

Leah's Garden
By C L May
Part One

The house was a bustle of activity that frozen February morning. Leah knew it must be colder than usual because Ray had asked her twice already if he could crank up the thermostat on the old floor furnace to keep the chill off the living room. If not for that she never would have known, because she was constantly wiping the sweat from her brow and upper lip with a corner of her apron. The turkey had been in the oven since about seven, and the kitchen was steamy with heat from boiling giblets and sweet potatoes and Thelma's homemade stuffing. Leah was rolling out the dough for the cherry and pecan pies she was going to make. Vanessa and Mary Kay were in the double entry separating the living room from the kitchen. They were perched atop a chair on each side tacking up the banner they had made for Bradley's homecoming. They both held it stretched across the top of the doorway and waited for Ray to nod his approval before they each pushed the tacks into place.

Vanessa stepped off the vinyl and chrome dinette chair from the set in the kitchen and inspected their work. WELCOME HOME BRADLEY, the banner read.

Vanessa's heart raced a little as she read it because she could hardly believe her brother was actually coming home. It had been eight years. Eight years since he had been in

this house. Eight years since she had seen him without a guard hovering over them, or worse, the visits through the glass. Unless it was an official supervised family day, they had to sit on opposite sides of an inch of glass with metal wire crisscrossed through it and hear his voice through the beat up old telephone receiver that linked them together. Sometimes he would show up in her dreams with those wire exes etched into his skin.

Visiting a loved one in lock-up was not the easiest thing to accomplish. Vanessa, Leah and Uncle Joey did try to make the three-hour trip to visit Bradley during the first years of his sentence. The state called the visits "family days." They were officially scheduled monthly but in reality took place every two or three months. Paperwork had to be filled out and signed each month. This kept them on the roster as official visitors. These visits were supposed to occur the first Saturday of each month. Sometimes they would get a phone call on the Friday before stating the visit day was cancelled. An explanation was never given. Sometimes they would make the three hour drive down to Big Mac prison, sit in a long line of traffic at the gate, only to be turned away at the guard shack. Visit Cancelled. It wasn't a good idea to complain. Vanessa spoke to one lady who had written a letter to the governor. She received an official apology from both the governor's office and Warden Laslow's office. After that her applications to visit were turned down for the next sixteen months citing conduct demerits for her husband, Joe. Prisoners with conduct demerits could not receive visitors.

Mary Kay and Thelma refused to go and visit Bradley at all. "I am not going to any prison," Mary Kay said, emphatically, "besides, I would have to find a babysitter."

Thelma would pat Leah's shoulder and say, "I don't want to take away from your time with him, honey."

Did they think the rest of the family enjoyed those visits to the prison? It was a sickening experience—joy and fear mixed together, anxious to see him in the flesh, to touch him and yet, hating it too. The visits were always a disappointment. Her brother was never like the Bradley that lived inside her mind. It was an impossible task for most siblings—to separate the person one grows up with from the adult that person becomes. But it was magnified in her case, because he left for prison when he was only seventeen, and he was the oldest. She could not help but picture him the way he looked then, even though she had seen him countless times since during the prison visits.

The last time she saw him before he went to Big Mac was at the trial. He was sitting up in the witness box answering the prosecutor's questions. Although his voice was a deep baritone, he still embodied all the traits of a teenage boy. Uneven patches of whiskers grew on his cheeks and underneath his bony chin. A man-sized Adam's apple protruded from his boy-sized neck. He was all arms and legs, skinny, slightly awkward in his movements, as if his brain had not quite caught up to his tallness. She thought of him that way even now when she dreamed about him or missed him and conjured up a picture of him in her mind. She pictured the boy he once was, the young Bradley, the Bradley before that awful night that changed all of their lives forever. He was the brother who climbed the sycamore tree with her, the brother who raced bikes with her and played chicken.

After the jury came back with the verdict, the bailiff bound Bradley's hands behind his back with steel cuffs. Although

the bailiff was polite about it, Vanessa could not bear to see him cuffed like a hardened criminal. Next, he led Bradley out of the courtroom through a door to the left of the judge's chamber. Vanessa remembered the sound the heavy door made, as the latch clicked behind Bradley and the bailiff. The judge banged his gavel once, gathered his papers and stood up. Rustling cloth and shuffling feet drowned out Thelma's soft sobs as people made ready to leave the courtroom.

She thought nothing could be as bad as seeing Bradley led out of that court room in handcuffs. But the prison visits were much worse than that. Simply driving up to the place gave her the creeps, seeing the twelve-foot high chain fence link topped with concertina wire. There was a tower that overlooked the prison yard where a guard's entire job was to be ready to shoot an escapee with a long-range rifle. During the indoor visits she had caught glimpses of hallways through double bar doors where rows of cells towered three tiers high. But she would not allow her mind to imagine him walking around in those cavernous hallways or wandering about an empty shower room or the many dark corners that must exist in an institution of that size. Also she simply hated being there amongst all those murderers and rapists. "Bradley shouldn't be here," she lamented to Uncle Joey during one trip down there. "He's got to pay his debt," Uncle Joey replied. "Just where else do you think he should be?"

She couldn't answer. Certainly couldn't say what she was thinking, not to Uncle Joey. She did not think of Bradley as a murderer. He did us all a favor doing what he did. That's what she wished she could say. Especially to Bradley.

She wished she'd had the guts to say it aloud.

Sometimes, during warm summer days the prison would host family days in an outside yard. On the outside visits there would sometimes be inmates in an adjacent yard separated by the twelve-foot chain link fence topped with concertina wire. There would usually be a line of them watching the visit yard. No, she didn't like the way some of those men stared at her, looking down at her crotch or her butt then moving their eyes slowly and deliberately up from there to her face not in the way some men do when they appreciate and admire what they see before them, but like they were at war and she was a despised enemy whom they just couldn't wait to capture. Their black lifeless pupils were framed by the color of rage and they traveled up and down her frame in a deliberately slow pace to remind her of who was really in charge of that prison. These men sent her a hard stare that said, "I could own you, bitch, 'cause you just walked into my space, and if these guards weren't here, I'd prove it to you." And to think Bradley had to live there among them.

The visits were always disappointing. She would nearly always imagine telling him how college was going and engaging in chit chat about daily life the way normal people do, but upon meeting him they would only make small talk like nothing was out of the ordinary and they weren't all sitting there in a prison yard chatting while anxious wives sat across from shame-filled husbands as their nervous children fidgeted and flittered about like wobbly little satellites orbiting around them in a volatile, unstable gravity.

Everyone would pretend not to notice how drawn he looked or how tired his eyes seemed. It was the same when they had visited her grandmother in the hospital when she was a child. Everybody lied and commented on how much

better she looked than the day before, though the doctors had stood right out in the hallway and spoken in hushed tones about how sick she was and that the cancer had metastasized and she could go any time. There was no way she was leaving that hospital alive. Vanessa had been told to act natural and not say anything about the cancer. They would fill up the empty spaces with idiotic small talk like, "That's a nice view, Grandma," or "Mom and I ate in the cafeteria yesterday and the food was really pretty good. It was chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes and cream gravy." The view out her one window was the top of a neighboring building with huge C-duct vents snaking up and a metal box the size of a room, probably a cooling unit of some kind. The steak was the type that cheap cafes and fast food restaurants buy—breaded and frozen with too-salty packaged gravy and boxed mashed potato mix. Vanessa was terrible at small talk, but Mama and Bradley were good at it. They were good at pretending everything was peachy.

When it was just the four of them out in the visitation yard her mother and Bradley would never look at each other straight on, they would address one another through Vanessa or Uncle Joey. Leah would nudge Vanessa and say, "Did you tell Bradley about the sweater I'm knitting for him?" Bradley would reply to the ground. "She told me," then he would turn to Uncle Joey and ask, "Hey, Uncle Joey, did you tell Mama I'm learning to cook?"

To Vanessa Leah would say, "Honey, remember I always told you Bradley was gonna be a better cook than you and Mary Kay someday." And it would go on like that. They just couldn't seem to look at each other. There was an invisible wall between Mama and Bradley. The wall was built with strange bricks from Mama, who didn't remember anything at

all and Bradley, who remembered too much. That invisible wall was thicker than time and just as impossible to take an axe to.

And it all started eight years ago on that awful night. Mama, Bradley and Daddy were the only ones at home. Daddy sure as hell wasn't ever going to tell, Mama couldn't remember and Bradley had chosen to carry the secrets of that night for the rest of his days. Everybody else in the family went out of their way to keep from being reminded of it. Yet it would cling to them all like August heat every time Bradley and Mama were in a room together.

At least Vanessa would have her brother back and they could be a family again. She sighed and walked over to the picture window in the living room. It was a typical Oklahoma winter landscape of brown lawns and bare trees. The old pecan tree in the Havens' front yard stretched its bare branches way up past the rooflines of the neighborhood houses and into the cloudy February sky. Their house was in west Tulsa, in one of the older working class white neighborhoods. Uncurbed asphalt streets ran in straight grid patterns. The houses sat on large lots with drainage ditches out front and gravel alleys in back of the houses. Tall oak, pecan, sycamore and sweet gum trees graced the yards in view. Dogwood, cherry and Oklahoma redbud trees stood poised and ready to don their pink, white and deep purple-red dresses after their winter's rest.

The naked branches of the winter trees against a gray winter day always made Vanessa feel a little sad. Would Jamie come? "I don't think I can make it for dinner, but I'll try to drop by later, okay? I've got to finish this term paper and then I have to go and see Mother." That was what she had said this morning as she lay sprawled out on the couch in

their apartment, feet propped up, papers scattered about as she did her research paper on her laptop. Her thick blonde hair was tousled and she was wearing blue and gold athletic shorts, an old torn, holey tee shirt. Vanessa marveled that Jamie was one of those people who always seemed to look so beautiful, even at her worst. In fact, being surrounded by chaos seemed to enhance her beauty all the more.

"You see your mother every day." Vanessa said it like an accusation. That was often the way they spoke to each other these days.

Jamie set her jaw. She always set her jaw whenever Vanessa disagreed with her or said anything about her mother.

"We've talked about this." She said it through her teeth. "And I do not see her every day."

"You do. Nearly every day," Vanessa accused, as if visiting one's mother was a bad thing. "You could skip it just once and come with me to meet my brother."

"I told you, I'm not making any promises. Maybe I can drop by later." Jamie had begun to type into her laptop, signifying the subject closed.

"Hope that fucking paper is brilliant." She already had her hand on the doorknob.

Jamie squared her jaw a bit more and shot Vanessa the finger, barely stopping to look up from her laptop as she did it.

Vanessa figured now she wouldn't come for sure, because they'd had a fight. Jamie would call it a spat and act as if it was no big deal. Either that or she would behave as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all. It would be ignored and if Vanessa tried to talk about it Jamie would say she was being paranoid.

Jamie made her furious and crazy and she never knew what to expect from her. Just the same every time she heard the hum of an engine or the clang of a car door she peeked out the picture window and hoped to see Jamie's blue Toyota pull into the drive.

When Mary Kay stepped down from her chair she did not glance up at the banner. It had been Vanessa's idea and she certainly did not support it. What did they all want to do, give him a medal or something? She picked her chair up and took it back into the kitchen, then retrieved the chair on which Vanessa had stood. Her sister was lost in reverie, as usual. Head in the clouds while everyone around her did the work. All Mary Kay wanted to do was stay busy. She was not as elated about her brother's return as everyone else seemed to be. It was just going to cause trouble. They had all been doing just fine, thank you very much but now it would come back up in their faces again. Neighbors whispering, people avoiding eye contact. Melissa Jo Salter would be watching for her in Walmart eager to rub her nose in it. As it was now she never missed an opportunity to ask Mary Kay nosy questions like, "How is your brother doing?" "When will Bradley be back again?" That last one she always asked in the presence of someone else in the hopes they might inquire 'back from where?' She hated to think what it would do to Mother. What if she had another nervous breakdown? And Mary Kay's own friends would ask something about Bradley's return awkwardly or say nothing at all just like they did after that horrible night.

Well, she hoped nobody would say anything because she did not want to think about, much less talk about it. This whole welcome home party was Vanessa's idea. Mary Kay did think it was nice to fix him this fancy dinner, but what were they supposed to do, act like he'd been away at college or something? Might as well make a banner that reads CONGRATULATIONS BRADLEY! You've served your prison time for murdering your own father. They could slap him on the back and sing him the jolly good fellow song and wish him the best of luck. Ha. Ha.

What about Daddy? Would any of them think of him today? Probably not. Selfish bastards. They should honor him today, too.

As she prepared herself to rejoin Leah and Thelma in the kitchen the sound of the chair scraping against the linoleum floor as she pushed it in place put her on the bank of Spring Creek when she was about five years old. It was a clear spring fed creek in the foot of the Ozarks that snaked through limestone cliffs. The creek bed consisted of flint, quartz and sandstone rocks. They spent their family vacations camped in a tent on the bank of the creek. She was sitting alone on the rocks of the south bank up the creek from the others. Bradley was behind her somewhere making an awful grinding noise scraping rocks together. He was making a valiant attempt to start a fire. She had just begun to cry, upset because Bradley and Vanessa had both found arrowheads the day before. She had been searching for hours and had not found anything.

Spring Creek ran through old Cherokee lands. Arrowheads and Indian artifacts were thick up in those hills. She had searched for a time yesterday and had spent a good bit of the morning on the hunt for a flint arrowhead and hadn't

found anything. Now she was sobbing quietly, the desperate sort of crying which is a combination of surrender and exhaustion, perhaps with a little self-pity thrown into the mix. If she had been old enough to verbalize her feelings on that day she would have described them as an aching loneliness in having been the youngest child, "the baby" who, for all the "babying" and extra attention she garnered from the adults, she often got excluded, left behind or downright ignored by her older siblings. Her very existence seemed an irritation, at times, a resentment to them. As she absently picked at the river rocks her father walked over and eased his lanky frame down onto the bank next to her.

"What's wrong, little Magpie?" Only he called her that.

Mary Kay took a moment to swallow the tears back down before attempting to answer. "I'm never gonna find an arrowhead, Daddy."

"What have I told you about crying? Huh? Are you supposed to be crying like a little baby?" He nudged her roughly on the arm with his wrist.

She wiped her face and sat up a little straighter. "No, sir."

When he tenderly took her face in his big hands, she could not help but flinch. He did not seem to notice.

"My little Magpie. You look so much like my Mama. You know what she'd say right now?" Mary Kay shook her head. "She'd ask if you've found any jewels yet."

"Huh?" Her eyes brightened.

He started picking up handfuls of rocks and sifting them through his long fingers. "Sure. An arrowhead ain't nothing but an ole piece of flint rock, anyway. What you want to find is one of them quartz rocks. Mama called them jewels in the rocks. Heck, they're a lot prettier than any ole arrowhead."

"How will I know, Daddy?"

"You'll know. They sparkle in the light, just like diamonds."

"Will you help me, Daddy?"

Course, I will, baby."

So they searched up and down the bank for a while until Mary Kay found the prettiest rock she had ever seen. It had the most beautiful purples, reds and yellows. The colors swirled through it and glittered like diamonds, just like he said! Everyone agreed it was just about the prettiest rock they had ever seen.

What about that Daddy? Did any of them ever think of the daddy who called his baby girl Magpie and helped her to find the jewels in the rocks? Did anybody but her care that he was gone? No. In this, too, she was alone.

Mary Kay shook her head as she released the chair. Why did that silly memory pop into her head? It simply proved her point that Bradley's return would dredge up old memories. Thinking about the past was a waste of time. She did not need to be reminded that she missed her daddy and she could probably never forgive her brother for taking him away from her. She hated to dwell on unpleasant thoughts like that.

Thelma had volunteered to make the meringue for the lemon and chocolate pies. She was cracking eggs into a bowl, separating the whites from the yolks with the deftness of a woman who had made a lifetime of meringue pies. Mary Kay began to listen as her aunt related the horrible murder of a woman whose body had been discovered after a five-day search.

"...they found her body by that old lake near Sapulpa. She was a medical student, just twenty-two years old. Of

course, she'd been raped and beaten and no tellin' what else. Good Lord, it's getting so a woman cain't go outta her house no more." She glanced around and gave Vanessa and Mary Kay one of her "I told you so" looks. "And you girls runnin' all over town by yourself all the time."

She shook her head. "The signs are all around us. All the super storms and wars and earthquakes to go along with the nastiness. It's coming, I'm tellin' you for sure. The Lord ain't going to stand for it much longer."

They all knew she was referring to Armageddon which she had been certain was coming any day now for the past twenty years, ever since that guest preacher the Reverend Phillip Robinson had come to Thelma's and Joey's church to deliver a sermon, as Joey described it "of hell fire and damnation".

Vanessa chided her. "Oh Aunt Thelma, I hope the world doesn't end at least until I get my journalism degree!"

Mary Kay and Leah tried to keep from laughing.

"Go ahead and laugh," Thelma barked. "But ya better listen. World's gonna end and those that ain't ready, well...I think we all know what happens to them....."

"Yeah, yeah," Leah said. She dabbed at the sweat on her face with her apron. "Let's hope Jesus has the decency to not come 'til after dinner, as hard as we're working on this one."

At that Mary Kay asked Aunt Thelma if she could assist her.

"When your flesh is burnin' off your bones, it'll be too late," Thelma warned Leah over her shoulder. She knew they didn't believe her about Armageddon. Even her own husband didn't believe. The good Reverend had warned her that only the true believers would accompany Jesus to

Heaven, and that they would be few in number. Still, there was no need to get mad about it. The pious would be rewarded in due time. She refused to allow their teasing to dampen her spirits. She answered Mary Kay with amity.

“Sure, hon. You can start peelin’ them sweet potatoes.”

Then her voice switched back to low and serious and she resumed talking about the murder of that young girl as if they had not said anything else in-between the two conversations. Telling stories was Thelma’s specialty. Thelma called them stories. Leah called it gossip.

“Anyway Leah, did I tell you that a lady at our church knew that girl? You know that widow, Mrs. Breakinghorse? Her husband was that Indian fellow that helped Joey put a new roof on the church a few years ago. What was he...Creek or Cherokee, one of the big tribes...Anyway...”

She stopped cracking her eggs for a moment and shuddered. “It’s the awfulest thing. Knowing somebody who knew that girl. I tell you, I’m glad Bradley’s coming home and staying with you. I worry to death about you livin’ here all by yourself.”

“You worry about enough things to keep the rest of us from worrying for the next twenty years.” Leah worked the dough into each pie tin carefully. Worry and talk, she thought, that’s all I’ve heard you do for the past thirty years. Thelma called her every morning after she got up and every night before she went to bed. Sometimes it drove Leah crazy. Why the hell hadn’t she been so concerned about her when she was in real danger? For twenty years Leah was in danger every day Brad was by her side. There were days she could barely get out of bed after one his rampages. Why the hell hadn’t Thelma called her one of those mornings? Hmph. Worry.

Leah had her own worrying to do about Bradley's coming home.

What was he going to be like? He wasn't going to be the same boy who had left at seventeen nor would he be the wooden, guarded soul whom they had visited in prison. She could not bear to think how that place had changed him. The last few times they had visited him, there had been a darkness to his demeanor, a coldness to his eyes. Not like her old Bradley. More like his father. Unreachable eyes. Not that they had been there that often. She had only seen him a handful of times in the past three years. He had requested they stop coming to visit. She carried the letter in her purse. It was too hard, he said. Made him feel vulnerable, he said. A vulnerable man can't make it in prison. So they stopped going except on holidays and his birthday.

It was all her fault he was in there in the first place. That night. That terrible night. She had one of her stupid blackouts. If she could have stayed in control maybe she could have stopped Bradley. She had never found the courage to leave Brad Sr., take the kids and run away after trying to so many years ago oh why had she been so weak and so stupid? The Leah that had stayed in the marriage seemed so far away from her now. Why had she stayed? She had always told herself she was too afraid, afraid of what he might do if she tried to leave him. His threats were always hanging over her head. They were like invisible shackles imprisoning her with the fear of what he might do. These fetters seemed stronger than any man-made steel, never more so than when she threatened to leave him.

She had been afraid. If only she hadn't been such a coward. Or if she had not been so wrapped up in herself she

might have seen what was coming that night, that awful night. But she had been blind. She had always accused Joey and Thelma of being blind to the truth but she had been the blindest one of them all never believing Brad Sr. would go that far, always making excuses for him like the ones he made for himself. If only she hadn't been so selfish, then maybe she could have prevented her son from doing the unthinkable thing that he did.

But the events leading up to that night were different. Something in her had been different. Having Cassie as a friend had changed something in her and Brad Sr. had sensed it. It was something good and pure and he had to destroy it. Bradley had been home that night. The girls were spending the night at friends' houses. Leah and Brad Sr. had a fight (nothing unusual about that), the fight had gotten out of control; those were the facts. All the facts were described in sickening detail in the newspaper accounts. She had read them with a macabre fascination, as if they were a tragedy that had befallen some other Cox family.

Fact: Bradley Foster Cox Sr. died as the result of a domestic dispute. Fact: Cox was killed with a single shotgun blast to the head. Fact: Bradley Cox Jr. fired the fatal shot. Fact: Earlier that evening, police had been dispatched to the Cox residence to settle a domestic dispute.

She read the news accounts over and over again, hoping she would remember something, but to no avail. It was like reading a news item about someone else's life, someone else's tragedy. She had absolutely no memory of it and yet, she had been there that night, just as Bradley had been there, just as she had been there the other times in her life she had completely blanked out time. How could it possibly be true when she could not remember? What had happened

that night? Newspapers don't tell the truth. They give the facts and sometimes they get the facts wrong.

Leah had tried to remember. But something kept stopping her.

She had even set deadlines for herself to remember that night because something in Bradley's eyes triggered a latent awareness somewhere deep inside her head; this did not produce a flash of memory, it was more like a glimpse of the door that opened into the room that contained the memory. The memory was behind that door, but she could not seem to open it. As each anniversary of the night itself approached, she hoped the memory would return to her. No matter how hard she tried, these deadlines always passed with no success. She had tried doctors, too.

After she spoke to the police psychiatrist he recommended therapy. "It might help you to remember," he told her. "You'll never have more than half a life, if you don't get at those memories. You have to slay your demons, Leah."

One doctor (his name was Choocanooga. Leah and Vanessa called him Choocanooga Choo Choo) said she was high strung with serious psychosis and stress-induced blackouts, which he theorized produced complete catatonia during these periods. "No sir. I have been told many times that I continue to function as normal. I walk, talk, drive and don't remember any of it."

"I should have to see that for myself," Dr. Choocanooga Choo Choo said as he tilted his head back in a superior doctor pose. He pushed his oversized leather chair back and crossed his legs. Leah noticed he wore expensive Italian leather shoes and no socks. He was typing notes and medical history into an electronic tablet and had barely

glanced up at her during the entire interview. In fact, she came to two more sessions and he spent the majority of her allotted hours inputting information into his computer. If she passed him on the street he would be unlikely to recognize her.

"Yes," he nodded gravely, as if he had her condition all figured out. "I will prescribe you this medicine and you'll need to see me twice a week." Leah thought it was funny that a guy who never even glanced up to look at her could have her all figured out.

She did not return for another session.

Another one, Doctor Laura Free, told her she thought Leah was an example of the classic theory behind multiple personality disorders and the inventive ability of the human mind to protect the id from harm in abusive situations. She asked Leah if she could do her thesis on her case.

All Leah knew was that she could neither remember that night, nor many others. No matter how hard she strained, her memory went blank at a certain point. "All you doctors want to do is study me. Why in the heck can't you make my mind stop doing that to me?"

"Only you have that power, Leah."

Dr. Free did not have to answer. "I know, Doctor Free." Leah slipped her arm through her purse straps and stood up to leave. "When I win the lottery, I'll come back and start the ten years of therapy it's going to take to cure me. Until then, I still got two girls to finish raising."

She never went back for therapy. Who had time for therapy?

Sometimes Leah would pretend Bradley was off fighting in a war. Protecting his country. To protect one's country, to kill for one's country, was this not the most honorable and

glorious act of selflessness that a man could bestow upon his government? If he had been in a war ordained by the government, would he not have won a medal for his bravery, keeping the enemy from harming anyone else?

But it could not have been self-defense because his father had been unconscious....that's what they had said, unconscious, helpless...passed out in an intoxicated stupor. If only Leah could remember, tell the authorities what happened, maybe Bradley would not have gone to prison at all. Extenuating circumstances. Or at least, if she could know what happened, really know, maybe she could have lied to protect her son. But not knowing was the worst. How could she lie to protect him, if she didn't know the truth?

As Leah's eyes came into focus Vanessa was setting two lightly browned pie crusts onto the counter in front of her. Had Leah put them in the oven herself? She had no memory of doing it. She took the can of cherry pie filling over to the electric can opener mounted under the cabinet. More time lost to her. Time in a kitchen browning pie crusts.

Leah knew if the county psychiatrist had not believed her, she might have gone to prison right alongside Bradley. She could only remember before and after that night. He must have thought she was a sick loony, because he told her it might take years of therapy for her to get better. She remembered that well enough.

They had put her in a bare room that smelled of old sweat and commercial floor wax and cold metal. She was seated in a straight-backed wooden chair, made of heavy oak with a rounded indentation in the seat. This was pulled up to a gray slate conference table on metal legs. The top of that table was nicked and scarred with marks from forty years of interrogations. The letters FU were crudely etched

into the rounded edge of the table just to the left of her vantage point. Leah was pretty sure if she was to bend down and look underneath there would be old blobs of chewing gum stuck there. Yuck. She was afraid to touch the table or the chair. She was almost afraid to move.

On one wall two large rectangular windows framed darkened reflective glass. She figured these to be two-way glass such as the type in police shows and movies where a person could watch her unobserved from the other side. There was also a video camera perched on a tripod in the opposite corner. It was aimed directly at her.

She wondered how many confessions had been signed on that tabletop. The longer they left her in there alone the more nervous she became. How readily someone might sign a confession, any confession just to get out of that room!

The doctor entered carrying one of those old cassette tape recorders about the size of a shoebox. He was a big hulking figure with slightly slumped shoulders and he waddled side to side on his huge feet when he took each step. He wore a dark gray suit with white dress shirt but no tie. He looked as worn out as the old scarred up slate table. Without offering his hand he introduced himself, cleared his throat and sat in a chair directly across the table from her. With slow deliberate hands he set the tape recorder down between them.

His name was Doctor Something. It started with a B. Benton? Berton? Or was it a V? Verton? Vernon? She had already forgotten his name. She was so damned nervous.

Leah kept her gaze on the scarred tabletop, fixing her attention on a few crude words and phrases lightly etched into the surface that someone had attempted to buff out of

existence. S ck my bi dick. Co ps suck. She braved a glance or two up from the etchings on the table. The doctor had thick bohemian hair and horn-rimmed glasses. His hair curled around his face and grayed at the temples and his glasses framed the kindest brown eyes Leah had ever seen in a man's face. His suit was wrinkled as though he had slept in it. His hulking presence and beefy calloused hands made Leah imagine him more suited to welding or carpentry. He certainly did not look like a doctor to her.

He cleared his throat again, scooted his chair back, then with a sigh he got up and walked over to the video recorder and turned it on. He returned to his seat across from her, got his big frame settled, then hit the record button on the old fashioned cassette recorder. It made a loud clicking sound when he pressed the record button.

"Hope you don't mind," he mumbled apologetically. "The audio recording is for my own personal records."

Did he really expect an answer to that? What if she did mind? Would it make any difference? The recorder hissed audibly as the tape turned inside the cassette.

He cleared his throat again. "So, Mrs. Cox," he began in a practiced tone, "Tell me what you remember."

He spoke to her as one would speak to a child and she thought, he thinks I'm crazy. That's how people talk to a crazy person.

Leah had to remind herself to breathe. The hiss of the tape recorder had erected a wall of heavy air between them. Finally she began, leaning forward and addressing the machine as she spoke.

"He was....mad.....mad at me....." No, that wasn't quite right. She could remember now. It was she who was mad.

He interrupted. "Who was mad?"

She looked up at him. "I was. I mean, we had a huge fight the first day of my Christmas break. I was angry. I mean, I was upset because Cassie was leaving. That's how it all started. She...."

"Who is Cassie?"

This was difficult enough without him doing that all the time. How long had it been, anyway? Since it happened? She had no idea. Time was completely out of her grasp. She talked to the tape recorder again, not masking the irritation in her tone at his bad manners.

"My friend. She was....my friend. Down at the cafeteria. You know all this. Didn't I tell the officers this already?"

"Yes, Mrs. Cox. But I need it all to be recorded properly, so that I can type up your statement and make an assessment." He reached down and pulled some notes out of the soft leather case he had brought in. "Is that your place of employment?"

Tulsa Public Schools District 2: Pawnee Middle School, Cafeteria Food Service.

"That's right. So.... Cassie and I had exchanged gifts before the Christmas break. Hadn't we?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Cox," Mister Doctor replied. "Had you?"

Leah shook her head. "Hummm?"

Mister Doctor exhaled a heavy breath. "Had you and..." he flipped through a couple of pages of the file.

"...Cassandra Jackson. Had you and Cassandra Jackson exchanged gifts?"

"Yes," Leah said curtly. "That's what I said. Cassie and I had exchanged gifts. I was upset and I didn't care what he did, so I ignored him. He didn't like that. When we got home I went to lie down. He took the picture from me and

threatened to burn it. I didn't care anymore. Didn't care what he did. That really made him mad. Don't you see? He could destroy it but I'd still have the gift, in here." She placed her palm over her heart. She was hoping that was explanation enough.

"She was my friend," Leah added. "My friend." Her gaze wandered to the non-mirrored wall. Staring straight ahead meant looking directly at the camera, its red light like an ill-mannered voyeur, a modern-day Cyclops judging her every move with its lifeless black iris.

"Now," he said breezily, perusing his notes, "Cassandra Jackson. Let's talk about her. She was the woman you called first before you called the police."

He obviously missed the import of her last statement. Cassie was the only friend she had during her entire marriage to Brad Cox. But she did not call Cassie, did she?

Leah became flustered. "I don't remember calling anybody." They kept telling her Cassie was there but she could not remember.

"Correction. Bradley called her. Then what happened?" He scratched his chin thoughtfully. He had a light stubble all over his chin. A five o'clock shadow man. If Leah liked him better she would tell him he should rub a little baby oil on his face after shaving and after his bracer so that he wouldn't itch when the stubble grew in. It was an old remedy of her father's. She used to love the sweet way it made him smell. Even when he would come in from the fields at the end of the day all sweaty and grimy from working, he still smelled sweet.

"Mrs. Cox?" Mister Doctor Bohemian leaned across the table toward her. She looked down at the recorder quickly because she realized she must have been staring at him.

Leah stared at the two-way mirror. Her next words sounded far away.

"Vanessa had something on her arm. I think it was a cast."

"Ma'am? And when did this take place?"

Leah looked at him. Why couldn't he keep up? "The first day of Christmas vacation. After that, I was in and out of the gray world."

He had to explain it to the damn machine. He addressed it as if it was a third person in the room with them.

"The 'gray world' is as you referred to it in your deposition, a period of memory loss."

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's talk about that night."

"I'm sorry. I don't remember what I was doing....maybe I was lying down in the bedroom when he came home. I felt bad....."

"Why did you feel bad, Mrs. Cox?"

In a sort of low-key epiphany, she gestured her open hand out toward the machine. "Cassie leaving, Vanessa's arm, twenty years of his nonsense..." she trailed off.

Mister Doctor Bohemian nodded, rubbed his forefinger knuckle on his chin. "Go on."

"He was mad because I hadn't fixed dinner. The girls were gone. Bradley was somewhere, but I don't....I don't remember. The next thing I remember is we were fighting and we wound up in the kitchen." Her eyes no longer saw the tape whirring around the heads of the recording machine. They saw the fight in the kitchen. Her ears no longer heard the uneven hiss of the tape, they heard only the screaming and the yelling in the kitchen. Why did they so often end up in the kitchen? That hard linoleum floor. Leah did not realize

she was rubbing her left shoulder until the doctor put a hand on her arm and jostled her back to the ugly naked room.

"Mrs. Cox?"

"...In the kitchen...he was so...angry...gone. I'm sorry, it's gone. The memory is gone. I just catch glimpses of it, like riding in a car on a highway, you know?"

"Like riding in a car on the highway?" He repeated it as a question. That was annoying.

Leah nodded. "Especially when I was little. Like when you are a kid riding in the back seat of a car and moving down the highway, how you see glimpses of trees and flowers and restaurants and gas stations, but you are speeding by them so fast and they quickly blur and fade out of your vision. All you end up seeing are flashes of greens, reds, yellows, diner windows, neon signs, gas pumps, roads snaking off into the horizon. Just glimpses. Blurry glimpses."

"Oh. Yes. I know exactly. Good description. Well, that's a start." He looked at Leah earnestly with his kind eyes. "Mrs. Cox, I hope you'll take my advice and see a therapist after you get through all of this. If you do not retrieve your memories, I'm afraid..."

Leah leaned forward across the table. "After I get through all of this, Mr. Doctor? I seriously doubt I'll ever get through all of this." Leah was uncharacteristically sharp with him. She immediately regretted it.

"I'm sorry," she said, leaning back in the hard oak chair.

"Quite all right. I meant after all of this is resolved. I'm afraid you...I mean, I am afraid you must get your memories back. To be whole, a person has to understand his past. And your memories are so deeply repressed. I believe you will need therapy to help you manage it."

"Therapy?" She thought she would give Mr. Doctor a

taste of his own method of answering with a question.

"Yes. Maybe years of it." He paused a moment before resuming his interrogation. "Where were we? Oh, yes... You were in the kitchen. You stated you had never seen him that angry before."

Leah closed her eyes. She tried to put herself back into the kitchen on that night. Brad had something in his right hand...no use. It blurred away and was gone

When her hazy sight came back into focus he was now standing and leaning as far across the table as possible. His face was only inches from her nose. With a jerk of her head she shrunk back into her chair. He sat back down and resumed his interrogation.

"Then what happened?"

How she wished he would stop asking that question.

"That's all. That's all I remember," she answered emphatically. And it was true. In all the years afterward she had tried to remember what had happened after that, to no avail.

What did it matter? She had moved on. They all had. That part of her life seemed so far away now. Bradley was coming home and they would all be a family again. Besides, she had gotten better all on her own. She had her flower gardens and her books. She had not had a blackout in eight years. The past was behind her. Brad Sr. was dead and he could no longer hurt her. She had buried him with every seed she had planted these past eight years.

And Bradley would be away from that place. Her baby boy, her firstborn, he was coming home to her. Everything would be okay as long as they had each other. She kept repeating those words in her mind. She even said them out

loud sometimes, to Vanessa or to Thelma. Everything would be okay.

Joey Richards crossed into McAlester city limits at around nine am. He would be right on schedule. His palms were starting to sweat a little on the steering wheel of his Ford pick-up. He had gone over the scene in his mind for years. Always knew he would be the one to bring Bradley home. They had all thought he might get out two years ago, but Bradley had gotten into some trouble with some other inmates and the parole board decided he should stay in a bit longer as punishment. As if the act of what he did hanging over his head and six years of hell in that place wasn't punishment enough. Those were the exact words Joey had said to the parole board. He pleaded with them.

"My nephew is a good boy. I know he's sorry for what he did. He's got family that care about him. That's more than can be said about a lot of these boys. Please let him come home."

Bradley sat there like a piece of stone not making eye contact. They were in a large room. Several rows of metal folding chairs faced the front of the room where two conference tables were put together to make one long table. The parole board consisted of three men and two women. They sat on the opposite side of the conference table facing the room. A single folding chair had been pulled forward and was separated from the rows of chairs behind it. This chair faced the parole board. Each inmate sat in this chair while his case was being decided.

"Mr. Cox," a corpulent black woman with big hair and

long red nails addressed the prisoner. "Let's for a moment put aside your disciplinary issues, as you were punished in house for..." She perused the file in front of her through bright red reading glasses. "...Yes I see on two separate occasions you were involved in altercations with other inmates, but you were subsequently punished in-house with loss of privileges. Is that right, Mr. Cox?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bradley answered as he looked down into his lap.

"Mr. Cox, you perpetrated a heinous crime." She took her reading glasses off emphatically and looked at Bradley. "Mr. Cox, I would appreciate it if you would look at me when I am addressing you."

Bradley said nothing. He slowly raised his head up. Joey could not see his face, but from where he sat he was worried that Bradley might be glaring at her.

"Mr. Cox. You killed your own father." Nervous inmates rustled uncomfortably in their folding chairs.

Bradley did not move, but Joey saw him grasp the bottom edges of his chair on either side as if he was hanging on for a bumpy ride.

"Mr. Cox," she said again, "are you sorry for what you did?"

Joey held his breath. It was the worst question they could ask.

"No," Bradley replied coldly. "I'd do it exactly the same way."

One of the inmates yelled, "Stick it to, em, Cox!" Then others chimed in with whoops and hollers of joy. The room erupted and Bradley was escorted out. They stamped two more years onto his sentence.

Joey shook his head remembering how furious he had been. After he prayed about it he decided to withhold his visits to Bradley for six months as punishment and even stopped sending him money for cigarettes. He would sure like to know what kind of foolish pride was worth two extra years in the pen. But to Bradley, it hadn't been his pride, but his honesty that guided his answer. Most of the guys get before the parole board and lie.

Ah well, nothing could be done about it now. He did better during his hearing three months ago. He said he had paid his debt to society and he swore that he was not a threat to the outside world, both of which were true. Still, Joey was sure that pride of Bradley's was likely to get him in more scrapes on the outside. All Joey could do was try to help his nephew find some kind of respectable work. Let him know he had family that cared for him, no matter what he'd done. That was a damn sight more than a lot of ex-convicts had.

Only ten more minutes and he would be there.

Bradley Cox was sitting in the hallway just outside Warden Laslow's office. Warden Ass-hole, they called him. Bradley was gazing out the heavy double glass doors, through two sets of steel bars and out into the dreary February morning. He had been in that hallway before. He had looked out those same doors before, but never with his heart in his throat like it was at that moment. He had pictured himself walking through those doors a thousand times and in a few minutes, he was actually going to do it.

Beside him on the bench lay his meager belongings in a black plastic garbage bag. There were socks and underwear, his wallet and two hundred and forty-two letters from Vanessa and his mother. He was wearing a stiff new

pair of Levi's 501s, a brand new salmon polo shirt (which he was certain Vanessa had picked out) and a pair of genuine leather deck shoes (Vanessa must have chosen those, for sure. They were probably what the college boys wore where she went to school. Bradley was sure as hell glad none of his prison pals would see these). He would definitely have to buy himself a pair of cowboy boots. A few minutes before, Warden Asshole had sent him to the infirmary down the hall to change out of his prison denims. He had nearly choked on the warden's patronizing smile as he handed Bradley the clothes Leah had sent. In his other arm he had Bradley's file pressed to his chest. In a deliberate motion, he fanned the file out away from his breast to read the name making sure Bradley understood that he was too busy and important for polite pretense.

"Here you are, Cox. Thought you might like to change into something without a number on it. You may change in the infirmary and then come back and sit down on this bench to wait for further instructions." The warden kept referring to Bradley's file, as if he could not keep his business there straight for five minutes. Not that Bradley expected the warden to know his name, but they must have crossed paths a thousand times in the past eight years. He mainly resented the way the good warden always cocked his head back when addressing a prisoner, so that he literally looked down his nose at him.

But he was comforted by the vow that he would never again gaze upon that pink-faced jowl after today, and when he stripped off his denim prison issued shirt, he swore to himself that he would never wear another blue denim shirt as long as he was alive. Thus changed into street clothes for only the second time in eight years (the first was his visit in

front of the parole board two years ago), he had returned to the hallway where he waited a good fifteen minutes before the warden's secretary motioned him in.

"Well son, you have paid your debt to society. Let's hope you have learned something."

Bradley had to laugh. It was a high-pitched laugh so filled with contempt it came out sounding positively evil. Bradley felt goose bumps pop up on the back of his neck. Sure as hell did. Learned how to deal drugs, make a shiv out of a piece of plastic and how to kill somebody with it, too. Learned what you stoop to do to form alliances with men so nasty they'd kill their own mother for a smoke, rape their sister 'cause they're bored, learned to look the other way when you witness shit so awful it makes you soak the sheets every night and gives you the shits for weeks all because you're so goddamn terrified and relieved that it wasn't you they were doing it to. After he caught his breath he stared across the monstrous mahogany desk. Better to ignore that and pretend it didn't happen or next thing they'll do is send you to the crazy house.

Warden Laslow's flabby pink face turned pinker and his watery eyes flittered as he fumbled with the paperwork in front of him. "It's that kind of attitude that will have you back in here, Cox."

"Yes. Sir." He almost laughed again, only this time he was sure it would be a giddy laugh. He felt insane. Completely insane.

Warden Asshole was openly glaring now. He did not like being ridiculed. He abruptly flipped the papers around and slapped them down in front of Bradley. "Sign here. Here. And here." He marked an ex in each spot to sign with his

gold Cross ball point pen. Then he handed Bradley a cheap plastic Pentel from his pencil holder.

Bradley signed, signed and signed: took his copies, and managed to get out the door before any more strange outbursts.

As soon as the guard at the main gate let Joey pass he pulled into the space marked VISITORS and waited. Within ten minutes Bradley emerged from the glass security doors at the front of the building with a guard escort. Joey watched the two men conversing pleasantly. Bradley eyed Joey's old pickup as they neared the lot but never quickened his pace. In fact, Joey had a sense that Bradley was almost reluctant to reach the truck. That is a strange boy, he thought.

Joey had never been an affectionate man, but on that day he was out of his driver's seat and embracing his nephew with his burly arms before either of them had a chance to say a word. Bradley returned the embrace roughly, in the way men hug each other, quick squeeze, slap, slap on the back. Uncle Joey stepped back abruptly, awkwardly, holding his nephew at arm's length so he could get a look at him. Bradley felt a lump come up in his throat. He swallowed it back down, afraid the freaky laugh might burst out again at any moment.

"Well! We need to put some weight on you!" Joey slapped him hard on the back, with the kind of affection he was accustomed to giving.

"With Mama's cooking I'm sure that won't be hard, Uncle Joey," was all Bradley could think to say as they both parted and climbed into the truck.

Joey silently turned the truck around. When they reached the outer gate the guard waved him on. Then he turned north onto the highway and headed for home. The drive would take about two hours.

Bradley did not turn around and look back at the prison as they drove away. For a while, he did not move. He was aware his emotions were swirling within him like a hurricane reversed, the eye being the storm and the outer edges being the frightening dead calm. The confusion made him numb and the only debris that got flung out of the fray was terror. It lay there like a broken stick on the floor of his stomach.

He feared going home almost more than staying in prison. If he had a choice, at that moment he wasn't sure that he would not choose the latter. What was home, anyway? In Big Mac he could wake up in the morning and know exactly how his day would be filled. He would work his shift in the kitchen, watch television on Tuesday and Thursday nights, get into his bunk and read until lights out, then drift off to sleep. Next morning he would mark an X through the previous day on his calendar. There was a rhythm to prison life, a structural routine so unmalleable day after day that it drove some men insane.

Bradley liked the structure. It allowed him the freedom to daydream. All the things he dreamed he would do once he got out! He could get his pilot's license. He could travel to California and Texas, maybe hike in the Rockies, see the ocean. Lose his virginity. It would all be possible the moment he stepped out those glass doors. Wouldn't it? Wasn't that what the word freedom meant? Possibilities.

But he was breathing the air of reality now. Of course he could not do any of those things, not now, not any time soon, maybe not ever. He would be on parole for 18 months. And

he would always be an ex con. Always. Reality. He would have to get a job and live with his mother and save some money. He was not free. Would he ever be truly free? It was easy to understand how so many guys wound up right back in the joint. Being out was scary as hell.

He felt like such a fucking loser already and he hadn't even begun the journey yet. What if he failed? What if he couldn't make it on the outside? His official parole had not even started and he had a powerful urge to bolt out of Uncle Joey's truck and run away to California. They would catch him and send him back to the joint. At least there he knew what to expect every day. But a life of possibilities? It was making him sick to his stomach.

As the lines on the highway came back into focus he watched them hypnotically. He liked the way they clicked away the miles. As terrified as he was to leave the only place he had known in his entire adult life, he felt better the further away they drove. Without taking his eyes from the road he reached into his plastic bag and felt around for his cigarettes. He pulled out his pack and held it up.

"Uncle Joey, you mind?"

"Go ahead." Joey waved his hand. "I gave them up, you know. If the good Lord had wanted me to smoke I suppose I'd have been born with a cigg in my mouth. So Thelma says."

"You miss 'em?"

"Every damn day. But you go ahead."

Bradley pulled one out and lit it. He rolled his window open an inch or so and took a deep drag off the cigarette. "My first cigarette as a free man," he said, relishing the warm tickle of the smoke down his throat.

Joey kept his left hand on the wheel as he reached down underneath his seat. Bradley immediately knew what he was searching for.

Joey brought out a nearly full pint of Canadian whiskey and offered Bradley the bottle. As he took the bottle a big grin appeared on his face. Wow. Uncle Joey treating him like a grown up, like one of the boys.

"Oooh, Aunt Thelma's going to be on the warpath, Uncle Joey!" Bradley unscrewed the cap and took a small drink, shivering as the fiery whiskey went down, the heat of it discernible all the way to his stomach.

"Woooo. That's good stuff, Uncle Joey."

"Did you ever drink whiskey in the joint?"

"Nothing like this. Just some homemade shit tasted closer to turpentine than whiskey. Stuff that rots your gut and sets your insides on fire."

"I've had some moonshine a time or two. Some good, some bad."

"Oklahoma was a dry state until, what, 1980? I bet you had all kinds in your time, Uncle Joey."

"There was a lot more of it then. But there were plenty of folks who ran liquor in from other states, too."

Joey shook his head as he took the bottle Bradley offered back to him. "Women just don't understand a man's got to have a nip now and then. A little hooch never hurt nobody." With that he checked his mirrors for approaching cars, then took a swig.

Bradley began to laugh at a boyhood memory.

"Remember how mad Aunt Thelma used to get when we'd come back from fishing after you'd had a few drinks? You would always deny it. One day she said to us, 'I'll fix your

uncle. I want you kids to tell me if you see him taking a drink on your fishing trips.' ”

Joey laughed as he rested the bottle upright on the seat between them. “And I'd tell you to look out the window until I said it was okay. Well, you never did see me take another drink, did you?”

“No, sir, we didn't. We smelled it, though. Sometimes we saw your reflection in the window glass, but we never saw you take another sip!” Bradley laughed. He took another drink. It went down smoother this time. But Aunt Thelma never did ask them if they had seen Uncle Joey drinking, because of course she always knew when he had been. Well, it was comforting to know some things hadn't changed.

Joey eyed the plastic garbage bag curiously, but thankfully never asked Bradley why he did not have the boom box they had bought him at Christmas. It was the sort of thing that would make Uncle Joey mad. He wouldn't understand Bradley leaving it to his cell mates. Instead he started talking about Bradley's future.

“I landed that job bid I was telling you about. Started in November. It'll be perfect for you to start back from the ground up. It is a new edition going up in east Broken Arrow. Nice homes. You'll get back in the swing of things in no time.....” He went on and listed all the things he had planned for Bradley; getting him a driver's license, a used car he had his eye on, opening him up a bank account.

Bradley rolled his window down a little further. He was beginning to feel the air in the cab pressing in on him. Aunt Thelma and Leah had already found him some jeans and work clothes at “them garage sales they go to”. The thought never occurred to Joey or to any of them that Bradley might

not want to work for Uncle Joey on his construction crew. He might want to choose his own clothes or decide for himself whether or not he wanted a bank account or that maybe he just wanted to be asked what he wanted. Bradley had a vision of them lined up talking all at once, each one telling him what he or she had planned for him to do. The feeling he had knowing there was no escape from the cold steel vertical bars descended upon him. Not a tangible thought really, but a feeling—like the way he felt after lockup every night. Cold metal locks clanging on metal. Slam. Slide. Click. So final. Undeniable. Hopeless. Feeling trapped only any prison out here was not going to have visible bars or audible slams, slides and clicks.

He shook it off. Couldn't let things get to him already. He wasn't even home yet. At least now, he was free. Free to gaze at the prairie and golden rolling hills of southeastern Oklahoma from an open highway in an old truck with a cold wind whistling through his window. Free to drink whiskey and laugh, both of which he did.

Joey did not ask him what he was laughing at. He always had been a strange boy, so quiet and thinking, all the time thinking about things. And Joey wasn't one to pry into people's private thoughts. He did have something important to tell him, though. "No one on the crew except Donnie knows you've been in prison. I mean, the way I figure it, it's none of their damn business."

"That's right. None of their damn business." Bradley laughed again.

"I think you've had enough of that." Joey took the whiskey and slid it back under the seat. He did not like the way Bradley's laugh sounded—mirthless and maybe a little

mean. It made him uncomfortable, the same way Bradley's father's laugh used to make him feel.

"You can do whatever you want. But if I were you, I wouldn't want them to know."

"None of their damn business," Bradley repeated. He was getting tipsy for sure.

They drove on toward Tulsa, talking about subjects that were open to them. Joey told Bradley the fishing had been good and promised to take him out in his bass boat. Bradley grew quieter as they got closer to Tulsa. He searched through the changes of the past eight years for familiar landmarks. They came in from the southeast where much of the open farmland had metamorphosed into suburban housing. Finally he spotted a familiar landmark.

"Dead Woodpecker Hill!" It was a church on a hilltop in Broken Arrow, a town about twenty miles southeast of Tulsa. A tall white steeple, which sported a low building on one side and on the other a series of arches beginning low from the steeple, then growing in width and height with each one, similar in style to the Sydney Opera House. The steeple was shaped like the beak of a long billed bird like a woodpecker, starting a bit wider around the base, then coming to a sharp point about a third taller than the tallest point of the widest arch. It was painted white and from the side it resembled an upside down woodpecker. When they were kids they used to call it Dead Woodpecker Hill. Being perched atop a single hill, it made the strange landmark Broken Arrow was known for.

But the church was about the only recognizable landmark left. The rolling hills of wheat and hay fields on either side of the expressway had been bought by developers and turned into an urban shopping mecca full of

big box stores, nationwide restaurant and fast food chains and assembly line, over-priced housing editions with names like Oak Acres and Whispering Hills.

Even the Broken Arrow sign had changed. The new sign had an orange sun with the silhouette of a bow and arrow aimed upward on it and the usual welcome to the city of Broken Arrow and some marketer's slogan underneath like it was a brand instead of a city. The old city logo showed the Oklahoma flag (a blue background with the Osage Indian shield, hung with eagle feathers and a calumet and an olive branch crossed in front of it) with a broken arrow above it. The image represented the pain and native blood spilled, the broken promises to the tribes that were here before and then the tribes that were forced here in the Trail of Tears, later to be decimated by the land runs.

"They just recently changed that." Joey shrugged. "Wanted to project a new image. I can't figure out what possessed 'em."

"I bet that silly looking thing was drawn up on a computer by some cat in a New York City office that ain't never set eyes on Oklahoma. Probably had to look it up on his atlas."

"One of the guys on my crew, name's Henry, he says they oughta change the name to Unbroken Arrow."

Joey kept going west on the Broken Arrow Expressway past all the old familiar exits, Sheridan, Harvard and Yale. They took the inner-dispersal loop and got on to 244 to head to the west side. Bradley watched the sights go by from the smudged windows of the old pickup. This part of Tulsa, old mid-town, looked the same. Trees lined each side of the freeway along the inner-dispersal expressway until a view of downtown opened up from the loop. Tulsa was built by rich oilmen in the ornate and decadent style of art deco from the

1920s and 1930s. It was a downtown one enjoyed just walking around in and he made a mental note to come down and explore. Or was that one of the things he used to want to do? His life had been on hold for so long, he wasn't sure if he could sort out stupid boyhood fantasies from legitimate desires. He had been nearly bursting with all these 'when I get my driver's license' type of dreams before everything came crashing down on it. In the joint a man keeps his desires simple and his dreams big. He desires sexual release, halfway decent food and no trouble with the badass inmates. The dreams are another story, with them the sky is the limit, because nobody actually believes he'll ever do anything decent again after doing what he has to do to survive in that hell hole. He was always telling stories about how he was going to get his pilot's license, learn Spanish and fly jets down in Mexico. "I'm gonna live on one of those touristy beaches like you see in the travel brochures and sip margaritas and eat chicken tamales all day when I'm not on duty." He knew just enough about flying to pull off the big talk. It was good to have a fantasy like that in prison, somehow it made the four walls not so close. J.T., one of his few friends inside, used to love for him to tell the story.

"Tell, me about the women on the beach," he'd say dreamily.

"Sweet. Well, Carlos knows how they are, cause all the girls in Mexico are pretty. Right, Carlos?" Bradley winked. He liked to tease Carlos in front of J.T., who thought anyone with a Hispanic name was from Mexico, even though Carlos had told him a thousand times he was not born there.

"I keep tellin' you idiots I ain't from Mexico. I ain't no greasy wetback. I'm Puerto Rican. Shit"

"It don't matter," J.T. said. "I bet all the girls are pretty just the same."

"Of course they are," Bradley said, picturing bikini-clad women on the beach with bronze skin such as he had seen in magazines, photos and movies.

It went on like that. He would embellish the story with as many crazy details as J.T. asked for, sometimes even down to the clothes the women wore. He enjoyed making up the stories as much as J.T. liked listening to them. Of the three buddies, Carlos was the only one who had actually been anywhere. J.T. and Bradley had never traveled outside their own counties.

"Is there a stewardess," J. T. asked with salacious, watery eyes.

"Huh?"

"You know. On your airplane. I picture a gorgeous stewardess with a mini skirt, you know, like the kind they used to wear."

"Whose fantasy is this?" Bradley playfully slugged J.T. on his upper arm. "Of course," he answered, after a thoughtful pause. "Her name is Cynthia. Not Cindy. Cynthia."

"Cynthia," J.T. repeated reverently.

"And nobody calls them stewardesses anymore, man. She's a flight attendant. And she's a totally modern woman. We spend weekends together and go on day trips exploring the Mayan pyramids, and taking long leisurely walks on the beach."

Carlos laughed. "Sounds like a profile on a dating website."

"X-rated website."

"Oh, yeah?"

He elbowed Carlos. "Yeah, because after that long walk we are gonna lie on the beach and make love as the sun sets across the water." Bradley held his arm straight out and gazed off in the distance at his imaginary sunset.

Carlos said, "You better take a blanket, cause that bitch gonna be pissed when sand gets all up in her ass."

They all laughed. Then Carlos got serious. "Hey, man. You oughta be a writer."

"No way. I'm just fooling around. My fantasies are probably lame compared to yours."

"Nah, I can't do that shit."

"Me, neither," J.T. said. "All I wanna do when I get out is see my Mama and hang with my yankas in my old hood."

"All I think about is gettin' me a job. I don't care what it is, just something so's Yolanda and me can get our own place."

Bradley asked him, "are you going back to the work you used to do?"

"I don't know. I don't really wanna go back to picking crops, but I don't wanna be a dishwasher in some restaurant kitchen, either. Maybe I'll try to get into a construction job. But Bradley, you a dreamer, man. You make up great stories. Yeah, you could be a writer, for sure," Carlos said. Bradley knew he meant it. Carlos was no dummy.

Bradley shrugged. "That's my sister's deal." Vanessa was always the one who wanted to be a writer.

Becoming a pilot was an old boyhood dream. He put it in his fantasy stories because somewhere inside he didn't believe it would ever happen. Prison had put everything on hold. At twenty-six his goals seemed so much further away than they had at seventeen. Whether he could actually do it

was questionable. Being an ex-con would definitely cut down on his job prospects. Hell, even if he got a license, nobody would hire him. And he would always be an ex con. Always.

But he had never forgotten the sensation he had when he was a kid and his dad's friend took them up in his small Cessna. Many nights when he couldn't sleep, he'd lay awake in his bunk and dream about being behind the yoke of a Cessna like that, high up in the sky, flying over the city like a free bird without a care. His problems would seem as small as the grid of tiny buildings and roads down below.