

We're Good People

by Shawn Faulkner

I shot the bird, but I only winged it, and it tumbled across the sky, half falling half flying until it thudded down near the creek. After the shotgun blast took its time echoing across the snow, the field was silent. I started walking. Halfway across I missed the chance to plug a rabbit because I was rubbing my hands against the cold. I was sick of being cold. I was cold all of the time.

When I reached the creek, I saw the body right away. It wasn't half hidden or anything. It was laid out open on the stones that lined the creek bottom. The girl's hair was long and yellow, and she was wearing a blue shirt. Her arms were extended up over her body, as if she was reaching for the sun. She wasn't wearing any pants, or panties for that matter, and her skin was white against the stones.

I looked behind me. Nothing moved. I was way out in the middle of nowhere, almost to the cave in the pancake rocks where I smoked dope as a kid. I reached down and picked up the quail and swung it around by the neck to make sure it was dead. Then I pushed the bird into the plastic bag tied to my belt. I looked around again then lowered myself into the creek by grabbing saplings that grew out of the bank. When I reached the bottom, I slipped on a pocket of ice, and my legs shot out from under me. I landed on my ass, and one of my boots kicked the girl. Making contact with her freaked me out, and I scrambled back against the bank. Then I told myself that it was stupid to be freaked out, because the girl was as dead as they get.

I stood and leaned my shotgun against a tree then squatted down on my heels the way old farmers did in the Bootheel when I was a

kid. There were several holes in the girl's chest and stomach. The holes were rimmed with red. I figured they were bullet holes. I had never seen one in a human body, but they were fairly self-explanatory. Her eyelids were open and her eyes, both of them, were blue, and for a moment they made me think of the ocean, and for a moment I thought of God, then I stopped thinking of him. One side of her face was banged in a bit, and the hair on that side was matted down and frozen solid with blood. It sort of made me sick to look at her, so I stood and pulled myself out of the creek.

In the field I stood thinking about the dead girl. I was sort of twisting about, wondering what to do, but then I noticed how far the shadows had fallen over the snow. I started back towards the house. I thought about her the entire way. Then I kept thinking of her as I cleaned the birds on the far side of the barn. I left the skin and innards on the ground beneath the bench and walked across the space between the house and barn, swinging the birds by their feet.

Katy met me at the door. Her face was puffy. She had been crying again. She cried all the time now. "Oh, she's collapsing in on herself, Billy. She can't barely breathe," Katy said.

I handed her the birds and walked across the house to the small room where we kept Mary's bed. I opened the door and looked in. I could barely see her swirled up amongst the blankets, but I could hear her breathing plenty loud, and it wasn't a good sound. But there was nothing I could do about it. She had cancer, the kind that gets down in the bones and grows out from there. She'd always had it. She'd lived longer than the doctors said she would. She was a fighter, they said, but now she was going to die. She wanted to see the ocean before she did.

I have no idea where that notion came from.

I shut the door, walked into the kitchen and pulled the whiskey bottle from beneath the sink. I took a big gulp.

Katy was crying where she stood above the stove. When I looked at her, I still saw her as she was as a kid, a skinny girl with shiny dark hair and light freckles across her nose. She had come from the good part of town, the part of town with brick homes and thick oak trees. Her parents about died when they found out about us.

I reached across and put my hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," I said.

"I know."

"It's ripping me apart, Katy."

"I know."

"She ain't got long now, then she'll be with God," I said. But when the words came out they sounded lame, and I knew they were lame.

"She kept telling me all day that she was cold, and that her bones hurt her bad."

"Did you give her the medicine?"

"She wouldn't take it. She said the pills make her sick, and that she hates being sick worse than she hates the pain."

"Goddamn kid."

"She's tough," Katy said then burst out so hard that she started coughing all over the frying pan. "And she ain't never going to see that ocean."

I walked into the living room. The radio was on and was playing old cowboy music. I loved that stuff, the songs about heartache and dark pool halls, but I didn't feel like listening to it just then. I walked back into the kitchen, poured more whiskey and leaned against the counter. The meat was frying and it smelled good. I had forgotten that I was hungry. We ate crowded together, leaning against the counter. There wasn't enough space for both of us to be in the kitchen without bumping into each other, but that was okay. We didn't mind being close.

"Lisa thinks she may have some work lined

up tomorrow," Katy said.

"That's good."

"She's cleaning this mansion out in Fairview, and she asked if I'd help."

"That's good."

"Said she would give me fifty bucks."

"Ain't peanuts."

"Will buy milk."

"I guess we won't have to worry about not having enough money for medicine. She ain't going to need it anymore."

"My God, Billy."

Kate leaned into my chest.

"We never imagined it like this, did we?" I asked.

"Never in a million years. You've had such bad luck."

"We had it pretty good for awhile."

"We did have some nights, didn't we?"

I pulled her against me. We laughed a bit, but Katy was still crying.

"My God, Billy, will it ever get better?" She asked and reached up and pushed my hair back on my head. "My parents said we would end up like this. They said you wasn't nothing but a case of bad luck."

I had long ago stopped worrying about her parents. But I was bad luck. That was the truth. Then Mary called to me. I walked across the room and opened the door. Mary was too weak to sit up. She was on her back, tangled up among the blankets.

"I heard you, daddy," she said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm cold, daddy. Will you pick me up?"

I picked her up. She was nothing more than a bag of bones and a soul. I carried her into the living room and sat with her on my lap. We listened to the radio. She had no hair. Her eyes were blue.

"I hurt, daddy. I hurt from down deep."

"I know you do, baby."

"Guess what, daddy?"

"What?"

"I don't want to see the ocean no more."

"You don't?"

"No, daddy. I think seeing it in pictures is enough."

She fell asleep in my arms. That was her way of letting me off because she knew I wasn't good for it, and like any kid worth their weight, she didn't want her old man to feel bad about it.

Goddamn.

"I've got to tell you something, Katy."

"I'm tired, Billy. Tell me in the morning."

"I found her today."

"Who?"

"Ludwick's girl."

Katy jerked up in bed. I could see her in the moonlight.

"Where? Is she dead?"

"She's dead all right."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was thinking on it."

"Well that ain't no reason. Get up and walk to Mr. Ludwick's right now." She reached beside the bed and started grabbing around for my jeans. "You go on and tell him. You know it's killing him, not knowing what happened to his girl. Was she beat up or anything?"

"She was naked from the waist down."

"My God."

"And her face was smashed in a bit."

"They said she was up to no good."

"Who did?"

"It don't matter. You get up and go right now and tell Mr. Ludwick where she is. He needs to know, as bad as it will be. And the cops and everyone else."

I didn't move. Katy piled the clothes on the bed.

"Katy," I said.

"Well, get going."

"Listen to me. I had this thought."

And that was when I told her.

"Oh, no, Billy. Oh, no," she said when I was done.

"She's already dead, Katy. Ain't nothing we can do to bring her back."

"Billy. It ain't right. You know it ain't right.

And even if it was, how would we do it?"

"I got it all planned out."

"That doesn't give confidence to me, Billy. Not with your track record."

"That girl should see the ocean."

"That ain't the way she's getting there. We're poor, but we ain't like that," Katy said, rolled over and closed her eyes. A minute later she rolled back to me. "How much do you think he would give us?"

I set the alarm on my watch, but we didn't need it. Neither of us could fall back asleep. I left the light on in the kitchen in case Mary woke up. I figured the light would help her not be scared. I hoped to Jesus that she wouldn't call out for one of us. Katy and I got bundled up as tight as we could and stepped outside.

The wind was whipping and biting hard at my skin. The moon was full. I could see my shadow as we walked down the metal steps. Katy whimpered and pushed up against me, but there was nothing I could do for her.

I grabbed the old toboggan from the barn and set a coil of rope on it. The sled slid silently over the snow behind us as we walked down the center of the gravel. It took a long time to get out past the last fence row. It was a hell of a place to drop a body, that's for sure. It would take a fool that couldn't shoot very good to find it. Some bad luck for them.

When we reached the field, I pulled Katy by the hand and we stepped into the hay. The snow was over our boots. Katy was crying and carrying on. "Good Lord I don't want to see her," she said. Then she started saying the Lord's Prayer over and over. I led her by the hand across the field until we stood on the bank overlooking the creek.

"You can turn your back to keep from looking at her," I said. "Just stand there and count the stars, and when I say it's time, pull like hell on the rope." I grabbed the rope from the toboggan and slid into the creek. It was darker down there, in the shadows from the trees that grew along the banks. Her body was as I had left

it. I squatted again and looked at her. I hated that part where her head was bashed in.

“Billy,” Katy called.

“I’m here.”

“Oh, God, Billy,” she said. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

I pulled the rope from beneath my coat and played out six feet or so. Then, holding my breath, I reached under the body and yanked the rope beneath it. She was heavy. I pulled the rope over and tied a knot in front of her chest. I yanked on it a few times to make sure it was snug. Then I took the loose end and played it out as I crawled out of the creek.

“Take it,” I said to Katy and handed her the rope. She was still standing with her back to me. “Pull when I tell you to.”

I dropped back into the creek. I straddled the girl’s head, bent over and pushed my hands beneath her shoulders. “Okay, Katy,” I yelled, “Pull.” I lifted the body and stumbled backwards over the ice. Near the bank, I tripped over a root and fell. The corpse rode up on my legs. I scrambled up and yanked the body halfway up the bank. “Hold her tight,” I yelled at Katy. I got my shoulder beneath the legs. Then I did a squat like we used to do in the weight room when I was on the football team, and the body went about halfway up then fell back on top of me. It was just like lifting a block of ice.

“You’ve got to pull harder,” I yelled.

“I can’t,” Katy screamed back.

I got back in my position, but this time, after I had straightened my legs and hoisted the body up a bit, I grabbed the trunk of a tree and held my position. I kept doing that, fighting for inches up the hill, until I had worked the body out of the creek. Breathing hard, I stood over the body in the field. I wasn’t cold anymore.

Katy came back to look at her. She threw up in the snow. “Oh, God,” she said.

“God ain’t got nothing to do with it,” I answered.

I untied the rope and coiled it. Then I lifted the girl’s torso and kicked the sled beneath her

body. I got her situated then Katy and I stepped into the loop and started across the field. Katy whimpered and carried on. On occasion we pulled the sled into a stump or a thicket of thorns, and that would really set off the tears. She finally said she couldn’t do it anymore and stopped pulling. I drug her alone. It was hard, and I got very tired. Katy walked beside me. She had stopped crying. She seemed dazed.

When we reached the road, I drug that sled right down the middle of the gravel. Once I saw the red eyes of a fox or a coyote, I couldn’t tell for sure which one it was, in the trees on the far side of a field. It sure felt like an evil omen.

We reached the house and Katy walked inside to check on Mary.

“She ain’t moved,” she said when she came back out.

“Good,” I answered. The corpse was on the ground between us.

“She’s still breathing the same way.”

“We’ve gotta pull this off fast if we’re going to get her up there before it gets light.”

Katy looked at the barn. “You think she’ll be okay in there?”

“We’ve gotta get her up in the loft just in case someone stumbles in there for something.”

“Or an animal.”

“Or an animal. I don’t want her drug all around the yard.”

“Oh, God, Billy. Don’t say stuff like that.” Katy started crying again.

“Okay. Let’s get started,” I said. But Katy just stood watching me.

I did it alone. I pulled the sled before the barn doors and tied a harness around her. Then I went inside. I inched up the wooden ladder and crawled through the hay in the loft. I crawled so I could feel the floor with my hands in case I came to a rotten section. Mice scratched around in the corners as I moved. When I reached the wall, I pitched open the loft doors and looked down. You wouldn’t believe how bright the moon was that night. I could see the dead girl’s eyes, and it looked as if she were staring right into my soul. It freaked

me out a bit, and I turned my head away.

Katy had walked to the steps leading into the house and was sitting with her head in her hands.

"Katy, I need you to throw me the rope," I said. She didn't move. "Katy," I yelled.

She stood and slowly walked to the dead girl. She turned her head and, keeping herself as far from the body as possible, inched her arm out until she could grab the rope. I missed it the first two times she flung it up at me, but I caught it the third time. I sat, then, and braced my feet against the wall. I leaned back and started pulling. The body rose and banged against the side of the barn. Katy moaned. The rope came slowly over the edge. The body was scratching against the barn the entire way up.

Then the weight shifted suddenly at the end of the rope. Katy screamed. I leaned forward so I could see over the edge. Part of the harness had come untied, and the girl had swung upside down. She was halfway up the barn, swinging this way and that. I leaned back and started pulling again. I was scared the rope would break, and I wasn't sure if a frozen body would crack in two if it hit the ground. But her legs finally emerged in the window, and I wrestled my left arm around them and let go of the rope. It was hard as hell getting a frozen corpse through a window made for pitching hay bales from, but I did it. I was sweating and cursing and a little sick at the end. I drug her back a few feet and covered her with hay.

When I reached the ground and started across the space towards the house, the sky had cracked red against the black field. Inside, Katy was standing above the stove, waiting for water to boil. Coffee was dripping into the pot on the counter. Katy's face was pale. She had changed clothes.

"I guess you're not going to bed?" I asked.

"No point. I've gotta meet Lisa in an hour."

"Yeah," I said and walked to the sink and grabbed a coffee cup.

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"We're not bad people are we?"

I poured a cup from the pot. Coffee dripped onto the hot plate and boiled. I leaned back against the counter. "We didn't do the killing."

"I'm not sure what we're doing isn't as bad. Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"If she starts to die today, you have to promise to come get me. I don't care what you have to do or where you have to go to do it. You come get me."

"I will."

"I don't think we're bad people, Billy."

The water boiled and she placed two eggs in the water. I stretched my legs out as far as I could. They were tired, and my back hurt like a mother. Wrestling a dead body, especially one that is frozen, is a hell of a thing.

Katy left an hour later. I watched her struggle through the snow towards the highway. I stood at the window drinking coffee. I was thinking of what I would say in the letter to Mr. Ludwick, and of how much money was fair to ask him for. I would walk into town that evening and use the library to type the note then stick it in one of the blue mailboxes out front. I didn't want to take advantage of Mr. Ludwick. I only wanted what was fair.

It would end badly for me. It always did. They would figure it out and be waiting for me when I got back. I wasn't scared of that. I wasn't scared of jail. I'd been there before.

I had sorted through the letter in my mind when Mary woke up. She didn't call out to me, but I could hear her crying. I walked to her room. After lugging that body around all night, she seemed to come out of her bed with no effort at all. She was crying from the pain, but I couldn't get her to take the pills. I carried her to the sofa and held her on my lap. We listened to country songs and stared out the window at the gray fields.

"Will heaven be ugly like this on some days?" she asked.

"No, baby. It's only sunny and blue in

heaven.”

“Do you think I’ll miss you?”

“Oh, I figure you might think of me from time to time, but you won’t be sad about me. You’ll be too busy riding ponies and coloring and things like that to miss me.”

“Will there be other kids there?”

“Yes. Tons of them. And none of them will be sick.”

“Daddy.”

“Yeah?”

“Will you be in heaven someday to see me?”

I didn’t answer.

“Daddy?”

“Yeah, baby. I’ll be there someday.”

I got her to eat a banana and drink a glass of water. She fell asleep in my lap, and I carried her back to her bed. I walked to the window and stood there staring out at fields that hadn’t changed in weeks. I started crying. I didn’t even try to stop myself. I cried for so long that the tears ran down my neck and into my shirt.

I waited for Katy, and the moment I saw her dark form coming down the road, I went out to meet her. I felt like running, and I did. I floundered through the snow like a maniac. When Katy saw me, she started to laugh. It was the first time I had heard her laugh in a long time. I met her and started kissing her. Despite the cold air, her lips were warm.

“We can’t do it, Katy.”

“It was such a stupid idea.”

“I never should have thought of it.”

“I never should have told you it was okay.”

“It wasn’t your fault. It was completely my doing.”

“It was a bad idea all around.”

“I acted like an idiot.”

“Look at this, Billy. Look at this.”

Katy was holding a canvas bag beneath her coat. It was full of cans of food and boxes of pasta. On the side was a bottle of wine.

“When we finished cleaning the lady’s house, she told us to take all this stuff. She said the wine was so bad she couldn’t bring herself

to open it. She said that somebody had given it to her as a gift, and that she wouldn’t even cook with it.”

“We’ll sure as hell drink it.”

“She wants us to come back again tomorrow to work on her guest house. Maybe she’ll have some more out there.”

I reached out and put my hand over the back of Katy’s head and kissed her again. Our foreheads rested together. I took the bag. We held hands as we walked back to the house. Inside the lights were on and it was warm. Katy cooked the pasta and we drank the wine, and for a time we seemed happy. My mind was clear again, at least, and that’s worth something. Katy lay down in the bed with Mary that night. I lay on a sleeping bag on the floor beside the bed. It was as close as I could get to them.

In the morning Katy got dressed. “You’ve got to tell him today,” she said as she laced her boots. “Listen, I was thinking maybe we could try another hospital. You never know,” she said.

“I won’t write another letter.”

She moved to the sink and rinsed out her coffee cup. “I’ve got to meet Lisa.”

“We’ve got a shoebox full of letters. They all say the same thing.”

“I know.”

“I won’t write another one.”

“Billy?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to tell him?” She asked and looked at me without smiling.

I turned away.

Katy struggled off through the blowing snow. I got ready for the walk to Mr. Ludwick’s. As I was stepping through the door, Mary woke up, and damned if she wasn’t talkative. She started asking me questions about heaven again. Finally I asked her if she didn’t want to go for a walk. She did in a bad way, she said, and I bundled her tiny body with blankets.

I went to the barn and pulled the sled up to the door. She smiled when she felt the cold air hit her. I loaded her on the toboggan and

dragged her across the field towards the road. When I reached the asphalt I pulled the sled onto the shoulder where there was still a layer of snow, pointed myself in the right direction and started walking. Mary had stopped talking, but her eyes were open, and she was staring at the road, which was black against the white snow. Across the field nothing moved.

The Ludwick home was a big brick affair, just like all the other homes built by farmers that had accumulated enough land to become wealthy. It sat a good way back from the road and had a porch across the front. You could see it for a long time before you reached it. It liked to announce itself, as my old man would have said. When I turned from the highway, the road leading to the house had already been cleared of snow. It must have taken some finagling to make that happen. Mr. Ludwick was an efficient man. He was a tough old bird, too.

"Are we going to see Joanne?" Mary asked from the sled.

"No, baby, we're not," I answered.

"I'd like to see her again."

"I know you would, baby."

"She was nice to me."

Mr. Ludwick was standing on the porch, one foot on the lower railing, talking with Sheriff Hendricks. I could tell by the way they were looking at the toboggan that Mary was staring back at them from her skeleton face. Mr. Ludwick forced himself to smile. His cheeks crinkled up like old leather.

He walked down the steps and bent over the sled. "Hello beautiful," he said. "You look as pretty as a polished apple." Mary giggled. Mr. Ludwick could always make her laugh. "When're you going to come over and eat dinner with me and Mrs. Ludwick? You know she loves to see those blue eyes of yours."

He was bent over the sled. He was staring at Mary, but I knew he was looking into different blue eyes.

"Mr. Ludwick," I said.

He straightened and looked at me. It seemed he was having a hard time breathing.

"Yes, Billy?"

"I got something to tell you."

He stared at me with those hard eyes.

I couldn't get the words out.

"Go on, son."

I could see something in those eyes, something that was refusing to give in, something that was still fighting, and I knew at that moment what I was going to do. "Mr. Ludwick," I said. "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry the rent is late. We've got it coming. I think we should have it in the next day or so."

The old man's body gave in a bit, and he exhaled into the cold air. "Billy, you didn't have to come all the way down here to tell me that. I ain't worried about your rent. Do what you can." He reached out and put one of those old leather hands on mine. It was heavy as a piece of iron. "You take care of that girl," he said, turned and walked back up the stairs. When he reached the deck, he stopped and looked out at the field for a long time. Then he walked inside.

I turned to go.

"Wait a second," Hendricks said and came down the steps. "We got a search organized tomorrow morning. If you can, I'd appreciate your help. We're going to start along the creek on the back of his property and work our way towards the highway. We've got a big crew lined up."

"I've got to get Mary back. She's been in the cold too long."

He gave me a ride. We tied the toboggan on the roof over the lights, and I sat with Mary in my arms in the backseat. He left the car running on the highway, its blue and red lights taking turns reflecting from the wet asphalt. I put Mary in bed. Hendricks waited in the kitchen with his hat in his hands.

"I'm sorry about your girl," he said.

"It ain't nobody's fault," I answered.

His cruiser was still running on the highway, the lights still spinning. "I hope you can join us tomorrow. I'd like to find her for the old man," he said and shook his head. "He still be-

lieves she's alive." He walked back, through the snow and the gray. I thought of the old man and of what he held in his heart. He didn't know any better.

That night I went through the steps in reverse order. I lowered her down from the loft. In the yard I arranged her on the sled. Then I set out again, in the darkness, dragging her behind me. I took my time. I was in no hurry. When I got tired, I sat down in the snow beside the corpse and rested. When I caught my breath, I stood and went at it again. I saw the red eyes in the distance. They were no longer an omen.

When I had gone far enough, I left the gravel and started through the field towards the creek. Halfway across, a large snowflake landed on my nose. Then one hit my eye. Then a bunch landed on the back of my neck. I looked up. The black sky was filled with white flakes tumbling down. My breath came out in a cloud.

I reached the creek but instead of lowering her into the stone bed, I followed the bank even further into the hills, away from the road. I went a long way. You can believe me on that. I walked until I reached the pancake rocks and the cave.

I reached the opening and crawled through on my stomach. I drug the body behind me. When I hit the second chamber, I stood and switched on my flashlight. The space was as I remembered it, small and tight and moist. The rock above the spot where I used to set my candle was still dark from the smoke.

I pulled her to the far wall where a narrow slab of rock jutted out like a bench in a park. As gentle as I could, I pushed the body beneath it. Then I forgot about being gentle and jammed her in there. I spent a long time dragging in rocks from the creek bed and stacking them around her, forming a wall that ran up to the bench. In the end I had her entombed pretty good. I thought about the smell that would come when everything thawed, but there was nothing I could do about that. I just hoped

it would pass quickly. I started to say a prayer that they would never find her, but I stopped after a few words. What would happen would happen. I'd done my part.

It was snowing like hell when I crawled back through the opening and stood beside the creek. I could no longer see the sky, only a solid wall of white falling among the black trees. I followed the creek back to the spot where I had found her then cut across the field towards the road. The snow seemed to fill my tracks as soon as I lifted a foot.

I had been out a long time. I started to get cold, real cold. Inside the house I dropped my clothes on the kitchen floor and opened the door to Mary's room. Katy was in there, curled around her tiny body. I slept on the floor again.

In the morning I stood at the kitchen window and watched Katy struggle to the highway. The wind was blowing hard. Her dark hair was whipping around her face. I'd lost sight of her when the first pickup felt its way down the gravel road and passed the house. Then a long string followed the first. Men were jammed inside. They stared at the house as they passed. A truck stopped, and Hendricks stepped out. He walked to the door and knocked. He wanted to know if I could help with the search. I nodded towards Mary's room. He said he understood and left.

It was a long morning. Mary woke up crying and I held her until she stopped. She asked me again about heaven and about what God would look like. I made up a bunch of stuff. I said that God's hair was seven feet long and solid gold. She laughed when I said that. I opened a can of soup and heated it on the stove, but she would only eat a spoonful. There was no point, really.

After lunch she went back to sleep. By then I could see the line of men, dressed in orange and camouflage hunting gear, fanned out across the field. They moved steadily towards the house, going slowly, calling and pointing at things, kicking under pines and at suspicious looking lumps of snow. It took them a good

hour to cross the field and reach the barn. Once there, the entire line paused. Some of the men took drinks from canteens. Hendricks and two other men separated from the line and approached the building. One stopped to kick at the bird guts. Then they all walked inside. They were in there a long time.

They didn't bother to look at the house when they stepped from the barn. They were looking at their boots. One raised his arm above his head and turned his thumb down, and the entire line of men, stretching out as far as I could see, their orange vests bright against the snow, moved forward in unison.

They didn't quit until they reached the highway. It was almost dark by then. They gathered around Hendricks on the shoulder of the blacktop. I could see vapor clouds rising above their heads as he spoke. Then they turned and headed down the road towards their vehicles. After thirty minutes or so, the long row of pickups, like a column of defeated soldiers, their headlights cutting the gray sky, pulled back onto the blacktop and headed towards town.

The sky had cleared by the time we woke up the next morning. I went out to the barn and dug through the cans of paint. I found two or three that would work and brought them inside. While the paint warmed near the furnace, I pulled the couch away from the wall and yanked the drapes from the window. Without the drapes, the room was much brighter. Katy watched me from the doorway.

"You didn't tell him did you?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

"In the pancake rocks."

She was quiet for a moment. "Why?" she finally asked.

"I haven't done much good in my life. You know that."

"And you're doing good by hiding her?"

"He won't be completely dead if he don't know. There'll be some light in the back of his mind he can draw near."

"And that's better than the truth?"

"It's better than what I've got."

"I don't know, Billy."

"My girl ain't never coming home."

"His never will either."

"He don't know that."

She didn't speak for a long time. Then she grabbed a paint can and walked into the room. We started with the blue first. I marked a line all the way across the wall. Where that ended, Katy painted a strip of sand, then a sun in the upper corner with a smiley face on it. On the sand we put some umbrellas and a dog. Then I painted three people, one much smaller than the other two. They were holding hands. They were walking towards the sun. ▲▼▲