

Cary Holladay

Merry-Go-Sorry

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And I will cast abominable filth upon thee, and make thee vile,
and will set thee as a gazingstock.

—Nahum 3:6

IT BEGINS in an Arkansas courtroom: the trial of a young man for the deaths of three boys. It begins in late May, a year after the murders, on a day so hot that the air conditioning can't keep up with the sweat on the seventeen-year-old defendant's face. He has confessed, though his lawyer protests that the confession, taped in hysterical segments by the police and existing too in written form, signed in Sid's childlike scrawl, means nothing: Sid Treadway is mentally retarded, he says, and the police coerced him.

Sid Treadway's long scarred dumbfounded face follows his lawyer's striding figure to the bench and back, and then Sid's mild green eyes are distracted by a cicada thrumming on a courtroom windowsill. He recalls the last such insect he saw, at his sister's house, which died loudly, clatteringly, in a dish of lemons. He barely hears his lawyer. In revulsion, his sister had thrown out the lemons, which she had planned to use in a pie. She has not come to the courtroom; only Sid's father is there for him, Big Sid, who when his son was arrested had burst into sobs like a child. There will be another trial for Sid's alleged conspirators, one of them widely re-

Good fiction shows us the inside of things—a community, a job, a relationship, the human heart. Great fiction can sometimes show all of these things working together; it lifts us briefly above the event horizon of our own day-to-day existences and gives us a dreamlike (and godlike) sense of understanding what life itself is about. Cary Holladay's "Merry-Go-Sorry" is one of those rare and always welcome stories.

Based on an actual event—how closely I don't know or want to know—it traces the aftermath of a triple murder. It is a story filled with marvelous details (Sid Treadway's "long scarred dumbfounded face," the yellow-haired Gulf Shores girl beside the green water and under the green sky, a nameless murderer vomiting at the side of the road as a rain shower pelts down) and illuminated by its passionate yet carefully controlled narration. Its real success, however, lies in Holladay's inspired (and sometimes eccentric) tracing of lives which come together in a blood knot and then wander away again on their own jagged courses. There is a pattern in the rebound, Holladay suggests, a blind evolutionary process that might be for the good as well as for the bad, and it is that mixed feeling which the title so beautifully evokes. Holladay shows us the inside of a senseless crime, where there is a pattern no tabloid headline can touch.

—STEPHEN KING

garded by an outraged public as the ringleader. Sid's trial is separate because he confessed, implicating the other two.

Sid Treadway helped to slay three young boys and left them hog-tied, bleeding and drowning in a ditch, says the prosecutor.

That is what the jury believes, swiftly convicting Sid Treadway, but that is just the prelude, the beginning.

It begins again in the trial of Benedict James, the devil-worshipping, girlfriend-biting, trailer-dwelling dropout who had tutored his disciples Sid Treadway and Robert Abt in evil (so the prosecutor says, six weeks later in the same courtroom), who had targeted his three victims (their eight-year-old faces—one slyly mugging, another somber, a third, the most lovable, expansively smiling—have decorated Tennessee and Arkansas newspapers for months now). If the trial of Sid Treadway was easy, the trial of Benedict James and Robert Abt is as simple as calling Satan by his name.

In Benedict's closet there's nothing but black T-shirts and black pants, a police officer testifies, and his diary has poems he wrote to the devil.

Benedict's pregnant girlfriend, Victorine Stark, sits every day in the back row. Sixteen, red-haired, beautiful, she has pointed to teethmark-scars on her white neck for the benefit of photographers. She is carrying the child of the man she loves; this is her fate, she says. Her mother, thirty-two but looking sixty, sits beside her embrodering the face of Jesus on a pillowcase. Nobody loves *her*, she tells reporters, and she'll be grandmother to the devil, but she has a sweet lovely daughter, she says; I want the best for my girl.

Benedict of the shaggy black hair, the fishbelly-white skin, the deeply scalloped underlip, the pedophile's eyes, gets sent to hell right there in the Arkansas courtroom, as daily the trial ends with a curse: the father of one of the victims (who will himself be on trial within the year, for stealing furniture from a neighbor's moving van), rushes Benedict in a ritual that the guards and the jury have come to enjoy: Burn in hell, murderer! You killed my little boy! he cries. The guards let him get within arm's length of Benedict before gently tugging him out the door. Benedict sits unmoved, only his large stomach moving fast with his breath, his T-shirt lifting up and down.

The other defendant, Robert Abt, is vocal, whereas Benedict says

nothing and does not take the stand. Robert Abt denies it all, the luring of the three young victims, the cutting, the binding, the rapes. But he gets confused. To the prosecuting attorney, he explodes, Damn you, man, you're trying to mess me up. His lawyer tells the judge that he has advised his client against taking the stand, but Robert Abt, age sixteen, insisted. I'm innocent, Robert Abt cries from the witness stand.

Benedict James is eighteen but looks older; he could be twenty-four or five. When the judge sentences him to death and asks if he has anything to say, he replies, No, sir.

Within six months, he's on television, complaining to an eager, rabbit-eyed interviewer about the regular rapes and the blandness of prison food. Yes, he says, he did bite his girlfriend during sex, just a lick, and he demonstrates with his tongue, while the reporter shudders. I don't worship Satan. I'm a white witch, a Wiccan, he says. I never said nowise else. He will not talk about the three murdered boys, whose faces flash again on the TV screen as Benedict is led handcuffed back to his cell on Death Row. Facing the camera, the reporter assures viewers that Benedict will be under lock and key until his execution; within minutes, the TV station is flooded with calls from viewers who express the wish that Benedict be raped every day for as long as he lives.

The drainage ditch, called Ten Mile Bayou, where the three young boys' bodies were found, still trickles through West Memphis past the truck stops and car washes. Now and then, somebody still leaves a wreath of flowers there; other such offerings, of wire and withered white silk, lie askew in the sludge, stuck in the ditchbank. Victorine Stark, in the trailer she shares with her mother, cuddles her newborn, a boy, and names it Malachi. That means "my messenger," she announces, with middle name Destiny. She had a vision, she tells a reporter who follows up on her story: on the day before the baby's birth, she saw a crow with a long strand of something in its beak, a long piece of videotape. It gave me hope, she says, her red hair spread out on the pillowcase with the Jesus face on it, while in the background, the baby whimpers and Victorine's mother spoons macaroni and cheese onto paper plates, inviting the reporter to stay for supper.

What do you think was on the videotape? the reporter asks indulgently. The one that the crow was carrying?

Victorine laughs, a sad gurgle that has caught on lately among the girls at her school, who copy the laugh and the way she wears her plentiful hair—loose with a tiny braid encircling the crown of her head. That videotape would be something pretty. It don't have nothing to do, really, with the crow. It would show the future my baby will have. Rising from her narrow bed, Victorine announces, I have memorized something from the Bible, from the Book of Malachi: *"Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."*

The reporter, a young man whose instincts keep him at bay from this girl, but who has loved her violently since he stepped into her trailer twenty minutes earlier, saw her on the narrow bed, and heard the Arkansas honey in her voice, says, That's beautiful: I've never heard it before because I don't read the Bible.

Victorine holds his gaze with her green eyes, undoes her flouncy white blouse, and nurses the baby. It's getting dark outside; her mother hovers nearby to light candles that smell of patchouli oil. Victorine says, I still love Benedict, no matter what. Here's my favorite picture of him. She nudges the baby from her breast to draw something from the pocket of her blouse: a newsprint photo of Benedict bare-chested, his arms flung out in the shape of the cross. That was took just a few days before he was arrested, Victorine says. Sid Treadway took it. They was drinking and clowning around. You can have it. I've looked at it till it's in my heart forever. I tell my baby about his dad.

The reporter turns the picture over and discovers on the other side a coupon for a casino in Tunica: SEAFood BUFFET HALF PRICE. Victorine sees it too and says, I can't wait till I'm old enough to go play those slot machines.

The reporter tells her, I hope things turn out just fine for you. And you too, ma'am, he says to her mother.

You got me thinkin', Victorine says.

The reporter drives back to Memphis, over the bridge, with the

scent of patchouli candles in his hair. For years afterward, while he entertains eligible young women in restaurants, he grows moody over his wine, imagines rescuing Victorine, taking her to the casinos that she dreams of. He tells himself she'll be old and fat by nineteen, but it is because of her that he does not marry until he is forty and the memory of her has faded to an outline of Arkansas trailer and nursing infant.

Oh, it begins, it begins a thousand times, as many times and ways as a heart can beat or break. It began when the victims were conceived, three boys—one of whom, Matthew, had he lived, would have committed sins at least equal to those he suffered; this secret was written in his genes and known only to God and to his mother, who had seen something that terrified her in his eyes one day when he came riding his bike out of the woods, April wind streaming across his fresh blond buzz cut, declaring, I'm the czar; beat a drum and blow a trumpet for me. Two weeks later, Matthew was dead. His mother assumed he had learned the word "czar" in school; that look in his eyes had matched the word, somehow. Glossing her lips in the years after the murders, after the trial, she looks in her mirror and thanks God that there is nothing of her dead son's gaze in her own face.

Yes I loved him, she tells herself, but not like I love the others. Her other children are twins, docile and calm, with a gift for mimicry. They go with her to pull weeds from their dead brother's grave, but doing so they talk about homework, church, cartoons. Both twins can do lots of cartoon voices, to the point where their mother goes weak with laughter, yanking pokeweed mechanically from Matthew's granite monument. The expensive stone bears in the center a porcelain photograph of Matthew, the somber one that ran for months in the newspapers. Matthew's mother was assured by the monument company that the porcelain picture will outlast even the monument itself. In five hundred years, a thousand years, Matthew's face will still gaze across the yard of the Presbyterian church.

We're as high as a cat's back, the owner of the monument company had said proudly as Matthew's mother picked out the stone and made a down payment, but we've been in business forever.

Lady, monument companies come and go as fast as you can say tick, but we'll be here.

I didn't know the grave marker business had such a high turnover, Matthew's mother said, tearing from her checkbook a pastel check printed with a design of irises.

Yep, said the man, but not us. We been in business sixty years, and the last forty, the owner-manager's been me.

Because of the case, a newspaper photographer wins an award, having snapped a picture of the furious crowd outside the police station the day that Benedict James, Sid Treadway, and Robert Abt were arrested. The black-and-white image of those who gathered to see them brought into custody—the bared teeth, the lunging accusation, the scene electric with lynch-longing—finds a place in national news magazines and on the bulletin boards of thousands of newspapermen, amateur shutterbugs, and crime enthusiasts. In the picture, Sid and Robert hang their heads, their cuffed hands chafe at their backs. Benedict looks handsome in profile, his black hair tossed back from his high forehead, his nose shaped like Elvis Presley's, but he's in handcuffs too, and he's hearing the jeers of the crowd that wants him torn apart.

The West Memphis police chief, Merle Neville, receives the personal thanks of the Governor for cracking the case. Modestly he announces, I just listened to the buzz, meaning he has eyes and ears throughout the local subculture. I kept hearing Benedict James's name.

What of "Stonehenge," the abandoned cotton gin-house where Satanic rituals were long rumored to occur, Stonehenge, where word has it that Benedict used to sacrifice dogs, cats, rabbits, chickens? The farmer who owns it, burns the parts of it that will catch fire, and tears the rest of it down. It had sat so long on the edge of his cotton field, a high-roofed shed; not until after the arrests did it blossom with five-pointed stars and 666, and the farmer himself scratched its dirt floor for animal bones and found none, though he did discover charred circles, which the police deemed ritualistic. (Aw, somebody roasted marshmallows out there, the farmer told police, while his wife said, Henry, that cult stuff is true; you just

don't want to believe it. There were *orgies* going on out there. Do you think it was anybody we know?)

Merle Neville reassures the public, Your German shepherds are safe now. That's what those devil-worshippers want, is German shepherds.

The farmer resists even that; he does not know anyone who owns a German shepherd, he tells his wife. Most everybody has hounds. The farmer owns a fat yellow Lab that lolls in the grass and snaps at flies as the farmer burns and dismantles his troublesome old cotton shed. To the dog he says, There were never any devil-worship meetings here. *You* know it and I know it.

Benedict James had played with a cat's skull, his classmates recall, jerking it up and down on a string in the second grade, when everybody else had yo-yos. He was seven, then; eleven years later he lured three little boys into the woods and with his two companions he sodomized and killed them, and then, according to Lyle Adair, a former friend of Benedict's who testified against him, Benedict bragged on it all. Victorine vouched that Benedict spent the night with her, but she could not account for the entire evening. She said it wasn't true that he wanted the baby named Lucifer.

He wanted me to give him a lullaby, but I wouldn't do it, Victorine had told the jury. He was with me right *after* them boys was killed. Don't get me wrong—he wouldn't do nothing so bad. But he wasn't with me at the time he said he was. So no lullaby.

She means alibi, her lawyer said.

There was another suspect, a man who had wandered into a Chicken Hooray restaurant the afternoon of the killings and covered the walls of the men's room in bloody handprints. The restaurant manager washed them off himself, disgusted, relieved when the man—wild, Indian-looking—went stumbling off without even ordering a meal. When the murders screamed into the news the next morning, the manager called the police and said, I saw the guy; he was here, all bloody. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't want to fool with him. I never saw him before nor since.

The restaurant sits on the highway close to the swampy field where the bodies were found. The investigators stopped by for fried

lished at the elementary school in honor of the murdered children: three sturdy benches donated by the local hardware store and a half-dozen oak saplings that will grow to shade the children of future years, who will linger there, the teachers hope, turning the pages of books, the oak leaves whispering above them.

Crystal, the daughter of the Chicken Hoorary manager, gets A's in school without reading anything at all. She pays attention in class. I don't read, but I can write, she tells her friends, meaning her letters to Robert, letters so hot and loving that even the recipient, stupid and angry in his cell, catches his breath as he holds the pink-mist stationery in his hands, the charm of passion searing his blood. He recalls her then. She has visited him three times: a blurry girl who weeps more than she talks, with blonde hair so thin her ears poke through it, reminding him of a lop-eared rabbit, yes he remembers her now.

To her friends, Crystal says mysteriously, Robert *knows something* about what happened, but he didn't do it. When her friends scowl, she sticks out her chin and says, He'd of told me if it was different.

What of the crushed roll of peppermints found at the crime scene, and the scrap of a handkerchief printed with a picture of a Hot Springs bathhouse? Why was one victim, David, missing his shoes, and where is the third bicycle, only two having been recovered at the scene? Who cared about mints or handkerchiefs when the bodies showed treatment that only the devil could have invented, or carried out?

One detective asked the chief, Why don't we arrest that Lyle Adair. We got as much on him as on the others. His name comes up just as often. He was seen at a laundry washing clothes with mud on 'em, and hauling a smelly secret box in the back of his car. Why don't we arrest Lyle Adair.

But Lyle goes free, a rangy, skulking presence who skips out of West Memphis after the trial. The convicted ones are enough, and three is a magic number: Sid Treadway, Robert Abt, Benedict James; three killers for three victims.

Never mind that David would have grown up to be a brilliant folklorist, that even at eight he knew that the ballad "Barbara Al-

chicken when the shifts changed and complained that the hot wings were too spicy and the chocolate malts too thin. That was when everybody thought some drifter had done it, a trucker or a hitchhiker stopping by to destroy kids who would have been out of school and into summer's liberty in just a few more weeks, kids who had played in the field and in the woods all their lives.

The restaurant manager weeps when Benedict, Sid, and Robert are convicted. To his wife and daughter, he says, They didn't do it. I saw the guy that did, but he's gone. I wish to God I'd left that blood on the walls. I wish I'd locked him in the men's room and called the cops. He did it, did it and got away with it.

The manager's wife says, Maybe he had just been in a fight. Those three creeps in jail, they're the ones did it.

Their daughter, Crystal, isn't listening. A wispy blonde fifteen-year-old with almost transparent skin, she is in love with Robert Abt, having fallen for him during the trial. She has even visited him in jail, secretly, making the trip by bus to the prison sixty miles away after telling her parents that she is at a friend's house, learning to sew.

Her father says, I will feel wrong for the rest of my life, like I'm wearing the wrong body.

His sobs sound wracking and unmanly to Crystal's distracted ears. She slips away to her room to write to Robert Abt, in a sacred ritual of pink stationery, calligraphic penmanship, and dabs of perfume on the envelope, always with a "LOVE" stamp, placed upside down. In school she had known Robert Abt vaguely; now she has pledged to herself that she will marry him, even if he stays in jail for the rest of their lives. Robert rarely answers her letters; she knows other girls love him too and that he could have his pick. Sid Treadway of the long pimply face and stigma of retardation and signed confession has no such following. Benedict James's admirers are the most varied, including the hardest-core of the tattooed high school girls, a number of quiet intellectual women who would never admit an attraction to him, and several stoned older women who alternately want to mother him and take him to bed.

The girls and the women, along with nearly everyone else in West Memphis, make donations to the reading grove that is estab-

len" existed in at least ninety-two forms, of which he could sing several, in a high clear voice. Nobody knew where he got it, the curiosity about the old songs or the beautiful voice. His mother, a hair stylist, a tough gal who spends her Saturdays waxing her jeep, says David just loved old songbooks. She doesn't like those songs, she tells her friends; it used to bug her when David sang about some Barbara Allen asking for a grave long and narrow. He had a premonition, David's mother says moodily, snipping little v's into a client's bangs to give lift and volume, as the radio plays the Statler Brothers. If I'd gone ahead and given him that Game-Boy he wanted for his last birthday, he'd've put those creepy old ballads out of his head. His dad and I never sung 'em.

Not that she's with David's father anymore. Within six months of the murder convictions, she has divorced David's father. Matthew's parents were long divorced already. The parents of the other victim, Troy, had never married, though they had talked about it when they were not involved with others. They had last discussed it—and decided against it—at a Halloween costume party the year before the murders, a party for grown-ups and kids, he dressed as a crescent moon, she as the sea, with Troy in tow as an undercover cop. It was a great Halloween party, Troy told his mother, his fingers deep in the sticky icing of a cupcake, amidst the flaring jack-o-lanterns and the flowing orange punch, though he had to keep explaining his costume to all the other kids: his old jeans and dirty T-shirt gave no clues. He had a squirtgun in his pocket, though, and a plastic badge on his chest, and late in the party he cut armholes in a paper sack and announced it was a bullet-proof vest. His father, the moon, and his mother, the sea, got drunk enough on rum that they spent the night together, the crescent cardboard mask tossed on her bedroom floor, and her silver shawl, sequined in turquoise, catching the breeze from the window, that warm night. It is the crescent moon who rushes Benedict James in the courtroom some months later, daily during the trial, cursing him to hell and back until the final day when the judge sentences Benedict to death, until Benedict, when asked if he has anything to say, moves his scalloped underlip just enough to reply, No, sir.

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The animal part of the legend grows: it wasn't just dogs and chickens sacrificed in McKenzie's cotton shed, the buzz goes, but horses and pigs, sheep and cows and babies of girls who were themselves raised by goats and bore on their foreheads the mark of Baphomet, the head of a goat inside a pentagram, young girls so far gone in depravity that they killed their own infants; they set the babies on a rock and raised the knife and you can still see the blood, the buzz said, look for the dark stain on the biggest rock on the floor of the cotton shed that McKenzie tore down. Babies' blood will never wash away, even if it rains forever.

McKenzie says to his wife, That triple murder was a sex crime. Didn't have nothing to do with the devil. That was just hype that the police and the lawyers thought up.

Satan works through men, through us humans, his wife says.

This is what Troy, the son of the moon and the sea, had done on the day he died. At school that day, he had been impressed by the science lesson: the teacher, a young man impassioned in his love for wildlife, had described a field experiment during a college biology class, during which time he had gone from nest to nest in a swamp, shaking the eggs of birds who had laid them there, birds that had invaded the nests of the rightful owners, rare endangered creatures of milder temperament. Troy pictured his teacher seizing the big speckled invaders' eggs and shaking them hard enough to kill the embryos inside. The teacher was kind, so Troy could not grasp the kindness in his shaking the eggs. It seemed so cruel to kill the baby birds inside.

After school, Troy found his friends Matthew and David. All three had bikes. With little conversation, they planned to race and play in the woods as they always did.

When the man at the woods' edge beckoned them to follow him, Troy's mind was on those birds' eggs being shaken, even as he pedaled toward the forest with his friends. He felt sick at his stomach, thinking of his teacher shaking those eggs. Something tugged vaguely at his thoughts—*don't*—but his legs were churning and his bike sped into the darkness where the trees were and where the man waited.

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 Humble dreams, Sid Treadway's: to be a trucker in one of the rigs that whiz along I-40 and I-55, staying up all night to cover, oh, six, seven hundred miles. Even after months in jail, he has not realized, not really, that this will not happen for him, that he will never drive such a truck, unless as a very old man straining to read highway signs, his eyes too bleared for driving after dark. It's the driving that has always attracted him, not so much the places, not Chicago or San Francisco or St. Louis, just the fast hard nonstop travel that is sexual for him, the idea of it.

When a damning piece of evidence—a knife—was retrieved from a pond behind Sid's house, Sid's lawyer argued that it was old, rusty, and unidentifiable as the murder weapon. The jury eyeballed it, still sharp as a spearpoint, its handle wrapped with leather thongs, and decided this was it: Those killers thought they'd fooled us, flipping it into the pond when they were through cutting.

After the trial, Sid's lawyer fumed to his friends, There's knives at the bottom of every damn pond in the world, and they said, We don't think so.

Sid had been to Memphis many times. Just before the three little boys were murdered, he had visited the Pink Palace Museum with his father (Sid had long since dropped out of school, abandoning his special education classes) to see a display of elaborate mechanical dinosaurs. At first Sid thought they were real. Roaring giants, they reared back, then lurched toward him, their claws flexing, their great tails thumping the polished museum floor. His father, Big Sid, dared reach across the velvet rope and slap the haunch of a stegosaurus. The creature rolled its eyes at him, and father and son cried out, only the father was laughing.

They got some kinda sensor in there, Big Sid said. It ain't alive. Look at them feet. You can see gears and stuff that they tried to hide with rocks and a clump of fake grass.

I want to go home, Sid said.

Who else, then, was in the cult? Besides Benedict, Robert, and Sid, (speculation ran), a harelippped housewife comes under suspicion. She lives on the edge of town; she might slip out of her house to buy

a quart of milk, and instead make her way to Stonehenge. Maybe McKenzie was in on it, people say, and his wife. After all, Stonehenge was on his land. Victorine of course was in the cult although who could blame her; Benedict had brainwashed her and would have eaten their baby had he not been caught in time. A dozen trailer-park teens, grunge-dressed, their ears dulled by endless playing of heavy metal CDs, tell tales of chanting and spells and wild sex, tales about each other and strangers too.

Thirty miles away, in another county, a man and a woman run a shop that sells roach clips, black candles, and wands. A cherry bomb crashes through their plate-glass window and explodes. The couple collect the insurance money and open a tanning salon. Business had been terrible, anyway, ever since the occult rumors got started about the killings. They were never devil-worshippers at all, the couple says; they are Methodists. Their tanning parlor, Sun Worshipers, offers discount coupons in conjunction with the pizza parlor next door. It's a hit.

Where were *you* that afternoon, that witching-hour of suppertime and twilight, that full-moon evening of sticky mild air and fierce mosquitoes, when the boys disappeared, leaving two of their bicycles mangled deep in the woods? Can you account for where you were every minute and with whom, and what you did and why? Suppose it wasn't Benedict or Sid or Robert or the bloody Indian-looking man in Chicken Hooray?

Suppose there's a man who knows the woods well; he's driven the service road to the highway a million times. He killed the little boys in a place near the highway, where the whizz-a-mizz sounds of traffic covered up their shrieks. By the time he read about the boys' disappearance, maybe he was rocking on his heels in Las Vegas. Through the newspapers, he followed the trial from Oregon, say, where he was backhauling trash to a landfill. He's on a fishing trip in the Everglades when he reads about the convictions. Every morning he buys coffee and newspapers from an old man at a little bait store. How 'bout them devil worshippers in Arkansas, the fisherman says, squirting milk into his Styrofoam coffee cup. The old man says, What about it. What is it you know. The old man has ears that

could hear the splash of a body being rolled into a creek nine hundred miles to the northwest. He has God's eyes.

The fisherman grins into God's eyes and says, Fix me a egg sandwich, mister, and don't tell me you never wanted to bugger no little boy. He slaps Benedict's picture on the newspaper and says, This guy got fat during his trial, didden he? That's what happens when a vampire eats jail food. He was used to living off little boys' blood. He sucked blood from one of 'em's cock, old man.

He drives off in a car he stole in Georgia, a rusty alligator-green Crown Vic with a busted radio and bad shocks. When a hard morning storm catches him, he discovers the car leaks, rain splashing through the vinyl roof and onto his arm as he steers. No fishing that day. His stomach lurches, he has to pull over and roll out of the car into the brush to vomit. The egg sandwich, he thinks. He sees again the old man's eyes. His guts heave. He has heard of people dying from throwing up when they get snakebit. He thinks of that now as he convulses in the weeds, though he knows he wasn't bit. His money's almost gone. The rain stings the back of his neck and slashes his bare arms, exposed in the cut-off T-shirt. It feels like knives, but it's rain.

The moon's face is God's head turned backwards. That's what a teen, brought in for questioning, told the detectives as the investigation stalled, then picked up, then gathered steam. Backwards, yes sir, the girl said, identifying herself as a spirit sister of Victorine, picking at her chipped black nail polish. Yes, she said, I had sex with Benedict and Victorine both. We had went to a carnival in Jonesboro and then we came back to Victorine's trailer and we was drinking. Later on I found out Victorine was pregnant, the girl says, and I'm scared she'll have Siamese twins because of what we done. They're both so sexy, the girl said, Benedict and Victorine. I know I ought to care more about the three little boys that got killed, but the ones I love are Benedict and Victorine and the baby inside her, please let it be okay.

She told the detective, I knew we was going to all make love that night as we was heading to the fair. We crossed this field that smelled all sweet like hay, and in the distance I could see the ferris

wheel lit up bright and I heard the music from the fair, and I just knew. It made me scared but so happy. I bet you didn't know anybody could be as happy as I was.

There was a word that Benedict loved, his mother says during the trial, speaking as if her son were already dead. It was an old word, something he found in a dictionary, a word that had not been used for centuries. The detectives write this word down: merry-go-sorry. It means a story with good news and bad, she says slowly, frowning, remembering. Joy and sorrow mixed together, yes, that's what my son used to say. He was always finding out old-timey stuff. Merry-go-sorry. Like if somebody had a lot of trouble in their life, but was still alive to tell about it. Ill fortune, Benedict used to say, and then something good happens to you. Good and bad smacking you in the face all the time. He's always been sad. He has not had much good in his life, but he's not an evil person. Just drugs and drink and getting that girl pregnant and no, he never killed no animals except maybe a bullfrog. He's on medication for sadness. I have tried. I have really tried. He seemed the happiest when we was living out in Washington state, a few years back, with his real dad. He went to school regular then and liked the snow and the mountains. Benedict James is the name he give hisself. When he was born, I named him Woodrow. His real daddy's last name is Gilson. He took his stepdad's name when he was twelve and searched through phone books looking for a first name. Benedict was the one he chose, so that's what he goes by and that's what them that loves him, calls him.

Luminol: what a beautiful word. It makes blood glow in the dark, the egg-shaking science teacher tells the class. Policemen use it to find where people were killed. They used it last year when your friends Troy, David, and Matthew were murdered. Luminol has to be used at night. The police are our friends. They went into the woods at night and sprayed the Luminol on the ground around the ditch where the boys were found, and it lit up like sunset. Phosphorescence: here let me write it on the board, but I've never been any good at spelling. Y'all are better spellers than I am. Everything

words—they're nearly what she expected—but by her tone, curiosity mixed with scorn and sadness.

Your daddy thinks that Indian-looking guy did it, the one came stumbling into Chicken Hooray, but I think the police got the right ones. Those three jerks in jail did it. The jury decided it and the judge just knew. If your Romeo got out tomorrow, he wouldn't seem so hot. Here's your bras and jeans I washed for you. Oh honey, Robert Abt can't take you to the prom. Find somebody who can.

I'm not going to any prom, Crystal says, glorying in the sacrifice of it all—turning down boys who would ask her. If she chose to, she could spend all afternoon with her hair in curlers, putting on her makeup, pulling on a tight dress with rhinestones on the straps, but she won't. She will take the bus to Cummins prison on that fine spring day and get home late, smelling the apple blossoms in the air and hearing the distant music over at a rented dance hall. Already there is talk among the juniors and seniors of holding the prom at the Holiday Inn, a place of such sophistication that Crystal's heart nearly bursts with longing to go there, but no, she tells herself, I will not.

Suit yourself, honey, her mother says. Proms is too expensive these days anyhow. Kids think they have to rent limos, for God's sake. Your daddy and I had one of them old-fashioned proms with crepe paper streamers strung up in the gym, and it was just as good that way.

Did y'all drink back then? Did you go all the way? Crystal sits up straight on her bed. She has never dared to ask her mother these things.

Of course we did. We still do, and I bet that shocks you more. Her mother laughs and leaves the room.

Crystal sits on her bed, the writing paper scattered across her lap, remembering something: the way her grandmother used to address her mother, Crystal's mother. She used to call her Daughter. Crystal's gaze falls on Robert's picture and it's her grandmother's voice she hears, saying, Daughter, I won't see you as a murderer's bride.

She picks up her pen again and writes to him. The memory of her dead grandmother has awakened something in her, a whole chain of memories. She writes them down for Robert: do you re-

leaves a trail. Do you pray for your friends who died? Let's all bow our heads right now.

Crystal, in love with Robert Abt and writing him every night now in the privacy of her own room, a room bedecked with angel sun-catchers, bowls of potpourri, and posters of handsome TV stars bare-chested in leather jackets, knows that sooner or later her mother will find out about the correspondence. Propped up on pillows on her pretty bed, she expects her mother to barge in, knock the clipboard and the pink-mist stationery off the bed, and seize her by the ear, declaring, Don't you *fool* with that killer, you hear me?

Yet weeks pass, and Crystal mails the letters each morning in secret at the mailbox near her high school. Growing bolder, she displays a picture of Robert Abt that she clipped from a yearbook. She sticks the picture in the frame of her mirror so she can look at his defiant face while she brushes her thin blonde hair. In dim light, his eyes follow her movements as she tosses her head, brushing her hair as if it's tresses, a word she doesn't know how she knows.

One night her mother enters the room with a basket of fresh clothes, spots the picture, and says, Who is this? Crystal puts down her pen and says, It's who I love.

Setting the laundry basket at the foot of Crystal's bed, her mother goes to the mirror, plucks the picture from the frame, and holds it up to the light. He's one of them three, she says, but with more caution than censure. Crystal waits for outrage, but her mother turns the picture this way and that, then chuckles. He could be in the church choir. Look at that stripe tie and that pressed shirt, she says.

I write to him every day, Crystal says, and sometimes I go visit him. I'm almost grown. Don't try to stop me.

How can anybody stop their kid from growing up? her mother says, laying the picture gently on Crystal's dresser. It's just 'cause he's in jail, and will be until he dies, that he seems like anything at all to you. You write to him all you want, but don't expect me to sew you any white gown for a jailbird wedding, if it gets that far. I bet he's got *sacks* of letters from girls.

Are you mad, Mama? Crystal asks, confused not by her mother's

Gulf. He loved the river, with its floods and the slow barges moving their cargoes of coal and timber from St. Paul to New Orleans. He loved the long flat Arkansas roads with cotton fields on either side, and mud puddles, and the painted wooden fake windows, nailed to the sides of small white churches, that serve as stained-glass "windows" for Arkansas congregations that don't have any money.

His own church was his room, where he wrote in his journal and burned his candles and loved and tormented his girlfriend, Victorine, on a bare mattress. The rest is all legend, what they say he did with animals and with those little boys. Isn't it.

Another baby is growing inside Victorine's belly, this time a black man's child. She took a black man for a lover as easily as she might help herself to a slice of pie. Of all her lovers, and even at sixteen and a half she already has trouble keeping count of them, this man is the one she loves the most, the one who makes her forget about Benedict (whom she had loved despite—because of?—the neck-biting, the two-timing).

This man is a groundskeeper for an old cemetery in Memphis. She met him at a quick-mart where he was buying gas for his truck. He looked at her as she passed by him, a hungry look that held in it a dream, not just of sex but of something lasting. She waited in the store, resting the baby, Malachi Destiny, half on her hip, half on the frozen foods case. She had come to buy herself a Fudgsicle, but now in her mind there was only waiting. The man came in the store and paid for the gasoline and then came straight to her with his deep eyes, hungry and waiting, too.

He said, I noticed you came here on foot. Would you like a ride, you and the little baby.

Victorine opened the ice cream case, which steamed frozenly up into her face. She reached in and plucked out a cup of strawberry ice cream. The man stood beside her, all quietness, older she saw when she looked at him again, older than she'd thought at first, yet with energy and newness.

I'm tired, she told him. I'm tired of everything. I live in a trailer with my mother, and I have this little boy. We don't have a car.

member, she asks him, as if they are seventy-five instead of fifteen and sixteen. Do you remember the way our elementary school used to play chimes before the principal spoke over the intercom. We'd hear a xylophone and then Mr. Butsavage would speak. Isn't that a funny name. I never heard a funnier one.

Crystal writes many other memories in her letter, but that's the only one that Robert Abt reads. He remembers Mr. Butsavage too, and he hurls the letter to the floor of his cell with an oath. He still remembers a beating the guy gave him, the old wooden-paddle kind. But he can't remember why.

There was a boy in an Arkansas town who wore a long black coat even in summertime, who walked along the levee speaking in verse, waving his hands with their long fingernails at the sky, squinting at the sun. The prettiest thing he'd ever seen, he told his friends, was a little girl with long blonde hair down at Gulf Breeze, Florida. He'd been there long ago. Her hair was so yellow and the sea so green. The sky was green too, because it was about to rain, and Benedict liked rain.

He used to gesture across the river at Memphis and mention a famous movie star who lived there. He'd tell his friends, I know friends of hers. They say she's the person they used to go to back in high school when they wanted somebody beat up. She'd get somebody to do it, or she'd beat 'em up herself. Benedict would make his group of followers pause and stare across the river, through the haze that hung always above it, at a pale smudge of townhouses on the cliffs: see that white house on the bluffs? That's hers.

How do you know these people, these friends of hers, a doubter asked. I think you make stuff up.

Maybe I do, Benedict said, and maybe people tell me stuff. Secrets. I like to think about that movie star beating people up in high school. I'd like to take her on.

She's old, man, somebody said.

But she's pretty, said Benedict. One time I was with a lady who was fifty years old, and she was damn sexy. You got no idea, he said to his friends.

So he loved the memory of the little blonde girl by the green

What's your name, he asked her, and she told him.

I'm Zebulon, he said. He took the cup of ice cream from her hand and bought it for her, then held the door as she went outside into the beautiful day (it was February by then, and warm the way the Delta can be in late winter, with the trees already wreathed in palest green). The trials had been over for a few weeks, and the baby was fussy, wearing Victorine out in the trailer all day. Benedict, when she visited him in jail, did not care about anything, he said. Zebulon held the door of his truck open and Victorine climbed into the passenger side. The truck was neat and clean and smelled like the man. She thought about how Benedict would have made her buy the ice cream herself and buy some for him, too. When Zebulon got behind the steering wheel and started the truck, she turned to him and said, Make me laugh. I haven't laughed in a long time.

He held the baby while she ate her ice cream.

That very afternoon he took her to Elmwood, the cemetery where he worked. She had not known there were whole cities of the dead, with lanes marked like city streets and communities of sorts laid out: for the yellow fever victims, for the Memphis Jews and Memphis Chinese, for the Woodmen of the World (some old-fashioned self-help group, Zebulon said), and row after row of Confederate soldiers. Huge trees stretched out their massed limbs above the graves, so that the whole place was a garden, and the ground was hilly like the old Indian mounds that Victorine used to play on as a child. Eighty acres, but it feels like a thousand, said Zebulon, proud. He said: One evening I saw four men all dressed in white, at the tomb of that there Napoleon Hill (with a jerk of his chin he indicated a cotton factor's grave), and they were disappearing.

What do you mean? asked Victorine.

Fading away. And I saw a little child one time, sitting on that stone there, the one with an upside-down torch, meaning a life untimely ended, extinguished you might say.

I want to be buried here, Victorine said. Is there room?

Yes, but it's high, said Zebulon. He showed her a new grave and said, Just the marble itself cost a hundred thousand dollars.

The air grew darker and colder as they wandered, the baby asleep

in Victorine's arms. She could hear the highway distantly on one side of the cemetery and a slow train moving behind the trees, but all around were just the silent graves.

Here's a man who went drinking on Front Street a hundred years ago and was never seen again, said Zebulon. Jasper Smith his name was. See the stone bale of cotton beside him. And here's two stone feet underneath a stone tree trunk—that's a lumberjack killed in Arkansas when a tree fell on him. His ma even had his feet measured so the stone feet could be made the right size.

But the stone that Victorine fell in love with was an angel, pointing to heaven with her fingers worn off by rain and time. She had a diadem in her hair, a diadem topped by a star. Victorine fell to her knees on the damp winter earth and wept. Zebulon knelt beside her and said, I have a wife and two daughters. I have always kept my marriage vows, but now I want to spend time with you.

That much felt familiar: Benedict had not been true to her either; she had not been his only girl. Victorine raised her eyes to the angel. Who is buried here, she said.

A slave dealer killed in a duel, he said. Here now, he said, don't wipe your eyes with that handfulla grass. Take my handkerchief.

The handkerchief was fresh and white, pressed as for church. He didn't touch her that day. That came later, and when it did, so lovely, even in her passion she remembered the angel, the clean handkerchief, the strawberry taste of ice cream on her tongue.

Where are they buried, the three little boys? None in the old cemetery in Memphis where Victorine's new lover mows the grass and listens to the silence and to the trains and the cars passing fast on the highway behind a screen of trees. One is buried in Alabama, where his mother's people are: that is Troy, whose mother customed herself to the sea. The cemetery is new, with the stones flat to the ground. Little David lies in Chicago, because his grandparents on his father's side pitched a fit lest he be laid to rest in the town where he was killed. Only Matthew was buried in Arkansas, Matthew who had he lived would have killed someone, too, and maybe many. His mother, who with her twins pulls weeds from his stone, wonders at how the weeds got a foothold so fast in the soil. She still hears the

church bells ringing all over town as they did on the day of his funeral. Fine, she thinks, trying to end it. This is what was meant for him. I told him not to go into the woods. I told him.

You can drive the back roads of Arkansas for a hundred years, past Indian mounds, past swamps where turtles cling to logs and slip underwater when your car rumbles by. You can pass through towns so small they have no sidewalks, where the autumn leaves scuttle through unpaved streets; inside the old shotgun houses that used to be sharecroppers' cabins, people love and fight and worry about money and children. Getting on toward dusk, you pass a barred owl perched on a sign, a black-striped sign that indicates a small bridge over a creek. The owl's broad face swivels around to follow your car, its gaze so fierce you back up to look at it again: it doesn't scare. It will hunt into twilight, hunt the mice in the grass and the flocks of blackbirds that whirl like a spray of pepper above fields of cotton and beans.

All over the Mid-South, an ice storm strikes in the winter after the trials, a storm so brilliant and terrible that power is out for weeks in parts of Arkansas, western Tennessee, and northern Mississippi. What's beautiful happens by accident: at the Memphis Fairgrounds, used as a gathering site for toppled trees and piles of brush, tons of debris ignite spontaneously into a colossal, magnificent fire, visible even across the river in West Memphis, where people jump up from their supper tables to stare, glorying and fearing, for it puts them in mind of Judgment Day.

Merry-go-sorry: a word that Benedict wrote in his journal and taught to his mother, a word detectives pointed out as Satanic, though Benedict had merely looked up the phrase in the Oxford English Dictionary.

It begins with three boys alive, then dead, it begins when they were conceived, when the man or men who bound them and knifed them were boys themselves. It never ends, not with Crystal setting down her pen and dreaming of Robert Abt in jail, or with Victorine nursing her two babies, both biggity—that Arkansas word that just means big—a pale biggity son and a dark daughter ("Amaziah," she named the girl, untroubled by the fact that Amaziah in the Book of

Chronicles was a king who set up false gods and was ruined; she just loves the name)—Victorine with the two babies at her breasts, happy enough with her children, or with Farmer McKenzie gazing up into the high ceiling of his barn where a hayfork hangs suspended, its spiked jaws chilling him: one frayed spot in the rope and the rusty fork could fall. He wants to believe some phantom killed those kids, not three young men possessed by Satan, as so many of his neighbors say, or three young men not possessed.

From his farm it's not far to the woods where Ten Mile Bayou spills its dirty water through the forest and out into the fields. Sowing and reaping, he adds up what he knows and finds it wanting.