

## Doak's Creek

By Schuyler Dickson

The way the stars bite down, it is cold and runny. The cold drips down cold.

I squat in a dark pool and look around the concrete. I think one of my hands is cut. I don't know if it was a pool of chemical or natural. I think both, no not now that I stick my hand in it and think about it I ain't sure. It burns.

I start thinking about helicopter rides. I hadn't had one. Blake took one over our house, over a bunch of houses all the way from Canton to Jackson, that state capitol, but I was stuck in the car. I could still feel it in my hand but I didn't know it was what it was when I pointed it at him and pulled it—a joke—and it snapped back in my hand and popped him in the neck. Things sprayed out but not the metal. It stayed in. Lodged, they said, in his spine, but I don't think it's in there any more.

Minutes ago, I hadn't had the wheel. I had her in the backseat with me but the wheel was up front. My head was back against the window. I watched the back of her legs, her knees pressed sliding against the other window leaving wet streaks. The pop of the train on the old creaking bridge across Doak's Creek sounded like a slow propeller's chant. Something big smacked us slid us against the rail and skid stopped and took off into the dark before I seen it.

The creek is low. I want to dive in and wash the filth from me but I don't because it's still warm enough for sliders. Teresa lays on the dented tailgate breathing and smoking a cigarette. The bumper's knocked off on one side and part of the paneling is twisted and all bent up against the flat wheel.

“What we gonna do?” she asks.

“Bring me a beer.”

“We're out.”

“Bring me—“

“You're gone have—”

“Bring me a boat.”

“You're gone have to beat the thing off the tire and change it.”

I look up at the cold up there and it's the same. I look at Teresa and I can't tell if she's breathing smoke or if it's her breath. She takes a drag. I see her face as she sucks and then I don't the moment she whips it away from her lips. I see her shadow flick the butt over the bridge and it flips and falls down into the water where it goes out.

“We could build a boat,” I say.

She groans.

“I'd let you be Huck.”

“I want to go home.”

I have to yank at the driver side door to wrench it open. I reach under the seat and pull the single action .357 I got out of the holster and walk out with it in my hand. There's a stop sign hanging in the tree in the dark. I know its shape, the outline even without no light so I pull back the hammer aim and it cracks but there's no *pang*.

“Haven't you had enough?” she says.

Headlights. Teresa sits up and looks at me and then looks back at the car coming. I slide the pistol down my back and underneath my belt and pants and pull my shirt up over it. It's no cop. We can see it is a truck and it snakes around and comes to the bridge and stops before it reaches us.

"What the fuck they doing?" I say, but Teresa hops off the tailgate and starts making her way over there. The truck creeps up. The driver cranks the window down.

"Y'all got room for one more?" she says. I peer in and see two guys smoking cigarettes. The passenger drains his beer and says yeah just one and looks at me so she walks around the back and opens the door and he steps out to make room for her between them.

"You got to make it worth our while," the driver says and they close the door so I can't hear nothing. The front driver side fender is dented in and the engine's having trouble. They pull off and I am left in the cold and dark and the melting stars that burn something that's not skin.

If it weren't for the busted ass frame I could change the tire and ride in my truck.

There's a metal lean-to that serves as some kind of non-denominational church up the road about—I don't know—maybe a couple of miles and I'm guessing because I only been there once when I was a kid. Some churches stay open and I might find a phone to call my buddy Tom. It's the only place I know so I start walking to it.

Last time we was young and I was spending the night with the kid who sat next to me in eighth grade, Fred was his name, and he had a sister who was a couple years older than us who was worldly. They lived out in Farmhaven, Mississippi, a little town outside of Canton where I live and we went to school, close to my dad's farm. We rode from school and Fancy—the whole damned family had names that started with F, the four kids *and* the parents—she kept scooting closer to me in the back seat and asking me if she could kiss me and I saw her other brother, Phillip, driving and keeping an eye on me in the rearview so I just looked at her and shook my head and she said yeah I didn't think so.

She said it real sad. It was me and Fred and Fancy and their parents was making us go to this church that night on a Friday, this tin shack with metal siding and metal roof. Inside it was just chairs all lined for eternity facing a pine stage. We all sat in the back: me and Fred and Fancy and their mom. There was a banner strung up above the stage that said Heaven's Gates and Hell's Fires. It was like a play. It had some people being good to people and going to heaven to meet Jesus and float around with their cousins and dogs and it had some people being bad, drinking and sexing and drugging, and they all went to hell with the nasty snaky Satan who spoke like a loud distorted guitar with pyrotechnics and little minions with sharpened pool cues. I didn't want to go either place the way they showed it, but I knew it wasn't real, just a play and I've been in plenty of those in elementary school. At the end of it, Jesus got on the microphone and said if we felt something during the show to come up front and get saved. Fred's momma, Fay, got up and so did Freddy and they scooted by us and so did half the crowd to make it up there. I got up too, but Fancy grabbed me by my pants and pulled me back to my seat so I sat down. She started rubbing my leg and it felt good. Jesus said a prayer for everybody up front and Fancy rubbed on me. Nobody said nothing on the ride home.

Fancy's hands. We took off to the barn and kissed by the hay bales. We kissed for hours and then came back in and her dad was the only one up, watching TV and

drinking beer. Fancy went to bed and her dad stopped me before I went to bed and asked where we'd been. I said just walking around. He told me to sit down on the couch next to him. I sat down. He drained his beer and asked me if I knew how to fuck a goat. I said, what? Do you know how to screw a goat? I said no. Well it's tricky, to make'm stay. You wrap your legs inside the insides of its back legs—he wrapped his arms together to illustrate. It'll run away if you don't. (I felt Hell in us both.) He said, you pull your pants down and wrap your legs around its back legs so it don't run away and you walk with it until you get to a pond or a lake, or I guess a hill would work if it's steep enough. That way it don't run away. You get it in a spot where it can't run backwards or forwards.

I see a legless snake slithering in the ditch. I unsheathe my pistol from behind me and fire at it and some dirt shoots up, just dark on dark. I wander. Alone. The night.

I start thinking again while I walk. We had a mandatory break meeting at school. I was eating a sausage biscuit from the cafeteria and got told I would get Saturday work day if I missed the meeting. Some yankee troop from up north was doing interpretive dance about sin. I couldn't interpret it. It was after I busted Blake in the neck. After the show they made us all stick around and miss third period—I was glad for that. They saw Blake in his chair with the motor making him breathe and the tube to blow in to make him move. To make up for it, I feed him every day with the same hand that did it and I bought him a rifle with a hook-up to where he could shoot it by blowing in his tube. He can't shoot a deer or anything unless it's deaf because of all the motors, but it's still fun to hit targets. Anyway, those yankee mimes saw him and called him up front and called everybody to get around him, everybody in the whole damn school to put their hands on him and pray for him to get up out of the chair. I prayed but it was me who put him there and I knew he wasn't going to get up from the chair. I knew since I felt it in my hand and on my chest and I think it every time I'm out at night with the cold dripping through my bones.

I get to the tin shack church around midnight. I look for the moon but I don't see it. I rub my hand against my shirt and see a dark spot from the blood. The other hand hurts so I rub it on the other side and leave a spot of dark on the white. The same truck that stopped earlier is parked in the gravel next to the church. The tailgate's down with one of the jokers squatting on it reaching in to the cooler when I spot him. He doesn't see me. I can see him just fine.

I walk down the gravel under the spotlight moon that shines through a hole in the clouds.

I seize the grip from behind my belt that pokes down into my backside. Old boy stares at me and when he takes the beer up to his face I whip it out and pull back the hammer and squeeze the trigger. It pops and flashes and the back windshield cracks. He falls off the tailgate and starts crawling. Two heads pop up in the cab. I jog over with the pistol down as he gets to the car and get him once in the head and he's down. I grab the handle of the truck and snatch it open and there's Teresa crawled naked against the other door and the other boy with his hands up trying to talk but it's just gibberish like a baby so I grab him naked by the ankle and tug him out and beat him. He gets a solid punch to

my chin that knocks me back and tries to get on me but I pull the trigger. A shot to the thigh. He falls back saying please, please but I look down the barrel at his face with tears on it. I shoot him in the neck.

Teresa cries sobs and the echo of it against the creek behind the church. I smell corn and the metallic sulfur and blood mix. I look at the front bumper with the headlights on and hunter green that was on my truck just hours before. I kill the engine and the headlights with Teresa wailing. Drag the bodies, one barely breathing the frothy blood from lips, one and then the limp other to the creek. I line the two up before I kick them into the water, the clouds parted now reflecting on the surface of Doak's Creek, those little hunks of burning gas and metal, their noiseless pop and baring shine.

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