

**An excerpt from THE TILTED WORLD by Tom Franklin and Beth Ann Fennelly**

**Prologue**

***April 4, 1927***

Dixie Clay was squelching through the mud along the creek's swollen banks, using her hat to shoo mosquitoes, when she saw a baby coffin bobbing against a sycamore snag. For a second the idea that her son Jacob, buried two years back, might have come home nearly collapsed her. She dropped her hat and her rifle and plunged into the stream. She was crashing hip-deep through the foamy, coffee-colored water when she got hold of herself. It wasn't Jacob in the coffin. Wasn't, in fact, a coffin; she slowed and trudged closer and saw that the box had rivets on metal bands, that it was a small steamer trunk, a hat trunk.

She was so focused on reaching it that she'd been hearing men's voices for a few moments before she realized what they were. Sounds could carry for miles, echo weirdly, in the wooded hollows around her house, but for these to reach her over the hissing, fumbling stream meant the men were yelling. Her husband, Jesse, wasn't supposed to be at the house this afternoon. No one was. She reversed direction in the swirling creek and fought equally hard to reach the bank and stumbled out, waders filled with water.

It was a quarter mile back to the house and she ran it, glad she'd borrowed an old pair of Jesse's trousers and glad too that she'd brought the Winchester. Dixie Clay was light of foot but the rains had swamped

their hundred acres and foot-deep mud pulled and slurped at her boots. As she ducked pine branches and dodged a blackberry thicket, she could hear Jesse's voice, though not his words, and the voices of perhaps two others. A few years back customers sometimes came right up to the house, but Jesse stopped it, didn't want her talking to men. Anyway, they didn't sound like customers.

When she crested the ridge she dropped to her stomach, but the back door of the house was clear. They must be out front. She started down the gulley, terrified when her foot slipped on wet leaves, releasing a cascade of pebbles and pinecones. She went on more carefully and kept in the dense shaded woods as she made her way around to the front porch. The voices were clearer now but she still couldn't see their owners. She was about two hundred yards off and to get closer she'd have to leave cover to dart to the stand of tulip poplars at the far end of the clothesline. She was halfway there, low and fast, when she heard a gunshot.

She almost flung herself into the poplar and crouched at its base, heaving.

Now the voice, unknown to her, was audible. "You want I should just kill you now?"

A mumble in reply.

"Then shut your pie hole."

Dixie Clay determined to move closer. Then she heard a staccato clacking. A rattler, she thought. But it was February and rattlers should be underground. Unless the rains had choked them out? She took a breath and forced herself to look down. Her trembling fingers were knocking her wedding band against the barrel of the Winchester. Dix, she told herself. Dixie Clay Holliver. Steady now.

She worked her way among the slick poplars and finally hunkered close enough to look down the slope, past the moat that used to be her damask rose garden, onto the front gallery. There was Jesse, sitting in

the rocker, and beside him two men standing. One was maybe twenty-two, clean-shaven, nosing his handgun into a shoulder holster. The other, older, bearded, wore a Homburg hat and leaned against crates of whiskey stacked on the hand truck.

At first they were strangers but then she remembered a few weeks back, how she'd been standing at the counter of Amity's store, testing the weight of different ropes, when she sensed a man at her side. She didn't turn. "I wonder if this will hold shut a busted valise," he said, and snapped a rope between his hands. She pretended the comment wasn't addressed to her and moved down the counter toward the fishing lures, letting Amity swoop in. Still, Dixie Clay felt his eyes. She was a small woman and men liked that, liked too her brown curls and the constellation of freckles across her nose. But she felt no pleasure in it. Long had it been since she'd thought of her legs as good for something other than walking to the still, her arms for something other than stirring mash. That day, exiting the store, she'd seen the man again leaning against a car, talking to another--talking about her, she could tell. Maybe if she'd looked them over instead of hurrying away, she would have realized what they were. But she hadn't. The rain had brought plenty of strange men to town, some working as sandbaggers, others as engineers, or journalists, or National Guardsmen patrolling the levees for saboteurs.

And now it had brought these two revenueurs to her house. Dixie Clay crouched, her heart galloping, peering through the scrubby azaleas that footed the poplar copse. Jesse looked small in the rocker, like a naughty school boy. His arms were folded behind his back and through the slats and she guessed he was handcuffed. Handcuffed, but not shot. His lemon yellow shirt still tucked in.

"But if we come back here," said the younger agent, shaking a Lucky Strike from its pack, "with a newspaper writer?"

The older man shook his head, but the younger continued. "How

did those Jackson fellas get their pictures in the paper? You wonder how?” He paused to pinch the cigarette between his lips and light it with a match. “They called the damn papers, that’s how.” He exhaled and dropped the match to the boards. “They don’t hack open kegs of giggle juice out in the country by theirselves with no one standing by. No sir. They telephone the paper. Then they tie a goddamn necktie. Brilliantine their hair. And only when the tripod’s up do they make like Jack Dempsey.”

Dixie Clay willed Jesse to look at her, to communicate what she should do, but if he knew she was there he gave no sign. He stared straight out. From that distance, his eyes looked black, not different colored as they were, the right one blue and the left green.

The older man crossed his arms and rested them on the handles of the hand truck, then propped his foot on the metal bar. He was shod with brogans, not boots, so there wasn’t a weapon there, and Dixie Clay could see he wasn’t wearing a shoulder holster. Beside the front door rested a shotgun. Perhaps that was his only one. “You want your mug in the paper so bad?”

“Don’t you?” continued the younger agent. “Give your wife something to crow about at Temperance? Besides, it’d be good for the campaign. And fetch us a raise, I bet.” He brought his cigarette to his lips and appraised the effect he was having on his partner. “Think of us out yonder—“ he jerked his cigarette in the direction of the still— “whiskey spraying up from a dozen barrels, us with our axes raised. And it’s a big still, bigger than the one they found in Sumner, I promise you that, and those collars ain’t paid for a restaurant steak in a month.”

“No phones out here. We’d have to drive in, call the paper, drive back out, take better part of an hour.”

“Then we’d best get going before it gets dark. I’ll fetch the car.”

For the first time Jesse spoke. “Gentlemen--”

With that the older man whirled and backhanded Jesse so hard

that the chair rocked on its rails, balanced for an impossible moment on the curved tip, and then crashed forward again.

Dixie Clay hadn't aimed, hadn't truly meant to fire, but the shot blasted from her gun above the house and the men on the gallery leapt and she leapt too. They dropped low, the bearded one scrambling behind the crates of whiskey and the other diving behind Jesse. Dixie Clay looked down, shocked, at the Winchester; now they'd be in even more trouble. And she certainly didn't want to shoot these revenuers to save Jesse. At times, in fact, she'd entertained for a spark of a second the daydream of shooting him herself. No, not shooting him; just wishing him gone. Disappeared somehow, bloodlessly, and at a distance.

As if reading her mind, Jesse hollered into the eerie ringing birdless silence. "Boys! Don't shoot yet. I know you got 'em behind the crosshairs—" Dixie Clay saw the two men exchange a glance—"but don't kill 'em till we see if we can't work things out." Jesse turned his face to the man using him for cover--"Now, if you want to see your picture in *The Delta Democrat*, you'll drop your gun and unlock these cuffs. Unless you favor the obituary section."

Across the porch the older man was gazing at his shotgun by the door, a full eight feet from where he crouched behind the whiskey.

Jesse saw the gaze and pressed on. "Just one of you with a weapon at hand, and I got me four Godless shiners aiming at your tenders. So drop your gun and uncuff me."

Instead, behind her husband's rocker, the young man's elbow flashed and a handgun snaked up and pressed itself to Jesse's jaw. The agent yelled, "Give yourselves up and I won't blast him to Hell, like I've a mind to. We'll take y'all in nice and peaceful."

Jesse tossed his head back in what looked like merriment. "Hey, now," he told the revenuers, his voice droll, "that threat ain't worth a pinch of coon shit. These fellas don't care if you kill me. It'd just mean one more slice of the whiskey pie for them. And as for you?" Jesse made

three quick clucks with his tongue. “They might shoot you just for target practice.” He commenced to rocking as if it were a Sunday afternoon filled with nothing more pressing than shelling peas. A fist flew up from behind to steady the rocker and Jesse’s chair stilled but his body seemed at ease and he crossed his feet with their two-toned boots.

“Yup,” he continued, flexing his foot, then circling his ankle. “They’re bored and ornery. Sharp-shooters from the war, that’s who I’ve got working for me. Just itching to trade some lead.” Jesse lifted his chin and called to the woods, “Hey, Clay! Show em how you beat the Kaiser!” He paused, surveying the porch. “Hit the pie plate!”

Clay. Dixie Clay. You can do this. Are you not yet that girl who won the blue ribbon for down-the-line single-barrel clay pigeon shooting, back when you wore pigtails?

On a cord from the ceiling, she’d strung a tin pie plate and filled it with bird seed. She liked to rock and watch the birds hop about. Now she aimed the Winchester. She remembered the years of hunting alongside her father, remembered shooting a panther out of a pin oak. She visualized that shot, and visualized this one. She squeezed the trigger. The pie plate rang and danced on its cord and the birdseed exploded into the air, then bounced on the floor and rolled still. She used the diversion to scuttle behind the sassafras, the last shelter before the downhill slide to the front gallery forty feet away.

“Hah!” Jesse yelled, watching the pie plate jangling on its cord. “Now it’s getting fun. Tell you what,” he said, addressing the revenuers and starting to rock again. “Let’s have us an exhibition. Yuh-huh. It’s Four-Fingered Fred’s turn.” For a second Dixie Clay was so caught up in Jesse’s fiction that she expected this phantom beside her.

Jesse continued, “Freddie, you big galoot, see if you can strike that there pack of Lucky Strikes.”

The revenuers looked at it, lying flat where the younger one had dropped it. Dixie Clay aimed at the red circle that centered the green

package, calmer, feeling again that electric connection of gaze to target, as if her eye fired the gun, not her finger on the trigger. She shot and the package did not explode in a flurry of red and green confetti. She'd aimed low, though the bullet hole in the floor wasn't more than an inch off. Not a bad shot, all told.

"Ah, Fred, Fred, Fred, I guess you needed that fifth finger to make that shot. Bit sloppy there, Fred. Your unlucky strike, I guess. Well, Bill, it's up to you." Jesse made a show of considering possible targets. "Tell you what, Bill. Tell you what I need. I don't like the Homburg hat."

Dixie Clay looked to the older man's hat, sticking a few inches above the stacked cases of whiskey. Jesse continued, "Don't care for the crease running down the middle, see. All the gentlemen nowadays know it's the smoother, rounded bowler that's in fashion. Bill, I need you to take that crease out of our chum's hat for him."

Behind the sassafras, Dixie Clay didn't move. Shoot the hat off his head? Surely Jesse didn't—

Jesse was talking again, his voice still humored, and only because they'd been married for six years could she hear the strain in it. "Yup, I need a little haberdashery for this gentleman sporting last season's fashion, cringing yonder behind the hooch we worked so hard to make. You do that, Bill, and then, Bill, then maybe your brother Joe can trim the man's whiskers." Jesse angled his mouth to stage whisper to the younger agent still holding the handgun to his jaw, "We like our revenueurs well-groomed." Jesse turned back to the woods. "Now, Bill—"

"All right!" the bearded man snarled. "You got us." He jerked his head to his partner. The younger man tossed his gun which skidded across the floorboards. Then he shouted towards Dixie Clay, "I'm reaching for keys, you hear?" and bent his face to where Jesse's hands were cuffed behind the slats of the rocker.

In a minute Jesse sprang up and lunged for the younger man's pistol and then rose and backed to the door to grab the other's shotgun.

He aimed them at their owners. For a moment all three stood like stiff actors waiting for the curtain to fall.

“Alrighty then.” Jesse’s smile spread, white teeth beneath the wings of his black mustache. “I’m taking these feds to town, see if we can’t come to an agreement. Y’all see any shenanigans, you got my permission to shoot. Otherwise, it’s business as usual.” Jesse put his foot on the grain bin beside the door and tucked the handgun in his bootleg. Then he waved the shotgun at the men and gestured at the porch steps. They turned and began walking and Jesse stooped beside the rocking chair where the handcuffs were dangling around the slats, and he threaded them through and pocketed them and followed the men. “Well, well, well,” Jesse said to their backs as they marched across the yard, leaping the moat that the men splashed through. “Where’d you hide your paddy wagon?”

Dixie Clay didn’t hear the answer but saw Jesse nod his glossy dark head as he marched them west, down the drive to Seven Hills. The sun was an orange smear behind the clouds at the crest of the ridge, and Dixie Clay watched until they disappeared and the colors of the sky leached after them. So Jesse would bribe them. It was something he was good at. Jesse would bribe them, and that would be the end of it. Nothing would change. She leaned her forehead against the puzzlepiece bark of the sassafras and let out her breath in a shaky stream. Out and in. Out and in. The damp bark smelled like root beer; she’d forgotten that. She felt exhausted and was aware of a string of sweat running between her shoulder blades, down her backbone. She leaned there until the peepers set up their evening song around her. Well, Dixie Clay, she told herself, it’s business as usual. And because her business was moonshining, and because at her back the moon was fixing to shine, it was time to go to the still.

But first she would pick her way down to the stream to fetch the broad-brimmed hat she’d left on the bank in her hurry, and to see if the

steamer trunk was still there. She half-stumbled, half-slid her way to the front gallery and sat on the steps to peel off her waders. When she stood, she returned the chair to its correct angle. Then she went inside to fetch the lantern, every key she could find in the house, the Disston handsaw, and the bent-nose pliers. She grabbed a heel of bread and a hard-boiled egg for her supper and, after giving the mule his, she climbed the ridge again and forged her way to the stream and found her hat.

The trunk was still caught in the snag and she hoisted it to the bank, bruising her thighs and drenching herself all over again. It was dark now and she sat the lantern atop the trunk and tried every key in the lock, hoping one would have the magic silhouette, but key after key refused. Nor could she pick the lock with the pliers. She'd almost resorted to the Disston when she spotted one last key in the corner of her sack and inserted it and heard the tumblers give. Inside, there was a chamois leather sack, dry, and she loosened the drawstring and drew out a mandolin, a bowl-backed beauty carved of mahogany.

She left the trunk yawning open on the spongy bank and took the mandolin with her, plucking a few strings as she walked, musing on its worth. In truth she wasn't of a mind to sell it, though neither she nor Jesse could play.

She was almost at the still when she heard, or thought she heard, the sound she'd replay, and question, and seek to assign to other sources—the call of a loon, a car misfiring, why not--but the sound which she knew came from the throat of a gun. Two shots, from the west, where her husband had marched the men she'd bluffed into surrendering.

*April 18, 1927*

The overhanging roof of the general store where Federal Revenue Agents Ham Johnson and Ted Ingersoll hitched their horses was tin, so at first they didn't hear anything but the rain, endless marbles endlessly dropped. They were quick about the hitching, keeping their heads down, water coursing off their hat brims. And even when they began climbing the stairs and heard the faint wailing over the rain, they weren't sure what they were hearing, for then came the shock when they realized the sacks of flour they'd glimpsed on the floor of the gallery as they'd ridden up were wearing boots. They weren't sacks of flour lying on a black tarp but two bodies in a thin scrim of dark blood.

Then the men had drawn their sidearms, were vaulting the final steps, Ingersoll's boots slick in the blood, half a step behind Ham. The bodies lay face down and Ham kicked their guns off the gallery, and then he and Ingersoll flattened themselves on either side of the door, pressing against the bead board. Ham nodded and they were through, into the dimly lit store lined with shelves and a glass display case on the left. Ingersoll took one aisle and Ham the other, both men scuttling low, meeting at a row of barrels, smell of rotten potatoes.

Whatever noise they'd heard had stopped, but Ingersoll turned. There was a door to a storeroom. And then that noise began again, ratcheting up, a climbing squall.

"I sure hope that's a cat," Ham said.

The baby was in the middle of the room, on its back, wailing and flinging spasmodically. And about ten feet away from it, facing the shelves stocked with cartons, lay another form on its side, black suspenders marking a Y over the shirt dark with blood, above a bow of apron strings dark with blood. Ingersoll kept his gun, a Colt revolver, on the front entrance while Ham darted to the figure and toed the shoulder, rolling it on its back, the head thunking on the wood floor. He was

maybe seventeen, a rifle a few feet from his head. Ham didn't bother to kick it away because when the boy's eyes opened behind crooked, blood-speckled glasses, you could tell he was already done for. Ingersoll scanned the store in front, the room behind. How much blood a bag of a body could hold, and then release. It was everywhere, puddled all the way to a rear entrance and running out the crack under the door. Another arm of it reaching toward where the baby was screaming. Ingersoll kept his gun trained at the door but backed closer.

"Son," said Ham, leaning over the boy. "What happened here?"

The boy's eyes tracked slowly to Ingersoll and then back to Ham. "Looters," he said. His "t" was crisp, likely a Scot.

"What's your name?"

"Colin. . .Stewart."

"Colin, we're going to get you and your baby to Greenville, to the hospital."

"Not my baby."

"It's okay, your baby is fine. We'll take him along, we'll be careful, have him looked at--"

"Not my baby. Looters. Looter baby. I shot 'em. Looters."

Ham and Ingersoll exchanged a look and when they turned back to the boy his lower lip was jerking. He spat an indistinguishable word and bloody foam flecked his chin.

"Jesus," said Ham, and holstered his gun to slide his hands beneath the boy's shoulders. Ingersoll did the same to lift his legs and the boy felt light, perforated. Ingersoll turned his head over his shoulder to steer around the baby and through the storeroom door, backing down the aisle, blood dripping off in splatters. They were out on the gallery again with its loud roof and dead looters and Ingersoll was aiming for the steps when Ham called his name. Ingersoll looked and saw the boy was dead. Ingersoll'd seen enough death to know it when it came. The body was sagging between them and they lowered it to the gallery boards

beside the other two.

“For fuck’s sake,” Ham said, and removed his hat and raked a hand through his bushy orange hair, the heel of his palm leaving blotch of blood on his forehead reminding Ingersoll of Ash Wednesday, the sign of the cross. “What the fuck will we tell Hoover?” Ham asked, and gazed beyond the overflowing gutter of the gallery roof to where the rain beyond striated the world into needles of green.

They’d gotten their current assignment just a few hours ago. The day had been earmarked for R&R, but Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover, now in charge of the Red Cross and overseeing flood relief for President Coolidge, had nixed that. First, Hoover’s men had telephoned Jackson’s Edison Walthall Hotel, where they’d just checked in, and summoned them to the train station. Hoover was crossing the flood region in a Pullman sleeper, dispensing relief and making sure to be photographed at each stop. It was quite a task, controlling--or acting as if he could--the record-high Mississippi River. Twelve hundred feet of levee at Dorena, Missouri, had collapsed just two days prior. One hundred and seventy-five thousand acres flooded. To calm the rest of the country, the River Commission had blamed Dorena, implying its levees were sub-par, just asking for trouble: “There has never been a single break nor a single acre of land flooded by a break on a levee constructed according to Government specifications” was the only statement. But there had been, and there would be. Just looking at the river could tell you that much.

So Ham and Ingersoll had gone to the station and were ushered by a Negro porter wearing a white jacket and a cap into the Hoover’s Pullman car. It was mostly filled with a polished mahogany desk and they stood before it and declined the offer of a drink and waited for Hoover and watched through the windows the frenzy of loading and unloading on the platform. Ingersoll had never met Hoover before,

though he'd seen--the whole nation had seen--the photo of Hoover giving the first public demonstration of the television. Hoover gave a speech from his office in Washington and they say men 200 miles away at the Bell Telephone Laboratory in New York stood before a glass box and could see Hoover and hear him too.

When the engine's whistle blasted, signaling imminent departure, Hoover entered, wearing a burgundy smoking jacket with tassels hanging from the sash. He told the men to take a seat, they were along for the ride, their new assignment Hobnob Landing, Mississippi.

"Sir," Ham protested even as he sank into a leather club chair facing Hoover's desk. "Our stuff's still in the hotel back in Jackson."

"Yes, yes, but you'll be compensated."

Ingersoll didn't doubt it but pictured his guitar in a locker in the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, where he'd stored it three assignments ago. His fingertips were losing their calluses, that was how long since he'd strummed her.

As the train made its way southwest to the river, Hoover outlined their new assignment. A tricky one, he said, and then began to tell them what they already knew. The levees, giant mounds of earth humped beside the river to keep it from jumping out of bed, were under tremendous pressure because of all the damn rain, and there had been plenty of crevasses from natural causes. But what they'd been concerned with was crevasses from unnatural causes. Saboteurs. And there had been plenty of those, too, usually groups of desperate men from the opposite bank, trying to save their town by sacrificing the other.

Ingersoll and Ham nodded, knowing this well. That had been the case at Marked Tree, Arkansas, their last assignment, and at the town before that, and the town before that.

But this time, said the secretary, it was different. The saboteurs weren't men from a rival town looking to save their farms. This time the saboteur was on the inside, willing to flood his own land, his own

townspeople, for what was likely a princely sum.

“How you know?” asked Ham, his right ankle crossed over his left knee, working his pocketknife in behind his boot heel to gouge out the mud. He’d spread a newspaper beneath his chair to catch the clods, which fell on “Chaplin Asks for Divorce” and “Nation Fears Flood.” Nothing about the four saboteurs they’d killed in Marked Tree. Hoover must have wanted it that way.

“There’s a town, a little town,” said Hoover, spinning his chair to face a small bookshelf secured by a chain, “on a bend in the river.” He lifted up a large leather volume and swiveled back to them. “Hobnob Landing.” He opened the book and balanced it on his left palm and licked his right index finger and began flipping pages. “A group of New Orleans bankers, big wig cotton merchants, approached the levee board of Hobnob, offering to buy out the town.”

“Buy out the town?”

“Indeed. Offered the town \$50,000 to let its levees be dynamited. Hobnob would flood, and that would take the pressure off the levees down south, saves those big columned mansions in the Garden District.”

Ham gave a snort.

“Hobnob land not much good for cotton anyway, so it seemed fair enough.” Hoover paused and lifted a pair of spectacles to his nose and bent over the page. “It’s a modest town, Hobnob, bout three thousand folks,” he continued, spreading the page flat and scanning. “Small farms, mostly corn. Some river trade, some railroad business.” He found what he was looking for and made a little cluck with his tongue and stabbed the spot with his finger, then angled the book toward them. “Big bend in the river there, so it’s been identified by the Corps as vulnerable.” Hoover glanced up from the map at Ham, who nodded. They’d been on levee patrol since November and knew how the river picked on weaklings.

“So it started out as a straightforward business arrangement,”

Hoover went on. "Let us dynamite your levee that's probably gonna blow anyway, and you all get a fresh start."

"And it ended up?"

"Human. The people of Hobnob jumped at the offer, but then they couldn't figure out how to divide the money. Some had more property. Some had better property. Some had no property at all. You can imagine the squabbles. In the end, they couldn't agree, and the bankers withdrew their offer."

"So what's the problem?"

"Men stationed at Camp Beauregard, Louisiana, tell me a pretty parcel of dynamite's been stolen. A fifty pound case."

Ham whistled.

"It was smuggled on a train bound for Greenville--" Hoover leaned over the map again to finger a black dot just north of the horseshoe bend in the river. "Only the dynamite never made it there. We'd learned about the thievery by then and were waiting at Greenville, but it had been unloaded at the previous station somehow." Hoover clapped the book shut which puffed his hair. "I bet you can guess where that was."

"Hobnob Landing," Ham offered.

"Bingo." He swiveled the chair around to slip the atlas back in its slot then faced them again. "New Orleans bankers claim no knowledge, say they'd given up on the idea of blowing Hobnob altogether and were pursuing other flood prevention measures." The secretary removed his glasses and put his thumb and index finger to the bridge of his nose. "But rumor is that the bankers found an insider willing to blow the town, if he gets to keep all the money himself."

"Who?" It was the first time Ingersoll had spoken.

Hoover looked at him sideways, over the fingers pinching his nose. "Well, if I knew that, I wouldn't be sitting here watching your partner flick clods of mud on my unread newspaper."

Ham looked up over his boot with a grin framed between his

orange muttonchops but when he saw Hoover was frowning he placed his boot on the floor and folded his knife into itself. "Sorry. I can get you another."

"I'll have my boy do it."

Ham tilted his chair legs and lifted the newspaper and balled it nosily, packing it in his palms. Hoover rose and walked to the window and looked out while the men chewed on what he'd told them, the train rocking as it gained speed.

"So we're undercover," Ham said. "Find the insider, find the explosives."

Hoover nodded. "And soon. And keep it out of the papers."

"Right," Ham said.

"I can't have anything in the papers."

"Yes, sir."

It was raining so hard that water was running down the inside of the glass, and Hoover removed a handkerchief square from his pocket and wiped a swath free. The drowned landscape clacked by, rows of shriveled cotton combed by water. "Nobody in that town knows about the stolen dynamite, and nobody needs to know. No sense having folks get their knickers in a twist."

"Gotcha."

"One more thing," Hoover said, turning. "The last two revenuers sent to Hobnob have gone missing. Been two weeks since we heard from them."

"Which revenuers?"

"Little and Wilkinson. Know 'em?"

"A bit," Ham said.

"Think they could be bought?"

"Couldn't say."

"Well, they're bought or they're dead. Figure it out in your spare time."

Ingersoll and Ham exchanged a glance.

Hoover walked to a coat tree and untied his sash and slipped the smoking jacket off and exchanged it for an Army coat. He turned to face them as he thumbed the buttons through their holes. "We'll be pulling into Greenville soon, and I can't have you disembarking when I do, in front of the newspapermen with their flash bulbs. They'd blow your cover."

"How will we get to the town, then?" asked Ham.

Hoover shrugged. "You're enterprising gentlemen. I expect you can wrestle up some horses."

Neither acknowledged this.

"Well?"

"Mighty wet for horses," Ham said.

Hoover stretched up an arm to a golden cord scalloping the wall over the window and pulled. A buzzer went off and the porter opened the door.

"Oliver, these gentlemen will be departing."

"Here?" Ham asked, incredulous. They were nowhere near a town.

"Yes, here."

The porter pivoted and was gone. In a moment the train's brakes squealed, like something punctured.

Hoover slid open his desk drawer and lifted two cream envelopes onto the leather blotter. Neither man reached so Hoover picked up the envelopes and walked around the desk and placed one in Ingersoll's hand and thumped him on the back and then did the same for Ham.

"I've read the war reports," he told them, which caused both men to look up. "You were tough in France. And you were quiet. You'll have to be both those things here. At the end of the day, this is just another war. A war against Mother Nature, and some crooks who stand to profit from her temper."

The door opened again. Hoover picked up a letter from the stack of

mail on his desk and turned it over to examine the return address.

“They’re ready.”

“Luggage, sir?” asked the porter.

“None to speak of.” He slid a brass opener into the envelope’s fold. “This war,” he said, levering the opener, “is the one I’ll ride all the way to the White House.” He looked at Ham. “And I’ll bring my friends with me.”

Ham nodded and pushed his club chair back and rose, tamping the newspaper around the mud clods, and as he passed tossed the ball into the waste bin. Ingersoll followed, looking back at Hoover unfolding his correspondence and lifting his glasses onto his nose. The porter held the door and they stepped onto the metal grating between the cars, both clasp ing their hats against the sidewinding wind. Beneath their feet the clacking had slowed and the blurry fields grew definition, shriveled brown claws where cotton should have been. First Ham, with a grunt, and then Ingersoll jumped out into the scrolling world of mud.

At the first farm they passed, they’d asked where they could buy two horses, and the farmer had said, “I’ll sell you two horses and throw in a farm to pasture them on, too.” Ham had said no, just the horses, and they’d barely had to lighten their Hoover envelopes for the two ribby roans.

Now Ham surveyed the three bodies on the gallery and shook his head. “Goddamn it. They were looting for boots.” There was a lidless box beside the bigger body that held nothing but cardboard boot lasts. Blood had soaked the bottom of the box and had climbed halfway up the sides.

Ingersoll knelt and turned over the other figure. A woman. The baby’s mother. She was wearing trousers, dark hair pulled back behind a man’s hat. Her mouth was open and she was missing a few teeth. Her stomach was open, too, where it had been shot through. Beside her on

the floor in the blood was a paper sack, rip revealing a box of puffed wheat.

“Probably drunk,” said Ham, but without conviction. The flood had made regular folks desperate, and already desperate folks downright reckless. Reckless, hungry, jobless. You can’t be hired as a corn sheller when all the corn’s been drowned.

“We’ll send the police back when we get to Hobnob,” Ham said, patting the man’s pants, and then the woman’s. He stood. “No papers, no wallet. Don’t imagine they’re from around here. Gypsies, I guess. Opportunists.”

Ingersoll heard the baby again, the wailing. It was a terrible sound. He stood.

As if to head off any thoughts his partner was entertaining, Ham said, “Let’s go, Ing. We’ve delayed too long already.”

“Ham.”

“Let’s go. Now. They got telephones in Hobnob.”

“Ham, we can’t leave it.”

“Well we sure as hell can’t take it with us. You heard Hoover. Explosives already there, fuse probably fizzing.”

“But leave the baby?”

“What? We should nursemaid the infant while the town blows up?”

“No, but...”

“It’s not our problem, Ing.”

“It’s an orphan now, Ham.”

Ham’s grey eyes met his and relented. “Oh for fuck’s sake. Fine. Fine. But I don’t like it.”

Ingersoll turned and entered the store again, Ham behind him, and they crossed their bloody footprints back to the storeroom and stood before the baby. It was wearing a shred of diaper. It had stopped crying but wasn’t happy either, making wavery, raspy breaths. The men leaned

over it.

“What do you think we should do with it?” Ham asked.

“Do with it?” They watched the baby kick his legs. “I think we should pick it up.”

“Be my guest.”

Ingersoll hesitated, then squatted to lay down the gun he'd forgotten he was carrying, and rubbed his hands on his thighs and crab walked closer, his knees cracking, and inserted his big hands stiffly beneath the baby. The cloth was wet. No wonder the little fella was unhappy. “Ham,” he said, “go get me a diddy. Got to be one here somewhere.”

“Jesus, Ingersoll, go get one yourself,” Ham said, but he was already walking toward the door.

Ingersoll lifted the baby to his shoulder, both of them so wet they couldn't get much wetter, he figured.

“Bingo,” called Ham.

A blue box flew into the room and skidded to Ingersoll's feet. He picked it up and turned it over to read, in small cursive, Kotex.

“It'll absorb just the same,” Ham yelled.

“Try again,” Ingersoll yelled back.

And then, “Wait, here we go.” Ingersoll stuck his arm up in time to catch the package of diddies. He put the baby down and it started crying again. Ingersoll was unpinning the soggy cloth, with difficulty, pins so goddamn small, when Ham walked up, pulling on a taffy, grinning at the spectacle. The heavy slab of wet diddy fell open and the baby straightened his little legs as he screamed, an angry red acorn of a penis vibrating.

“Least we know he's a Junior now,” said Ham.

Ingersoll yanked a cloth from the brown paper package and made several attempts to wind it through his legs and then he figured close enough and pinned it loosely. He picked the baby up and with straight

arms and held him out from his chest.

“What now?” asked Ham. “You’re the orphan expert.”

They decided the matter quickly, Ham agreeing to push on to Hobnob, find them lodgings, search for the saboteur, while Ingersoll doubled back to Greenville. He’d drop the baby off in an orphanage, town of 15,000, had to be one somewhere. But first he’d visit the police station, better to do it there than Hobnob if they wanted to stick to their story of being levee engineers.

“I’ll say we’re just some fellas that needed some chewing tobacco and had the bad luck to arrive after the shoot out,” said Ingersoll.

“Talk like that and they’ll know you’re a fed,” said Ingersoll. “Other people would call that timing good luck.”

Ingersoll held the baby while he and Ham picked out supplies, Ingersoll filling his saddlebag with two cans of Pet evaporated milk for the baby and a bag of fried pork skins and a Nehi soda and two cans of tuna for himself. Then they went outside past the three bodies and collected the looters’ guns and Ham flung his saddlebag over his horse and took the reins and hoisted himself into the saddle with a grunt.

“Ditch it fast,” he said, jerking a thumb toward the baby, “and get you to Hobnob. I know you like that colored music, but don’t stay for no Greenville jamboree. Only thing them poor niggers are playing these days is shovels and picks.”

He kicked the horse to a trot and it flung back two crescents of mud which Ingersoll turned to take on the shoulder, shielding the baby. He watched Ham ride away, patting the baby in time to the hooves, feeling like a discarded wife, husband gone off to fight Hoover’s war.

## Two

Dixie Clay stepped onto the covered gallery of the Hobnob mill and shrugged off her slicker and untied the strings of her rain hat and held it dripping away from her body. She pounded the door but rain guaranteed that neither her pounding nor any answer to it would be heard. So she put her shoulder to the swollen door and shoved: it whooshed and she stumbled into the gloom, sending up a few puffs of flour. There were several groups of women seated around the roller mill. They looked up but none acknowledged her. They turned back to the work of their hands.

Dixie Clay pushed the door closed against the roar of the rain, and scanning the room she saw, to her right, the unmistakable backside of Amity Tidwell oozing between the slats of a high-backed chair. She was sitting with three others before a pallet stacked high with sacks of corn meal, the pallet functioning as a work table. Dixie Clay hung her coat and hat on a nail and stood wordlessly behind Amity who looked up then with a smile and said, "Dixie Clay. Many hands make light work. Pull up a chair." But there wasn't a chair left so Dixie Clay hauled over an upturned grain bin which increased her awkwardness as her head was now a foot lower than the others', and she felt like a child whose indulgent mother lets her sit with the grownups though she stifles their gossip.

Amity instructed her how to select branches from the pile of willow saplings before her, and how to weave them through the thicker switches already laid on the pallet. They were making fascine mattresses to buttress the river banks, trying to siphon some of the rage out of the

waves smashing into the levees where Hobnob made its famous horseshoe bend. Dixie Clay watched the plump, ringed fingers of Amity and imitated them with her own smaller, work-nimble ones. The conversation which had ceased when Dixie Clay entered now picked up a bit, the women talking about the flooding in Arkansas, 5,000 people in Forest City without homes or food. 6,000 refugees in Helena. The state newspapers had been told to downplay the flood but someone had fetched *The New York Times* from Memphis last week and it passed from hand to hand in the mill. When it came to Dixie Clay, she read, "Seven more die in flood along the Mississippi . . . Additional levees broke today on both the Missouri and Illinois shores. . . . Somebody's house passed through Memphis today en route to the Gulf of Mexico." She was glad when the time came to pass the paper on.

After a while, the women talked of the local news, the alligator that had swum into the Neill's chicken coop, the oak which the last storm had crashed through David Gavin's roof. Talk drifted to the mill itself which had fallen on hard times since the farmers had no corn to be ground up for meal. Last summer had been the rainiest they'd ever seen. It rained all March so farmers only got light plantings in the ground, and it rained all June so they got little harvested. The miller himself was a sandbagger now, though Dixie Clay preferred to remember him standing beside the millstones with his hands on his hips, his eyebrows and mustache battered with cornmeal.

Talk meandered to their husbands, levering rain-heavy sandbags up the levees. Dixie Clay didn't add to this conversation. Nor did they expect her to—they knew that when she rode home with a sack of corn meal, warm and damp and laid over the pommel, she wasn't frying cornpone or feeding the chickens. "I prefer my corn in a jar," Jesse liked to say. Many of these women hated her because they thought she was married to a bootlegger. What would they think if they knew that *she* was the bootlegger? In it as deep as Jesse--as deep as murder, if those

two revenueurs didn't show up alive somewhere soon.

"Last time I braided willow saplings," said Lettie Ball, organist of Hobnob Baptist, "it was to beat that rascal son of mine, who'd gone and –"

"Which one?" asked Dorothy Worth. "Eli, or Arlis?"

"Lord, Dorothy, you know my Eli is so sweet you get a toothache just looking at him. No, it's my Arlis, wild as a june bug on a string. And this day I'm talking about, you remember when the Washington County fair was just fixing to start, 'bout July first of last year—"

Dixie Clay let their voices braid above her head as the switches braided through her fingers. She'd forgotten how women's talk could harmonize women's work. She remembered the pneumatic player piano owned by the mayor in Pine Grove, Alabama. At the Christmas party, it played a ragtime, the black and white keys depressing as if by ghostly fingers. Now Dorothy was telling a story on her son who worked for the bridge tender. Over the keening of wind and rain, the story and the lulling affirmative "uh-huhs" of the women were hole punches in the paper scrolling in the wooden piano, pulling the work along. Dixie Clay had never learned to play much piano herself, though her mother had begun teaching her before dying when Dixie Clay was ten. Her household after that was just her father and brother Lucius, and certain aspects of her education had fallen away, but she rarely felt the lack of them. The Irish neighbor, Bernadette Capes, had sent for Dixie Clay a few times a year when it was time for canning or quilting, so Dixie Clay could learn women's ways, and otherwise, she read a lot.

A new woman had come in with a gust from the door and lifted a plastic rain bonnet off her head and held it dripping at arm's length to give Amity a quick kiss and move on down the table. People selected their seats carefully, because the bid to flood the town had divided them into Flooders vs. Stickers. Dixie Clay hadn't heard about the bid until after it had fallen through, but Jesse had been right in the center of

things, as usual. He had friends and customers in New Orleans, and it was Jesse who brought their proposal to the town meeting. Later she'd asked Jesse which way he'd been leaning when the offer was still on the table, and he'd lifted the bottle of Black Lightning he'd been drinking from and said, "You think I wanted to dynamite my money-printing factory?" Dixie Clay would have sided with the Stickers, too, if anyone had asked her opinion. Not that she didn't thrill to the idea of a fresh start, this whole rotten town underwater. But Jacob's grave: that's the thing she couldn't imagine losing. It was the only sign he'd ever been alive.

Again the door to the mill opened and conversations paused until it was shut against the roaring rain. This time it was Bess Reedy, a Sticker, who would pay Dixie Clay no nevermind. About two years back, Bess's husband was drunk and pissing into the river when he'd fallen in and drowned. He'd been drinking Black Lightning, sold to him by Jesse.

"What's the level?" Bess asked another Sticker.

"Fifty-two feet."

"And the flood crest still upriver." Bess shook her head. "How long 'til it reaches Hobnob?"

"They say two weeks. Lord help us all."

Bess touched Amity's shoulder as she passed, but not Dixie Clay's.

Well, if Hobnob snubbed Dixie Clay, Dixie Clay snubbed Hobnob.

When she and Jesse were first married, she came in every once in a while. Then she got tired of waiting for a baby to quicken in her, and took over the shining from Jesse, and after that she was too busy. She cooked the shine, and Jesse sold it, and it worked that way fine for a while. And then Jacob was born. Jacob and his necksweet. Jacob and his milkbreath. And then she didn't shine as much, and still didn't go to town. Why would she go to town? She had Jacob's tiny fluted nostrils, she had the tender depressions on his temples where his pulse throbbed, she had his toes like ten shelled peas, each one delicious. But Jacob--

Jacob didn't last three months. She'd bundled his tiny body—he looked sunburned, the scarlet fever rash like sandpaper on his arms and legs, redder behind his knees, knees so tiny her thumb and forefinger could meet around them—and hitched up Chester and rode to Hobnob. When she got there, Jesse was gone, to Greenville, said the Chinese greengrocer, who was a customer. Greenville: thirty five miles north. And not immediately afterward nor now could she recall how she got to Greenville. She must have ridden in someone's car. The time after Jacob's death was full of holes.

What she recalled was knocking at the garish painted door of Madame LeLoup. A light-skinned Negress answered, wearing a blue flapper dress that stopped at her knees.

It took Dixie Clay a minute before she realized that she must speak. Seemed like days, maybe weeks, since she'd spoken to anyone but Jacob.

"I'm here for Jesse Swan Holliver."

"Never heard of 'em," the Negress said.

"Jesse Swan Holliver. My husband. He has different colored eyes."

"Ain't nobody here like that. Ain't never been."

"Please," Dixie Clay asked, and then "Wait—" as the Negress started shutting the door. Dixie Clay held up the bundle, what she had held in her arms while riding the mule, Jacob wrapped in the baptism gown she'd made from her wedding dress, though the child hadn't been baptized.

"Lord," said the woman. "Lord." She blessed herself and said that she would bring the husband down. And she had.

Now Dixie Clay flinched to feel a hand on her shoulder, Amity's warm palm pulling Dixie Clay back to present. Amity angled her shoulders to address Dixie Clay privately as the women's conversation shifted farther down the table.

"Jesse know you're here?" she asked in a low voice.

“I reckon he’ll guess. Can’t work Sugar Hill when there’s no sugar. Can’t even check the trap lines.”

“Traps washed away?”

“Traps and animals both. Beaver dams sunk. Minks drowned. Rabbit burrows collapsed. So I figured, might as well do something useful.”

No, Jesse didn’t know where she was today, or any day really in the last two weeks, because she’d hardly seen him after confronting him the day after the gun shots in the woods. She’d been waiting on the dock of the Gawiwatchee when he pattered up in his boat and threw Dixie Clay the rope and she caught it and tied a bowline knot and squatted and cinched it around the post. Then she stood and while he climbed onto the dock she watched to see if he had been drinking—he had—and if the boat had been christened a new name. This past year it had been *The Teresa*, then *The Cheri*, and now it had been *The Jeannette* for four months, and still was. She knew without anyone telling her that these were the names of women he’d run with.

He lurched past her onto the uneven dock. “Jesse,” she started, her voice thin. She called again, louder. He stopped but didn’t turn.

“What?” he said, spitting the “t.”

“Last night, after you left with the two men, the revenuers. . . .”

“What, Dixie Clay, what?” He turned then and his blue eye and his green eye were both squeezed with anger. She said nothing and he began walking toward the house. But this was her chance. If she didn’t ask now—

“Jesse!”

He whirled. “Jesus H. Christ on a Popsicle stick, here you are harassing me before I’ve even had my breakfast.”

“But, Jesse—“

He took two rapid steps toward her and raised his arm and she moved back but was on the dock, trapped. She was lifting her arms

towards her face when Jesse slipped on some fish scales and skidded and dropped to a knee. He pushed to his feet and began scraping his two-toned calfskin boot against the dock piling. And just like that, the anger was directed at the dock, which he cursed at, and his workers who'd cleaned fish there between whiskey deliveries. Finally he kicked the boot off and said "I'll take dinner in town tonight. Have this cleaned up by the time I get home," and walked up the path to the house, teeter-tottering in one sock foot and one heeled boot, heeled to make him appear taller. He moved into the tree, hissing ". . . sicka this small town. . . deserve someplace with some goddamn sophistication."

Jesse hadn't come back after dinner and Dixie Clay couldn't stop thinking about the gunshots. She needed to know what she'd been a part of. So in the morning she tugged on her boots--she tramped the western acreage and discovered nothing, no bodies, nor signs of struggle, nor the paddy wagon. Yet she couldn't shake her dread. Still, if she were going to go to the police, she'd need to be sure.

"Ouch!" Amity dropped the branch which had pricked her and stuck her plump pointer in her mouth. She studied Dixie Clay, then withdrew her finger and seemed to address it. "Jesse might not be too keen on you being here. He's getting his sugar today. He phoned from the store yesterday. It's coming from New Orleans by tug."

"New Orleans," said Dixie Clay, and shook her head.

"Woman on the phone said, 'What you need five hundred pounds of sugar for? Cotton candy?'"

Both women gave a low chuckle at this. "Tugs have been coming along the river too fast," Amity continued, "sending waves against the sandbags." She selected a willow branch and began to weave it. "Randy Yates and them are all worked up about it. They telegraphed the Port of New Orleans saying tell the barge line that if they can't control their speed, we will. Saying the next boat that comes through at thirty-five miles per hour better have two pilots, as they intend to shoot the first

one.”

“Lord God. They sent that?”

“Anonymous they did.” Amity lifted a willow branch, then discarded it by her feet for being bent. “So Randy Yates and Jim Dees and some others have spread a few miles down the levee.”

“Amity, won’t the sugar go to you first, for the store?”

She smiled wryly, carding the woven branches with her fingers to pack them. “Whiskey before cake.” She angled her backside on the chair to rejoin the larger conversation.

When the mattress was finished two women lifted one end and Dixie Clay took the other. She was 22 and five-one but strong from lifting 25 pound sacks at the still. The three women half-hoisted, half-dragged the mattress to the wall to stack it with the others, then stood a minute brushing their hands against their skirts.

Dixie Clay was the first one to hear the rifle fire and she held her hand up and the two women stopped chatting and then they all heard the shots. Amity, with a grunt, heaved from her chair and hustled to the river door. The others followed, funneling onto the loading dock. By the time they’d gotten outside, the shooting had stopped, the tug just coming into sight as it sloshed around the horseshoe bend with an angry blast of its horn.

“But it’s not even going that fast,” said Amity. “Thirty, at the most.”

They watched the tug slow even more as it exited the horseshoe and then it came abreast, muscling down the river, dragging two parabolas of smoke. It sounded its horn as it drew abreast to announce it was still angry, the captain in profile red and jerky, very much alive. The tug passed them, blasting its horn a third time to warn small craft that it approached the Hobnob dock.

“Don’t know why they fired, but they fired above it. I guess Randy and Jim were just feeling ornery. Or maybe having a pissing contest,

you know.” She shrugged.

The dock trembled beneath them. It abutted the levee, the giant wall of earth thirty feet high, with another few feet of sandbags on top. In normal times, the river’s natural banks were almost a mile off from this levee, so when you climbed to the road at the levee top, you looked down to see the berm, then the barrow, which functioned as a dry moat 15 feet deep, a pit from which the red earth was dug and carted in wheelbarrows to build the levee. Then you gazed toward the river over the wide flat batture, planted with willows, and a few separate channels that paralleled the main river, braiding in and out, serpentine around small temporary islands. Then the Mississippi itself, almost a mile wide, and on the far side, Arkansas. That was normal times. But the river had started gobbling up the batture in January, closer every time you looked. And the whole town was looking as the river absorbed its braiding channels, swelling and fattening, covering the batture, then filling the barrow pit, then climbing the levee foot by foot. Now it sloshed and surged at the top where the sandbaggers raced against it.

The men had slowly straightened to watch the tug and now stood blinking, their fists pressed into their lower backs, the sky gauzy and low, like a rafter cobweb she yearned to knock down with a broom. The tug, now out of sight around the curve, gave a last blast of its horn, and then they heard only the rain again, which is what passed for silence these last months. Dixie Clay thought how they’d all forgotten the sound of not-rain, the way they’d forgotten the smell of not-stench. No, they didn’t smell it, none of them, not the fetid mud, the festering crawfish mounds, the rotting cow washed down from Greenville and caught in their bight, nor, deeper, inalienable: their own flesh rotting. Beneath their sodden boots, the webbing of their toes scummy white and peeling in layers.

Here was the question everyone was asking: When will it stop? And here was the answer everyone was giving: It can’t go on forever. But

the answer had a lilt and sounded like a question.

As if the sky read their thoughts, as if it'd stepped back and regarded their puckered upturned faces, it boomed a laugh of thunder and redoubled its efforts, pewter skewers hitting the men full in the face. Without protesting, they slid their fists from their backs and bowed down to the sodden sandbags once more.

Amity turned and the others followed her back inside and resumed their weaving. But not Dixie Clay. She walked through the mill and lifted her hat and slicker from the hook and exited, knowing Jesse's men would be getting his sugar off the tug and that she'd be needed. So she was waiting on the gallery but still jumped when she heard the bray of her name. Jesse had ridden up alongside the mill. Jesse's hat in the rain, his face obscured behind that dripping veil, just a pale oval and the dark smudge of mustache. Beneath him the bay mule, Chester, laden with tightly tarped sacks of sugar. She was glad the women were inside and couldn't see this, though if they were here, he wouldn't yell at her.

Jesse rode to the porch steps and slid off Chester. She crossed to them and stood on the second lowest step and swung her leg over the saddle. Jesse leaned in close to yell over the rain and she grabbed the pommel to steady herself against whatever words he'd hurl at her but as his lips opened someone hailed him from the levee and just that quick his mouth curved merrily and he swatted the mule on the rump and turned away.

Dixie Clay pulled her collar tight against her neck as Chester plodded down Broad Street, his hooves spackling her skirts with mud, and every time they came to a break between buildings she craned her head to gauge the men's progress on the levee. Will it hold, will it hold, will it hold: that was the other question asked a thousand times a day. She couldn't discern the workers' faces in the slanting rain, just limbs rising and falling, looking like nothing so much as the furious scrambling of ants building their hill. Some of the limbs were dark skinned: the

sharecroppers in cotton country all around them had been trucked here, slept at night on a barge tied to the levee.

Dixie Clay stopped just once to ride behind the Tidwell store and yell for Amity's husband Jamie to come out. She unloaded a sack of sugar and left it slumped against the wall but she cared little for issuing awkward explanations or receiving awkward thanks so she was back around the corner by the time she heard the door.

Chester knew the way home without even a nudge. Before Jesse had bought the Model-T, this same bay mule had taken Jesse to Hobnob from Sugar Hill several times a week. It didn't need her guidance now, so she withdrew her rain-chilled fingers into the sleeves of her coat and slumped into the saddle. She rode past the town square with its courthouse and jail, its Farmers' bank and Lund pharmacy and Collins Furniture and Hobbs Undertaker and Amos Harvey Furniture with its Victrolas cupping their ears to the glass to listen for a pause in the monotonous song of the rain. They plodded past the stolid stucco McClain Hotel, but Dixie Clay turned the mule before reaching the Vatterott Rooming House, a place she avoided. That's where they had stayed the night when Jacob died. After she found Jesse at Madame LeLoup's, they'd ridden back to Hobnob in his Model-T, and Jesse took a room at the Vatterott's. He sat Dixie Clay, holding Jacob, on the bed. He told her he was going to order the coffin. He removed Jacob from her hands then. Just lifted him right out. When Jesse came back a few hours later she was still sitting on the white chenille bedspread, staring at her empty hands. They stayed the night and their room was on the alley side, a floor above the speakeasy, and lying in bed, Dixie Clay heard the horns begin to slide their brassy song. She pretended to sleep so Jesse could sneak downstairs.

In the morning, they drank coffee in the dining room and when they went back to their chambers, they found Mrs. Vatterott had lain out a black dress for Dixie Clay, and Mr. Vatterott a dark tie and jacket for

Jesse. So, like children playing dress up in clothing much too large, they walked to church where there was a tiny maple coffin on the altar. The preacher and the soloist and Hobbs the undertaker were the only people there. Words were said and a song sung and then Jesse lifted the coffin (the size of a tool box) and carried it to the churchyard, Dixie Clay following and tripping on the dress. She didn't listen to the words spoken there either. She was thinking of how Jacob liked to suck his three middle fingers. That little slurping sound. How he liked to grab a handful of her dark curls while he nursed. The preacher was a stranger, had never even laid eyes on Jacob. She couldn't imagine why they permitted an unbaptized baby be buried there. Most likely the preacher was thirsty.

After the funeral, she and Jesse had walked back to the rooming house, where she saw Chester tied to the post beside the Model-T. They stood in front of the hotel, Jesse turning his hat in his hands as if a eulogy might be embroidered on the label. They watched the mule lower his muzzle to the weeds poking out of the slats in the porch. Dixie Clay was aware of being stared at by both the people on the street and in the parlor. She spoke at last, saying, "Reckon those traps need emptying, before the coyotes get there."

Jesse hadn't answered and after a moment she continued. "Reckon I better ride home and see to 'em, and to the still."

She turned and began the business of unhitching the mule, and reached down for her satchel before she remembered she'd come to town with nothing in her hands but her stiffening son.

At her back, Jesse said, "I'll follow on directly in a day or two, once business here is tied up."

She nodded, and fit her shoe into the stirrup and swung up.

Jesse spoke again. "Dixie Clay, hey, you go on, take the Model-T. I know you know how. I know you've always wanted to. I'll—I'll take the mule this time."

She merely yanked Chester's head toward the road and giggled his flanks.

Jesse called out to her back. "Dixie Clay. Dix. There will be more babies."

She giggled the mule harder and was gone.

It was April when Jacob died and it was April now but a stranger looking through her eyes wouldn't guess she traveled the same road. It had been raining for months of days, and the road was mud-choked, deeply rutted, washed out altogether in spots, a sort of phantom road springing up alongside the first, cutting through the forest where a giant elm, struck by lightning, had toppled, or where a buggy had mired in the mud and the furious owner up and left it there after a vicious kick or two. Today, if she didn't get stuck and have to haul the mule out herself, the seven miles down Seven Hills Road would take over two hours, and it'd be dark when she arrived. This ride three years ago would have taken a hour. Not that she'd been in a hurry to go home and find her house empty of everything but signs of how much life it'd once contained.

As she rode with her shoulders hunched against the rain she thought that if she'd lived in a different kind of place, she might have been spared the worst of that homecoming. If she'd had a sister, or a friend like Patsy McMorrow back in Pine Grove, or a neighbor like Bernadette Capes. Neighbors, not these squinty, rifled men (here she passed by Skipper Hayes' house, another bootlegger, but one who drank too much of his product to have enough to sell), men skittish and inarticulate as the game they trapped. A sister, friend, or neighbor would have come to strip the baby bunting and remove the cotton dresses she'd made, each with a J in blue embroidery floss. Instead, after that mule ride home, she'd stood in the doorway and stared. On the floor had been the soft cloth that she'd used to wipe Jacob's sick--when he'd still take enough of her milk to get sick on, that is, before he turned away from her leaking breast, his mouth panting, first the White

Strawberry Tongue she'd heard of, pale with raised red bumps, and then progressing exactly as she'd heard it would to the beefy Red Strawberry Tongue. She must have dropped the cloth as she'd fled with him. Balled on the floor, it was studded with flies. She'd kicked and the flies had lifted, swirled, resettled. The air was rank--milk she'd left on the counter. She'd known that as soon as she got the still running, she'd have to put things to rights, get down upon her marrow bones and scrub. She was twenty then and knew that all that lay before her was work and more work until she died. So far, she hadn't been wrong.

Now Dixie Clay swerved the mule off Seven Hills to skirt a tree that had fallen even since her ride into town. It was an elm, with a squirrel's nest that had been ripped like a paper sack as the branches bounced against the ground. But maybe, she told herself, the squirrels had felt themselves falling and had leapt to safety. The key was to know when you were falling.

Around the tree she was in sight of the last hill, beyond which was the turnoff to their house, a drive you came upon quickly, as Jesse had intended. Of course Chester knew to turn. Pines crowded the drive, low limbs forcing Dixie Clay to duck, and once she didn't dip her head low enough and a shaggy forearm knocked what felt like a gallon of cold water down her back. But there was the house, a black bulk against the navy sky.

She'd hated Jesse that day three years ago for saying there would be more babies—as if Jacob could be replaced—although some part of her knew, too, that that's what she'd been waiting for. But Jesse'd been wrong: there'd been no more babies. Jesse stayed in town more and more, coming home only to load whiskey to fill the orders that he wrote in his pretty script in a little ledger he kept in his breast pocket. She knew now she'd never recover from Jacob's death. She didn't even want to. That's what Jesse had never understood: she didn't even want to.

She'd known, too, for the first time, that her mother was lucky to die in childbirth, still one with the baby dying within her.

She led Chester past the house to the barn and unloaded the sugar and the wool blanket from its back and began to curry his coat. He gave a little whinny and she scratched his long black ears. She wondered--when was the last time she and Jesse had lain down together? Would she even want that? As she dumped a scoop of grain into the mule's bin and watched him sink his nose in, she tried to imagine Jesse kissing her, the tickle of his mustache on her lips. But when she thought of kissing, she thought only of Jacob. Suckling, his hungry mouth working, his eyes squeezed closed in pleasure, his long eyelashes two dark zippers.

And what did Jesse want? Did Jesse want to kiss, to touch her? She considered this, but doubted it. He kept a room, she knew, at Madame LeLoup's, paid for with cases of whiskey. Her whiskey. She remembered again the painted door, the whore in the short blue dress who'd opened it and brought Jesse downstairs, how she'd opened the door again after Jesse had gone back up to get his things. The woman was staring at the street when she said, "I done lost three."

For a second, Dixie Clay didn't know what she was talking about, and it must have shown.

"Three babies," the woman said. "I done lost three. All three."

Dixie Clay knew now that the world was full of secret sorrowing women, each with her own doors closed to rooms she wouldn't be coming back to, walking and talking and cutting lard into flour for pie crust and slicing fish from their spines and acting as if it were an acceptable thing, this living. But there wasn't the least thing acceptable about it, Dixie Clay thought, as she bent to grab the corners of a sack of sugar and, with a flip, hoist it over her shoulder. Not the least, and she made her way by memory up the path to the darkened house.

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