

Shell Game

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THE HOUSE, LIKE a native language he had lost since childhood, spoke poverty. As a boy he had only been here in his imagination. He could see beneath the dilapidated porch clear to the other side. The windows had no curtains now, but the chimney, long and slanted, still smoked. Ten children were born here, Tom thought, all of them big and globular at birth like their mother, all of them growing up fatherless. And one of them stood with him, looking along the ditch that ran in front, but not at the house. Ruby said the smoke was the trace of tramps and trash who had moved into the West End when Swan Chemical went broke. They never left, she said. They went from one condemned building to the next, she said, stripping wood from the walls to build their fires. Tobacco-spewing, two-legged termites, leaving behind an empty frame.

"I never thought you were that poor," he said.

Ruby laughed abruptly. A dry cough of a laugh that did not suit her. She was large, yes, and still robust, and she seemed to him ageless. She led him down the ditch toward a street corner away from the house. The rest of the neighborhood had been rebuilt. Most of the homes were painted ugly pastel pinks and blues, and a few had aluminum siding or jerry-built garages.

"This here was called the Old Mail Road," Ruby said. "And right chere's where the body laid."

He looked at the spot she pointed to along the ditch. Weedy blades rose waist high across from them, but sloping down under their feet the banks were red clay, the color of dry blood. The ditch was small enough that Tom could easily have straddled it at its widest. It looked like the old, never-stitched, and badly healed knife scar he had seen the day before on one of the black men at the Calhoun County Court House.

"The body laid there face down most of the night, I reckon," Ruby said. "We seen them flashes from the gun back on the porch. I remember Mama had tried awful hard to come down here, but none of us let her. Ole Sheriff Hutchins never showed up till after midnight, even though it all happened at dusky dark. Johnny Shacks—he used to live in that house there—had done run back up and tole us Bunk was dead."

Bunk was dead. That was a fact. The Fact. Back at Ruby's, Tom had the transcript to prove it. Bunk had been dead for more than forty years, almost forty-five. Ruby still talked about it in a language that was almost dead, too, at least to him. Tom thought that there had been no tramps in the South since the Depression and that the last of the white trash had disappeared with urban renewal, say, when Boogertown had been razed up in Huntsville while he was still a teenager. Just as they reached the car, he asked her to wait for him, and he ran back to the house. He stopped at the porch and walked as quietly as he could up to one of the dirty front windows. Who would build a fire in the middle of August?

Inside a small fire did blaze, but made from sticks and twigs gathered late on a Friday night rather than from wood pulled off the walls. There were about six of them, boys with scruffy long hair sitting on the floor round the fire or lounging about in exaggerated poses copied from comic books and movies, smoking stolen cigarettes and occasionally scuffling with each other. They had blankets for pallets, and one had a sleeping bag. The oldest could not have been more than twelve, and the youngest was about eight. On the otherwise bare walls hung a *Sgt. Pepper* poster, a Confederate flag, and a homemade sign, "The Rebels." Near the farther wall sat a single chair, the foldout kind Baptist churches used in Sunday school classes. In front of the chair an up-turned crate served as a podium. For a mike they employed an old broom, wedged upside down in the crate. Three of them, joking around, had just begun to sing in bad harmony, imitating the Beach Boys, or maybe the Zombies. As the oldest kid launched an imaginary riff on the broken tree branch that served as his guitar, he glanced at the window and saw Tom.

They vanished. They left behind their blankets, their half-empty pack of cigarettes, what remained of last night's snacks, and a pair of tennis shoes. Then one of them, the youngest maybe, came back for the shoes. He hesitated and he reached down for them and looked at Tom and shivered and ran. When Tom got back to the car, he did not tell Ruby what he had seen, but he asked her for perhaps the thousandth time since he had learned to speak why Wendall Patton had really killed Tom's grandfather.

I. Excerpts from the Bill of Exceptions

Mrs. Maud MacDuff, being sworn as a witness for the State, testified substantially as follows:

My name is Mrs. Maud MacDuff, and my husband's name was Tom. They called him Bunk MacDuff. He died in August on Tuesday evening in this County. We lived on Route 3, in the West End at that time. I don't know the name of the street. I call the road that we lived on the Eulaton Road. I am acquainted with the defendant, Mr. Patton, and his family. They lived right across the road from us. I know one Mr. Shacks. He lived west of where Mr. Patton and I lived on the same side of the street that the Pattons lived on. I didn't see the difficulty. . . . only after Mrs. Patton and Lurleen had Mr. Shacks down.

The first thing I saw when I got out of my front door was Mrs. Patton down over a man beating him with something. I don't know what it was. Lurleen was down with the man. Mrs. Patton was hollering, "Old Bunk MacDuff has killed Dell," and I ran up and took hold of her. I went out there and she was fighting with that man Shacks. That finally ended and Mr. Freeman carried him in the house. There was not anything but blood on Mr. Shacks. I didn't notice any injuries on the two women and I didn't see the pistol. I didn't know at the time where my husband and the defendant were, and they were not in my sight. It is about one-and-a-half lots from my house down to Mr. Shacks's house. I don't know what size the lots are. I couldn't say how far it was from the defendant's house down to Shacks's house. They are all pretty close together there. There is just a little street or lane that runs down between the houses. At no time while I was out there did I see my husband or the defendant, except just when the last

pistol shots were fired. I could not distinguish what it was. Just two men lit up by the flashes. I heard some pistol shots while I was out there back toward the railroad beyond Shacks's house. Yes, they could have been echoes. I remember four discharges. I saw four flashes. I did not go down there because Mr. Freeman and my daughter was holding me. I did not notice where Mrs. Patton and Lurleen were, because I was struggling with Slick and Ruby to get away from them. Slick is Mr. Freeman. When I did go down there everyone had left. I found my husband dead. My husband had on a blue shirt and a black suit. I saw Mr. Patton when he came going home to his house that evening. I do not recall how he was dressed. This is my husband's hat. He was wearing the hat at that time. It did not have that hole in it when he wore it off. I didn't see that hat down by the body when I got there. His hat was not on his head when I got down there. There was no weapons about his body when I found it. I noticed the injuries on my husband's body and blood was coming out on the left side. All of his clothes were burned, and right through his body was a shot, and his head was all cut and bleeding. My husband weighed about one hundred and thirty pounds. His average weight was about one hundred and sixty pounds, but he had been in bad health and had his teeth pulled and he didn't weigh but about one hundred and thirty.

On cross-examination, this witness testified substantially as follows:

Mr. MacDuff had his suit on. He was not in his shirtsleeves. I do not know what Mr. Patton had on.

The transcript's legal language mixed the lawyers' questions and the witnesses' responses in a stenographer's confection that was both awkwardly formal and not a little folksy. In any case, it was too long and too exasperating in spots to imagine reading it all more than once right now. Tom could hear the irritating whine of automobiles and motorbikes outside the open window of the bedroom as they accelerated from one traffic light to the next. There were too many witnesses, and none of them was honest. If the defense did not impeach them effectively, the prosecution did. In the end, he could trust none of those who saw it.

The humidity of the bedroom was stifling. Even a telephone

ringing in the house next door distracted him. He could not get a clear picture of the Pattons' or of Bunk's motives, but whether it was because he was a poor juror or a lousy historian, or because his brain had ceased to function in the heat of an Alabama August seemed to him an open question. Maybe if he simply put the mass of xeroxed paper aside, tomorrow he would understand it better. He had had more than twenty years of not understanding, one more day couldn't matter that much.

The banshee wail of the teapot brought him out of the bedroom into Ruby's kitchen-dining room. It was one of the larger rooms in the house, and the air—circulating more freely—seemed less stale. Ruby, typically, had refused to let his father pay to air condition the place. Tom made himself a cup of instant coffee and resolved to forget the transcript and to wait for Ruby to return from the Rebeccas before thinking about anything at all.

When he took a drink from his cup, he remembered the derby. He searched Ruby's bedroom for it, trying not to lose his temper despite the sweat that attended any effort; but he had already slung folded nightclothes across the bed with a curse before he found the hat tucked away in a corner of one of the old cedarwood chifforobes.

He examined the derby before he tried it on. He ran his hand along the tear the hatchet had made and put his finger through the single bullet hole. When he looked in the mirror, the hat appeared too small. He had been surprised that Bunk was as little as he was. Tom had always confused him with his own father, who stood six-three and weighed one-ninety. When he was four and his father still worked for the pipe shop in Anniston, Tom and his brother Robby would sit each afternoon at the front window to watch for him to come home from work. They lived then on a dead-end street at the top of McCleroy, and the two boys could see him far off down the hill even at dusk. Nights Tom dreamed the approaching figure grew larger and larger until he could see the head it carried in its hands at the side of its body far from its severed neck. The black derby sat on the head above eyes that winked and a smile that muttered in an unintelligible and evil tongue.

Evidently, Bunk had a terrible temper his widow had never mentioned. After she died, Ruby began to tell him about it. Whenever any of the MacDuffs argued, Ruby would say, "It's the Bunk in you comin' out." For a while, the phrase had become one of those family sayings. Even now, whenever Tom saw someone's face contort and redden, when he heard loud, sharp, vicious language, he imagined Bunk trapped in the speaker's body, struggling to get free and to tell him the truth of things. But he could not see the Bunk in him mirrored back to him now underneath the rotting derby. Maybe it was his age. Bunk was thirty-five when he was killed, almost middle-aged. Tom was still a young man, not yet twenty-four. He slung the derby onto Ruby's bed.

There had been the shirt, too, half burned from the powder of the gun and riddled with more bullet holes. But Ruby threw that out when Mama MacDuff died. The Widow MacDuff was the only one who truly came alive for him in the transcript. He had heard her speak, and he could still catch her voice in the testimony, even through the stenographer's garbled account of it. Tom's parents thought she had gone slightly crazy the night of the murder, but he wasn't sure. His father was six months old then, his mother not yet born. They didn't know any more than he did.

He remembered his dad's mama as a huge, looming, vague glob, who told him stories at night about the family and about her girlhood on a farm and, especially, about Bunk. She had died when he was in junior high. Tom's family lived in Huntsville then, but he did not go with his father down to the funeral. It would have been better if he had, he thought, because he felt—well, *suspected* might be a better word—for a long time afterward that she was not really dead. The grotesque picture he formed from his father's telling had haunted his imagination for years. She fell through a termite-weakened floor in her house in Jacksonville and hanged herself on the loose electrical wiring underneath. But he always imagined her still alive, caught by her neck on the wires, flailing her fat arms, twisting her obese body, jerking her legs to get free.

Tom heard the front screen door creak. Ruby was home. Quickly, he threw the derby back into its dark corner and stuffed the clothes on the bed into a half-opened drawer.

“Tom,” she called. “Tom, boy, where are you?”

II. Excerpts from the Bill of Exceptions

M. H. Hawkins, a witness for the State, being duly sworn, testified on direct examination substantially as follows:

I am connected with the Usrey Undertaking Parlor here. I remember the occasion when the body of Mr. MacDuff was brought to our place. I examined the body and found some wounds on it. There were three wounds on the left side. One entered above the sixth rib, one about the seventh, and one about the ninth rib, ranging directly toward the right. There was another wound through the right arm, and a wound on the left side of the head. There were four small wounds on the left side—three wounds on the left side and one through the right arm. That would be four on the body. I did not see any powder burns on the body. This seems to be the hat that was with the body. That hole was in it. The wound was on the left side of the head. There was a small piece of the skull, I suppose the size of a dime, but hardly the thickness of a dime, chipped off the skull. The wound was four or five inches, I suppose. The piece of the skull that was cut out was about the size of a ten-cent piece, maybe a five-cent piece, but not the thickness of either. I remember this bundle of clothes. . . That is the coat that was on the body, and that is the shirt. We tore the shirt in preparing the body. That is the coat, trousers, and top shirt that were on the body.

On cross-examination, this witness testified substantially as follows:

There was a piece burned out of the clothes when I got them. I don't remember whether or not the flesh was burned at that place. To the question, “Don't you remember that you testified before, for the purpose of refreshing your recollection, that you said one of the wounds was blistered, and I asked you what that indicated, and you said it indicated that the pistol was at very close range, probably right at the body?” The witness answered: “Well, according to that the pistol should have been very close to the wound there. It was fresher in my mind at the preliminary than it is now. I remember when you asked me what the appearance was with

reference to how close the gun was when it was shot, and I said, 'We can only tell from the powder burns and blisters.' That answer was correct when I gave it."

At this point the defendant asked the witness the following questions, "So it is a fact that when you got to the body the clothes had just been on fire a few minutes previous to that and there was a blistered place there right at one of the wounds, and powder burns there, showing. . ."

When Ruby came in she gave him a letter just arrived from Kathy. She moaned about the heat, said she intended to take a bath before making supper, and left him in the kitchen.

Dear Tom,

Just when do you plan to stop playing this game and come back? I didn't think you would become like the rest of your family, so obsessed with the past, so morbid, like some Faulkner novel. That's what it is, isn't it? You read Faulkner and then you simply had to find out about your dear old granddad. Well, I can tell you it is not pleasant here. Your mother mopes around like always, trying to con everyone into complimenting her on her good looks half the time and moaning about poor Christine the other half. Maybe she'll have another breakdown. Why are you all so morbid! JoEllen doesn't sit around and mope for Richard—and he died a hero. She's proud. I know what you'll say, you'll say that's all she has, that Richard was no more a hero despite the medals than any other fool who went to Vietnam.

Like your father. He told us the most awful thing when JoEllen was over here. He said they don't even ship the bodies back, that all she buried of Richard was an empty uniform. That's why they seal the coffins, he says. Needless to say JoEllen got very upset, but that's not what your father was trying to do. He's just so insensitive, he didn't realize how it would affect her.

In short, this place is just hell. (But I'm being good, like I promised, honest.) Say "Hello" to Ruby for me (ha-ha). And Kelly sends her love. She says it: "Lubb."

Did you mean that about not going back to school together?

Your loving wife, Kathy

P.S. I told mother we were talking about a separation, and she said she couldn't understand why I would want to do that now just when you were becoming respectable. Isn't that just like her? She won't believe it is you, not me. She is stubborn, but at least she's not morbid. Tom, I know this letter sounds both bitter and flippant, but I can't help it. I don't have your knack for words or know how to write what I mean. I want you to come back and let us get all this straightened out before the fall. I meant it when I said I would change. I can stop, really, for Kelly's sake as well as yours. I love you. K.

Bodies, Tom thought, were finally all we had. Kathy's changed when she carried Kelly. For the only time in her life, she ate too much and did nothing else. Her buttocks were striped with scars—stretch marks—like kneaded dough, which somehow made her attractive to him in a way her beauty did not. Richard's body did not even exist. And all Tom's mother's hysterics were an attempt to replace the image of Christine's corpse. She had been unable to relinquish the drama of its absence she first staged at the funeral. It was her longest, her finest, performance. She had a tacky oil painting done from a photograph of his dead sister and hung it on the living room wall next to a better one of herself. The so-called artist had straightened Christine's curly hair to make her look more winsome and doomed.

Not that Tom could remember how Christine actually looked. Most of the photographs of her were made after her illness. The last year she was alive, between relapses and remissions and a dozen different treatments, her body swelled and shrank, lost its hair and grew it back, and turned various shades of yellow, all at the whim of the doctors and their drugs.

"Your mother's getting weirder," Kathy said when she first saw the painting, right before Tom left for Ruby's.

"Yeah?" he said. "Maybe she's on dope."

Kathy walked away.

Memory was the vacuum of missing bodies.

He wrote:

Dear Kathy,

You're right. I'm playing a game, the "game of Bunk." Ruby and I began the minute she picked me up at the Birmingham airport. She was so obviously glad to see me and happy to talk that, for a while—maybe an hour, or even two—I was able to suppress my feelings about you, and your habit, and graduate school, and Richard, and Vietnam, and money, and your mom, and the whole fucking thing. We had dinner in a roadside cafeteria filled with rednecks, and I asked her about Bunk, the way I used to when I was a kid farmed out to her and Slick by my parents off on one of their bickering jaunts to this or that beach in Florida. She responded with her vague, half-remembered stories, just as she used to when I was a kid, and we were off! When we got to her house I told her about the transcripts.

Ruby had finished her bath. Nothing about her body was missing. It filled space and it moved. He had not felt so close to her since he was a boy and he went along on the trips she took to get away from Slick. After he died, she at least made the attempt to be faithful to her memory of him by completely denying—perhaps forgetting would be a kinder word—what life with him had actually been like. She forgot it at the Grand Canyon and at Mardi Gras in New Orleans and in the deserts of the Southwest. She became president of the Rebeccas, and they paid for her trips. Tom could never see a postcard of Arizona or New Mexico or watch a movie, say, set in Nevada without imagining her voice, "Tom, that is just what it's like out there. A body can see for miles and miles and there ain't *nothing*." Shaking her head. Smiling. "*Nothing* at all."

After she served her term as president, she settled back into the depot she had made of her house, amid the accumulated junk from her travels that lined the walls and filled her end tables and spilled over into half-packed boxes. She spent the next ten years giving the stuff away at birthdays and weddings and Christmases. Nobody wanted it, but she always included with whatever piece of tourist junk she gave you a real present, expensive and surprisingly thoughtful—and folks kept the crap. He did not mind that Kathy disliked her; it was one more argument for his coming down alone.

But if you're right to call it a game, you're wrong when you say it's morbid. It's, well—let me put it this way. When I told Ruby that we should be able to find transcripts of the trial and fix exactly what happened that night, she didn't like the idea. Immediately, she warned me the old courthouse had burned down in 1930. I laughed. The new move in the game was too much for her, definite information, proof—or not—for the myths they'd made of the past. Not one of them, in all their telling and retelling of what had happened, ever considered documenting the story.

I've got to hand it to Ruby, though. The next morning she was as enthusiastic as I was, if a little reluctant to let on. It must have occurred to her that this was a rare thing—to be able to check her memory after all these years. She said something about my father—see, my father, not Ruby herself—finally knowing something definite about the father he never saw. She was blunter, cruder, but that's what she meant. We were like detectives in a murder mystery, only we knew who did it, not why.

When we got to the courthouse, the clerk—a woman—told us she thought the records had been destroyed. "We had a fire in 1930 that burned everything," she said. And Ruby said something like, "We know that, honey, but we want you to look just the same." There was this tension between them, as if they were talking a different English from the one I understand. In any case, the clerk found an old, charred indictment that began with the phrase: "Wendall Patton, for crimes against the peace and dignity of the State of Alabama" and ended with "and for shooting Old Bunk MacDuff, alias Tom MacDuff, in the head with a pistol." It was funny.

I thought, That's exactly what history is—florid rhetoric laced with mean little facts. But me, hell, I just asked again if there were a transcript. The clerk said, "An appeal was filed, else there would be no indictment recorded." So I asked, "Is there a transcript?" She replied if—really emphasizing if—an appeal had been filed that means there must be a record of it in Montgomery. "That means there is a transcript?" I asked. The woman gave Ruby a pained look, like it was going to kill her to help somebody after a lifetime of blissful bureaucratic slumber, and she involuntarily explodes with a "Yes!" Ruby said to me, "Looks

like we are going to Montgomery." We left—it's two hundred miles—right then.

I admit it felt pretty strange to hear that crabby old woman read out my name as the victim in an indictment for murder in 1928. Ruby noticed. She told me she had never heard him called anything but Bunk either. It's like the past—not just the stories they told me, but what did in fact happen—was a palimpsest that—

He didn't know.

III. Excerpts from the Bill of Exceptions

Johnny Shacks, being sworn as a witness for the State, testified substantially on direct examination as follows:

I remember the occasion when Mr. MacDuff is said to have been killed. It was on August 28th in this County. I am acquainted with the defendant and was acquainted with Mr. MacDuff during his lifetime. We all three lived out there pretty close together. I talked to Mr. MacDuff at my gate just before the killing occurred. It was something over one hundred feet from my gate over to Mr. MacDuff's house, and it is about the same distance from my house over to Mr. Patton's house. Mr. Patton and I lived on the same side of the lane that runs up there, and Mr. MacDuff on the other side. It was something after six o'clock when Mr. MacDuff and I were engaged in conversation at my gate. The public road leads right by my gate. Mr. Patton came along while we were talking there. Mr. MacDuff was dressed in a black suit of clothes and a black hat that day. Mr. Patton had on his work clothes. I didn't think he had on overalls. I think he wore breeches. I don't know what color his pants were, but he had on a blue shirt. He was in his shirt sleeves. I had just heard a few words spoken between Mr. MacDuff and Mr. Patton when Mr. Patton came along, and he said, "Patton, I want you to talk to your wife and get her to quit fussing at my wife," and Patton said, "I have never said nothing to you," and Mr. MacDuff said, "You have," and that is the only conversation I heard between the two of them. This was not said in a loud tone. It was in a mild way, and neither had the appearance of being mad. I didn't see a weapon of any kind. Mr. Patton had a saw and a hand ax and a hammer.

Mrs. Patton then came up. She nearly got to the point where we were, and I walked out there and she turned around and walked back toward the house a piece. She just said, "Lurleen, bring my gun." I first saw her when she was coming from her house down toward mine where those two men were talking. She had gotten within three or four feet of MacDuff and Patton when she hollered to her daughter to bring the gun. I did not follow her until she hollered for her gun. I saw Lurleen come out in the road with a pistol. I ran ahead of Mrs. Patton to get her and the gun. I reached down to get hold of the gun, and when I got hold of the gun, Mrs. Patton got hold of me. She beat my head with a rock or something. If I struck her I didn't know anything about it. Mr. Freeman, Mrs. MacDuff, and Ruby Freeman came up and got her off of me, and then Mr. Freeman carried me to the house.

The Solicitor then asked the witness this question:

"What was your condition?" The defendant objected to this question and the court sustained the objection.

There was blood on my face at that time, and I had some bruises on my head. The condition of my head was bruised and bleeding, and the condition of my face was that blood was running down it.

I took the pistol along with me. That is the pistol, an Ivor Johnson nickel .38 caliber pistol. That was right after the time of the difficulty. I didn't strike the little girl. I never touched her. I didn't see anybody touch her. I do not remember hearing any shots. I went down there after the man was killed, just a little while before the ambulance got there at midnight. He was something like seventy feet further down from my house when he was lying there dead.

On cross-examination, this witness testified substantially as follows:

. . . Mr. MacDuff and I were not on speaking terms with Mr. Patton at the time of the difficulty. I met Lurleen just this side of a little drain or culvert pipe that runs across the lot about the west line of Mr. MacDuff's garden. I couldn't tell you how long I was with these women. Mrs. Patton got hold of me just about the time I got hold of the pistol. Lurleen never did turn the pistol loose. I tried to take it and she held onto it, and she just sat down in the road. I didn't hit Mrs. Patton with anything. I don't know who it was that knocked the tooth out of her mouth. If I bruised that place

on her shoulder I didn't know anything about it. I wasn't close to her until she got hold of the gun.

At the request of defendant, Mrs. Patton was brought in where the jury could see her.

If there was any hollering or screaming going on, I didn't know it. I didn't hear her or anybody else scream from the beginning of that time till it was all over. I am not deaf. Mr. Freeman separated me from the women. I don't know where he went after that. I don't know what the women did then. I couldn't say how long I was in the house before I went out to where MacDuff was. He was dead when I got there, and Mr. Patton and the others had gone. I went out there and looked at Mr. MacDuff after he was dead. I found him lying there in the road by the mailbox. He was lying up and down on the bank of the road in the ditch. . .

The people at the State Clerk's Office in Montgomery were much friendlier and more helpful than the County Clerk had been. The State Clerk himself came out with us to the records office and helped us find the transcript, only he carefully informed me that it was not a transcript but a "Bill of Exceptions," which means, I suppose, it's a sort of summary of the testimony used for appeal rather than exact, word-for-word, question-and-answer typescript. It's certainly nothing like the testimony you read in all those trial novels or you see on Perry Mason. Then he showed us the copy center and asked the secretary there to make us a copy.

The State Clerk told Ruby he remembered hearing about the trial when he was a boy from his granddaddy, who was State Clerk back at the time—ah, the South! Ruby asked him for two copies, and he said, "Why, sure, Miz Freeman." At last, some Southern hospitality. The secretary had trouble getting the xerox machine to work, so I did the xeroxing—at least a degree in History's worth something, I told Ruby.

This morning Ruby and I went out to the West End and saw the house. It was all so small and close together and slum-like. I had never imagined my family really lived like that, Kathy. They all worked for this chemical company just a field away from the houses. And I saw these kids inside the abandoned old house.

They had a gang, you know, a club, and the house was their clubhouse.

It was dark by the time he gave up writing the letter. Ruby had made supper, and the two of them ate in silence. Afterward, they would play "Bunk." They would sit in the living room with their copies of the transcript and try to piece together what had happened. During the meal they restrained themselves, because if they talked at all, they would talk about the murder and spoil the game.

When Slick was still alive the table here was never silent. Slick and Ruby fought constantly. About Slick's special fat-free meals, Ruby's lodge meetings, Tom's lack of appetite, his kid brother Robby's atrocious manners. Everything—every minor, senseless thing—was the source of an exuberantly vicious argument. Through the years, they had developed a language so vile that even words that weren't filthy in his mother's lexicon took on the force of curses, like the word "habit" these days between Tom and Kathy.

When he was a boy, the house seemed charged by that language, but now it was empty. Something of the electricity came back during "Bunk," the way it had the first night he arrived last week, when he mentioned the possibility of finding a transcript. The words he and Ruby used had not been vile, but they had touched the charge.

"The what?" Ruby had asked him.

"The transcript. The record of Patton's trial. There must be one. We could start at the courthouse."

"Lord, Tom. You got to know everything. That's what's wrong with you. Finding some blame *transcript* ain't gone change a damn thing."

"I don't want to change a damn thing."

"The courthouse *burned* in 19 and 30—"

"That doesn't mean there's no transcript. Don't you *want* to know the truth—"

"The truth!" Ruby laughed. She laughed so hard she finished in one of her coughing fits. "Blame dust. This house. The truth! I already told you the truth."

"No, you haven't. One time you say Bunk was defending his neighbors. Another time you tell me it all happened over chickens. Once you said that the Pattons all had to kill themselves at least one person before they felt like real men—"

"That's the truth."

"Mother said—"

"Your mother doesn't know what she is talking about."

Tonight they sat among the bric-a-brac. On the mantle above the fireplace were five carved deer, a two-monkeys-and-a-tree salt-and-pepper shaker, a bouquet of plastic flowers, porcelain fairies, brass Washington monuments and Empire State buildings, a bust of FDR in miniature, tiny Hawaiian dancers, and several impressed oval portraits of Jesus. Under crocheted placers, the glass-topped coffee table was filled with dozens of photographs of various nieces, nephews, and cousins in differing stages of growth. The exposed wood walls were adorned with awful, sentimental landscapes and one religious painting of a long- and white-bearded God and hundreds of angels piled indiscriminately on top of each other. The furniture was overstuffed, except for one imitation leather vinyl recliner with a stool whose side Tom had melted as a boy one Saturday morning by getting too close to the fireplace heater when he was watching cartoons.

Tom generally tried to keep to the text. He would hypothesize from the testimony. Ruby generally attempted to outmaneuver him, complicating his reconstructions with pieces of evidence from her memory.

"Okay. We have established that Bunk was the aggressor."

"What?"

"He started it, you know th—"

"Now, how do you know th—"

"Look, Ruby, he sent Patton a note telling him to get out of the West End. Right?"

"Old man Shaddocks said that. You can't believe a word—"

"And Bunk was waiting for Patton when he got off work."

"*Work*. If'n you can call it that. He *said* he was a carpenter,

working on the floor of the West Side Baptist Church. Six months later, the blame floor caved in—”

“That’s irrelevant, Ruby. Bunk was waiting for him. He told him he had a bullet with his name on it, I mean, *literally*. He pulled a gun on Patton. He fired the first two shots—”

“So says the Patton bunch. Tell me, Mr. History Major, if he fired the first two shots point-blank, like you say, how could he a missed him?”

“I think I can explain that. He was trying to frighten him. He didn’t want to kill Patton, just get him out of the West End. Now, the important thing is, why? We know it had something to do with the women—”

“No, sir. That ain’t right.”

“But everyone agrees that’s what they said to each other. Bunk told him to keep Mrs. Patton away from Mama—”

“But why Tom? That’s what you’re asking, right? It was over this garage that Shacks got Bunk to help him build. It was right next door to Patton, and he said they was building it—part of it, anyway—on his land, and he told them they had to tear it down or he’d burn it down. He was just a nasty contrary man. And that’s what the women argued about all the time.”

“But that’s not in the testimony.”

“Because John Shacks weren’t nothing but a coward. He’s the one that started the fight in the first place, and then he run off to jump the women soon’s the going got tough. Hid out in his house the whole time Bunk was being shot and hacked to death by that pack o’ liars next door. You think he’s gone turn right around and tell twelve good men and true why they were waitin’ for Patton to come by that day? Lord, Tom, old Dell Patton told so many lies even he couldn’t keep ’em straight—”

“But we were talking about Shacks.”

“Bunk was a sick man—just had all his teeth pulled. Surely, you read *that*. And that Lurleen. . . nothing but a hussy. She was sleepin’ with half the menfolk in the West End. She’s the cause of me resigning as president of the Rebeccas. Now, I bet you never knowed that—”

“I thought you served out your year—”

“Now that’s the *truth*. They wanted to let her on the executive board, by God. I almost quit thirty years ago when they let her in in the first place. The Anniston chapter blackballed her, I saw to that, but she went on over to Holt and got in. Well—it must of been ten years after that—I went down to the state meetin’ in Mobile and there she sat! Vere Higgenbottom was still alive then, though she was about to die, and when she asked me what was wrong with Lurleen, I said, ‘Now, look here, Mrs. Higgenbottom, that’s the woman who helped kill my step-daddy.’ And she said, ‘Oh Lord, Ruby, I had no *idea*. . .’”

“Ruby, stop it. You sound just like Mama MacDuff. She used to tell me stories like that. She told me that Bunk had been shot with a shotgun, but he was killed by four bullets from his own pistol. She said that Lurleen chopped off Bunk’s head, and she only ‘hit him a lick’ and probably in self defense. All Mama ever even saw were four flashes in the dark from where you held her on the front porch. Lies. All of it lies. I don’t buy it, Ruby.”

“Tom, now just a damn minute. I’m only telling you the truth. Just because you think you’re some kind of hoity-toity historian now, you don’t have to know everything.”

IV. Excerpts from the Bill of Exceptions

Wiley C. “Slick” Freeman, a witness for the State, being duly sworn, testified substantially as follows:

My name is Slick Freeman, and I remember the time that MacDuff was killed. I don’t remember the date, but I remember the occasion. I live in the neighborhood of the place where this occurred. My house is about six hundred and fifty feet from Shacks’s house and is about seven hundred and fifty feet from MacDuff’s house. The houses of Shacks, Patton, and MacDuff are pretty close together. I am familiar with the land out there to some extent, and a passageway called Pine Grove runs between the houses; there is another road nearby called the mail route, on which are several mail boxes. My attention was attracted to some noises on the evening of the killing down in that direction. Yes, this was after I had seen

Mr. Shacks and the Patton women in a scuffle. I helped Mr. Shacks to his house. I heard the noise when Shacks had gone inside. I went down there when this occurred. It was about seven o'clock. It was not dark at the time. I could see. There was an automobile with a light on it behind me. The light shone on the combatants. When I arrived at the scene, I found my wife there. My wife is Ruby Freeman. She is Mr. MacDuff's stepdaughter. I also saw two men. I didn't know who they were for sure at the time. There were a lot of people there from all over the neighborhood. I learned that they were Mr. Patton and Mr. MacDuff from my wife. The first thing I saw was two men in the road, and they appeared to be about five or six feet apart. A shot was fired, and they clinched and went to the ground. They went to the ground and went over and over, first one on top and then the other, and then two more shots were fired while they were on the ground. This young lady Lurleen Patton run up. The old lady came up too. When they got there Lurleen hit the man with the dark suit of clothes on over the head with something: I do not know what, and then he straightened up and three shots were fired and he fell over on the mail box. The deceased was dressed in a black suit of clothes. I remember that it was Bunk. The lights of the automobiles were shining south. The man with the dark suit of clothes on was on top of Patton when the young lady struck him. When he was struck he straightened up and Patton shot at him. He shot him three times, then they all gathered and hollered and went on home; that is, the defendant and his wife and daughter. My wife and Mr. Shaddocks and Jonas Bryan came up also.

On cross-examination, this witness testified substantially as follows:

. . . MacDuff was on top when the two shots were fired. They went over again when this happened and Patton got on top and then MacDuff got on top again. The girl ran up and hit him with something. MacDuff was on top of Patton when the girl hit him. Patton was on the ground and MacDuff was on top of Patton. He was in a kneeling position when the girl hit him with something. She ran up and grabbed him with her hand and hit him, and he straightened up and leaned against the fence and three shots were fired. The girl had hold of his left shoulder and hit him with something. He was facing west. He was shot immediately after she hit him, and he straightened up and leaned up against the fence. After he was hit he did

not throw Mr. Patton down, nor did he get on Mr. Patton any more. Patton was standing when he shot Mr. MacDuff. MacDuff was in a stooping position about four or five feet away, MacDuff was leaning over, not exactly facing Patton, when he was shot. His left side was leaning a little away from Patton. MacDuff's front was practically all presented to Patton, but not squarely facing him

Jonas Bryan, a witness for the State, being sworn testified substantially as follows:

My name is Jonas Bryan. I remember the occasion when Mr. MacDuff was killed in the West End. I owned several houses in the West End at that time. I lived about a quarter hour from the West End. Swan Chemical is one of several businesses in which I have part ownership. I was visiting one of my foremen. Yes, Bunk MacDuff is a foreman at Swan Chemical, but he was not the one I was visiting. When I came up in my car I was coming from the north on the mail route road. I stopped my car about fifty feet from where the men were fighting. I had the lights on my car, and they shone on the scene before me. When I first drove up I left the lights on and got out of the car, and just as I got there a gun was fired and the girl reached over and hit Mr. MacDuff. He was standing up, and when she hit him he fell to the ground. Mr. Patton got on top of him and shot him. There were only two shots fired while I was there. She hit him with a hatchet. She hit him on the head. He shot one more time after the dead man fell to the ground. I saw Mrs. Patton there. I did not see anyone else there. Others were standing further away. They were just huddled up in the road in front of my lights, four or five of them fighting. I went up to the scene of the trouble after Mrs. Patton and the others went into the house. They left Mr. MacDuff there. He was dead when I arrived. There was nothing to do.

On cross-examination, this witness testified as follows:

I was driving a Chevrolet Cabriolet, 1927 model. Both of my lights were burning, and they were good bright lights. They threw lots of light on these two men. The lights had shades on them. They are white lights, and they shone pretty brightly on these two men that were struggling. Anyone could see that the automobile lights were shining on the men. The men seemed to be scuffling, and they were huddled up when the first shot was fired. I did not see any flashes. There weren't any flashes. I could tell from

the sound when the shot was fired. After the first shot was fired the girl reached over and hit MacDuff. She did not have hold of him when she hit him, nor did she have him around the neck or by the shoulder. She reached over somebody else's shoulder and hit him, and she was not touching him with the other hand when she hit him. I was about fifty feet from them when this was taking place. Mr. Patton was on top when the gun was fired. I did not say when I testified before that MacDuff was on top when the gun was fired. Mr. MacDuff never got on top after he was hit with the hatchet. I did not swear at the preliminary hearing that MacDuff got on top after he was hit by the hatchet, and that I was positive of that fact. Mr. MacDuff did not do anything after he was struck by the hatchet. He did not fight or struggle or get on top. I never did see them struggling on the ground. The only time I saw them struggling on the ground was when I saw one man get down on the other and shoot him. I am positive that Patton was down on MacDuff when he shot him, and not standing up. MacDuff was lying on his back when he was shot and doing nothing. I think that Patton was down on his knees when he shot him.

Later that evening when Tom called Washington his father answered. He knew something was wrong by the pauses between words. The hesitations.

"What is it? Bad news?"

"Well. . ."

"Is it Kathy? Mother?"

"Your mother."

"What's happened? Is she—"

"She's not here right now, son. She's spending the night in. . . Alexandria. Resting. She became upset. . ."

"About what?"

"Nothing. Just nervous. You know. How's Ruby?"

"She's fine. We've been. . .doing something pretty interesting. Did mother have a, I don't know, breakdown again?"

"I wouldn't call it that. She's just resting. So, what is it you've been doing that's so. . .interesting?"

"We—I found the transcript of Patton's trial."

"Who?"

"Wendall Patton. The man who killed Bunk."

"Oh."

"I'll bring you a copy back with me. You can look it over. Find out what really happened, maybe."

"This is costing money, Tom. Did you call collect?"

"Wait. Don't you want to hear about this. It's your father. I have this theory about why Bunk—"

"Listen, Tom. I can't worry about that now."

"But—"

"I don't mean to be harsh or dismissive, son, but I've got other things on my mind. I know all I need to know about my father. He's dead. He's been dead my whole life. He was just never there. Do you want to talk to Kathy?"

Tom said he did. When she took the phone she said hello and then fell silent. "Kathy?" No answer. "Kathy, are you there?"

"Just a minute."

"Is Dad still in the room? Is that it?"

"Yes."

Oh, God, Tom thought. "What is it, Kath?"

"They took your mother last night, Tom, what if they take me?" The words came rushing out, self-willed words, her voice alive, uncontrolled, the words pouring over each other, their meaning incomprehensible, their sound crazy. "Oh, Tom, I dreamed about Richard and it was so real I thought he might really be there and he had this big hole right in his forehead and he was so pale he said they got him and they'd get you too and me if I—"

"Kathy, for Christ's sake. We *agreed*. We agreed. You'd lay off while you were there. Je-sus."

"I have Tom I really have this isn't the crazies I know it was a dream but it was so real and Richard kept moaning and asking for you and why you deserted him—"

Tom hung up. Out there where the flashes came from everyone was mixed up in it, all screaming and shooting and hitting each other with mortars and napalm and rocks and hatchets.

Ruby came into the kitchen when she heard him slam down the telephone. He could feel the dampness, under his armpits, along his forehead. The night did not cool things off. She looked at him. Her eyes questioned him from the recesses in her bloated face. Those acres of skin, moist from the heat, undulated into a sardonic smile as her figure ballooned into the room, filling up the space around him—like the heat, a kind of vile language.

“You,” she said, beginning her horse’s laugh, her joking voice, her mother’s voice. “You look like you just seen the truth, boy.”

She howled, rocking backward like Slick used to do, then slowly coming forward in a bow, laughing and coughing, as if she had choked on the sound of her own voice. At the door, he heard her call to him between hacks. *Where—hack, hack—do you think you’re going?* Hack, hack—*just a minute—hack—Tom. I’ll—hack, hack—go with you.*

“Ruby, I can’t take all this, this, fussing.”

Outside, the heat was worse. It must be around nine. The neighbors were still out. My name is Tom MacDuff. I live—he looked back at Ruby’s house and saw the porch light flick on. Soon, she would join him. Leave the house, that pile of dead bodies. The sidewalks along Quintard were twisted upward by the roots of the elms that lined the street. A palimpsest. A palimpsest. Now what did that mean? Lines to be erased, written over already filled space.

Some of the neighbors along the street nodded to him from their porches where they sat on rockers and fanned the air around them. Kids played hide-and-go-seek. One, next to a tree, chanted numbers, faster and faster. Tom had wanted to talk to Kelly. He had meant to ask Kathy to hold her up to the phone. *Lubb*. She was the only one who could not lie to him. She could not even form sentences. Just words. Single, imperfect, sounds. *Lubb*. How many lies had Kathy already infected her with? *Lubb*.

In recent years, Quintard had become a busier street, parts of it going commercial. More cars, more people, more kids. Lights would flash around him as he walked, and he could almost feel their harshness. Then they would pass. A light found the face of the child as he

left his counting tree. The boy looked like one of those in the clubhouse this morning. But they all looked alike. The house was on the other side of Anniston. *Lubb*. None of it made any sense. It was a coincidence of names. *Lubb*.

A boy, dashing for the tree behind Tom, plowed into him, and Tom shoved the kid down to the ground.

"What do you think you're doing!" he shouted.

The boy looked at him.

"Watch it!" Tom shouted.

"I never did anything to you, mister," the boy said.

He was weeping.

"I never did anything!" the boy cried.

Some of the neighbors left their porches, and Tom walked on. Headlights caught him in their glare for a moment and passed by.