

The Way Things End

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opening chapter

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The Way Things End

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Roosevelt Sands

1940

‘My mama and my six brothers all burned up in a fire and I got through that. You don’t think I’ll get through this?’ asked Roosevelt.

He had a look in his eye, a sign or glimmer of something far away, some secret he knew. It was something that could only be seen now and again, usually at night, in a faint gleam of light or a reflection caught in his deep brown iris. A momentary star. He had never seen it himself.

Dab Wooley was on his back, stunned and surprised and shot in the gut. Roosevelt was over him like a great black bat, his long coat blowing out like ragged wings, one hand on his hip.

‘You gotta wait, Rooster.’ Dab’s breathing was heavy, sucking at the air. ‘Ain’t no call for all this.’

His voice cracked. Roosevelt straightened himself. He looked up at the trees, at the black space of night. He looked at the moon and how it was peeking through the silhouette of the forest canopy. He felt immense and tacit, like vapour.

‘Ain’t no call for much of anything I suppose. Things just are. Sun rises, moon rises. New days come and go . . .’

He paused, put the pistol in his belt and knelt down next to Dab. He pushed his finger into the bullet hole in Dab’s gut. Dab sucked air and then screamed and Roosevelt stared at him hard and unblinking. He cocked his head to one side and looked up into the trees.

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‘The moon is the sister. The wind. All of it speaks something. Some language. Some voice,’ said Roosevelt. ‘We human beings, we’ve long since forgot about all that sort of thing. White folks lost it a long time ago, too much thought on keeping us niggers in line. Niggers lost it too. Too much thinkin’ on how to stay in line. Too much thinkin’ about how to get out of line and not get caught.’

He pushed his finger further into the wound. It was warm, and a slow blackness spread on Dab’s white shirt while he screamed.

‘You got out of line, Dab. You got out of line and you got caught. Should’ve been listening to that voice.’

The wind scratched at the leaves in the trees. Dab Wooley’s breath was heavy. Roosevelt twisted his finger in the hole. Dab made terrible sounds, guttural noises worse than a woman giving birth.

‘You can’t hear nothing when you scream, Dab.’

Roosevelt stood up. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hand.

‘You can’t hear it anyway. Not from down there.’

He knelt again. In a single swift movement he pulled a straight razor from his coat and slashed it across Dab’s throat. There was a perfect sound, a thin singing as if something very small had been pulled across glass and someone in another room had heard it through the wall. A shadow spilled from Dab’s neck and Roosevelt stared into his eyes, twins with the moon.

Roosevelt picked up his guitar case and walked down to the river and threw the pistol as far as he could into the water.

Nobody missed Dab Wooley, Roosevelt had counted on that. Dab Wooley was a thief, people said. No good. Dab Wooley was low down dirty. His death was no surprise. He should have been in church with his mama, they said. If he woulda been in church, he wouldn’t have died out in them woods, gut-shot and

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slit open. Gambling and hustling and whore-muggin' is what really killed him.

Roosevelt knew police didn't care if niggers killed niggers and there weren't any nigger police. But it wasn't police that made Roosevelt flee that night or the thought of jail or even the thought of dying in a noose. It was Dab Wooley's brothers, Murrel and Arness. They would know who killed Dab. Even though Roosevelt felt pretty sure they knew of Dab's scheming, they would want some sort of revenge 'cause he was family, and even if family is shitty and thieving, family is family. Roosevelt knew someone'd come up on him and slit him open just like he done Dab. They'd shoot him in a bar, or as he lay with a woman, or while he was playing guitar. The threat of sudden death is what caused him to leave in the night. He saw himself lifeless in a ditch, dew on his face and coat, his neck the same leaking black smile as Dab's. So, distance was on his mind. The Gulf. With water he saw freedom, a horizon of opportunity, space where things could be born over. Maybe an island. A life afraid was one he had vowed years ago never to experience again. He had lived that life already and he wasn't going back.

By the time someone stumbled on Dab Wooley two days later, Roosevelt Sands was far off in another state.

The woods ended in gravel. The steely moon cast the cutout where the train tracks came through in blue and grey light. In the woods it was pitch black except for the broken highlights of the moonlight spilling through the canopy. Roosevelt stood on the edge of the darkness as it tempted him to enter. A whip-poorwill called somewhere in the distance. He remembered his mother telling him that whip-poorwills carried souls away and he wondered who had died and to what place they were going.

Roosevelt thought about Dab. He thought about his money that Dab had taken and then about the idea of money itself, paper bills and metal coins that drove men to be evil to other

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men. Always money. Dab had the earliest of human vices which was greed and it had blossomed and forged him into a deceptive snake, his deceit like a cascade over Roosevelt, a thing that must have been engineered from the beginning of their acquaintance. The anger grew in Roosevelt and he stood on the edge of that space and thought of his old partner, his manager, purveyor of free drinks and free women. Dab had promised a lot. Looking into the darkness of the forest, at the shapes of the moon and his own breath, Roosevelt felt the dead man's betrayal linger, the terrible act, how the girl disappeared off into the dark. He felt satisfaction in his revenge, and things looked clearer in his mind, Dab faceless in the dark. But none of it mattered. With Dab dead a great weight came. Roosevelt looked at his finger and recalled his fury, the warmth of Dab's hollow insides and the black liquid. With Dab gone so went his every promise. The men had known each other as boys and that made the blade of deceit the sharper. Years of lies, Dab's honey tongue like a devil kiss licking wounds and telling stories and hugging women and drinking whiskey and playing cards. Dab's smile.

The whippoorwill called again.

Roosevelt turned and stepped up to the tracks and put his ear to one of the rails. It was cold steel, gunmetal blue, and the moon was huge over him. A ringing sounded in the rail. There was a train somewhere far away. The ringing grew louder.

It was coming.

He sat on the tracks for nearly twenty minutes and looked up at the sky, at the dome of stars above. He wondered about those tiny pin-pricks of light. Where did they come from? How far away were they? What did they have to do with him or anyone else? Then, way away, down the cutout between the trees, there was a break of light and he heard the train. The light danced through the trees as the train rounded the bend and shot out of the cutout as if from out of the ground. In less than a minute it was upon him and he stood and held his guitar in its leather case

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and watched the engine go by as it belched a cloud of smoke turned a strange shade of blue by the moon and the night. It was music in his ears. Steel on steel. His own thoughts. He stepped up to the train and put his hand out. He felt the breeze and listened to the heaviness of the titan. He looked up at the boxcars as they passed. Smoke trailed overhead like a phantom unravelled.

The end of the train cleared the bend. Roosevelt felt his heart pump and knew what was to come. He started to trot alongside looking up at the passing boxcars. Beyond the train looked like the loneliest place he had ever known. He started to run. He looked over his shoulder as the next boxcar came up and his speed increased and he felt his heart beating. He put one hand inside the open boxcar door and with the other he threw in his guitar case, his legs moving like pistons. He felt himself pulled toward the train as if its gravity outweighed all other things. All thought went from his mind. He felt the muscles in his arms, his legs pumping. The steel wheels shrieked, churning death in the dark below. He was careful when he made his move, pulling himself up and scrambling with his other arm. He kicked hard, his legs dangled for a moment, then he climbed into the car. He caught his breath and stood up with one hand on the edge of the door, poked his head out at the moon, at the silhouette of woods passing by, back at the spot where he had jumped aboard.

The train lurched to a stop and Roosevelt awoke, stiff and bundled in his own arms in a dark corner of the boxcar, his guitar case at his feet. It was dawn and dreary. A large white man with a baby-bald head looked over the edge and inside. Another man, smaller and carrying a thick club joined him. Roosevelt thought of the razor in his pocket, the pistol he had thrown into the river. He was thirsty and hungry.

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The small man climbed up first. He was lean and wore a dirty button-up shirt. His pants were cuffed and his boots dark, his face gaunt and skeletal and his hair patchy. Roosevelt picked up his guitar case and stepped backward. He felt the razor through the material of his pants and it seemed a hundred miles away. He tried the heavy latch on the opposite door but it was stuck.

‘A free-ridin’ nigger?’ said the large man. He pulled himself into the car. ‘Got us a free-ridin’ nigger, huh Jimmy?’

The bald man was nearly six-and-a-half feet tall, with massive arms and a squashed face, squinty eyes and a heavy, slab-like brow. His pants were pulled halfway up to his chest and tucked into the waistband was a wood-handled pistol.

The small man grinned and gripped the club until his knuckles were white.

‘What’s yer name, nigger?’ asked the bald man.

Roosevelt hesitated and the smaller man poked him hard in the neck with the club.

‘Rooster.’

‘Uh huh. You know, ridin’ the train ain’t free, Rooster.’ The bald man smiled a yellow-toothed grin. ‘You gotta pay up’.

The little man thumped the club against Roosevelt’s shoulder and followed it with a hard blow to his stomach. The air left him and Roosevelt went to his knees. He dropped his guitar case.

‘I got no money,’ he said, breathless, staring at the big man’s boots. He hated the look of the men’s boots. He hated the cuffs of their overalls. He looked up cautiously and thought about rushing the small man.

‘A broke nigger. That’s like sun in the summer, huh Jimmy?’

Jimmy smiled a nervous smile, eyes darting from the bald man back to Roosevelt.

Jimmy stepped forward and brought the club down onto the flat of his back. Pain ran like a telegraph wire from the point of impact up and into Roosevelt’s neck and the back of his head.

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He felt his weight topple and he hit the floor. The animal feed that had previously occupied the car filled his nose, an earthy aroma.

The train jerked hard and started to move forward.

'If you ain't got no money, I guess you'll have to pay some other way.'

Jimmy laughed. Roosevelt stayed flat against the floor. The train jerked hard again.

'How 'bout that?' said the big man with surprise in his voice.

Roosevelt looked up.

'Reckon yerself a music man?' asked Jimmy. He feigned striking Roosevelt but Roosevelt did not cringe.

The big man picked up the guitar case. The train lurched and he caught his footing. He opened the case and took out the guitar.

'Whoowee!' said the big man. 'Fancy ass.' He examined it, turning it over, plucking the strings. 'You steal this here guitar?'

'No,' said Roosevelt.

The big man eyed him. 'Well, where'd ya get it?'

'Worked hard. Saved up near a year to buy that.' Roosevelt hated the fact that he was forced to answer. He hated the bald man, the weak henchman, a pathetic little man, nothing. The pistol in the bald man's waistband was a warning that no matter how fast he was, Roosevelt could never take them both.

'Stole it didn't yah, huh boy?'

'Worked hard for Mr Richmond. He and his wife was good to me.'

The big man looked inside the guitar. He looked at Roosevelt.

'Fancy ass,' said Jimmy.

'I reckon this payment enough.'

Roosevelt got to his hands and knees. Jimmy brought the club down onto his back and Roosevelt fell again to the floor, a

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flat pain reaching from his shoulders down into his legs then up and into his neck, a brief flash of white before his eyes.

‘Alright,’ said the bald man as he put the guitar back in its case. Jimmy took a step back, as if to stop himself striking Roosevelt again.

‘Here’s the deal, boy. Me and Jimmy here can’t be sharing no train car with no nigger.’

Roosevelt looked up.

‘Don’t eyeball me, boy,’ said the big man. The train was picking up speed.

‘In other words, me and Jimmy, we’re gonna let you leave. But ya gotta leave now.’

Jimmy stepped forward and struck Roosevelt’s head. The early morning light blurred and Roosevelt felt hands on his shoulders and the aroma of feed sacks in his nose. He heard heavy boots and shook his head as if trying to wake up. There was a ringing in his ears, a splitting pain like lightning through his body.

‘Here’s your stop.’

The blurriness subsided enough for Roosevelt to make out the grinning face of Jimmy and the big man. Then he felt weightless, the wind and the rush of air. He heard the wheels of the train, saw the outside of the boxcar and then felt something hard under him.

He lost the day lying unconscious in the weeds. When he awoke the sun was on its way down, fire-orange across the sky. At first, walking was a chore. He wondered if getting old felt like this, if old men woke up each morning and had to lay an extra half hour, had to vomit before they started their day. He was only twenty-four. The idea of his guitar in the hands of that white man made him feel sick. They’ll sell it, he thought. Sell it for pennies. A pint of whiskey. The thought disgusted him. He

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imagined Dab Wooley buying the guitar. He imagined cutting Dab's throat and taking his guitar back.

The sun died a fiery death behind the trees, a slow explosion of yellow and orange gradually eaten by the darkening silhouette of the forest. Then the hues of southern dusk faded into a desaturation of colour. The sky grew ever darker and then the sun was gone. The moon appeared, white light behind the trees. Slowly it rose and Roosevelt watched it for a period as it moved through the trees before emerging big and round above. The blue of night again washed the world and there was a chill to the place. He walked on. When the railroad tracks veered to the north Roosevelt entered the woods and left the cutout behind.

The whippoorwill was calling and Roosevelt moved quietly. In the thick overgrowth briars caught in his coat and his skin and sometimes his fingers. He put his fingers to his mouth and nursed the wounds, pausing and looking about and then moving on. The moon was near full and, while partially obscured by the treetops, gave him enough light to see and move through the dark. And then the forest ended and he was in a large field which was overgrown with briars and blackberry bushes and young trees just a few years old, growths of milkweed and pokeberry bushes, nettles. Tufts of coarse grass were all about, waist tall and taller. In the centre of the clearing stood a large oak; he moved toward it with his arms above the undergrowth as if he was wading through a river. Beneath the tree lay the remains of an old stone chimney, the frame of an old house, its foundations still embedded in the ground, grass and moss grown over the crumbling stonework. An old metal cistern was on its side, rusted through and crumpled under its own weight, in the grass to the side of the ruins. A blackberry bush hugged the cistern, its vinery already embracing the thing.

All was quiet. It reminded him of his own home. Like his father he was the seventh of seven boys. And just like his father's, his birth brought rumour and gossip. For some it was

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the work of the devil, something terrible, a mark upon the child and the family. Others said it was magic, witchcraft, something ancient in the blood of the family brought over with their savage ancestors in Africa. People claimed his grandfather was a priest or a witchdoctor, a practitioner of some heathen religion. They said he charmed and lay with a white woman and she had given birth to seven mulatto boys, Roosevelt's father the last. Roosevelt had never known his daddy, who had died in a knife fight days after Roosevelt came screaming into the world. That left his mother to raise seven boys alone. They buried his daddy on a hill that belonged to a farmer just up behind their house.

They lived there outside of town until Roosevelt was ten and the house burned down and his brothers and mother with it. He wasn't with them, he was in the shed where his mother locked him up at night. She believed the rumours. Nothing good could come from the seventh son of a seventh son, that sort of creature was made from Satan himself. She let him roam during the day, but at night he was locked up. For his own good she would say.

When the house burned, everyone in town said that it was intentional, that it was the mother's fault, that she couldn't go on with those heathen boys and their dead father buried up on the hill. How the fire started Roosevelt never learned. It had been a long time since his thoughts had dwelt on the fire. He had assumed and wondered many things about that night but it was vague, more than a decade in the past. He used to have nightmares about the fire, the flames licking the roof of the house. He would dream about watching through the slats in the shed. He dreamt of being trapped in the shed, pulling at the door with all his might, screaming for someone to release him. Then he would wake up wet and hot and shaking.

He looked at the old cistern. The morning after the fire, he'd stood among the charred remains of the house, the beams and walls blackened, the curled up sheets of tin that once made the

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roof, the trickles of smoke rising. The old pastor shook his head and prayed while a whole crowd of people stood around. Some of them wept. An old fat woman sang a song and kept looking at the sky, her voice half a cry. It was the only time any folks had come around that house except for when his daddy had died and he didn't remember that. Death makes folks social.

He left the day after the fire and never went back. He disappeared from the town's memory and became a musician. An old man named Willie C. would show him some chords on a guitar if Roosevelt brought him a bottle. So Roosevelt stole bottles of cheap whiskey called Chisel and traded them for lessons. Willie C. would play the blues on his old guitar. Sometimes he would cry and then he would take a drink and play some more. Roosevelt took him bottles almost every day for months. During that time he had grown to know the guitar, the way to move his fingers across the strings, the chords and tricks using the body as a type of drum, a keeper of rhythm. One day Roosevelt went to see Willie C. and the old man was dead, slumped in his chair, his guitar leaned up against the corner in the room. Roosevelt put the whiskey on the table, took Willie C's guitar, and left.

He wandered aimlessly, sleeping in sheds and barns, all the while playing that guitar. Several times he was beaten, sometimes by white folks who caught him sleeping on their land, sometimes by black folks who needed someone to beat. The guitar always survived the beatings and so did he. And he got good on that guitar. He got so good that he found work. A fourteen-year-old blues boy banging out sad tales in dives and back alley bars. It was never a stretch for him, the blues were in him after all those nights in the shed, his brothers and mama burning up in that fire, the preacher shaking his head as if he was disappointed. Beatings from white folks and black folks. There was always music even when there was none. The guitar brought him alcohol and women. Eventually it brought him Dab Wooley who explained to him that he was good, but could be

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great. He believed Dab and the two became quick friends. They drank whiskey and gambled. They had women. Dab became his manager and set up gigs all over. He handled all the money and Roosevelt didn't care. They called him Rooster Springs and Rooster Brown and Lightning Rooster. Some people called him Roose Dale. He made a name for himself. He got famous and Dab got a little bit richer.

Roosevelt scratched in the dust. There were crickets and frogs off in the distance. The moon was midway up in the sky and a big ring was around it like a faint rainbow. He slumped down with his back against an outcrop of worn brick and mortar. He pulled his coat up and buttoned it and brought his arms around himself just as he had on the train. Listening to the frogs, he went to sleep.

Sleep came in drifting waves lasting minutes or hours between waking and drifting again. The night air was chilled and wet. Something rustled in the high weeds and Roosevelt awoke to the sound, thinking of wild dogs. They bayed and wailed. He watched their dark forms meander then merge with the dying night.

Morning came and with it a thick fog. Roosevelt pushed up the collar of his jacket. His fingers still hurt from the day before, as if poor sleep and the night had accentuated the tiny wounds.

He walked through the fog, his arms above the tall grasses to avoid the dew and whatever else lurked below. By the time the sun was up the fog was gone and the chill was dissipating and a warmth, a precursor of the stifling heat and humidity, erased the pain and the uncomfortableness of the previous night. He found a small stream trickling through the woods and he drank from it.

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He came out of the woods and into a clearing where a dirt path had been made, and he knelt and looked back toward the woods. The wind blew easy in the tall grass.

The path led to a small house on the edge of the clearing. The house had a rusty tin roof, orange and brown and streaked. Grey wall boards were plastered with mud and straw and cloth; some hanging loose. Mud dauber nests were under the eaves and the swayed porch beams. A creek rock chimney gave out no smoke, but there was firewood neatly piled under the porch between the limestone blocks on which the house sat. A mesh screen door hung partway open. Roosevelt listened for dogs then, hearing none, walked slowly up the path. He took his hands from his pockets and whistled.

He knocked at the door and waited. There was a shuffling sound inside like heavy cloth pulled over the floor.

‘Who’s there?’ came a withered old voice. It was a woman.

He ceased whistling.

‘Just me, ma’am. Roger Sands.’

It was the first name that came to mind. He didn’t look like a Roger nor had he ever known a Roger. Roger Sands. He repeated it to himself silently.

‘Come on in, Roger Sands,’ said the voice.

Roosevelt opened the screen door. Across the small room in a wooden rocking chair sat an old, white haired woman. She was in a dirty sleeping gown. She looked toward Roosevelt and he saw her eyes. They were white and cloudy, milky things set in her wrinkled head.

‘What can I do ye fer? What was yer name again?’

‘Roger. Roger Sands.’

‘Roger Sands?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Well Roger Sands, you either must be lost or workin’ fer the government to be out here.’

Roosevelt closed the screen door gently behind him.

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'I ran into some bad luck ma'am. Some men on the train robbed me. Took my money, my bag.'

'Robbed ye?'

Roosevelt eyed the old woman. He looked at her eyes and waved his hand. A bird sang outside and the old woman turned her head.

'Yes, ma'am. Took all I had.'

'Pretty bird.' The old woman rocked. 'Was they niggers?'

That word from her ancient mouth, not angry, but something simple, as if the laws of the universe had been written for such things to be uttered without thought, something handed down to its emissary, a blind old crow shackled up and left for dead in a southern wood. He thought of the slats of the shed his mama kept him locked up in, how the light looked in the mornings. How the light looked on that last morning.

'Yes, ma'am.'

She huffed and he wondered if she sensed anything about his appearance from the sound of his voice.

'Niggers these days is out of control, I tell ye. They used to steal my chickens, when I had 'em, chickens that is. They used to come round here and steal my wood and my chickens. Steal my wood in the winter if ye can believe that?'

'I can believe that, ma'am.'

'So you want I should give ye some money or something since you got cleaned out? You must a saw that sign in my yard that said charity house?'

Roosevelt looked out the door for a moment. The old woman grinned with rotted teeth.

'Cataracts took my eyes but not my sense of humour. Or my Christian heart,' said the old woman. 'I don't have no money but I do have soup. I'd be willing to share I reckon.'

Roosevelt watched as the old woman got to her feet. She looked a sprawling mess in her dirty gown. There was a tear in

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the fabric along the side and he saw the black veins of her leg, the milk white fat of her thigh.

‘Soup sounds might’ good, ma’am.’

‘Well.’ She walked toward him and felt her way to the table. ‘You’ll have to wait while I heat it up. Soup don’t heat itself up ya know and I don’t eat cold soup. I ain’t like some people.’

Roosevelt stood watching her as she made her way around, feeling about with her cane.

‘Sit down here, young man. Roger. Don’t just stand there all awkward. I might be blind but I can still feel.’

Roosevelt pulled a wooden chair out from the small table. He checked the back of it as it seemed unstable. He eased onto the chair and found it sturdier than he had anticipated.

‘This here soup is just vegetables brought over by that boy last time he came. I just eat soup now that I got old.’ The old woman laughed.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

He watched her as she tottered and sluffed around, feeling the stove and the swollen wood-topped counter. There was black mould on the floor, like the crawling veins running up her flaccid legs. Her fingers searched for a box of matches just out of her reach.

‘To the right a bit,’ said Roosevelt, watching.

Her hand fell on the matches.

‘I know where things is, young man. I’ve lived here twenty-eight years and the last few of them has been blind.’ She got down on her knees at the foot of the stove. Her breathing was heavy and hard. ‘You young people,’ she said.

Roosevelt watched her fumble around for a moment. There was something familiar in her debility and he imagined his mother when he was real young with the weight of him and his brothers on her neck, taking them all to the store and yelling at them to get off this and get out of that and stay quiet and hush

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up. The old woman was pathetic, a sodden lump he imagined too ornery to die.

‘Ma’am. Would you like me to light that fire?’

The old woman was visibly frustrated.

‘You seem achin’ to do something so come over here and do it.’ She huffed and got to her feet standing like a weird old doll with its arms out to the side. She had no neck and her back was hunched.

He took the matches from her and got down and looked in the stove. The wood inside was black and burnt. The old woman shuffled around the table and sat down.

‘Just gonna put some kindling in there, to get it going,’ said Roosevelt. The old woman was silent.

He took a bit of paper from near the wood box and crumpled it. He took some kindling and several small pieces of wood and arranged them neatly inside the stove, in a crosshatched way with the little pieces at the bottom and the fatter ones towards the top. Then he lit a match and watched the tiny flame erupt and dance onto the match head. He put the match to the paper and the flame grew. The wood was dry and caught easily. He closed the door.

She said, ‘Sometimes this boy comes around and helps. He busts up wood and breaks up kindling fer me and sometimes fixes things I can’t fix.’ The old woman laughed. ‘Once he got stung something awful by mud daubers. They stung his forehead poor old boy. Next time I seen him we laughed about that.’

‘I been stung by a mud dauber.’

‘They smart. I got stung on my neck when I was a girl. Lord I cried so hard.’

Roosevelt looked at her, at her black and brown smile, her wrinkled face.

‘That soup pot is over on the back step,’ said the woman. ‘Put it on that fire.’ She pointed off to nowhere, her fat arm lost in space.

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Roosevelt took the pot from the back step, raised the lid and was taken aback by the smell. The vegetables had rotted and the liquid was a foetid, oily mess.

‘That’s good soup there. I just made that.’

Roosevelt looked at her and then put the lid on it. ‘It looks good,’ he said. He put the pot on the stove.

The old woman began a story about once when she was a girl how she and her daddy had gone all the way to some place called Cordsville and bought ice cream. Roosevelt didn’t listen much but he murmured or laughed occasionally. He looked around as she talked, at the filthy mess, the unkempt place. He imagined the difficulty she must have had living alone all these years, an old blind woman in the middle of nowhere. He thought about his own mother and the place he had slept the night before.

The old woman laughed about something and then she started to sing . . .

*I see the stars, I hear the rollin’ thunder,
His power throughout the universe displayed.
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

Roosevelt was amazed at the power of the woman’s voice. ‘They used to sing that song in church,’ he said.

‘It’s an old song. Always my favourite. I used to sing it real good, not no more though.’ There was a sadness to her words. Roosevelt heard the loss, he saw it in the way her dead eyes looked. ‘Now my husband, before he died, he could sing and play a guitar like nobody else. He could have been famous for guitar playing had someone heard him besides me.’ She laughed.

The soup on the stove had begun to stink even worse than it had when Roosevelt had taken the lid from the pot.

‘You still have his old guitar?’

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‘Got it somewhere, in the closet I think. That boy. . .’

‘The one that got stung by the mud dauber,’ joked Roosevelt.

‘Yes. He used to play it when he would come over sometimes. He couldn’t play too many songs though, not like Elmer. You smell that soup? That’s just how my mammy used to make it.’

Roosevelt nodded. ‘Smells real good,’ he said. He looked around the place and rubbed his shoulder. His back ached. ‘Mind if I look for that guitar?’

‘Don’t mind. It’s there, in that closet over yonder.’

Roosevelt went to the closet and opened the flimsy, thin wooden door. Behind it was nothing more than a broom space that was dark and filled with spider webs. The guitar sat at the bottom, on top of a metal bucket half rusted. He took it out and brushed the cobwebs from it. He blew some dust from the body and closed the closet door. An old parlour guitar.

‘You find it there, young man?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

He looked at the guitar and at the dust that had settled on it, at the greened strings and the wear on the edges of the body. A small crack ran up from the bottom of the soundboard. One of the tuning pegs was chipped and he wondered how long it had been since the thing had felt a human’s touch. He ran his finger around the inlay of the sound hole and put the body of the instrument against his own body and gently brushed the strings with his fingers.

‘Sound like you know how to play, huh?’ asked the old woman.

It wasn’t nearly as nice as his, the one he had lost.

‘No. No, ma’am. I always wanted to play guitar, but I never learned. Never really had the time I guess.’

‘Shame for a young man not to know how to make good Christian music. These days it’s all that rowdy music everywhere. Young folks hootin’ and hollerin’ and dancing up a

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place. There's a judgment for them people. One day, young folks and black folks and you and me, we all stand before the Lord.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Roosevelt. He closed the closet door and set the guitar down in front of it.

The rancid stink of the soup had filled the air and Roosevelt wondered if the old woman's sense of smell was as dead as her sight. He imagined she was used to the smell and probably the taste as well.

'That soup's done. What's your name again?'

The question caught Roosevelt off-guard. The silence swelled. He heard Dab Wooley in her voice. 'What's your name again?' The first thing Dab had asked him. He fingered the razor in his pocket.

'Robert. Robert Sands.'

The old woman stared dead-eyed into an abyss, somewhere through Roosevelt and into the wall of the shack house and out beyond into the southern wood. She seemed to tremble and her mouth moved without words.

He took the razor from his pocket and unfolded the blade as if the instrument was the most delicate of all creations, then he set it gently on the table.

'You ain't from around here are you, Robert? I never heard of no Sands up here. I know most everyone, but not no Sands.'

'I'm from up north a ways.'

'Up north.' She tilted her head as if thinking real hard. 'Suppose people are all the same though. Up north or round here. Some folks kind-hearted some not.' She swallowed hard, audibly, like the echo of a stone sinking in a deep well. 'Some folks been through a lot, done a lot.'

A silver stretch of mirror, his distorted reflection in the steel. He turned the blade over twice. Aquiline; long and thin and deadly. It had been a gift from Dab. 'Never know when you'll need it.' That's what Dab had said.

Again the silence. Roosevelt remembered his error. *Roger.*

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‘Let me pour that soup.’

Birds sang outside. She nodded and said nothing, helpless in her dark world.

Roosevelt poured the old woman a bowl of soup and set it in front of her.

‘Here.’

‘Thank you, young man.’ Her voice was weaker now as if she was about to cry.

She fumbled around the bowl and found the spoon.

‘Just like I’m rich. Being waited on by servants.’ Her voice was shaky like her hands.

Roosevelt sat in his chair and poured himself a small bowl of the squalid mess. The razor lay open next to the chipped bowl and he imagined it the only thing clean in the house.

‘Thank you for the soup.’

‘Just like my mammy used to make. Just like it.’ Triumph in her voice accompanied by nervousness. Roosevelt wondered if she had remembered the first name he had given. She stared dead-eyed at him, her grey irises like new eggs, wet and thin and opaque. ‘We all done things we regret. All of us.’

Roosevelt stared at the bowl of soup.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he said.

The smell of the soup reminded him of garbage, peels and husks rotted in the sun, a pig sty on an August afternoon. He moved his spoon around in the dark contents of the bowl. Then he picked up the razor and cut an overgrowth of cuticle around his thumbnail, folded up the razor with a movement he had practiced a thousand times and shoved it into his pocket.

The old woman did not speak while she ate but she was not quiet. She ate loudly and every now and then she would spit a little soup back in the bowl, as if something had offended her sense of taste. Roosevelt found it difficult to watch her and turned his eye to the guitar against the closet door.

‘Just like my mammy used to make.’

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The old woman finished her soup and Roosevelt took the bowl.

‘Now, you know there ain’t nothing free,’ said the old woman.

Roosevelt watched her.

‘No sirree. I expect you’ll do me a bit of work tomorrow before you head out. Help an old lady.’ She sounded both serious and sad. Then she grinned. There was a dark green something in the gap of her front teeth.

‘Yes, ma’am. My mama raised me not to be no freeloader. I’ve never taken nothin’ in my life without workin’ for it.’

‘Well then, you had a good mammy, that’s for sure. Lots of young folks don’t care what their mammy’s say no more. Think they know everything. Why there is so many problems in the world today. Young folks your age forget what they mammy’s taught’ ’em and run off and behave like heathens.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

She paused, and if it wasn’t for her blindness, she would have been gazing directly at him. ‘You can sleep outside in the shed.’ Her voice was dull. ‘Should be a blanket in there that boy uses when he stays over. In the morning you can bust up some wood for me. It’s round the back if you didn’t see it when you came up.’

‘I saw it.’

‘Good mammy I say. Raised up in the way of the Lord.’

She coughed.

‘We can finish that soup for lunch tomorrow. After you bust up that wood.’ Her face was sour, flat, a husk.

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Roosevelt stood up. ‘I suppose I best get some sleep and get up early. Never liked workin’ in the hot sun.’

The old woman nodded.

Roosevelt went to the guitar and picked it up as quiet as he could. At the front door he looked back at the old woman.

‘Night, ma’am.’

She stared at the stove.

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He went to the shed out back. Inside were some old corn cobs and busted wood crates all pushed to one side. On the floor was a grey, wool blanket. It was dirty but dry. Roosevelt picked it up by one corner and shook it. Heaves of dust came from it. He took it and wrapped the guitar in it. He scrounged some pieces of twine, a couple of long ones and a handful of shorter pieces that he tied together. He twisted the twine around the blanket and pulled it taut, around the neck first. He tied another two pieces around the body. He used the leftovers to make a crude harness. It took several adjustments and the finished product wasn't comfortable, but it worked.

By the time he had finished wrapping and securing the guitar, the sun was nearly down. He filled an old clay jug with water from the old woman's well. He waited till it was dark and then started walking.

He walked for several hours along a winding path and then veered off into the woods. When he had grown tired, he sat down with his back against a tree. He ate some blackberries that he had found earlier and saved in his pocket. He listened to the woods as he ate and it was quiet. Sometimes a small critter would rustle in the undergrowth. Sometimes the wind would come up. After he finished the berries he took the twine from around the blanket, unfolded it and gently brushed the strings of the guitar with his fingers. He adjusted two of the tuning pegs, brushed the strings again, adjusted another peg.

He smiled and began to play.

The music came to him with ease, as if it had been waiting in him, as if it was wanting to be set loose from his mind and his fingers. It's a reservoir, he thought as he played. He started to hum and then he sang a little. He sang about leaving things behind and murdering a man in the dark. He sang about his dead mother. He fell asleep playing, his mind completely relaxed.

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He awoke the next morning and found that he had pulled the blanket up and over him at some point in the night. The guitar was on its side less than an arm's length away. He stood up and although hungry and exhausted he felt good and he still felt the music from the night before.

Played it to sleep, he thought.

Roosevelt walked for a while. The music was in his mind and he could feel it in his fingers. He thought of Dab Wooley and of the joints where he had played, where he had drank into the night with women on his lap and at his side, his arm draped over them. The laughter. When he came out of the woods he found himself on the edge of a dusty road.

The rest of the day he stayed on the road.

When night came again he was hungry, his stomach in knots, churning and growling. He felt empty and his legs were tired. There was a heaviness in his head, in the back of his neck. The landscape became a flat expanse with only the moon looking down and that long, red clay road. All around were fields, tobacco on both sides. Way on down the road there was a single light.

The light was on a post in the middle of a gravel turnaround. It was a bus stop, as indicated by a hand-painted wooden sign. There was a bench under the light. The turnaround was off to one side of a four-way intersection. Roosevelt stood in the middle of the intersection and looked south, then north. It all looked the same. He looked up into the sky, the circle of hazy yellow created by the light slowly fading until he could see the stars, tiny blue and white points in the black above. He imagined it all a dome, with him inside, the sky just a single big roof that covered everything.

Roosevelt sat down in the middle of the intersection. He lay back with the guitar at his side. He put his hands across his chest and interlocked his fingers. For a moment he thought about the

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darkness around him, the idea that he was in a giant coffin. He wondered what Dab Wooley would have looked like in his coffin. How his mama must have been raising a riot over her boy's death, Murrel and Arness plotting revenge off to the side.

There was a light breeze and the tobacco rustled. The whip-poorwill was there for several short songs and then it was quiet. Far away, over the fields from what direction Roosevelt did not know, came the whistle of a train.

He sat up and listened. The whistle came again and he thought about the two men he had met days before and he wondered if they were riding the train he now heard across the featureless expanse.

The wind picked up. Rain, he thought, rain is coming, a storm. He could smell it. He stood up. The lamp at the bus stop flickered.

He took the guitar and began to play.

He started as he always did, fingering the strings and knocking his fingers against the body like it was a drum. He remembered some of the stuff he had sung from the night before and he sang it again, but with different words.

And then something happened inside Roosevelt Sands, something that he could not feel or touch, something of which he was completely unaware. His music became a voice and it rose up and merged with his mind and the two things spread out from his fingers and the instrument that he held.

Wave upon rippled wave, floating sounds of metallic pings and rhythms and harmony building from nothing into chaos, into magic. It was as if he was picking incantations lodged somewhere deep within the instrument, as if every wrong done by and to him slept inside it, as if the weight of the world sat upon that crossroads in that red clay amidst the fields. He was at one with the increasing wind and the tiniest parts of matter deep within the soil, the molecules and the atoms like little universes

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contained one within another, all vibrating to the sound that flowed from his fingers on those strings. The music reached into every world, into the cells of the grass and its roots, down lengthy dark passages where the tiniest of creatures dwelled, the worms and the ants and the dead old fossils which had lived long before any man stepped upon the soil. He could sense somewhere in his deepest thoughts that he had found the key to all things, his music, the rhythm, the building of the sound, the train, the blind, the hatred, the memories of Dab Wooley, his brothers all within the flames, his mother cursed, the preacher's sweat and the fire of a thousand hells. All of the fear and love and hatred and joy came out in his song. It bloomed upward in invisible perfection, spreading throughout the world and Mercury, Venus and Mars and the distant spheres of gas and ice, rolled past stars and nebulae. Sailing it went in billows and splintered outward through time, through every age and at all peaks and lulls and hums that had or would ever come into being. The song, a single word rolled through the cosmos, the beauty of all things terrible to come.

Roosevelt played and the universe shifted.

He lay there in that red clay soil in his torn pants and dirty shirt and the ragged black coat he had once worn to church. He lay there half-drunk, intoxicated by the divine voice which inhabited him. He spoke upward into the dominion from which all life sprang without a single word being uttered from his lips. He screamed into the infinite, the eternal thread of existence and reality, the being that binds all things taut and whole. Eternity heard his voice, his voice in the song sung perfectly as it had never been before, never by a single creature on any world. Now spoken by the lowliest of men, the most enraged and bent, the most tortured and misunderstood, a voice of suffering, the voice of all those who had felt pain or loss or separation, that was his song.

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And the song ended as perfectly as it had begun, from chaos into perfection and then back into chaos. Roosevelt lay in the crossroads of that red soil, his body exhausted, his legs bent and twisted as if he had fallen from the sky. The guitar skewed off to his side.

He opened his eyes.

The clouds broke their parsimony and the rain came in sheets. He opened his mouth. He lay still and unaware, paralysed and confused by what had happened. His body numb and small, like a child, like he had witnessed some great thing, but what remained was nothing, no memory, only the flicker of something that he thought he had seen or felt or heard. He had no idea of the power in his conjuring, his song, a single word in the language of creation itself.

It was through Roosevelt Sands, on a red clay road under a nighttime sky somewhere deep in tobacco country in 1940, that the universe and all things within it began to unravel.

It rained on him throughout the night, his body unable to move, his legs still bent beneath him, his hands gnarled up half-fists stunned and splayed as if he had dropped with the rain. A palsy he thought. He had heard of the affliction striking strong men. Through unconsciousness and out again he went numerous times, the old cistern in his mind, the bald son of a bitch on the train car. What had happened Roosevelt had no idea. He remembered playing, the rhythm and its sound under the sky. How long he had played he did not know. The rain had fallen and continued to fall and the moon was a keeper of time, with each opening of his eyes and his brief foray into the waking world he saw the moon as it passed on its arc across the night sky. Then, sometime before the sun came up, when the sky was fire and the clay red road that was his bed seemed a carpet rolled out beneath him, all things, in dream or awake, he did not know.

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