

This Thing Don't Lead To Heaven

a novel by
HARRY CREWS

"Harry Crews' work is southern Gothic at its best, a Hieronymus Bosch landscape in Dixie inhabited by monstrous, darling pets." — Jean Stafford



**THIS THING DON'T LEAD
TO HEAVEN**

A novel

HARRY CREWS

1970

To the memory of my boy
PATRICK SCOTT CREWS
1960-1964

Chapter One

CARLITA ROJAS MUNDEZ walked out of the men's restroom of the Gulf Oil station in Cumseh, Georgia and saw the Greyhound Bus leaving her. She did not shout for the bus to stop, or even wave, but simply stood watching until it was gone. Then she walked around to the door of the station and told J. L. Gates that the bus had just left her and she was not sure what she was going to do now. But J. L. who had been looking at a comic strip from the *Albany Herald*, didn't understand her because she spoke to him in Spanish. And J. L. had never heard any Spanish in his life, didn't even know anybody spoke it.

"How's at?" he said.

She told him again, and while she spoke she walked over and sat down in a chair in front of the fan that J. L. had humming on top of a bulk oil drum. She was a large woman, taller than J. L. She carried a black cloth bag about the size and shape of a bowling ball and closed by a drawstring that she had looped about her wrist. The bright yellow dress she was wearing made her dark skin appear even darker. But J. L. knew right away that she was not a Cumseh Negro, not only because he could not understand what she said, but also because of the way she had plopped herself down in front of his fan. She was not even looking at him now. The dark hair stood out from her neck in the stream of air. She had gold rings in the lobes of her large flat ears.

"You caint set there," J. L. said.

He did not want to think about the way her voice had sounded when she had spoken to him. His mind was dulled from wondering over the static images of the comic strip. He had just drunk an RC Cola and he could taste it in his mouth. She still had not moved. J. L. got up and went to the door and looked out into the street. The hard bright sunlight hurt his eyes. It was Sunday and he had not pumped a single gallon of gas. Nothing had stopped at the Gulf station but the Greyhound, and J. L. could smell the burnt oil still lying on the air where the bus had left it. The driver had stopped the bus by the pump island and come inside because J. L.'s station was also the bus depot in Cumseh, Georgia. The driver had picked up a package that was going by Greyhound freight to Macon. He stayed long enough to drink an RC Cola with J. L. because the air conditioning was not working right on the bus and he was not stopping for lunch until he got to Cordele, which was still an hour and a half up the road.

J. L. stood in the door sweating, not wanting to turn around and look at the nigger who was obviously not a nigger, who had opened her mouth and said something that nobody could have said whether she was a nigger or just looked like one. The blue oil smoke from the bus still wavered in the layers in front of the gas island. J. L. could feel the heat rising, cracking the sidewalks, melting the macadam highway, and distorting the whole world through the plate-glass window of the Gulf Oil station. He wanted to get back into his comic strip in front of the fan on the bulk oil drum. But he couldn't with that nigger still sitting in there. She might be crazy. The thought had occurred to him but he didn't want to think about it.

"You caint set there," J. L. said, turning to look at her.

He was sorry he spoke, because for the first time he saw the doll in her lap. It was small, not much bigger than a man's thumb. It had a straight pin sticking in its eye. One of her hands held the doll, the other held the pin. Directly, J. L. turned around and went outside to the grease rack where a Negro was asleep on a croker sack, a felt hat pulled forward covering half his face. J. L. kicked the Negro lightly on the bottom of the shoe.

“Lummy,” he said, “wake up.”

~~Lummy half raised the felt hat and opened one eye. But he was not looking at J. L. Lummy was~~ looking at the grease rack. It was empty. He was dreaming. J. L. never woke him up except to grease cars. He had looked at the rack to see what kind of car was on it. But it was empty. He was dreaming. He let the felt hat down again and was instantly asleep.

J. L. kicked him again, this time not so lightly. “Lummy, goddammit git up.”

Now Lummy resisted. He held tightly to what he thought was sleep to keep from waking to what he thought was a dream. But then J. L. reached down and lifted the felt hat. The awful sun smashed right through Lummy’s closed eyelids. He had gone to sleep in the shade, but his head had crept slowly into the rising sun and he could feel his eyeballs cracking in the glare. He clamped his hands over his eyes and squinted out through his fingers, again at the grease rack.

“It ain’t nothing on the rack,” said Lummy.

“It’s in my office, Lummy. Git up.”

It had to be a dream, but Lummy unwound his legs and got to his feet. If J. L. had a goddam car in his office, he’d grease it. He wouldn’t say the first thing about it; he’d just act like it happened every Sunday morning. But Lummy slouched into the Gulf Oil station and found Carlita instead. She had a doll in her hands. The doll had a pin in each eye.

“She come in here and set down like that,” J. L. said.

“Say she did,” said Lummy. He had pushed the felt hat onto the back of his head and was now examining the yellow palms of his hands. He had drunk moonshine whiskey until midnight and then had come over to the station and gone to sleep on the croker sack beside the grease rack because his wife threatened to cut him with a razor if he got drunk again. And Lummy was in no shape to look at a doll with pins in its eyes. He was trembly inside from the whiskey and waking up early and the bright sun.

“Tell her she caint set there,” said J. L.

“You caint set there,” Lummy said to the palms of his hands.

“The bus left me. I must wait,” said Carlita in Spanish.

“What did she say?” demanded J. L., going red in the face.

“She say habla habla habla,” said Lummy trying to reproduce the sound he had heard from Carlita. Lummy knew it was a dream now, knew it in the hopeless and desperate way of all dreams and knew also that he was caught in it and that he would never understand it. It was the moonshine. He never should have drunk it. All he could do was hope to wake up.

“She’s afflicted,” said J. L.

“Say she is?” Lummy said. He was ready to believe anything, anxious as he was that he and J. L. agree on *something*.

“But she looks all right,” said J. L.

That was really what bothered J. L., the way she looked. She was bigger than he or Lummy either one. And she looked stronger than both of them put together. He would have liked for something to be wrong with her. Obviously wrong, like a deformed hand or crossed eyes. But nothing was. She shined, sparkled almost—her hair, her burnished skin, the whites of her eyes. She glanced at J. L. and he could tell by the way she immediately looked away that she had simply dismissed the fact that he was there at all. It offended him that she was not afraid. Anybody that came in and sat down at his filling station like that on a Sunday morning—not to mention the way she talked—anybody like that should have been afraid.

“You better watch out,” said J. L.

Lummy jumped back. "Whoa," he said, holding up his hands.

~~"Not you goddammit, Lummy," J. L. said. "Her. She better just watch the hell out."~~

"Say she had?" said Lummy. He wanted to agree. But not where she could hear. He didn't like the way she was pushing those pins in the doll's eyes.

Carlita put the doll down and opened the drawstrings to the round cloth bag. She took out a handful of hair and put it on the bulk oil drum behind the fan. It was heavy, coarse hair and the edge of it fluttered in the suction of the fan. Then she took out strips of cloth and several bones about a inch long.

"Godamighty! Hair and bones!" cried J. L.

Lummy hugged himself. "Say it is!" He had cut his eyes away as soon as he saw the hair coming out of the bag. And he was now afraid to look back. If he could have convinced himself that he was awake, he would have run out the door. But since he was convinced it was a dream, he knew that if he ran through the door he'd only find an elephant or something standing out there beside the gas pump.

"You watch her, Lummy," said J. L. "I got to call Axel."

J. L. took the phone off the hook on the wall and started dialing. Lummy crept closer to the fan of coarse, fluttering hair and short yellow bones. He looked into the open mouth of the cloth bag and saw five little round heads on five little stick bodies peering up at him, diminutive people with pins in their necks.

Carlita reached out and took a piece of hair and two of the bones. It was more than Lummy could bear. He leaned closer, so close she had to look at him.

"What is it?" he asked. "What is it?"

II

✦ A MAN appeared in the door of the Gulf Oil station. But J. L. did not see him because J. L. had his back to the door now, yelling into the phone about a nigger that might be crazy—habla, habla, habla. Lummy saw the man but did not believe him. He was part of the dream, part of the elephant act that Lummy knew was pumping gas on the melting macadam driveway outside. Lummy had never seen such a man, even in a dream. He was dressed entirely in green, even to his shoes—dark green trousers, a lighter green coat, and a shirt of yet paler green. He stood glowing in the doorway, sucking his teeth and doing complicated tricks with a toothpick he had caught between his lips.

Carlita stopped what she was doing with the hair and bones. She gave Lummy a comforting smile. Lummy's eyes were swollen. Bright drops of sweat hung in his tight cap of hair like bits of broken glass. She could smell his fear.

"It's only goat hair and chicken bones," she said in Spanish. "Don't worry. I'm not making you

"Why, that's Spanish," said the man in the green suit whose name was Junior Bledsoe and who was not the slightest bit interested in whether it was Spanish or Arabic. He would not have crossed the street for that.

Lummy kept his back to the speaking dream and whistled "The world is not my home, I'm just passing through." It was a nervous gesture, the same tune he whistled in the same breathless way when his wife threatened to cut him with a razor.

"Spanish?" said J. L. who had put the telephone down in time to catch the last word.

"Spanish," said Junior Bledsoe.

"I never known a nigger to speak it," J. L. said. He'd never known anybody to speak it, but he did not want to appear ignorant.

"I'm Junior Bledsoe," said the man in green, holding out his hand.

"Name J. L. Gates." The two men shook hands. "This my place of business," said J. L. "And she come in here and set down like that and I ain't been able to git her to talk. Looks like I'm gone have to take her by the head and drag her if I want her out of here."

As he spoke, J. L. saw Carlita ease a pin—carefully and with frightening gentleness—into the ear of the doll she had just made out of the hair and bones. She did not stop until the pin came out the other side of the doll's head. Then she spun the doll on the axis of the pin like a top.

"Course I don't want to do that," J. L. added quickly, "because I like to treat a nigger right."

"Bus left her," said Junior Bledsoe.

"You mean the Greyhound?"

"I saw the whole thing from across the street where I was eating breakfast in the cafe. Bus pulled up, driver got out, left the door open, she got out, he got in, bus left."

Lummy had eased away from the cloth bag with the dolls in it and was now squatting on his heels against the cool cement wall behind Carlita. He slipped the felt hat down over his eyes. He wondered whether or not you could sleep in a dream. He'd never tried it.

"You ever seen anything like that?" asked J. L., pointing to Carlita where she was working with the bones and hair and strips of cloth.

"No," Junior Bledsoe said.

But he was lying. He was an expert on dolls because he was an expert on age, and he had seen men dying of senility who carried dolls about with them all day long.

“Well,” said J. L. “Axel’ll know what to do with her.”

“Axel?” said Junior Bledsoe.

J. L. took him by the arm and turned him to the brilliant plate-glass window. On the far side of town, the horizon lifted on a gently rising hill, a wooded hill full of pine trees and scrub oak at the top of which was a huge, three-storied house.

J. L. pointed. “Axel’s Senior Club. Her daddy called it a Old Folk’s Home, but Axel calls it Senior Club. You got to keep up with the times in the business world. She’s clever like that. I called her, she’s coming.”

Junior Bledsoe shot the toothpick out of his mouth like a dart and smiled. His heart lifted. Then he explained the store he had seen as he zoomed into Cumseh on his way back to the home office from St. Petersburg, Florida, where he had just set a new Coronation Casket record. He had seen the brick store front and the glittery letters embossed across its face: WHEN NATURE DENIES, CALL FLYY’S. Chrome wheelchairs and shiny braces winked at him from the dark recesses of the store. Hernia belts and artificial breasts hung in the window. He was two miles on the other side of Cumseh before he could get the big Lincoln slowed and turned around. He cruised back into Cumseh and parked across the street from the store. *Herman Flyy’s Store of Human Accessories*, he read the name with satisfaction. Of course, it was Sunday and he couldn’t go in and browse. He sat very still in the car and tried to keep calm. Such a store meant old people. Old dying people in need of him, Junior Bledsoe. But where? He craned his neck and looked out the side windows. A small town, very small. But a big store of human accessories. He tried to keep himself in hand. It was no use though. He could feel the blood swelling his eyes, his heart fluttering.

Death had been good to Junior Bledsoe. It had led him to the top of a competitive profession. He was, at thirty-three, the head of Coronation Casket Works’ Memorial Garden Division. He sold nothing now but Garden Plots. No more caskets or vaults or formfitting-corpsewear-for-final-sleep or even last-memorials-of-pure-cast-plaster-for-the-loved-ones, although all of it still held a special place in his heart and always would. But Garden Plots were the thing now, the last step in a well-planned death.

In dwelling upon them, he had come to have the same kind of instinctive feel for open graves that he had (at an earlier time) developed for open caskets. Just by looking at a Prospect he could tell nearly every time whether he would prefer a Garden Plot in flat ground or on a hill. (Does one want one’s head or one’s feet elevated?) Or near a tree? (We only plant trees with shallow root systems in our Memorial Gardens and one does not have to worry about a thing.) On dry land or near a stream? (Thin silver streams of fresh water, artificially pumped through concrete beds. No drainage problems can ever develop. You can set your mind at rest. Coronation *leaves nothing to chance.*)

“Just eating breakfast,” said Junior in answer to a question, “over there in the cafe. And I saw her get out and then saw her get left.”

J. L. Gates squinted against the bright sheet of glass. And there across the street was a Lincoln car parked in front of the Southern Gentleman, Cumseh’s only cafe. It was open on Sunday to cater to the tourists, but since the superhighway, I-75, had been completed they did not get many tourists any more. Occasionally, though, one or two got lost and wandered down into Cumseh.

“You a tourist?” asked J. L.

“Well, you might say that,” Junior Bledsoe said. “I was on vacation, but I managed to get in a little business. I handle Memorial Garden Plots.”

J. L. did not have a clear idea of what a Memorial Garden Plot was—he thought it might be some form of truck farming—but he was intimidated by Junior Bledsoe’s green clothes and his big car and he did not want to appear ignorant in front of such a man. So instead of asking what a Memorial Garden Plot was, he went over and kicked Lummy.

“Wake up, Lummy, goddammit.” But it was a half hearted kick on the side of the shoe, and Lummy, who was now in a deep dreamless sleep, did not wake up.

“There’s something around her neck,” Junior Bledsoe said.

“It is?” said J. L., backing away from Lummy and looking where Junior pointed.

“It’s a card of some sort with typing on it,” said Junior.

The two men moved in on Carlita to get a closer look. She ignored them and slowly bent the leg of the doll up behind its back.

“It’s strung from a string,” said J. L. “Can you read it?” He was so close to her he could smell the hair.

“Cuban Relocation Center,” said Junior Bledsoe. “Miami, Florida. Says she’s to be a cook for a Spanish teacher at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. Finder please return. Postage guaranteed.”

“Why, she’s a cook,” said J. L. as though that somehow explained everything.

“That’s what it says on the card,” said Junior Bledsoe.

J. L. turned on his heel, went to the telephone, snatched it off the hook, and dialed a number. “She’s a cook,” he shouted into the telephone. “Yeah, it’s around her neck. A cook.”

“I’ll just step next door a minute,” said Junior Bledsoe to the back of J. L.’s head, and ducked out the door.

Junior wanted to look at Herman Flyy’s store, to get close to it. He walked quickly across the black macadam drive from which heat rose in wavy lines, distorting everything, causing the taffeta colored curbstone to wiggle and the street to undulate like water. Herman Flyy’s Store of Human Accessories was next door to J. L.’s Gulf Oil station. Junior Bledsoe pressed his nose against the plate-glass window. Then, after a long look, he jerked back and turned his face up toward Axel’s Senior Club, then finally to his Lincoln car where it waved in the rising sun in front of the Southern Gentleman Cafe. On the shelf at the rear window of the Lincoln lay a ring of red flowers, now yellowed and wilted.

A girl wearing a Polynesian grass skirt had put that ring of flowers around his neck on the second day of his vacation in Miami Beach. She worked for the hotel and she thought she was entertaining him. But Junior’s red pinched eyes had stared at the skin of her smooth muscled belly and he had felt stifled, gagged, unable to breathe. He stretched his neck now at the memory and looked off to the rising hill where the three-storied house leaned on the horizon. Anybody that had a belly like that would never buy a Garden Plot. Her flesh still smelled of immortality.

But he had not been there in that hotel to sell Garden Plots anyway. He was on a forced vacation. His superiors at Coronation had shipped him off to Miami Beach like a corpse in a casket. He had not wanted to go. But they were concerned about his health. He had never taken a vacation, and he was working too hard. They were afraid he would collapse. So they had sealed him in his Lincoln car and sent him off to Miami where he had been able to stand it for two days until the girl with the unbearable belly had looped his neck with flowers. Whereupon he had let out a groan like a dying man and rushed out of the hotel without even waiting to pack and driven furiously, stopping only once for gas, to St. Petersburg, Florida, the city of the living dead, to the very heart of the largest Senior Citizen Community in the world.

And for the remainder of what was to have been his two-week vacation, he stood under the

blazing Florida sun on the shuffleboard courts in the Retirement Centers, and in the cool tropic night at Patio Dances for Senior Citizens peddling Garden Plots. And back at the home office when the orders first began to trickle in and then swelled to a flood, the officials of Coronation Casket just chuckled and shook their heads and said how you couldn't keep a good man down.

But he was due back now—overdue in fact. Because of his success in St. Petersburg, there was talk of opening a branch office in that city. The president of Coronation himself had called Junior on the telephone to talk about it. And now he was supposed to get back to the office and work out the plans, lay the groundwork so to speak, for the St. Petersburg Memorial Garden branch office.

But it was Sunday and hot, and the plate glass of Herman Flyy's store stood in front of him like a sheet of refracted ice and on the hill a house full of dying men and women leaned against the sky. And Junior Bledsoe had never known anyone who did not feel his mortality more keenly on Sunday.

That included himself.

III

☛ JEFFERSON DAVIS MUNROE'S room was a small cubicle behind the furnace. It had been used to store coal when Axel's father was alive. But when he died, Axel took over and converted to gas. She gave Jefferson Davis his meals and the little room behind the furnace and let him practice his profession there in the basement on a steel table padded by a thin strip of foam rubber and covered with a blanket. It looked good on the advertising pamphlets Axel sent out to be able to say that there was a masseur right on the premises. And along with the statement she would include an inset picture of Jefferson Davis, but only of the head and shoulders. That way he looked entirely normal, even handsome.

But he was not. His father used to get drunk and beg him to grow. His father, who always reeked of the sweet, stinking smell of drying cow's milk, would come in from the barn drunk, spilling great splotches of milk as he came, and set the milk buckets down by the fireplace, go to his knees, and beg Jefferson Davis not to hold it against him and grow. "Stop holding it against me," he would cry, rolling his wounded eyes to heaven. "Stop holding it against me, *grow!*"

But he had not. Jefferson Davis stopped growing somewhere around the age of four and never started again. And today, at thirty-seven, he looked like a child that has been taken apart and then hurriedly and unskillfully put back together.

His room in back of the furnace in the basement of Axel's Senior Club had a window at ground level from which he could look right down into Cumseh. He was on a box at the window now while Axel talked on the telephone. She was lying uncovered on her stomach on his workout table, arched up on her elbows, white, grunting into the telephone. From his box, Jefferson Davis squinted, strained his eyes. The man in green, whom Jefferson Davis had watched walk across the street from the Southern Gentleman Cafe, was standing in front of Herman Flyy's place now.

"A cook," grunted Axel. "All right, all right, J. L., a goddam cook."

Jefferson Davis Munroe bounded off his box by the window, took two hops, and landed on the bench beside the workout table. The hair on his enormous head flew about his face as he struck Axel in the side with the wedge of his hand.

"Cook? Did he say cook?" demanded Jefferson Davis. "What about cook? That'er name?" But Axel only grunted with pleasure and kept the telephone to her ear.

When the telephone had rung the first time that morning, Jefferson Davis had been scared to death that it was Sarah Nell Brownstien from Macon. She had threatened to come. She said in her letters that she just couldn't stand it any longer and she was just getting on the Greyhound one morning and come on to Cumseh. And he knew she would. In spite of the fact that he wrote and told her he was busy, busy, busy, he knew in his bones Sarah Nell was coming.

It seemed like a bad dream, but she was real all right. There was a picture of her above the head of his bed, stuck into the wall with a thumb tack. She was posed beside the flagpole in front of the main post office in Macon, Georgia, where she worked as a mail sorter.

Jefferson Davis slammed Axel in the back of the neck with his little steel fist. "That'er name? Cook? What Cook? Mary Cook? Suzy Cook?" But Axel only groaned again and caused her pendulous

buttocks to shiver. Jefferson Davis could hear J. L. Gates barking through the line.

—Sarah Nell had told Jefferson Davis all about sorting mail, about how thrilling it was—as she p
it—to touch all those lives, those paper lives with a six-cent stamp on them passing through her hands
all day long. She told him everything in her long discursive letters, all about reading poetry, Sidne
Lanier mainly, and about being a poetic person herself, and finally she got around to telling Jefferson
Davis the most important fact of all, that she tended to be a tallish girl—just a shade over six feet.

She had seen his picture, a neck-and-head shot, in one of the pamphlets that Axel sent out right
after Jefferson Davis had come to stay in the Senior Club. It was an admirable picture. The features
were large but cleanly made, the nose high and straight over a strong mouth. It was surely the head of
an enormous and powerful man. At least it had seemed so to Sarah Nell (as she had told Jefferson
Davis in her first letter), who had first seen it sitting alone on a ladder-back chair in her second story
walk-up in Macon, Georgia. She had immediately fallen in love with Jefferson Davis Munroe's head
and with the rest of him, too, even though she had never seen the rest of him. But it seemed obvious
to her what the rest of him must look like. So she had written him long interesting letters about how she
had always loved big men. And it was not that he had lied to her, he simply had not told her the truth
that he was not yet four feet tall. Now she was, and had been in the last several letters, threatening
to come see him.

Jefferson Davis put his head down close to Axel's and strained to hear what J. L. was yelling
through the telephone. His heart thumped in his chest, and his eyes were fixed on the spot over the
head of his bed where the photograph showed Sarah Nell, blond and breastless, smiling wildly beside
the flagpole in front of the main post office.

"I said I would," said Axel into the telephone. "Didn't I say I would?" She handed the telephone
to Jefferson Davis for him to replace on the hook.

Jefferson Davis grabbed the flesh on Axel's back and twisted it in his hands until she sucked a
bit of skin in through her teeth and whimpered like a dog.

"Who was it?" asked Jefferson Davis.

"J. L." Axel said, clawing at the table.

"Hell, I know that," said Jefferson Davis. He had heard that much from the first telephone call.
"It's her I mean. Who was it on the Greyhound?" He set his feet and pulled at her back as though he
meant to skin her alive.

"Nigger," gasped Axel. "It's a nigger."

"Gret," said Jefferson Davis, releasing her back to chop her lightly across the shoulders. "Just
Gret." He poured linament over his hands and applied it briskly to her upper arms.

"But we got to take the pickup and go down there anyhow," Axel said.

"How come?" He wasn't concerned now. His voice was indifferent. Sarah Nell had not come
on the Greyhound. He rolled Axel over and grabbed both her breasts at once and wrung them like ears
of corn he was trying to tear off the stalk. Her breasts turned red as blood in his hands.

"How come?" he asked again in the same indifferent voice, like a barber asking about the
weather.

"Nigger caint talk," said Axel, her glazed eyes rolling toward the far wall.

"Caint talk?" Jefferson Davis splashed alcohol over her belly.

"Habla, habla, habla," Axel said, shivering from the freezing alcohol.

"Habla, habla, habla?" asked Jefferson Davis.

"That's what he said she said."

"Your cousin ain't got good sense," he said. "Git up. I'm done."

IV

☞ JEREMY TETLEY had lost a tooth that morning, a Sunday. And Sunday was just the worst time to lose anything, because on Sunday he often thought of God. And God to him was death. He couldn't help it. At eighty, death—a thing he knew nothing about—was the realest thing in his life. It was what was left over after all the other sums had been subtracted. His business was gone, his money, his wife, both his brothers, and even a sister who had been twenty years younger than he. And now Jeremy, himself, lived in a graveyard. Or so he thought of his body, the last thing left him, and the least permanent.

When he awoke that morning he had known something was wrong the moment he had opened his eyes. Lying very still he felt a brief loosening beside his tongue, and a tooth dropped into his mouth. At first, he thought that it had somehow broken; then his tongue found the hole. There was no blood and it wasn't even sore. Rather, there was a dry leathery socket where the tooth had simply fallen out.

Jeremy had been standing at the window almost a half hour watching the hard bright sun filtering through Molly's flowers in the corner of the yard. Farther away down a sloping hill where he and some of the Members of Axel's Senior Club sometimes walked in the evening hours, birds flew out of the grass toward the dark trees. He was still in his pajamas and he still had the tooth in his mouth.

He turned from the window and sat down on a little wooden bench in front of his dressing mirror. Slowly his right hand lifted to his mouth and took out the tooth. It was the last of his upper jaw teeth, stained the color of tobacco, even though he had never smoked, and ground down across the top with a little piece of metal embedded in the center of it. Now he had ten left, all front teeth except one, a single bottom jaw tooth at the back of his mouth and useless because it had nothing to grind against. Carefully he set it down in front of him on the dresser and examined his face. He squinted to see his image reflected in the green wavy depths of the mirror. He couldn't see that the collapsed tooth made any difference.

But that it made no difference was not cause for happiness. It only depressed him. If he lost all his teeth, he would probably look just the same. His skull and the fragile workings at the hinge of his jaw were insistent under almost transparent skin. His hair was pale, and trained, what little bit there was of it, to fall straight back over a bald spot the size of a baseball just below the crown of his head.

He took a deep breath and tried to think of breakfast. He examined his face, touched his cheek, traced the line of his chin. Then shyly, like a girl undressing for a lover, he opened a bottom drawer on the right side of the dresser and lifted out a slender jar. It had four teeth in it. He screwed off the lid and dropped the tooth in. He let himself look where the hard bright light from the window caught the teeth in the bottom of the jar. Five teeth, five pieces of him. In some mysterious way that he could not have named, he hated—dreaded—to part with the tooth. And so, with his face still partly averted, he screwed the lid back on and put the jar away.

He got out of his pajamas and examined his belly in the mirror. His body was thin, his atrophied thighs almost liver-colored and dimpled so that the light from the window threw a rough shadow of texture over his skin. But wherever he looked, his gaze always came back to his belly, sagging and seeming almost to pulse as though it were beating with a life of its own. He turned sideways to the

mirror and drew in his stomach. But even as he was caught in the effort, he remembered his wife naked and standing in just the same way, the same attitude. The light caught her pregnant straining belly where it seemed to throb before the mirror.

A lost distracted look came into Jeremy Tetley's face, and his thin dark hands touched his belly, trembled, lingered on its sagging curve. He remembered the life he'd felt in her stomach and felt still. In an awful split static moment he saw himself, an eighty-year-old toothless ruin, wondering what he would name the child he had sired eight months earlier and who had been dead for over half a century.

He had not thought of his wife in a long time, and his face was suddenly hot with shame. Without looking again into the mirror, he got into his clothes. He took down a pair of black trousers where he had hung them the night before, carefully brushed them, and drew them on. Then he took down a white shirt he had laundered himself and hung to dry. There were hardly any wrinkles in it. He did not own any ties anymore. But he had two ascots, a red one and a yellow one, both of which he cared for a great deal. He chose the yellow one. It was really too hot for a coat, but he put one on anyway. It was the maroon one that had food stains beside the middle button which he had not been able to get out with the fluid he used to dry-clean his clothes.

Finally, when he was dressed, he left the room without checking himself again in the mirror. Directly across from his room was a small shaft with a grill door. It had a padlock on it. The single huge bay window at the front of the house was covered with heavy drapes, making the light bad in the hall so that he went down very slowly toward the stairs leading to the dining room. And he was never to know whether it was the bad light or losing the tooth that morning or what—but whatever it was, he was suddenly aware that his gait over the faded brown carpet was abrupt and fragile, a kind of controlled lurch.

"God help me," he said aloud, "I walk like an old man."

Whereupon he stopped and went back into his room and got the tooth he had lost that morning and took it to breakfast with him. He came into the dining room downstairs with his right hand tight clutching the tooth in his pocket. The broad staircase led directly into the long hall-like room in which the members were fed. The drapes had been pulled all the way back and the room was alive with light. Jeremy adjusted the ascot at his throat and sat at the table. He was late because of losing the tooth and the only other Member there was Mary.

"It's going to be another hot one," he said bravely. He never knew what Mary might say when he spoke to her.

He settled himself onto the chair as her head jerked up from the bowl of mush in front of her. Her eyes, like two pieces of mucus pasted into the pallor of her face, struck directly into Jeremy's own, and he felt the center of his chest go cold. She had a piece of food stuck to the side of her nose.

"Good morning," said Jeremy.

"Turn it up, turn it up," said Mary. She bent her head and began dipping mush into her mouth again.

Utopia came out of the kitchen, her strapless shoes slapping the floor as she came, and stopped beside Jeremy's chair. Utopia was in charge of the house. She had five colored girls to help her. She did not have to keep the Ward out back. Axel had three men for that. Utopia stood, not looking at Jeremy but at the open window through which the green pine hill shimmered in the sun. The thumbs on both her hands had been broken and had healed badly. She habitually carried them wrapped in the apron over her belly.

"You late," she said, her hands struggling briefly under the apron as she spoke. "Nothing left."

thrown it out.”

—“Coffee, I only want coffee,” Jeremy said, not looking at her. He could not stand to think about how she might have broken her thumbs.

Utopia slapped back into the kitchen and brought the coffee, lukewarm and without cream, but Jeremy let it pass. He wanted her to go back into the kitchen so he wouldn’t have to look at her. But she didn’t. She started clearing the table, moving listlessly through the heavy air like a tired swimmer in water. Her thumbs stood grotesquely from her hands as she raked mush out of bowls and stacked empty plates. There didn’t seem to be many plates and bowls, but she went interminably on, paddling back and forth over the table. She had several cups stacked in a high precarious line when Molly came in and sat at the end of the table.

“You late,” Utopia said, her twisted thumbs clutching the stacked cups. “Nothing left. I thrown out.”

“Good for you, Utopia,” Molly said brightly. She took off her glasses, breathed on them, and began polishing them with a napkin.

Utopia left for the kitchen with the stack of cups. Molly smiled down the table at Jeremy. Jeremy drank his coffee with one hand and held his tooth with the other. Mary put another piece of food on the side of her nose and quietly admonished someone to “Turn it up, please.”

“I was the first to eat this morning,” said Molly. “I like an early start.”

Jeremy sipped his coffee and did not answer. He slowly looked the other way.

“Poor Utopia,” Molly continued in a louder voice. “If she can’t rake it in a bowl or stack it in a pile, she just doesn’t know a thing about it.”

Utopia came back in and stood poised, regarding the long wet surface of the table.

Jeremy’s head snapped round suddenly to look at Molly. “How old are you?” he asked.

“Sixty-six,” Molly replied instantly, as though she had been expecting the question all morning. “How old are you?”

“Seventy-seven,” Jeremy said.

“I’m fifty-five and had five children,” said Utopia, doing a slow breast stroke up the table, a damp cloth in each hand.

“You don’t look a day over seventy, if that,” said Molly.

She and Jeremy regarded each other across the table. Jeremy did not trust her. She had been at the Club for only six months, and he had been here for seven long years—yes, seven, he thought—and it had come to seem his whole life. It was becoming more and more difficult for him to remember the time before he was here. He had never asked her age before, nor she his. And that was unusual because the question “How old are you?” was rarely out of earshot in Axel’s Senior Club. It echoed in the halls, floated out of the individual rooms, hovered about the dinner table and over the shuffleboard courts under the oak trees behind the house during the long still evenings when the Members huddled around the colliding pucks in the failing light. But Jeremy had never put the question to Molly because she allowed her to put it to him because her cheerful good humor depressed him.

She wore it like a suit of armor. Her mouth seemed permanently nailed into a smile. But more depressing than her good humor were the bandages she wore on her right leg. They were Ace bandages that she bought out of the drug store and dyed various bright colors. The bandages started just below her knee and went up her leg under her dress. He didn’t know how far. The bright colors seemed particularly offensive to him—even obscene—in the drab, dust-colored atmosphere of Axel’s Senior Club.

The one she had on this morning, he couldn’t help noticing, was an eye-shattering red. He had

not seen one that bright before. She must have found a new kind of dye.

—“It’s a fine day,” said Molly. “A fine bright day.”

Mary made a sound in her throat and pushed her bowl of mush away. Utopia swept it up and slapped away to the kitchen. The wet slab of the table glittered between them.

“A fine bright day,” said Molly, who thought Jeremy might not have heard her.

“I heard you the first time,” said Jeremy, who knew exactly what she thought. “I hear as well as I ever did. I don’t wear a hearing aid.” He turned his head carefully so she could see his ears, see that he didn’t have a button in either one.

As he turned his head, a mad ringing of bells came up the hill from Cumseh. They looked away from each other toward the sound of the bells. It was Mr. Hiram Peters’ church bells, which were not bells at all but rather a round metal eyeliner that played in a machine and was then amplified from the steeple of the Church of the Universal Christ. They began exactly at eight-thirty on Sunday morning.

“Mary won’t make it today,” said Jeremy.

“They said she wouldn’t make it last Sunday,” said Molly. “Look on the bright side.”

Every Sunday before noon, if the weather was good, Axel took the Members down the hill to a place where wooden benches were formed in a semicircle to hear Mr. Peters deliver what was called a talk of Moral Uplift because Mr. Peters did not like the word sermon. Every Member that could walk went to hear the talk. If a Member collapsed and could not walk, he went to the Ward, a low brick structure built behind the Club. Nobody ever went anywhere from the Ward.

“I lost a tooth this morning,” said Jeremy, suddenly overwhelmed with his loss and, as soon as he had spoken, shamed that he could have made such an admission to a stranger. He should have waited for Molly to have gone and told it to Mary, who had been his mindless confidante for months.

Molly spread her hands on the table and discreetly looked out the window. She sensed his shame. She had not had a tooth in her own head for twenty years.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“That’s stupid,” he said, forcing himself to be calm. “It’s stupid to be sorry.”

Then to his own horror and disbelief, he took the tooth out of his pocket and put it on the table in front of him.

They both stared at it as though he had produced a lump of gold.

“This morning?” she whispered, straining forward on her elbows.

“Not an hour ago,” said Jeremy.

With the end of his finger, he pushed it two inches across the glittery table toward her. He wanted her to touch the tooth, to take it in her hand. Her hand moved, touched the tooth, closed on it. For Jeremy it was a naked vulnerable moment.

“I’ve got two kidney stones I passed in a jar in my room,” she said.

The light turned his eyeglasses into flashing mirrors. She could not see his eyes, but she felt his gaze merging with her own as warm as a handclasp.

“I saw your flowers from my window this morning,” he said finally.

“I try to keep something bright,” she said.

“I’ll meet you at the flowers at twelve o’clock,” said Jeremy.

They talked in a quiet monotone, the tooth, dull, absorbing the light between them.

“We can’t,” she said. “You know we can’t. Axel. Mr. Peters’ Moral Uplift.”

Jeremy smiled, showing her his nine front teeth. Something was releasing, in his mind, his heart. He felt free, airborne. “Lady,” he said, “I’m...” He could not remember if he had told her he was seventy-six or seventy-seven, so he told her the truth. “I’m eighty years old and I don’t give a damn

about Axel.”

~~“I’m seventy-one myself,” she said.~~

They both laughed and Mary said it was loud enough, she could hear it now.

V

✿ J. L. GATES was waiting in the door of the Gulf Oil station when Axel and Jefferson Davis got there. They arrived in Axel's red pickup truck which had a chrome horn on each fender and a red light mounted on the roof of the cab, which Axel only used on those rare occasions when she found it necessary to race down into Cumseh to the doctor with one of the old people. Axel was driving and Jefferson Davis was sitting beside her on an enormous yellow pillow. He had come along for the ride because it was Sunday and he had nothing else to do.

J. L. came out to the truck, crossed his arms, and leaned in the window at Axel. She reeked of rubbing alcohol. J. L. suspected the two of them of unnatural behavior. The midget's hands always carried the same odor.

"How do," J. L. said to the midget. He was always formal with Jefferson Davis. He turned his quick sweating face on Axel. "You not gone believe this, Pearl Lee."

J. L. had not seen her in a week, and he was behind in the payments on the mortgage which she held on his station. So he called her Pearl Lee, a name she hated and had not used since the death of her father. He always called her Pearl Lee when he wanted to show her he was not intimidated by the mortgage payments. J. L. was her first cousin on her daddy's side.

"I ain't got enough to do," said Axel. "I got to look after the niggers, too."

"She ain't a nigger," said J. L.

"You said she was black," said Axel.

"It was what thrown me off, her being black. Ain't a nigger though. She's something else."

"It ain't nothing else, if she's black."

"Where bouts you got her?" asked Jefferson Davis, hardly looking at J. L. It was small talk to him. He didn't care.

"She's in there in front of my fan making dolls."

"Dolls?" Jefferson Davis' head snapped around. His nose twitched.

"In my chair in front of that oil drum," said J. L. He was enjoying it now. It was no longer his problem. Axel was here.

J. L. stepped back from the door and Axel got out, and the two of them stood beside the truck and waited for Jefferson Davis to slide down off his yellow pillow to the running board of the truck where he squatted briefly and then hopped to the ground. He came around the truck in his rapid swaying little stride, looking at neither of them, and headed for the station door. J. L. and Axel stopped outside, still standing in the sun, but Jefferson Davis charged straight inside. He stopped so close to Carlita that he could have reached out and touched the doll she held.

The doll wore blue pants and a blue jacket. Carlita had contrived to place a peaked cap upon her head. Jefferson Davis, during his life, had been a great rider of buses—north and south, east and west across the entire country; and so skillfully was the doll dressed that Jefferson Davis knew immediately that it was a Greyhound Bus driver. The doll's hands had been placed together and pierced with a pin.

Carlita put out her hand slowly and touched Jefferson Davis on the shoulder. He did not flinch or draw back but looked steadily at the doll in her hand. Axel and J. L. stood trancelike in the door.

"You are very beautiful," said Carlita in Spanish. She put the doll down, picked up the cloth bag

and opened it for Jefferson Davis to look in. "See," she said. "Plenty of hair and bones and the powder too."

"That's Spanish," said Junior Bledsoe. He had come up behind Axel and J. L. and leaned his chest between them.

"That's what he says it is," said J. L. "Just Spanish. No nigger."

Axel ignored him. "What time does the next bus come in?" she asked.

"From where?" asked J. L. He had the bus schedules, destinations, and mileages stapled on the wall beside the door.

"From anywhere," said Axel. "Put her on the next one comes in. The Greyhound don't pay me to worry about lost niggers."

Junior Bledsoe wedged himself in between J. L. and Axel. "She's a Spanish cook on the way to Atlanta to work for a teacher."

"Next one comes through in fifteen minutes," said J. L.

"Put her on it," said Axel.

"Ain't going the way she was going," J. L. said. He was loving it now, watching Axel squirm. He wished he had four niggers that couldn't talk.

"I don't care which way it's going. Let the Greyhound worry about it."

"We could use a cook," said Jefferson Davis. He was squatting on his haunches now, squinting into the round dark mouth of the cloth bag.

Axel stretched her thick neck. "Cook?" she said. "Cook?"

"She's a Spanish cook on the way to Atlanta to work for a teacher," said Junior Bledsoe. He had not moved from Axel's side.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked, turning on Junior. She had finally noticed not him but his green suit.

"I'm Junior Bledsoe," he said. "And I think we can do a little business."

"That's his car over in front of the cafe," said J. L.

Axel looked through the shimmering glass. There was only one car there, the buff-colored Lincoln. "Maybe so," she said.

"He's a truck farmer," J. L. said, brightly.

"Garden Plots, Garden Plots," said Junior Bledsoe.

"We ain't got a cook," said Jefferson Davis. "We need a cook." They turned to look at him. "Utopia caint cook worth a flip."

Carlita had left off with the dolls. She was holding the cloth bag open by the drawstrings and Jefferson Davis had both hands in it, turning the contents first this way and then that. Suddenly his hands came out. They were full of hair and bones.

"God!" said J. L. "See, I told you. Hair and bones."

Jefferson Davis put the hair near his nose. "Goat," he said. "It ain't nothing but goat hair." He looked at the bones. "Goat hair and chicken bones."

"No wonder she caint talk," said Axel. "That nigger's crazy."

"Ain't a nigger," said J. L. "It's a Spanish."

"A Spanish cook," Jefferson Davis said. "And we need a cook. We gone all die from Utopia cooking."

Axel sighed heavily and looked out toward the wavering street. "Jeffy," she said, "we caint talk her up the hill just because we need a cook."

"How come?" His huge brow furrowed and he stared furiously up at her through the dripping

locks of his black hair.

—“She don’t belong to us,” Axel said.

“She don’t belong to the Greyhound neither,” said Jefferson Davis.

“What time does the next bus come through going where she was going?” asked Axel.

“Midnight,” said J. L., spearing the time schedule with the long yellow nail of his forefinger.

“And the the next one after that?” asked Jefferson Davis.

“Tomorrow morning,” J. L. said. “The same time as the one that left her off.”

“Well,” said Jefferson Davis, “let’s keep her tonight anyway. You caint drag her down the hill in the middle of the night that way. Let’s just keep her until in the morning.”

“What the hell you want her for?” asked J. L. “She caint talk.”

“Shut up, J. L.,” said Axel.

J. L. went over to the metal box in the corner, took out a bottle of Royal Crown Cola, and opened it. He sat behind his desk. “I don’t care what you do with her, long as you get her out of here.” He took a long satisfying pull at the RC. “She caint set in front of my fan all day.”

“See,” said Jefferson Davis. “She caint set in here in front of his fan all day.”

“Actually,” said Junior Bledsoe, “a Garden Plot is just a grave. But we’ve found our customers prefer to call it a Garden Plot.” He had some literature in his hand he was trying to show Axel, but she shoved past him and walked over to where Carlita was sitting.

“Put the hair and bones back, Jeff,” she said softly.

“Not till you say if we can take her up the hill,” he said.

“She caint even talk. I don’t see how we can. She ain’t even our kind of people. We couldn’t even git her in the truck.”

Jefferson Davis stared up at her, his eyes snapping like a hawk’s under his wide pale brow. Then he gently replaced the goat hair and chicken bones. He took the round cloth bag in his left hand, and with the other hand he took her by the wrist. Her wrist was black and so big that his fingers did not reach around it. He jerked his head toward the truck.

“Come on,” he said.

She got to her feet, smiling, and followed him out into the sunlight and climbed in the back of the truck. Jefferson Davis got his yellow pillow out of the cab and put it in the back beside her and sat upon it. He looked back toward them where they stood in the filling station. His face was grave and pinched, but his eyes still flashed.

“Let’s go,” he said. “She ain’t no trouble.”

“Damn me to hell,” said J. L. “I never.”

“Shut up, J. L.,” said Axel. “Just shut up.” She started for the truck.

“I’ll get my car,” said Junior Bledsoe, holding a tinted picture of a graven angel, a tombstone, in front of her. But she ignored him and the picture. Junior hopped across the street and spun his Lincoln around. J. L. was still sitting behind the desk when the Lincoln roared past the station. He saw the rim of wilted flowers sail out the window and land on the curbstone.

J. L. leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes as he sucked the last frothy bit of RC out of the bottle. And it was because his eyes were closed that Lummy saw the Greyhound Bus first. He saw it stop, heard the hissing airbrakes. Then the door swung open and he saw the girl. She was a single stick of color, two parallel lines, with a little round yellow face at the very top, almost hidden by a brown inverted bowl of hair. The bottom half of her face was split in a smile. Her teeth were white in the sun. The bus groaned and hissed and was gone. Blue diesel smoke lay on the air around the girl. She started toward the station and the smoke fell away before her. When she got to the door, Lummy looked up

his eyes swimming in a net of veins.

~~“Habla, habla, habla,” Lummy said, unnerved by the dream, trying to cooperate.~~

“Habla, habla, habla?” asked Sarah Nell Brownstien, momentarily amazed, blinded, coming out of the sun.

“Goddam, another one,” said J. L. Gates, dropping his RC bottle.

Chapter Two

CARLITA ROJAS MUNDEZ had never owned a midget. But she had always known she would. And she had owned Jefferson Davis Munroe completely and without question from the moment he had come swaying into the gas station. She knew it, and apparently he knew it, too. He sat absolutely still on the yellow pillow beside her now in the back of the truck and let her touch his foreshortened arms and pass her hands over the elongated trunk of his body.

Behind them a rooster-tail of dust followed Junior Bledsoe's Lincoln. Junior, leaning forward over the steering wheel, smiled and winked and waved to them. But Carlita ignored him. She was concentrating upon Jefferson Davis, who sat beside her stony-eyed, his face white and drawn.

She had waited a long time for a midget and she intended now to enjoy him. She would not be rushed. And although there was a temptation to panic, she resisted it. Her father had owned a midget or so her mother told her. She herself could not remember her father very well. Not as a man anyway. Rather she remembered him as a presence, a myth, a legend that filled her mind in the middle of the night until she could hardly bear it. Magic ran in her blood. The ability to turn a chicken into a god, a man into a chicken, was not an easy thing to live with.

Her father had been the most powerful voodoo *hougan* in Haiti the day Papa Doc Duvalier ascended to the presidency. And that night her father had been summoned to the great white palace. No one ever saw him again. She and her mother left the next day at sundown in the dark hold of a ship where they sat six days before arriving in Cuba. And her mother, who had been Cuban to start with, took back her family's name and dropped her husband's French, but not the black skull of his religion which she kept alive in smoking chicken guts and white chalky designs drawn over the walls of the house. Her mother had flourished under the dictator Batista, but the liberator Castro took away her beads and bones and sent her to the fields to cut sugar cane where she cut off the foreman's head instead. The People's Justice took almost five minutes to decide to send her mother to the wall, where she died in the middle of a curse that would have doomed the entire island.

And it was only with the sheerest good fortune—plus threatening a visa official with permanent sterility—that Carlita found herself two months later in a Miami bus station with a fat female agent of the United States government.

The female agent's name was Miss Smith and she had learned her Spanish at the University of Mississippi. Her face was very red, and sweat was rolling down her neck into the limp blue uniform of the Cuban Relocation Center. It was eighty-eight degrees in the shade, and Miss Smith had four other Cubans to relocate besides Carlita and all of them on different buses going to different places across the United States. Miss Smith made them all hold hands as she pulled them through the sound of loudspeakers blaring destinations and loading zones. Tourists stared and took their picture with Kodak Instamatics.

Miss Smith shouted continuous instructions in Mississippi Spanish as she got them all loaded. She saved Carlita until last because Carlita was the only one of the five who could not speak any English at all. She tied a card around Carlita's neck, gave her a thick box of food and twenty minutes of very careful instructions, part of which included a specific warning not to get off the bus under any circumstance until the Spanish-speaking teacher from Georgia Tech boarded the bus in Atlanta and took her hand.

But Miss Smith forgot to tell Carlita about the restroom at the back of the bus. And Carlita had

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