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Opening his eyes to thick darkness, Benny sniffs the air. It smells like old newspapers and rusted pipes, a dank smell, a winter smell in a warm climate where moisture clings to the walls, settles deep into the grooves of the floor. The jangling of the phone has roused him. Now it rings a second time and Benny sits up, clutching the thin blanket with his old man's hands. Who could be waking him in the dead of night? Probably Ivory Genwright used his worthless toilet and the mess came right back over the top of the bowl. Even in the darkness, Benny can see Ivory staring in confusion at the toilet then stumbling to the phone, the smell of his bowels trailing the hem of his pajamas.

Benny waits for the next ring. When it comes, he waits some more. Trouble comes with four rings, sometimes five. Trouble will be his boy Chester, his middle son, the one with the sugar disease, the one who's made his heart old before its time. Chester dresses in dirty, ragged clothes, torn sweatshirts and stained baggy pants like someone living on the streets, even though he gets a disability check every month from the government and lives right down Bird Dog Road in Mr. Walker's duplex. When he was little, Chester loved nothing better than starched white shirts and midnight blue pants with a stiff knife pleat creasing the center of each leg, the kind of clothes he wore every Sunday morning to Bethel Street Baptist Church. "Going to talk to Jesus," he always said with a beatific smile, and Pauline, his mother, used to say proudly, "Look how Jesus brings Chester joy." But now Chester is all grown up and don't want Jesus no more. He gets his joy other places.

As Benny shuffles to the phone, he expects to hear Deputy Swinn snarling at him with bulldog authority, telling him, "Get your ass down here to the jail ASAP." Last April, Deputy Swinn put Chester in jail for disorderly conduct, for drinking and swearing and threatening another patron at Gwen's Hideaway with his big, loving hands. Benny used his last fifty dollars to bail Chester out, then brought the boy home, washed him up as best he could, and put him on the living room sofa, the *good* sofa, to sleep off his drunk.

Now Benny swallows hard before he answers the phone.

“Mr. Taylor.” Benny is surprised to hear a woman’s voice, soft, almost timid, on the other end of the line. “I’m sorry to disturb you at this hour, but this is Dr. Barton at the hospital. Am I speaking to Mr. Taylor, Mr. Benny Taylor?”

“Yes ma’am,” Benny says. He’s been standing up, waiting for a shock, but now he slumps in the green plastic chair with the stuffing held in place with two strips of duct tape. He closes his eyes, never ready to hear the worst, words that will make his breath catch, his feet burn, his mind go flat as red mud.

“Mr. Taylor, the police found your son Chester on the side of the road, intoxicated and sick, and they’ve brought him in to West Central Hospital. I’ve started a saline iv, given him insulin. He should be much better in the morning, but I wanted you to know the situation, know where he is.”

Benny opens his eyes, stares at the curled cord of the phone and sees Chester lying in the ditch, motionless, his body slumped there like he’s sleeping, a smile curled on his pretty-boy lips. Lips the color of wild cherries dropped ripe to the ground. “Sweet lips,” his mama used to say when he was a child. Now his hair will be full of dirt and weeds, his clothes grimy, stained with vomit and spit. But what Benny keeps coming back to is that smile, the way Chester, at forty-two, looks so peaceful, so happy to be throwing himself away, lying sprawled in the dark.

Benny knows he should thank this new doctor, knows she’s just moved to town and lives in a big white house on Summer Hill, but beneath gratitude something riles him. He feels revulsion at a woman doctor peeking under his son’s clothes, touching him in private places no woman oughta be touching, wiping spit off his pretty-boy smile. He decides he doesn’t like this Dr. Barton so he says his thank-you, very curt and stiff, ready to hang up.

“I’d like to talk to you, Mr. Taylor,” she says with sudden firmness. “I understand this isn’t an unusual occurrence and I’d like to meet you in my office tomorrow so we can discuss what might be best for Chester.”

Benny closes his eyes. “Yes ma’am,” he says, resigned, wishing he could say “go to hell.” But he knows he has no choice but to meet with the white doctor and talk about Chester. He thinks of his son sleeping off his drunk in a clean hospital bed, hovered over and tended to, not worrying about a thing.

Now that he’s up, he’ll never get back to sleep. He gets

the quilt off the chair and wraps it around him, then sits on the orange tweed sofa and stares into darkness. Out the window he can see the silhouette of Mr. Bonapart's carport, and the front end of Gabriel Petry's broken down truck. The azalea bushes fan out against the school yard across the way and before he can stop himself, he's seeing Chester as a little boy, Chester at seven scrambling up onto the roof. Chester would sneak out of the house early on Saturday morning while the older kids were sleeping, drag old Mrs. Montgomery's broken down ladder from her shed and be sitting by the drain pipe, staring up into that warm nothingness of blue when Benny came out to his truck.

"What ya doing?" Benny would ask.

Chester would put his hands between his skinny legs and smile his plum sweet smile. "Talking to the sun," he'd say, and then he'd lift his face to the sky as if the sun was his own personal discovery.

"Well, get down from there. You can talk to the sun right here on the ground like the rest of us."

"Aw, Daddy."

"Aw, Daddy nothing. Get down."

And Chester would climb obediently down, each step barely connecting with the ladder, which trembled and shifted, though Chester never showed a bit of fear.

When Benny thinks about this now, he knows he's smiling, wishing only that he'd stayed longer to see what Chester did next. But he had work to do, sinks stopped up and toilets overflowing and the whole mess of broken-down lives. His kids, he figured, would grow up like he did, held up by the church and held down by white people and poverty, broken early to the horrors of the world.

But then Chester grew up and got the sugar and still acted like some little kid talking to the sun. Like he had every right to climb up on a roof and daydream. Like he didn't have any worries. No responsibility to bring up the race. No sugar in his blood. Chester acted like he was just any man at all.

Benny walks through the door of the doctor's office and stands in the waiting room with his hat pulled tight on his gray head. He's waiting for the lady at the counter to check him in. In the past, when Chester saw old Doc Westfield — who treated black and white with equal impatience — they knew him in the office and all he had to do was sign his name and sit down. Doc

Westfield would see him within twenty to thirty minutes. If he got tied up, he'd come out personally and tell folks sitting there why he was late. "Mrs. Buckley's got notions of labor," he'd say, or "Doug Hatterfield's boy was run over by a tractor and I gotta set his right leg." Now they don't know one old dog from another. He can see the lady at the counter eyeing him from behind a bough of holly as she finishes up some form, her eyes taking in every wrinkle on his 80-year-old face. He wants to bug out his eyes. Push out his teeth. Show gums. Get her good. Instead, he stands stooped and tense, waiting to be noticed.

"Dr. Barton," he says when she finally looks up. "She said be here at 10:00." It's 9:50 on the wall clock.

"Benny Taylor?" the woman asks.

He nods.

"Dr. Barton's had an emergency at the hospital, but you can wait for her anywhere you want."

"Must be why they call it a *waiting* room," he says to the floor and finds a seat.

An hour and forty-five minutes later when he's called in to Dr. Barton's office, he's hungry. He usually eats lunch at 11:30 sharp, stops off at Dell's Bar-B-Que and has a deluxe sandwich and cole slaw, heavy on the mayonnaise. After that, he doesn't eat until nearly 8:00 at night. It keeps the gas out of his stomach. But now his stomach is growling and empty. The nurse says for him to see Dr. Barton in her office.

She's on the phone, her head tucked down, but her eyes flash up a moment to acknowledge him. He doesn't know where to sit. There are two upholstered chairs beside her desk and then a leather chair off to the side. He prefers the leather, but he doesn't know if that's the right one, so he waits just inside the door.

When Dr. Barton hangs up, she indicates the chair beside her desk and he sits down, sinking into the softness like a man folded into a cloud, his overalls starched and stiff against his knees.

"Mr. Taylor," she begins, "what Chester has is a tricky disease, but we can control it with insulin, diet, and exercise." She sits primly behind a cherry wood desk, her stethoscope hanging limp around her neck, her dark hair straggling down from a hastily formed knot. She looks serious, aggressive as if she's put away all worldly foolishness to personally attack this disease.

Benny nods. His eyes feel like milky oysters floating in his

head. His knees ache with arthritis. Now these words press down on his sore back, words he's heard many times before. Once again, he glimpses the shadowy danger in the dark, feels a shiver around his heart. He knows about the sugar disease, knew when old Doc Westfield first talked to Chester about it, that it was the enemy. Benny imagines sugar dissolving in Chester's blood, the alcohol making the sugar spiral around his body like snow crystals shimmering in the cold, then heating up and melting, doing something bad.

"Now we know diabetics often get rebellious with so much control. . . it's only natural." She tries out a smile, a brief pause, though Benny can see her mind's hurtling forward. "Is there anything you can tell me about Chester's life, anything that keeps him from looking after himself?"

Benny thinks of Chester as a little boy sitting on that roof, believing the world would open its arms, then Chester angry at twenty in his army uniform coming back from Vietnam, moody and tired and cynical before the army doctors found the sugar, and finally Chester as a middle-aged man lying drunk on the side of the road. "No ma'am," he says. He doesn't like these questions, questions that suggest he might know the clue to Chester's life. He thinks how Doc Westfield didn't ask him any questions but put the responsibility squarely on Chester's shoulders. When Chester would come into the hospital with sugar so high he was vomiting, Doc Westfield said bluntly, "You drinking, Chester?" When Chester nodded, Doc Westfield shook his head. "Well, let's just knock it off right now if you're not going to do it the way I tell you to. You going to drink, I don't want to see you." And he walked out. Right out of the room. Benny respected that though Chester had only rolled his eyes and watched the liquid drip in tiny increments from the IV bag.

"Do you know how much Chester is drinking?" Her question brings him back to the present. "Because when he came in here his blood alcohol level was high."

"No ma'am," he says again. We don't talk about it, he could have said, because every time he brought up the trouble with the alcohol, Chester walked out the front door, slamming it hard, the pictures rattling, dust floating up in the air. He remembers the morning after Chester got out of jail. "Look what you done." Benny said, shaking Chester's elbow, pointing at him lying on the couch.

Chester looked around him. "What? I hurting this

couch?” Chester looked slyly at the couch as if he were inspecting it for damage, then he fluffed the pillows, smoothed out the little doilies Pauline had made years ago. “Man, I don’t wanna do nothing to this couch. This your prize possession.”

“You know what I mean,” Benny said angrily. “You running head first for trouble.”

Chester closed his eyes. “You think I’m doing it head first?”

Benny ignored this. “Now we gonna make a pact. That’s right. You gonna straighten up and I’m gonna help you.”

“Scuse me,” Chester said, opening his eyes and smiling at Benny. “What you gonna do?”

“I’m gonna watch.”

At that Chester got up and walked out the door.

Benny looks at Dr. Barton, wants to tell her that Chester is a grown man. And even though Chester lives just down the street from him, he doesn’t see him that often because every day he’s out fixing somebody’s leak, getting himself all twisted up behind white ladies’ toilets, in the crawl spaces of people’s houses where sometimes he has to tease out the snakes before he goes in, or wade through a house with a burst pipe, the water gushing around his ankles. When he gets home, he takes a shower and fixes himself some beans and bread, maybe a little hamburger or chicken wings, and sits before the TV hoping he’ll fall asleep with those voices around him. Living alone now that Pauline is dead has made him jumpy. He’s lost the hold he once had on Chester and they avoid each other as if that is the nicest way to show the distance between them.

When he leaves Dr. Barton’s office, he goes directly to see Chester in the hospital. He doesn’t stay long because Chester is sleeping or pretending to be asleep. Benny stands in the room and looks at his boy’s smooth face, his sweet curved lips and the small cut on his forehead stitched with silky black thread. One knee is flexed as if he means to get up soon, and this detail so touches Benny that he has to turn away. This is the way Chester slept as a child, arms splayed across the bed, one knee bent as if the upper part of his body has given in to sleep, but the lower part is still climbing trees. Benny looks quickly back at the IV bag hanging above Chester’s bed and shudders. He doesn’t like hospitals. Pain frightens him. He walks out into the cool sleeve of the afternoon, worried that by the time he gets there, Dell will be clean out of barbeque.

When Chester comes home from the hospital the next day, Benny calls and asks him to come over for some crowder peas and cornbread Bessie Genwright sent over for supper. It's the middle of December and a sharp wind is blowing from the east. Benny has fitted the front windows with old newspapers that rattle with each new gust. He's been under a house most of the afternoon, in the cold damp crawl space where some roots have blocked a pipe, and now his shoulders and hips ache. "Crowder peas?" Chester asks. "I can't say no to crowder peas. Give me twenty minutes."

Benny sets out the plates and silverware on the table, anxious to eat. He keeps the cornbread covered in aluminum foil and the crowder peas in the serving pot. After twenty minutes, he begins to get restless. He calls Chester's house but gets no answer. After thirty minutes, he calls again. Still, no answer. He picks up a piece of cornbread and stuffs it into his mouth, chewing as he spoons some peas into a Tupperware container. Then he marches down the street to Chester's house. He bangs on the front door, and when there is no answer he opens it to an empty room. The TV is blaring, but there's no sign of Chester. Only some Diet Coke cans lined up on the counter and an empty pack of cigarettes. Benny can see Chester's lips, how his mouth tilts up on one side when he smiles. As he is probably doing right now at Gwen's Hideaway.

"Damn pact."

There's nothing hidden about Gwen's Hideaway. A string of red and green blinking lights surrounds a painted gold door busted at the bottom where it's been kicked. A lighted beer sign highlights the only window of this dump that used to be somebody's house. When he opens the door, Benny sees Chester sitting at the bar laughing at something the bartender is saying. It's all he can do not to throw the peas at his son. Instead, he walks up behind him, opens the Tupperware and puts the peas on the counter in front of the beer, then brings a fork out of his pocket.

"Eat your peas," he says.

"Daddy." Chester smiles. "Well, look who's come calling," he says, grinning at the bartender and a tall, skinny man with dreads sitting next to him, as if including them in his joke. "Mmmh-mmmh!" He bends over and smells them. "Nothin' I like better than fresh peas. I'm gonna eat these right after this beer. Scout's honor."

"Eat your peas," Benny repeats, looking at the half-full

glass of beer on the counter. The man next to Chester snickers, and before Benny can stop himself, he grabs the beer and pours it on top of the peas. “No need to wait.”

After that night, Benny refuses to call Chester. Let Dr. Barton worry about Chester. Let Dr. Barton stay up all night staring at the phone.

For a week Benny stays busy. He’s out all day in his truck, going twenty miles east to Auburn to fix Mrs. D’Angelo’s leaky sink and ten miles north to Notasulga to hack down ten-inch roots in old Mrs. Ainsley’s crawl space. He manages to get only two days of Dell’s spicy barbeque and has to take peanut butter crackers and an Orange Crush with him in his truck to stop the rumbling in his stomach. On Saturday when he goes to the Piggly Wiggly for his weekly grocery shopping — butter beans, kidney beans, lima beans, two loaves of Sunbeam bread, a supply of Vienna sausage, Lipton tea, oatmeal, and corn pads for his feet — he is surprised to see all the Christmas decorations, the miniature Santas and snow men hanging in a swag from the ceiling. Red and green ribbons and bows are clustered around the check-out aisle. He’s forgotten all about Christmas, though it’s only one week away. He doesn’t bother much with Christmas now that Pauline is gone and the other two sons live in California with wives who work and older kids in baggy clothes who act like he’s some ancient Uncle Tom. When Pauline was alive, she insisted on a tree with all the balls and tinsel she saved from year to year, and a turkey dinner in which Chester was obliged to come because his mother asked him. Then, they went to church together, even Chester in a white shirt and borrowed tie and quickly polished shoes.

Benny pushes the cart past the fresh fruit and vegetables, being tempted only by the bin of turnip greens that look fresh and plump and will cook down good. But he doesn’t buy any. He doesn’t fix anything you have to cook more than 20 minutes in a pot. He is rounding the cake mix and cookie aisle, heading for the canned vegetables, when he sees Chester in the middle of the aisle, bent toward some stuffed bags of sweets, a red plastic basket on his arm filled with what looks like pretzels. He stops and stares, waiting for some momentum to push him forward. His stare is so intense, he expects Chester to turn and acknowledge him, but Chester doesn’t waver. Chester picks up two or three bags, turns them over, puts them back, picks up a few more,

then says without facing him, "You watching, Daddy?" and holds up some salted nuts and a package of string licorice. Benny can hear Pauline say, "Give the boy another chance for my sake," but Benny feels again the dark anger boiling in his stomach, rising in his throat, and he pushes his cart straight ahead to the check-out, forgetting what he's come for.

That same week, Benny receives the letter from Dr. Barton, a letter which details Chester's treatment in the hospital and the low carbohydrate, low fat diet that the letter says "would be most beneficial for Mr. Chester Taylor," along with regular checking of blood sugar "at least three times a day." The letter is official, pragmatic except for a line at the bottom written out in fine blue ink: "I know you're worried about your son, and I don't mean to trouble you further, but I thought this information might be helpful."

Benny throws the letter in the trash. What does she know about his worries? Damn woman don't know a thing about him. She made him wait too long in her waiting room and now she thinks she can get inside his head. Doc Westfield would have just said, "Keep your nose in the wind, Benny," and they'd have had a good laugh.

It's Christmas morning when the second call comes. "Mr. Taylor," she says, her voice cautious, anxious. "Benny Taylor, this is Dr. Barton." Immediately he thinks of Chester lying dead in the weedy thicket behind Gwen's Hideaway, along with the empty whiskey bottles and wadded up condoms and leftover pretzels. Or dead in the middle of the road, like roadkill. Without thinking, he sinks into the green chair and feels the gas in his stomach start rising up to his throat. He doesn't want to see Chester's body, doesn't want to be the one called in to identify him, to sign him over to Brother Peace and the undertaker. "I'm so sorry to call you this early, but we've got a small problem." It's the word "small" that makes him sit up straighter. Small can mean another hospital or a night in jail. He burps softly, feeling the foul air push out of his mouth.

"What's going on?" he asks. It's the first question he's ever asked Dr. Barton.

"Well, I apologize for interrupting your Christmas morning. This is a private time, but I didn't know who else to call."

"What's going on?" he asks again, louder.

"You see, every one of our toilets have stopped up and we've got company coming at noon, and I knew that you. . .

well, you seem to have the reputation for being able to fix anything.”

Benny goes silent. All the images in his head about Chester dissolve into pictures of rusty pipes and tangled roots, clogged toilets, and the stink of sewage.

“I know this is inconvenient, and I wouldn’t ask . . . well, if it’s impossible —”

“Where do you live?” he asks, letting the annoyance show in his voice. He knows of course that it’s the big white house on Summer Hill, but he wants her to have to tell him. He wants somehow to make her beg.

He’s there in twenty minutes, dressed in his clean but wrinkled work clothes, his felt hat on his head, big tool kit in his gnarled hand. The house, up close, is bigger than he’d expected, a sprawling house which curls back on itself, a maze of rooms, some you step up into with lots of many-paned windows. She meets him at the door, a carved wooden door, in a soft, violet bathrobe tied tight around the waist. In the soft light of the big house, she looks younger, prettier than he remembered, but he dislikes her more for it and refuses to smile when she says, “This is a great generosity. You don’t know how much my husband and I appreciate this. Let me get you some coffee.”

He wants to say, “Let’s just knock it off,” as old Doc Westfield had said to Chester, but he takes the coffee and follows her through the house. He’s distracted by the splendor of the rooms, something he can grasp only in bits and pieces: the grand piano polished to a high sheen, a fancy painting on the wall of a woman in a floral dress, a plush sofa, an ornate clock and the silvery drop of a chandelier. They move through a kitchen, a breakfast room, a den, a piano room, and a bedroom until they’re in a high-ceilinged mirrored bathroom, a room as large as his living room and dining room together. He can hear Pauline say, “Ain’t this pretty, Benny. Looks like you could have a party in that tub.” Pauline would have looked around shamelessly, even going up close to see the curlicues on a wall sconce.

He doesn’t see any toilet. He’s about to ask when Dr. Barton opens another door opposite the tub and there it is. He sucks on his bottom lip, shakes his head, thinking how these rich people can separate their business from the rest of it while everybody he knows crouches down to shit while somebody is brushing their teeth or washing out clothes.

She leaves him there. He fixes the toilet, scrunched around its base, then screwing a tank-to-bowl gasket back in. He

sees the grimy twists his tools have made on the white flesh of the toilet, and though usually he wipes up after himself, today he leaves the marks. Let her get down there. Let her bend over in a knot. He picks up his tools and wanders back through the maze until he finds the second bathroom, just off the kitchen. That one takes a little longer but when he finishes, he gathers his tools and heads to where she said the third one is. He moves down a long hallway, the wood beneath his feet dark and shiny, the walls a quiet beige. He must have taken a wrong turn because when he opens the door that should be a bathroom, he sees a small boy with dark curls sitting on his bed, his face red, either from crying or yelling. While Benny stands there, the kid kicks at the dresser, yelling at someone in the other room. "I won't! I won't! I'm *not* going to do it." Now Benny can see he's crying. The boy looks pale, sickly, but when he sees Benny, he says meanly, "Don't come in here!"

Benny steps back, eyes narrowed, lip jutting, knowing there's nothing he can do about this child's bad manners. *Don't respect his elders*, he thinks, then sees his own grandchildren changing the channel on the program he's been watching without so much as a "Grandpa, may I?" the last time they visited. When he turns, the smell of bacon cooking somewhere in the house makes his stomach growl. He didn't have time for breakfast and now the black coffee's eating into his stomach lining.

"Douglas!" he hears Dr. Barton call. He's in some long hallway where sound bounces around like an echo chamber. He's just started away from the room when he hears what must be retching and he turns quickly, opening the door again. The child is bent over, his body heaving, vomit spiraling out of him, splattering on the floor.

"Son," Benny automatically says, stepping back into the room.

But the boy ignores him, running into an adjoining room, shutting himself inside. Benny can't move. He hears more retching. Then Dr. Barton rushes past him, a syringe in her hand. She pulls on the doorknob of the room, but it doesn't open. She's frowning, eyes squinted.

"Come out of there, Douglas." Though her voice is firm, her hand, Benny notices, is trembling.

"No!" the boy shouts.

"You must get your shot."

"It's Christmas. I don't have to have it on Christmas —"
And then there's the sound of something breaking as if a mirror

has dropped to the floor. The child screams.

Benny can't move. He knows he should leave but he can't make his body obey, can't turn away.

"Douglas!" Dr. Barton's voice is tense now, excited.

"Open the door. This minute." She rattles the knob.

"Mama," the boy's voice is low, weak.

"Unlock the door, Douglas. Com'on, honey, you can do this."

There's silence as they both wait. It's only a slight turn, but she glances toward Benny, not seeing him, he knows, only taking in the pile of vomit, the slight stench of the room. Her eyes have that worried frenzy in them at Pauline's eyes used to get, a dark haunting as if the child's illness was her undoing. Thinking of Pauline, Benny backs out of the room quietly, intending to go down the hallway to that first bathroom and wipe up the grimy marks, but when he gets to the den, the husband stops him and quickly takes out his billfold, handing him a fifty. "Thank you," the husband says hurriedly. "We thank you," and motions toward the front entrance before he rushes toward the voices in the back room.

Outside in his truck, Benny looks at the fifty-dollar bill. He intended to charge seventy-five, twenty-five for each bathroom, even though the third bathroom he never got to. Still, it's Christmas, the Lord's day, not a working day and they owe him for that. It's the first time he's said the word to himself. "Christmas," he says out loud, surprised at the gentleness of the word. He thinks immediately of Pauline and the tree and the turkey he didn't buy. He'll go by her grave now and talk to her. Tell her what's happening, what he's seen. Of course, he'll tell her about Chester. He wonders what his boy is doing on Christmas day. He sees him sitting on his broken-down couch, laughing at the lot of them worrying so much. Benny has a mind to go right over there and tell him to straighten up, knock it off. But he knows it wouldn't do a bit of good. What he will do is go by Piggly Wiggly tomorrow and buy some turnip greens. He'll cook them like Pauline used to do in a big pot, letting them simmer all afternoon on the stove with a ham bone stewing in their middle. Then he'll take them down the street to Chester. He'll say, "Here, son. Brought you some greens." And he won't ask for nothing. He'll just walk back down the street to his house and watch the TV, whiling away the afternoon, waiting for sleep to come, waiting for trouble to follow, waking him, as if always does, from his dreams.