

## Night Fliers

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*Reina McKeithen*

All summer Sims watched his corn die of thirst. He carried water from the well and the spring until the water table dropped after a month of spitty rain and then he hauled it home from town, fifty-gallon drums of artesian well water, one at a time in the trunk of the Studebaker with the lid flapping as he drove slowly on the dusty washboard road to the house. But it wasn't enough. The strong young green leaves lifted up straight as spikes, looking like sugar cane. They stayed that way for a week or more, raised in beseechment like they were praying to the heavens for rain, then the leaves seemed to give up, sagging and hanging like they'd been wrenched in their sockets and the corn bowed itself over to face the sand it started from. At night in the moonlight the corn looked like dead people standing in the fields.

The bear was there, watching and waiting, its fur blending with the browning stalks. Sims could see it out of the corner of his eye as he chopped cotton and in desperation hoed the cornfield, clearing it of moisture-sucking weeds so that maybe the corn might come back. But it was useless and he knew it just like he knew it was useless to try to plug up the spring to keep the water in, but he did it because he had to do something. He could feel the bear's small hot eyes on the back of his neck as heat rose up between the cornrows and the leaves curled and folded over on themselves and it seemed to Sims that his own blood was drying up.

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Sims tracked Retta through the cornfield. Saw her straight-footed prints stitched between the rows of parched cornstalks. Like Indian tracks. Like a deer. Like the piebald deer last winter that banker Arthur Gates shot. Wanted the head to hang in his office. That's what they do with them, bankers and such. Sims' people made head cheese out of them. Used to do things with the antlers, too, a long time ago. And the hooves. Retta screamed at him all night.

"Why'd you tell him? Why'd you even tell him?"

He tried to explain.

"We was just talking. Men talk. About hunting and things. I just said we had a piebald deer on our place. When he asked me to take him hunting I couldn't turn him down. He offered me good money to take him in our woods. He has our mortgage."

"You must of knowed he was after that deer," she screamed back.

He didn't know. He didn't even think about that deer. The tractor needed new pistons. Spring was coming. Seed money time. Bank money due.

It was part her fault. She'd been feeding that deer. It wasn't scared enough of humans. It come toward Gates to get food. Maybe even a scratching. Sims knew what Retta could get creatures to do. Gates shot it. Didn't ask. Just shot it with that fancy gun of his.

"I didn't know he was going to do it. I'd of told him no if I had. I would."

She wouldn't listen. She went off and stayed in the woods all day and left him the little boys to feed and everything. Gates took the head and hide and steaks. Left him the rest. He had to take it to his momma's to make sausage out of. But he got the tractor fixed and some toys for the little boys' Christmas. Got his momma a box of candy, tie for his daddy. Got Retta a new dress for church, red to make her dark eyes shine and her hair. She had the prettiest black hair, like a cloud of night.

"Why didn't you get pink? I always wear pink or yellow," she'd yelled at him.

"I thought you'd look pretty in it."

His hands throbbled down by his sides. He'd hooked his thumbs into his overall pockets to take the weight off them. He couldn't return the dress. D'nelle's Dress Shop didn't allow that. 'Once bought, it's yours' was the sign over the cash register.

She wouldn't wear it, not to church, not to town, not even to the Mahan family reunion in June. Then the mad dog came, slimy with sweat and foam, making those sounds. After they killed it they had to fight the woods fire all night. Shells from Ellsworth Greer's shotgun had set the pine straw afire and then some of the trees caught. The bear was after him that night, too. Sims didn't have time to think about Retta or the mad dog or the bear or anything but the spurting flames and the heat and the cinders that seemed to bore into his skin. He fell into bed around daybreak. Didn't even know Retta wasn't there. The little boys woke him up the next evening hungry. They'd gnawed on crackers and cornbread and some peas they found on the stove. But now they were hungry again. He got up and fixed them some food and asked where their momma was. They didn't know.

He looked around the two room house, behind the pink flowered curtain she'd put up to make a closet in the corner and under the bed but he

couldn't find her red dress or her pocketbook. She had run away again and she was wearing the red dress, the dress she wouldn't wear for him. Sims went out to the well and pulled up a half bucket of gritty water and washed himself. Told the little boys to go over to Mamaw's and went after Retta in the Studebaker. He wasn't worried. She'd already run away two times that summer but had never got far. Only trouble was, he remembered as he put the key into the ignition, she'd been gone a night and a day this time.

He drove across her footprints in the dry cornfield, churning up fine dust, the dead cornstalks snapping and crunching under the wheels all the way to the railroad tracks.

Sims knew where she was going to now. He followed the tracks to the highway crossing and turned north on the paved road. Retta wouldn't go south. She was always wanting to go up north where there was snow. Snow was the coolest thing she said. Just looking at it made her feel cool even in August. She had a picture she'd kept off an old calendar, a tidy white house and a dark red barn with snow piled up all around it. That's how a farm should look, she said. That farm would always have water, she said.

Sims drove all night, his eyes pressed against the dark ahead of the Studebaker's lights. The car shook when it got up to 50 miles an hour. It made Sims' teeth feel funny but he kept it up there, stopping at every truck stop to ask about Retta. On the other side of Macon a waitress said yes, there'd been a black-haired woman in last night. He showed her Retta's picture.

"Red dress, huh. We get a lot of them." She leaned her fanny against the counter. "Last night was a slow one. Lotta blue. No red."

She poured a cup of coffee without looking at the cup on the counter. Sims turned to go.

"Say," the waitress made a flapping motion with her apron like Retta shoeing chickens in a pen or the little boys back into the house, "there might have been one. It was kind of late."

Say it's her, he begged silently. "Take another look." He held out the picture, its edges curling like his high school diploma. The picture was black and white, taken in a booth at the fair in Farrell before they were married, before Malcolm was made. She was wearing a flowered blouse and skirt she had sewed out of feed sacks. She was so little she could make an outfit out of three. She was smiling at the camera and looked happy. Happier than he'd seen her look in a long time. There was a little bit of something at the corner of her mouth. Cotton candy, he bet. She loved cotton candy. Said it was like eating pink clouds. Or maybe it was a piece of dust on the camera lens. The fairgrounds were always dusty.

The waitress looked at Sims, taking in his blue eyes, his short blond hair, stubbled tanned face, faded khaki clothes. She looked at the picture.

"That's her," she said. "I remember now. She was headed to North Carolina with a trucker going to Rocky Mount. Or maybe it was Wilmington. Say, you want some coffee to take with you?"

But he was already at the door. He'd find her now. She couldn't get away from him. He didn't know why she always had to run away. She knew she had to come back, if not to him, to the little boys. Sims drove into the searing dawn light. He had to rub his eyes every few miles. His skin felt like it had shrunk. The old black Studebaker was a dull slate color, pitted by the sands that blew around on the farm, bleached by the sun, spotted white as though salt had leached out of its metal skin. But it was still dark enough to soak up heat inside.

Sims kept an RC Cola bottle on the seat beside him and every few miles unstopped the cork to take a swig of the warm water he'd filled it with at the truck stop. It tasted different from his well water. More like medicine or watered down shine. He couldn't seem to get enough. He refilled it every time he stopped to show Retta's picture around.

At noon he was between Augusta and Columbia. Nobody had recognized Retta since Macon. One waitress said she thought she'd seen her but the woman had been wearing an orange dress and her hair was short. That couldn't be Retta. She wouldn't cut her hair.

The center line swam between the black watery lanes of the highway. Sims couldn't stop thinking about the woman in orange with the short hair. It could be Retta. She had always threatened to cut her hair off. It was hot enough to make her do it. But she didn't have an orange dress.

A few miles down the road a thought thudded between his eyes. Somebody could have bought her the dress. The trucker or whoever she was riding with now. She could have told him she didn't like the red dress and he could have said, 'Honey, I'll get you any color dress you want,' and they could have stopped at the next town and bought her the pink dress she wanted or the yellow or orange. Did Retta like orange? He couldn't remember. The woods alongside the highway streaked by. The asphalt sizzled with blue sparks.

He was a fool to think he could find Retta. She could have headed west from Macon. Or northwest to Atlanta on up to Chattanooga or St. Louis or even Chicago. He'd never been past Macon himself. How could he hope to find her if she left the highway, went to a city. Sims didn't know anything about cities. And what if she had got on a bus somewhere? He might never find her, just drive around and around looking for a woman in a red dress (or pink or yellow) like somebody in a song on the radio. Maybe she was the woman in orange.

The bear that had crouched between his cornstalks all summer was riding in the back seat now, hot dry wind blowing its dark fur into whorls with

white centers like little eyes. Sims could feel the bear's hot breath on his neck, its fur sticking to his sweaty skin. "Get away," he told the bear. "I got to find Retta."

Sims caught himself as the Studebaker left the road. He wrenched the wheel. The heavy car veered to the other side and two of the wheels left the pavement to hang over the steep edge of a ditch. Sims turned the car the other way and almost went off the pavement again on that side. The bear was slung against the door. Sims' eyes didn't seem to belong to him any more. They felt heavy and gummy, like they were full of hot tar. He needed to stop.

Around the next curve he came upon a lake, wide and green and smooth with a bait shop grocery store by the road. Sims stopped to buy a loaf of white bread, a jar of sandwich spread, a half-pound of boiled ham slices, a box of moon pies and a bottle of milk from a woman so tired she could hardly wrap the ham in butcher paper. She had to punch the cash register key twice to get it down.

The lake was almost an oval with trees growing down close to the water. Old rowboats were tied to some of the trees or pulled up on their bellies on the bank. He drove around to a shady spot on higher ground and got out of the hot car. He sat under some pines, his back against the rough resinous bark and ate his lunch. The milk felt like smooth ice to his throat. The lake danced with light. A breeze slid off the water, riffing the pines. I'll just lie down for a minute, he thought. The ground was hard beneath the mat of pine straw but it felt good to stretch his sore back out.

Retta kissed him. Her lips were tender and loving and warm. She ran her tongue over his lips, his chin, his cheeks, his eyes. Sims moaned and reached for her. He woke up with an armful of red bone hound. She looked at him and licked his nose, the only spot she had not cleaned. Sims let her go with a shove. "Get away, hound."

She gave him a reproachful look, then slunk away but only as far as the car. Sims had never allowed a dog on his place. They carried fleas. His daddy kept a pack of hounds. Sometimes his yard was full of fleas. Sims would go over and the minute he got out of his truck, the fleas jumped on him, jumped right out of the sand up as high as his knees and hung on to his pants legs.

The dog sat down to watch him as he walked down to the lake and washed his face in the water. Glassy minnows raced away from his scooping hands but one lay in his palm between callus hills as the water drained through his fingers. He could see its delicate bones and organs as it flailed about searching for water. Gently Sims lowered his hand and the minnow raced away to deeper water. He turned to the hound.

"See. I didn't hurt it," he said. He felt the need to explain. The hound watched him.

"I seen her one night at the fair in Farrell. She was from over at Doerun. Her momma died when she was little. Her daddy left before that. She was raised by some of her kin; passed around to whoever had a new baby and needed help. Had to stay home from school a lot and never got past the sixth grade. We got married before the first little boy was born. That was important to her. To me too. She wasn't but sixteen. That was Malcolm. He's six now. Or seven. He goes to school. Then there's Lawton. He's going next. And Carvell. He's about three. The baby Judge we call him. He's one about."

The hound gave him all her attention. But when Sims moved closer to the Studebaker, she went under it and lay with her head on her paws, looking up at him from beneath the running board. She made a sound in her throat. It didn't seem threatening but he bet she was the kind of hound that could run off a bear.

"You hungry, hound?" He answered himself. "Hounds're always hungry. Wouldn't be hounds if they wasn't." He took out a piece of the boiled ham and rolled it in a slice of bread. Then he broke off a bite and tossed it between the dog's paws about an inch from her nose. She sniffed it and the bite disappeared behind a row of small white hound teeth. Sims threw her another bite. She sniffed it, then ate it just as quickly. He didn't even see her chew.

"You must be mighty hungry." He fed her the rest of the sandwich and made her another with the last of the ham. Then he gave her plain bread. She licked crumbs from her paws and then the dirt between them and looked at him, wanting more. Sims unwrapped a moon pie and broke it up. His hands were large at the end of his wiry arms, his fingers blunt-ended, his nails cracked, a thin black line of dirt deep underneath that no scrubbing could reach. His hands and arms had little scabs and pink spots where the cinders from the wood's fire had burned him. He laid the pieces of moon pie on the wrapper in front of the dog. She ate them daintily, chewing this time. Her claws were black and delicate and each of her front paws were tipped with white like they had been dipped in milk.

He poured the last of the milk from the bottle into his hand and let her lick that. Her tongue rasped against the calluses. Then he stood up and opened the car door. He would take the dog with him. She would be company on the road.

The hound regarded him with puzzlement. A dark furrow ran between her light brown, almost yellow eyes.

"Come on, hound."

She backed away a few inches under the car. Sims bent to pet her. She flinched but stayed where she was. He touched her fur. It was stiff and rough, worn away in patches. He stroked her head. The fur was softer there and smoother. She put her head down but her eyes watched him.

He tried to get her into the car again but she stayed under it. He squatted almost to her level. She looked back at him, waiting. "You don't trust me, do you, dog? You're just an old throw away stray hound and you won't even go with me. A little food, a little petting ain't enough for you. You don't have nowhere else to go, do you? President Truman didn't invite you to the White House, did he?" He laughed at his joke. The hound opened her mouth in a grin.

"That's better. Here's the way it is, girl. You don't have a home. You was starving just now. I don't have no wife, and I'm away from home. If you want to come along with me, I'd welcome the company. The eating won't be fancy. I don't have much money. I don't even know exactly where I'm headed or if I'll know when I get there. How about it?"

The hound stared straight into his eyes. He'd always heard that dogs didn't want to be stared at. They got all nervous and guilty acting and slunk off under something. They would look at you with one eye or glance at you with two but wouldn't look at you with both eyes for any time at all. But this dog did. She just stared and stared. She seemed to want him to look at her.

Sims was the first to look away. A breeze drifted through the pines and the air felt suddenly cooler. Across the lake toward the north a line of dark clouds lay along the tops of the trees. Sims stood up and held the door open. "How about it, hound. You coming or not?"

The dog slid out from under the other side of the car and walked down to the lake. Sims watched as she meticulously lapped water.

His own mouth felt dry. There was an ache somewhere in his chest and he realized that it had been there a long time. He tried again. "Come on, girl."

She raised her head and looked at him. Water ran out of her mouth. She put her head down and drank more. Then she looked across the lake. She seemed to be studying the clouds.

"Come on, Lady. Let's you and me get on down the road."

She turned back and he noticed she had eyelashes, short fine eyelashes the color of dust. He couldn't read her eyes. She seemed to be studying him.

He tried once more. "Please, Lady. Please. Come on with me, that's a good girl. Come on now, please, Lady. Please?"

The dog blinked.

"Is that your name? Lady? Did someone give you a name before you lost your home?"

Slowly, with her head high, the dog strolled back to the car. She stopped and looked up at him again, seeming to question him. He waited quietly, his hand on the broken door handle. "Let's go, Lady."

She leaped to the running board and onto the seat. Without being told, she moved over to the passenger side. Sims got in and slammed the door hard

so it would catch. The dog didn't flinch at the sound. Sims leaned over and rolled down the window on her side. The dog put her nose out and sniffed. Then she bobbed her head, gave Sims a look and sat back.

Sims started the car and drove it up on the blacktop. The Studebaker lurched as it left dirt but settled out on the road. Wind sang in his ears and occasional raindrops blew in and wet his damp cheeks as Sims drove steadily north. If the bear was in the back seat, the dog didn't seem to notice. Her attention was on the road ahead of them and Sims thought maybe they had left the bear back by the lake.

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"We got to go to Mamaw's," Malcolm said.

Carvell was licking peas up off the floor where he'd spilled them.

"Don't do that, Carvell," Malcolm said. Carvell went on licking until he got a splinter in his tongue and howled.

"Told ya. Spit it out. Don't swallow it. It'll grow a tree in your belly."

You mind Malcolm, Daddy had said when he left. Lawton didn't see why. Malcolm didn't know anymore than he did. Malcolm could read but that was only because he had been to school. Lawton was going in a few weeks. He would learn fast, faster than Malcolm. Lawton bet he'd be reading the first day. He bet he'd be reading as soon as they gave him the book. He would know all about Dick and Jane and Sally and that dog named Spot the first day. Malcolm thought he knew everything.

Carvell spit with a loud *ptui*. Most of it landed on the baby Judge, still in diapers. Judge yelled and poked Carvell who punched him back.

Lawton stared out the window. "Why don't they come back?" he said. It was already getting dark outside. They should have left earlier for Mamaw's. The woods seemed to come closer in the dark. Sometimes Lawton thought the trees tiptoed up and watched him while he slept. If he woke up during the night, he wouldn't open his eyes, not even to go outside to pee. He would feel his way out of the room they all slept in through the other room and out the door where he would pee in the sand off the porch. Once he'd peed on the hood of the car pulled partly under the house. It made a funny sound, like the rain on their tin roof. He'd squinted a little and seen the dark shape. It didn't look like the car. It looked like a giant toad crouching there, a toad with silver teeth shining in the moonlight.

"They won't be back for a long time," Malcolm said. He pulled Carvell off Judge. "Come on, put on your shoes. We got to go. Daddy said."

"I don't want to go," Carvell whined.

"Me neither," Lawton said.



"Lookit them shadows," Malcolm said.

The room was full of them. They were getting big as trees, crawling all over the walls. Lawton threw a leg out the window and jumped.

Malcolm piled some clothes into the old wagon out in the yard and set Judge on top of them to hold them down. Carvell wanted to ride, too, but the wagon was too heavy to pull through the sand with both of them in it. "You'll have to walk," Malcolm told him.

Carvell sulked.

"Ride to town on that lip," Malcolm told him.

"On a horse," Lawton chanted.

"On a mule," Malcolm sang.

"Pulling a plow."

Carvell punched Lawton but he danced away, kicking up hot white sand with his clumsy high-top brogans. Lawton liked making dust fly out of the fine sand and forgot about the woods until he glanced at the edge of the sky and saw the curved moon hanging just above the dark line of trees. The sun had sneaked away when he wasn't looking, leaving its warmth lying behind in the dirt.

The boys crossed the field of cotton stalks hung with tight little brown balls where the cotton ought to be but wasn't because of the drought. Lawton thought he could hear the balls rattling but there wasn't any breeze. It could be a rattlesnake. He studied the rows for thick brown stick shapes that might jump up and bite him.

They were headed toward the black woods, blacker now that the fire the night before had scorched some of the trees. Daddy and the men had killed that mad dog that started the fire in the pinestraw but there were other things in there.

At night the woods were loud. Sometimes the noise woke Lawton up, the frogs and crickets and panthers and things that screeched and hollered, and things that thrashed and thumped and roared Daddy said was gators in the black swamp. Lawton would lie in the dark afraid that they were coming up out of the woods and swamp, creeping toward the house to lie in wait. To get him.

His stomach felt like it was full of sand. He tasted the peas and cornbread and greens and fried fatback Daddy had fixed them before he left in the Studebaker to bring Mama home. "Maybe he's found her. We ought to go back."

"He ain't going to find her this time," Malcolm said. "She had a head start. She's probably clear to Atlanta now."

"That don't mean nothing. She's had a head start before. Daddy always finds her and brings her back." He would find her this time. He had to.

"He won't find her." Malcolm was confident. "She left last night while he was fighting the fire. I seen her."

Carvell whimpered. Lawton felt tears start. He hadn't seen her leave. He should have seen her. He could have stopped her. He was watching the fire, crowded in the window with his brothers, one leg slung over the sill for balance, watching the pines spurt, his daddy and the others--little black stick men against the red flames.

Judge laughed and banged on the sides of the wagon. "Fasser! Fasser!" The wheels squeaked. Anything could hear them. Malcolm should have put lard on them.

"What if he don't come back?" Lawton whispered. "He'll come back when he don't find her. Won't he?"

They came to the end of the field. "Let's don't go in there," Lawton begged.

"We got to."

"No we ain't. We could take the road."

"It's too far. It'd take us all night."

Lawton didn't care. He'd rather walk all night on a road that had car lights on it and farm lights low-hanging like friendly stars. He stuck his thumb in his mouth as they turned onto the pinestraw trail through the woods. Even in the daytime before the pines were charred from the fire, the woods were dim and dusty. Bushes and briars snatched at what light sifted through the needles.

Lawton looked back at the open field behind them, their house a dark smudge now with its lopsided porch, the tire swing like a round black O mouth hanging from the pear tree. Then the woods closed around them, the ashy smell sharp in Lawton's nose, in his mouth. He needed to sneeze. Malcolm went first pulling the wagon, then Carvell, and Lawton last looking behind him every few steps checking for snakes, panthers, boogermen, his left thumb glued to the upper part of his mouth.

"Farp! Farp!" Judge ordered.

"Shut up," Lawton told him. "You don't know what might hear you."

That quieted all of them.

Lawton couldn't see the moon now. He reached out and grabbed Carvell's shirt. Carvell tried to pull away. "I ain't no baby."

"You might get lost," Lawton told him. "Hold onto the back of the wagon." Carvell clamped his fingers onto its rusty back rim.

They tramped on through the night sounds, sticks and pinestraw snapping under their brogans, the wagon wheels squeaking. Panthers and alligators bellowed all around. They sounded close in the dark.

"Will Daddy come back if he can't find Momma?" Lawton asked.

Nobody answered. They all knew he wouldn't. They'd heard Sims say he would never let her leave. He'd always go after her. And he'd keep on looking for her til he found her. She belonged to them. But she wasn't theirs, Lawton thought, or she wouldn't keep leaving. So if she wasn't theirs, she wasn't his neither and she wouldn't come back even if he found her and he wouldn't come back cause she wouldn't. Tears slid down his face. A palmetto stuck his arm. Briers pulled his hair, jerked at his clothes. A branch slapped his face.

"Owwww," Judge yelped.

Carvell whimpered.

"This ain't the way to Mamaw's," Lawton accused.

"It is," Malcolm insisted. "It is too the way."

"We're lost." Lawton could hardly say the words.

Carvell squalled. "I wanta go home."

"Shut up, stupid," Malcolm said. "We ain't lost. I know the way. I been this way hundreds of times."

But not in the dark. Never in the dark. Lawton could only see the faintest glimmer of Malcolm's face and he knew his brother was scared.

Something soft brushed Lawton's forehead. He screamed and clawed at the softness. It was sticky. "What was that? It was a bat."

"It was a spiderweb," Malcolm said.

"I bet it was a bat."

"It was a spiderweb."

Lawton was sure it was a bat. He'd felt it. Maybe even heard it squeak. "We lost."

"We ain't lost," Malcolm said. "Lookit, there's the moon."

There was light ahead. It wasn't Malcolm's face. It was the moon. But Lawton didn't trust that moon. It looked blurry, the way the kerosene lamp did sometimes when the kitchen steamed up. And it was too low. Lawton didn't think it was even in the sky. Moons didn't grow in trees.

The light grew bigger and brighter. It was a house. "It ain't Mamaw's," Lawton said. He hoped he was wrong.

"It might be." Malcolm didn't like to give up.

But it wasn't Mamaw's. It was a house none of them had ever seen before, a tall house looming above them in a clearing, making its own light somewhere inside, its white paint peeling, a big porch across the front with four big posts holding up the roof and a little porch hanging over the doorway. Light spilled through the wide open front door and they could see a woman just inside. She was brown and wore a shiny purple dress. She was wiping a bar-top with a limp gray rag. Lawton didn't want to go in.

"Well, looka here, Henry," the woman said when she heard the squeal of the wagon wheels. "Four little angel boys. You angels musta slid right out of that cradle moon."

Behind her a man's voice laughed.

The man was tall. He leaned on the bar, working a burned wooden matchstick around in his strong yellow teeth under a straight line of moustache. Tables and chairs sat about the room and in the one beyond, barely visible in the light shed from two overhead kerosene lamps. Behind the bar a stairway disappeared into the darkness above.

The woman laughed. The boys left the wagon at the edge of the porch. "You got to walk now," Malcolm told Judge.

"Hi y'all," the man said as they climbed the steps to the porch.

"Bet you hungry." The woman said her name was Esther. The man was her brother Henry.

"They thirsty." Henry took two bottles of cocola from a box under the counter and opened them up. The caps clinked on the floor. He poured some cocola in a jelly glass for Carvell and jerked his head at Judge. "He use a glass?"

Malcolm nodded. They were all thirsty. The bottles were cold and slick with ice water and bits of ice stuck to the thick green glass. That cocola was the best thing Lawton had ever tasted, dark as swamp water shining red in the lamplight. It prickled his nose as it washed away the ashy black taste of the woods. Lawton didn't know how long they had been lost but it must have been a long time.

"Mighty slow night to bring in angels," Henry said.

"What you angels doing out this late?" Esther asked.

Malcolm told her.

"You way off track," Henry said. "Reckon you better stay here tonight. We'll take you down to your Mamaw's tomorrow."

Somewhere upstairs a door slammed. A thin young man in a green shirt ran lightly down the stairs. "Car coming."

"It could be you know a visitor," Esther said.

"Could be. But I think there's a red light on top. Sugarlee's cooking tonight. I got to warn them. He ain't paid. If it's your friend, keep him here." He went out the back door just as car lights flashed two big eyes on the wall above it.

"Oh Lawd." Esther hummed as she set Judge up on the bar. His eyes were wide open. He rubbed her dress and she laughed.

Lawton had felt sleepy but now he was wide awake. Carvell drank all his cocola and asked for more. Henry opened another bottle and said heartily, "On the house."

"I'm hungry," Carvell told Henry.

"Give him some of them saltines," Esther said. "Now you boys don't say nothing 'bout nothing, hear?"

They nodded and crunched their saltines as a boiled-looking man in a tan uniform got out of the car and clomped up the porch steps. His leather belt and holster creaked as he leaned on the bar. "Evening Esther." He pushed his wide-brimmed hat back an inch. His sandy brown hair was plastered to his pale forehead. His eyes looked like pecan shells, stuck in among light stubby lashes.

"Evening, Sheriff. What you doing out here so late? It ain't your night." She wiped up saltine crumbs that fell out of Judge's mouth.

"Heard there was some stew being cooked out here tonight." Esther and Henry laughed like he'd made a joke. He looked hard at Henry who went on picking his teeth.

"Henry barbecues on Tuesday. You know that. This Thursday." Esther laughed again.

The sheriff didn't look at her. "Didn't hear it was Henry doing the cooking. Where's Sugarlee?" He turned as he spoke. Lawton sucked his thumb and stared at the sheriff. He was big. The Mahans were thin people. Mamaw always said they was lean as a lizard-eating cat. The sheriff was heavy, but not fat.

Esther shrugged. "I can't keep up with that boy. He's got him a new girl."

"Sonny?"

"Ain't seen him, neither."

"Well. I'll just have a little look around."

"How 'bout a little drink first?" Ice rattled as Henry took a bottle of beer out of the cooler. Ice chips glittered on the brown glass, on the dark skin of his shiny wet hand. Henry took off the cap and it rolled away to join the others. He wiped his hand on the bar rag.

"Just one." The sheriff took a long swig from the bottle. He jerked his chin at the boys. "Who the Little Rascals there?"

"They my sister's boys from up near Macon."

"They look white."

"No." Esther shook her head. Her thick fluffy hair swayed from side to side like she knew what she was talking about. "They black."

The sheriff looked at them. Their hair was black except Carvell's that always turned brown in summer. Their blue eyes looked dark as they turned their faces up.

The sheriff regarded them in silence. He didn't appear to believe her. Lawton swallowed. "We black." His voice sounded funny, high like a swamp peeper.

"Reckon you are then. Nobody, not even a kid would say he was black if he wasn't. That right, Esther?"

"Sho is, Sheriff." She shook her head again but the other way this time.

"What they doing up so late. It's near midnight."

"They little angel boys fell out of the cradle moon." Esther laughed and so did the sheriff.

"Angels spose to be white." He put the bottle on the bar.

"Up in heaven we all white," Esther said.

The sheriff cut his eyes at her. "Now don't you be getting ideas on me, Esther. I look after you but I can't do it if you get to talking that way."

"It just a joke, honey."

Lawton glowered at the sheriff. He shouldn't be talking to Esther like that.

"What's that awful smell?" The sheriff raised his head and sniffed. Lawton looked up and saw hair sticking out of the sheriff's nose.

It was Judge. "He messed," Malcolm said.

"I believe I'll just mosey on upstairs and look around," the sheriff said. He took the bottle. It left a damp ring on the bar. Esther ignored it.

They tracked him by the creaks on the stairs. Esther whispered to Henry, "He's gone up to the third floor to look out the windows for the cooking fire. What'll we do?"

Henry spread his hands flat on the bar. His fingers were thick and splayed on the ends. His nails had white moons where they grew out of his skin. "Ain't nothing we can do. Hope Sonny got it out in time. Might change that baby's britches, though."

Esther noticed Judge. "You little angels got something to put on that baby?"

"We'll get it," Malcolm said. "Come on, Lawton."

The sheriff's new black '47 Ford was parked right by the steps.

"Get down," Malcolm hissed at Lawton. They crept down to the yard. Lawton touched the car's bumper. The chrome gleamed in the light from the doorway. If he could drive he would jump in the car and go through the woods, ahead of Sonny to the cookout to warn Sugarlee and then out on the road to find his daddy and his mamma. He bet he could drive if he had the key.

"What we gonna do?" he whispered.

Malcolm crouched behind the sheriff's car. "You know how to let air out of tires?"

"I seen Daddy put it in."

"You unscrew the little cap off and hold the nozzle down til it goes flat. Then throw the cap in the bushes."

Lawton nodded. He could do that.

"It'll make the sheriff mad. Don't let him see you."

Lawton nodded again and put his hand over his mouth to stop the giggle he could feel bubbling there. He crept over to the near front tire and unscrewed the cap and held the nozzle down, his other hand over the spewing air. It sounded like a soft fart. It smelled like swamp gas, like cabbage, like a fart. The hissing air rose over Lawton, up and up as high as the trees and higher. Lawton wished he could go up with it, float over the treetops, the swamp, over the alligators and snakes and ghosts and panthers, as high as the moon. He could look down and see Mamaw's house and his house. He could see his daddy's car and he could see his momma running, running away through the cornfield. Lawton would wave to his momma and she would look up and see him and stop running and say, Lawton how in the world did you get up there? And then she'd say, Lawton, you come down from there right this minute before you get the moon dirty and I have to come up there and scrub it. And Lawton would giggle and she would laugh and everything would be all right again.

When the first tire went flat he moved to the other side and flattened that one while Malcolm did his. He kept the little caps. Nobody would find them in the bottom of his pocket. He could put his hand in there and feel them anytime he wanted to.

They took a clean cloth cut from one of Mama's old dresses out of the wagon. It was soft with pink flowers faded from all the washings. Lawton thought he could remember her wearing it before she cut it up for Judge. He wanted to bury his face in it and smell his mama but he handed it over to Esther.

Esther had cleaned Judge while they were gone. She folded the flowered cloth before she pinned it between his fat legs. He was the only one of them who was fat. "Been sucking his mama. The rest of you is sure skinny little angels. Bet your mama is, too."

The sheriff thudded down the stairs moving fast. "Gotta go," he said, thumping the empty beer bottle on the bar.

"Where to?" Esther asked, reaching out to catch his sleeve. Judge kicked at him.

The sheriff pulled away from Esther's hand and left it touching air. "There's a light over in the southeast woods," he said. "You know anything bout that?"

"Might be a house," Esther said.

"A bonfire," Henry offered.

But the sheriff didn't wait for their replies. He stomped down the porch steps, slammed the car door, revved up the motor, and flashed the red lights. The car bumped partway across the clearing before the sheriff hit the brakes.

"Sheriff's tires is flat," Esther said from the doorway.

"Mighta ruint them if they been scraping the road again," Henry observed from behind her.

The sheriff jumped out and checked his tires. He kicked each one, cursing in a high whine. "Who did this? I want to know who did this."

Esther and Henry turned mystified faces to him. They didn't know. They had been right there in the bar the whole time. "Maybe it happened in town," Henry said. "Took this long for the air to go out."

"I only got one spare," the sheriff said: "You got any tires?"

"Naw. We ain't even got a car. Had one once," Henry said.

The sheriff wasn't listening. He called his deputy on the car radio to come out with tires. "I don't care. Wake him up. I got to have tires."

The sheriff had another beer while he waited. He went outside and Lawton could hear him cussing and pissing off the porch.

The deputy came with his siren full blast. The sheriff roared away in the deputy's car. Through the doorway Lawton watched the deputy change all four of the tires. The boys had fallen into a sleepy heap beside the bar. Judge was snoring and even Carvell puttputted softly against Lawton's leg. Lawton wished they could stay there until—he couldn't think ahead to until. Now was far enough. Malcolm was awake but Lawton drifted in and out of sleep. The noise from the woods wasn't so scary here with Esther and Henry talking above him, his brothers around him. Lawton reached up and felt the hem of Esther's dress. It was the softest thing he ever had felt, softer than cornsilk or creek mud. His fingers slid from the hem. Esther's skin was smooth and warm. Things floated in the lamplight, his mother with hair like shiny black wings and Esther with her black cloud of hair. They both wore purple dresses that swirled and billowed about them. They soared out the door, over the treetops in the light from Sugarlee's fire, swooping and dipping, the stars and the moon spinning above them. They beckoned to Lawton. He stood on his tiptoes and stretched and then he was flying, too. It was easy. All you had to do was let go.

The deputy came in and had a beer. Esther told him the story of the black angels and the deputy said you could sure have fooled him that they was white. ♦