

SOMEWHERE IN THERE, THE TRUTH

Gary Fincke

Seventeen years buried, this story. Like the cicadas predicted for any day now. Enough time for me to be staring forty in the face and feeling like I'd like to shed some part of myself like those bugs can do. My wife Jeanie, she doesn't take to me coming round again to Dale Timmons' big birthday party gone wrong, the downslide to where Dwayne Reese, my friend since the third grade, ends up dead in the back seat of Eugene Cuff's Ford Mustang. But now, because the DA says there's witnesses willing to come forward after all these years, it's in the newspaper every day this past week and counting. And me? I'm looking at wearing a coat and tie today to testify against Eugene and Roy Mertz, boys, like Dwayne Reese, I ran with back then gone now to strangers. And they will surely squint my way like they mean me to die right there on the stand when I add my way of seeing things in among all the lies and excuses, hoping the jury can see somewhere in there, the truth.

Dwayne's been talked about like he's been dug up and getting the once over, but it's Eugene and Roy waiting to see if somebody on that jury won't believe they kicked and beat the life out of him during Dale Jr's. twenty-first birthday party. Work boots do that sort of fatality damage. And a ball bat, one of those metal ones they're thinking of banning because they put fielders in harm's way.

On top of things, there's one of those make-it-worse questions being asked—was there still hope for Dwayne after that ass-whipping? The jury's been hearing from more than one who was there that day that he got dumped in Roy's truck bed and laid along the Timber Creek Road to look like he'd been hit and run. They've been hearing about him being alive there for hours until he ended up somehow in the back seat of Eugene's Mustang.

I hadn't gone to watch any of it. I had to take a vacation day even to testify, but to tell the truth once would have been enough of Eugene and Roy eyeballing me and the other storytellers scattered around that room, and maybe myself sitting right in front of somebody who was there to swear my version a lie, somebody considering so hard on what I was taking an oath on that he'd begin to wish me serious harm.

Reading the paper each morning had shown me there'd been variations on peoples' stories, so many that it began to sound like Eugene and Roy might beat this thing and be able to pay visits to those, like me, who were giving a side that put them in a bad light. It was only the one thing everybody said they remembered the same way—Dwayne coming on to Rita Sue, Eugene's girl, and him knowing Eugene was the jealous type doubled down by drinking in the late afternoon sun. Particulars? Dwayne saying things with people around that you keep to yourself until you close a door behind you. Dwayne's hand on Rita Mae's arm, her sweating like everybody that day, even in her sleeveless, but turning heads with his hand running along her bare flesh like that, like he was fixing to move his fingers to where there was no going back. Rita Sue not squirming away, maybe even enjoying somebody paying attention to her instead of the beer. Dwayne acting like it could be his own self deciding just where on her body his hands might end up.

They had eight kegs out there on what's still called the Heimbach Farm. Though my Aunt Gretel Timmons had given up her name these forty years, it was a matter of the name being passed down in the family rather than the name on the mailbox.

It's been the Heimbach Farm for more than a hundred years, but for the last twenty-five there's only a patch of vegetables and a few chickens and the rows of raspberries Aunt Gretel loves during June and July. So farm isn't exactly the right word, and some call it the Timmons Place now because Dale Jr's. mowing a big-ass circle around the house once a month is as close to farming as anybody does with a lawnmower back in town.

But back those seventeen years, even with Dale Sr. still alive, our family name was all over that land the day of the party. And surely it was Heimbach Farm where people were told to go, though Aunt Gretel regretted being so generous when the word spread so wide that not everybody who parked on both shoulders of the county road was on speaking terms.

It was a day my nearly brand new wife Jeanie stayed home and maybe that would have made all the difference from then on to today, her eyeballing everything too, but she had her migraine and the curtains all closed in every room an hour before I left. And it was a day my first wife, Shelby, left our Chrissie, almost three at the time, with Shelby's mother because she wasn't about to miss a chance to drink with boys who wished they could follow me into her bed.

Aunt Gretel had Dale Sr. mow a full five acres the day before, the stubs of milkweed and thistle and burdock reminding anybody dumb enough to go barefoot or in cheap sandals what the field would look like in a couple of weeks. That big swath took the clearing nearly to where a trailer set up on cinderblocks was rusting away back in the thickets. A cinderblock porch in front of it was split all to hell from two tree-of-heavens pushing up like they can do from what looks like nothing at all for roots to take.

Dale Jr., after he managed to graduate high school, said he had plans for that trailer, but all he did was pile up pizza boxes and beer cans and porn magazines inside where he'd set up an old mattress and a couple of scuffed up beanbag chairs like that would make it a place any not pass-out-drunk girl would enjoy for even half a minute. He'd hung an extension cord over the door, but when the party came around, it still led nowhere, leaving anyone walking there to take a piss to guess what he had in mind.

What there was most of near the trailer that day was shattered glass and rusty cans near the stumps of beech and pine that had been cleared when the trailer was new, all that debris from target shooting. Dale Jr., he was fond of betting on himself as some sort of Buffalo Bill, maybe seeing himself winning

large enough to do more than pretend he could do something besides wait for his daddy to die in order to be the man of any house.

Another hundred years, I thought, and maybe all that shit would be broken down and erased for good by the wind and rain. And though I knew I was wrong with that guess, that was more than far enough in the future it didn't matter what happened to any of it. My way of thinking back then, and turning out wrong, because what mattered now was how every bit of that day and that place could lead to the truth, and me with my own small part in it testifying after all these years about just what I remembered about how and why Dwayne died that day.

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The day I was scheduled, the morning paper gave me its last clues to what I was walking into. The day before, Marlin Sauer had said Dwayne didn't do anything others didn't do—flirting, what men do and women enjoy, the drinking helping things along out there by the Keister Road. A good start on Dwayne's behalf, but then, speaking for the prosecution no less, Marlin swore he didn't see Dwayne touched. "I seen everything" was his brag line, making the DA look the sap.

Todd Riggs, who I shared a few thirty packs with back in the day, had started off on the right foot, saying Dwayne took a few licks, but then he said, “It was just a little knock around, nobody falling down or like that.” And Dwayne, he said, had all his senses after. “Lucid” is what the newspaper article quoted him as saying. “Dwayne was lucid. That’s what he was—lucid,” as if Todd had studied on that word like he might impress the jury more that way, like he’d looked straight at the jury and said “lucid” the way a witness makes his lie prettier with book words.

It didn’t sound like the way to nail down an open-and-shut, not after the DA had decided to prosecute two men who weren’t even suspects back when the case was new. But then Carla Rohl, half-sister to Eugene, ended the day in tears while she testified Dwayne was assaulted hard-core as people watched. A woman marking her half-brother as a killer is a powerful thing. “I feel bad for the guy not getting his justice” was how she explained her talking after so long, quick to add Eugene and Dwayne being best friends, words to surprise anybody I knew. The defense lawyer didn’t question that. What he did do was get Carla to admit her old boyfriend, Warren Shaner, was an original suspect, getting that old news in front of a jury who might have long since forgotten or maybe never heard of at all.

I didn't need any sort of interpreter to tell me I might be risking myself for a case already pulled under and drowned, but the newspaper had its own mind made up. I could see that in the headline—*Conspiracy of Silence*. And down farther, in the pictures that ran each day, Eugene and Roy in hunting gear with the sort of scruffy beards and overgrown mustaches a man who's been in camp a week would carry when he posed with a trophy buck the paper cropped out. Dwayne, he was decked out in a coat and tie in his photo, and every day his name was underneath as Dwayne Reese IV, like he was from royalty instead of from Daddies who wanted their own names repeated for a hundred years.

While my wife Jeanie was helping me with my tie, she said "You tell the story three ways and each of them are lies to everybody," but I was thinking all those looking at Rita Sue after seventeen years would be hard pressed to think a man would risk himself to flirt with her having turned to fat and not having the sense to give up her tank tops and tight jeans. But there she was married to Eugene for thirteen of these years, so he'd slept beside her night after night while every which way but the truth was going on.

"I can go late," I said. "There's Aunt Gretel and who knows who else before me. You think there's roll call for this?"

“I know what you’re thinking,” Jeanie said, “but don’t you dare.”

“You don’t see me starting, do you?”

“And don’t you stop anywhere along the way.”

“I’m just nervous. Anybody would be.”

“Nervous is okay. Nervous doesn’t stick to you afterwards like beer on your breath or a slur in your words.”

“I’m okay,” I said, and I meant it. I knew testifying after all these years was more complicated than stocking shelves at Home Depot. I kept my promise. To make sure, I left the cooler in the garage.

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I’ll admit it gave me the shudders, that courthouse, its outside all made of stone turned so dark it looked like it had been built before Columbus sailed. Inside, though, there weren’t any fancy chandeliers or tapestries or any of the things castles always have, just a men’s room with fixtures old fashioned enough to prove how many years the guilty and the innocent had relieved themselves there.

The rest was the same offices I’d visited a few times about my own troubles in the next county over, that courthouse a less imposing place, one built by farmers who didn’t foresee much more than deed and custody issues taking up

a part-time judge's time. And surely, I was happy to go through a metal detector because I knew plenty of candidates for armed mayhem who had a curiosity about the goings-on inside the court room.

There were a few before me yet, but only two I saw around sitting up by the judge and promising the truth. Roy's cousin, half-removed, said there was plenty of chaos, what's expected when up to a hundred set themselves into partying mode. And Ginny Waite, who announced herself a cousin of Eugene, something I'd never heard, said nobody raised a hand to stop anything, more an accusation against the rest of us than anything that would convict.

All in all, everybody I heard looked to be moving guilty into the red zone, leaving me and Aunt Gretel to take it across the goal line. I walked to the Stop 'n Go by myself for lunch, a bag of chips and a Slim Jim I washed down with a Cherry Coke. I saw some faces I knew in the aisles, but I kept moving, keeping a space between me and anybody. And then I spent the last hour of the ninety minute lunch break, a forever amount of time, sitting with a *PA Sportsman* magazine in the tiny town library where nobody I recognized would come in.

That is, for twenty minutes, when Aunt Gretel snuck up behind me and said, "Hey there, Keith—hiding out?" making me hold up the magazine like an excuse while she sat down beside me on the couch. "Sitting among all these

books reminds me how much your grandma liked her fairy tales so much she thought the name of a smart little girl would help me along some day. Your daddy ever tell you that about me?"

I laughed like I thought I was supposed to. "The only way he'd tell me that would be if he was Hansel, and he had to explain how he had the worst name in Pennsylvania."

Aunt Gretel laid a hand on my thigh and patted it. "Your grandma had somebody else in mind for him. Your daddy got Jack from another one of those stories, but nobody's ever connected him to any sort of giant killer."

"How about me," I said. "What about Keith? She ever tell my Dad about somebody she hoped I'd be?"

"I don't recollect Keith for good or bad," she said. "Maybe that's all you can ask for around here where people are scattered every which way, but still they get themselves tangled." She pushed off my thigh with her hand to help her stand. "I got to get back and think things over about the say-so I have to give, but you stop by when this is over, for sure, promise?"

I waited another ten minutes before I walked the two blocks back to the courthouse, sweating the whole way and wishing I'd brought my cooler and

had just enough Busch Light on ice to steady myself. Just outside the courtroom, what did I see but my girl Chrissie showing more of herself than what was good for her and reminding me that Jerry Hoke, her stepfather, was on tap for the defense.

Chrissie was nearly twenty now, still a few years shy of my age that day when Dwayne died, and she hadn't visited with me since she turned fifteen. Back then Jeanie told me, "She's grown in more ways than one," something I had agreed with. For sure, I was happy not to see first-hand her sneaking out to parties and such, where men, or boys who think they are men would give her drinks and pills and calculate just when she was ready to be taken somewhere private so if something terrible happened, there would only be the suspicion of who was responsible but never the proof.

Coming up on her so close, I needed something to say, so I started in with. "You have any cicadas out your way yet?"

"No," she said, all calm like, so I pressed on.

"Those bugs must be crazy from being underground for so long. They just make their sound, all of them playing the same note and keeping it up like they know there's no time for anything else."

“You’d be screaming too if you knew how things were,” Chrissie said, and now she was putting on a pout that made me feel like a son instead of a father.

“They’re not screaming,” I said, “and anyway, they don’t know.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she said. “Of course they know. That’s all they know. That, and how much they all want to get laid.”

She said it straight out like I was supposed to know she had those thoughts and acted on them. Like it wasn’t a new thing at all. And just then, there came Shelby all decked out for sunbathing too, like the two of them were competing with all that cleavage showing.

Jerry Hoke, in a maroon shirt and white tie, walked up beside them, and I gave him a nod. “What are you looking at?” Jerry said, and I turned away. “I thought so,” he added as I walked through the metal detector as if it might keep them all from following, but what came after me was Chrissie’s loud laugh.

A few minutes later, Aunt Gretel started right in. “That boy was in such bad shape I remember the exact words I used on Eugene and Roy. ‘You want to kill somebody, you move that body off my property.’”

I could see the jury trying to decide whether this damned Eugene and Roy or Aunt Gretel, but she never looked anywhere but at the DA. “I drove off to

the convenience about the time it was looking to get dark. I needed bread and milk and the like, and I was wishing by then the whole lot of them would have drunk the place dry and left by the time I got back. And there was Dwayne Reese face down in the middle of the Beech Hollow Road. I didn't need anybody to tell me I should get right to the convenience and call 911."

"You didn't stop?" the DA prodded.

"Of course I did. Who wouldn't? I tugged on that boy's arm, and he opened his eyes and made a noise I hope I never hear again, a sound like worms make if we could hear them, like what you'd say if you was covered in slime. Not many drive along Beech Hollow. I figured he'd stay right there until the experts came to take care of him."

Aunt Gretel described the store. She described the 911 call. She even totaled up what she bought and paid for. But what got everybody's attention was her trip back home. "I was back on Beech Hollow, and there was Eugene and Roy about to lift that boy by the looks of it, and Eugene, he looked through me. I knew what that meant."

"Objection," the defense lawyer said, but it was too late to scratch out that small, good thing, from the jury's memory, so that lawyer, he got right up on

Aunt Gretel the first chance he had. "Let's clear something up," he said. "You didn't tell this story to the police seventeen years ago, did you?"

"I was told by the police what they thought had happened, that it was another pair back then that done this to that boy. I didn't need to be told twice they'd leave me be about the shindig at my place if I let them tell the story their way."

Soon after it was my turn, and I told what I'd always known, that Eugene and Roy kicked and beat Dwayne maybe a hundred times before they stopped and Roy pissed on Dwayne laying there senseless in Aunt Gretel's new-mown field.

Eugene looked at me as if he was trying to identify somebody at our 20th class reunion, but I went through the details a second time, making sure the jury would know I was the bearer of the true story. "Why did you keep quiet back then?" the DA asked, and I took a breath and got ready to confess.

"Later that summer," I said, "when the police were sniffing around, Eugene punched me in the head." I said it twice, repeating it when the DA asked again in a tone that sounded like he expected my shame to show how honest I was. "A punch in the head, right above the temple like it was, is different than in the face. It was the punch of a man who was giving a lesson, and me, I had

my three year-old daughter in my arms and had to settle for keeping my balance and not dropping her on the ground outside her mother's doublewide where I'd come to bring Chrissie back after she'd spent a weekend with me."

The defense lawyer walked up toward me slow, like I was somebody to size up. "That punch, if it occurred, was several months after the party, was it not, but the police spoke with you earlier, didn't they?" he said.

"Yes."

"How do you account for the story you gave them before that alleged punch?"

He smiled like he expected me to stammer. But I was ready. "I was on probation for a DUI. I was afraid I'd go to prison if I said I was at a party with alcohol."

"So you say you saw a man get beaten to death, but a driving while intoxicated conviction was more important to you?"

I took a breath and kept my eyes on him like Jeanie had told me. "I'm not proud of what I did," I said. "I'm here to fix that as best I can."

"One incident shouldn't have made you so afraid."

"I had three DUIs on my sheet."

The lawyer turned away and stared at the jury. “And you were drunk at a party that you would have to drive home from later in the day?”

“I was going slow. You know, pacing myself. I wasn’t going to drive drunk.”

He smiled again. Self-satisfied. Terrifying.

After I sat back down in the audience, I looked at the jury, but whatever their expressions had said while I was talking had been erased. Every last one of us was swearing to something we didn’t swear to seventeen years ago. One thing was clear—one way or another, we were all afraid of the law. And if any of those jurors subscribed to once a liar, always a liar, we were in for it.

And I had time, while the lawyers pestered the judge about something or other, to consider on just how many times Shelby had told Chrissie that story about the day Eugene punched me, how she was standing so close by I could have passed Chrissie to her to free my hands. How Chrissie, by now, might believe she remembered that punch and my backing down rather than thinking she remembered it from hearing it second-hand.

I hurried out as soon as the judge adjourned us. I was happy to live fifteen miles from the trial, happy to get out of the lot before anybody else decided to give me the once-over.

What's worse? To be a killer or the one who lies for him? With all those secrets out in the open and recorded word for word, there was a buzz in my head like the one that was coming from the cicadas, frantic-like until I wanted to snap open a Busch Light right there and start pushing everything underground for another seventeen years, leaving just the everyday secret to deal with, the ones like everybody has, not these loud, swarming red-eyed ones with bodies so temporary they must be terrified to surface.

"You say your piece and bear up under what follows," Jeanie had said, and I'd agreed, but with eight miles under my wheels, I stopped at The Log Cabin, figuring nobody from that courthouse would be inside. Wearing my white shirt and blue tie made me feel like I was from another country, somebody who wouldn't be understood if I tried to talk. I tossed down three drafts and was ready to order a fourth when a voice I knew to be Jerry Hoke's spoke right into my ear from behind. "You know why you don't have to worry about having the shit kicked out of you?"

I was supposed to say “Why?” like his question was the start of a knock-knock joke, but I just looked at the bar until he said, “Because you’re so afraid of everything nobody even knows you’re there.”

I took two breaths and turned, but Jerry, his tie already stripped, was on his way to a table where Shelby was sitting. I left a ten on the bar and walked out into a sun that surprised me with its low-slung glare, and I opened a Busch Light from the refrigerator as soon as I walked in, tugging that tie off.

“Bad?” Jeanie said.

“I said what I had to say.”

She made her bitch face and said, “You made a stop already. You couldn’t wait even that long? You know what could happen.”

“I was in and out in half an hour. At the Cabin, practically in the driveway already. There’s nothing to happen from that.”

So there I was, back to myself, and when Jeanie switched to “You did what you could” and “It’s not your fault” like she still had sorry in her, I let her talk without telling her to shut up with those lies.

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Jeanie gets this magazine once a month like her period, and for a couple of days she reads me things while I drink my coffee. The day after I testified it

was this: “As late as 1892, in Vermont, the body of Mercy Brown, thought to be a vampire, was exhumed for public autopsy.”

Just like that is how she started in, expecting me to be all in for listening to a story with a vampire in the middle of it. “The father had to give permission, think of that,” Jeanie said, “but he had a son coughing up blood from the same TB that had killed his daughter and his wife before her, so what was there to lose?”

Plenty, I thought, but I poured a second cup and sat back to let it cool.

“He had to watch his neighbors dig up his daughter,” Jeanie said, sounding all worked up now, like she was talking about somebody she knew. “He had to agree to have her heart burned and his son eat the ashes.”

“So did it work?” I said.

“What? You trying to be funny? Of course it didn’t work. The son died two months later.”

“Maybe if they’d dug her up sooner, the heart thing would have worked.”

“You’re disgusting. Think about it. What father watches his child twice buried? What father lets a bunch of idiots burn his daughter’s heart and feed it to his son?”

“How does anybody know this stuff is real after all these years?”

“Research. It says here Mercy left behind a quilt she stitched from scraps and remnants she expected some day to tuck under the chins of her children. Down at the end it gives the names of the people who have learned these things, but they’re never anybody you ever heard of.”

I sipped my coffee and waited for her to settle. “What do you really think?” she said at last, and something in her voice made me think it over instead of saying how fucking stupid people can be.

“Everything’s worth a try,” I said.

“I’m asking about the father—him forced to watch his girl eaten like an animal.”

“Nobody’s touching Dwayne, if that’s what you’re thinking, not after seventeen years.”

Jeanie slapped the magazine shut and stood up so fast I thought she might roll it up and swat me. “Yes, they are,” she said, but she walked away and left the magazine behind.

A minute later, when I read the account of my testimony, I felt as if I’d been caught in some filthy act, like I’d exposed myself to a young girl, everything good about myself lost from this single act. I called a guy I knew at Home

Depot and got him to switch with me, something he was happy to do because I took his Saturday in exchange.

This time I had a six-pack in the cooler, but I walked into the courtroom with just the coffee in me. I listened to four men, including Jerry Hoke, swear there was no fight. "Roy's truck never left," Jerry said. He was wearing the same get up as the day before. "I could pick his out from a hundred same make and model."

Just before lunch break, Todd Riggs' ex-wife swore Todd was drunk and sleeping it off in their truck when "that little bitty squabble came and went."

"Your lies will follow you," Dwayne's father yelled as she stepped down, and I knew he was right about that, something to say to any of us even if it got him strong-armed from the room.

I walked the cooler into the park that sat behind the courthouse and welcomed my first one. I sat at a picnic table, and it came to me that if Dwayne had been beaten this summer, the killing would have been recorded on a dozen phones, maybe more. There was no need for testimony anymore. Just watch the movie and see for your own self.

There's some, I'd bet, who'd say the camera angle lies, but there'd be plenty who wouldn't delete something like that. A jury would have that ball

bat and those boots to think on. They'd have to figure out just when Dwayne was good as dead. Spooling back to see when that bat caught him flush on the skull or a boot caved in his ribs and something came apart inside, bleeding begun where nobody could see.

All somebody like me would have to do is turn my home movie over to the police. People would see there was no stopping them from doing harm. They'd look at that ass-whipping and look at me and know the only thing I could do was make sure I had backup for my story. But right then what I wanted to see was Aunt Gretel hovering over Dwayne still alive out Beech Hollow, maybe killing him twice.

I had the cooler back in the car with twenty minutes yet to fill, but I had such a need to piss I went back inside. When I came out of the men's room, there was Chrissie again like she was waiting to show me she knew to cover herself when her stepfather was there to say his piece.

With her in a buttoned-up blouse, I could smile and say, "Hard to tell who's telling the truth."

"It's fucked is what it is," she said, and I could tell she saw the beer in me, so sure of it I groped around for something smart to say.

“We used to know a bunch of words for terrible,” I said. “Now we just have fucked.”

“Fucked covers a lot of territory.”

I locked my eyes on her, steady now. “It doesn’t cover anything. It’s just a noise.”

“Who sent you off to college?”

“Horrible. Awful. Pathetic.” I hesitated, scrambling to keep it up. “Beastly.”

“Beastly? Better to say fucked than a pussy word like that.”

I wanted to say more, make a list so long she’d have to admit I was right about something, but I noticed Jerry Hoke closing in, and all I came up with was “Forget it.”

“Fucking horrible. Fucking awful. Fucking pathetic. But you can’t say fucking beastly without sounding like a fucking asshole.”

I thought she’d been drinking for lunch like me. And then there was a moment when I thought she was softening, her grimace melting toward something like affection, or at least regret. Her eyes were watery, what I wanted to take for sadness, but looked, I decided, to be somewhere between excitement

and fear, an expression I remembered her mother had tightened into during the early months of carrying Chrissie inside her.

But there was Jerry Hoke beside her now, looking on with nothing but pride, and I couldn't tell whether it was because he thought his testimony had helped free his friends or because he thought Chrissie was sexy, that he liked being seen as the father of a young woman whose body men turned to look at.

I felt the need to piss again, and by the time I was finished, Chrissie was gone, and I'd decided to use the rest of that day like the Saturday I would be missing.

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I had half an hour and two beers to myself before Jeanie came home from grocery shopping and found the cooler with the empties where I'd left it on the front seat. I heard her slapping cupboards shut for a few minutes before she came out on the deck. "You gave up our Saturday to drive around half drunk?"

"There's no way they'll be convicted," I said. "I heard enough to make me think I lied up there yesterday." I stood, and when I didn't move straight toward the screen door on the way to the refrigerator, I hoped Jeanie would relax, maybe even sympathize.

Instead, she said, “You know what I hate?” starting in like she does with a question I couldn’t possibly answer.

“What?”

“All these years and you never once said anything about what Dwayne must have thought.”

“Getting beat like that, he wouldn’t be thinking, not like you mean. He’d have been trying to curl himself up and cover where it hurt the most.”

“When it stopped then. When he was still alive and being handled like a carcass.”

“I’ll give you he might have wondered how it all got out of hand.”

She looked around the yard, and it came to me she was seeing if there was a weapon handy, something she could pick up and beat me with. “He would have wondered why nobody stepped in.”

“Like me?”

“Like the good friend you and some others said they were.”

“You weren’t there. You don’t know how it was.”

“I’m an adult who’s breathing. It doesn’t take any more than that to know.”

“Then you’ll be just like that jury. They’ll think what they want, but they’ll never know.”

She slapped me then, not my face, but against my chest. Both hands thumping up and down like a child. When she’d gone on longer than I would have guessed, I grabbed her wrists. “You know what I think?” she said, not struggling. “I think you’re jealous of Dwayne.”

I let her wrists go. “You got yourself so worked up, you’re talking crazy now. Nobody wants to be beat to death in front of a hundred people.”

“I’m not talking the method,” she said. “And you know in your heart I’m right.”

§

By the time I got on the way to Aunt Gretel’s on Sunday it was almost noon. I had the cooler in the trunk instead of beside me on the seat. If I had a mind to start, it needed to be on the way home. I didn’t need Aunt Gretel looking at me like I was some beaten dog.

Aunt Gretel was out by the raspberry bushes when I pulled in. “It’s too early,” she said as I made my way toward her, “I know that, but I’m as bad as a little kid coming up to Christmas when it’s barely December.”

“I bet they’ll be sweet and juicy when they’re ready,” I said, and then, fishing for words, I added, “The place looks smaller than it used to.”

“It oughta. I have Dale Jr. mow less these days. Once a month I make him drive the tractor over just this patch, laying the cutter bar down low so for a week or two, at least, the land looks cared for from a car driving past. Just to keep all that shit from getting so close to the house it would start getting ideas about coming inside.”

“I thought you might be swarming with cicadas by now, but I don’t hear or see anything.” I said. “You think the know-it-alls got it wrong?”

“We’ll be invaded, don’t you worry about that, like when Saddam woke up one morning and found out he was shit out of luck.” As if she expected to hear a buzz explode like an air raid siren, she looked out toward where what was left of the apple orchard was being absorbed by the expanding growth of scrub trees. “Let me show you something,” she said, and I followed her until we stood among the apple trees, what was left of them, but Aunt Gretel said, “Look over this way” as if she had a secret hidden among the nearby sumac. “You remember the names of all this that takes over fast?”

“Tree of heaven,” I said, playing along with one I recognized because I’d always been fascinated by the way they’d split that cinderblock porch in front of the old trailer.

As if my answer was incomplete, Aunt Gretel said, “From China. As if anybody here needed another kind of tree from so far away. It’s like when a neighborhood changes, when after a while there’s nobody left like you because the strangers have put down roots.”

“Goldenrod,” I said. “Lamb’s ear, onion grass, Queen Anne’s lace, skunk cabbage, Virginia creeper, poison ivy.”

“So you do remember what I taught you,” she said.

“The names of all the stuff you don’t want.”

“Can you find the cicadas?” She knelt down beside one of the apple trees. “Get yourself down here and take a look.”

I bent over and squinted at the patchy weeds. “What am I supposed to see?”

“Look at the bare spots. See all those tiny little holes? See them? That means they’re coming real soon.”

“The cicadas?”

“None other. They’ve worked their way up from down by the roots. They’re all around us here, waiting for whatever it is that tells them to crawl out and fly.” She stood and brushed her hands together. “These old apples were worth a shit back when their Mamas laid their eggs in their branches, but now it doesn’t matter if the whole lot of them decided to strip them bare.”

I rubbed my foot over a bare patch of earth and stepped out into the mowed area. “I went back Friday. I traded off at work.”

“I expect you found out there was a herd of them rounded up to say otherwise than us.”

“Enough for doubt.”

“For some folks,” she said. “The rest of us have to live with the knowing. All that positivity about them boys getting what they deserve won’t get far with a jury full of those that don’t know them.”

“It was like they could sling the truth into a truck bed and dump it so deep in the woods it would die there and nobody could ever prove anything ever again.”

Aunt Gretel nodded, but then she sniffed the air. “You smell that stink?” she said. “You can cut down all this shit if you have a mind to, but when the

wind turns this way that stink you're smelling gets right after you and there's no getting rid of it."

"I hadn't noticed," I said.

"That makes you a liar. It's been what, five years since you've set foot on this place? Lucky you. These days we're surrounded by chicken farmers. There's so much dried shit scrambled up into the air, it's like pollen. Other people get their dust from blossoms, we get ours from a chicken's ass."

"Really," I said. "It's not that bad."

"Easy for you to say. If you lived here, you'd be wanting to set those barns on fire like the rest of us."

"It must be worth the smell," I said, and Aunt Gretel shrugged in a way that made me sad.

"I've been told my land could hold three of those barns. Cloyd Mays, you remember him down the road apiece? He's still at it with the farm but four years ago he mortgaged up again and built himself three barns. 60,000 chickens he's got there shitting up a storm. They get born and they're gone in five weeks, can you believe that? He can do almost half a million chickens a year as long as he can look the other way about the stink and the way those chickens get treated."

“You and me both ought to move away,” I said.

Aunt Gretel spread her arms and rocked as if she intended to fly. “Where to?”

“Just away,” I said. “Away from it all.”

“That’s no place,” she said. “That takes you to nowhere.”

§

I was home after work Monday, just into my second Busch Light, when the phone rang, a voice on the other end saying “Not guilty” followed by nothing but breaths as if those words formed an obscene slur. I counted seven breaths before I hung up.

“One-sided calls don’t promise much but trouble,” Jeanie said.

“Somebody letting me know Eugene and Roy got set free.”

“A long time listening for that.”

“The rest was breathing.”

“A man’s or a woman’s?”

“A woman. She talked deep like a man and with just the two words it could have been anybody.”

“Even Rita Sue Cuff?”

“Sure, it could have been. She had to sit and listen to me swear her husband beat Dwayne Reese to death.”

I poured my next beer into a glass and took it outside where the cicadas had begun to swarm just like Aunt Gretel had promised. I got it now about them. Their natural defense was numbers. If some of them made their way into the light a year early, the birds ate every last one of them so fast they never got a chance to mate and keep things going. But it made me wonder what sort of weapons those cicadas carried a million years ago before hiding among a crowd so large that there weren't enough birds to eat all of them satisfied the ones that were left. Once that system worked so well they didn't have any other way of defending themselves except being on time and acting exactly like the rest of their kin.

Jeanie sat down beside me on the swing we had on the side of the deck by the house. She swatted a few cicadas away, but she didn't complain. “You know what I wish?” she said

“No.”

“I wish you were a storyteller.” She paused in a way that made me think I'd never know what she meant unless I begged her to explain. At last, she stepped close and looped her arms around my back, looking up at me as if she'd

just raised her head from my shoulder after we'd finished doing one of those slow shuffles we used to do when we were drinking together and maybe one song away from sex. "Then you could start the story that I want to hear straight out to the end, like one of those Jesus stories where everything bad means something good."

"A parable?" I felt her press against me in a way that made my free hand slide under her shirt.

"Yes, like that."

Gary Fincke's latest collection, *The Killer's Dog*, which includes "Somewhere in There, the Truth," won the Elixir Press Fiction Prize and will be published early in 2017. *The Out-of-Sorts: New and Selected Stories* will be published by West Virginia University late in 2017.

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