother loved that white piano. It gleamed on top of the red shag carpet. I stared at the gold pedals for hours, listening from underneath while everyone else was off at school or work. That was my daycare. About a month after my father died in 1977, our doorbell rang. A couple of men in coveralls stood sheepishly on our front porch.

“Ma’am, we’re here for the piano. We got a call from a Mrs. Turner, who said she would be consigning the piano at our store. Are you Mrs. Turner?”

“I am, but it must have been my mother-in-law who called you. It’s hers.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Ma’am, if you’d like to purchase this piano, I’m sure you could get financed at the store.”

My single mother with no job, no degree and no foreseeable way to support two young children told the men to come on in.

She wiped her eye and said, “No, y’all go ahead and take it. I don’t want it. I’ve got some lemonade in the kitchen if you men get thirsty.”

“Don’t let them take it, Mommy,” I whined.

“It’s o.k. honey, let’s get you some lunch,” she said and led me to the kitchen.
I ate Beanie-Weenies while the piano movers cussed the piano up the stairs.

Ardell was all business. She didn’t drink, she didn’t smoke and she didn’t dance. I never saw her play a record or a game. No fun of any kind. She ate garden vegetables and got plenty of exercise. She was invincible, and the thing she was most proud of was her superiority. She hated everybody. I’d say she was prejudiced, and I’d be right, but prejudiced didn’t cover it. Ardell didn’t even like us.
My dad, Glenn Edward Turner was everything my Papaw wanted him to be, a three-year varsity starter, grades good enough for college, a crew cut and the right attitude. Dad was a marksman, horseman and a hundred and fifty-five pound, five foot nine inch defensive tackle. He had everything in front of him. After a couple years of debauchery at The University of Missouri School of Mines, Dad returned to Alabama. He enrolled at the University of Alabama (*The University*), where my mom attended, and continued his engineering “studies” closer to home. 1967 brought the summer of love to San Francisco, but in Alabama the summer just brought the heat. The war in Vietnam weighed on the minds of young people in America, and Dad was no exception. His 1A status loomed large. The solution was beautiful in its simplicity. He asked my Mom, Karen, to marry him and immediately give up birth control. Their first child, Glenn, Jr. moved him to 3A and all but removed the spectre of military service. At least that’s how I heard the story.

I know my dad mostly through stories. I have stories and a few memories. What’s left is a jigsaw puzzle no one wants to reassemble but me. My maternal relations assumed I had no memory of my dad. Everyone was willing to believe I experienced no permanent trauma and was perfectly happy to move on. And that’s how it was treated.

“You’ll make friends at your new school.”

“I’m getting married.”

By 1978, I was a resident of Avondale, with a new parental unit and a new home that resembled the Munster’s place. The part no one, except my brother, Skip, understood was that in Palmerdale, Dad didn’t die so much as he transcended. All of his
sins were washed, as they say on Sunday. The pictures in claustrophobic hallway of the Palmerdale house sparked memories every time I walked to the bathroom. There’s one picture of him and his hunting dog, “nigger,” sitting on the tailgate of a pick-up, Dad has a rifle slung on his shoulder. He haunted that northern Jefferson County mausoleum. He was everything to them. The way they described him you’d think he walked on water. He didn’t.

Al’s favorite story about Dad was an old one. He must have told that story five hundred times. When Al moved them to the Palmerdale house back in the forties, the railroad had an easement on the place. Freight trains carried cargo through the property to various points within the state. Often enough, the train brought transients. You know, hobos. Well, this one black hobo had the misfortune to get off the train early. He was likely put off the train and was seeking civilization beyond the tracks, naturally taking him through Al’s homestead, toward to the only road. Also unfortunate for this fellow, Al wasn’t home, so he got my Mamaw, Ardell. She did what any mother with a small child at home would do. She grabbed up a rifle and fired one over his head.

“Get out of here, nigger!”

At this point, my eight-year-old dad says to Mamaw, “Mom, give me the rifle, you missed.”

I never heard the rest of the story. After the “punch-line” everyone laughed and looked longingly at Dad’s picture.

My mom often surprised me through the years with interesting factoids about my Dad. When I flunked out of school, she told me Dad never graduated. He bought a class ring and lied to Al. I felt better and eventually graduated from the school he didn’t.
When I mentioned throwing my mother-in-law out of my house, Mom told me not to let it go on too long. She implied her mother never forgave Dad for her banishment. I felt better, and I let my mother-in-law come back over, in a couple a days. He haunts me too, I suppose.

Dad helped a lot of people, but he wasn’t without sin. Dad coached youth football, and Al would let him off work to get to practice on time. He spent most of his time with the players. He brought me and my brother to the ball field. This was nothing new to my brother who was steeped in football. He was four when Dad first suited him up in pads. He ran “up-downs” until he couldn’t stand. He “let” us run tires on the sideline while he coached.

Dad had immediate success, not only with the team but also with the players. He soon moved up to the 115 pound division. It was a YMCA program, so most of the boys were fatherless and thrived on Dad. The at-risk boys’ mothers couldn’t say enough nice things about him.

“My son used to be in trouble all the time, but now he’s too tired”

“Scott used to backtalk me, but now he says ‘yes ma’am’”

“I sure do like that moustache on Coach Turner”

It wasn’t just the at-risk boys either. The kids from the plant all played for him too, Claudia’s son, Scott and Sandy Vetter’s boy, Curt. They worshiped him. One player came to practice with bruises all over his neck and stomach. Dad told the kid, Morgan to sit out until his step-father came to pick him up. When he got there, all six foot-three of him, Dad met him in the parking lot and explained to him what would happen if Morgan
ever showed up unfit for practice again. Morgan made every practice after that, the team won the regional championship.

He built a pool, so the players could go swimming after practice. There were always players at the house. Dad ran a “voluntary” off-season training program, and the ones who participated had pool privileges. The program not only kept Dad out of the office, but also gave him more time to develop his players. His idea of development was to break a child’s will and then build it back up through a series of physical challenges meant to instill pride and discipline. These days it’s called child abuse, but back then it was called character building. The players couldn’t get enough. Every summer afternoon, there was a group of teenage boys chicken-fighting in the pool while my Mom grilled hamburgers.

His “foot in the ass” style of coaching worked great on the gridiron, but at home it was problematic. Getting mad at a problem enhanced football, but the method was less effective on toddlers and wives. Dad was legendary for not taking “any mess” off anyone. He once benched a quarterback for an attitude problem even though the boy’s father had been recently released from the penitentiary. He got a call about seven o’clock on the Saturday night after the game.

“Turner’s residence. Hey, Marjorie. (Pause) Yeah, I’m sorry about that, but Roger didn’t think he had to work hard at practice. (Pause) What’s that, now? He said he was on his way here? Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it. Thanks for the call.”

Dad went to the front door and locked it. He turned off all the lights and moved us downstairs into the kitchen. Sitting there in the darkness he said, “Karen, when I go outside, you wait ten minutes. If I’m not back inside then call Jim Brooks.”
“Really?” Mom asked.

“I mean it.”

About twenty minutes later the knock came. More of a banging than a knock, it sounded like thunder.

“Get out here, you son-of-a-bitch. I’m gonna show you who has an attitude problem. I’m not fucking around, Turner.”

More banging. Dad walked out the back door.

“Turner, I’m not leaving!” he screamed.

More banging. Then it stopped. Dad’s muffled voice was barely discernible.

“If I see you at the practice field then I’ll know you’re looking for trouble. Now go on home.”

The front door locked rattled open and Dad walked in, turned the lights back on and walked in the kitchen. He laid a .357 revolver on the kitchen counter and said, “Let’s eat.”

The next morning before school my brother found a crowbar in the yard. I don’t know if the events were related, but three months later, Roger was living on our couch.

Dad was a fearless man, but an angry man, an abnormally angry man. His cussing tirades scared the neighbor’s dog. He and mom fought, never in front of us, but we knew they were fighting. They went into the bathroom to yell, but the door would shake. It seemed normal. He was a football coach. Coaches yell. He had ultra-conservative, ultra-stern parents who didn’t exactly shower him with love, and his whole life people rewarded him for aggression. He started having chest pains when he turned
thirty. Mom began to wonder if his anger wasn’t just learned behavior. Two years later he was gone.
Janet

A few months after my Dad died, I spent the night at my Aunt Janet’s place. Janet was my dad’s baby sister and Al’s only daughter. I remember that night because it was the only time I ever stayed with her. She and her husband, Steve, had a crappy little apartment over in Roebuck. In ’77, Roebuck was a quiet, average looking suburb for lower middle class whites who hoped to one day make the move to the new Mecca of civilization, Center Point, where I lived with other middle middle class white people who were glad they got out of Roebuck or Palmerdale or wherever. In this soon to be depressed and crime ridden area, my dad’s sister had a one bedroom apartment with classic yard-sale décor. The kitchenette/dining room sat on yellow linoleum, and the “room” opened into a den/living room/divan area where a portable television set rested on an ironing board. A doily covered the pad but you could still see the folding legs. The tan couch was a fold-out with a wafer thin mattress my brother and I shared. Well, I shared, he took. I can still feel his heels in my back. It was exciting to sleep on a hide-away bed and watch black and white TV through our socks. This was years before Papaw bought Janet and Steve the new house.

My brother, Skip, and I watched “Ultraman” on TV the next morning, some Buck Rodgers type with a metal power suit, and Janet made pancakes. After breakfast she taught us how to draw scribble pictures. A scribble picture is when you scratch out a bunch of intersecting lines and then fill the sections with color. It was some art school training exercise she knew from college, and we did it for hours on their wobbly card table. The night before we went to Shakey’s Pizzeria, the Chucky Cheese forerunner,
where men in bear suits danced on stage while you served yourself cheap-ass pie and warm beer. It was the first time I ate cold pizza.

This was back when Janet thought she could have children, about five years before she adopted the twins. The twins were great; identical red-headed girls who enjoyed more tenderness from Al than I ever saw. No one ever said anything to me, but they particularly didn’t say anything about why Janet and Steve couldn’t have children. I did hear some loose talk about a clandestine operation in college.

Aunt Janet definitely wanted children. Janet and Steve had married in a classic redneck ceremony in which I was cast as secondary ring-bearer costumed in a pinned-up baby blue crush velvet tuxedo. Steve was visibly drunk, and Janet hasn’t been that happy or thin since, but they bent over backward trying to make us happy. She showed us how if you look at a drawing of a light-bulb the right way, it looks like a fat lady dropping her nylons. The funny part was because Janet was pushing two hundred pounds and resembled said light bulb when she tied her shoes. She had a pretty face, and I’m sure back in the 60’s she looked all right in a spinning dress and a handful of daisies. Steve, on the other hand was a rail thin college drop-out. In the ten years since they met at the University, Steve’s long golden locks receded from sight, his mustache got bushier and his glasses got thicker.

Steve wholesaled wine, which meant he had a trunk full of Gallo Brothers and a ton of Aldo Cella posters, and Janet was an elementary school art teacher. We had a great time with them; I asked my mother ‘why can’t we go back?’ Due to my unfailing ignorance, I didn’t understand the magnitude of a lone Saturday night sleep-over. I enjoyed my time with Janet and Steve. I thought they were on my team.
I once watched Steve play “donkey softball” for the Civitan club. One person held the donkey at first base and the batter made a flying leap to mount up and ride the bases. I think you had to drink a beer every inning or something because everyone was falling off the donkeys, especially Steve. It must have been his bad back.

Somehow my dumb-ass never put it together. My mother’s infinite politeness never let her speak ill of Janet. She never told me about the shitty things she did. She never told me Janet had to be removed from the ICU the night Dad died. She never said she was nuts. I thought Janet was a breath of air in Ardell’s house. Janet was terrified of her mother, and sought her approval at every turn. She enjoyed hinting at a wild past, which was clearly the reason Ardell never gave her approval. I should have seen my mother’s lack of comments, and her staunch refusal to schedule another Janet sleep-over as the bitter feud it was.

Janet gave me a three foot tall solid chocolate Easter bunny one year. I was also three feet tall, so finishing this bunny was impossible. So the decaying, slobber-ridden bunny left a snail trail through my mother’s new house until she pried the rancid bunny from my grubby hands. I was furious at my mother, and she was too, but she never said a word about Janet.

Janet and Steve brought their new car over to Al and Ardell’s and parked the new grey sedan under a massive oak tree next the driveway. After lunch in the grass, we always ate outside in the warm months because potato salad doesn’t taste right until the mayo spoils, Al relented to my constant pleadings. He let me drive his riding mower around the yard.
He said to Ardell’s scowl, “It’s not the tractor, he’s plenty big enough.” I was maybe seven or eight and still about three feet tall. Twenty feet down the driveway I bumped it into high gear, lost control and t-boned the new car. Aunt Janet laughed off the dent, and Ardell got super pissed at Al. I figured she paid for the car. Ardell hated to come off a nickel.

Getting back to the sleep-over, the surprise revelation therein was my mother’s social life. My mom had a date. She knew her boys might be sensitive to new men, considering the amount of changes already, and selected a sitter we would be comfortable with overnight. Janet knew the purpose of the sleep-over when she agreed, but somehow while pouring Aunt Jemima on my plate she passed moral judgment on my mom. That was the rub. Janet was a nut. She was never bound by quaint restrictions like reality or accountability. Clearly, we all got the ability to compartmentalize.

Janet judged my mother to be indecent. She felt mom was dishonoring my dad. It wasn’t enough for her to disapprove, but she had to vocalize her feelings. She started making haranguing phone calls to my mother, the undereducated widow with two hungry boys at home. My mother, in an uncharacteristic display of unbridled honesty, vocalized what Janet could do with her opinion. End of sleepovers. The calls, however, didn’t end until my step-father (the man from the date) had a talk with Al.

I don’t remember what the timing was. I don’t know how long it was before Mom started dating, but everyone will agree it was soon. I also don’t know what the morality threshold was on something like that. Maybe there was some sort of algorithm Mom could have used. What I did know was that Mom’s social calendar wasn’t Janet’s god damn business.
Ike

My dad had a couple of siblings, my Aunt Janet and my Uncle Ike. Ike was the baby. More specifically, he was Ardell’s baby, and he lived his whole life that way. His room, which he once shared with my Dad, was adjacent to Ardell’s. He never left that room. When he dies, he’ll leave a shadow on the wall like Hiroshima. His little hovel was the prison John Donne wrote about.

He had an elaborate brass bed frame on his queen bed, and a soft reading lamp next to an upholstered chair. The chair is so close to the closet the door won’t fully open. The closet housed Ike’s comic book collection and other superhero/Star Trek memorabilia. Naturally, as children we were anxious to see the toys but we were strictly forbidden from opening Ike’s closet. We weren’t forbidden by Al or Ardell, so the warning lacked authority. We were forbidden by Ike, who was as old as our parents but lived at home. Chubby and pale with thick black plastic eyeglasses, Ike was a doughy accountant who never worked anywhere his dad didn’t.

He dressed up for Star Trek conventions before there were Star Trek conventions, but he controlled the flow of comic books in a house short on entertainment. At first, I respected his wishes.

I was ten or eleven when I tried to sneak a comic out of his closet. I ended up with a copy of Beach Boys, which apparently was not about the band, unless Brian Wilson ran an all male nudist colony.

Ike had been away to college, a good one, Sewanee, and he went to the same prep school me and my brother went to. He even had some of the same faculty. The school wasn’t coed back then, but it was the same in many ways. We had a lot in common, but
we were never close. He wasn’t the kind of Uncle who threw the ball with you or showed you a naked lady picture. He would draw you a picture of a superhero with big muscles and tight pants. He had an aloof detachment and laughed with a giggle. His manner was suspicious, like a rundown daycare and there was something hateful behind his eyes. But he was my uncle. He and my cousin Orin would take me and Skip to the movies, back when the movie theaters were in the mall. I never questioned him. I acted like everything was as regular as the mail while I could.

One Saturday afternoon, back when I was maybe eleven pushing twelve, I was out in Palmerdale without my brother. Skipper had teenage stuff to do that weekend which didn’t include me. Anyway, about two o’clock Al said he had to ride to the plant to, “check on the front end loader” or whatever he said that really meant “I’m out of beer” or “I’ve got to meet my girlfriend,” and Ardell went for the bi-weekly groceries. I wanted to go swimming, so I hung back at the house.

Ike was left in charge. Mamaw said she would be back in a couple of hours. Ike liked to make his phone calls while his parents were gone, not surprising considering the only telephone was attached to the kitchen wall. Al put the pool in the year before, and I couldn’t wait to go swimming. It was a hot day, and the wait stretched on while Ike chatted. Mamaw insisted no one under fourteen swam alone, even if they had a pool at home and their Mother let them. I guess especially not if my mother allowed it. I was at the mercy of Ike’s call.

“Yeah, Jeff. We should. We should do that. What do you think Pamela would say? I know, really” he giggled.

“When I get off the phone. So anyway, Jeff. Let’s see Star Trek II this weekend. Gene Shalit loved it,” he went on without even looking at me.

Sitting out by the pool, I could still hear him through the window. ‘Fuck this,’ I thought. ‘Papaw’s not going to bitch, and Mamaw will get after Ike, not me.’ I was proud of my pre-teen logic, which always prescribed fulfilling my wishes. I pulled off my shirt and jumped in wearing my cut-off blue jeans. I floated for a while before Ike came out.

“You shouldn’t be out here by yourself,” he said climbing the ladder down into the pool. The vinyl reflected the sunlight through the water and threw beehive patterns on his pale fleshy back. He wore old style trunks, even for then, that looked like gym shorts. The colored piping “accented” the sides.

“I didn’t drown. You don’t have to tell. Besides, I won’t be able to swim after Mamaw gets back. We’ll have to shuck the corn for supper. I couldn’t wait all afternoon for you to talk on the phone. You can talk on the phone when adults are home, you know,” I threw up all the reasons I could to avoid involving the authorities. I was confident he would get it worse than me, but I was never sure. We might both get it.

“Maybe I will. Maybe I won’t. I guess it depends,” he said. He followed the edge to the far side of the deep end.

I swam over beside him and clutched the side of pool. “Depends on what?”

“Depends on how you treat me,” he giggled.

“What do you mean?”

“Like those shorts you’re wearing. I’ve told you not to wear them in the pool. They clog up the skimmer. I’m the one who cleans the pool around here, and I’d say
you’re not treating me very well,” he sneered. His shaking middle finger pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“My cut-offs? That’s a myth. I clean the pool at home, and I’ve never noticed anything,” I protested.

“You have to take them off. It’s o.k. No one can see you out here. Take them off, and you can swim in your underwear,” he encouraged.

“No way. I’m not wearing any. Anyway, that’s stupid. Tell if you want to,” I said swimming away, but I didn’t move. I thought my shorts were hung on something, but then I felt his fat fingers creeping into my waistband. I grabbed at my fly to keep it shut, but I sank. I couldn’t hold my shorts on and tread water. I had to let go. My top button came loose as I struggled to the surface. “Let me go!”

“Take them off. Take them off,” he snickered.

He outstretched his arm unmooring me from the edge and kept pulling at me. I wish I could say I overpowered him and punched him out, but I didn’t. I held onto my shorts as long as I could, but when I took in a breath of water my arms went limp. I scrambled toward the surface without success. I was beat, floating underwater in his grasp with my zipper down. Then he let go. I buoyed to the surface.

“Asshole!” I said through tears and chlorinated water.

“Come on. It was only a joke,” he said, still giggling. I hitched my britches up and looked around. Then I saw it. Ardell’s Mercedes was coming down the driveway.

My first instinct was to tell. Tell Ardell about her baby boy. Tell her he pulled down my shorts. Well, sort of. Tell her he tried to pull down my shorts? The shorts I’m
not supposed to be wearing while I got in the pool without an adult. I wasn’t sure.

Mostly, I was scared.

Ike dried off and met Mamaw at the car. I stormed out behind him not sure what to do. She peered at me through her horn rims and then back over at Ike.

“What’s the matter with him? Why’s he all red in the face?” she asked.

“Nothing. We were horsing around in the pool, and he got his feelings hurt,” Ike said looking at me.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am.” I blurted out.

“Go on in the house and get some dry clothes on.”

“Yes ma’am,” the only answer.

I heard their voices while I was inside, but I couldn’t make out the words. They were having an argument, but not loud like with Papaw. They argued quiet. When I got changed and out to the breezeway where the corn awaited me, Ardell announced there would be homemade ice cream after supper, and once Ike was through cutting the grass, he would do all the cranking.
Skip & Chance

We were a set, me and my brother, Skip. Until I was seven, I never heard my name without the antecedent, Skip. In all familial situations, Skip and Chance were a unit, so much so our names became interchangeable. My older relations called me Skip sometimes. It was fine with me. I didn’t mind being mistaken for the elder. My brother got the short end of that deal, and he got saddled with a lot of my caretaking.

“Take your brother outside.”

“Make sure your brother doesn’t get hurt.”

“Be sure to include your brother.”

I think they wanted to keep him busy and thinking he was in control of something, but I was happy to benefit from it. We were close, as young siblings always are, but much closer after Dad died.

I remember the day my mother told me my father died. It was several days after the funeral, but that’s when it happened. She was prostrate on the bed crying for what seemed like forever to a five year old. She pulled me up across the scratchy bed spread with the red and yellow flowers and took the washcloth off her forehead. I looked in the dark red and blue circles around her eyes and asked if she was sick.

“No” was all she said.

I don’t remember what she said to me, but I remember pitching a fit on that bedspread as the flowers scraped my wet cheeks. I kicked and screamed until I couldn’t anymore and threw the washcloth at my mother.

“No he isn’t,” I kept screaming. I expected him to come back.
I don’t know how my brother got through it. He experienced it in real time without a toddler’s oblivion. He was ten and on the precipice of becoming the next great Turner when the rug got snatched out from under him. I got through it because of him. All I know is he was there for me when I needed him. When I asked if he thought Dad would be proud of me he said, “Yes.”

He punched people in the nose for me, gave me rides and taught me to fight. He never “took it easy on me” or shielded me from “bad stuff” and I didn’t thank him enough. He was still a Turner mind you, so don’t think he was without sin.

Same as all little brothers, I idolized my brother. He was a three-sport man every year. I can remember him changing uniforms in the back seat of Mom’s Chevy between practices. He was tough. His front two teeth got knocked out when he was eight and he was stomped on and bitten by a horse before he turned ten. Nothing ever happened to me over on the sideline. Nothing good anyway.

I didn’t notice at first, maybe youth, maybe unconscious blindness, but he started changing after dad died. He had no interim school. He went straight to prep school when we moved. I don’t think he’s picked up an athletic jersey since. I even took time off from sports, because he wasn’t playing anymore. I got to his school and started thinking maybe sports weren’t the way to go. He got into rock music; I got into rock music. My brother saved my ass regularly, and I could always count on him. The problems we had were small, the kind resolved with a drink or a punch. There were some questionable decisions.

The pot may not have been the best decision either of us made. I suppose the jury’s still out on that one, but it seemed great then. Such is the nature of brothers, they
share. He was building a bridge out. He needed something contrary to what had been. He was burying his pain as I masked mine. He was building a bridge out of town which he boarded at graduation. He picked something alien to Al and to the generations of Turners firmly committed to alcohol as the cause and cure of all of life’s problems. My brother turned different, maybe a little smarter. He let go when everyone else dug in. Skip had more of my mom in him. Not to look at him, but in his manner. Skip was restrained. He could have one drink and go home. He smoked, but never picked up the habit. I smoked a pack a day at age thirteen.

As much as Papaw pushed him to be my dad, he pulled back. He was the first born. He was supposed to take over, to be in charge. Instead he watched. He watched everyone, studied images. He built his own darkroom and spent his money on equipment and developer. Hunting trips went unrealized because he had photography camps and college applications. For years, Papaw talked about taking us out west, but Skip kept finding reasons not to go. Papaw and I went by ourselves and talked for two weeks about how Skip should have been there. It was the best trip I ever took. I learned a lot. Some of which I wish I could unlearn, but I’ll tell that one later.

Skip saw something different on the horizon. He forgot he ever told a black joke when he deplaned in New England. He enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design and never answered to ‘Skip’ again. He switched to Glenn. Somehow inhabiting the name freed him from it. My obsession with the past was mirrored by his distaste for it. Only our mutual love of Alabama football and each other survived the ashes of his bridge. Even in ’90 when Ardell got wise to Al’s dalliances, Al called him. Skip called
me at my freshman dorm in Colorado in the first of what would become a long string of phone calls passing familial duties on down the line.

“How could this happen? Can you believe it?”

“It was that waitress from Little Joe’s, right?” I asked from my freshman dormitory floor.

“Uh, yeah. It was. You knew about this?”

“Sorta.” I laid there smoking a cigarette waving a nice girl named Jessica out the door. “You didn’t?”

I guess he hadn’t been to lunch with Papaw in a while. I guess I was the one with first-hand experience. Like when my dad would take me to his girlfriend’s house, no one thought I was paying attention. It was the same attitude slave owners took with the enslaved. No one believed they had ears. In the moment, on that floor, I understood my place in the family. It was me that would come back.

“What’s her name?” he asked.

“Janie, I think. Used to be the sheriff’s woman. Her husband worked at Dixie Bronze.”

“No shit.”

“All roads lead to Dixie, huh?”

Al never told me about the divorce or any of the details. I got those years later when he made me sue Ardell. He told Skip. It hurt me, but he was first in line.

Skip moved to New Jersey after college, and he was there when I called him a year later.

“I’ve been thrown out of school.”
“Nice work. What did Mom say?” he asked even though he already knew the answer.

“She said I can’t live at home.”

“That sounds about right. What are you going to do?”

“Maybe try to get on with the Cattleman Association.”

“When was the last time you were on a horse?” he said with his usual condescension.

“Allright. It’s been a while, but they mostly use trucks these days.”

“Do you have a truck?”

“Why do you keep asking me shit you already know?”

“Do you have any money?”

“I got about a hundred bucks, but I could stay here a couple of weeks and draw another check from work.”

“How much will you spend on dope in those two weeks?”

“I get your point, asshole. What the fuck else am I supposed to do? I’m not exactly flush with options. Two of my roommates are already awaiting trial. I need to move, man. Today.”

“Calm down. Gas up your little Honda and come stay with me. I’ll get you back together.”

“Do you mean it? What about that girl of yours, she never liked me. Is that going to fly?”

“You’re my brother. Let me handle her. Get in the car, right now and head East. Call me when you get to the Jersey Turnpike.”
"You mean, like Thunder Road? From that song?"

"Yeah, they love the Boss here."

"That is kind of cool."

"Get in your car, before nightfall."

"Thanks, Skip."

"Don’t worry about it. Just leave."

I packed up what I had left to my name, three guitars, a carton of Marlboro and a three foot bong. I stumbled across a quarter pound of mushrooms under the seat of my car when I was packing, material evidence in the aforementioned trials, and filled up at the Texaco. I made a short sale before I left, so I could have a little hotel and dinner money, but ended up buying a bag of pot instead. It was time to go. Boulder never looked better than in my rear-view mirror.

Two nights later I called my brother from the edge of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which I reminded him was a turnpike, just not the one I wanted, and I told him to stay up because I was headed in. He laughed and the waitress laughed.

"I’ll be there," I said.

I tested the limits of the Dunkin Donuts bottomless cup of coffee and got back on the road. Ten minutes later I was lost again. I pulled into a filling station for a local map. As I walked in, the cashier, a pasty girl around twenty and a moustached cop around the same age looked up at me.

I grabbed a map and pack of B.C. powders from the rack by the register.

“What are those things?” the cashier asked. “I’ve never seen anyone buy one.”
“There like a crushed up aspirin. They work great,” I said wishing she would ring me up and I could get away from this fucking cop and back to my car full of drugs.

“You lost or something, man? You don’t seem like you’re from here,” he said without a smile.

I thought the ‘man’ bit was a set-up. The silence went on too long.

“I’m just kidding, man. Of course you’re lost. You’re buying a map.”

“Leave him alone, Pat,” the cashier cooed.

“Come on, I’ve got a better map in my cruiser.”

I walked out with him, and he pulled his cruiser up behind my Honda shining his lights on my “In Search of the Eternal Buzz” bumper sticker. He laid the map out across my trunk, which contained all my contraband, and started blathering a mile a minute. I couldn’t pay attention, because all I could think about was prison. After a minute, he looked at my confused face and said, “You know what? This is too damn complicated. The turnpike’s not ten minutes from here, but you’ll never find it. Follow me; I’ll come back for Janice later.”

He raised his eyebrows toward the station and made a lewd gesture which left nothing to the imagination.

The shock of following his cruiser, sirens wailing and lights flashing through the Pennsylvania night would have been too much if I wasn’t stoned. He drove eighty miles an hour and ran every stoplight, Springsteen style. He pulled on to the shoulder and waved his hand toward the turnpike on-ramp. I rolled my window down, and I swear he was blasting Led Zeppelin. He screamed, “Who says cops aren’t cool. Good luck. man”
I pulled up in front of Skip’s apartment building at four twenty-three a.m. He walked out and helped me unload guitars and we drank a beer as the sun came up.

“Thanks for the beer.”

“I told you. Don’t worry about it. When I get home from work tomorrow we’ll see about finding you a job.”

“You really saved me this time.”

“You’re worth it. Let’s get some sleep. There’s not anyone following you, right.”

“Shouldn’t be, they got bigger problems than me.”

“However it shakes out. You’ll be all right here. Does anyone know you’re here?”

“Not even Mom.”

“Good. I’ll handle her. Get some sleep.”
Beavers

Papaw picked me up on weekends. Ardell’s hostility discouraged my mother from going to Palmerdale, and Al liked to come to Birmingham. I’d be packed and waiting in the kitchen for the sound of his car. The leviathan signaled me within a block of the house; the slate grey diesel Mercedes approached with the subtlety of a tank. Back then, I didn’t consider the irony of a World War II veteran in a German automobile. The engine strained for breath like an asthmatic. The car was like Al. You felt it before you saw it. When he killed the engine, the resulting silence was deafening. Thunk. The door must have weighed two hundred pounds, and the sound it made was unlike American cars.

He came through my kitchen door with the authority of a war veteran who owned the country because he killed for it. His black eyes squinted as he took in and took over the room. The normal air of homework and television blew out the window.

“Papaw!” I gushed.

His dark eyes and chiseled face softened, and his infectious smile took hold.

“Hey, hot shot. Put ‘er there.”

He outstretched his hand to begin our ritual. I grabbed his paw with my underdeveloped hand and squeezed with all the force I could manage.

“Awh, pilgrim. You’re too much for me,” he said taking a knee in mock defeat.

“Can you have him home by five on Sunday?”

“Of course, Karen. It’s great to see you.”

“You too, Al. Be a good boy, son.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said holding the door open for him.
“He’s always good, aren’t you bud?”

I looked back at them standing there together, “Mostly, I guess.”

They enjoyed a laugh together while looking at me, but when their gazes met, the moment ended.

A few years earlier, when mom remarried, we moved into town. My step-father’s work at UAB demanded it. Within eighteen months of my sixth birthday, I lost my father, moved from home and gained a new parent. I went from a rural private experimental school (by experimental I mean they experimented with ways to re-segregate) to an underfunded public school and my head swam. Three years later, I changed schools again, this time, a swanky private school full of super rich people. Nothing was certain anymore, except Al.

When I climbed into Al’s car, all tensions disappeared. The smell of his car was reassuring. Part hair oil, part gun oil and part pasture, the interior of the car belied its exterior. His hard hat and briefcase in the backseat, he sat upright never taking his eyes off the road, even when he raised his beer. He asked about school, and always followed my answer with an encouraging word about education. He was demonstrably proud of my school work, but never dwelled on it. Weekends with Al had a different purpose. Whether it was the Bear Bryant show or splitting logs, there was some microcosm waiting which involved great ritual and alcohol. We were never idle.

“The pasture’s flooded again. In the morning, we’ll get the beavers out. We’ll get up at five and eat.”
Al’s plans were non-negotiable, so protest was useless. We rounded the half-mile of driveway and saw horses dancing on the edge of the pasture on a sliver of dry grass. I was amazed by the impact. Beavers were something I saw on cartoons. They built logging communities and competed with woodpeckers for resources. Looking at three feet of standing water, I finally saw beavers for what they were, rodents. I admit I was impressed by the beaver’s power, the industrious little bastards made a creek into a lake in a month.

I waded through the slop by the barn to feed a carrot to my favorite horse, Comanche. “Don’t worry. We’ll get ‘em tomorrow.”

Walking up to the house to greet the others, it occurred to me I was about to walk inside soaked in water, manure and grass. I wasn’t even to the breezeway before Mamaw struck. Flying out of the screen door like a wasp, she must have had a dirt premonition. The rims of her glasses flared from her nose like antennae, and the breeze in her wake curled the apron string out from behind her back. A spatula pointed toward an invisible line.

“That’s far enough. Take ‘em off,” she commanded.

“But Mamaw, it’s cold out here.”

“Off! Your pants too.”

“But…,” I started to protest, but she was right by the kindling. I didn’t relish a switching. “Yes ma’am.”

I pulled my boots and socks off, and set them in the garage. I took my jeans off and clipped them on the line while she watched. I walked in behind her, defeated.

“Get dressed and get you something to eat.”
She was like that. Pain then pleasure. Humiliate me and then ply me with homemade fried pies. I ignored the jeers of my uncle, visibly tickled by my predicament, and found some ill-fitting dry pants.

Friday nights were slow at Al’s. Eat supper; look at some television and right to bed. Al would be asleep on the sofa by eight, Ardell would fade out by eight-thirty, and Uncle Ike would stay up until ten watching Masterpiece Theatre. I was left alone in the dark with the crickets. Too many distractions for a ten year old.

Beaver hunt weekend, I drifted off sometime after twelve, and about a second later Al was shaking my foot.

“Rise and shine. Breakfast is on the table.”

The others had been up for a while. The sofa bed was adjacent to the kitchen table, so as I stumbled out get my pants off the line, I floated through the smell of breakfast, cat-head biscuits with fried eggs, cantaloupe, and bacon. The rising coffee smell was intoxicating. Everyone did their part. Ardell and Ike weren’t going hunting, but they were up pre-dawn making breakfast. No matter what the household tensions, the work never stopped. I crammed some eggs down and mopped the yoke with a biscuit.

“Grab your boots and your rifle.”

“Yes sir.” There was only one response to Al.

I jammed my feet into damp boots, and I stepped onto the breezeway to get my gear. Al handed me a .45 revolver. I think I leaned to one side when I holstered it. I balanced out with the rifle. Ardell stuffed our lunches in my backpack and we left.

We walked around the pasture, on the high side where the water hadn’t reached. The dew burned off with the rising sun, but I could still see Al’s footprints. I tried to step
where he stepped. He didn’t say a word until we hit the dam. He was like that. He moved through the woods in silence. He was a two hundred and fifty pound ghost.

“Look there. Do you see him?” I nodded but couldn’t see anything but trees and water.

“We’ll have to get in close before he sees us. Stay here while I circle around. If he hits the water, shoot. If he makes the dam we’ll never find him.”

I nodded again and he faded back out of sight. Believing I was merely an observer, I looked around for a bush to pee on.

“Chance! Get set!” Al hollered.

I turned and looked upstream. Al’s shoulders and head floated above the water. He was in up to his chest. In front of him was a family, or army, of beavers. They looked like fifty pound rats with flat tails. Buck teeth glimmered above the water reminding me of a horror film. Papaw looked like an inverted pied piper with a pistol in lieu of a fife. I don’t know how long I stood there with my mouth open, but long enough for Al to remind me.

“Shoot him, Goddamnit!”

Pow, pow, pow, pow. I unloaded the rifle. Pow, pow, pow, pow. I wasn’t aiming or looking for the big one; I was just firing. The ones I missed ducked under the dam.

“All right. All right, I think that’s got it. Damn, son. Cartridges aren’t free,” he scolded.

“Let’s see how we did.”
He waded up to the edge of the dam and felt around among the loose sticks and logs. Panic shot through me like an electro-shock. *Could I have missed them all? How could I miss from zero feet away? Will I be back at the house with Ike next time?*

Then, I saw him, King Beaver.

“Here he is, Papaw.”

His fat body floated up, tail first, next to the bank. I tried to pull him out, but forty pounds of soaking wet beaver was pulling my ten year old frame into the creek. Al reached over and plucked him out the water by his tail.

“Good shot. Or shots, I suppose.”

The beaver had more holes than guts. He probably drowned from the weight of the bullets, but I was feeling pretty good. I bagged the head beaver, didn’t shoot anyone and didn’t fall in the creek. Papaw climbed out of the water like Moses. He chunked the beaver on the ground and asked for my backpack. I complied, looking forward to an early meal. What he pulled from my pack wasn’t food. He revealed two long red sticks with writing on the side. Dynamite. I was walking around with dynamite in my pack.

We went out onto the dam, and I thought about the angry kingless beavers located beneath my feet. A couple of hatchet strokes made a melon sized hole in the dam, and, to my surprise, no gnashing teeth sprung forth. Al set the sticks in the hole and unspooled the fuses. I crouched behind a tree, and he lit the fuse.

I could hear the fuse crackling like on television. Boom! Water sprayed over my head and little pieces of sticks sifted through the branches. I expected to see Wily Coyote standing there with black face. He wasn’t, but there were a small beavers littering the
creek. We waded back out into the water and chopped some more until the water flowed through.

“Little bastards work, don’t they?” He asked.

“Yes sir,” I offered.

“How about that lunch?”

I pulled out the lunch bag, making sure there weren’t any more explosives, and Papaw returned with his rifle and a six pack of Miller. I don’t know where it came from, but I didn’t question such things.

Alcohol was never allowed in the house. We always drank, but in the car, or in the driveway. Beers were available however warm they might be. These were all right. The October air kept them cool. We sat out in the woods eating cold ham sandwiches and potato salad while I wondered why he didn’t freeze to death. The sun crept up and warmed my neck while Papaw sank another beer.

“Let’s head back before your grandmother starts to wonder. Don’t let her smell that beer on you.”

“Yes sir,” I said like I had any control over the odor of my breath. We were a mile into the woods. Where was the breath mint tree?

He strung up the beaver’s feet and flung him over his shoulder. We walked back the same way we came in. I stared at the dead beaver’s face while we walked. I wondered what was in his mind that morning. I’ll work on the dam a while, then maybe play with the kids, and lunch. Sorry, varmint. I finished you. We don’t cotton to squatters around here. Maybe it was the beer, or maybe it was achieving a goal, or maybe I was happy I didn’t screw up, but I felt proud.
We laid the carcass in the driveway to dry. Al teased me about having it for dinner, but I could already smell the chicken inside.

Saturday night was lively in Palmerdale. *Hee Haw* came on at six, and we hurried through dinner to watch. Al was half-tight from his only off day, and everybody stayed up until nine o’clock. Everybody but me. I was out while Buck and Roy were still pickin’ and grinnin’. I slept the sleep of a contented boy. There were problems in that house. I knew that, but there were no mysteries.
Camp LSD

In the August heat of 1987, two friends and I planned a simple camping trip. We picked Oak Mountain State Park, largely for its sparse attendance and renowned flora. My friends were a couple of teammates from school. John was a shy kid from Mountain Brook who came to Altamont a year before, and Carey was there before me. He was a year older but repeated eighth grade. That may not sound like a lot, but to Carey it was huge. Carey’s dad was president of the Board of Trustees, which meant he handed out diplomas to the eighth graders. Carey was the only eighth grader who didn’t get a sheepskin that year. It must have been on purpose. Carey was a smart guy, and the most gifted athlete I ever saw, but he pissed it away taking dope with me. Again, on purpose. A few years ago he earned a PhD from the University of Denver and got a good job teaching comparative religion, so I know he was slacking. Carey and I got to be friends during his second eighth grade. I let him cheat off my paper in Algebra. Sometimes I would finish mine and swap papers so we’d turn in each other’s, just for kicks. The next year we started playing varsity ball together. That’s when we added John to the crew.

Back then Oak Mountain was remote, not like now with amphitheaters and Wal-Marts all over the Pelham Parkway. We packed the usual stuff, tents, beer, hotdogs and bug spray. In lieu of fishing poles, we took six tabs of 4-way window pane acid straight from San Francisco. 4-way means you can split it four ways.

We even started the trip under false pretenses. The ranger informed us we had to be eighteen to camp. We said, “oh shoot” and told him we’d be sure and leave before the park closed.

“Fifty cents apiece,” he said without looking.
We looked at each other through the marijuana smoke and started laughing. No one had any money.

John said, “I spent mine on beer,” and I answered, “I got the pot.” We looked in the backseat at Carey, who came from one of the wealthiest families in the South East but never had a dime. He had a two-party check for eleven dollars he could cash at the Crestline Piggly Wiggly, but no cash. We didn’t even ask him. After ten minutes of scouring the floorboard of my Volkswagen, we scraped up a dollar-fifty.

The guard handed us three movie ticket stubs, “Enjoy the park.”

Easing in under the privet hedge, we parked the car backward to hide the tag, and unloaded the gear. The cicada hummed around our heads, striking and falling against our bodies in an impotent flail. We hiked across the six foot waterfall like three Walendas, the cooler between me and Carey, and John with a day-glow yellow portable radio under his arm. The “nigger box” his dad called it last Christmas. We waved at the staring kids on the “beach” who watched us disappear into the woods.

Once we were out of earshot and smellshot, we fired a joint and passed out the window panes. They were called window panes because the tabs of paper had crosses etched on them. The individual panes delineate the doses. We did no splitting. We each took a whole. We barely got the tents up before it came on.

LSD comes on slowly at first, but when the giggles hit you better be finished assembling your tent. Your eight hour rollercoaster has begun. John was an aspiring pyromaniac, so the fire was cooking in about a second. I was so paranoid about a forest fires I dug a foot wide ditch around the campfire. Pleased with ourselves, we cracked some Old Milwaukee’s and waited for the trees to whisper.
The Grateful Dead ticked softly in the background as shapes and images flew up from the fire in a maelstrom of geodesic patterns, constantly morphing and increasing in color intensity like a streaming kaleidoscope. The leaves on the trees crawled like an ant farm. The heat became tangible. LSD’s power creates a feeling that the cosmos is so interconnected a child could easily understand the nature of an expanding universe and the curvature of the time-space continuum. It can also make you bat-shit nuts. The altered reality is so concrete the user can often never escape, but it also turns every light source into sparkler. The camp fire quickly became the center of the known universe.

At this time, when the druids welcomed us and the wind cried my name, we made a decision. We decided to take more acid. That was about an hour before I learned what “bad trip” meant. I was writing my name in the air with a cigarette when the plan took a hard left.

Carey stood up in front of the fire and stripped his shirt off. Left with just his shorts and flip flops, his chest reflected an unholy pattern of concentric dark circles writhing like leeches.

“This is ridiculous,” Carey announced.

“What the fuck is he talking about,” I asked John. John’s vacant face stared back with giant pupils. I looked back at Carey and he was naked, arms outstretched and plummeting through a front facing Nestea plunge. It happened slowly. In my mind, it was slow motion, but I have no idea how long it was, two seconds, maybe one. I was across the fire from Carey when he fell. He didn’t exactly fall. He dove into that fire.

I jumped over the fire and pancaked him.

“What the fuck are you doing?”
“I love her. I love her. This is ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous? What the fuck?”

“She’s there, waiting for me,” he said as he threw me aside like so much brush. He headed back toward the fire before I hit him hard from behind and sent us both tumbling through the tents.

“John! Fucking help me, man”

“What do I do? What’s happening? What’s going on? Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.”

“Grab him, goddamnit!” I said as Carey kicked me in the head.

I saw stars circling my head, like a Looney Toon. That’s sort of what LSD is, a scary Looney Toon. John grabbed his arms, and I grabbed his legs when I remembered he was buck-ass naked. You never want to see a teammate’s junk outside the locker room. I didn’t have time to worry about it. He bit John, hard enough to scar. John screamed and turned loose.

“Oh shit,” I muttered.

Carey was a powerful athlete twenty pounds heavier than me. That night, he was the Hulk. He picked me up by my shirt and shorts and threw me into the pile of tents. He started making sounds, sounds of a distressed animal. Whatever it was, it wasn’t human. I ran interference between Carey and his beloved fire while John kicked dirt on it. That aggravated the beast. He raged about, tossing us around until we could catch hold of him, but he never got tired and he never held back. He beat the hell out of us. I don’t know how long it went on, but when the fire faded, I bailed. I ran into the woods,
Carey snarling behind me. I don’t know where John went. I never asked, but I ran about fifty feet and buried myself in a pile of leaves. Carey screamed for hours.

I remember thinking as the morning sky turned periwinkle, “I guess we got far enough away from the rest of the campers.”

When he finally stopped I heard the radio batteries dragging out “U.S. Blues.” I was cramped up from the fight, tick laden from hiding in a leaf pile and sore from the strychnine. Another tremendous health benefit of LSD was the rat poison. You had to attach the drugs to the blotter paper somehow. Anyway, it lingers in your joints the day after, making a teenager feel arthritic.

I dusted the leaves out of my hair and slouched back to camp. John and Carey must have heard me, because they came out too. I pulled a crumpled box of Marlboro from my pocket. The box fell apart in my hand, but the cigarettes were intact.

“I should do a commercial, huh?” No laughs.

I lit one, and we broke camp in silence. Carey found some clothes, but looked at his feet like he was still naked. His shorts were lying beside the fire. I threw them at him. He didn’t say a word. We balled up the tents, bagged the garbage and headed back out to the car. About twenty minutes into the hike I realized why no one heard us. We were at least three miles in the woods. I’m not sure if we were still in the park. The heat beat on me until I threw up. Another LSD benefit, the user has an unlimited tolerance for alcohol. My one hundred and ten pound frame soaked up twelve beers during the night, adding a special something to the throbbing I was already enjoying.

The three of us in the little VW was no picnic either. The stink of us demanded the windows be down. We drove back to my place, because my parents were working
and no one was there, but I began to fume. The longer we drove without Carey saying anything last night’s fear became this morning’s anger. The world loving affect of the drugs dissipated, and I began to think, not about the stupidity of what we were doing or how I got what I deserved but about the personal attack on me. How could he put his life in my hands? How dare he bring his damaged psyche to the heavy drug party. He had no right to put that on me and John. And not even a ‘thanks’ for saving you from permanent disfigurement. What a douche. Not even a ‘sorry’ I kicked you in the head or bit your fucking shoulder? Asshole. I glared at him in the rearview mirror while he pretended to sleep.

I never once thought about what Carey went through, or how embarrassed he was or how fragile he was. I only thought about me. I held a grudge for years. Carey left Altamont the previous spring and was only year away from reform school, so it was easy to let him go. It was John who finally made me get over it.

He looked at me one day and said, “You know it could have been one of us.”

“You know, I hate it when you’re right, John.”

I was pissed, but that’s adolescence. It’s a myopic existence which many never escape, much like a bad trip. In retrospect, the scary part of the story was not the proximity to death or the insanity of gobbling enough drugs to dose the Island of Cuba, but the lack of discernible impact. I took LSD from the same sheet less than two months later, without a thought about Oak Mountain. Hell, I was sixteen, nothing could stop me.
House Arrest

Al built his homestead, the Palmerdale house, on a sleepy northern Jefferson County road called Cyndell Drive. Cyndell ran about a quarter mile up from Al’s place until it hit Marsh Mount Road. There was a neighboring house on Cyndell, but in twenty-five years there I never met the occupants. The road ran the high side of the property, so every car turning off of Marsh Mount Road was seen and indentified about three minutes prior to arrival. I guess three minutes was time enough to unlock the gun case and get set.

The driveway cut through thick St. Augustine grass and led around to the front. The screen porch, the breezeway we called it, connected the garage to the house. The garage was modest, big enough for two identical Mercedes diesels, the good saddles and the cast-iron smoker. The doors were single piece, solid metal, manual lift kind. Someone had to get out and open them; same rules as the pasture gates. If you’re on the passenger window you opened the door, unless you were Ardell.

The breezeway was a tin roof with glass sides set onto a concrete slab. The walls were split into grey rimmed window panes with tiny hand cranks. Screen doors were on the east and west, the garage and kitchen on the north and south. The furniture was an outdoor patio set, low vinyl seats and benches with a wheeled chaise lounge. A three foot aloe vera plant grew in the corner, great for scratches, burns and switchings. The breezeway was a hub of activity. We cleaned the guns here. We shed dirty shoes there and sat there on cool rainy nights. I spent a lot of summers stuck to that vinyl.

On past the kitchen, to the left of the gun cabinet was the formal dining room. An eight seat mahogany dining table with chairs swallowed the space. The Oriental rug’s
fringe extended beyond the chairs and delineated the off-limits zone. God help the child who disturbed the fringe. Ardell would sting you like a hornet. The ceramic floral center piece sat immobile except on Christmas and Thanksgiving. I never sat at that table. I never made it off the kid table. No dust accumulated in the dining room. The rich luster of the table and chairs painted a Norman Rockwell scene. Even the gun cabinet could be conveniently hidden by the door. All the rooms in the house had doors. It was the only house I’d ever seen with that feature, full wooden doors at every ingress and egress. Each room sealed like a porthole on a sinking ship.

The dining room opened into the family room where evenings were spent watching television or reading comics, especially in the winter. Ardell rarely turned the heat on, so the stone house stayed cool. The fireplace had gas logs, and we took turns standing in front of them. The gas logs were an improvement. Originally, the house had a central heating grate on the floor of the hallway. When the blower cut on, Mt. Vesuvius erupted. The day I burned my two-year-old butt on the damn thing was the happiest my brother ever saw Mamaw. She laughed like a child when she saw the checkerboard on my ass.

A low coffee table in the middle of the room supported an unused ashtray on one end and a grey covered candy dish on the other. I made a beeline to the treat dish only to find orange butterscotch. The TV sat in the corner on a wheeled table. Strictly network, no cable service as of 1992.

Down the hall, past the sixty-year-old bathroom, were the bedrooms, two equal sized rooms with a queen bed, a closet and a dresser. The one on the left served the master, and the one on the right belonged to Ike. I’ve already told you about that one.
The master was extraordinarily plain. Its chromatic severity countered the softness of Ike’s room. The dresser was the same dark color as the dining room furniture, and the bedspread was woven from sack cloth. The anomaly was the bed. It was pitched ten degrees forward to combat a circulation problem Ardell suffered from. The problem was Al circulated too much, and she wanted him to suffer.

Al was the undisputed master of the castle, but Ardell was the “straw boss.” The beautification and maintenance of the house and yard was her exclusive domain. By way of illustration, back in the mid-eighties, there was a house, a shack even, right over the property line on the corner of Marsh Mount. The house was long abandoned and often attracted squatters. Periodically, Al would roust a sleeping transient and show him the way to the next county, but that wasn’t good enough for Ardell. She wanted it gone. “The nigger house,” she called it. She wanted it gone, but wasn’t about to shell out any money to buy a worthless lot. She demanded the county condemn it, but they said the city did; Palmerdale and Remlap said they were only townships and the property really belonged to Pinson; Pinson said they couldn’t do anything without approval from the County and the State. The situation did not make Ardell happy. Like I said, the house was right where you turned onto Cyndell Drive, so every visitor passed the ruinous house. It got a little worse every time I saw it, some graffiti here, a busted window there and maybe some old clothes scattered around inside or out. This went on for years.

We tried to stay away from Ardell. We went camping one weekend, and dedicated two full days to eating bream and shooting squirrels, sitting in the woods until we ran out of beer. We didn’t come back until late Sunday. We certainly didn’t go to church. Al and I were no fans of Sunday learning, but Ardell’s campaign to end her
house blight cinched the deal. Ardell was on the bully pulpit. She preached it after
church, on the front steps and out into the parking lot. She told everyone what they
should be doing about her problem. The sinful house had to be stopped. She told the
mayor. She told the Police Chief. She told the Fire Chief, the town council, the
aldermen and the City Council.

We knew she’d be in a mood after a whole morning of bitching with only Ike
listening. I wasn’t too worried. I was old enough to drive, and I wasn’t planning to go
inside when we got home. First we had to take the mail truck back to the “high” barn, the
one on the far side of the property near Marsh Mount, so we slipped out of the woods on
to the main stretch near the turnoff.

“How bad do you think she’ll be?” I asked.

“Bad enough I’ll sleep in the RV tonight,” he said.

We came up to the turn and slowed to a crawl. The mail truck was a more van
than truck. We usually rode with the sliding doors open. The windshield was three feet
tall and six feet wide. I saw the carnage from fifty feet. Al eased onto the shoulder and
the kerosene smell hit. The charred black cinderblocks of the foundation smoldered. It
looked like an h-bomb detonated. Scorched earth encircled the slab for a ten foot radius
from the chimney.

“What do you think, Papaw?”

“I think I’m going to church next Sunday.”

I didn’t go in the house that evening, and I never heard another word about it, but
the girl down at the Jet Pep said no police or fire departments responded to the fire
Saturday night. According to her, the call came in about nine o’clock. She saw the fire
from the parking lot, while she was out there smoking, and flipped on her Bearcat scanner.

“Nobody could figure out who should go, Pinson, Palmerdale, Remlap or the County,” she said.

“By the time Pinson said o.k., the fire was out. Whole thing was over in twenty minutes. Them firefighters stopped in here for coffee, you know. That’ll be $2.37.”


“Probably one of them Richard Pryor-type deals, you know?”

“Yeah, maybe.”
After Al and Ardell split up, the Great Schism I called it, there was a shift in my Papaw. The shift was more tectonic fissure than sponge migration. It was distinct. I often didn’t know what to make of it, but during those ten years in Blountsville, Al was happier than I’d ever seen him. No longer constrained by Ardell’s unique morality, Al Turner returned to his natural state. Ejected from the homestead he built in 1946 and stripped of all his possessions except his guns, his tractor and his camper, he marched on. I was thrilled he got the camper. We took it out west for a couple of weeks when I was twelve, and that was about the best trip I ever took, but I already told you about that.

He lost three hundred and sixty acres in the property settlement; his new house sat on forty (no mule). A pre-fab piece of nothing, Al said he could put his foot through the wall. The barns were more substantial than the house. One had four horse stalls and room enough for the camper, and the other was filled to the ceiling with round hay bales. True to form, and with better reason, Al had security in mind when he built the Blountsville house. The lot had a fifteen foot clear cut buffer, with three sides obscured by woods. The concrete pad extended beyond the front door to make a driveway. There was only one way in or out by vehicle. A car could be indentified or disabled well before its arrival. He laid the driveway by hand, spreading some quick drying chemical compound, creating an inconsistent grade and preventing anyone from going fast. At the time, I thought his precautions excessive, but later I was appreciative. Other than the bunker mentality of the principal occupant, the house could not have been more distinct from Palmerdale.
This was Blount County, the next county over from Ardell and right up the road from some of my cousins on Ardell’s side. These cousins were great. I lost touch with them for years, because Ardell didn’t like the wife, but I always enjoyed them. Dad’s first cousin Byron and his wife Cheri (Cheré) were the fun relatives. Twice married, to each other, they liked fishing, hunting and drinking. Byron’s long hair and beard gave him a hard one percent look, but Cheri was warm as a hug.

“You want a beer?” was the first thing Byron always said. “Mixed drink?” was the second. Byron set his own rules for living. If you can’t see his gun, then it’s in his pocket.

“Take some of this home with you,” Cheri told me after every meal. It’s was neither a question nor a statement. She just looked at you and outstretched a stack of plastic margarine tubs.

They lived together with Byron’s mother, Dot, in a house Cheri’s family built five generations ago. They updated the bathroom, and the refrigerator wasn’t on the porch anymore. They were the best neighbors if you ran low on Sevin Dust or gunpowder. They came to every holiday, birthday, graduation, child birth or otherwise special event in Al’s life (and mine) from the day he moved to Blount County until the day he died. Cheri found the body on the kitchen floor where we held the last “Outlaw Christmas” weeks earlier.

“Outlaw Christmas” was special. From 1993 through 2001 I spent every Christmas at Al’s new place. After a lifetime of two Christmases, I finally got to sit in one place and relax. At Ardell’s Christmas I had to lie to sneak out for beer or cigarettes. Not at the new place. Beer and wine carried the morning while we prepped the meat, and
whiskey was opened over the grill. Smoking was permitted, and shooting was encouraged. We ate around four, but no one left until late, if at all. We watched the Cowboys game during dinner, and no one dressed up. We were over it.

I brought a girl some years. One trip was usually enough to scare them off. Not everyone appreciated the unparalleled joy of unrestrained rednecks, and I tended to argue when I drank. Al, by contrast, stopped all his foolishness when he moved out there.

When he finished the house he moved his girlfriend, Janie, in with him. She drug her twenty-something child behind her. The daughter, Donna, had a birth certificate without Al’s name, but Janie’s husband did work at Dixie Bronze. I never asked.

Donna and her mom were problematic. The first couple of years I stayed out of it, but eventually the daughter became a problem I couldn’t overlook. I didn’t want to push the issue of her drug abuse, considering the glass house I lived in, but eventually I did.

“If you don’t get that junkie out of this house, then I’ll put you both out!” I screamed at her.

I hurled a pan of watery, store-bought dressing in the sink behind her. No sooner had I said it than I realized how ridiculous I sounded. I was self-employed as a part-time landscaper and a full-time independent pharmaceutical representative. The only reason I recognized her behavior was experience. Didn’t matter. Jack Daniels was doing most the talking.

Donna had fled the premises after we ate dinner.

“I’m going for cigarettes,” she said slamming the screen door.

I looked at Byron, and he looked back.

“2-1 says we don’t see her again,” he whispered.
“I’ll take twenty of that.”

She was gone. At ten o’clock Al left with a twelve gauge. He didn’t even ask me that time. It was not unusual, and I was not about to chase her all over Altoona on Thanksgiving.

“I’m taking the kids home. See you for Christmas?” Byron asked.

“Absolutely. Call me if she turns up. I’m going to talk to Janie for a second before I go.”

“Allright then.”

“Buy, hun,” Cheri kissed my cheek as she shooed her kids outside. The door snapped shut, and the dressing flew. I don’t remember everything I said, but it was bad. “Worthless junkie” and “trailer trash” made appearances. “What kind of fucked up redneck bullshit is methamphetamine? Is she a trucker? She might as well be huffing paint,” I waxed on wobbling there trying to focus on Janie’s face. I never took a real look at her before. She was not an attractive woman. Al was discriminating with everything in his life, but this one was something else. There must have been other criteria.

It must have chapped Ardell. I never thought of my grandmother as attractive until that second. Looking at Janie’s missing chin and bucked teeth, I thought of my Mamaw. For the first time, I stood in her sensible shoes. She must have had a stroke. Beating on the door of the camper, pistol waving, ready to finish it for good, and out walks Janie, ugly, chubby Janie. She was about fifty, but with lots of mileage. I understood why Mamaw didn’t shoot her. She was too surprised. I drove home struggling to get my head around it.
My tirade was extreme enough for me to be worried about it the next morning. In my post-alcohol fog, I wondered ‘is Papaw on his way over here to whip my ass?’ I struggled to recall how deep a hole I was in while I looked for a beer. There, behind the Chinese take-out, lay salvation. I pressed the cold aluminum to my cheek. Wow. I wish I would’ve come straight home last night. I popped the top and grabbed the box of moo-shu. The phone didn’t ring, and it didn’t ring for a week. I didn’t know if he was waiting on me, or moving them out. I couldn’t stand it, but I wasn’t about to poke the sleeping bear. Then it rang while I was gone to work. The answering machine was blinking when I got home.

“Chance, call me tonight,” Al commanded.

No questions. Huh. I figured I’d play it tough. I screwed up enough courage to call. He answered on the first ring.

“Heh, Papaw. You ready for Christmas? Where does the Tide roll now that we dropped one to Spurrier?”

“Son, Janie’s dead. (Pause) She was taking these diet pills during the holidays, and she thought if one was good then five was better. She had a stroke last night after supper.”

‘Holy shit,’ I thought.

“Donna’s still not back, but I have a good idea where’s she’s hid out. I’ll bring her home tonight.”

“I’m sorry, Papaw. What can I do?”

“Nothing right now, son. I need to find Donna right now. Once I get her home, I’ll call you.”
“All right. Please don’t go hunting her. She always turns up. I’m sure she’s in no hurry to find out her mom’s dead.”

“I need to tell her.”

“Yes sir.”

Donna was home for Christmas. We took turns babysitting her until she stopped trying to get loose. She spent the week fidgeting, sleeping and cussing, until she calmed down enough to bust loose after Christmas. The cycle continued for years. I never understood why he tolerated her. When she got the life insurance check, I was sure she’d be dead in a week.

The police found her that time. They found her in Snead, naked with the needle still in her arm. The doctor cleared up the infection in her arm, and we took her to the women’s clinic in Birmingham. A little time in county, a little rehab and she was out again. Meanwhile, we swept the house. I tossed her room with welding gloves. I wasn’t about to catch a needle for her.

Outlaw Christmas went on, but change crept in. Al never got another girlfriend. I cut my hair, re-enrolled in college and quit my old sales job. By the time I was in law school, Al had me drafting pleadings to beat his alimony payments and talking to prosecutors about Donna’s probation.

By 2000, Al was sick. Failed back surgery left him with about fifty percent mobility, and his eyes usually kept him from driving. The doctor told me “he can’t live alone anymore.”
I had a year left in Tuscaloosa, and although Cheri was down the street, she had a job and two kids. We relied on Donna to call 911 when there was an accident, but her state sponsored vacation was running long. I tried everything. I even called Janet.

“That’s your mess. You clean it up,” she told me.

I was broke. I quit two jobs the previous summer to take care of Al, and fall semester was about to start.

I moved him into a home. It was called an assisted living facility, but it was a home, a stinking, filthy home full of senile bed-wetters. I thought I would die. I was pushing him into the grave, and he fought as I wheeled him inside.

What else could I do? I had to get Donna.

I picked her up from the Marshall County woman’s facility in Guntersville. As we drove south, I explained the situation.

“I talked to your Judge. He’s agreed to re-instate your probation, so you can stay with Al,” I said, still not believing he agreed. The judge must have known Al from Donna’s many court appearances. The old guy had a real sense of decency.

She looked at me, half-angry and half-pitiful. She smelled of jail, like a wet sandwich. She lit up my last Marlboro and said “Can we please stop and eat. I missed breakfast processing out.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m out of cigarettes anyway.”

“I don’t have any money,” she mumbled.

“I know, honey. I’ll get you a cheeseburger.”

I let her eat in peace, the cheeseburger aroma mercifully supplanting the inmate Chanel. I bought her cigarettes, Marlboro, same as me. We had a lot in common. We
liked the same music. We went to the same college. We both loved Al. We both battled drug addiction, albeit with differing amounts of success. Unlike her mom, she was good looking and easy to be around. We would have been friends if we met in college rather than Oneonta. Things could have been different.

“Look. I’m not sugar coating this. Your history of total failure leaves me with zero confidence, but I don’t have much choice. You do. You can help me and Al and yourself, or you can go back to Tutwiler prison. Decide, right now. What’s it going to be?”

“I want to go home, Chance.”

“All right. Good. Do I need to tell you how fast you’ll be wearing orange if you fuck up?”

“No. I understand. I don’t do it on purpose,” she blubbered. “You don’t have to be a dick about it.”

“I don’t have to be. Not as long as you understand I can be.”

“How is he? Is he going die?”

“He’s all right for now, but anything else will finish him, his heart will give out.”

“What happens to me if he dies?”

“I don’t know, Donna. Can we just get him home for now? I can’t leave him in that shithole one more day. Help me take care of my Papaw, and I’ll help you. O.k.?”

“O.k.”

We drove the rest of the way in silence. We got there and Al was packing. I watched him shuffling around. He was old, old and beaten. She fell into his arms and they both started crying. I never saw my Papaw cry.
“Let me take y’all home,” I said.
Trestle tables were very popular in the Middle Ages and they’re still popular even today, being mainly appreciated for the fact that they’re easy to assemble and to take apart, easy to transport and to store. They allowed multifunctional spaces to thrive as a room could serve as a dining area one moment and as a game room or dance floor the next. This type of flexibility made the trestle dining table the ideal occasional piece. The style is still popular today although in some cases the flexibility and ease of storage has nothing to do with it. View in gallery. Trestle dining tables usually lo