

B L O O D R E L A T I O N S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

FROM SOMEWHERE INSIDE the barn came a dripping noise. It made Denny feel strange because it sounded like rain, yet he was sitting outside in the warm evening, watching the moon come up through the East Texas pines.

The moon was big and orange-colored and looked like a pumpkin with little smears of dirt on it.

“Denmmny!”

“Coming,” he said. He didn’t want to go inside. When he went inside it meant the day was almost over, and he didn’t want it to end. It was the last day of summer, which made him a little sad, but it was his birthday, too. They’d given him a puppy, and he wanted to stay outside and make the day last forever.

Today he was thirty-five years old.

RUNNING HOT WATER into the saucepan, Anne took another look out the window. Denny was still by the barn, watching the moon come up, and she wondered if she was going to have to go out and lead him to the dinner table by his hand.

It had been a good day. Even Tom had seemed to relax a little, and he and Denny had played together in the Indian summer sunshine like a couple of idiots—

She almost bit herself. A flush of shame went down her neck and she had to splash some water into her eyes. It was one of those words—like “dummy” and “fool” and even “monster”—that she couldn’t use any more. Denny had only been with them a few weeks now, since Mom had died, and in the years she’d been away from him she’d lost the habit of watching her words. So far she hadn’t slipped in front of him, but Tom had, more than once, and the worst part had been the tension it left behind.

When she looked out again Denny was shambling back toward the house, slump-shouldered and staring at the ground. Good. At least he remembered.

Then he turned again and started for the door of the barn, and her heart sank. It was no use.

“Tom?” she called. “Can you get Denny for me? He’s headed for the barn.”

SURE, TOM THOUGHT. I’d love to. What else do I have to do but play hide-and-peek with your half-witted brother?

The rush of guilt followed instantly, and he shut his eyes. “Okay,” he said. “I’m going.”

What's happening to us? he wondered, as he pulled on his boots and stamped his tired feet down into them. Guilty all the time, everything falling to pieces around us . . .

As he came around the side of the house he could see Anne framed in the yellow light of the kitchen window, but no sign of Denny.

"He went in the barn," came Anne's voice. "I'm putting supper on the table now."

"Okay."

A chicken cut across his path, and for the hundredth time he wondered what he was doing there. He was no farmer, yet for nearly a month now he'd been tending two horses, four cows, a dozen chickens, and one tired old sow. The university in Nacogdoches had let him set up his schedule for afternoon classes, leaving his mornings free for the chores, but the hour's drive into town seemed to eat up the last of his free time.

It was harder on Anne, of course. She had to do the gardening, cooking, half the repairs, and take care of Denny besides. But then, it was her farm. It was her mother that had left it to them, and her brother that was part of the package.

And there I go again, Tom thought. Trying to squirm out from under the responsibility.

In the pasture behind the barn one of the horses whickered nervously. The other night sounds of the farm all went quiet.

Suddenly Tom caught the odor of the swamp that lay a mile or so south of the house, and he wondered if it affected the animals the same way it did him. He believed in history, not in superstitions, but something about that swamp was frightening, even in daylight. "The glades," the locals called it, and like the Florida Everglades it was full of birds and snakes and even alligators. But the locals talked about other things that lived in the swamp, things out of their rightful place and time. Like the bug that one of the neighbor boys claimed to have found, a dragonfly-shaped thing over a foot long.

But of course Tom had never seen it himself. When he asked what had happened to it, the boy told him a cat had eaten it. "Made the cat sick as all get out," the boy had said, laughing, and Tom had just assumed the kid was having him on.

But nothing accounted for the smell of that place, or the way the animals got nervous when the wind blew up out of the south.

Tom put his hand on the barn door and stopped. A snuffling sound was coming from inside, and he suddenly didn't want to open it.

He pulled on the handle. The hinges groaned, and he stared into the darkness of the building. "Denny," he said softly. He could still hear the snuffling, and behind it another noise, a steady, persistent dripping sound.

"Denny?" he said again. For some reason his voice was barely coming out of his throat. He slapped at the wall with his left hand, searching for the light switch, and finally found it. The floodlight high in the ceiling came on, blinding him, and as his eyes slowly cleared it looked like everything was all right. Denny stood over one of the low shelves at the side of the barn, facing away from him.

Then he saw what Denny was looking at, and saw the blood dripping onto the dirt floor and the puddle of it under Denny's feet.

"Oh my God," Tom said. "Oh my God..."

DENNY WAS UPSTAIRS, still crying. Anne could hear his sobs through the floor and wanted to go comfort him, but she wasn't sure she could think of anything to say. She was more afraid she would just start crying herself, or worse yet, screaming, and not be able to stop.

She couldn't believe that Denny had killed the dog. Tom hadn't gone into details, but she knew from the look on his face that it had been bad, something savage and brutal, and Denny simply wasn't capable of it. Tom had said he didn't believe it either, but the doubt in his voice had put a wall between them.

But if Denny hadn't done it, then who had?

She lay in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin. The breeze that pushed and rustled at the curtains was still warm, but she wore a flannel nightgown in spite of it. She had a book in one hand that her eyes refused to focus on. She knew as well as Tom did that it was there for a defense, an excuse not to talk to him. He lay with his back to her now, the set of his shoulders and the depth of his breathing telling her he was not really asleep.

The sheriff hadn't had time to come out. Three area high schools had football games scheduled that night, and unless it was an emergency he needed every man he had to keep the drunks off the roads. That was his excuse, anyway, though Anne believed he simply hated to make the long drive out to their farm. First thing in the morning, he'd said.

Anne put the book down, and shut herself in the bathroom. There's a simple explanation, she told herself, turning on the faucet. The sound of running water relaxed her, and she left it on while she looked through the medicine cabinet for some Valium. Rats, maybe, she thought.

But Tom said it had been killed somewhere else and carried over to the shelf. Rats didn't do that.

She found the pills and took two of them, washing them down with a long drink. Her reflection stared back at her from the door of the medicine cabinet, tired and brittle-looking.

Thirty-two, she thought, patting compulsively at the split ends and spikes of white coming out of the straight blonde hair. I look forty, at least. Her eyes were bloodshot and swollen, as if she had been crying for hours instead of fighting to keep from it.

Coming to the farm had been a mistake, she knew.

Everything was too fragile—the marriage, Tom's ego, Denny's temper, most of all their bank account. They could have sold the farm to pay for some kind of hospital for Denny, with maybe enough left over to send Tom to England for the research he'd always wanted to do.

She turned the water off, started to reach for the light cord, then opened the door first. She wondered how she was ever going to sleep again.

THE SCREAM WOKE Tom instantly. He came up out of a dream of

desolation and fear, where he'd been wandering through a bleak, alien landscape. He was ravenous, but everything he put in his mouth turned sour and putrid and he couldn't swallow it.

He woke so hard that his legs kicked into the wall, and he rolled over to see Anne as a huddle in the sheets, scooting away from him. Her breath was coming in short gasps, making a *huh, huh, huh* sound.

He reached for her automatically, knowing she was still half asleep and wrapped in a nightmare. "It's okay," he told her. "There's nothing there."

"Yes there *is!*" Anne whispered. "*Look!*"

Her hand shot toward the window, and Tom felt like the bed had dropped from under him. Christ, what if—

He got his legs under him and turned to the window. For an instant he thought he saw something, but when he blinked there was nothing but the shadow of the tree.

"You're dreaming," he said. "You're just dreaming. Everything's okay."

A branch rasped against the window screen. Anne sucked in her breath with a harsh whistle.

"It's just the branches," he said, putting his arms around her loosely and stroking her back. Gradually he felt her relax; after a moment she muttered something, turned over, and was still.

Tom tried to get comfortable again, but his nerves were humming. Had he really seen something, or was it the combination of the dream and Anne's own terror?

He closed his eyes and the image of the dead puppy came to him again. Its eyes were closed as if it was only sleeping, but its head was twisted ninety degrees from the body. The pale white cords of the neck muscles looked like electrical cables in some sort of mechanical toy. Or they would have, if there hadn't been blood everywhere.

Something rasped along the screen again, and Tom thought his heart would punch its way through the wall of his chest.

This is not getting me to sleep, he thought. And sleep is what I need right now.

There was nothing else to do but go outside and cut off the branch. He'd been meaning to do it for weeks now, anyway. He was next to the wall, and had to slide carefully down the length of the bed to avoid waking Anne. Even so, she got up on one elbow to look at him.

"Where are you going?"

He pulled on his pants and groped around on the dresser top for the flashlight. "Outside," he said. "Just for a second."

"Why?"

"Never mind. Just go back to sleep."

He slid his feet into leather slippers and thought for a second about getting the shotgun out of the closet.

Jesus, he thought. You're really in bad shape.

He closed the bedroom door behind him and turned on the hall light. The side door would let him out of the house right next to the tree, but he found himself unwilling to go out empty-handed.

He went into the kitchen and took a butcher knife out of the drawer. He told himself he needed it to trim back the branch. He wasn't fooling himself. Instead of going back to the side door, he went out the front, turning on the porch light.

The wind had picked up from the north, blowing thin shreds of cloud over the moon. Tom stopped, puzzled, and then figured out what was bothering him. With the wind out of the north he shouldn't have been able to smell the glades any more. For some reason the odor was still there. The air was cooling off, and Tom felt goosebumps knotting themselves on the skin of his bare arms.

He opened the gate into the chicken yard and heard something thump into the dirt. His hand snapped back reflexively; then he realized that something had fallen off the top of the gate when he moved it.

He bent over for a closer look, and for a long moment he didn't believe what he saw. Then his mouth slowly came open and the flashlight dropped from his fingers.

ANNE LAY IN BED and looked at the wedge of light coming in through the door. She hadn't been able to get back to sleep after Tom had left the bed. She tried to remember the dream that woke her up. It had been so vivid and close to reality that it was hard to separate from what had followed. She knew she had been seeing some shadowy ... *thing*, but she'd seen more than just the physical form, she'd also seen its feelings. Through the jumble of emotions she'd felt a hopelessness and a driving compulsion. It had frightened her, and when she came awake she was still seeing it, there at the window. Even after Tom had held her and talked to her, she could still see it.

The Valium made her feel insubstantial, but it didn't quiet the voices in her head. She wondered where Tom was, what he was doing, why he was taking so long. The house was quieter now than she could ever remember it. Even Denny upstairs was not shifting around or making noises in his sleep. The soft sound of her own breathing was starting to hypnotize her, and she felt her eyelids slowly close.

Suddenly she was sitting bolt upright in the bed. A noise had gone directly into her subconscious, and now she couldn't even remember what sort of noise it had been. But it was wrong, not a normal noise at all, and this time she knew there would be no more sleep .

"Tom?" she called softly.

Silence, then a rustling, scraping sort of sound from outside.

"Tom!" She didn't care if Denny woke up. Even the sound of his crying would be a relief.

She knew she had to get out of bed and look for Tom. Don't even think about it, she told herself. Just do it, because you don't have any choice about it. Something's wrong, and you have to know what it is.

She dropped her legs over the side of the bed and felt them hit something soft and furry. Tom's description of the mutilated puppy flashed across her mind, and she bit off a scream an instant before it could get out.

It's your slippers, she told herself. She reached out with her feet again and put them on.

Now get up.

She walked around to the foot of the bed. Her hand went to the drawstring of the curtains, hesitated, then pulled it sharply down.

Nothing. The tree, with a leafy arm held against the screen. The dusty yard, empty as a desert in the moonlight.

As she turned her head, something glittered in the dirt. She glanced back again and saw a piece of metal lying near the fence. It looked for all the world like one of the kitchen knives, but she couldn't understand how it had gotten outside.

She went back around the bed and reached for the lamp. She didn't even realize how badly her hand was shaking until she felt the slick porcelain skitter out of her grasp and crash onto the floor.

"Shit!" she cried, and it was almost a scream. There was no overhead light in the bedroom; Tom had always meant to put one in, and now it was too late, too late.

She wrapped her hands around the knob of the hall door and forced herself to calm down. Nothing was wrong, nothing beyond the jumpy feeling in her stomach. She would get the flashlight, clean up the mess, and go find Tom.

Tom had taken the flashlight.

All right then, she'd go find Tom. And as a concession to her nerves, she'd take the shotgun with her.

DENNY SAT BY the window upstairs, hardly daring to breathe. He knew he wasn't supposed to be out of bed, and sometimes when he walked around at night the floorboards would creak and Sissy would come up and find him.

Funny things were happening. First had been the funny thing with the puppy, which wasn't funny at all, and he didn't like to think about it because it made his chest hurt and his eyes bum. Then there had been the dream, and when he woke up from it Sissy was screaming downstairs. Then Tom had gone outside and Denny had come to the window to watch. Tom came out the front door, right under the window, carrying a knife and looking very frightened. He had disappeared around one side of the house and after a while Sissy had gotten up, and now lights were coming on all through the house.

The dream had been the funniest part of all. Denny didn't usually remember dreams, except the ones the doctors had helped him with, but this one he did. Feelings of being lost and confused and frightened.

And very, very hungry.

ANNE COULD SEE Tom's tracks in the porch light, leading around toward the south side of the house through the soft dirt. She was looking down and following them, carrying the gun cradled in her arms, and so she saw it before she stepped on it.

It took nearly ten seconds for her to realize it had once been a chicken. The head was folded completely back against the body, and blood had soaked

through all its feathers. There was blood on the top of the gate, where it had obviously been lying.

The way the puppy had been lying on the shelf.

The strength seemed to leak out of her legs. She steadied herself against the side of the house with one arm.

“Tom!” she shouted. “*Tom!*”

The wind snapped at her nightgown and a strand of hair stung her face like a tiny whip. There was no other answer.

She pushed open the gate and bent to pick up the piece of glittering metal. It *was* one of her kitchen knives, a butcher knife, and something had discolored the handle and part of the blade. For an awful moment she thought it was blood. Then she saw that it was something else, something like mud, with the greenish color of the river bottoms in it.

Tom’s footprints ended in a scuffed place in the sand. It looked like branches had been dragged over it to cover up the tracks. The brush marks led off toward the tree at the bedroom window.

“Tom?” she called again, hopelessly.

Something was wrong, beyond question, and she tried to sort through the drugged, frightened muddle in her head for the sensible thing to do. She wanted help, no matter how foolish she might sound, and she was going to try to get some.

She went back into the brightness of the house and picked up the phone. The buzz of the dial tone was a comfort to her, and she suddenly realized how afraid she’d been that the phone wouldn’t be working.

She dialed the sheriff’s number from a little white stick-on label on the cradle. It seemed to ring forever. Finally a woman’s voice answered.

“This is ... this is Anne Jeffries, out on the old post road. I think . . . I think I have a prowler.”

“You called earlier?”

“That’s right. You said ... unless it was an emergency you couldn’t ... but now I think it is, yes, an emergency...”

“All right, Mrs. Jeffries, I’ll get someone out there as soon as I can, but it’s going to take a while. Is your husband there?”

“Yes. That is—” A sound came from the bedroom, a rustling, then a creaking of bedsprings. “Yes, he is. Listen, I’ll call you right back, okay?”

“Mrs. Jeffries? Wait, I need—”

Anne put the phone down and went back to the bedroom. “Tom? Is that you?” The shotgun was still in her hands, and she couldn’t bring herself to let go of it, not yet.

She pushed open the bedroom door, but the light from the hall barely reached the corner where the bed was. She stepped inside, barely noticing as a piece of broken lamp crunched under her foot. The outline of a body was just visible on the bed, and a trickle of moonlight from the window glittered on the red of Tom’s beard.

“Tom? Why don’t you say something?” He was sulking again, she thought, but it didn’t matter. She was so relieved to see him that she could put up with

his moodiness. She laid the shotgun by the door and crawled into bed, sliding across to get next to his warmth.

“Tommy?” She reached up to stroke his face, running her hand up his neck, and her hand came to a mouth where no mouth should be.

Her hand was drenched in cool, sticky blood.

She felt the grayness of fainting close over her, but her horror of the bed was so great that she fought it off and rolled onto the floor, still half conscious.

She wiped her hands across the sheets, the smell of blood now seeming to fill the entire room. Her stomach rolled and twisted. The darkness had a coarse texture to it, like black burlap, and she prayed she wouldn't faint, that she could get to the shotgun and stay awake until someone came to help.

Still too weak to stand, she scooted herself backwards on the hardwood floor, toward the rectangle of light from the hallway and the gleaming barrel of the shotgun.

The stairs in the hallway groaned with the weight of someone walking on them.

It's still inside, she thought. And, oh God, it's been up there with Denny ...

She got to the gun and crawled back into the shadows of the bedroom with it as slow footsteps moved down the stairs: a shuffle, a creak, a pause, and another shuffle.

She sighted through the doorway, the barrel propped on her upraised knees, trying to keep herself from shaking. Only another few seconds, she thought. Another couple of seconds, then close your eyes and make yourself do it and it will be over.

The shuffling reached the bottom of the stairs and moved slowly toward her. She took up the slack in the trigger and held her breath.

And nearly shot her brother as he shambled past her into the yard.

THE TENSION WENT OUT of her like the light from a broken bulb. Her head went down onto her knees and the tears started out of her eyes. She tried to call Denny's name, but all that came out was a sandpaper noise from deep in her throat.

Then she remembered what was waiting outside for Denny, and the blood hammered in her ears.

“I can't,” she heard herself whispering. “I can't go on.” She got to her feet anyway and went into the hall and out the open door to the yard.

Denny was running now, toward the corral, and in a couple of seconds he would be out of the circle of light from the house and she wouldn't be able to see him.

“Denny!” Her words whipped away on the wind, and Denny faded into the shadows.

The darkness next to the barn was full of darker shapes, and she strained to make them out as she stumbled forward, clutching the shotgun. As she moved through the dark she could see the outline of the tractor and the individual posts of the fence. And then she was seeing shapes where there shouldn't have been any, and she pulled up short. She closed her eyes, then opened them again, but it only made things worse.

It was slaughter. Blackie, the mare, was sprawled across the bench seat of the tractor, forelegs bent, throat torn open. A few feet away lay their sow, belly up on a watering trough with her head flopped over at an impossible angle.

The dirt in all directions around them was soaked with blood.

She dropped to her knees, holding the shotgun to her chest. From far away she heard Denny's voice.

For just an instant she thought it might be the sheriff, that help might have arrived. The idea faded instantly. She knew Denny was talking to the killer.

She was just getting to her feet when she saw Denny back away from a deeper darkness in the shadows next to the barn.

"D-don't be scared," Denny said to it. "Puh-puh-please don't be scared."

The wood fence of the corral stood between her and her brother. She got over it with clumsy speed. Something unexpected was happening to her, blanking out the memory of her slaughtered husband, turning off the Valium, even pushing the fear into some other part of her brain where it didn't bother her. She pointed the shotgun into the shadows.

"Denny," she said. "Go to the house. Now." Denny was almost within her reach as he turned around.

"Sissy?" His puffy, childish face struggled with ideas that were too big for him to put into words. "What is it, Sissy?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. She tried to keep her voice calm, but it slipped away from her at the end of the sentence. "But it's bad, Denny. It's some kind of monster, and it can hurt you."

"Monster?" Denny said. "Like me?"

Oh God, she thought, not now. Some other time, when I can deal with it. "Run," she told him. "Run away. As fast as you can."

She saw Denny pick up the fear in her voice, saw it seize control of him. He spun around, tried to run, and tripped over his own feet. His head went into the wooden fence post and his eyes rolled back. He moaned softly.

Anne stepped between Denny and the shadow. "Stop," she said to it, "or I'll shoot."

The smell hit her, and once and for all she knew that the killer was no escaped lunatic, was not even human at all. It was a river bottom smell, chalky and decaying, but with a yeasty sourness underneath.

A matted, green-brown arm came out of the darkness, and Anne pulled the trigger of the gun.

The explosion kicked her back two steps and nearly made her fall over Denny. When she looked up, the creature was still moving, slowly coming into the light.

She couldn't seem to focus her eyes on it. It was seven feet tall, asymmetrical, pulpy, without any obvious features except its arms and legs, leaking its foul odor in a cloud around it.

She pumped another shell into the chamber and fired the gun again. This time she was ready for the recoil, and she watched as the thing took the full charge of buckshot the way a bull might take a blow with a stick. And then it was coming again.

Anne knew she was going to die.

She had time enough to pump and fire again, and , then it occurred to her, too late, to turn and run. But it seemed easier to stand there and face that awful thing than to face the thought of running away and leaving Denny alone. She was pulling back on the handgrip to load another shell when the thing took hold of her.

And pushed her gently aside.

Off balance, she slipped to her knees and watched it step over Denny's legs and through the gap in the fence, heading for the tiny pasture where the cows were left to graze.

And then it came to her. One dog. One chicken. One horse, one pig.

One human.

And as she heard the cow's scream of terror and the slick, chopping sound of its death, she remembered her dream, and knew that the thing was only sampling, only trying to find something that didn't turn to gall in its mouth. That it was looking for a prey that no longer existed. That it was lost, fallen somehow into a time and place where it didn't belong at all.

Like me? Denny had said.

With a strength that Anne could not comprehend, the creature lifted the dead cow in its arms and turned with it as if looking for some place to put it, driven by the same unfathomable purpose that had made it put her dead husband back in her bed. Finally it laid the mangled corpse in front of her, almost apologetically, and moved away.

A shivering took hold of her and she hugged her knees to herself, listening as the thing shuffled off into the darkness, still searching.