

People lose people. I don't know why we're all so damned careless. Folks lose their kids, men lose their women, even friends get lost if you don't keep an eye out. I look through the windshield at the houses going by. For every person sitting in them houses, watching TV or eating a ham sandwich, there's someone somewhere wondering where and why they lost them. All those lost people, carrying on their everyday business like the air's not full of the sound of hearts breaking and bleeding.

I'm driving up Barkton Road, Johnny Cash on the AM radio, grumbling "Folsom Prison Blues." Johnny Cash makes me think of my old man, on account of they both did time in prison. Not me, though. I never did time in a cell. But every time I hear Johnny Cash, I think of the old man. I look over at Sally next to me. Her and me just getting back from the Dairy Queen. She's picking the colored sparkles off her vanilla cone, one at a time, popping them in her mouth like she always does. Time she gets to the ice cream, most of it's running down her arm, but she doesn't care.

I ask her, "Why don't you just ask for a handful of sparkles, skip the ice cream?"

She give me one of her looks. We pull into the yard, me steering with the left hand and balancing my root beer float on one knee with the right. Kick the door open on my side because it sticks, and step down into the dirt. No grass ever tried to grow in our front yard. Samson come running out from behind the house, barking and snarling like he don't know it's us. Stops when he sees Sally, and sidewinds up to lick the ice cream off her arm. She lets him, like she always does.

"This dog isn't very smart," she says.

"He knows it's us. Just showing his form."

"Someday, his eyes go bad, he'll rip us up." She's patting his good ear.

"His eyes go bad, he'll run out in the road, get hit by a car, and we won't have to worry about it." I have her there, and she knows it.

I pull the sack of groceries out of the bed of the pickup, toss the last of the root beer float in Samson's direction, and head for the house. Humming "I Walk the Line" between my ears. Sally isn't so keen on my singing, so I try to consider her feelings. But I can hear Samson over my shoulder, humming along with me as he finishes the root beer.

It isn't till I get in the screen door that I hear the crying. Someone crying back in the kitchen. I'm headed that way anyway, so I don't yell, "Who's there?" Figure I'll know soon enough. Not Sally, though. She must've heard it from out on the porch, because her voice comes past me, high and dusty. "Ginny Honey? That you?"

Sniffle, snort, gulp from the kitchen. "Sally?"

I didn't even notice her car outside, parked off to the side of the house. I know right off that I don't want to be in the middle of this, but I got the groceries in my arm and I can feel the hamburger dripping blood through the bag, so I keep walking. Sally catches up with me about the time I see Ginny Honey sitting at the kitchen table with her eyes all black and runny with mascara, wiping her nose across the back of her arm. Time I'm through the kitchen door, Sally's got her arm around Ginny Honey's shoulder.

"Ginny Honey, what's wrong? You okay?"

I don't say anything, just set the bag on the floor and open the fridge. Ginny Honey's been sniffing in somebody's kitchen since the day she married my brother Billy and started popping the kids out. I dig around and check the eggs to see how many of 'em cracked on the ride home. Three.

Ginny Honey doesn't lift her chin this time, doesn't make a show of being brave. I don't see any bruises; can't even smell any liquor on her. But she does not look good, like her skin's gone gray. I pull the hamburger out of the bottom of the bag, which is all soggy by now. Making a mess.

"Billy's dead." No fresh wails out of Ginny Honey, no sound out of Sally, nothing. Silence. I think maybe I didn't hear her right.

"Huh?"

Ginny Honey looks at me and I see her eyes burning red underneath all that smeary black. I guess I did hear her right.

“Someone killed him.”

I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. Sally and Ginny Honey are looking at me like I'm supposed to know the punch line. I feel my gut turn over a few times, think I might throw up, but don't. Sally's voice meets me halfway across the kitchen, higher than ever.

“Put the hamburger down. You're dripping.”

I look down and see the watery blood making a little puddle on the floor. Oh look, Billy's dead. Like the two go together in my head.

Billy was a son of a bitch. I could picture him doing a lot of things but getting killed. Just about anything but that. Whoever got him must have been even meaner than him. Only one person I know like that. The thought scares me so I light a smoke, toss the match in the sink, and squat down on the floor. Butt on my heels, back against the cupboard door, lying low when the shit flies. Done it ever since I was a kid. Sally and Ginny Honey have stopped looking at me and I'm breathing again, almost normal. Sounds are coming in, people talking, but it's like they're out in the yard, behind the lilac bush.

“... found him early this morning. Head bashed in. Had his wallet on him still, or they wouldn't have known who it was. How was I supposed to identify that mess? Your ma was there, looking at me like I done it or something. Crazy old bitch. Sorry, Ray. Raises herself a goddamn animal and looks at me like it's my fault his head is pounded into scrambled eggs. Ain't never gonna get that out of my eyes, seeing him like that. Why'd they make me look at it? Why'd I have to go look at it?”

She's crying now, so she can't say anything more. Sally's making clucking sounds in her throat, patting Ginny Honey on the shoulder like I used to do with Ma. I can see it's doing about as much good. I feel the fire of my cigarette burning down between my fingers, but I don't toss it aside. The heat runs up my hand, past my elbow like a lightning shot. Time it hits my shoulder, I feel almost okay again, back here in the kitchen. I smell the skin on my fingers

burning and sneak a look at Sally. She knows that smell. I figure this is not the time to piss her off, so I snuff the cigarette. She'll see the blisters and give me hell for it later on. She puts up with a lot.

"You want something to drink?" It's all I can think of, but I know before it's out of my mouth that it's the wrong thing. Sally looks at me like I'm about to get what Billy got. Ginny Honey doesn't answer. I pour myself a half jelly jar of whiskey and leave the bottle on the table. There if they want it.

"Do they have any idea who did it?" Sally trying to distract Ginny Honey from that picture of scrambled eggs she can't get out of her eyes.

"They got some kind of rock. Say they're sending it into Jackson to get some information off the fingerprints."

"Well, that's good, isn't it? That's something."

"They was talking about skin samples and hair samples and I don't know what they was talking about half the time on account of I'm not even there, like my head's floating around ten feet behind my shoulders the whole time."

Hair and skin samples. Hearing that sort of puts a picture in my head. Dirty rock covered with blood and bits of bone, and Billy's nails with skin or maybe hair in 'em and God knows what else, but I don't want to know so I blink a couple of times, finish off the jelly jar, and light another smoke. Damn.

Sally plows ahead, patient and steady in her teacher's voice.

"You have to figure he died right off," she says. "You have to figure he didn't suffer much."

Ginny Honey opens her mouth to say something. Her cheeks puff in and out a few times and an awful sound comes out of her. Sally pours another shot into my jelly jar and hands it to Ginny Honey, who wraps it in her two hands and huddles over it like a tiny campfire on her lap.

"They said it looked like he crawled clear from the corner of McGregor up North Lake Road to Dewey's Tavern. Found him in the ditch just short of the

parking lot. I guess if he was--I mean, he left a smudge line of blood in the dirt shoulder all that way. I guess he was--" Ginny Honey breaks off and stares at her whiskey, forgetting to drink it.

Well, that didn't work. I look over to Sally to see what she's gonna try next. She leans back in her chair, bringing her bare feet up to rest on the table, balancing on the back two legs of the chair.

"You're gonna go ass over teakettle, leaning back in that chair," I tell her.

"Hasn't happened yet."

"Don't mean it won't."

"Call up Joe Lee and have him bring the kids out," she says.

Oh. That's right. Billy's dead. Seeing her bare feet on the table fooled me to thinking everything was the same as yesterday, or this morning. Or just a half hour ago. I feel bad about forgetting Billy being dead, then I wonder if maybe it isn't shock or something. People do all kinds of shit when they're in shock. I wonder if they ever just forget. I call Joe Lee at the garage and he picks it up on the eighth ring.

"Joe Lee's Sunoco."

"Hey, Joe Lee."

"Hey." I can't hardly hear him on account of an engine fifteen feet away from his end of the line, having its idle adjusted.

"Ginny Honey's out here, gonna stay for a couple of days." I'm trying to bring the volume down, but that engine is revving even higher. "Sally wants you to bring the kids out."

Joe Lee doesn't miss a beat. "They home or next door?" he hollers.

I look over at Ginny Honey. "Home or next door?"

“Home.” Ginny Honey doesn’t even look up.

I hold the top part of the phone away from my ear, killing the engine sound.  
“Home,” I yell.

“Right. See ya.” And he hangs up. Only now do I think to ask him if he’s heard about Billy. Joe Lee’s picked up Billy’s kids and brought ‘em out here so often he wouldn’t ask what for. Just figure Ginny Honey run out again, talking divorce, restraining orders, hiding out with the kids until she got sort of lonely and Billy come around and talked her into coming back. Ain’t none of his business--he’s just an old friend doing me and Sally a favor. I feel funny talking to Joe Lee like everything’s all right. I want to light another smoke, but even striking a match feels funny and wrong all of a sudden. Like I’m supposed to sit here like a stone until someone tells me it’s okay, go on with your day, your brother ain’t dead anymore.

I tell Sally that Joe Lee’s on his way. Ginny Honey seems to be in a dead zone now, where it’s useless to try and tell her anything. Sally rocks easily up off her chair, lifts Ginny Honey like a idiot child, and walks her out of the kitchen. By the time they’re up the hall to the bedroom, I finally got my match lit. Salems lay on the counter where I left ‘em, but I stand by the phone and don’t move. Watching the flame on the match, I count up to twenty-three before the smell coming off my thumb brings me back and I pinch it out.

I’m thinking, Does this mean he’s not my brother anymore, now he’s dead? Can’t say, “He’s my brother.” Supposed to say, “He was my brother.” But if he was my brother then, what is he now? Not my brother anymore. My dead brother. “Yeah, you remember Billy, my dead brother.” Or is he just nothing? The last idea gives me a stab of comfort that I erase as quick as it comes. Bloody rock. Hair samples. Somebody made Billy into nothing. Somebody took that thing full of mean and made it nothing at all.

“Damn,” I say out loud to the warped tile floor. Who did that? I want to see him. I want to meet him. I want to--

Sally comes back in the kitchen for the whiskey bottle. Ginny Honey already carried the jelly jar into the bedroom.

“You okay?” She’s standing with one hip cocked sideways, like she does when she’s had to ask me the same question two or three times. “You want another shot of this?” Nice of her to offer, when she hates me drinking so much. She looks the same as she always does when Ginny Honey shows up. All steady and matter-of-fact: We’ll deal with the situation at hand and feel bad about it later. Meaning not now. Meaning not ever. This of course makes me think that it’s just another fight, just another case of Ginny Honey getting the hysterics.

“Is Billy dead?” Just checking.

“Looks that way.” Sally clucks her tongue once, for emphasis and sympathy. “Sorry, Ray.” She looks sorry for me, sorry for Ginny Honey, maybe even sorry for the kids. Sorry for everybody but Billy. Not a reason in the world why she should be sorry for him.

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The summer I’m ten, I collect beer cans with a buddy of mine, Randy Keilman. This is before recycling and deposits and all that. He picks up any kind of can, but I grab just Budweiser, what my old man drinks. We go out on the back roads on our bikes with empty garbage bags and come home at the end of the day with those bags full. I have my own room, in the basement. The heater and hot-water tank are in the corner, but it’s mine and it’s private. I take those cans and I stack them up so one entire wall of that room is solid Budweiser beer cans. Billy come in there one day, chasing the cat, who runs into my room whenever it can. For safety, I guess. Same reason I’m in there. Billy come running in, drags the cat out from under the bed by its tail. Cat turns around and smacks Billy’s hand with a front paw, laying open the skin all along his thumb. He calls the cat a cocksucker and throws it hard against the wall, the wall of cans. Throws it at an angle so it skids across kind of, and takes out pretty much the whole damn thing. Beer cans are flying and clanging, and the cat’s hissing and screaming, and by the time it hits the floor it can’t walk on its hind legs, because its back is broke this time. Billy thinks this is about the funniest thing he’s seen since Randy Keilman’s baby brother took a foul ball right between the eyes and got knocked off the back of the bleachers at our Connie Mack tournament. Three years old, sitting next to his mom, and next thing you know he’s out cold, laying on the ground, and his mom’s screaming and Billy’s busting a gut.

My old man has to kill the cat. It's no good to no one, can't walk. He doesn't take it to the vet or nothing. Just goes out back behind the shed, holds it steady with one boot, and chops its head off with a shovel. Makes a good story. Randy's almost peeing in his pants laughing when I make the sound of that cat flying across the wall. But I throw the beer cans away after a couple of days. Rolling around on the floor all hollow, and some of them have dirty old cigarette butts in them anyway.

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“Okay?” Sally's looking at me, waiting for an answer. I panic, thinking it's a test I'm gonna flunk.

“Sure. Okay.” I keep my hand curled so she won't see the redness on my finger and thumb.

“I'll just get her to sleep, then.” Sally finishing up a whole conversation I just missed. Try to breathe normal, breathe through my nose like Randy taught me. She's not trying to trap me. Just ask her. Tell her I didn't hear her. “Okay” what? What did you say? Don't panic. Just ask her.

“Sally?”

“Yeah?” She's halfway down the hall and turns, whiskey in one hand and the other on her cocked hip.

“Nothing.” Smile to show her I mean it. She smiles back like she does sometimes; like she sees all of me and doesn't mind. Then it's quiet voices in the bedroom, and I put away the rest of the groceries. It's a typical Michigan August, hot and muggy as hell. Food'll go bad whether Billy's dead or not. I work my way past the bologna (put it in the meat drawer, I remember), past the Cheez-Its. Time I hit the canned pears, I wonder again if I can just forget the whole thing. Call Billy up and go out to Dewey's Tavern for a couple of beers. Drive like hell up North Lake Road and laugh at the trail of blood on the dirt shoulder.

“Hell, just forget about it,” Billy'd say, and pop open another beer.



I dial his number, figuring I'll give it a try. No one answers, so I hang up and put the canned pears on the top shelf above the sink, in the back. The phone rings and I jump out of the top of my skull thinking it's Billy, but it's not. Joe Lee's hollering into the phone out of habit, even though he's not in the auto shop, he's over to the house.

"Kids ain't here. Neighbor says Jean took 'em."

I close my eyes, lean my forehead against the doorframe. Let out a whoosh like whales do out of those holes in the top of their heads. Jean took 'em. Means she already stopped at Ginny Honey's, saw she wasn't there, and figured the only other place she'd be is my house. Means her truck'll be pulling up into the yard just about now, full of kids and full of Jean. I tell Joe Lee thanks and hang up. Check my watch against the clock above the fridge. 11:36 A.M., and my watch is running three minutes fast. Shit. Sally comes into the kitchen.

"Who was it?"

"Joe Lee. Jean got the kids already."

Sally's mouth and chin flatten out like a frog's, with the lips turned straight down at the sides. Not happy about the news, thinking.

"She's on her way here, then," she says, frowning deeper.

"Sorry," I say, trying to erase the frown. "I didn't call her."

Sally doesn't look at me.

"Let me put something on your finger." She leads me into the bathroom for a B&B. Bacitracin and a Band-Aid. It's a joke I never shared with her yet. Now is not the time.

I look at the top of Sally's head while she patches up the burns. A single gray hair sits grinning up at me. I kiss it, turn to look out the window. Best to see Jean coming from a distance. Breeze from the east smells sweet for half a second, like rain might fall, like it smelled one afternoon years ago when Jean's voice was somewhere above me and little red foxes were running in a pattern

across the bedsheets. I glance at Sally's head, afraid she can read my thoughts. There's a rabbit at the far end of the yard, chewing away at one of Sally's tomato plants. I wonder where Samson is. I watch this rabbit chewing like hell, and it takes me a few minutes to realize that he's looking straight at me.

"I never saw Billy. I never knew Billy. Billy never laid a finger on me." The rabbit's talking with his mouth full, so the words are all muffled.

"What'd you say?" I whisper, but the rabbit drops the tomato leaf and makes a dart back out of the yard.

"I didn't say anything." The top of Sally's head is bending sensibly over my burned finger. "Be careful with the matches. All right?" She's not gonna lecture me. She's letting me know it's okay. She stands up and rubs my back absently, looking out the window. I want to stay just like this for the rest of my life. Safe.

"I love you," I tell her. But it's the wrong thing, because her eyes look sad and the frog frown comes back. I look out past the yard to see Jean's truck coming up the road. She's trailing a cloud of exhaust and dust, a space shuttle taking off sideways across the earth, coming straight at me. Like saying the words "I love you" made her pop up like magic. I turn back to the safety of Sally, but she's disappeared.

I come out the front door as the truck stops, dust blossoming, three kids erupting from the truck bed like soup boiling over in a rusted pan.

"Pile everything on the porch. Stay near the house." Jean's herding 'em toward the backyard. Each kid has a pillowcase filled with underwear, pajamas, toothbrush, clothes for two days. They know the drill. Trish, already eleven, keeps hers packed and under the bed. Ready, waiting, hoping. A pile forms on the steps: pillowcases, sweatshirts, lunch bags, even a library book. From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler.

"I read that," I say to the red-haired one, whose name I never remember.

"Did not."

"Did so."

“Did not read it.” The red-haired kid is looking at me like I’m something he found under a wet log. His whole hair is wobbling back and forth in defiance.

“Kid runs away with her brother, lives in a museum with some mummies, steals quarters from the fountain to buy food.” I let it roll out casually, like I spend every morning of my life discussing books on the front porch with twerps like him.

His nose bunches up in suspicion. “How’s it end?”

“Ain’t telling.” I can’t remember, to tell the truth. But I’m right not to give away an ending, and he knows it. He takes off with his sisters without another word. That leaves me on the porch, with Jean standing three feet away from me. She’s wearing a blue bandanna rolled up for a headband. The same one she had on yesterday out to Billy’s, when we were all out there for the barbecue. Yesterday when Billy was alive. I can smell the sun and dust on her freckles. Sally’s inside, where I hear the muffled clink as she puts away the whiskey bottle.

“What are you grinning at?” Jean, pinning me to the doorframe with a direct question.

“Sally putting the whiskey away.”

“Where’s Ginny Honey?”

“Laying down.”

“You seen him?”

“No. She and Ma went.”

“Sheriff been here?”

“No.”

“Asshole woke me up, banging on the door. ‘Sorry to bother you, ma’am.’ ‘Then don’t,’ I says. Bang, bang, bang, ‘Your brother’s dead, lady.’ ‘Which one?’ ‘Billy.’ ‘Kill himself?’ I’m hoping. ‘No, ma’am. Somebody did it for him,

ma'am.' Fucking ma'am this, ma'am that, and I'm in my bathrobe and I'm squinting at him with his hat in his hand. Jesus Christ, he's asking so many questions, you'd think I did it."

"Did you?" Two little words hanging in the dust between us, like they came from far away. She's looking at me like she knows everything I ever thought. This is going on for a long time, and I'm starting to think about hollering for Sally to come out here, just for the hell of it, but now it's Jean's turn to grin.

"No. I didn't kill him."

My heart sinks with relief, collapsing my chest so I suck in a deep breath, just like Randy always told me not to do. I get dizzy and sit down hard on the top step.

"Jesus, Ray. Take it easy." Jean's boots clump past me, the screen door bounces twice against the wood frame, and I hear her voice echoing off the summer walls of the breezeway.

"Hey, Sally. Kids are out back, but I promised 'em lunch when we got ..." The rest of her voice is swallowed in the shadow of indoors. Now it's just the insect buzz of August sunlight, and kids screaming on the other side of the house, a hundred miles away. She's in the kitchen now, but I can still see the dark outline of her in front of me, close enough to reach out and grab. And the smell of her freckles lodged in the back of my nose. Not a word about sorry or how was I doing. Not even a blink when I asked her if she killed him. The only person in the world who scares me more than my brother Billy is my little sister Jean.