
ONE

That was the summer of the bicentennial, when all these things happened: my sister, Josie, began to hate our country and slapped my mother's face; my wild aunt, Nell, moved in with us, bringing along all five thousand or so of her records and a green record player that ran on batteries; my father started going back to Vietnam in his dreams, and I saw him cry; my mother did the Twist in front of the whole town and nearly lost us all. I was ten years old, and I did something unforgivable.

The first true day of summer for me began with a scream. Only one long, choked, jagged cry, but the sound was full of so much terror that I jumped out of a deep sleep, straight from the bed and onto the cool floorboards. By the time I was on my feet, morning stillness had overtaken the house again, but then I could hear people moving about and I unfroze myself so I could venture out into the hallway.

My sister, Josie, was standing in the doorway of her room, looking down the hall toward my parents' bedroom, as if expecting some other sound to give us direction as to what we should do. But all we heard was my mother cooing our father's name.

"Stanton, it's okay," she whispered, like wind in big leaves. Then, his whole name, as if to remind him who he was: "Stanton Book. Stanton."

Josie, who was sixteen and nice to no one except me, put her hand out and I took it. We moved down the hallway with caution, stepping through squares of white sunlight that fell on the floor. She kept hold of my hand but also walked just behind me, her other hand on the back of my neck, as if steering me.

Their door was ajar, so Josie called out, "Loretta? Stanton?" She had taken to calling our parents by their first names that summer, much to their dismay.

"It's all right," my mother said, but Josie brought up her toe and pushed the door aside anyway. Only a crack, but enough that I could see in. Daddy was sitting on the edge of

the bed with his feet on the floor, and Mom was on her knees in the bed, her hands on his back. Daddy didn't turn to look at us, but the morning light was falling onto his face so that it shone out to us. His eyes looked far away, like he might not know we were all there.

Mom peered at us as if we were witnessing something we shouldn't. Her eyes were full of a kind of fright I couldn't name at that moment, but later I realized that it was a sort of new knowledge there on her face. Maybe for the first time she knew exactly what the war had done to her husband. "Go on, now," she whispered, nodding. "He's just dreamed of Vietnam. That's all. Everything's all right."

I kept staring at my father, though. He was rocking on the edge of the bed now, his hands up to his face. The muscles at the top of his back were stretched tight. I hated the fact that I barely knew him. He was most often good to me, sometimes snatching me up to ride me on his shoulders, tousling my hair, even letting me sit in his lap and drive his truck up the road every once in a while. Then there were times when his temper flared for no known reason, so that we always felt like we were walking through a minefield, waiting for an explosion.

Once I had asked him to tell me about the war and his only response had been a tightening of his jaw before he said, "No. Never," and then walked away without looking back. My mother had felt no pity for me in this moment. "Drop it," she'd said, in her I'm-not-budging voice. But most

of all he was just quiet, a man who lived in the shadows of his family. That was the hardest part, and it left me a boy surrounded by all these women, all the time. Not a bad thing, but sometimes it was confusing and lonesome.

“Josie,” Mom hissed, and nodded to me, so that Josie grabbed hold of my hand again and we moved away with hesitation, even walking backward for a few steps. Finally Josie directed me back down the hallway, dropping my hand at her bedroom door so she could yawn with balled-up fists going into the air. Her oversize Led Zeppelin shirt rode up too high and showed her panties.

“Now that I’ve been scared to death properly,” Josie said, “I believe I’ll go back to bed for a little while.”

Daddy had been awaking us all with his screams lately, so once Josie knew that it was another Vietnam dream, she saw no reason to be upset. I suppose she thought she was used to living with screaming and war, but I had not been able to convince myself of this yet. There was no way I would be able to go back to sleep, and my nerves would be on edge the rest of the day. I worried a lot about Daddy. I worried about everything. I worried about the Russians dropping a nuclear bomb on us. About Josie talking mean to our mother. I worried that Daddy would snap one day and let his anger go too far and hurt one of us.

“Well, go on,” Josie said, nudging me toward my room while she ground a fist into her eye. “Get back in the bed. It’s not even seven o’clock yet, and it’s *summer*.”

"I'm going riding," I announced.

Josie nodded. She would have agreed to anything if it meant she could go back to sleep. She ran a hand through her hair and stumbled into her room. "Be careful, little man," she said, and eased her door shut.

I pulled on a pair of blue-jean cutoffs and a muscle shirt. Chuck Taylor shoes with no socks. Last I put on my Uncle Sam hat, which we had made on the last day of school. Mine had turned out especially good, so I wore it every day when I went riding on my bicycle. I ran on out and found my bike where I had left it, a layer of cool dew standing on my seat.

It was only six thirty, but the world was wide awake like me, and white with summer light. The air was still cool with morning, and even though it held the heat of yesterday beneath, there were goose bumps all down the underside of my arm. The trees behind our house were filled with bird-call. I straddled my bike and stood listening, watching the trees for a sign of the birds. My mother could name every bird by its song, but I had never been able to do this.

I had brought along my transistor radio, so I latched it to the handlebars. There was nothing on yet except for the tobacco reports, so I snapped the radio back off and tried to figure out where to go. Before I had a chance to jump on, I heard someone calling my name.

It was Edie. She was my best friend, but I never would have admitted this to anyone back then. If I had let it be

known that a girl was my best friend, the boys never would have let me live it down.

She was in her backyard, which bordered ours, leaning against the big old willow she loved. Her father was always threatening to cut it down, saying its leaves made too much of a mess in the fall. So far Edie had been able to talk him out of it. She was crazy over that willow tree.

“You coming or not?” she said, since I was standing there, looking at her. She didn’t have to raise her voice, as it carried well on the morning air. “Or are you just going to stare at me like a retard?”

I walked my bicycle across our backyards and put the kickstand down—I couldn’t stand kids who let their bikes fall to the ground—and squatted next to her. “What’re you doing up so early?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I just woke up, wide awake. I think the birds woke me up. Listen at ’em.” She put her forehead against the tree. “What about you?”

“Daddy woke us all up early. He had another bad nightmare, about the war.”

She sat up straighter, interested. “What’d he do?”

“He just hollered out. But it scared us all to death.”

“Does he ever talk to you, about the war?”

“No. Not about being over there.”

“You ought to ask him about it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said, but she looked at me as if I

were stupid. "It'd be interesting, that's all. Don't you think it would?"

"Yeah. But he wouldn't tell me nothing."

"You never know until you try." This was one of Edie's mottoes. She believed in trying everything, in not being afraid of new things. She believed in not judging other people based on how they looked and in having what she called "an open mind." She was eighteen months older than me, but we had been friends before either of us could remember, so it didn't matter that she was older. She hung around with all of us boys because there were no girls on our road. I don't believe Edie would have played with girls even if there had been some, though. She was as good as a boy, anyway, and all of us knew this, even if we never would have admitted it aloud. She was tough. She could balance herself as she walked across the narrowest fallen tree, carry more rocks to build the dam than anyone else, climb the steepest cliff without shedding a tear if her legs got all scratched up from the rocks. All of us boys lived in secret fear of her, to be honest. We all knew that she could beat us at most things. It was bad enough to lose at something, but to be beaten by a girl was the ultimate humiliation. Once, Paul Shepherd had tried to put his hand down Edie's shorts and she had hit him in the face with her fist and called him a Communist pervert. He ran away crying, blood streaming out of his nose, and Edie just laughed.

"Run to Mommy, little wussy!" she called after him,

then turned to the rest of us, who stood nearby, mesmerized. "That's what he gets for messing with me."

Lately, though, Edie had started looking more like a girl. I hadn't really noticed, but Matt Patterson, who lived four houses down the road, had been riding bikes with me only a week earlier when he had asked if I had seen Edie's boobs.

"Boobs?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"You know, stupid," he said, and put on his brakes, causing the back wheel of his bike to take a crooked, sliding halt in the dirt. I stopped next to him and watched as he used his thumbs and forefingers to make two little tents at the top of his shirt, pulling them out. "Like *Laverne and Shirley*."

"No, she don't," I'd said, and took off, pedaling hard so that it took him a while to catch up with me.

Edie lay back against the tree, tucked into an indentation of the trunk that seemed to fit her perfectly.

"I've been getting up every morning and sitting against the tree," she said, with her eyes closed. "It has a good soul."

"You're crazy, man," I said, although I didn't believe this. Lately I had started putting *man* on the end of my sentences, the way Josie did.

She stood on her knees, the way my mother had been doing in the bed, comforting Daddy. She grabbed my wrist. "Here, put your hand on it." I let her direct me to the trunk

of the willow. I noticed that she had on white fingernail polish. I had never seen her wear any kind of makeup before. I laid my palm flat against the tree and was surprised by the cool bark. "Now just be quiet, and listen."

We sat there in silence for a time. I watched her face, waiting for her to tell me more. "Close your eyes, and feel," she said.

I did. I shut my eyes and listened to the birds. Her hand remained on my wrist for what seemed a long while, but she eased it away. Then the birdcall faded and there was a big silence that made me notice only the sensation in my palm, where my skin was tingling from contact with the old willow.

"You feel it, don't you?" she whispered. "The trees, they can talk to you if you listen hard enough."

I was listening hard.

Often, when I met someone for the first time, I could tell if they were a good person or not. I just *knew*. And that's the way I felt in that moment, like the tree was good, too, and that I knew it without knowing why.

Lately I had realized that I was different from most other people, and I still wasn't sure how I felt about that. I had begun to think that I might be a writer. I definitely read more than normal kids. I read and wrote all the time. That year alone I had already read *Sounder*, *Where the Lilies Bloom* (my favorite), two Louis L'Amour westerns, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and *The Light in the Forest*.

My idol was John-Boy Walton, and I had started saving every dime I could scrape up to buy myself a little typewriter like the one he had on *The Waltons*. Meanwhile, stories popped into my head and I scribbled them into my black-and-white composition book.

I hadn't told anyone of this. I liked the idea of having this secret as my own, during a time when I felt nothing at all belonged to me. Being a writer was a fate I had accepted, although I was not as open to accepting that I was weird.

I was also a country boy. My father was very proud of us being country people, so I strived to please him in this regard. My greatest hope was to make Daddy proud of me, and I would have done anything to make this happen, but the fact was that I would have been a country boy regardless.

Suddenly there was a faint, building buzz in my hand, as if the tree was humming beneath my palm. The willow was sending me some kind of reassuring message. I was sure of it. The trees were a part of me.

I jerked my hand away, like someone who has gotten too close to a flame.

"You're weird," I said, not sure if I wanted her to know how weird I was, too. I rubbed my palms together, trying to rid myself of the sensation in my right hand.

"I like being weird," she said. She looked pleased with herself, smiling at me. Edie had very blue eyes, which is the thing everyone always remembered about her. "But you felt it. I know you did. I could see it in your face."

I stood, tapped my kickstand up with the side of my shoe, and hopped on my bike. "Come on, let's go riding."

We pedaled up the road and watched the world come awake. The houses along our road were almost identical: small, plain, all with a porch that ran the whole width of their fronts. Since everybody had pretty good jobs but no intentions to move, many of the families had built on an extra room or a screen porch. These additions only made the sameness of the houses more noticeable, though. The add-ons looked as if they had fallen out of the sky and attached themselves.

These homes had once been company housing. The women all tried to make them look different with paint and flowers, but they were all still just alike. Blue trim around the windows or doors painted red or forsythia bushes didn't change anything; all the houses were the same underneath.

One by one, each little house showed life. My mother's best friend, Stella, who lived three doors down, came out with a laundry basket propped on her hip. She let it fall at her feet and immediately began to pin sheets to the clothesline. Finley Hopkins fired up his truck and backed out, heading to work at the Altamont Mines. Old hateful Miss Lawson was sweeping her front porch in a great fury, swinging the broom back and forth as if the fate of the world might depend on the cleanliness of her porch.

On the other side of the road from the houses were the shoals of the Refuge River. The water was never more than

six inches deep there during the summer. Teenage girls like Josie carried lawn chairs on up the river, past the big cliffs where the kids weren't allowed, to lie in the sun. There they lay back with their fingers occasionally scooping up water to splash out over their naked bellies. They talked about Leif Garrett and listened to ABBA and Steve Miller on a transistor radio. Farther up the river was a big biscuit-shaped rock that hung out over a deep swimming hole where the water was suddenly still. I was too young to remember, but Josie claimed that when she was about ten we had lived through the hottest summer in history. She said the heat had been so bad that everybody on our road had come together at the swimming hole on one ungodly hot July day. Even the old people. "You never seen so much white flesh in your life," Josie said. "God, it was horrible." But something in her face told me it had been nice somehow, too.

Soon we were past all the houses and up where the woods took over one side of the road and the river widened on the other side. Stripes of mist moved down the hillsides and burned away in the new morning. We raced. We each rode a stretch without holding our handlebars, a trick Edie had taught me.

After a while we turned around and headed back the way we had come. I clicked on the radio and the deejay was encouraging everyone to stock up on fireworks for the bicentennial celebration on July Fourth. Then he gave the

weather and said it was going to be the hottest day of the year so far. "I'm going to play a big hit from the summer of '74 to get you all up and moving this morning," he said, and then "I Can Help" came on. Josie had this record and still played it all the time. We pedaled in rhythm to the song, let our bicycles sway and veer across the road along with the weaving music. We both knew every word and sang it very loud. Stella heard the music as we coasted by and turned from her work at the clothesline to snap her fingers and dance a little. We laughed at that and kept singing. Everyone loved Stella.

When we rode back by my house, I realized that Daddy had already left for work at the station. I had wanted to tell him good-bye. When I noticed his truck was gone, I stopped in the middle of the road and stood with my legs on either side of my bike, watching the house as if he might magically reappear. Edie had sped on past me, but now she had noticed that I was stopped in the middle of the road, staring at the house like a dullard. She hollered and laughed at me but I couldn't move for a time, and eventually she rode away, putting her arms in the air to ride with no hands.