

The Legacy

1

In less than forty-eight hours after Edmund Glass's death, a box containing his ashes was shipped up north to his sister. Thus his mortal remains came to rest far from this enclave of the Deep South where he had resided for two years. With his departure, a chapter in our town's history was closed.

The last of us to see him alive was Spencer Barnes, when he was called upon to prepare a will. Edmund had become a pariah in town by then, but Spencer made the trip to his home because, as he admonished, he would deny no man legal counsel. The truth was that he already felt involved in Edmund's transgression, for it was he who had drawn up the contract that had set everything into motion. And there was simple curiosity: Spencer wanted to see the infant.

Driving to the house, Spencer caught sight of a figure silhouetted on the horizon, struggling to raise something upright — a pole, it seemed. The figure's stance, with both arms extended straight over the head, reminded Spencer of the photograph of the flag raising on Iwo Jima, except that this object was twice the height of the lone person who leaned into it.

By the time Spencer pulled up to the entrance of the Porter estate, a round metal post was standing proudly erect, its base embedded in a hole filled with thickening cement. Earl Freeman was going around the post, using a small sledge hammer to tap wooden support stakes into place. He frequently interrupted this task to pick up a three foot level which he used to check the verticality. Another post lay nearby, next to a post hole digger and other tools. Off to the side were the remains of the old gate, a tangle of rotting wood and wire and vines.

Spencer stopped his car, rolled down the window and leaned out. "Hot work, Earl."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Barnes," said Earl, not able to pause in his securing of the post, but nodding and grinning in acknowledgment of the greeting. He was breathing hard, and his brown T-shirt was plastered to his sweating back, emphasizing its broad, muscled expanse.

Earl was a short, compactly built Negro in his forties, the color of dark chocolate, with the thin, blacker line of a mustache over his lip. Everything about him seemed compressed into a dense kernel. The contours of his round face had bulges and crevices which appeared to be as hard as his square, calloused hands.

"If you paint it gold, it'll be like entering heaven," said Spencer, grinning. "Like passing through the pearly gates."

Still bound to his task, Earl honored Mr. Barnes' witticism with a bray of laughter, bending over as he grasped the pole and even raising one foot to stamp the ground.

"That's a good one, Mr. Barnes. Sure enough. Pearly gates. That's a *real* good one."

Spencer drove on to the house, rearranging the features of his elderly face into a dignified expression.

Lela, Earl's wife, opened the door, filling the doorway with her bulk. Her features were soft and generous, as if to complement the world of comfortable domesticity that she presided over. For this role she wore an apron and a multicolored bandanna.

"Afternoon, Mr. Barnes," she said affably, and stood aside for him to enter. Edmund waited in the door of the dining room. He was growing a beard, as white as the hair he combed sideways over his balding head. The beard was in its early stages, when it could merely be the result of a failure to shave, though this possibility of dissolution was offset by the crispness of a

cream-colored shirt and blue linen pants. He had put considerable weight on his once lanky frame.

Edmund approached Spencer with his hand outstretched. Spencer, who had previously been to the house on social occasions, gripped the hand only briefly, and his “Good afternoon, Mr. Glass” was bluntly formal. Edmund’s tentative smile faded, and when they sat at the dining room table, where he had laid out papers on the dark mahogany surface, Edmund went over the facts of his life, both personal and financial, in a businesslike manner. With the same air of formality, he spoke of his demise from this world.

His body was to be cremated. His ashes were to be sent to his sister in Ohio.

All his money and property were to go to his son, Edmund William Glass II.

Spencer did not look up from a computer printout listing stocks and certificates of deposit.

As they neared the end of their business together, a baby squalled in another room.

“He’s awake,” said Edmund, looking up at the sound. He paused, then asked, a bit stiffly, as if fulfilling a ritual of politeness, “Would you like to see him?” Spencer nodded, and the two men pushed back their chairs.

They went into a dimly-lit nursery, the curtains drawn. Spencer peered into the crib, at the scrunched up face of the six-week-old child. He observed, grimly, that the boy was clearly mixed, not at this stage favoring one race over the other. Spencer straightened up without speaking a word.

Edmund continued to lean over his son, his long white finger caressing the tendrils of black hair that stuck to the boy’s forehead. The gesture recalled to Spencer his own feelings for his two infants, and he wondered at the unconditional love these helpless little beings can claim. That was true, even in this case; it even defied the blood crime of miscegenation. The town, in its pride and shame, could turn its back on Edmund Glass, but, standing beside him, Spencer had to feel sympathy for this fifty-three-year-old man, twice married and twice divorced, never before a father. This man who had bestowed his name, and all his considerable wealth, on this little mulatto bastard.

Then Spencer noticed Cecily, sitting in a chair by the wall, her dark presence blending into the shadows of the curtained room. The mother, all of twenty-two, completing the tableau.

Spencer remembered the contract that he had drawn up, a little over a year ago.

The Porter house had been built by Jason Porter ten years before the Civil War, and he died in it nearly ten years after that war. Since then the house had been empty. The shanty set off behind it, however, had never been unoccupied. It had originally been one of four slave cabins — the others had been torn down — and in it, as far back as the oldest old-timer in town could remember, a male Freeman and his wife and children had lived.

We saw this as an arrangement whereby the descendants of Jason Porter could have a caretaker living on the grounds of the house they had inherited. Every month, for years, passing into generations, a Freeman would come into town, first in a horse-drawn wagon and later in a

truck, to cash a check at the Citizens Bank. The surnames on the checks varied over time, for Jason had had only daughters, but we knew it was a Porter sending them.

More than that passed without a change. We lived our lives set off from the modern world, thankful that the interstate, with its new mall, was fifteen miles away.

Then came the day when Spencer got a long distance call at his office. A personal secretary on the line connected him with Elaine Tolliver who, judging from the sound of her voice, was elderly and imperious. She identified herself as the owner of the Porter house and stated her desire to put it on the market.

The request violated a tradition. Over time the house had taken on the dimensions of a monument. Those rooms, which none of us had set foot in, had been hallowed by a hundred years of emptiness.

Yet, as it turned out, a tradition was to be honored, though one inexplicable to us. Mrs. Tolliver closed her instructions by adding a stipulation.

“The buyer of the house must agree to allow the Freeman family to remain on the property, in their home. That must be written in the act of sale.”

Spencer thought of the sagging, unpainted shack, a throwback to antebellum times. Surely a potential buyer would balk at inheriting two blacks and a shanty. He wondered “Why?” but did not ask. Instead he told Mrs. Tolliver that, upon receipt of faxes verifying her ownership, he would handle everything. Later that afternoon he called a realtor in the nearest large town. It was decided that the net to be cast for a buyer should include New Orleans.

A month later Edmund Glass sat in Spencer’s office, his long legs stretched straight out and crossed at the ankles. He questioned the attorney as to how he might disentangle himself from the stipulation.

“You’ll be legally bound not to kick Earl and his wife off the property, or to tear down their home,” said Spencer. “On the other hand, the Freemans are not obligated to remain on the property. Earl has the right to sell out to you. After you buy the house, make Earl an offer. I doubt if he’ll drive a hard bargain. A little money is going to seem like a lot to him.”

For the act of sale Elaine Tolliver appeared in town, the only descendent of Jason Porter ever to do so. She was a tiny woman whose eyes, behind a black veil, were haughty and restless as a bird’s. She arrived and left in a limousine that waited for her at the curb.

So we had a new resident, though one separated by miles from his nearest neighbor. When Edmund came into town, to stop at the post office or to browse in Pennington’s Feed and Seed, he was treated with cordiality, tempered by a trace of reserve. We had a deep-seated suspicion of moneyed New Orleanians, especially one originally from up north, and some felt that Edmund found our booted, blue-jeaned world to be amusingly backward. We wouldn’t be condescended to.

Spencer was his staunchest proponent, and it was with relish that he announced, over coffee at Brewster’s Cafe, that he had accepted an invitation to dine at the Porter house. Part of his relish came from the fact that Spencer, a widower with few culinary skills, saw an opportunity to indulge his last remaining passion, that for food and drink.

He drove through the open gate — it was so entangled in vines and undergrowth that it could not be closed— and up the gravel drive. The house, which had long been in a state of

genteel neglect, had been restored. Ever since Earl had learned that the house was for sale, he had embarked, unasked, on a campaign of repairs. Whenever the real estate agent had arrived, she'd find him at some task — painting, patching window screens, replacing floor boards on the porch, reclaiming camellias and azaleas from brambles.

The house was no plantation to take tours of, but it had an air of elegance. It was graceful in its lines, generous in the materials that had made it. When Spencer entered, he found himself not in the ghost-haunted past but in high-ceilinged rooms where all was quiet, stately, cool. The plaster walls were painted in beige, the floors of heart pine gave off a muted glow. Fan blades circled languorously above, shifting the lace curtains at the windows. Edmund had had central air and heat installed, and the wiring updated, but, as he told Spencer while taking him on a tour, that was all that had been needed. The house had been ready to move into — even the old furniture had been preserved under sheets. Antiques, worth a fortune in a French Quarter shop, Edmund said, his hand tracing the inlay on a cherry wood desk top. As they looked into his bedroom, the late afternoon light slanting almost horizontally through the windows, Edmund told how, on his first night in the house, he had climbed between sheets that smelled of the breeze that had dried them.

When the two men were settled in cushioned chairs on the screened porch, sipping cocktails, Lela entered bearing a platter. On it were thin slices of pie. The pastry top was browned to a warm gold; the filling was a mixture of bacon, onions and sour cream, seasoned with chives and caraway seeds. Spencer's eyes widened at the first bite. Edmund nodded and smiled.

“And it's like this every night,” he said with quiet solemnity.

Later they moved to the dining table, where a bottle of Chardonnay cooled in a bucket of ice. Their main course was breaded catfish fillets under a thick cream sauce that contained whole oysters and mushrooms. On the side they were served a casserole of broccoli and rice.

The two men ate with sensual slowness. Each time Lela appeared in the doorway — bearing additional helpings or another bottle of wine — they would greet her with exclamations of praise. “Well, I'm glad you like it,” she'd say, a trace of a grumble in her voice. Her face glistened with sweat and her bandanna had slipped down on her forehead.

“Just this afternoon Earl caught these fish,” said Edmund. “In the pond on the property. You didn't know there was a pond? Oh, yes, in the woods. And there are other surprises in those woods. I saw Lela come out with a bucket of mushrooms.” Edmund speared an umbrella-shaped cap with his fork, held it up, observed it. “She knows about everything that grows, Lela does. She has a garden, where the vegetables absolutely flourish. This broccoli came from there. Everything we're eating is as fresh as today.”

After the best pecan pie Spencer had ever tasted, they retired to the porch, where they sipped from snifters of brandy. In the darkness Spencer surreptitiously unbuckled his belt. Along with the chirruping sound of crickets on the other side of the screen came the fragrance of night-blooming jasmine.

“I went down the path Lela came out of,” said Edmund. His voice had a disembodied quality, coming as it did from a shadowy form. “There are paths branching off all over those woods, and I spent hours exploring. I think I found where Lela picked the mushrooms. There was

a place where the path sloped down and the ground was soggy. Darkish place. I saw these ghostly white heads sticking up, growing around the roots of a huge oak tree. And then I made another discovery. Up ahead, where the land rises again, I see that it's bright, the sun is shining there. I come to a clearing and I see wooden markers. It's a cemetery, Spencer, a black cemetery, and every name carved on the markers is a Freeman. The oldest name I could find was Willis. Born in 1827 and died in 1881. Which means he lived in slave times. The first Freeman. And now there's Earl, over a hundred years later. Which is amazing, that the Freemans have stayed on here for all this time. And I've been wondering ever since: What's the story behind it?"

The question roused Spencer from the stupor of satiation. He shifted in his chair and selected his words carefully, answering with an evasive honesty: He didn't really know why the Freemans stayed; he supposed it was just a job that had been handed down from father to son.

He did not go on to tell the story of Jason Porter and Willis Freeman. That story was part of the town's history, but something private, not to be shared with an outsider.

Spencer knew the story more intimately than most. He was seventy-three years old, and sixty-five years ago he had heard it from the lips of James Freeman, Willis's son — as old then as Spencer was now. Spencer gazed into the darkness outside the screen. He could recall James' face — the milky yellow eyes, the smile creased into deep folds of leathery skin, the black cheeks sprouting gray whiskers. He could even remember the man's voice, rising and falling with expression, telling the story he had told all his life. Except for those moments, when he wove his spell, the people in town knew him to be a humble Negro.

3

Jason Porter came to town in the 1840s, arriving without a history but with enough cash to buy sixty cleared acres from Sam Pritchard. He and his wife and two daughters moved into the ramshackle Pritchard place. Jason was a slightly built man, but he carried himself with a military erectness that suggested an unyielding will. His face had the straight and regular features that we call handsome; his black hair was softly curling, though his mustache was thick and bristling. His eyes were blue; a haughty blue, some said. Even when he'd talk and laugh with the other men, he seemed to hold himself in reserve. His wife, though outwardly warm and gracious, avoided entering into the town's social life, so they existed apart from us.

But they did make an attractive family, for she was a beautiful woman, black-haired too. Every Sunday they would ride into town in their carriage, the little girls in white and the church bells tolling.

People observed Jason Porter from afar, evaluating everything he did. When he purchased a slave, Willis, his choice caused heads to shake. It didn't make good sense. With his funds apparently limited, he could have bought two strapping field hands for what he paid Ian Mulroody for that fifteen-year-old boy. Willis came dear because he was skilled. His father was a cabinetmaker, had a workshop set up behind the Mulroody place on Main Street, and Willis had learned to do everything from frame a house to finish carpentry. He'd never lifted a hoe in his life, yet Jason paid the high price Ian was asking and set Willis to work in the fields.

In the first years Jason worked alongside him. They set out together in the mornings, sweated under the same sun, and returned together at twilight. It was odd to think of that aloof and prideful man working like a field hand, but in a time we understood it to be a manifestation of Jason's unyielding will. He would do whatever it took to prosper. We saw that he knew farming, and after years of increasing profits he began to invest his money in more slaves and more acres, until in time he no longer dirtied his hands but rode out mornings on his chestnut stallion, ramrod straight in the saddle, to oversee the work done in fields that stretched white with cotton.

During these years Willis took a woman to live with him, in one of the cabins behind what was still known as the Pritchard house. She died giving birth to James — the James who would tell, over and over, the story of what happened to his father on a cold December day.

But before that day, the house was built. Willis's skills finally came to the forefront; he was the boss man of the project, directing field hands wielding hammers and saws, though he chose to do much of the work himself. The house grew slowly, almost evolving, studs and joists and roof framing sprouting up on the hill beside the old Pritchard place; its graceful lines contrasted grotesquely with what it was attached to. After five months Willis had completed the inside of the addition, and the Porters moved in. Next the Pritchard place was stripped to a skeleton of framing. It then grew into something larger, the whole emerging as one symmetrical entity. It was, suddenly, the Porter house.

Less than half a year after the house was completed rumors of discontent began to reach our ears. It seemed that Willis was unwilling to be relegated back to a field hand, just another slave among eleven others. To Willis, there was an old agreement that had not been fulfilled. We heard this slave talk with misgivings; discontent was contagious. Men who had shaken their heads disapprovingly nine years ago did so again.

Willis was seeing a woman at the McConnell plantation; they had had a child. One day Willis, hat in hand, approached George McConnell. He asked George to please buy him, to set him up as a cabinetmaker, as his father had been. To us it seemed a solution to the problem, but when George approached Jason Porter about it, offering a good price for Willis, Jason stiffened; his manner became coldly formal. As for selling Willis, he would not; and he would see to it that Willis would have no further opportunity to enter into private negotiations. Jason turned on the heel of his boot and walked off.

One day Willis ran. He was gone ten days; we suspected that he was in a swamp community that some free blacks had set up, deep on a jutting finger of the bayou. It was not a place you ventured into.

There was a man in this parish, Leon Burgess, who was in the business of catching runaways. He brought Willis back one overcast afternoon in December. Willis was on foot; his hands were tied behind him and there was a noose around his neck, the rope attached to the saddle horn of Leon Burgess's horse. They came to a halt at the back of the Porter house and Leon dismounted and untied the rope from his saddle. The slaves came out of their cabins and gathered in a silent semicircle. James was among them, watching his father.

"Daddy have a set look on his face, stubbornlike, like he close out every thought but one. It cold that day and Daddy have on this shirt tore down the front and no shoes and he standing by

a stack of firewood and kindling, kindling I chopped up that day. I have on my coveralls and I feel someone take hold of the strap over my shoulder. Then the back door of the big house open and Mister Porter he step out on the porch. His clothes look like he just got them on, the shirt out in some places. He standing there looking down. I see a hand reach out from inside and take his arm but he pull away and come down the steps.

“Mr. Leon say ‘Caught him going to see that woman of his.’ Mister Porter he just walk toward Daddy and Daddy say ‘Gonna run again’ and Mister Porter say ‘You won’t, damn you.’ Both voices sound the same, both set-like. And Daddy say ‘Gonna run again’ and Mister Porter he say to Mr. Leon ‘Tie him up’ and Mr. Leon he jerk Daddy to the post and wind the rope around him from his chest to his ankles so he can’t move none and I feel the hand on my coverall tighten up too.

“Daddy he laugh, kind of wild sounding, and say ‘Gonna run again. Nothing you can do to stop me.’ And then he say another word, like something bad in his mouth and he spit it out. ‘Massa’ he say and he laugh again. And Mister Porter he come up to Daddy and raise his arm, but like he holding hisself back he bring it down slow and put his arm in that white sleeve cross Daddy’s throat. It weren’t like he strangling him none, more like he holding him and we don’t hear the words they saying close up. And then it happen, suddenlike. Daddy, his head snap forward and his skull strike Mister Porter on the forehead. It make a sound like hitting a watermelon with a hoe. And Mister Porter he stagger back a way, his hands up to his head, then he sway and fall to his knees. When he look up we see blood all in his face, in his eyes, and then he set right out crawling. Crawling on his hands and knees toward Daddy. I jerk loose and start running over there with my eyes staying on Mister Porter moving over the ground and I see when his hand grab up the little hatchet lying where I dropped it. The hatchet I chopped up the kindling with, lying there in his path like it waiting for him. And I run by Mr. Leon but his hand shoot out and catch me by the arm and snatch me up short from where Mister Porter get to Daddy, not far away. I seen when Mister Porter bring that hatchet down on Daddy’s foot. He chop twice, three times. Daddy, he scream. I stand there looking. No hand holding me back no more. I stand and look at them toes, there in the dust. I swear they moving, wriggling like brown grubs. And being all wet with blood they getting covered with dust like you’d cover livers with flour for frying. And the blood just coming out that stump. Mister Porter he slumped over, like he done. I look up and see Daddy’s head hanging loose-like, and his mouth open and his eyes open a crack like he peeping down. And there be a spot of blood on his forehead. But from his foot that blood just keep coming. Nobody move till Mr. Leon say ‘Christ, he’ll be dead’ and he loosen the rope around Daddy and there be people catching Daddy when he slump down and they carry him off. Miss Lilly she take me by the arm but I stop to look back. Mister Porter he sitting in the dust by them toes he struck off, the hatchet by his side and his head hanging down dripping blood. When I walk away I look up to the porch at the Missus standing there and she back off inside and close the door. And in the window I see the faces of them two white girls staring out like ghosts.

“They make me stay with Miss Lilly that night but next morning I see Daddy twisting in bed, burning up with fever, his eyes not seeing me and him straining and not making any sense in what he saying. His foot got a compress on it and they keep changing it. That day the doctor come and he say it infected and could start to rotting and that it got to be cut off. I be standing in

the doorway and on the chair next to me is this case, and the doctor he go to it and open it up and I look inside and all these tools is fitted into their places on both sides the case, setting in some black cloth, and I see a saw, like a hacksaw. The doctor he turn to look at me with his big white face and I back off and then I run and run until I get so far I can't hear nothing. I don't get back til near dark. First thing I smell something, like something been burnt, like when they scald a hog. It all quiet and nobody about, only Ben sitting on his doorstep, and I don't ask him nothing but sit beside him and we look at the ground and then after a time he start to talking. Telling me that once Daddy's foot be off the doctor he took this thing like an iron that been heated red hot and what he done was press it on that stump to seal it. But I never heard it. I was too far away.

"Daddy sick a long time and when he came out of it he quiet-like. Like he tired out. He sit on the porch making hisself a peg to fit on that stump of his."

James, in finishing his story, would smile.

"That's the last carpentry my daddy do. Made hisself a fine peg to get around on. But not far. No, he don't go far. That one thing Mister Porter be right about: Daddy never run again."

James would shake his head and laugh softly, as if at a fond memory. Then, without another word, he'd turn and walk off.

If Willis was transformed into a silent figure, so was Jason Porter. He seldom came to town, nor was he often seen on his chestnut stallion in the fields. The carriage with the Porters in their Sunday best never came to church again. Less than a year after the incident, Mrs. Porter and the two girls left, without anyone seeing them go. Jason Porter, once propelling himself to planter status, reversed his fortunes. Every year he sold slaves and land.

When the war broke out there were only four slaves on the Porter place; as if accepting the defeat of the South before we fought, Jason set them free. Willis and James chose to stay on. After the war Willis gave himself and his son the name Freeman. Jason Porter became a total recluse. Over the years only James came to town to get supplies.

Of the two of them who had started out together on that piece of land, as master and slave, Jason died first; then six years later, Willis. James stayed on; he married, raised a family, took care of the big house and the grounds. Received a check every month from a woman who had been a girl, staring out the window at the scene he told about. He cashed the check at the Citizens Bank, grinning and bowing in line. It was then that he began to tell the story of what he had seen that December day. He'd laugh and shuffle his way into it, like a minstrel performing.

After his death his son stayed on, as did the other Freemans that followed.

That was the story that Spencer did not tell, not on his first visit to the Porter house nor on his next two. He found each meal to be delicious, and the conversations revolved, for the most part, around the pleasures at hand. Spencer observed wryly that Edmund never brought up the matter of buying out Earl. Apparently Edmund found the situation he had fallen into too convenient to give up: having a handyman, yardman, cook, housekeeper, laundress, all free of charge. Earl even changed the oil in Edmund's car.

One day Cecily, Earl and Lela's daughter, who had been gone for four years — to where, we never knew — was back. The three of them bounced into town in Earl's truck, on his biweekly trip to get groceries and supplies.

The girl sauntered about our streets, wearing a thigh length dress, a clinging affair, her sandals slapping the pavement with a slothful sound. The way she moved was a little too relaxed, too casually inviting. She had the easy slenderness of the young, though her body sprang into unrestrained voluptuousness at her hips and breasts.

"I need to help Mama out," she told anyone who asked. "She's too old to do everything herself, specially now, with someone to do for." Cecily's face was soft, very dark. She'd turn and walk off, the motion of her hips making a closing statement.

The women of the town gave tight-lipped predictions to their husbands that night, in the privacy of their bedrooms. The men had little to say; they felt wary, as if their restive wives might any moment turn the attack on them.

It was when the lights were off that the men could finally let their imaginations dwell on the situation at the Porter house. Spencer had described to them how Edmund was served drinks late into the evening. How easy it would be, when inhibitions were blunted, to place a restraining hand on the arm that passed near you in the darkness. How the straps of the dress would slide so easily off those round shoulders. The sound of her husky voice, chuckling a bit. "Well, well . . ."

The trouble was, it would be so damn easy.

5

When Cecily came to town flaunting her belly, people became openly cold toward Edmund. He reacted by withdrawing to the confines of his home. Spencer's visit, to make out the will, was the last time any of us saw Edmund alive.

Though one night after that visit Spencer was awakened by a ringing phone. The voice on the line was barely recognizable as Edmund's. His speech was slurred and contorted by — what? Drunk, thought Spencer, and he was about to put the phone on the receiver when the line clicked off in his ear.

The next day Spencer drove by the Porter house. A month earlier Earl had hinged a scroll-topped gate to the posts he had erected; he had painted it a glossy black, not the gold that Spencer had suggested. The gate was chained shut.

It was unlocked only when Earl and Lela, or sometimes Cecily, would come to town. The last time they made this trip, Earl looked at rifles in the hardware store. "Think I'll get me one of these," he said, eyeing along the sight of a Smith and Wesson. The rifle's barrel swung around the store, swung past Joe Harding several times. Earl grinned beside the trigger. Joe reported that Earl's demeanor was different that day. He came down the aisle with a cocky swagger, and instead of getting his supplies himself, as he had always done in the past, he gave his order to the clerk and then opened the case of rifles without asking permission. When he looked over the items the boy had placed on the counter, he picked up a nipple of galvanized pipe. "I told you three quarter inch," he said to the boy, his voice sounding as raspy as a metal can pulled over concrete. When the boy went to fetch the right size, Earl pronounced one word, heard clearly by

Joe and the customer he was waiting on: "Peckerhead." Joe stopped what he was doing and looked hard at Earl. Earl's eyes met his, unyielding. The ingratiating grin was absent, not a memory of it under the grim black mustache.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd be civil, Earl," said Joe.

Earl rose to his full height, and his chest swelled like an offended rooster's. "I call a peckerhead when I see one." He turned and walked out of the store, his goods still on the counter. After that day Earl and Lela drove the fifteen miles to the new mall to do their shopping.

6

On a blustery day in February, almost two years after Edmund moved into the town, Wallace Schwab at the funeral home received a phone call. It was Earl.

"Got a dead body here," he said.

Wallace called Sheriff Watts, who went out to the Porter house.

The sheriff stopped at the gate and beeped his horn twice. Earl drove down in his truck and unlocked the gate. Neither man exchanged a word. The truck and the patrol car proceeded to the front of the house. The sheriff eased out. Earl motioned toward the porch.

"He's in there, just like Lela found him."

Sheriff Watts went inside. Edmund Glass was slumped in a chair. His beard had grown in full, a neatly trimmed white colonel's beard, and he was dressed in a white linen suit and a light blue shirt. He had become fat and his bloated face had a yellow tinge.

Lela appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron.

"He been feeling unwell," she said in a petulant voice. "Complaining of them stomach pains. I told him to go to the doctor. Told him and told him, but he didn't pay me no mind." She shrugged her shoulders.

The sheriff looked at the dead man. It seemed to him that Edmund had not dressed himself, but that the clothes had been put on his slack body; the fly to his pants was askew and shirt was tucked too tightly over the belly.

In the sixteen years that Kelvin Watts had been sheriff, he had learned that there were times when you looked into things and there were times when you needed to look away. There was no question in his mind about how to proceed with this body in front of him. This was the town's dirty laundry; it needed to be disposed of.

He walked out to his patrol car. Earl watched him from the side of house, holding a dribbling hose over some azaleas. The sheriff picked up his car phone and called in to the station and told Debbie to get Dr. Kenilworth out to the Porter place. Then he sat in his front seat to wait. He knew that the coroner, a lifelong resident of the town, would see things his way.

That night Sheriff Watts got a phone call. It was Wallace Schwab at the funeral home. "You need to get out here. Something you have to see. I called Spencer too."

The new funeral home was on the outskirts of town, the only building for miles on that stretch of highway. The two cars arriving at the empty parking lot, within minutes of each other, had a clandestine air. The slamming doors echoed in the night.

Wallace gestured to them from the back edge of the parking lot, a ghostly figure in his white undershirt. When Spencer and the sheriff reached him they saw that he was wearing latex gloves; there was a cigarette held between two plastic fingers. The frames of his glasses seemed like black circles around his eyes.

“I was getting the body ready — they pick up tomorrow, early, to take to the crematoria. So I was stripping him down . . . Well, I need to know what to do.”

The three men walked through a double door and were in the embalming room. It was bright with fluorescent light. A thick, sweetish odor saturated the clinical interior. The room was dominated by a porcelain table, slightly tilted, rimmed by a trough. Over the table hung tubes, not connected to the body underneath them. On the table lay Edmund Glass. He was covered from the neck down by a gray plastic sheet. Spencer looked at a face the color of old wax. Only the white beard remained pristine.

Spencer found himself holding his breath, as if the air were palpably corrupt. He gasped and looked away from the face. His gaze fell upon a gurney with an unpainted pine casket on it, waiting. The lid of the casket leaned against a large trash can, full to the brim, a pizza carton and soft drink cans showing. Spencer looked to the counter; next to a metal sink was a pile of clothes, the pants pockets pulled inside out, the socks twisted on top.

Wallace motioned the men to the other end of the table. He set his cigarette on the edge of the trough and, without a word, he flipped the sheet aside, revealing two feet. Or part of one of the feet. The men looked down on a toeless stump. The whorls of truncated bone and tendon stared up, embedded in flesh that had hardened to a scar, thick and dark.

Spencer murmured, “Poor bastard” and turned toward the night air. He heard, behind him, the sheriff’s voice, rising as he spoke, reaching a harsh finality.

“It don’t make no difference, man. Don’t you see that? What we need to do is get this burned. Finally get it over with.” Then came the sound of the gurney being wheeled to the table.