

ADELIENE 1

Never thought I'd find myself at a Baptism Lunch, or as some uppity women call it, *luncheon*. You can't call fried chicken and deviled eggs piled up on a washtub turned upside down a luncheon. Not when it's outside, by the *Tar* River. It ought to be called River Revival, something a little more exciting than exactly what it is. But then again, every Baptist I've ever known makes it a goal of their lives to wash away any flare or pizzazz a particular circumstance might introduce. They do love a good river dipping, though, them Baptists. And what with the singing and Amen'ing and hollering—who needs whiskey? If you'd come up on that river baptism by chance, you would've thought John himself had returned from dusty Jordan to do the cleansing, the very last lent ball of sin pinched off by his bony fingers. No, they do not drink, they do not dance but By God those Baptists know how to howl all the same. Assigning God the reason for all the fuss seems like an afterthought. "Praise the Lord!" the menfolk shouted while their womenfolk stood around and smiled half-smiles, looked at the ground, one or two muttering their sweet lady-like Amens. Dressed in their Sunday finery, the men near about shook each other into a palsy with their handshakes, slapping each other on the back as if they were trying to dislodge a fishbone. In the end, they sure seemed pleased with themselves, a "sin" I suppose they allowed themselves on river days.

Benji, my brother, wanted me to come along with him and his wife, Marguerite. Although he didn't regard sin as all that awful, Marguerite, or Maggie as they called her, did. "Sin" was an abstract concept for Benji, never buying into hell or Satan or any of that growing up as we did in a rather lax Presbyterian household. We lived in a religious home because our mama wouldn't have had it any other way; had it been up to our daddy, we'd work the fields on Sunday like we'd done all the other days of the week. I was the next to oldest of four, Benji

being the oldest. Since he was a replica of Daddy both in mind and spirit, he was in alignment with a seven-day work week, too, loving the land with an even tenderer hand than Daddy had. Benji might call sin “misbehaving” or “acting out,” never branding it with the weight of God. Then there was a big gap in babies—four years, which to a farmer like my daddy signaled sure demise—more abled bodies meant more work got done. I know the one time I asked Mama about it, asked her why she waited so long to have after me to have any more babies, she whipped her head around so fast from where she was frying cornbread I thought it might spin off. She whipped it right back just as fast, staring a hole into that cast iron pan of sizzling bacon grease. At the time, I was embarrassed but in the way a kid gets embarrassed, not really knowing why. It was Mama Trecee who told me years later, after I was grown and had already had Michael, that Mama had miscarried a little boy. There’s a five year gap between me and Christina, or Tina as we all called her. The sweetest little thing you ever saw with curly red hair that must have come from the Beaumont side, and after that, Juliebelle, who Mama had when she was thirty-six years old. Doctor told her not to have any more children because she damn near bled to death with Julie. So, Benji was essentially crowned prince, being the only boy. He worked hard and played hard and would never count the simple pleasures of life as sinning. A trio of horn players who knew their way around C minor was not a sin, nor was a cold bottle of beer after picking the flea beetles off tobacco leaves in the heat of July. Maggie’d had herself a time trying to adjust his view, and after subsuming a good amount of time in that project, she’d settled on dragging him to church (which he didn’t mind), forcing him to “volunteer” his time painting any old thing the Preacher needed him to paint (which he liked doing anyway, since painting was his chosen profession), and convincing him that “seeing the Lord in action” down by the river was a sight that would ignite a different sort of fire in his soul (it hadn’t but Benji

could not be troubled with it, knowing Maggie'd "ice him" if he didn't attend, a term he used to describe her days-on-in silent treatment).

It was late March, probably about fifty-six or seven degrees, chilly for the first day of Spring. The yellow heads of daffodils were pushing through the layers of sand that make up that part of the world and the pretty pink dogwoods along Nash Road that are usually out by mid-March in Eastern North Carolina were holding back, smart enough to know the ground was plenty warm but the air was not. The magnolias weren't about to start their dramatic show of eggshell-colored blooms against deep green shiny leaves, not with the chill to that air. And the prettiest little redbud trees in the church yard looked as if they were still deciding: in or out. I wouldn't have seen them at all had Benji not told me I had to go to the service, too.

"Church? You gone soft in the head, Benji? Maggie's got you going regular to church on Sunday but I'm not obligated to do any such thing."

"You ain't going to join us for church? How you figure? They might think you just coming out to the river for a biscuit and iced tea, then." He moved around my kitchen, picking up a magazine then my lighter, looking for anything to soften his attention. I have never known Benji to sit still, not even for a minute.

"You going to drag me into that hell-fire brimstone nest? Benji, honey, I haven't graced the doors of a Christian establishment since Jesus wore sandals."

"So?"

"So? So the place might fall down around us once I walk in. Can't I just meet y'all out there?"

He opened a drawer, then another as if he was looking for a butcher knife to slice my fool throat, keep me from talking anymore. Finally, he turned around with a pen and piece of paper and wrote down the name of the preacher, handed it to me. He sat down, pulled the ashtray closer to him and rolled himself a cigarette.

“Now what do I want with this?” I said, staring at my brother’s north-leaning handwriting.

“Go visit Preacher Noble. He’ll calm your nerves about walking into the house of the Lord.”

I laughed out loud, nearly spitting my coffee all over the floor. “You think I’m *ashamed* of going? You think I need to repent before stepping up those marble steps of your wife’s church? Benji, I do believe you have forgotten who you are talking to.”

“They ain’t marble.”

“I don’t need to see no preacher.”

“No sister of mine is going to show up for the eating and skip the praying. We’ll pick you up at 10:30. Don’t wear nothing too...bright.”

I moved the ashtray closer to me and stubbed my cigarette out, restraining myself from blowing my last plume of smoke in his face. I palmed the table with both hands and got so close I could count the hairs on his nose. “You might think you can guilt me into darkening the doors of First Baptist but you will not, little brother, tell me what I can and cannot wear.”

Benji looked down at my chest where my slip had fallen open and pressed one finger to close the gapping view. “Three years in Memphis don’t make you smarter than me. Just

remember you ain't going to a honkytonk roadhouse," he said with his eyes squinting from the curling smoke of his cigarette. "Besides, you think it's me wants you to come? Hell no! It's Maggie. She'll have a kitten she sees you down by the river and not saved by God's word."

I snatched his finger and squeezed it a little, feeling giddy he hadn't been turned into a holy-roller yet, that he was just hen-pecked by his woman, like so many men I knew. What was the harm? I'd always liked the hymns and maybe this Preacher Noble had a good sermon up his sleeve, could make a person feel big, or important with his words. I was hoping he wasn't one who made you feel small, and dirty. Lord knows we got plenty of them in the South. Hell of a name for a preacher man, I thought.

And so I went with them. Now Maggie was an extremely complicated woman, and I guess that falling in love with a simple man like my brother helped keep her two little chickadee feet on the ground. She had money—Charleston money—and marrying a banker or even a preacher (she loved herself some holy men!) would have just heightened her need to make them listen, sit, rollover. A house painter who decided not to farm tobacco like his daddy would serve her and her life better. He was a jack-of-all-trades, truth be told. Did she think she could control Benji? He let her think she did, saying 'yes mama' and 'sure thing, mama' to her all the time. Thing was, he wasn't much for conflict. I say he was simple but not in a brainless way, not in a way that let people think they could cut him down, step on him or dismiss his presence. Standing six feet four, no one could dismiss him even if they wanted to. I remember one Thanksgiving Aunt Jean, my mama's sister, had come to visit, traveled all the way from Meridian, Mississippi! Benji was sixteen, and I don't think Aunt Jean had seen him since he was crawling. Well, she ambled up the steps and Benji was there at the top, holding the screen door open for her, probably not even knowing which side of the family she was related to. Benji spent his teenage

years a lot like I spent mine—working and trying to stay awake in school, trying not to miss too much of it. A simple, uninterrupted night of sleep without Tina and Julie arguing or crying was an indulgence to be savored. At sixteen, he was already six-foot-two and skinny as a bean pole. The first thing Aunt Jean said as she gave him the once-over was, “By God, Dorothy done lost her Scarecrow!” We all called him “Scarecrow” or just “Crow” for a couple of weeks but to his relief, the name did not stick. Daddy didn’t like crows, anyway. Said they were portenders of death, a bad omen, which was unusual coming from a man who lived off the land all his life and had an uncanny affection for animals.

And why did my scarecrow brother want me to go with him to the Baptism Luncheon? Why’d he see my presence there was all that important? Well, he didn’t. That, too was Maggie who crouched in them bushes, whispering into his chest at night about how the flames of hell would be licking the lobes of my ears and did he want that for his sister? Reminding him that our mama was a God-fearing woman and my, what a shame that her faith had to end there and not be evident in her two oldest children. She thought I could use some spiritual uplifting that didn’t have to do with the lifestyle I was living. She’d forced him, and he’d forced me. The things we do for those we love, making corrections for things we don’t even see as wrong.

The church part wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I knew a lot of folks in the congregation; some even had the decency to say hello. Some acted like they’d never seen me before, which was okay with me. There was the slightest recognition in their eyes, then they’d look up and away, remembering their night at Miracle Grove when I sang them back to something they’d buried, or maybe to something they’d just discovered. Oh yes I recognized several of those pale jowls, darting eyes sitting behind withered faces. If it wasn’t for their monthly visits south to Edgecombe county, plenty of them would walk right out of their starched

suits, walk back to the graves of their mamas, walk back in time to before they'd found Jesus or jazz. They may have been shocked to see Benji Peppiatte's sister in church, as many of them knew him through work or a card game. A syrupy feeling filled my blood vessels when, just for a quick moment, their pressed, pert wives would see them seeing me and an ocean would open up, filling the pews with the green water of suspicion. Pupils would dilate and lips would tighten into a thin line. *Where you know her from* made a trail of crumbs which dabbled the minds of those righteous church ladies. Everybody knew I had been living in Memphis, and naturally, they figured the city had corrupted me. I had come back at Christmas, and found somewhere to sing by New Year's but Miracle Grove was not your typical bar. They had blacks and whites singing and playing music together and although it was 1958 in America, it was still 1865 in the minds of some people. Hell, they believed all that junk about rock-n-roll being "devil" music, what do you think they thought of blues, of jazz?

Some of those straight-backed church ladies might have even asked their husbands about me, once they were safely in the parking lot. Could be a sin to make a scene in the holy house of the Lord.

Or maybe they asked on the ride over to the river. "Who was that woman you nodded at, sitting on the middle pew with Benjamin and Maggie Peppiatte?"

"What nod? Who are you talking 'bout?" Palms sweating, a jungle of vines crawling up their backs, down their legs.

A minute, two would pass while the Missus regained her breath. "Don't tell me you didn't notice her, darling. She was wearing an orange and purple paisley dress, for heaven's sake

with a pair of pink gloves. Pink! In church! She looked like she missed her bus to New Orleans. They's probably holding the parade until she arrives."

Or maybe they wouldn't say anything. Just sniff, reapply their lipstick, and burn the dinner that night out of spite. Fall into a silence even a dead man could pick up on.

The sermon wasn't bad. Preacher Noble was not quite as flashy as I'd imagined or maybe hoped for but the message was a good one. He preached on the passage about 'Give Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's' or whatever that verse is. I truly enjoyed the Gentle Lambs Spring concert. They sang *Blessed Be the Tie That Binds* real slow, and all the words came at me differently. I closed my eyes and sort of floated above their heads for a minute, humming the tune softly to myself. I thought maybe I'd try that at Miracle Grove, take a song everybody knows and slow it down, way down. I liked the feeling that came with the surprise satisfaction. You know it but you don't, not like that. It's new yet familiar.

I asked Benji if we could stop off at my place so I could change my shoes. Wasn't going to ruin my heels by no Tar River! Maggie insisted I looked fine and I wanted to say to her, hell, woman, I know that I just want to be comfortable! But they wouldn't stop, saying it'd be rude if we turned up late, what with Maggie's very own brother-in-law one of the two who was getting baptized that day.

God Damn the day I met Duke Macalister.