

# *William Cobb*

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## **Passin' Side/Suicide**

Glory Sanders is a friend of mine. She's a drunk like me, only she calls herself a "grateful recovering alcoholic." She hauls me to the AA meeting in the basement of the Episcopal church over in Talladega every Thursday night, and when she gets up to talk that's what she calls herself. Glory runs the Waters Edge Bait Shop on county road 20. Glory has been around the bases a few times. She's been there and back, as they say.

I'm sittin in the little back room cafe at the Water's Edge that looks out over the lake. I'm drinking coffee and she's behind the counter, leaning on it, smoking a cigarette. Glory's always telling me to get a job. That's what everybody says to me, get a job. "You need to get a job," she says, "you need to go to a meetin every day, ninety meetins in ninety days." I tell her I ain't the meeting type. They made me swear when I was leaving the treatment center that I'd go to at least three meetings a week. I raised my right hand up and swore to God, knowing right then I wasn't going to do it. No way. But I figured they wouldn't let me out if I didn't say it.

"When you going to-" Glory begins. She's leaning on the counter.

"Don't start," I say.

"Jesus, Robert," she says, "I'm just tryin to..."

She don't finish. She calls me Robert. She knows I don't like for people to call me Bob, but she always used to call me Bob before I went to treatment. Now she calls me Robert. Glory was there the night the cops took me in, after that fight at the Silver Moon Cafe. She goes around with the cops on Saturday nights, looking for drunks she can save.

"I'm a honorary deputy," she says, "on a mission of mercy." They put me in the county jail and then took me to a psycho ward on the top floor of Brookwood Hospital in the city. The windows had bars on them. After a few days they gave me a choice: thirty days in jail or thirty days at a treatment center out in Warrior. I thought it was a no-brainer.

Glory was waiting for me when I got out. "I'm your sponsor," she said. "Like hell you are," I said.

There's a television in the cafe. Me and Glory are watching "So You Want to be a Millionaire." Halfway through the program she says, "These people are dumb."

"Dumb as a post," I say.

Glory is looking at me funny. "What are you, forty-four? Forty-five? What?"

"You got it right," I say.

"What?"

"Both."

She looks at me like that explains something to her. She turns back to the tv set. I have two birth certificates. I guess I'm two different people. One of them says I was born on April 9, 1956. On that one my mother's name is Annabelle Pleasants, and the father is listed as "unknown." I am Robert Pleasants. On the other one, dated April 6, 1955, my mother's name is Anabelle P. Fosque, and the father is Ralph Fosque. On that one my name is listed as Robert Fosque. "We was never married," my mother told me. "It was the fifties, you had to do that." "Do what?" I asked. I was about ten years old at the time she talked to me about it. "You know," she said. I didn't know. But I didn't say anything. "He was a real bastard," she said, "you're better off not ever knowing him."

"I don't give a shit," I said, and lit up a Camel. I kept them rolled in the sleeve of my white T shirt.

I have always gone by the name of Robert Pleasants. It has never made two hoots in hell to me that I've got two birth certificates, two names.

"Shit," Glory says, her eyes on the screen, "the next time I see forty-five it'll be a *hunnert* and forty-five!"

If you ain't a drunk, you don't know what the Big Book is. Unless you're married to a drunk, I guess, or living with one. It tells you all you need to know about recovery. It's the AA Bible. It lays out the twelve steps for you, right there. Glory keeps after me, and I'm on step nine. Sometimes I do them half-ass, but I try to do them. "Seek out those people you've hurt with your drinking and make amends to em," Glory says. "Just one'll do. It'd take you the rest of your life to find em all. Just one. Find em and..."

"...and what?"

"Say you're sorry. Ask em to forgive you," she says. "It ain't easy."

"Shit," I say.

I think about Jolene. She would have to be the one, I guess. She was too young for me from the start, but she was something wonderful I just couldn't let alone. I could tell her mother thought I was trash. She didn't like me from go. They lived in a little white-washed farm house over on the other side of Pachuta, near Bay Springs. Jolene worked at the Ritz Twin Theater in Pachuta, selling tickets. I thought I might like to spend the rest of my life with Jolene, and when I thought that it scared the hell out of me. She would

get off at eleven, and we'd drive out to the quarry in my pickup and make love under the moon. She was sweet as the inside of a ripe pineapple. Salty and juicy as a plum in June. She was not even yet twenty, but she was wise. She knew what she was doing.

"Why you come sniffin round me, old man?" she would say, running her fingers over my bald head, giggling. I'd root like an old hog, and she'd squeal like a piglet. Lordy. I get horny just thinking about it.

"We thought you was in jail," Jolene's mother says, when she finally gets to the door. The front yard has old tires painted white half buried in the dirt on both sides of the front walkway. There's one of these old bottle trees in the front yard. I knock and knock. When she opens the door she just stands there looking at me. Her name is Sheila. Her expression don't change at all. Her eyes droop like wilted blossoms. She's got on a pair of red shorts and a T shirt that says SHUT UP AND PITCH. She props herself against the door jamb with one arm. She's got her other hand on her hip, the fingers of that hand holding a long, thin cigarette with a little string of smoke rising straight up like the thing is hanging from the ceiling. Just stands there, like that, until all she says is, "We thought you was in jail."

"Nope," I say. "Jolene here?"

She don't say anything, but her lip curls down. She looks tired enough to have been digging ditches. She's skinny as a preacher bug, but she's got this little belly, like half a soccer ball. It looks like it don't belong on her, like she borrowed it from some fat person. She's a lot closer to my age than Jolene is.

The living room smells like cigarette smoke and used up butane. It smells like cooking grease and dust. One great big old vinyl recliner. One of those console televisions that you don't ever see anymore, that sits on the floor. There used to be a sofa with an old blanket thrown over it, but it's gone. I could smell coffee. These folks drink a lot of coffee, I remember.

"She ain't here, she says, after she's already motioned me in.

"Where's she at?"

"She's gone."

I look out of the side window. There are two lawn chairs out there, with the yellow and white webbing faded and broke and hanging down. There is a Snapper lawn mower and a charcoal grill, both gathering rust. I see clumps of crabgrass in the yard. I remember then how the grass smells when the

sun's been on it awhile. How the sun makes you smell the dirt, the earth. Ever since I got out of treatment I think about things like that.

"I ain't got no significant other," I told my counselor, when I was in the treatment center. His name is John Berry. He's a drunk, too, sixteen years sober. They want me to invite somebody to come for family week. They tell me I need to.

"You must have somebody," John says.

"No. You got the information right there." I point to this clipboard he's drumming his fingers in his desk. It's the long form I filled out when they first admitted me. He holds a ball point pen in the fingers of his other hand. They are delicate and slim, like a woman's. He's all man, though, a wiry son-of-a-bitch. He don't let you get away with nothing. You can't shit him. I have tried, the whole time I've been here. "Mother dead. No sisters and brothers," I say.

"What about your father?"

I laugh. I have told them every story in the book about my father. I told them he was a black man, working in my mother's yard. I told them he was a Gypsy, passing through. That he was this rich doctor in Mountain Brook. That he played ball for the Yankees. I passed the time thinking up shit to tell them about my father. I told my therapy group my father was George Wallace. Half of them believed me. They had burned up so many brain cells they'd believe anything.

"Okay," he says. "But there must be somebody." I think of Jolene. It's been about a year then since I've seen her. I sit there seeing her in my mind's eye. She ain't what you'd call a knockout, but she's a pretty thing. Her mouth is too big. Her eyes are too close together. But she's got great hair, and legs. She's got legs so great they're prettier than eight miles of new road. You never saw better legs that Jolene's got. What got me, though, was how she always knew what I was thinking, and it made her laugh. She would look at me-she has these really black eyes, like marbles-and I would be thinking of something funny to say and she'd be already laughing. Like that.

"No," I say, "there ain't nobody. Period."

"Okay," he says.

"You got yourself a loner here, John-boy," I say. "I can take care of myself."

"Yeah," he says, "right."

Me and Jolene were easy together. We could just sit for a long time without even talking. "You're old enough to be her father," her mother said to me. "So?" I said, and Sheila cut her eyes at me. Her droop-tired eyes. Jolene's daddy is a welder, works at TCI in Birmingham. Him and me used to drink beer together. We'd smoke some weed, visit the craps game down at Zorba's corner. Named Sid, and he's restless as I am. He works all the time, ain't hardly ever at home. "I ain't never thought of myself as old." I said to her, "as old enough to be anything."

"Jolene wants a life, a family," she said.

"I ain't standing in her way, am I?" I said.

She told Jolene I'm a sorry one. Jolene laughs about it. She puts her hand on my arm and holds it there, leaves it there. She just looks at me. Her eyes smile at me.

I am at the Silver Moon Café, a few months before the night of the fight that got me sent up to treatment. They call it a café because you can get a hamburger or a platter of greasy fried catfish and hush puppies, but it's mostly a night club and dance hall. It's got big plate glass windows overlooking the lake. It's got a long bar against one wall and a bandstand and a dance floor. Country bands play here, nobody you ever heard of, and it's always packed to the gills, specially on Friday and Saturday nights. These cowboys and their women come out from Birmingham, and good old boys from out in the country wearing their Caterpillar hats and great big silver BAMA belt buckles. College kids come out here sometimes, looking for trouble. Or for women. Same thing.

I'm flying high. Soaked to the ears. This woman, Jesse, is here. She's got eyes so green it sets your teeth on edge just to look at them, married to a mechanic at one of the shops over in Talladega. Her jeans been painted on and she wears cowboy boots and a little frilly white blouse. You can see her nipples from here. I've danced with her before. It seems like the whole world is loud and drunk and high and happy. The band tonight is called Naked as a Jaybird, and they play all these great old Eagles songs.

I sit and drink my beer and stare at Jesse, until she starts to stare back. I can see those green eyes glowing through the smoke. I don't see her husband. She's with these two women I've seen here before, both about forty, at least ten years older than she is. The three of them get up and dance together, and Jesse keeps looking over at me. I'm breathing smoke and beer vapor,

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and the band is whacking out on "Take it Easy." Overhead lights spin. Beer signs make these melting drops of colors on the wall across the room. It feels and looks good. Just right.

I'm glad I'm here. This is the one place I'm supposed to be, right now, in the whole world. I'm just about to go over when somebody grabs my arm from behind. I turn around and it's Jolene. She's smiling, happy. Laughing. She's got a long-neck Rolling Rock in her hand, waving it in time to the music.

I think: *What are you doin'? Checkin up on me!* I say, "What in the hell are you doin here?!" I'm thinking, *She thinks she owns me. Just let a woman... Just let a woman...*

I say it real ugly like. "Well? You don't own me, woman," I say.

The grin just disappears from her face, falls away like a light bulb blowing out.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I don't know you." I say it hard and nasty. "I was just fixin to dance with somebody," and I walk off and leave her standing there. As I walk over to Jesse, I can still see Jolene's eyes, the way they looked. They are like a little child's that you've disappointed, let down. Jesse sees me coming and stands up. Her body looks fluid, like I would drown in it. I look back and Jolene is gone.

That was the last time I saw her. I think about them eyes now, full of all that hurt, standing here in the living room with her mother. "Well," I say, "you gone tell me where she is, or what?"

"She don't want to see you," she says.

"Now how do you know that?"

"I just do," she says. She's tapping a filter tip cigarette against her thumbnail. "You want some coffee or somethin'?"

"Black," I say. When she goes to get it I stand there smelling her cigarette smoke. I can taste it in my throat, scalding and spicy, the warm way it swells out your chest. I gave them up. When I got out I just threw my pack in the Coosa River. I figured without booze, I didn't want cigarettes. I want one now, but I won't ask her for one. I'm tense, tight like the skin of a drum. Shelia brings me my coffee in a blue mug. There is a picture of Jolene on the table on the corner, in her high school cap and gown, that tassel thing hanging down beside her face. She is smiling her easy smile. It's as natural as a breeze, that smile. I realize I ain't seen Sid in months. The house has a feel like he ain't in it anymore. I don't ask.

"I want to tell her I'm sorry," I say. I blow on my coffee, sip it.

"Ha!" she says, "I already told her that." She don't look at me. She sits down n the vinyl recliner. When she brings her cigarette up to her lips, I can see her hand trembling. She shakes her head. I can see where her hair is parted on top, ragged, like when she combed it she was in a hurry. "Sorry is as sorry does," she says.

"I'm serious," I say.

"You think I ain't?" She looks up at me. She's got tears standing in her eyes, and I can see she's really pissed at me. She's really upset. She looks at me like she hates me. "You come in here...you come in here..."she mumbles. Her shoulders slump, just collapse and fall. "I have made my peace, and then you..." She drags in the cigarette and sucks the smoke deep, then blows it out like spitting.

"She's *dead*," she says then. I don't hear her for a moment. The word goes right by me. Then it comes back around and hits me in the back of the head. My knees go weak.

"What?" I say.

"You heard me," she says, her voice rising to a shriek, "she's dead! Dead! You want me to spell the word for you?" She stands up and turns her back on me. I can't move. I just stand there holding the mug, and I have forgot how to move my arms. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to feel. I think she must be lying to me. I can see the bones in her shoulders, under the thin cloth of the T shirt. I know she ain't lying to me. My mouth goes dry.

"What...what...?" I manage to say. She don't answer. I find my voice, but it sounds hollow in my ears, like an echo. "A car wreck, or what?" I say. "No," she says. "She was pregnant." She turns back around to face me. "She was pregnant, with *your* child, and she-"

"Wait a minute," I say, "wait a minute now-"

"With *your* goddam baby, and she wouldn't...She wouldn't..." It feels like the floor moves under my feet, like I'm gone fall, right there. "I tried to get her to have an abortion. I tried to talk to her, make her get rid of it, but no. No! She wouldn't listen to me. 'I'm gonna have it,' she says. 'I want this baby,' she says." She is just looking at me now, her eyes narrow slits. I can see tear tracks down her cheeks. She breathes real deep. I'm just hanging there, like in midair. I can't take it in. She looks like she wants to say something else. I can see her brain working behind her eyes. It's like I'm watching a television show or a movie. A long ash falls off her cigarette, and she notices it and grinds the butt out in a glass ashtray that's already full. She starts tapping another on her thumbnail.

She takes another deep breath, then another. When she starts talking, her voice sounds calmer, but still tight and dry. "She was staying with my sister out in Center Point," she says. "She got a better job working at Rich's in Century Plaza Mall. Everything was fine, she said. She would come out here and I never saw her so happy. I kept telling her she didn't know what she was getting into. She didn't care. 'Don't worry Mama,' she'd say, 'I'm happy.' She said she wanted to be a single mother, was looking forward to it. Then something happened. One day she started bleedin. She was eight months along, and they figured the baby was coming early, so they took her to the hospital. Took her to Medical Center East. Somethin was bad wrong. The doctors said the baby was dead. The had to operate on her to get it out."

She stops. I can feel my heart beating in my ears. "What happened?" I ask. My mouth has gone completely dry.

"Somethin went wrong with the anesthetic," she says. She opens her eyes wide. She looks at me like I'm pond scum. "She had a reaction to it. She had these convulsions...She...went into a coma. She never woke up," she says. "And then she died. And I never got to say goodbye to my baby. You son-of-a-bitch. I didn't get to even say goodbye to her, and she was all I had, all I ever had."

I don't say anything. I don't think there is anything to say. There is nothing I can dredge up from inside me that would matter at all. She starts to cry, then, just stands there sobbing, and I can see her pale eyes go all opaque, like she's not seeing me anymore at all, like she's totally all alone in the room, in the world.

I drive around. There is a lump of cold in my chest. I get on the expressway and drive all the way to the Georgia line, to Tallapoosa, then turn around and come back. Something is burning and smoldering in the back of my brain. I see five thousand billboards advertising whiskey and beer. Every one is like a mouth full that I can taste, and I swallow, and it's only air. I play the radio, but I don't hear it. It's like I keep dozing off from time to time, and I worry that I'll drive off a bridge.

Like I jerk back awake and I'm surprised that I'm driving down the road because I've been dreaming. I've been with Jolene, smelling her skin, smelling the soap she used to use. Shampoo that made her hair smell like fresh berries. Then I just feel her there next to me in the truck, sliding over, fitting herself around the gear shift lever, getting close. She's warm. Comfortable and quiet. I miss her now, something terrible.



It gets dark and I'm on the back roads, all the way up in St. Clair County, and I just keep driving. I can't think of anywhere I want to go. And I can't think of any reason to go home. Then I'm on County Road 20, and I can see lightning bugs twinkling like stars between me and the lake. I have shut the radio off long ago, and I pull off and shut the engine, and all I can hear are the crickets and the tree frogs, and off in the distance the deeper burping of bullfrogs at the edge of the water. There's no moon, and the night is dark as pitch.

I try to cry. Grief for Jolene burns the back of my eyes like acid. But the tears won't come. I feel dry as sand. Grief for that child. *Our* child. I remember the look in her eyes that night at the Silver Moon. That look is burned into my mind. I know I can't ever forget it. If I have Jolene in my memory, I have to have that look, too. Those eyes. And Sheila, too. I see the shiny tear paths on her face. I see the hatred in *her* eyes.

I don't know how long I sit there alongside the road. I start the truck and drive on. I feel drained of strength, like coming off a ten day binge. I see the neon sign for the Silver Moon up ahead. The clock on the dash says it's a little after midnight and the parking lot is full. I park half in the ditch and get out. I can hear the music, distant, the stomping of feet and laughter, and the bullfrogs, coming from somewhere a long way away from where I am. I'm walking toward the front door. The crowded parking lot is dank-hot, smelling like sweat and tar and motor oil. Then I see them, these motorcycles, seven of them, pulled up in a row, gleaming black and silver in the dim neon light from the sign. There are four Harleys, two BMWs and a Triumph. It's a motorcycle gang from Woodlawn, in Birmingham. I've seen them before. They've been out here before with their tough-mouth women and their tattoos and their leather pants. They wear curly beards. They're mean, real bad-asses. They carry knives.

In the pale light I'm looking at the first hog in the line. It must be the leader's. It's an expensive BMW that gleams like a freshly dug lump of coal. It's got silver side mirrors and rhinestone studs lining the seat. It's got these two little signs hanging on each side of the back fender, so anybody coming up from behind could read them. The one on the left says, "PASSIN' SIDE." The one on the right says, "SUICIDE." Cute. I stand there looking at the little signs.

I go back to my truck in the dark and find my sawed-off pool cue under the seat. Three feet of heavy, slick polished wood. A carved handle so you can grip it. I go back to where the hogs are parked. I swing my stick and knock the little signs off into the weeds. Then I start in on the first windshield. I swing as hard as I can and the glass is like iron. Then it smudges.

Then it shatters some. I keep flailing away. I lose my breath, but I'm banging and chopping. My pool cue splinters in my hand, comes apart, and I fling it into the ditch and go back and get a tire iron from the toolbox behind the cab.

Then I really go to work on them bikes. Glass and metal flies. I move from windshield to windshield, knocking off mirrors, too. I hear someone say, "Hey," from the doorway of the café. "Hey, what the...?"

I'm like a maniac. I'm blind with my own sweat. I'm swinging away like crazy and the sound of the tire iron on glass and metal is like explosions in my ears. I can see the glass from the windshields spraying like bits of ice, and for some reason this strikes me as funny, and I start into laughing. I can't help it, but I'm laughing fit to kill, and all of a sudden I'm crying, too, and I don't know if these sounds I'm making, these gulps and sobs and carrying on, are laughing or crying or both or what. I'm flailing away and I must be making one hell of a racket, what with the tire iron on the bikes and these sounds coming out of me, and I can't catch my breath and I have to stop from time to time to heave and struggle and try to inhale. I keep on, my whole body getting numb and cramped.

And all the time I'm laughing and carrying on, howling like a crazy hyena. My arms are heavy under the numbness, but they keep moving, gripping the tire iron with both hands, and I'm ruining the hogs, really trashing them, and I see but never hear the old boys come boiling out of the door, all of them, all on me at the same time.