

The Lost Boy

by Neal McKenna
- *Taken from Evil Little Stories* -

He stood on the edge of the thicket, watching her and what remained of the house. He was still a boy. From a distance, he looked the same as he always had, except for his eyes, of course. She could not see, but she knew the boy's eyes stared, without recognition or hope. Dusk gathered. Four times she had returned.

Four times she would leave alone. The pilgrimage, now nearly a half-century old, had been reduced to liturgy. This *had* to be the last time, she promised herself. She was too old. She held two salt tablets in her hand. They were ancient and dirty and would likely never be used. Nothing would be changed. He had been trained to keep his distance. He might never be set free and she would always remember. She always hoped to forget.

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It was not her imagination. He *was* watching her! For the third day in a row, a scrawny boy, not more than twelve years, stood motionless, almost lost in the thicket of alders. Gloria Dixon patted transplanted scotch marigolds, still rooted within dark Wisconsin clay, into the baked southern soil. Golden heads drooped in the relentless August sun. She stood up from her gardening and shaded her eyes with a gloved hand. On impulse, she waved. The boy continued to stare in her direction without acknowledgment.

Slowly, he turned and vanished into the tangled green of the grove.

"Miz Dixon?" The voice was soft and tentative but its close proximity caused her heart to pound. An electric tingle danced along her spine. She jerked about to find Lem Suggit, the handy man she had just hired, closer than arm's reach.

"Ah'm sorry, Miz Dixon," he said in his unhurried drawl. "Didn't mean t' jar yuh none."

"Lem!" She suddenly laughed. Her heart still pounded. "I didn't hear you!"

She took a step back. "I was watching that boy in the woods." She pointed to the underbrush beyond the fence. "Does he live close by?"

Lem Suggit did not look. "Ain't nobody livin' out this far 'cept fer you, Ma'am. Most o' the ol' farm houses ain't even standin' no more, not since b'fore the last War. Nearest people in that direction's about five mile away."

"You didn't see a boy? Wearing faded blue denims and a T-shirt. On the skinny side?"

His expression darkened just for a moment. "No, Ma'am," Lem Suggit shook his head. "Didn't see no one at all."

"You're sure."

"Purely sure, Miz Dixon, purely sure." Lem's face split into a wide grin as he tried to make light of the subject. "That description jus' bout covers every kid livin' in the county. But I didn't see no boy."

“That’s odd.” She turned back to the stand of alders, sensing the boy still watched from some secret place in the shadows. She quelled a shiver but experienced its icy burn.

“Ma’am, ah came t’ tell yuh ah’m done with the white-washin’. Ah’ll get ‘nother coat on the house startin’ Monday mornin’.” He paused. “Planted some snapdragons ah brung from home. Thought they’d pretty things up.”

“More flowers, Lem?” She smiled courteously. “That was very thoughtful of you.”

“T’wern’t nothin, Ma’am. Yer welcome.” He nodded grinning. “An’ I fixed the screen on the back porch. If y’cain’t think o’ nothin’ else that needs fixin’ jus’ now, I’d like t’call it a day.”

“Did you manage to get the television antenna put up?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I did,” he drawled. “An’ it purely was a hellish job.” He wiped his sweaty brow with the back of his hand. “But, I left yuh lots o’ that flat cable-wire. You’ll have to bring it in through th’ winduh.”

“Fine.” Gloria Dixon forced a new smile. “I’ll write you a check if you don’t mind.” She put more distance between herself and the handyman. “I don’t think I have quite enough on hand to pay you for the week.” She walked in the direction of the house.

“Pay me what you can then, ma’am, in cash money. I’ll collect the rest ‘nother time.”

She grasped the handgrip on the wooden screen door. New metal mesh hung silvery white and taut in the opening. Hammered securely into the wood, three tiny nail heads formed a decorative triad below the clasp. “Lem, you’ve done a wonderful job of the screen door. But what’s this?” She pointed to the nail heads.

“I’ve seen this somewhere before.”

“It’s m’mark, Ma’am,” he replied, “fer good luck.”

“Thank you for the thought, Lem,” she said, a little too brusquely, “but I don’t believe in luck.”

She stepped through the threshold. In the kitchen, new wallpaper and fresh white paint made the room seem larger. Chintz curtains momentarily fluttered on an unexpected breeze. The sudden gust was scorching.

Doris Day sang “*Orange Colored Sky*,” music spilling from the bread-box sized radio on top of the refrigerator. The lilting voice, absent of drawl, was reassuring.

Gloria Dixon pulled two green bills from her purse.

Lem Suggit stood outside the screen door and wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

“All I have is twenty dollars.” She moved towards the screen door. “I’ll have to give you the other five at the first of the week.”

The handyman opened the porch door but did not step inside. “That’ll be fine, Ma’am.” He pulled a red flannel cloth that served as a handkerchief from his overalls pocket and daubed his sweaty face and the back of his darkly tanned neck.

“It’s awfully hot.” She felt obliged to be gracious. “Would you like to come in for a glass of lemonade or some ice tea? I have both.”

“No, ma’am.”

She was relieved.

“Ah am powerful thirsty,” he quickly added, “but ah cain’t. Ah cain’t come intuh this house.”

“Of course you can.” She felt her body relax. “Especially if I invite you.” She chuckled softly.

“Are you afraid of what the neighbors might think, Lem?”

“No, ma’am.” he remained serious. “Ah jus’ cain’t come inside.”

“Why not?”

He hesitated a moment. “Ma’am, it’s jus’...” She watched him struggle to find the words. “Ma’am, it ain’t safe fer me t’ go intuh this house.”

“What do you mean? Is the roof going to fall in? Will the floor crash down into the cellar? Just exactly what are you afraid of?”

“Ah’m powerful feared o’ ‘witched places.”

She blinked. “What?”

“This here’s where...”

Gloria Dixon shook her head, not believing her own conclusion. “You think the house is haunted. You think Jim Dixon is still here, just because he died in this house.”

“No, it ain’t got nothin’ to do with the old doc,” Lem blurted almost apologetically. “It’s what happened here after he passed on.”

“What happened here?”

“Ah shun’t be talkin’ ‘bout this, not t’n outsider.”

“Well, Lem, that seems a little unfair.” Gloria Dixon put the two ten dollar bills into her pocket. She moved back into the kitchen. “Fine, I can be that way, too.”

Suggit stood with his mouth gaping.

She took a tall glass from the cupboard. Deliberately, as though performing a ritual, she opened the refrigerator door. A glass pitcher tinted a cool green and filled with lemonade rested on an upper shelf.

She pulled a tray of ice from the tiny center freezer compartment. Ice cubes were set free from the aluminum receptacle with the grinding crackle of a metal lever. Vitreous chunks clattered with a ringing sound to the bottom of the tall tumbler. Lemonade splashed over them and the ice clattered again.

Perspiration trickled down Lem Suggit’s face. Water droplets condensed and bled along the sides of the frosty glass. Gloria held it in her hand. She watched his adam’s apple bob as he swallowed hard.

With a determined stride, she crossed the kitchen and the narrow porch. She thrust the lemonade into his hand. “I think you need this.”

“Thank y’, ma’am,” he grinned and drained the glass in a gulp. He drew a deep breath.

“Why do you think this house is bewitched, or cursed, or hexed, or whatever you believe it is? Lem, you don’t believe in that mumbo jumbo stuff, not really, do you?”

“There’s goin’s on here, ma’am, y’ain’t likely t’ believe in. Y’ain’t from here.” He enunciated carefully, “Yuh cain’t possibly understan’.”

“Lem, I...”

“No, Miz Dixon.” He looked her straight in the eye and she knew it was the time for listening.

“Y’all jus’ attend me a minute. Ah knows yuh think we’s all a bunch o’ ignorant country folk. An’ fer what it’s worth, that might be true, but what we believe in, *that’s* truth too. Some people here got the *power* and they uses it fer no good. Really, ma’am, it don’t concern you none.”

* * *

Gloria Dixon’s fifth weekly trek to Jerome, Arkansas occurred on a Saturday.

Comprised of stops at the general store for groceries and more wallpaper, the butcher shop for what passed for meat, and the post office for word from the outside world, she stretched the time in town to more than half a day. She left the bank just before three o’clock in the afternoon. The air was still. Her long auburn hair hung in a limp tangle, pulled back into a ponytail and tied with a white chiffon scarf. She studied her reflection in a shaded store window and did not like what she saw. The printed cotton halter dress she wore clung damply in the sweltering afternoon. Sweat trickled between her breasts. Beneath a faded canvas awning, she imagined herself melting into a puddle of tallow on the street corner.

Gloria Dixon’s dark blue Packard eased from its parking place into the sparse traffic of Jerome’s Main Street. Though a full three years old, the car was the newest and most extravagant automobile in all of Drew County. Old men and little boys turned their heads as she drove by. It never occurred to her they may not have been looking at the car.

The sedan bounded over the unpaved country road. Dust billows kicked up in a foggy wake. Back home, in Milwaukee, twenty miles was a junket across town.

Here, the same distance delivered her to absolute isolation. She drove on. The air moved but remained hot. With care, she chose not to allow her eyes to probe the ruin of a long-ago abandoned house.

Only another couple of miles, she reminded herself. She fixed her attention on the road but still perceived the desolation. Invisible eyes watched; she felt them, lurking in the dark hollows of empty window frames. “Damn you, Lem Suggit!”

She cursed out loud. “Damn you and your wild, superstitious stories.” She tried to laugh at herself but could not. She slowed the car as it neared the dark thicket. Shrilling cicadas suddenly stilled. She thought of the boy again. The Packard sedan negotiated the long driveway.

Surrounded by open fields and a copse of low trees beyond, the little farmhouse stood white and correct in the afternoon sun. Further back, a chicken coop and a barn appeared dingy gray, still waiting for their coats of fresh

whitewash. Safely home, she felt foolish. The farm was a peaceful, friendly place. The house was not haunted, she knew that. She began unloading supplies.

“You the lady o’ the house?” The voice was ragged and coarse.

Gloria responded with a gasp. A paper bag containing a jar of pickles and two quarts of milk leaped to the gravel with a splat. She couldn’t speak. The woman continued. “M’name’s Arvina Judd. Y’are ol’ Doc Dixon’s daughter-in-law, ain’t ya?”

“Yes,” she gasped, at last able to breathe. “That’s right.” She took another breath and placed a hand over her thumping heart. “Does everybody around here prowl about so quietly? I’m forever having the life scared out of me!” She returned her attention to the ruin of pickles and milk on the ground. “Oh, Lord, what a mess!”

The woman took no notice but commenced with her objective. “This here’s m’ son, Ransom. We jus’ call ‘im Ransey.” The boy slowly stepped forward. He was barefoot. A tattered straw hat with a wide brim rested on his head. He wore faded denim overalls and dirty T-shirt.

“Hello, Ransey,” Gloria smiled, extending her hand. “We’ve already met, well, sort of.” The boy made no attempt to complete the offered greeting.

Uncomfortable, she rubbed her moist palms together.

“Ah figured y’all must be needin’ help on the farm.” Arvina Judd continued her sales pitch. “Y’ bein’ a woman all alone here an’ such. Ah means since the ol’ Doc passed on an’ yer man bein’ off t’ the war.”

“Well, Mrs. Judd, I appreciate the concern but I’ve already hired Lem Suggit. I really don’t think I’ll be needing anyone else.”

“Y’ won’t get no decent day’s work out o’ that lay-about, mark my words, missy. Y’all need a real good worker like m’ Ransey here.” The boy stood silently, not once looking up.

“An’ ah know m’ boy’ll cost y’ a lot less.” Arvina Judd gained the momentum of an over-wound mechanical toy.

Gloria tried to guess the woman’s age.

“Ransey’ll work fer three dollars a day. Lem Suggit costs y’ more’n that, don’t he?”

Gloria again looked at Ransey Judd. His head hung listlessly. Ribs showed obviously beneath his shirt. On impulse, Arvina Judd removed the boy’s straw hat.

He did not blink his eyes in the bright light. His cheeks were hollow, his skin an unnatural pallor of yellow-gray. “Oh, my!” Gloria reached out to touch the ashen cheek. “He doesn’t look well.”

Arvina Judd intercepted with a growl. “The boy’s just fine.” Gloria pulled her wrist from the woman’s grasp. “He don’t like bein’ touched by strangers.” Arvina Judd quickly shifted gears, returning to her line of persuasion. “Ransey’s a lot stronger ‘n he looks. He can work in the garden an’ do yer chores. He’s quick, my Ransey. Yuh only have t’ show him somethin’ once. There won’t be no cause fer complaint, ah can promise y’ that.”

Gloria again looked at the boy. Ransey Judd stood quietly, seeming to be in a daze. She could only think about getting proper, nutritious food into him.

“All right,” she nodded. “He’s hired. He can start Monday at nine. I’ll include lunch and he can go home at four in the afternoon.” She turned to the boy.

“Would that be all right with you, Ransey?”

“No, ma’am,” the woman spoke firmly, “Our place is more ‘n five mile away. Ah don’t want Ransey walkin’ back an’ forth every day.”

“Well, the house is very small and my own son will be arriving soon. I don’t exactly know where Ransey could sleep during the week.”

“What about the hired man’s room out in the barn?” The old woman knew the Dixon farm well. “That’d do him just fine.”

“Oh, no. I couldn’t let him sleep in the barn all alone. I could make a bed for him on the sofa.”

“No, Ransey wouldn’t like that.” Arvina Judd’s head wobbled. “He’s a poor sleeper. Ah wouldn’t want him disturbin’ ya. An’ as fer feedin’ ‘im, ah’ll take care o’ that m’self. Ransey’s got a finicky stomach. Aversions, y’ know? Ah knows what he can an’ cain’t eat. When ah come by each day, y’ can give me the money.”

“But if Ransey’s doing the work, isn’t the money his?”

Arvina Judd sniffed. Her exasperation was evident. “Miz Dixon, we’s jus’ poor folk here. Everybody’s poor, ‘ceptin’ fer a few. We don’t have time fer no high-falutin’ notions like that. Ah have other young-uns t’ feed and their Pa’s dead. Ransey’s the only one old enough t’ work.”

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Someone pounded on the back porch door. Gloria dropped her mending on the sofa and ran to the kitchen. Three rapid thumps sounded again. The screen door made a clack, clack, clack noise. She opened the back door. Lem Suggit stared in the direction of the chicken coop. He continued to hammer the screen door with his fist.

“Lem, what is it?”

He turned to her but gestured to the boy. “What in the devil’s name is that thing doing here?” She saw revulsion in his eyes.

Ransey flung meal from a canvas pouch in a slow side-to-side motion. Instead of flocking around him, hens and half-grown chicks circled but kept their distance.

As he passed, the birds scurried to the food and pecked it up.

“That’s the boy I was asking about last Friday. Remember? He’s going to help with the chores.”

“That’s Arvina Judd’s bond-boy!” He swallowed hard. “Ma’am, you don’t want him here. There ain’t gonna be nothin’ but trouble.”

“Well, Lem,” she smiled a knowing smile. “At least the Judd boy showed up for work yesterday, and on time. That’s more than *you* can say.”

“Ah had some trouble with m’ truck.” He pointed to a freshly crumpled fender. “Went off the road yesterday, on m’ way over here. No reason fer it neither, jus’ went off the road. Ah coulda been killed.”

Ransey Judd approached, the chickens still trailing at a distance. Lem Suggit grew more agitated. "...And no, ma'am, that boy ain't Arvina Judd's son." He shook his head emphatically. "He ain't even a boy no more."

Gloria Dixon was losing patience. "Shouldn't you get started painting the chicken house?"

"Ma'am, ah'm tellin' yuh, y'gotta get rid o' that kid. True 'nuff, he ain't nothin' but spooky. But wherever he is, Arvina's sure t' be close at hand. An' she ain't t'be trifled with."

"This is nonsense, Lem."

"No, it ain't!" He raised his voice angrily. "I'm tryin' to tell yuh somethin' important. Watch out fer Arvina Judd. She has the power and she *will* use it agin' yuh. Especially if you got somethin' she wants."

"What could I have that Mrs. Judd would want?"

"Could be jus' about anythin'." His voice grew more hurried and shrill as Ransey neared. "But, don't ever invite her into yer house and don't ever give her any stuff of yourn. Without that, she's got no purchase over you." He abruptly clasped a hand over his mouth as though he had given up a terrible secret. "I've done as much as I can to protect you an' yer house. But there's only so much I can do. Believe me, Miz Dixon, the woman is a practitioner of evil."

"Shhhhh," she scolded. "He's going to hear. If you've got more to say, tell it to me inside."

"No, ma'am, ah cain't."

"Lem, I've just about had enough of this! Either you speak your mind in the house or you get to hell to work. What's it to be?"

Ransey neared the house. Lem Suggit grasped the small pouch that hung around his neck on a leather thong. He rubbed it with his fingers and hastily nodded.

"Awright, ah'll come inside." Lem Suggit stepped gingerly over the threshold and into the kitchen. He looked about the room warily. "Miz Dixon, ah hope y'ain't plannin' t'eat those." He pointed to the vegetables sitting on the drain-board.

"Excuse me?"

"Them cucumbers."

"Yes, I think they're English cucumbers. I picked them this morning. They were growing next to the garden."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout no English cucumbers," Lem Suggit motioned to the vegetables, "but those ain't them."

"Well, what do you call them?" Gloria's tone was patronizing.

"People in these parts calls 'em zombie cucumbers. That's 'cause they's real poisonous. They do bad things t' the brain."

"You're sure?" She picked up a cucumber and examined it. "These things are poisonous?"

"Yes, ma'am, ah am." He nodded his head in all sincerity. "These things is powerful bad."

"Well, Lem," she exhaled a deep breath. "It looks like I am in your debt."

“No, Ma’am, I’m jus’ glad I could warn yuh before y’done yerse’f any harm.”

“Yes, I am, too,” Gloria agreed. “Lem, go on into the living room and make yourself comfortable. I’ll get us some cold drinks and you can tell me what you have to say about the Judd boy.”

In the living room, Lem Suggit stood nervously. On the television, Senator Joseph McCarthy interrogated yet another Hollywood writer. Gloria entered the room carrying a black tray. On it were two glasses of ice tea and a plate of store-bought cookies. She placed the tray on the coffee table and settled onto the sofa.

“Would you mind turning that off?” She pointed to the combination radio-television receiver. “And then please, Lem, sit down. You’re not on trial, you know.”

“Ain’t never seen one o’ these things up close b’fore.” He gazed at the balding man in the three-piece suit on the blue screen. “‘Ceptin’ fer the one in the winduh o’ Floyd Burley’s store.”

“Perhaps you and your wife can come over some evening.” She got up and switched off the television set. Lem Suggit sat stiffly on a turquoise hostess chair, enduring his nervousness. “Lem, I don’t like all this hocus-pocus stuff about curses and witches. It’s unhealthy superstition. After all, this is 1954, not the dark ages.”

The Senator from Wisconsin roared at full volume. “*Is it not true you are affiliated with the Communist Party?*” The picture flashed and rolled. “*Have you not, in fact, been a member of the Communist Party since March, 1938?*” Gloria leaped forward. She twisted a large knob on the front of the television. The voice thundered. “*Is it not true the entire American Film Industry has been subver...*”

She ripped the plug from the wall.

Lem Suggit was gone.

“Lem!” She ran out the back door. The truck’s engine was already racing.

“Lem, it’s just a *short* in the switch.” Metal clashed against metal within the manual transmission. “Just a *short*, that’s all! I meant to get it fixed before I left Wisconsin.”

The battered Ford pick-up lurched forward. Bald tires clawed into gravel. A flurry of squawking chickens exploded in all directions. Oblivious, Ransey stepped onto the roadway. Gloria Dixon screamed.

Fishtailing, the truck swung wide, tires again screeched their protest. Ransey Judd’s straw hat flew high into the air. Head lolling, he continued his unhurried pace. A gray dust plume chased Lem Suggit as he made his escape.

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An electric fan hummed on the windowsill. Its oscillating head cut swaths of motion in the hot dimness. A full moon bathed a patch of floor with fluorescent white light. The alarm clock tick-ticked with an irritating meter. Luminous numerals glowed from the dresser—almost ten past two in the morning. Gloria

tossed in the double bed. She prayed for sleep. More than the night's heat, anticipation was what was keeping her awake.

Tomorrow was the day! The prospect of leaving the farm, heading off to Little Rock was curiously exhilarating. Charmaine and Teddy would arrive by train at eleven o'clock. Teddy! Her baby would be home tomorrow. Even if she did not sleep a wink, she promised herself, she would be on the road by seven.

Her rayon nightgown was suddenly unbearable. She shrugged it off and poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the nightstand. Tepid water moistened her parched throat. She moved to the window and the brightness of the night. He should have been asleep! Ransey Judd faced the house. Modestly, she stepped back into the shadows. He sat motionless in the doorway of the barn. Slack arms rested on bony knees. Head tilted back, his face was a sardonic mask. Sparse strands of hair seemed directly attached to his skull. Dull eyes stared, locking with hers.

* * *

The Packard came to life with the first turn of the key. Gloria Dixon shifted into first gear and the car rolled gently along the dusty driveway. She had to stop to open the wide wire gate. Somehow, it had closed during the night. *The wind must have blown it shut*, she rationalized, but she knew that was impossible.

As she unlatched the gate, she saw it. At the edge of the road, a dead shrub had been hammered into the earth. It was a chilling parody of a Christmas tree. Each naked stem was trimmed with carefully blown eggshells. They jostled on threads in the wind. She suddenly became angry and shouted. "You're not going to scare me with all this mumbo-jumbo stuff, Lem Suggit!" She marched over to the tree and pulled it from the ground. "You're not going to scare me!" She hurled the bush into the ditch. Delicate eggshells shattered.

Powered with anger, Gloria Dixon yanked the gate with both hands, soiling her white gloves. It was heavy and scrubbed the grass beneath it. With sheer determination, she dragged it open enough to allow the car passage. She was inside the Packard again. The engine started with a rumble and she tromped the accelerator. The car sailed over the dirt road, swiftly climbing into rolling hills.

The moving air was almost cool. As she drove farther away from the farm and the strange denizens of Jerome, Arkansas, she felt relaxed for the first time in weeks.

* * *

Gloria Dixon looked steadily forward, aiming her car over the smooth ribbon of blacktop. Teddy lay asleep on the back seat. She glanced at her younger sister.

Charmaine knelt on the wide bench seat, her feet curled beneath her. She wore a counterfeit Dior travel suit and a faintly pink blouse. The jacket, made of a light wool silk, was slung over the seat back. Obligatory white gloves were knotted together beside her. White patent leather heels lay on the floor.

It was difficult to think of Charmaine as grown and married. Married to Stavros Pensintis of all people! Gloria was not quite sure if she approved. Stavros is old enough to be—*well, to be her uncle*—at the very least. She silently wondered if perhaps little sister had married more for lucre than love. *Maybe she loves him and his money.* She smiled, enjoying her own wickedness. The smile faded quickly.

Well, at least, her husband is safe at home. Gloria Dixon tried not to think of her own situation.

Charmaine Pensintis pulled a chrome-plated compact from her white patent leather handbag.

“Glo?” She dabbed powder on her cheeks and nose.

“Hmmm?” Gloria aimed the fast moving car along the highway.

“You’re sure everything’s okay. At the farm, I mean. It hasn’t been a mistake moving there, has it?”

“No, of course not.” Her manner was furtively cheerful. “Besides, what choice did I have? Really.”

“I don’t know. You made up your mind pretty quickly.”

“Well, when Ward’s father died, it was up to me to take care of things. Ward certainly couldn’t now, could he?” She shrugged. “After the funeral, it just made sense to make the move. Why live in a rented place in the city when we’d just inherited a farm in the country? With Ward still away overseas, you have to admit there wasn’t much to keep me in Milwaukee.”

“But the Ozarks!” Charmaine Pensintis pulled a face. “Isn’t it a little uncivilized for a city girl?”

“Jerome isn’t in the Ozarks!” She returned her sister’s grimace. “The Ozarks are the mountains up north. Actually, I think it’s quite charming down here. Besides, I’m working at becoming a country girl.”

“Yeah, you and Grace Kelly,” she laughed. “And I think you both may have been tragically miscast. So, what do you and the other ‘country girls’ do at night? Where’s the excitement?”

“Charm, I’m up at six most mornings.” A hint of exasperation colored her words. “Night life consists of *Uncle Miltie* or *December Bride* on the TV and into bed by nine. In between, I paint, and paper, and sew, and try to get the farm into some semblance of order. Trust me, that’s plenty to keep me busy.”

“Then what’s the matter with you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Glo, this is me, *Charmaine*, the blunt one, remember? I could pretend to be polite and wait for you to tell me what’s going on, but that’s not my style.”

“No, really,” Gloria insisted. “There’s nothing going on. Everything is just fine, especially now that you and Teddy are here.”

“Listen, I don’t have to be hit with a brick. We’ve been talking non-stop for two hours. And, up until a minute ago, you hadn’t said a solitary word about Ward.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“You haven’t heard from him?”

“Oh, two, maybe three weeks ago.” Gloria summoned a less than convincing smile. “His Unit is relocating. They’re dismantling the camp hospital. They’re all pulling out. It’s difficult to get word out sometimes. After all, Korea’s halfway around the world. It’s not like he can pick up the phone any time he feels like it.”

“Well, he could write or send a telegram.”

Gloria bit her lower lip to prevent the tears. “Oh, damn it all, Charm. All the way through the war, I never really worried about him. Ward’s entirely capable of looking after himself. He always finds a soft place to land, no matter what.” She adjusted the rearview mirror. Teddy continued to sleep on the back seat. A new toy, a helicopter, was clutched in his arms. “...Sally Walker was posted to his Section.”

“What!” Charmaine Pensintis blinked. “How in hell’s name did *that* little tramp manage to get assigned to his unit?”

“I suppose competent surgical nurses are still needed over there, maybe more so, now.”

“Yeah, and we all know, first hand, about her bedside manner.” She shook her head. “That scheming little witch. How long have you known?”

“Since before I left Milwaukee.”

“Oh, but you should have told me, Glo. I could have helped.”

“No, you couldn’t.” Her tone was emphatic. “I had to think this one out on my own and I have.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Charmaine sat correctly in the seat. “Gloria, this isn’t like you, not at all.”

“No, I’m *nothing* like me anymore. Besides, what am I supposed to do? Dash off to some godforsaken part of the world and claw her eyes out?” She never looked from the road.

“I just don’t understand why Ward has to stay there a minute longer.”

“He’s a doctor, for God’s sake. It’s been over with for almost a year.” She sighed and shook her head. “Oh, Charm, I’m so damn tired of it all. But the way I see it, whatever happens, it’s up to him.”

“And his soft place to land.”

“I can’t let myself think about her!” Gloria Dixon was determined not to cry.

“Not right now.”

* * *

Charmaine Pensintis faced the kitchen window. Hot water hissed into the deep porcelain sink. Lunch dishes disappeared beneath billows of white froth. “Well, Glo, you have to admit he’s an odd boy.”

Gloria continued mopping the linoleum floor. “Ransey isn’t strange, just unfortunate.”

“Well, I think he might have sticky fingers.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because my silver compact is missing.” She raised her eyebrows emphatically.

“And Teddy can’t seem to find the helicopter I bought for him in Milwaukee.”

“I’m sure there has to be some other explanation for it.” Gloria continued to mop the floor.

“Ransey does nothing but his work. I can’t believe he would steal anything.”

Charmaine Pensintis returned to washing the dishes. She looked out the window.

“Glo, who’s that?” Gloria placed her string mop into the bucket and joined her sister at the window. A bedraggled woman with graying hair tied in a knot at the back of her head trudged through the field. In each hand, a lard pail with a tin top securely fastened swayed on thin wire handles.

“Oh, that’s Arvina Judd, Ransey’s mother. She comes every day with his lunch.”

“Why don’t we feed him lunch?”

“It’s a long story. She comes every day with his food and collects his pay.”

“She takes his money? Aren’t there child labor laws in this part of the country?”

“Apparently not. I’ve seen the stuff she feeds him.” Gloria wrinkled her nose.

“It looks like wallpaper glue.”

Both watched through the window. Ransey stopped his methodical hoeing of the garden. Without turning, he moved sluggishly in the direction of the barn. Arvina Judd approached from behind, quickening her step until she was at his side.

No greeting was exchanged. Ransey sat in the doorway of the barn as the mucilaginous gruel was dolloped onto a tin plate. He ate unenthusiastically.

The screen door slammed. “Mom, I hate this stupid old farm.” Teddy tromped over the wet floor leaving black sneaker prints in his wake. He slouched dramatically on a chrome chair. “There’s nothin’ to do.”

“Theodore Dixon, the floor!” Gloria chastised.

“There’s nothin’ to do around here. I hate it.”

“There’s plenty to do, especially if it has to be done twice.” Gloria mopped the footprints away. “If you’re bored, why don’t you try to make friends with Ransey?”

“Aw, he’s weird. All he does is work.”

“Isn’t that amazing?” Her eyes flashed with momentary anger. “Imagine, a boy who doesn’t mind working. Have you considered giving it a try, just to see how it fits?”

“Your mother’s right.” Charmaine joined forces with her sister. “Maybe if you did a little something around the place, you wouldn’t find the time so long.”

“No, I mean it, that kid is really weird.” Teddy planted his feet squarely on the freshly mopped floor. “He never says anything and he smells funny.”

“Teddy,” Gloria knelt by her son. “Some little boys aren’t as fortunate as others. Ransey is what they call a mute; that means he’s not able to speak. It doesn’t make him weird, he’s just different.”

“Well, I have to admit I think he’s spooky too,” Charmaine concurred.

Gloria aimed a sharp look at her sister. “Well, thank you, Mrs. Pensintis,” she nodded her head in tired exasperation. “Your enlightened viewpoint is duly noted.”

Charmaine shrugged. “I think the kid’s a brick short of a load.”

“Charmaine, you’re not helping.”

Teddy grinned.

“I’m serious, Glo.” Charmaine continued to wash the lunch dishes. “When you look at him, you can tell. The lights are on, but nobody’s home.”

“No, that’s not true.” Gloria cut in quickly. “Ransey’s not stupid. I’ve seen enough of him to know for sure. Until he came here I’m certain he’d never saw a vacuum cleaner before, let alone ever used one. Now, every day, vacuuming the floors is a part of his regular routine. I swear, you only have to show him how to do something once and then he never forgets.”

“Yeah,” Teddy joined the conversation. “It’s like he’s a machine, or somethin’.” His face brightened. “Maybe he’s a robot! Like in this neat movie I saw last week at the La Salle, where a mad scientist takes this babe with really big bazooms and...”

“You saw a movie at the La Salle Theatre?” The question was addressed to Charmaine Pensintis, then to Teddy. “You saw a movie in a sleazy theatre in the toughest part of Milwaukee?”

Teddy shrugged. “Yeah, it was really neat.”

“It’s the first I’ve heard of it.” Charmaine pulled the stopper in the sink. Soapy water gurgled down the drain.

“Teddy, please, tell me you didn’t go to that place all alone.”

“Heck, no.” His reply was indignant. “How could I? Uncle Stav took me. The picture was called *Voodoo Woman*.” He looked up quizzically. “Mom, do you think Mamie Van Doren wears falsies?”

A quick, no-nonsense rap rattled the screen door. Stern-faced, Arvina Judd peered through the mesh opening. “Ah came to collect t’day’s earnin’s.” The door swung open with a squeak of dry hinges. She still carried one of the lard pails.

“Come in, Mrs. Judd.” Gloria went to the cookie jar and extracted three one dollar bills.

Charmaine and Teddy watched in silence.

The old woman faltered as she crossed the threshold. “Lordy, I do hate the smell of snapdrag....”

Her face reflected surprise as she noticed the metal triad beneath the door’s mechanical clasp. Her eyes grew blank, like Ransey’s, then rolled back, showing only the whites. Her body swayed stiffly, a sturdy bough in a strong gale. Her free hand groped the wooden casement for purchase. The spell passed in an instant.

Safely over the doorsill, full alertness returned. Arvina Judd looked back at the screen door as the coil spring slammed it shut behind her. Gloria saw suspicion—or was it recognition—in her face? She extended the three bills in her hand.

The woman pocketed the money without thanks. "Ah brung Ransey's lunch fer tomorra. Ah have business down to Pine Bluff an' won't be able t' bring it then."

"That's fine, Mrs. Judd." Gloria reached for the pail. "I'll keep it in the refrigerator."

"Jus' be sure t' bring his food out at breakfast time. Ransey likes his mash at room temperature. Cold vitals upsets 'im."

"I'll do that." Gloria forced a smile. "Mrs. Judd, I'd like to introduce my sister, Charmaine, and this is my son, Teddy."

The woman nodded her head curtly. "How do, ma'am." There was no friendliness in her voice.

She looked at Teddy. "Yer boy needs a haircut." Her eyes narrowed. "They ain't gonna allow him intuh no school here abouts with a shaggy mop like that."

She tousled his hair. A grimace curled her lips. Teddy stiffened then cautiously withdrew from her touch.

"I suppose he is getting a little woolly," Gloria agreed. "I guess we'll have to get you into town soon, won't we?"

"I guess." Teddy answered glumly.

"Ah could do it fer yuh." Arvina Judd's voice took on the persuasive qualities of a snake oil huckster. "Ah do it all the time fer m' own young-uns." Her grin widened, exposing chalk gray teeth. "I could do it right now. No charge."

"No." Teddy crossed his arms. "I'll get a haircut, but I want to go to a real barber."

"Hush, boy." Her voice crackled. "Ah can save yer ma a quarter dollar." She looked Gloria squarely in the face. "Ah'm only tryin' t'be neighborly, Miz Dixon."

"Well," Gloria looked at Teddy. "You are starting to look like the wild man from Borneo."

"I don't care!" Teddy was emphatic. "I don't want to look like a goof."

"Oh, is that all yer worried about?" Arvina Judd cackled. "I' bin doin' haircuts fer years. Y'don't have t' worry. I won't put a bowl on yer head."

A reluctant Teddy sat in the middle of the kitchen, draped in a bed sheet. Arvina Judd worked her magic with comb and scissors. Clipped hair surrounded the chair on the shiny linoleum floor. "There!" The old woman snipped the scissors, cutting away stray strands. "That' should just about do it." Teddy sat with his eyes clamped shut. "He don't look bad, now, do he?"

"No," Gloria agreed. "He looks wonderful." She held a framed mirror before her son. "Come on, Teddy, you might as well take a look." Slowly, he opened his eyes. They grew wide with relief and astonishment. The kid in the mirror had a regular haircut. It was short, but he didn't look like a goof.

Arvina Judd smiled at her handiwork and walked over to the broom propped behind the kitchen door. She stooped for the dustpan with a groan. Returning to the center of the room, she began sweeping the floor.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Judd," Gloria protested. "You've done enough. Let me do that."

“No, you just stand back, missy,” the old woman almost barked. Her tone softened. “I started th’ job an’ I’ll see it through to completion.” Stiffly, she dropped to one knee and swept the clump of hair into the dustpan.

“Thank you, Mrs. Judd. This has been very kind of you. Are you sure I can’t pay you something?”

“No, Miz Dixon, ‘course not!” She rose to her feet with great effort. “That’s what neighbors do fer each other ‘round these parts.”

“Well, then, let me take that for you.” Gloria reached for the filled dustpan.

Arvina Judd shrank away. “No!” She growled. “It ain’t no trouble.” Again she revised her tone to be more congenial. “I have t’be on m’way, as it is. I can get rid o’ this mess on the compost pile.”

* * *

Charmaine buttered thick slabs of bread and stacked crisp leaves of lettuce on generous swaths of egg salad. She shook salt and pepper over the creation before top slices were laid into place. She cut the sandwiches diagonally and stacked them on a stoneware platter. A garnish of green olives with red pimento eyes added pellets of necessary color.

She looked at the pail of pasty-white gruel warming on the porcelain drain board. The stuff bubbled as though obscenely alive. Her nose wrinkled. Reluctant but swift, she grasped the tin top with thumb and forefinger snapping it over the yawning opening of the bucket. She shuddered and immediately washed her hands in the dishwasher.

Quickly, she set out four places. She laid the platter of sandwiches in the center of the kitchen table. The incessant drone of the vacuum cleaner came from the living room. Carefully, she poured glasses of ice tea. “Okay, everybody, lunch is ready. Come and get it!” She followed the noise. “Teddy? Glo?”

His back to her, Ransey lethargically raked the living room carpet. The sight of him set her skin crawling. She stopped herself from slipping back into the security of the kitchen. “Ransey,” she called over the whine of the vacuum cleaner’s motor.

“It’s time for lunch. You can stop now.”

His movements reminded her of an automatic record changer, precise but without awareness. He stepped on the power switch. The rasping drone died away.

He did not turn around. “Ransey,” she repeated, “it’s time for lunch. You can eat with us in the kitchen today. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Ransey Judd unplugged the vacuum cleaner and picked up the canister. He carried it away without a word. Charmaine hugged herself as though the room had turned cold. This time, she did escape to the kitchen.

She opened the refrigerator door and extracted a large glass bowl. In it was a mixture of cubed potatoes and chopped vegetables. All that remained to do was add mayonnaise and crushed dill, then it would be her super-deluxe potato salad.

She mixed the final ingredients with a long wooden spoon. She turned, holding the container. Her heart pounded in her chest. A shudder rocked her entire body.

Charmaine Pensintis let out a stifled shriek. Ransey Judd sat at the table.

Somehow, she managed to catch the bowl before it crashed to the floor. “Oh, God!” She gasped, still feeling her heart flutter. “You scared the b’jesus out of me!” He sat motionless, staring blankly.

“You must be hungry.” She tried to compose herself. “I’ll just get you some potato salad,” she said, placing a large lettuce leaf on his plate and dolloped a generous scoop of the creamy mixture onto it.

Charmaine turned again to look at him and immediately didn’t want him touching the food she or anyone else might be eating. Forcing herself, she moved to the table. She placed a sandwich half on his plate next to the salad. Reaching across the table, she quickly put lunch in front of him. “It’s all right, Ransey,” she urged, “you can start without us.” Slowly, he reached for the sandwich.

* * *

“I can’t seem to find Ransey.” Gloria Dixon entered the kitchen. “Have you seen him?” She stopped abruptly. Charmaine sat trembling on a chrome chair. Her face was ashen, mouth slack. “Charm?”

She ran to her sister. “What’s happened?”

She stared blankly in the same way Ransey did.

“Charm?” Gloria shook her lightly. “What’s happened?”

“He spoke to me, Glo.” Her voice was an expressionless whisper.

“Who spoke to you?”

“Ransey.”

“What do you mean?” Gloria knelt down in front of her sister. A guiding hand turned Charmaine’s face until their eyes locked. “Where is he now?”

“Gone,” Charmaine answered in a low, listless voice. “I gave him some lunch.”

A hint of awareness returned. “Some *real* lunch. He only had a few bites and then he got up. And then he....”

“He *what*, Charm? What did he do?”

“He walked over to me and put his arms around my waist.” She shuddered remembering it. “He hugged me. And then, he said ‘*thank-you.*’ Oh my God, Glo, I never heard a voice like that before. It sounded like it came from the grave!”

“You gave him regular food?” Gloria bolted to the door, her eyes searching the field and the hills beyond. “You shouldn’t have done that! Regular food isn’t supposed to be good for him.” She sensed movement near the thicket. “Ransey, come back!” She ran outdoors, past the chicken coop. “Ransey! If you have to go home, I can drive you there. Please wait!” He was already gone.

Gloria rushed into the house. She snatched her purse, which hung on a coat peg by the door. Frantically, she rummaged through it. "Damn it! I can't find my car keys!"

"Where are you going?" Charmaine was beginning to recover.

"I have to find him, Charm."

Charmaine pointed to the top of the refrigerator. "Up there." Gloria grabbed the key ring. Metal clattered against metal. "Make sure Teddy eats lunch." She again moved to the door. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Charmaine Pensintis was on her feet and running after her older sister. "No, Glo, please," she shouted. Panic etched each word. "Please! Don't leave us all alone!" Gloria was already in the car. The engine started with a roar. The large sedan lurched forward. Tires squealed. Charmaine watched from the back porch and began to cry.

* * *

Dusk gathered like a shroud over the landscape. Gloria Dixon eased up on the accelerator as the Packard neared the open gate. The car had scarcely come to a stop when Charmaine bounded from the house and down the back porch steps.

"Did you find him?" Her voice shook. "Is he all right?" Silently, Gloria got out of the car. "Glo?" Charmaine went to her sister. "Glo? Are you all right?" Gloria did not respond. "Glo, please talk to me," she pleaded. "You're scaring me!"

Gloria drew a slow, deep breath. "Nothing happened. Nothing at all."

"You didn't find Ransey?"

"No," her voice lacked any hint of tone. "The Judd farm was deserted."

"Well, where's his mother?"

"In Pine Bluff, remember?" Gloria was suddenly alert. "Ransey is out there somewhere. He's sick and it's our fault. And his mother is still away in Pine Bluff!"

"What can we do?"

"Nothing," she shrugged. "I went to see Sheriff Nichols, in Jerome. He told me not to worry. He said he would take care of everything." Gloria felt a sudden chill and hugged herself. "He had the oddest expression on his face."

Charmaine put an arm around her sister and they both walked into the house.

* * *

Gloria Dixon looked at the kitchen clock. It was just a few minutes before noon.

Instinctively, she glanced out the window over the sink. Right on time, Arvina Judd trudged through the field. A lard pail swung in one hand. If anything, this day the woman looked more bedraggled than usual. "Oh, my God!"

Gloria came to a quick realization and ran out to meet her.

"Mrs. Judd!" she caught up with the old woman just as she reached the barn.

“Mrs. Judd, isn’t Ransey at home?”

The woman eyed her warily. “No, why should he be?”

“Well, Ransey left for home right after lunch yesterday.” She tried to explain. “I went after him but I never did find him. He is all right, isn’t he?”

“M’Ransey left fer home?” Her eyes narrowed. “He would never a-done that ‘ceptin’ if somethin’ were done to him.” The pitch of her voice rose. “What did y’do?”

“We were having lunch.” Gloria saw the growing fury burning Arvina Judd’s eyes. “Ransey’s meal looked so,” she grimaced, “so unpalatable. Really, it was done out of kindness.”

“Y’had to meddle, din’t yuh?” Arvina Judd’s mouth was a hard, fixed line.

“Yuh did it, didn’t yuh? Y’fed him something other than his mash!” Her growl r to a raging shriek. “You meddling fool! You couldn’t leave well enough alone! Could yuh?” She hurled the pail of gruel to the ground. The lid snapped off. Slowly, the pasty sludge inside oozed onto the ground.

“I’m sorry, but Ransey was so thin.” Again, she tried to explain. “He looked like he was starving to death.” She touched the woman’s shoulder. “Mrs. Judd, I’ll gladly pay any medical expenses.”

“Medical expenses!” Arvina Judd hissed and slapped the offending hand away.

“Yer gonna pay a lot more’n that, Missy,” She shook her fist. “You took what is mine! Now, I make you a promise! I will take what’s yours.”

“Mrs. Judd, please....”

“Don’t you know what you done?” There was no hint of grieving in her voice, just pure rage.

“You done killed m’Ransey!”

“How can you say that?” Gloria Dixon’s temper also began to flare. “You didn’t know anything was wrong until I told you.”

“Ah knows he’s dead, all right.” Arvina Judd spat. “Y’gave ‘im food with salt in it! All city folk food has salt in it! Salt’s th’ one thing his system could not abide.”

“Exactly what kind of allergy does Ransey have?” Gloria Dixon finally exploded into anger. “I’m a registered nurse, Mrs. Judd, and I have no knowledge of any allergies where salt would be lethal.”

“Ah don’t owe you any explanation at all!” Arvina Judd’s voice shrilled. “I pledge you just one thing.” She wagged a spindly finger in Gloria’s face. “I will make you suffer!” The old woman trudged off in the direction of home, still railing and cursing.

* * *

The train whistle blasted. Charmaine Pensintis stood on the platform, in her ersatz Dior travel suit.

“Oh, Glo,” she hugged her sister. “I feel like I’m deserting you here.”

“Don’t be silly.” Gloria hugged back, pretending to be braver than she actually was. “You have to get back to your life and your husband.” She found a

convincing smile. "We're going to be fine. Teddy starts school on Tuesday and everything will get back to normal again."

"I hope so," Charmaine replied. She knelt down and hugged Teddy. "You take good care of your Mom, okay?"

"Yeah, okay, I will," he answered, trying to escape her grasp. "But I wish I were going back to Milwaukee, too."

"Oh, Teddy," Charmaine held him at arm's length, looking into his eyes. "You can't really mean that, can you?"

"Sure, I mean it." Teddy's reply was emphatic. "I hate that farm! And, I hate this whole creepy state. I don't think I'll ever leave this place again."

"Oh, come on," she laughed. "Once your Dad's back from overseas, I'm sure you all will be moving to someplace big and exciting."

"Maybe," he conceded, "but I still hate it here."

Gloria held Teddy's hand. They waved as the whistle blasted and the train lurched forward.

Charmaine blew kisses to them through the green tinted glass of the dome car.

They stood silently watching as the silver cars grew small in the distance. "Well," Gloria said with a large sigh, "I suppose we should think about going home."

"Do we have to?" Teddy complained. "I get so lonesome at the farm."

"It will be better once you start school," she consoled. "I promise."

"Yeah, maybe." His tone remained glum. "I never thought I would look forward to school."

"The world is a strange place," Gloria chuckled. "Tell you what? Why don't we do some shopping? We can get you a few more things for school and maybe, we can look around some toy shops."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"A little more enthusiasm would be appreciated."

"Yeah," He answered a little more brightly. "That would be fun."

Impulsively, Gloria touched his forehead. She expected him to be running a temperature but instead his skin was cool, almost clammy. "Are you feeling all right, Teddy?"

"Uh-huh, I think so," he nodded. "I just feel kinda tired."

* * *

Gloria Dixon drove the blue Packard sedan in a southerly direction. Teddy sat on the seat next to her, silent, half asleep. She turned a chrome knob in the center of the dashboard. The radio sprang to life.

...Since this whole world began, there's nothing sadder than ...a one man woman, looking for the man that got away. ...The man that got away.... "That's Judy Garland," babbled the disc jockey, "and her big hit, 'The Man That Got Away' featured in the movie 'A Star is Born.' You're listening to WOK radio, the voice of Pine Bluff and south-central Arkansas." Immediately a jingle began to

play. *Lestoil, Lestoil*, burred from the radio speaker, *it's so easy when you use Lestoil....* No, none of that was what she wanted to hear. She switched it off.

"You awake Ted?" Her voice was low, scarcely a whisper.

"Yeah," came his scarcely interested reply.

"Feeling okay?"

"I guess."

"Things will get better," she soothed. "You'll see."

"I hope so."

"School will make a difference."

"But I want to be going to my school with my friends back in Milwaukee" he protested. "I don't want to go to a hillbilly school."

"Now who put those ideas into your head?"

"It's true, Mom, we don't belong in this place."

"Well, like it or not, young man," she snapped, "this is where we are. You had better make the best of it." She switched on the radio again. Don Cornell was in the midst of singing *Hold My Hand*.

Another hour passed before they drove through the town of McGehee.

Conversation remained at a standstill. Evening was falling as the Packard moved through Jerome. Main Street was deserted. 'I Love Lucy' played on the television set in the window of Floyd Burley's hardware store. Twenty minutes later, they were moving along the driveway leading to the farmhouse.

Teddy slept in the front seat of the car. "Come on, Honey, lets get inside. I'll make some supper and then you can go to bed, if you like." She shook him.

"Teddy?" She shook him again. "Teddy!" At last, he stirred. "Wake up, baby." She shook him again. "Wake up!"

"Mmmmm," he groaned. "I'm so sleepy."

"Let's go inside," she urged. "You can't sleep in the car."

Groggily, he nodded and opened the car door. She had her arm around him for support as they climbed the back porch steps in the darkness. Gloria's foot crushed something metallic. She stumbled but regained her balance quickly enough to prevent herself from falling with Teddy. They moved on. Fumbling with keys in the dark, she opened the door and switched on the lights. The kitchen and porch were flooded with light. Teddy went inside.

Gloria's gaze returned to the porch floor. A tin plate lay at the top of the steps. In it, a small, homemade doll stuffed with straw lay on its back, arms and legs splayed wide open. It was partially burned. With it was the charred and crushed remains of Teddy's missing toy helicopter. She picked up the doll. The face was blank but it had hair, brown human hair, glued to the grotesque, little head. She was immediately aware of the foul stench coming from it. Gloria Dixon dropped the doll and backed away. She closed the kitchen door and locked it.

* * *

Jangling, shattering the silence, the black wall phone rang. Gloria Dixon ran to answer it. "Hello?"

She spoke into the receiver. There was silence. "Hello," she repeated.

"Mrs. Dixon?"

"Yes?"

"This is Inez Hoffstedder," the voice was deliberately calm. "I'm the vice-principal at McGehee Elementary School..."

"Teddy?" Gloria gasped. "Is it about Teddy? Is my son all right?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Dixon, but we've had to send Theodore to Pine Bluff hospital."

"What's happened to him?"

"We don't know, exactly," the voice explained. "He was in physical education class and he just collapsed."

"Is he all right?"

"Yes, he was responsive when the ambulance attendants arrived," Inez Hoffstedder continued. "We felt he should have a thorough check up."

"He's at the hospital in Pine Bluff?"

"Yes, Mrs. Dixon," the voice assured. "He is in good hands."

"Thank you Miss Hoffstedder." Gloria's heart pounded. "Thank you for calling." She placed the receiver on its hook and picked up the car keys.

* * *

Gloria Dixon rushed through the glass doors of Pine Bluff's surprisingly modern hospital. Following instructions given at the reception area, she made her way to the pediatric floor. A nurse in a crisp white uniform and cap sat behind the counter. She looked up and smiled. "Can I help you?" There was only a slight trace of drawl.

"Yes, my name is Gloria Dixon." Her voice shook. "My son, Teddy, was brought here by ambulance from his school in McGehee."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Dixon." The nurse scanned her clipboard. "He's Dr. Patterson's patient. I'll ring for him."

"How is Teddy?" She wrung her hands. "Is he all right?"

"We're running tests," the nurse said in a professionally assured voice. "But I think he's going to be just fine."

A young doctor, clad in hospital whites, walked through a swinging door. "Mrs. Dixon?" Gloria nodded and attempted a smile. "I'm Frank Patterson." She shook his hand. "How is Teddy?"

"In just about every way," the doctor guided her to a bench to sit. "He's a normal, healthy boy." He shook his head. "It's just that his electrolytes are unusually low and he's on the anemic side. And I can't find any reason for it."

"But low electrolytes is a condition usually associated with heat exhaustion."

She looked squarely at the doctor. "I can't imagine any physical training teacher working fifth graders that hard."

"You're well informed." The young doctor grinned. "But no, the phys-ed class had just begun. Nobody had even broken a sweat."

“So what’s your best guess? What do you think is causing his anemia?” She grasped his coat sleeve, making sure he had her full attention. “You can give me the technical explanation, Doctor. I am a fully qualified nurse.”

“There’s nothing to tell you, Mrs. Dixon,” he shrugged. “At least not yet. But I will need your permission to run a full battery of tests.”

* * *

“He’s been in hospital for two days now.” Gloria Dixon stood in her kitchen, talking into the mouthpiece of the telephone. “No, Charm, he’s doing fine.” She shook her head emphatically. “No, you don’t need to come back. He’s going to be released tomorrow afternoon. Besides, it’s the middle of October. You don’t want to travel anywhere at this time of year.” Lightning flashed outside. “Look, Charm,” she peered out the window. “I want to get off the line. I don’t like being on the phone when it’s storming out.” Thunder boomed overhead, rattling the windows.

“Charm, I...” A loud thump sounded on the kitchen door. It flew open with a clatter. A large brown rat was skewered to the door. It writhed on the blade of a hunting knife. It shrieked in agony. Gloria Dixon screamed. The receiver dropped to the floor “Glo? What’s happened?” Charmaine Pensintis’ voice shouted from the handset. “Glo! Are you all right?”

Gloria ran to the open door. Without thinking, she grabbed the knife handle, frantically working the blade from the whitewashed wood. The rat dropped to the floor in a bloody splat. It continued to screech. She kicked the bloody squealing thing across the threshold and onto the porch. The door was hurled shut behind it.

She still held the bloodied knife in her hand. “Gloria!” Charmaine still shouted from the receiver. “Gloria, what the hell is going on?” Gloria Dixon picked up the handset. “Everything is fine, Charm.” Her voice was even again.

“What is going on there?” Charmaine demanded. “Why did you scream? What was all that noise?”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle, Charm.” Gloria’s tone was resolute. “Arvina Judd is just up to her old tricks again.”

* * *

Wipers scrubbed across the windshield, sweeping the driving rain away. Teddy sat on the front seat next to her. “We’ll be home soon, sweetheart.”

“Yeah, I know.” He shifted on the seat. “I’d like to stay up late enough to see Dagnet tonight. Can I do that?”

“I suppose so,” Gloria focused on the road ahead. “I want to keep you home tomorrow, so I suppose that would be all right.”

Teddy switched on the car radio. *...Tropical storm Hazel has been upgraded to full hurricane status. Earlier today, the storm struck the island nation of Haiti where an estimated four hundred have been killed. Currently, the storm is moving north in a clockwise direction, and already has battered the Atlantic*

coast. Moving inland, it's expec... Gloria Dixon reached into the darkness and silenced the radio.

"I don't think we really have to listen to that."

"Mom," Teddy's voice was tentative. "Do you think that hurricane is going to blow through here too? Could it knock our house down?"

"No, I don't think so," she answered, trying to sound certain. "It's heading north. We're going to get lots of wind and rain, but I think we'll be all right."

Ahead, red taillights flashed bright. The color was smeared in the droplets that raked across the windshield. Immediately she slowed and pulled to the right. A battered old Ford pickup rested nose down in the ditch. A lanky man jumped from the vehicle. It was Lem Suggit.

Gloria rolled down the side window. "Lem," she shouted over the howl of the wind. "Lem, get in out of the rain! I'll drive you home!"

"Miz Dixon!" He bounced into the back of the car, quickly closing the door behind him. Drenched he shivered. "Thank y,' ma'am. I thought I'd be stuck here all night."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes'm," his teeth chattered, "just cold an' wet."

"What happened?"

"Ah don' rightly know." he wiped his face with a wet sleeve. "Somethin' came bounding across the road. I jammed on th' brakes and then I was in the ditch."

Gloria shifted into low gear and the Packard moved on. "Well, it is a good thing we happened along. Your wife must be worried."

"Yeah, ah reckon she is."

The car moved faster into the storm. "So, Lem, how have you been? I haven't seen you since you quit working for us."

"Fine, ma'am," he answered sheepishly. "Ah s'pose ah owe y'n apology."

"No, don't be silly, Lem." She could afford to be generous. "There are no hard feelings."

"I appreciate, that, Miz Dixon." Relaxing, he settled back into the seat cushions.

"An' how are things goin' at the farm?"

"Well," she drew a deep breath. "Teddy has been ill and it's been difficult without hired help since the Judd boy died."

"Th' Judd boy died?" There was real surprise in his voice. "An' yer boy here's been sick?" He was silent for an instant. "How long was it after the Judd boy passed on that yer boy took ill?"

"Just a few days later," Gloria replied. "Why do you ask?"

"How did Ransey die?" Lem Suggit continued with his odd interrogation.

"I don't know," Gloria replied. "His mother said it was the food we gave him. How could fresh, healthy food kill him?"

"What kind of food?" There was a hint of alarm in his voice.

"Sandwiches, and potato salad. We all ate the same thing. It was perfectly fine.

"What kind of sandwiches?"

“Egg salad, I think. Why?”

“That would have salt in it, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would.” She looked into the rearview mirror but saw only blackness.

“Lem, what are you driving at?”

“Oh, Miz Dixon, I tried to warn yuh. I tol’ yuh not to get involved with Arvina Judd. I did everythin’ I could to protect yuh.” He leaned forward and spoke softly.

“I planted snapdragons at your front and back doors. I hammered the protective sign at yer threshold. An’, ah even put an egg tree at yer driveway.”

“So that was your work!” Gloria nodded. “What does it mean, Lem? What is this all about?”

“Get outta here, Miz Dixon! Get out with yer son while y’ still can!”

“In this storm? Don’t be silly.”

“Th’ powers o’ darkness are gatherin’. Y’ gotta understan’ that. Arvina Judd is a what we call a malfeasant. She means to get her revenge. You rested her zombie slave! Don’t you get it? Th’ salt done him in. She will do whatever it is that will hurt you the most. You get yerself and yer boy outta her sphere o’ influence and y’ better do it quick.”

“A zombie!” She scoffed. “Oh, Lem, don’t be ridiculous. I want you to stop this kind of talk right now! I don’t want you scaring Teddy.”

“He’s not scaring, me, Mom,” Teddy chirped up. “I think it’s real interesting.”

“Miz Dixon, does Arvina Judd look young ‘nuff to be th’ mother of a 12-year-old boy? She’s well past 60 if she’s a day! Her younguns are grown and long scattered from this pitiful place. That boy weren’t her son. He were her property. I swear to God, she is in league with th’ devil! She is a truly powerful witch.”

“Stop it, Lem,” she warned. “I swear I will stop this car right here and throw you out! Arvina Judd is just a woman. A mean-spirited, nasty woman, I admit, but she’s not a witch. Witches are just superstition. She has no supernatural powers!”

“Just because y’ cain’t see somethin’ don’t make it not real,” Lem Suggit argued as lightning flashed bright electric blue. “Lot’s o’ things are like that.

Things like ‘lectricity an’ the air we breathe. We cain’t see them neither, but they’re as real as real can be.” A boom of thunder followed. “She brung her witchery down here from th’ mountain country.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“You let her into your house, didn’t you?”

“What if I did?”

“Did she take anythin’? Has anythin’ gone missin’?”

“No,” Gloria replied curtly. “Nothing.”

“Something that might have belonged to you or maybe yer son?”

“Of course not.”

“Anything at all? Something personal?”

“Personal?” Her voice shook. “Like what?”

“I dunno,” he faltered. “Fingernail clippin’s, maybe some hair.”

“Why in hell would she want anything like that?”

“Did she ever have th’ opportunity?”

“Well, yes, she cut Teddy’s hair just before school started.”

“Oh, my God!” There was true horror in Lem Suggit’s voice. “Tell me y’haven’t found a doll! Y’haven’t found a small handmade doll, have yuh?”

Gloria remained silent.

“Ma’am, yuh gotta get yer boy as far from her as you can git. Go back t’ Wisconsin! Leave tonight!”

Gloria Dixon brought the Packard to a stop at Lem Suggit’s gate. “Get out, Lem.” She was angry. “You may not have frightened Teddy, but you’re scaring the hell out of me!”

Twenty minutes later, Gloria Dixon and her son were at their own driveway.

The wire gate was closed, barring their way. “Damn you, Arvina Judd!” She cursed under her breath. “Damn you!” She shifted into neutral and engaged the emergency brake. Drawing a steeling breath, she opened the door and ran to the gate. Immediately, she was soaked to the skin. With all her strength, she heaved on the gate. It did not move. Again she tried, but it held fast. The wind howled.

Raindrops stung as they struck her. “Oh, fuck it!” She screamed at the gate, stomping her feet in the mud. “Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it!” She stopped abruptly, surprised at her momentary tantrum. More so, she was shocked that she had used *that* word.

She was inside the Packard, knowing full well she was ruining the velour seat covering, not to mention the muddied carpet. She released the brake and shifted into reverse gear. The car rolled gently backward. “Okay, Teddy, hang on.” She took a deep breath and stiffly hung onto the steering wheel, bracing herself. *This is what Bette Davis would do*, she thought to herself. “This is going to be a bumpy ride!”

Gloria shifted into first and stomped the accelerator to the floor. Wheels whined as they spun in the slick mud. With a lurch, the large car sprang forward, smashing through the gate. The driver’s side headlight shattered. The light fizzled with a pop. The sedan skidded down the long, narrow drive leading to the house. What had been worn furrows were now gooey ruts. Water pooled in them. Out of control, the Packard sped, sliding sideways. Gloria Dixon worked the wheel left, then right, but nothing happened. The car continued in its uncontrolled flight.

Gloria took her foot off the brake pedal and cranked the wheel with all her might. The sedan came to a stop in a spray of mud, next to the chicken house. It immediately sank to its axles in the mire. Lightning flashed. Thunder roared. Again, she tromped the accelerator to the floor. Tires sang a high-pitched aria in concert with the wind’s banshee wail. Rain pounded on the metal roof.

“Well,” she said, breezily, “we’re home.”

“Yeah!” Teddy agreed. “That was some driving, Mom!”

“We’ll have to make a run for it,” she told him. “Show me how fast you can get to the house.”

“Okay,” Teddy laughed. He opened the car door and leaped into the night.

Gloria gave chase in the pounding rain. She stumbled in her high heel shoes and fell headlong into the mud. She wanted to cry and curse. Instead, she picked herself up and ran up onto the porch. Lightning flared bright. She was the Arkansas mud queen. Teddy burst out laughing and so did she. He opened the unlocked door and switched on the kitchen light.

* * *

Gloria Dixon sipped strong coffee from a mug. Warm and sweet, it tasted of normalcy. Somehow, it soothed her jangled nerves. She sat at the kitchen table wrapped in a thick terry robe, a towel wrapped her freshly washed hair. The storm was worsening. Rain hammered the roof. Windows rattled as ever changing winds gusted. For the moment, she felt safe. If need be, she and Teddy would take refuge in the cellar. It was cold and damp but they would be safe down there. Sleeping bags, pillows, and a flash lantern were already waiting by the door. Winds made mournful moans, whistling under the eaves. Though she knew it was her imagination, she could not shake the notion that she was being watched.

Teddy slept on the living room sofa. Gloria looked in on him. He was snuggled under a comforter and looked utterly peaceful. She smiled, wishing she could feel the same serenity. This was not a night for sleeping. She returned to the kitchen and topped up her cup. The noises of the night grew louder. Seeking respite, she clicked on the radio, parked atop the refrigerator. A bouncy piano played a happy tune.

This old house is afraid of thunder... Rosemary Clooney sang. *This old house is afraid of storms. This old house just folds and trembles when the night wind flings its arms. This old house is feeble, this old house is a-needin' paint...* A windy blast forced the back door open with a crashing slam. Gloria Dixon's heart froze. Wind and rain swirled into the room. *Ain't a-gonna need this house no longer. Ain't a-gonna need this house no more.* The inappropriately cheerful song continued. *Ain't got time to mend the shingles. Ain't got time to fix the floor. Ain't got time to oil the hinges nor to mend the windowpane...*

She expected to see another of Arvina Judd's gifts impaled on a knife, hanging on the door. This time, there was nothing. She ran to the door and closed it. She was positive she had locked it. She shook her head, trying to remember. This time, she secured the dead bolt. A muffled cry came from the living room.

"I'll be right there, sweetheart." She moved a chrome chair and hooked its back under the doorknob. Teddy cried out again.

Teddy struggled on the sofa. A dark figure crouched over him. Gloria switched on the ceiling light. Arvina Judd was forcing something into Teddy's mouth! It was white and slimy, like the gruel she fed Rancey. "What the hell are you doing?"

Gloria shouted, running across the room. "Get away from my son, you bitch!" She tackled the old woman like a linebacker. They tumbled to the floor.

Arvina Judd looked straight into her eyes and cackled triumphantly. "It's too late, Missy," she crowed. "He's mah boy now."

Teddy's body convulsed in contorting spasms. Every part of him twitched, moving in all directions at once. "What have you done to him?" Gloria was beside her son. Abruptly, he stopped struggling. He lay on his back, mouth gaping, eyes staring glassily at the ceiling.

"Ah give him cucumber mash. That's what ah done!" Arvina Judd got to her feet. "An' there ain't nothin' that y' can do t' fix it. Yer modern med'cin cain't begin t' fight this."

"Zombie cucumber? You poisoned him?" Gloria looked up at the woman in horror and disbelief.

"You would kill an innocent little boy just to spite me?" She felt weak. She scarcely had the energy to speak. "Ah'm jus' claimin' what's mine."

"You won't get away with this! I'll call the sheriff."

"Do as yuh please." There was confidence in Arvina Judd's voice. "There won't be any proof."

She laughed again. "'Side's who is gonna believe an outlandish story like the one yer gonna tell?" Again, the wind moaned under the eaves. "Come, boy," the old woman ordered, "it's time to get t' yer final restin' place."

Slowly, Teddy rose from the sofa. Mechanical, like Rancey, he stood without protest.

"Teddy?" Gloria's voice shook.

"His name ain't *Teddy*, no more," Arvina Judd corrected. "It's *Ransey* now."

"C'mon, Ransey, we need t'git."

Arvina Judd walked calmly to the kitchen. She opened the door and stepped into the storm. Teddy followed. Gloria Dixon could only watch as her son's body lurched in the wind-driven rain. Arvina Judd wrapped her shawl tightly about herself as she reached the crest of the hillock. Lightning flared brightly. Teddy stood by her side, oblivious to the storm. They were swallowed by darkness as the flash faded.

* * *

Ninety-nine Americans died as Hurricane Hazel ripped across the Atlantic seaboard. Not satisfied with her take, she tore northward, exploding into southern Ontario and killed two hundred and forty-nine more. In all, between October thirteenth and seventeenth, 1954, seven hundred and fifty-eight lives were lost.

Those statistics meant little to Gloria Dixon. Her only child had vanished forever. And, halfway around the world, in Korea, a helicopter crash had killed her husband. After surviving the shellfire of a bitter four-year war, Ward Dixon, Sally Walker, and six others died because of a mechanical failure. Their helicopter had crashed and exploded on impact. She often wondered just how far Arvina Judd's power did reach. Oh, yes, she was a believer now. How could she not be? Arvina Judd had taken everything she held dear.

* * *

In time, Gloria Dixon stopped grieving and built an entirely new life for herself.

She met and married Michael Armstrong, a man who made a great deal of money. He also made her as happy as she could ever be, although she was never to be a happy person. Together, they had two daughters, twins Terrie and Tracie. The girls, of course, were long grown and would be thirty-four years old in the spring. They both were married with husbands of their own.

And, as husbands are prone to do, Mike Armstrong died after thirty-one years of marriage, again leaving Gloria to go on alone. That was the natural order of things, she realized. Her second life had been as orderly as her first life had not.

But no matter how she tried, she could not forget what Arvina Judd had done to her. Nor could she ever forget Teddy or what really had happened to him.

However, the details of that long ago night she chose to keep secret. After all, Arvina was right. Who would believe it?

Gloria watched. He stood on the edge of the thicket, staring back at her. He looked small and frail. From a distance, he appeared the same as he always had.

Dusk gathered. This was her fourth return to the farm, each visit punctuated by a decade. *This is too tiring to continue*, she thought to herself. *This has to be the last.*

She was too old. She held two salt tablets in her hand. They were ancient and dirty and would never be used. She threw them onto the ground.

Gloria Dixon Armstrong opened the rear door of the stretch limo and settled into the dark leather seat. The door closed with a heavy thunk. "I'm finished here, Bertram," she instructed the driver. "It's time to put this place behind us."

As the car pulled away, the boy warily approached. At length, he stood in the very spot the woman occupied. Slowly, mechanically, he knelt to the ground. He found one of the salt pellets. He held it between a bony thumb and forefinger. He sniffed it, then tasted it.