

Part One

Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 2013

“Every life is in many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves.”

Ulysses

James Joyce

Chapter 1

Hours of silence hatched the noise of urgency. A pleasant Saturday watching baseball without my wife around would soon become a performance of pretense at her friend's party, where surely four years of my unemployment would be a reliable conversation starter.

With a swoop of my jacket, I slammed the screen door with accomplishment, but there it was, as always, the loose post at the end of the front porch. Three steps later, I leveled my best suburban karate kick, leaving the desultory pole dangling over the edge, clinging to the ceiling but without purpose. For my wifely status report, I had indeed addressed a home repair project.

The dry leaves of September reminded me of camping with Dad, back when he existed, and I so wanted to drift into those lost weekends. But searching through memory reruns had to wait as I was off to the christening of a nouveau riche mansion. My Saab dashboard clock glared 4:08, already an hour late. Janine would be mad, but I needed to pull into the Good Stuff convenience store for a Barq's root beer. The fifteen bucks she gave me for gas turned into eight dollars and a brisket panini, Ray Curry's smoker delicacies again too bewitching to resist.

A few back roads, then my last Newport before the long driveway up the highest hill within five miles. Near the top, a switchback slowed me when a black poodle darted from behind a row of azaleas tucked into the steep drop-off. A skid saved his hide, but when I pushed the accelerator, my tires spun on the gravel surface. Car in neutral, drifting slowly backward, I punched into first gear, leaving the fake wood housing around the shifter cracked from front to back.

"Crap," I said, then spit my gum out the window and prayed for at least one good tread.

Up top at the far end of the circular drive, a BMW backed out, so I pulled into the slot, hoping the leaping concrete porpoises in the driveway fountain had camouflaged my entrance. The delusion melted as a perfect crowd gathered. Surely, I'd impressed the onlookers with my skillful driving, especially my six-foot-six host, Eric.

"Nice job there, Winstead; that last push to the peak is deadly, isn't it? Tell me, did you have to use oxygen, or did you just suck up the thin air? I bet you just sucked, right?" I stared into the distance, pretending not to hear, my trustworthy sarcasm apparently left at home.

From behind the porpoises, Janine flushed a pale smile, and before I could speak, she announced, "Larry has two good job prospects lined up, management jobs; isn't that great, Eric?" My God, if only I'd brought a cyanide tablet.

He looked at Janine as if she'd ordered a double laxative on the rocks and then almost seemed to acknowledge his rudeness, but instincts were stronger than civility.

"Well, well, that's good news, Larr; the little woman seems proud. And I didn't even know Taco Bonanza was hiring. Heck, with your driving skills, you got home delivery all to yourself."

This moment was why people should not carry hand grenades to parties because I'm fairly sure I would have hurled one at Thor. But the crowd parted as if someone had broken a bottle of red wine. Eric seized me by the neck. "Only kidding there, sport. You know that."

The thought flashed to kick him where his primary brain sags, but Janine's bloodless expression insinuated restraint. Then she disappeared into the crowd. Talk about alone—even the gossipers had rushed for cover while Janine sought asylum in the ladies' room. Not even the dog wanted a sniff.

My lifelong skill at faking the truth had mysteriously disappeared, so to avoid the isolation of arrival, I plowed through the crowd, making loops through different rooms, trying to lose among the chandeliers and marble floors the trailing scent of sobriety. Washing my face helped, then I melded into the swarm of people guzzling tequila shots from a line of silver platters atop a white piano. At last, I didn't feel different, so I focused on my excellent new idea of how a roadkill skunk might end up floating in Eric's pool.

After an hour, Janine and I couldn't avoid each other any longer, and at the dessert station, we shared stares of survival. A language of wedded indifference carried us through cheesecake and strawberries, and as the sun burned down, we inched towards the car, skulking behind a Gatsby cluster all leaving together. Clara, Janine's old high school friend and hostess, was not fooled.

"Oh, Larry, hold up a moment, please. I want to thank you for coming. I realize you don't know many people here, but I appreciate your making the effort. We all adore Janine so; it's nice to see she has such a loving husband to support her." My eyes rolled back as the tequila continued pickling my brainstem, but resident charm seized control.

"No problem, Clar, enjoyed the hospitality. Your husband already made me feel quite special." Those words slipped from my mouth accidentally as I thought I was only talking to myself, but with rescuer's response, Janine intruded between her friend and me.

"Yes, about that," Clara said. "I heard Eric, and I want to apologize; he'd had a little too much margarita, I'm afraid. You understand he was only poking fun. He's a super-kind person, and at the country club, he gives the caddies the biggest tips." Words seemed to fail her as she lost momentum in mid-thought, her eyes studying the loose stones of the driveway.

Unfortunately, my brain wasn't in full communication with my mouth, which, in the absence of restraint, made a run for freedom. So, I sidestepped Janine's protection, then offered one last note of appreciation: "Sure, Clar, no problem. Maybe next Saturday I can lug his clubs around; you know, earn a few bucks myself. . ."

Janine jostled me towards the car, and I heard a blur of "thanks" and "see you soon" as I slid into the front passenger seat. The stuffy air almost made me gag before I cracked the window enough to catch a little breeze, but regretfully also to hear Janine's last words to Clara.

“Oh, it’s Larry. He drinks too much. . .” I looked to see if Janine would offer me a glance. She did, a laser shot from emblazoned blue eyes, a would-be terminator unmasked in Hattiesburg. I’d only come to show her friends how I was changing my life, and yet something predictable had occurred. I rolled up the window, not wanting to hear who I was.

The thud of distant music hammered, and without warning, an old image of my grandfather popped into my head. He’d dropped by the house on my sixteenth birthday to give me his old shotgun, and there in his left eye was a peering void I’d not seen before, a darkness that scared me, though I wasn’t sure why. Two weeks later, he died without warning. Today, Janine’s empty stare brought back that kindred knowledge of having looked through the pane shielding one life from another, encasing the secret dark matter of separateness. That glare penetrated me, searching for those unspoken things I’d meant to tell her but didn’t, those withholdings I’d postponed without realizing.

The drive home quivered in the escapist blur of alcohol, but I’d glimpsed Janine’s secret. Farms slipped past as dim forms, silhouettes languishing without sun, mildly aware of approaching winter; and through the Mississippi countryside, my wife and I traveled into a dusk of separated silence, alone, yet not.

Violence awaited me. Not puerile hitting or pushing—oh, if only. The lid to a long-sealed vault had shifted on the day’s blunder, releasing within me highly charged imbalance to merge with Janine’s fury. Now, vintage stores of abandonment began surging upward, that hopelessness from my dad’s unexplained disappearance two decades earlier mindlessly uncorked in the icy celebration of failing marriage. And on the horizon, a dying star struggled to hold its heat.

Chapter 2

For the next few days, I lived in a walk-in freezer. Janine visited each night, then left in the morning as early as possible after sharing a few gutturals about “supermarket” or “credit card bill.” Days passed with only an occasional call from my mom or that nice lady selling attic insulation, but mostly life consisted of my guitar, inane television, and the sound of ubiquitous nothing.

On Thursday morning, Janine announced she would attend another dance class after work. She’d been going on Tuesdays for a couple of months but got a price break for lessons twice a week. We couldn’t afford the luxury since my job at Blockbuster had ended so suddenly. But working as a paralegal for a shyster attorney, she deserved some reward; besides, I figured the house could heat up easier with her coming home later.

At least I didn’t have to defend myself against the muffled fury of a forty-year-old woman embarrassed in front of high school friends. Instead, I enjoyed my time without wrestling pretense or rationalizing excuses that never got spoken. Oddly, her mother, Eleanor, became warmer toward me, though our past relationship had always been strained.

“No, Janine’s not home right now. She usually gets back from dance around eight. Do you want her to call?”

“Dance class? I thought she went on Tuesdays.”

“She does, but now she goes twice a week.”

“Oh, I see. Funny, she didn’t mention that. Well, I’ll talk to her tomorrow. I wanted to invite you two to lunch Saturday. My old friend Dante Whitfield is passing through, and Don is barbecuing chicken for lunch. Can you make it?”

“I guess so. I’ll check with Janine. We’re still getting over our last barbecue.”

It would have been the perfect time to make up a story and get out of the whole thing, but I didn’t want to antagonize Janine even more. Eleanor annoyed me wanting to know every detail about our lives as if it mattered a twit if Janine took two dance classes a week or one, but those were the only words I’d spoken all day except for singing in the shower, and it felt good to hear a pleasant voice not trying to sell me something.

“Okay, Larry. Good night, love. Miss seeing you lately. I always enjoy how funny you are.”

The unexpected compliment quickened my heartrate, but I couldn’t remember ever saying anything humorous to her. Over the years, Eleanor and I had endured our challenges, especially over her habit of drilling into meaningless personal information, but I eventually realized she did the same thing to everyone. But that comment, “Funny, she didn’t mention that to me,” unsettled me, though I wasn’t sure why.

At seven-thirty, I thought to start dinner and have the house smelling homey for Janine. Every day I tried to do something pleasant, even though she ignored the effort, but my theory was that with a little normality, time erodes memory. Perhaps not compatible with my planned new diet, but I cooked biscuits and redeye gravy because nothing makes a house smell more inviting than homemade buttermilk biscuits.

Mom showed me this recipe ages ago, and I liked to put a little cayenne pepper in the tomato gravy to make it southern. Before long, the house reminded me of Pete's Corner, the home cooking café where we used to eat family style. I sure missed his banana pudding.

With biscuits almost done, a worry rippled up my neck. Janine had never been later than nine. I thought maybe the car broke down, so I called her phone—only voicemail. I was sure she'd forgotten to power up the cell after class. Or had she told me she needed to stop by the grocery store?

Fifteen minutes passed, then I heaped up a plate with three biscuits as a levee to make sure nothing leaked out. The cayenne peppers from the garden were about finished this season, so I'd picked a whole handful, and for the first time that day, I tried not to think.

An hour passed, and after peeking out the curtain for the thousandth time, I called Eleanor. No, she hadn't heard from Janine. I started to worry and began pacing, peeking out every window, checking to see that the phone was on the hook, looking for a note that might have gotten covered up. Nothing. I didn't even know the name of the dance studio, and minutes jogged arthritic laps.

Finally, the phone rang: an urgent message to vote yes on the middle school bond issue. Why couldn't they call in the daylight when I had time to chat? For the tenth time, I tried Janine's cell but received only a bland message to call back later.

A hot shower did little to relax me even with the phone pulled into the bathroom. At just after eleven, car lights glared through the den windows, and the old muffler rattled of weariness. My heart thudded, the blood swishing through the arteries in my neck sounded like rain. It was hard to control my emotions as my rage wrestled with the realization that Janine was safe. Steady breathing, in and out—Janine's yoga tapes had taught me this, and I readied myself.

The door tweaked open as if she thought I might be asleep. I waited in the hallway with only the stove light dimly illuminating that part of the house.

"Oh, hey," she said. "Didn't see you standing there. Scared me." I didn't respond. "Good, I smell redeye gravy. Did you fix biscuits, too?" Her friendly tone was effective, but my irascible self was in no mood to be pleasant.

"Yeah, four hours ago."

“Oh, about that, a couple of us got together after class, talking you know, and the time got by me. We stopped and had a drink and listened to some music.”

“Drinks and music, huh,” I said. “It didn’t occur to you to give me a call? You didn’t think I might be worried about that piece of junk car we drive?”

“Well, no,” Janine rolled out her words as if calculating effect. “Really, I didn’t think about it, and you didn’t call. Besides, we took somebody else’s car, so it was okay.”

“I called twenty times; your phone was turned off. Who were you with?”

“Some people from class. Nobody you know.” Then she turned her back to me.

“Well, maybe I should get to know them if you’re going to stay out till midnight drinking without even bothering to let me know where the hell you are.”

“It’s not midnight; it’s only eleven-thirty, and I’m tired. I’m going to take a shower and go to bed. We can talk in the morning.”

“No. We’re talking right now. I’ve been pacing around this house like a tiger in a shoebox. Good God, Janine, I was worried sick, and you act like it doesn’t even matter.”

“Larry, be reasonable. You can see I’m right here. There’s no reason to worry.”

“Something’s not right. You did something, didn’t you?”

“Of course not. I told you we had a glass of wine and talked, that’s all.” Her sideways glance reeked of a sneer.

“Who went with you?”

“People from the class, Kathy, Toni, and Bill.”

“Whose car?”

“Well, I rode in Bill’s, if that matters. Good grief, you sound like my mother.”

“Oh, it was you and another man in his car, and you think I’m overreacting?”

“Well, you make it sound worse than it was. Bill is going through a divorce and needs somebody to talk to, that’s all. I’ve got my own problems these days, so it seemed like we could support each other.”

I stepped forward. “Did you sleep with Bill tonight? Don’t lie to me.”

“That’s ridiculous. Of course not.”

“Have you ever been out to drinks or lunch or walks or anything else with this guy?”

“I’m tired of this inquisition and I’m going to bed,” Janine said. “I don’t need your paranoia. You can’t stand that I had a little fun tonight while you sat here moping around like a has-been.” The slamming bedroom door emptied the house. Only crickets outside breathed as they spread the word of a new ice age begun.

“I would have gone, too, if you’d asked me.” Directed at the closed door, the words dribbled half-frozen from my lips, unheard and punctuated only by the cooling pop from the muffler groaning in the driveway.