

WE SHALL
NOT ALL
SLEEP

TONY WOODLIEF

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a novel

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B O O K S

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A Novel

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For Mama

I WILL TELL YOU the story of my father, and I will begin with the day we killed the boy. I never received my father's visions, nor his savagery, nor even his ability to find good water in the earth. For a time I saw shades of what he saw, and this is enough to tell you the truth of his life. Or perhaps just as much truth as a man was meant to bear. In memory my father is hell-kettle diver, shore-wandering oracle, tunnel wraith. All the earth is filled with his terrible glory. But my father is also deliverance in the blood-clouded depths, and he is laughter, and he is salvation borne through smoke and ash. The memory of my father is a shadow, and a boy chasing the shadow, and the shadow is his name.

On the day we killed the boy, in the summer of 1972, Daddy told Mama he intended to drill a well. "Sweetwater," he promised her that morning in our kitchen. "Cold as winter."

Mama nodded without looking up from dishwashing. She was likely thinking of a dozen tasks more important than a hand-pumped well on a back acre we didn't even use. Sometimes Daddy knew Mama as if she were his own flesh. Other times he acted like he didn't know the first thing about her. I reckon both can be true.

"I bet not as sweet as an RC," I said. I was hell-bent on riding to town with Daddy when he went to get his drill bits sharpened.

Mama shook her head. Whatever Daddy's ability to read her thoughts, my mother knew exactly what *I* was thinking at all times. "Absolutely not," she said. She gave the dish she was washing an extra-furious scrub. "Those old men at the Esso talk like sailors."

"Sugar, how much time have you spent with those old boys? Or sailors, for that matter?" Daddy winked at me.

"I've bought gas there my whole life, and my whole life there's been old men perched on stools in there like a pack of wrinkled possums, grinning sideways at each other."

Daddy sauntered over to Mama like a man looking for trouble. "Looks and grins ain't filthy talk, baby-cakes."

Mama whipped her head around, chestnut hair whirling like a swing carousel. "Don't you take on like a lawyer with me, Ray

Waterson! I know how men talk!” With her eyes she cut him stem to stern. “And I know what they talk about.” She turned back to the sink. “My son will not set foot in there.”

“I’ve never heard anything filthy in the Esso,” I said. I realized my blunder when Mama dropped a handful of silverware into soapy water and turned to fix me with her stare. “Boy, why don’t you tell me how you came by your extensive knowledge of what constitutes filth?”

I knew she was thinking of my best friend, Calvin Pruitt. She believed he was a slick talker, which was true, though he came by it honestly, what with his father one of the biggest merchants in town. Whenever I acquired a soul-eroding habit—like rolling my eyes, or faking stomach problems that required me to stay in the bathroom for the entirety of Reverend Hardison’s sermon—Mama assumed I’d picked it up from Calvin. If she was thinking Calvin was instrumental in my acquisition of cuss words, she was absolutely right.

“Come on now. Let’s hear it.”

“Shit, sugar,” Daddy said. “Anybody who watches the news with your mama is liable to get his ears melted. She’s even taught *me* some words.”

If Mama had been washing steak knives, she might have skewered him right there. Instead she lit into him with a stream of abuse that was no less frightful for being profanity-free. Her missiles in this fusillade were his heathen Indian lineage, his no-good slut of a mother, and his ongoing contribution to the delinquency of my grandmother, most recently in the form of buying her a new spittoon. Mama said things to Daddy that no man would ever dare utter.

“Now sugar,” he said, a grin on his face.

“Don’t you sweet-talk me!” Mama’s emerald eyes had narrowed to slits. Her people came from Scotland; she said it’s why her eyes were so green, her temper so hot. Daddy liked to say her eyes are what kept him from making good grades in high school. He’d say her eyes reminded him of four-leaf clovers, and horse pastures, and other things. Mama would slap his chest when he said *other things*. Right now her hands were serving as punctuation for her sharp sentences. Tiny soap suds flecked Daddy’s beard.

With a speed that seemed unnatural for a man so big, Daddy darted under her gesticulating arms, seized her waist, and put his teeth to her throat like a wild beast. Mama yelped and beat his shoulders. “Ray! When are you going to trim this scraggly beard? It feels like I’m being molested by a hillbilly!”

“You are, baby,” he murmured into her throat.

Mama shrieked and slapped his back as he burrowed into her neck and lifted her onto the counter. She tugged the hem of her dress toward her knees and with her other hand yanked his thick black hair. Daddy’s laugh became a howl. He gripped her waist, put his lips to her ear, and whispered something that evoked outrage and laughter. I felt embraced between them, even though I sat at the kitchen table, my toes just touching the linoleum. I was nine years old.

Mama glanced my way, and her face became that of a mother again. She ordered Daddy to put her down. “Ray,” she said. “*Now.*”

Daddy kissed her neck with loud, wet noises. Mama yanked his ear like it was the starter cord on our lawnmower. He yelped and backed away. “*Goddamn* woman. You’re mean as a snake.”

“Don’t you blaspheme under this roof, you godforsaken heathen.” Mama said it so meanly I thought maybe she meant it, about Daddy being godforsaken.

Daddy looked at me and shook his head. “It’s the prettiest ones that hurt you the worst.”

Mama narrowed her eyes and shook her head at his bullshit. I wondered if she was literally thinking *bullshit*, though she would never say it. She slid off the counter, adjusted her waistline, and walked over to where Daddy stood massaging his ear. She stood on tiptoe, kissed him hard on the lips, then slapped his chest with such force that tiny soap suds flew across the kitchen and lodged in the peach fuzz of my forearms. She turned back to her dishes. “I suppose the boy can go with you.” She said it as if she’d tried her best to keep us from perdition, and was now resigned to letting us ruin our lives.

The matter of my RC Cola wasn’t settled, but I knew Daddy would make a more sympathetic court of appeal, so I waited until we were bouncing along our dirt driveway in his Jeep. I sat back, interlaced my fingers behind my head, and let out a satisfied sigh. It was a sound intended to convey that, so far as I was concerned, we were all on the same page. “That RC sure is going to go down good in this heat,” I said.

Daddy adjusted his rear-view mirror, which I’d tilted while pretending to drive.

“Yessir, a cold drink is what you need on a day like this.”

Daddy grunted as he steered onto the blacktop. We accelerated, lurching as he shifted gears. I could feel the tires’ vibration in my teeth.

“I brought a quarter.”

“We’ll see, boy.”

"You talked her into it. That kiss meant *Yes*." The truth is I wasn't sure what Mama's kiss had meant, but it sure hadn't looked like *No*.

"Daniel."

I stilled myself and took in the smell of burning oil and gasoline. Daddy's musty Army duffel slouched between my knees. I knew it held two Delco batteries and a scattering of dirt-caked rotary bits, but I pretended it still contained the killing tools I imagined he'd once carried in it: long magazines packed with bullets, knurled hand grenades, rope for scaling cliffs.

Daddy was no longer a soldier, he was a water witcher. He did other kinds of work, but he was known for witching. Farmers from all over North Carolina called him. People imagine a witcher finds water, but in truth it was always the water that summoned Daddy. Maybe this was why he meant to plumb a well on our own land—because it was calling to him. All manner of hidden things called to my father. I hadn't yet come to understand that, but this day was probably the beginning of my understanding. Years later Daddy would tell me that the dead themselves are like a river beneath the soil.

I turned my gaze to his arms, which were brown and hard, like knotted cords. They stretched the sleeves of his T-shirt. Sometimes, when Daddy sat with his newspaper or his coffee, I would lean against him, rest my head on his shoulder, and take his arm in my hands. I would move it up and down, left and right, like I was operating a crane. I wondered if that was what it was like to be a man. To sit up in the cab behind your eyes and maneuver the big arms and legs you'd waited on so very long to arrive.

His right forearm bore a thin scar, white as a fish's underbelly, extending from elbow to wrist-bone. Whenever I held his arm in my hands, I ran my fingers along that pale wound and shivered at its straightness. If I asked he would say: *Aw, now*; or, *It's nothing*. Sometimes he was silent, his face that of a man who was trying to remember himself.

I reached to where his hand gripped the gearstick and traced his scar with my fingertip. He let go of the gearstick and brushed my hair from my eyes. The Jeep roared in the afternoon sun, its tires thrumming like a jet engine. It seemed to carry us forward of its own volition.

I considered the thick, red skin of Daddy's neck, his patchy beard and long black hair. He had the longest hair of any man in church. Nobody whispered about it like they did about Eddie Gilchrist's big

brother, home from Chapel Hill for the summer, whose stringy yellow hair was shorter than Daddy's. I knew they treated Daddy differently because of the war.

Sometimes I heard people utter the name of that country that was unmentionable in our house. I wondered what they would say if they saw the medals he kept in black boxes, lined up like little coffins, at the bottom of his dresser drawer. There were two bronze stars, a silver star, and three thick hearts of purple and gold, bearing an image of George Washington. On the back of each heart was a mysterious descriptor in thin, raised type: *For Military Merit*. I wished I could ask him what that meant, but I didn't dare admit I'd gone through his belongings.

I reckoned Daddy's right to long hair, and that Bowie recon knife on his belt, and the wide perimeter most people afforded him, all derived from *Military Merit*. I imagined his long hair gave him power, like Samson. I wanted to let my hair grow like his, but Mama kept it clipped short. One day I was going to leave home, grow my hair long, and gather my own scars. I was going to prove that I had *Military Merit* too.

As we hurtled toward the outskirts of Hickory Shore, a thick rat snake slithered onto the road like it intended to bar us from town. Daddy accelerated, and the snake drew back its upper body and struck as we reached it. There was a clang on our bumper and a tumbling sound beneath. I twisted in my seat to see the snake whip along the asphalt in our wake. It came to a stop and lay unmoving but for a twitching tail.

I have driven thousands of rural miles, and I have never since that day seen a snake attack a car. I got the impression it didn't surprise Daddy at all. That he was used to creation behaving unnaturally in his presence. Or perhaps revealing the fullness of its nature.

We slowed as we reached town, rolling past brick-front stores, the post office, my school beginning to stir in preparation for a new year. I imagined we were in a parade, Daddy and me. I envisioned the people of Hickory Shore lining the sidewalks and fenced yards, cheering for Daddy with his cabled arms and long, wind-tumbled warrior's hair, and me beside him, my arms thin and smooth, but destined to one day be like his. As we rolled past the shops on Main Street, I imagined the crowd waving flags, beckoning us onward to glories yet unrevealed.

When that bundle of green and blue exploded from behind a car parked along the curb, my brain tried at first to incorporate it into my

parade fantasy. It was a wayward balloon, maybe, or confetti shot from a cannon.

Daddy stomped the brake pedal so hard I thought his boot would punch through the floorboard. I lurched forward, smacked my face against his extended arm, felt the smooth hard line of his scar against my mouth. Our tires made a scrubbing noise on the pavement and there was a *thump* that sounded like a potato sack tumbling from a cellar shelf.

I would come to think of that boy as a bullet fired long after Daddy thought the war was over. I suppose to the boy's mother, who stood in the Red and White pondering a roast for dinner, or maybe examining a honeydew for soft spots, and who heard that sound and probably thought, for just a second, that a car had hit another car, until realizing it wasn't the bright crunch of metal striking metal, but the sound one hears when an animal gets hit, and who remembered, with a lightning bolt through her chest, that she'd just told her seven year-old son: *Yes, you can go across the street and see about getting some construction paper*—well, to that poor woman, it was Daddy who was the bullet.

Daddy yanked up the parking brake and jumped out of the Jeep. When he saw what lay before our bumper, the muscles in his face seemed to melt. He dropped to his knees. I pushed my shoulder into the door and scrambled out to see Daddy holding a brown-headed boy. Half the boy's face seemed asleep, the other half was swollen and open-eyed, leering at me from my father's arms.

"Daniel," Daddy said. "Get back inside."

People spilled into the street. Daddy shouted for somebody to call an ambulance. "Daniel," he said, "please."

The boy's mother squeezed through the crowd and let out the beginning of a cry that disappeared back down her throat. She knelt beside Daddy. Prayer tumbled from her mouth. Daddy shouted *Somebody call an ambulance for Christ's sake*. He pleaded with me to get back in the Jeep. I just stood there, watching him and that poor whimpering mother cradle her child between them as if together they'd made him, all he was and ever would be, she giving him life and my father taking it and this dead boy peering into the space between them with just one eye, because to consider the short span of his life unflinching is too much for a boy to bear. I wondered if he could feel Daddy cradling him through his paling skin. I wondered if death takes all of you instantly, or by degrees.

A hand settled on my shoulder. Clay Tompkins, our assistant pastor, stood holding a brown grocery sack. He crouched to get his eyes level with my own. Golden hair framed his face, which was smooth and youthful, even to a boy who thought everyone over the age of 20 was old. "Come along, child," he said. He walked me to the sidewalk, sat me down on the curb, and handed me his grocery bag. He went to kneel beside Daddy and the dead boy and the boy's mother.

The boy's mother screamed. She hurled her scream upward past silent faces and downturned eyes. In the distance there was a siren. The cloying scent of peaches wafted up from Clay's grocery bag. I wondered why he'd bought so many. Did he have a mother who was going to bake him a pie? A woman was screaming in the street for Jesus, and the sirens were drawing close, and I wanted my mama.

Clay returned, eyes downcast. "C'mon, Daniel. Let's get you home."

"I threw up."

"It's okay, bud."

"I didn't get it on your peaches."

He stepped behind me, gripped me under the arms, and helped me stand.

"I want my Daddy." I was light as smoke. I was going to drift upward into the cloudless sky with that mother's screams.

From the street came the sound of a slap. A man said, "Why in hell d'you do that?" Another answered that he was trying to calm her down. There was scuffling, then a man was shoved onto the sidewalk a few feet away from us. He scrambled to keep from falling, straightened himself, looked over his shoulder, and walked quickly away. The boy's mother was weeping now, calling for Jesus from the depths of her throat. *Jesus, Jesus, Lord Jesus help my baby.*

I suppose you could say the rest of this story began with what happened next, though maybe you could say it began with what my father did in Vietnam, or with what happened to him as a boy, or with some deeper mystery rooted in the history of his people. Our people.

What happened next is that the dead boy stood up. His mother still crouched over the emptiness where he had lain, mourning the nothing in her lap. Daddy still shook his downcast head. But now that dead boy stood over them, as if he were just another member of the witnessing crowd. Only instead of looking at them like everyone else, he turned to regard me with his one good eye. You can't imagine, unless you've seen it for yourself, how a single eye can contain so much

sorrow. He looked at me as if he expected me to say something. To justify myself. I felt my heart dissolve in my chest.

“Are you okay, bud?” Clay squeezed my arm. “Can you walk?”

I looked up at Clay, then back into the street. The boy was a corpse again, lying between his mother and my father.

“Come on, bud. This is no place to be.”

“Daddy.”

“He’ll be along later.”

“Is he all right?”

Clay thought I was asking about the boy. “No, child. He isn’t.”

Mama stood on the bottom porch step with arms wrapped around herself. Clay walked me from his VW slowly, as if girding himself to tell her what happened, as if she hadn’t already heard the news, as if half the town hadn’t by now called the other half. Mama’s eyes brimmed with tears. She pulled me to her chest.

“Did he see it?”

“Yes ma’am, I’m afraid so.”

“Lord have mercy.”

“It . . . it wasn’t as bad to look at as you might think.”

“Still.” A quake ran through her body and into mine.

Our dog Bailey—*Beagle Bailey*, Daddy called him—pawed at my pants leg.

“Let’s pray.” Clay sounded mildly surprised when he said this, like he’d just remembered his profession. He cupped Mama’s shoulder and the back of my head with his hands. He prayed for that dead boy and his family, for Daddy, for me. In the years to come, I would wonder if Clay prayed it wrong, like when Aaron’s sons offered up strange fire to God. I would wonder if his prayer, instead of rising to heaven, slipped through a crack in the earth and tumbled down into hell. If it was demons, rather than God, who answered, slithering upward to afflict that dead boy’s earth-creeping spirit and my unraveling father and me.

Daddy told me once: “History’s not written until the dead have their say.” We wrote some history in the coming years, the dead and me. Understanding them was not the power I wanted, but it was the one I received.

And that Army duffel in his Jeep, the one I imagined once carried my father’s weapons of war? Ten years later I would shoulder my own and realize that a soldier’s duffel holds mostly food, clean socks, and letters from his mama. But between the day we killed that boy and the

day my own death summoned my father's wraith, I would come to understand that the man everyone else knew as Ray Waterson had no need of weapons. My father was the killing thing.



Interview with Chief William ("Little Will")
Holland Thomas of the Qualla Cherokee. Fa-
cility for the Mentally Disabled and Insane,
Butner, N.C.
June 14, 1887.

Q: Did the Qualla believe their burial grounds were sacred?

A: You have so many questions about the dead. How can I help you see? To us, every living being is holy. Do you understand? This means every place a person dies becomes holy. See? Where they fall is holy ground. And by us, I mean the Cherokee, and many human beings besides. The people of my heart, is what I mean, not the people to whom I was born -- though my white mother and father loved God as much as any Cherokee.

Q: What did it mean, that the places where they fell became holy?

A: Why, it meant we buried them where they died. My friend Little Moon fell taking a deer, just as his father before him. On the very same hillside, can you believe that? On the very same hill. So we buried him there, beside the bones of his father. And we believe Little Moon and his father had many great hunts after. Fools Cree -- the great warrior about whom I have already spoken to you -- he collapsed while speaking his peace in the meeting house in Paint Town. So we pulled up the boards and buried him. And how many fell at Baptist Gap, and at Cedar Creek, fighting the Yankees? So many. So many.

Q: You didn't bury your dead in graveyards?

A: (Laughs.) Goodness, no. What truck do the dead have with one another? Do they join a different tribe in death? Do they leave their families, their mothers and fathers, their children, after they have passed over? No. Of course not. They are still bound to their people. And so we bury them where they fall. And sometimes . . . because they are so close, they forget that they are dead.

Q: What do you mean, "they forget"?

A: (A long pause.) They rise. They rise and move among us.

Q: You're saying the dead come back?

A: (Laughs, then begins to weep.) Yes. Yes. Even a white man knows, in his inner heart, that the dead are not nearly so gone as he might wish.



The morning of the funeral, Mama dragged me into the upstairs bathroom and took a washcloth to my neck, my mouth, the backs of my ears. She peered into my face as she scrubbed, like she'd lost something behind my eyes. Daddy stood behind us knotting his worn tie. He'd trimmed his beard and slicked back his hair. Lines spread from his eyes' corners like runnels gouging a riverbank. He noticed me watching him in the mirror and left the bathroom.

Mama knotted my tie, though I knew how. "Your breakfast is on the table," she said. In the kitchen, a bowl of scrambled eggs waited on the table across from Daddy, who sat still as stone, eyes on his mug of coffee. He'd scarcely looked at me since killing the boy. I slid onto my chair. I felt like I had on that curb, seeing the dead boy rise. Like I occupied a body that wasn't mine. My church shoes thumped against the table legs, causing the surface of Daddy's coffee to tremble. He stared at his untouched cup and winced at the clatter of Mama's heels. She entered the kitchen, sighed at my uneaten breakfast, and carried my bowl to the sink. "Ray," she said, "we should get going."

Daddy gripped his cup, his gaze on the tabletop.

"Ray." Mama turned from the sink. Her voice lowered. "Ray?"
"We're not going."