

A photograph of a wooden boat on a river. The boat is made of light-colored wood and has a red cloth draped over a chair on the deck. In the foreground, there are tall green reeds. The background shows a sunset sky with orange and pink clouds, and a line of trees on the right bank.

Over Yonder

A NOVEL

SEAN
DIETRICH

SEAN OF THE SOUTH

Over Yonder

SEAN
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HARPER MUSE

Over Yonder

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Prologue

THE GIRL WAS DEAD BEFORE SHE EVER GOT TO THE HOSPITAL. Melinda could tell she was dead because the EMTs were unloading her slowly. They don't move slow when you're alive. The killer had probably not expected the girl to be able to call an ambulance when the vomiting began. Odds are he had not expected the girl to call Melinda either. Melinda was praying the ambulance had arrived at the girl's apartment before the killer had.

When the ambulance pulled in, Melinda was waiting. She stood at a distance in the rain-slicked parking lot, beneath the vapor lights, smoking a cigarette in earnest, a pile of butts around her feet. She coughed between nearly every inhalation. The chemo had made her weak and wrecked her lungs. For the last hour she had been watching vehicles come and go from the ER entrance. She had come directly from work, which was why she still wore her Taco Bell outfit, minus the stupid obligatory visor. The corporate-approved shirt hung on her emaciated frame, tucked into faded black jeans that were size 0 but still a little too big on her wasted body.

Over the course of the last eleven cigarettes, twenty-two patients had entered the ER's sliding doors in varying states of

disrepair. She had seen one gunshot victim. One stabbing. She saw parents rushing into the ER, tugging their kids by the hands, carrying their children in their arms. She had seen dozens of patients discharged too, wrapped in gauze, holding piles of paperwork, sitting in wheelchairs, marked with a bracelet, doomed to wait for a ride. Or worse. Call an Uber.

The cigarette hissed when Melinda stepped on it. She trotted toward the entrance. Her boots clicked against the pavement. Her bleached, fried hair caught the moonglow, like an '80s heavy-metal band singer beneath the stage lights.

When Melinda got to the young woman, she felt tears swell to the surface. The EMTs told her to step back, but Melinda would not. It was her, all right. Her hair had streaks of Pepto-Bismol pink, like all the young kids were doing.

"Crystal!" Melinda shouted. "God, Crystal!"

"Ma'am, you're going to need to back away, please."

"What's wrong with my friend?" she shouted.

"Ma'am, please."

"We're roommates, you can tell me!"

Melinda flung herself atop the body. She pressed her cheek against the girl's forehead, which was as cold as a slab of marble.

"Crystal! No!"

The EMTs relented and gave her a moment. But after a few seconds, they gently removed Melinda from the deceased, albeit kicking and screaming. They wheeled the gurney past the ER doors, leaving Melinda on the sidewalk alone, mascara trails like two black spider legs crawling down her cheeks.

In her hand was the USB-C flash drive.

On her journey back through the parking lot toward her car, she could see a dark shape moving in tandem with her. She caught glimpses of him beneath the halide lights. He was moving a little too casually.

She walked faster.

So did he.

She slowed down.

He did too.

Her car was only a few feet away when he attacked. He was a big guy. Not tall, but solid. Thick cowboy mustache in the shape of a horseshoe. Smooth head, shaved clean. She knew him. She had dated him once. They had both been members of the same organization. Just like Crystal had been.

He tackled her. He shoved her skull into the pavement as she hissed and swore at him. He pressed a knee upon her flailing left wrist, pinning her forearm to the ground.

“You thieving little Judas,” he said.

He searched her pockets with both hands.

And this was his first mistake. The man was so busy searching her that he didn't see what was in her right hand, and thus didn't know what to do when she stabbed him with it. She jammed the two-prong-like electrodes into his rib cage, squeezed the trigger, and released 150,000 volts into his body.

He hit the pavement, unable to move, his face frozen in a silent cry. He sounded like he was choking on his own spit. She hit him two more times with the stun gun until the man had thoroughly wet his pants. She hit him one more time for Crystal's sake.

Then Melinda crawled off the asphalt, dusted herself, and plucked the flash drive from his clenched fist. She lit her final cigarette, drew in a cleansing inhalation, and released a breath of fog into the autumn eve.

“Don't tread on me, Peter,” she said.

Chapter 1

INMATES DON'T CRY. THEY CAN'T. IF A GUY CRIES INSIDE, IT'S rare. And it doesn't last. Like a lunar eclipse. Over before it even begins. This is because crying gets you nowhere in prison. When they let you out of prison, however, you want to cry. You need to cry. You need it so badly it's frustrating. You want to experience the enormous release of celebrative emotion. You want to sob. Heave. Let go of all the accumulated sorrow. Fall onto your knees. Howl and scream. But you just stand there.

Your emotions are missing a few keys in the upper octaves.

Numb. That was how Woody Barker felt as he walked the long, sterile hallway toward the Receiving and Discharging desk. The corridor was gray and featureless, made of cinder blocks. After ten years inside, his hair was the same shade of white as his jumpsuit. And he was a lot leaner than he'd been back when he was fifty.

"This way," said one of the officers with a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. The officer used his key card to open a large, green steel door. "You get to see what's behind door number three today, Woody."

He was escorted by two officers whose faces were made of

wood. They were both young and solidly built, like pro-wrestlers with badges.

When the green door opened, he wanted to weep. He truly did. But his tear ducts—thanks to years of disuse—wouldn't cooperate. He was like a Chatty Cathy doll missing its string. Or like the Stretch Armstrong dolls from his youth, whose legs had been overextended so many times that Stretch's crotch area has become purely theoretical.

Woody checked in with the R&D clerk. She gave him a small envelope containing his Social Security card, birth certificate, and a prepaid Visa with the rest of his inmate account money on it. They gave him some cash. There were purple watermarks on the money. He'd never seen these marks on US currency before.

"What's wrong?" asked the clerk behind the discharge desk.

"Money looks different," he said.

"Different how?"

"I don't know. Just different."

"If you don't want it, I'll take it."

His release clothes came in a plastic bag, courtesy of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. And in true BOP fashion, they were prodigiously crappy clothes. Dollar Store Polo shirt, brandless jeans, Nike knockoffs, and cheap underpants that bunched up in your main crevice like thong underwear made of cling wrap. When he emerged from the bathroom wearing his new clothes, tugging at the seat of his pants, he felt odd and out of place. The jeans were rough against his skin. His shirt smelled like plastic. He had also nearly forgotten how to tie his own shoes since he'd gone so long wearing rubber sandals.

"Don't you clean up nice?" said a female officer who was waiting for him outside the bathroom. The lady guard was imposing, with broad shoulders. The prison had started hiring female guards about five years earlier.

“I feel ridiculous in these clothes.”

“How you think I feel wearing this every day?”

They made Woody wait for about an hour in R&D while they got his paperwork ready. He saw a guy in a nearby office making morning PA announcements. Woody was dumbstruck. He’d heard this man’s voice reading announcements every morning for ten years but had never seen the guy’s face. The guy came out of his office and shook Woody’s hand.

Woody felt like he was meeting a celebrity.

Next, they led Woody to another waiting room, past electronic gates, steel doors, and chicken-wire windows. Finally, he was in the main lobby. The room had cushioned chairs. New carpet. *People* magazines on sofa tables. The CO and the lieutenant met him in the waiting room. Woody knew them both. But today they were acting differently. The decorum of authority was gone. In this room, they were all just guys. Just regular people.

“It’s going to be a shock to the system out there,” the CO said. “You take care of yourself, boss.”

“Thanks,” said Woody.

“And if you ever get lonely,” added the lieutenant, “you can always come back and we’ll give you your old room.”

The guards all laughed. But Woody wasn’t certain whether he should join in or lower his head or what. You didn’t laugh with an officer in Wallace Correctional.

After that, the guards fell into quoting many of the prototypical clichés you hear at funerals, weddings, and used car dealership grand openings. There is nothing more human than using a cliché to ruin a ceremonious moment.

“Just take it one day at a time.”

“Live life to the fullest.”

“Be a blessing to others.”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

“Take time to smell the roses.”

“Remember, you’re only as strong as the tables you dance on.”

They all shook hands. Woody marveled at the firmness of their handshakes. He had not shaken another man’s hand more than a few times in over a decade.

The doors of the South Bend Federal Correctional swung open at 1:19 p.m. Woody walked out holding a plastic bag of belongings. His dad’s truck was idling at the curb. His father’s arm was hanging out the open window with the butt of a cigar cupped in it.

Nobody waved goodbye. Nobody did anything, really. He could feel the officers watching another former inmate exit hell on two legs.

And just like that, Reverend Woodrow Barker was a free man.

Chapter 2

THE BEAT-UP HONDA LOOKED LIKE A PORTA-JOHN ON WHEELS, only with more rust. The engine backfired and coughed black exhaust into the atmosphere, puncturing nearly visible holes into the ozone above. It had left a hundred-mile trail of sooty atmosphere all the way from Black Creek, Kentucky, to Knoxville. Caroline could hear a heavy grinding beneath the car each time her boyfriend shifted into third. It sounded like the vehicle was going to rattle apart into a heap of nuts and bolts on Interstate 40. The car had no suspension. There was a tetanus-rimmed hole in Caroline's floorboard; she could see the highway speeding beneath her.

The car was a '93.

The girl was seventeen and pregnant.

Caroline stared out the lace-like cracks of the passenger window's single bullet hole at downtown Knoxville as they rode past all the franchise chains that have transformed American townships into carbon duplicates of themselves. Her hair was the color of a carrot. She was ninety-four percent freckles. Her small, upturned nose, full cheeks, and cherub face brought to mind a character from the highly successful Cabbage Patch Kids product

line.

Caroline lowered her book and tapped on the cracked window with the bullet hole in it.

“Pull over here,” said Caroline. “I need to stop by Bath and Body Works.”

Her boyfriend, Tater, glanced out the window at the shopping area’s sea of cars glinting in the sunlight and snow.

“Bath and Body Works?”

“I need to get Selina a thank-you gift.”

Tater ignored her. “We are not going shopping.”

“It’s not shopping. It’s a gift.”

“What does Bath and Body Works even sell?”

“Happiness.”

He snorted. “We’re definitely not going.”

Tater wore a ballcap with a table-flat brim. Around his neck was a thick golden chain, bearing a marijuana leaf medallion the size of a baseball glove. His bare torso was painted with a quilt of tattoos, which was why he was shirtless in twenty-nine-degree weather. There was a spider on his left pectoral. Buzz Light-year was on his other one, flying in a victory pose as he plunged through outer space, hovering directly over Tater’s right nipple as though it were Neptune.

He took a hit from his vape pen. “Selina can buy her own freaking perfume.”

“She’s covering my shifts.”

“So?”

“So it’s a way of saying thank you. She had to get a babysitter and everything.”

He laughed. “She’s stealing *your* hours. She should be buying *you* perfume.”

He sped past Bath and Body Works.

“Are you serious right now?” she said.

Tater Bunson was indeed serious. Short men usually were, and her boyfriend was barely five-foot tall with shoes on. He wore a baby-hair mustache on his upper lip that was only visible in certain lighting. They had been together for a year, and it had not been a good year.

“Where’s my next turn?” he said.

She looked at Tater’s phone GPS. “It’s right here.”

Caroline was multitasking, calling out turns, but also reading a Richard Russo novel in her other hand. They shared one phone between them, and it belonged to Tater. Tater was the Keeper of the Phone because he was male. Caroline had never owned her own phone and, like most seventeen-year-olds, there was nothing she wanted out of life more than the latest model of Apple phone.

Tater spun the wheel right.

The car made a sound not unlike a Folgers can of rocks falling down a public stairwell. The Honda Civic EJ1 car was a mutant vehicle, comprised entirely of spare parts, forming a checkerboard of salvage-lot steel. The hood was primer gray, caked with clods of Tennessee dirt. The tires were a curated collection of four differently aged junkyard donuts. The spiderweb crack on the passenger window came from a .22 caliber bullet that had passed through the glass during Tater’s last heated disagreement with his mom.

“Wait,” said Caroline. “Why are you turning right?”

“You just said turn *right* here.”

“No,” Caroline said. “I said turn *right here*. You’re supposed to turn *left* right here.”

“What the hell, Caroline! Which is it? Right or left?”

She lowered her book and pointed out the windshield. “Can’t you see the hospital on your left?”

He saw it all right. He saw North Knoxville Medical Center

just as they were passing the exit.

Tater shouted a colorful word beginning with the sixth letter of the alphabet. He stamped on the brake and shifted into reverse in the middle of traffic. Soon he was heading backward in the intersection, moving against the flow. Horns blared. Cars swerved. Motorists extended hands from open windows and introduced Tater to the Tennessee state bird.

“Are you crazy? What’re you doing?”

“Will you put down that stupid book and pay attention?” he said as they wheeled through traffic, butts first. “You’re supposed to be looking at the GPS, not reading a freaking book while I drive.”

Tater spun the wheel and screeched into the parking lot of North Knoxville Medical Center on two wheels. He barely avoided colliding with one Tesla, one Land Rover, and one little boy in a wheelchair.

The car came to a jarring halt and Gary the goldfish’s travel aquarium nearly fell off the dashboard. Caroline caught his temporary home with her foot. Gary traveled in a Hellmann’s jar. Gary went everywhere Caroline went.

“We can’t park here,” Caroline said. “This is a handicap spot.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just hurry up.”

“You’ve got to move.”

“Relax. They won’t do nothing to us. This is a hospital.” He threw the gearshift into neutral and yanked the parking brake to underline his point. Case closed. The male hath spoketh. Long live the male.

They just stared at each other.

She sighed, then placed Gary’s jar into her backpack carefully, using library books to cushion the jar on all sides.

“I really think you should move the car,” she said. “This is illegal, and it’s not fair.”

“It’s not a big deal. I’m allowed to park here. My dad’s on full disability and I’m a member of his medium family. It’s legit, Caroline.”

“*Immediate* family.”

“Exactly.”

Caroline kicked open the door and slung the backpack over her shoulder. She looked at Tater the way a kindergarten teacher looks with pity upon a kid who just pooped his pants in class.

“If you get a ticket, I’m warning you, I am going to be positively choleric.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Let’s not find out.”

“Why don’t you never speak English to me?”

“Sorry. I only speak English with members of my medium family.”

Her own remark struck her as deeply hilarious. But she stifled her laugh because there was nothing Tater hated more than being laughed at, except for, perhaps, gainful employment.

“You think you’re so much smarter than me,” he said. “You and your stupid goldfish. Well, I got news for you, you ain’t near smart as you think you is, you’re just sorry white trash like the rest of us.”

“Well said, Stephen Hawking.”

“Screw you.”

“Don’t be upset because you don’t know who Stephen Hawking is.”

He slapped a hand on the dash. “Did you hear what I just called you, White Trash? Ain’t no amount of reading what can fix being trash.”

Unfazed, she leaned into the car and pinched his nipple hard enough to squish a cashew. “Put on a shirt. Your nips are turning blue.”

“Dammit, Caroline!” Tater said, shielding his vulnerable areolas.

She fastened her hair into a ponytail and checked her face in the side mirror. Her state of dress embarrassed her. She was braless, wearing double T-shirts to make up for the lack of maternity undergarments. The overshirt was a Snoop Dogg T-shirt that belonged to her boyfriend, worn inside out so the world wouldn’t see Snoop broadcasting his middle finger to the photographer. The shirt hung on her frame with all the charm of an unfurled parachute. But it was the only shirt that fit her pregnant body.

“I’m not skipping the water bill again,” she said. “I’m done bathing outside in this freezing weather. I’m not paying your parking ticket. You’re going to have to get an actual job.”

Tater worked part-time for his cousin’s start-up power washing venture. Business had been slow for the past three or four presidential administrations. Caroline, on the other hand, worked at the Super 8 off I-75. And she worked nights at Walmart stocking shelves.

“Now go find another parking place or so help me . . .”

He scoffed. “Or so help you what?”

“Don’t tempt me, Tater. I’m serious.”

“What’re you going to do, leave me?”

She did not answer.

“You going to live under an overpass? Maybe a cardboard box? You going to squat in some back alley somewhere and go to the bathroom against a brick wall? No, wait. I know. Maybe you could live behind Bath and Body Works.”

Caroline was about to answer him, but she was worried if she spoke her voice might crack. Then she lobbed his iPhone at him. It was a direct hit. The phone bounced off his sternum and he slammed the door behind her as hard as he could. The bullet-hole window crack grew three inches.

And she walked toward the hospital, crunching in the snow.

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CAROLINE'S MOTHER'S HOSPITAL ROOM WAS NONDESCRIPT. WHITE walls. White floors. Vinyl upholstered chairs, torn and scuffed by too many visitors whose collective butts had squashed the cushions into pancake submission. Typical medical room decor. Corporate quaint. Like the interior of an IRS holding cell, but with bedside toilets.

Caroline's mother was asleep in the bed. Her mother's boyfriend, Jack Jr., was sitting by the window, slumped in a chair, scrolling TikTok and watching a barrage of videos involving thong underwear. The room TV was blaring *Divorce Court* at a volume loud enough to change the migratory patterns of waterfowl.

He did not acknowledge Caroline's presence. When she approached the bed, she felt her composure start to fade. She had not seen her mother in a year. And things had changed considerably since her diagnosis.

Melinda Boyer was fifty-seven years old, but she looked *ninety*-seven today. She was bald, wearing one of those caps cancer patients wear. She had always been skinny, but now she was a ghost.

Her mother awoke slowly and focused her weary stare on the bouquet of white carnations Caroline carried in her hand. Then her gaze moved toward Caroline's midsection. The woman spoke with a slack jaw and labored voice.

"Oh my God, you're pregnant."

Caroline's emaciated mother struggled to sit upright and looked like she was going to break apart beneath the effort. "Who knocked you up? Please tell me it wasn't that idiot named after a potato."

"How are you, Mama?"

“How the hell’s it look like I am?” Her mother snapped her fingers and held out her hand. “Did you bring them?”

Caroline reached into her backpack and withdrew a carton of Marlboro Blacks. Her mother yanked the cigarettes from Caroline’s hand, then peeled the plastic packaging using her teeth.

“What about my lighter?” she said, spitting plastic.

“All you said on the phone was cigarettes. I thought you’d already have a lighter.”

Her mother fell back into her pillow. “Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the donkey too, Caroline. You think they let me have a lighter in this place? Stupid, stupid girl.”

The woman snapped her fingers at her boyfriend. “Jack Jr., go find me a lighter.”

Jack Jr. wasn’t paying attention.

So Caroline’s mother threw the cigarettes at Jack Jr. They hit him in the face. “I said find me a lighter, loser.”

Ah, *amor*.

Jack Jr. took several whole minutes to lumber to his feet.

“While we’re young!” Melinda threw a sugar packet at him. Then a spoon. Caroline thought her mother would throw her entire meal tray at him too, but evidently Melinda was showing some restraint today.

Her mother had been with Jack Jr. longer than any other boyfriend. They had been on again and off again, at varying degrees of on- and off-ness, for several years. Her mom’s boyfriend was cut from the same cloth as Tater, only older, with silver in his hair. He had a brown tattoo of a coiled snake on the back of his neck. The snake was supposed to be the timber rattler from the Don’t Tread On Me flag, but instead looked more like evidence of a healthy colon.

Caroline pulled a chair up to her mother’s bed. The sound of *Divorce Court* filled the uncomfortable silence between them. TV

had often done that when they were together. Like grout, filling in all the cracks.

Caroline and her mother absently watched the screen, avoiding any actual talking.

Caroline muted the TV.

“Tell me how you’ve been, Mama.”

“Oh, just wonderful,” her mother said. “Look at me. Livin’ the dream.”

“Well, what’s been happening?”

“Well, let’s see. Last night we had a soufflé and a floor show. Tonight we’re going to have an ice cream buffet and a sunset cruise. God, Caroline.”

Nobody said anything. Her mother unmuted the TV, then coughed into a napkin. The napkin turned pink with blood. Pancreatic cancer was no way to go.

“When are they saying you can go home?” Caroline asked.

“They aren’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not going home. Least not through the front door.”

Caroline looked into her lap. Her eyes began to get blurry with tears.

“I don’t have long,” her mother finally said. “I might not even have this week.”

“Mama.”

Melinda cranked up the volume. *Divorce Court* had turned into a wrestling match. They both watched the screen to keep from watching each other. Caroline thought daytime television represented about eighty percent of their relationship.

“But I’m glad you’re here,” her mother said, reaching out to touch her daughter’s hand. “Because I need to talk to you.”

“About what?”

They were interrupted when Jack Jr. entered the room. “Hey,

no lighter, but I found a butane torch,” he said, bearing a canister torch that was about the size of a thermos.

“Where did you find a butane torch in a hospital?” said Melinda.

“The maintenance closet.”

The torch had an electric ignitor switch. The butane hissed to life and a blue flame roared. Using this to light a Marlboro would have been akin to using a wrecking ball to secure a thumbtack. But any port in a storm.

Melinda Boyer removed the oxygen cannula from her face. She tossed back the sheets to reveal her bony frame. Her knees looked like soft balls attached to femurs.

The woman attempted to crawl out of bed and almost face-planted. “Someone get me out of this damn bed. I need to smoke before I die.”



Chapter 3

CAROLINE WAS THREE WHEN HER MOTHER WAS FIRST ARRESTED for possession. The incident happened in a Kmart parking lot. Caroline was too young to remember the entirety of it all, but she still recalled the highlights. She could remember, for example, riding in the shopping buggy as they exited Kmart. She remembered that it was sunny. Her red hair in pigtails. Her mother was pushing the buggy, singing to herself. Caroline was happy in the memory because her mother let her have a strawberry milkshake, back when Kmart served food.

She also remembered seeing all the cop cars parked around her mother's Pontiac Trans. She remembered the blue lights flashing, lighting up daylight. She remembered that her mother was messed up on something—meth probably. Maybe oxy. If you were the child of an addict, you always knew when your parent was high.

Her mom freaked out when she saw the cops. The woman lost all sanity—and she hadn't had much lucidity left to lose. Melinda Boyer let go of the cart and started running in the opposite direction. She had been just high enough to believe she could outrun cops.

The buggy with Caroline in it began rolling away, wheeling for the edge of the parking lot, toward traffic. Caroline happily grasped her milkshake without knowing what was truly happening. She didn't know she was rolling toward a busy highway as she sipped away, the streaks of highway vehicles whooshing before her vision.

The buggy slammed into a curb, and Caroline shot out of the seat. The milkshake somersaulted through the air, landing on the pavement with a pink splatter. Caroline still bore a scar from where her lower tooth had punctured the skin above her chin. For weeks she could squirt milk at unsuspecting victims through a tiny hole in her lower lip.

That same week Caroline became property of the Tennessee Department for Children and Families and went into foster care. And it was only the beginning of what was to come.

Now Caroline wheeled her mother along the breezeway. Her mother was using the torch to light her cigarette and almost caught her gown on fire.

"Roll me over to those benches and tables," her mother said.

Foster care is a lot like a bad habit; once you enter the system, you're hooked for life. Most foster kids come and go from the system multiple times throughout their lives. Caroline went back into foster care three more times. She bounced between group foster homes like she was caught in a tragic pinball machine. Caroline's case was particularly complicated because she had medical issues. She was eighty percent blind in her left eye. She'd had three heart operations and eleven other surgeries. Nobody wanted a kid with medical issues. Not even her own mother, who caused all this to begin with.

When Caroline's mother got out of rehab the second time, Caroline tried moving back into her mother's trailer. She was fourteen at the time. Caroline thought it might work. But it

didn't. One summer day, after a shower, she exited the bathroom wearing only a towel. Her mother's boyfriend du jour, Larry, was standing in the door, staring at her. His eyes were strange. His grin was menacing and his hand was in his pants. Later that afternoon he walked into Caroline's room when she was changing her clothes. Caroline threw a lamp at him. Nothing happened, thankfully. But when Caroline's mother found out about this, she was horrified. The only logical solution in her mother's mind was to kick Caroline out.

So Caroline went back into foster care. She would technically remain in foster care until age eighteen. But at age sixteen, she met a young man named after a starchy tuberous vegetable. The young man owned his own house, which his aunt had left him, so she moved in. Though they talked every once in a while, it had been a long time since Melinda and Caroline had been this close in proximity to one another.

Until today.

They were in the picnic area of the medical center, watching the snow fall. Her mother sat in a wheelchair looking into the iron sky. From this angle, Caroline could see Tater's Honda in the parking lot in the distance, crookedly parked in the handicapped space.

Melinda offered Caroline a cigarette.

"No thanks," said Caroline.

Her mother made a face. "Why? You quit?"

"I just don't want one."

Her mother looked at Caroline's tummy, then flicked her lighter. She pointed to Caroline's inner forearm. "You got a new tattoo."

The tattoo was a sunflower. The sunflower was adorned with cursive text: *Survive*. Her mother inspected the inkwork. "You design it?"

“Yes.”

“*Survive*? What’s that supposed to mean?”

A gaggle of nurses passed them. The medical staffers all stole glances at the frail woman on the breezeway, sucking smoke from the cigarette. The looks of their disapproval were palpable.

“It’s not meant to be cryptic,” said Caroline.

“What exactly do you think you survived?” said her mother.

“Does it matter?”

Her mother didn’t seem to care.

“You been by my house and fed my cats?”

“No.”

“You said you’d go.”

“Can’t Jack Jr. feed them?”

“No. He’s got the ankle bracelet thing.”

“Then how’s he even here?”

“He’s been living in Knoxville for the last three months with his brother.”

“He wasn’t living with you?”

“We’ve had issues. Promise me you’ll feed them.”

Caroline stared into the parking lot at the Honda, puffing its blue exhaust. “I said I’ll go. How many times do you want me to say it?”

Her mother seemed satisfied by her answer. She drew smoke inward, then exhaled it through her nostrils slowly. Melinda’s face was harder and more angular than Caroline had ever seen it.

Melinda Boyer absently played with a necklace she wore. The gold pendant was the timber rattlesnake from the Don’t Tread On Me flag. Same as on Jack Jr.’s neck.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” her mother said.

Her mother released another massive cloud, this one bigger than the former. Nicotine filled the air with the leathery, sweet

smell Caroline had tasted in the womb. A smell she grew up with. A smell she both hated and enjoyed.

“Something to tell me?”

“Yeah.” Her mother kept playing with the necklace. “And don’t look at me like that, Caroline.”

“Like what?”

“You can never manage to hide your disappointment in me.”

“I’m not looking at you like anything.”

“You are not my mother, Caroline.”

The truth was, Caroline had always felt as though her mother were a sister. In many ways, a distant sister. Even from a young age Caroline had always seen herself as older than Melinda somehow.

Her mother released the gold pendant and was silent for a few moments. Melinda rolled her chair forward and touched her daughter’s hand. It was such a small act. But it was maybe the most affection Caroline had ever received from the woman.

“You don’t think I get it, Caroline? I screwed up your life. Believe me, I wish I could make it better. I wish I’d made different choices. Hell, I wish a lot of things. I know I made a mess of everything. I know I ruined your childhood.”

Melinda gripped her hand. Caroline looked at the veiny hand, clasping hers. The skin like tissue paper.

“Please, Care Bear. Try to understand me. Put yourself in my shoes. I wasn’t always like this. I never meant to hurt anyone. Least of all you.”

Caroline’s mother hadn’t called her Care Bear since she was a little kid.

“Mama, please.”

“No, listen to me. I have something for you. Something important. Something that could change your life.”

“Mama.”

Her mother squeezed Caroline’s hand harder. Caroline felt the bones in her hand pop. There were tears in her mother’s eyes.

“Listen to me, Caroline.” She held Caroline’s gaze until the tears reached critical mass and began to fall onto her cheeks. Crying turned into heaving. Heaving turned into coughing. Coughing turned into choking. She was trying to speak, but nothing was coming out.

“Care Bear, I need you to forgive me.”

Caroline did not respond.

Her mom took a deep breath, collecting herself, then flicked her cigarette into the snow. “Take me somewhere private. I’m done smoking. We need to be alone for what I want to say.”

Caroline said, “Mama, there’s hardly anyone around.”

“Do as I say.”

Caroline looked out at the parking lot. She saw a police car pulling up to Tater’s Honda. The officer got out of the cruiser and walked around the Honda, examining the plates. Caroline watched the officer rap on Tater’s window. Within moments, she could see the officer getting agitated, which was the classic reaction to social intercourse with Tater Bunson. Then the officer pulled out a pad and began writing a ticket.

Caroline reached for the butane torch in her mother’s lap. “I’ll take one of those cigarettes.”

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ON APRIL 2, 1865, THE CIVIL WAR WAS ONLY A WEEK FROM ITS END and the fall of the Confederate capital was imminent. Federal forces were closing in on Richmond. Confederate president Jefferson Davis and his cabinet were compelled to leave town quickly before their proverbial ass was metaphorical grass. At least that was how Caroline’s mother put it when she told the story.

They were sitting behind the hospital, not far from the dumpsters. They were totally alone and yet Caroline's mother was still whispering. Caroline was on her second cigarette, staring off into space, disgusted with herself but enjoying the small buzz.

"Are you even listening to me?" her mother said.

"I'm listening."

Jefferson Davis and the six members of his cabinet fled Richmond overnight, taking few belongings with them in their haste, along with the entirety of the Confederate treasury, which was upward of one and a half tons of gold and silver bullion. The money had been appropriated from various sources in the South, including banks and private donations, and from the seizure of Union assets. The cargo amounted to a pile of gold and silver so heavy it required iron-reinforced transport wagons. This was a payload too heavy for a modern-day Chevy truck to carry without completely wrecking the suspension. Which was why, Caroline pointed out, that members of the cabinet should have unanimously agreed to purchase a Ford.

Her mother was annoyed. "Are you going to sit there and mock me or are you going to listen? This is important."

Caroline just closed her eyes.

The gold and silver were transferred via wagons, pulled by teams of Morgan draft horses. The cargo was guarded around the clock by a brigade of sharpshooters as wagons were hauled across the entirety of the American South on back roads, traversing hidden trails, hiding on local farms, resting in thickets. For a solid month, fleeing cabinet members and military escort lived in makeshift camps along the roadside, moving steadily southward, through Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, until their capture in Irwinville, Georgia, on May 10. When federal forces came upon Davis, there were no wagons. No draft horses. No gold. They transferred Davis to Fort Monroe, Virginia, where he was

imprisoned in a casemate cell, kept in close confinement, shackled by the ankles. For upward of seven hundred days, Davis was doggedly interrogated on the whereabouts of the gold and silver, but he maintained that the tonnage had simply been lost.

“Lost?” Caroline said.

“The Yankees didn’t believe it either,” her mother said. “Think about it. How do you lose almost two tons of gold and silver?”

Even so, Jefferson Davis offered no explanation.

Davis was released on bail in 1867, after over two years of imprisonment. Following his release, he lived in Montreal and in London. He had been stripped of land, assets, and citizenship, and died relatively poor compared to his former glory. The gold was never recovered.

“But,” said Caroline’s mother, watching a pencil-thin line of smoke drift upward from her splayed fingers, “it’s still out there.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I think I’ve found it.”

Her mother’s face was solemn.

Caroline waited a beat, then laughed. With undisguised disgust.

She took in her surroundings. The dumpster. Her mother. The pathetic reality of it all. Caroline looked at her cigarette, identical to the one in her mom’s hand, and stabbed out her smoke like she was killing a spider.

“I can’t believe what I am hearing,” said Caroline. “I *cannot* believe this. I came all the way to Tennessee for this?”

Her mother patted the air. “Lower your voice.”

“Do you even care about me? Do you care about *anything* I’ve accomplished in my life? Do you care who I am? Do you have any interest whatsoever in anyone but yourself? You haven’t even asked me how I’m doing. You haven’t asked about my baby. You

don't care about anything in my life."

Her mother wheeled backward. "This could change your life, honey." The woman lowered her voice to a whisper. "There is something hidden inside my trailer, something important, and I want you to have it. This could change everything for you. People have died for this."

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"Caroline, listen to me."

"Are you *freaking* kidding me?"

"Caroline."

"Buried treasure? Seriously?"

Caroline looked off. A sour cry still roiling beneath her hard surface. Then she looked at her mother with the most honesty she could muster.

"There's not enough gold in the world to make up for you not being there."

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THE HONDA WAS PARKED AT A SHELL STATION. TATER SAT IN THE front seat eating a gas-station taquito that had been sitting on the roller grill since the Jimmy Carter administration. He was looking at his parking ticket with mild amusement. He ate while simultaneously administering inhalations from a raspberry vape cartridge. Tater was a big fan of combining the two flavors. Salty and sweet. Nutrition and carcinogen. The air-freshener fog exited his mouth and nose like two giant albino worms fighting free from his sinus cavities.

"Two hundred and fifty bucks," he said, eyeing the ticket. "That chick fined me two hundred and fifty freaking bucks. You believe that?"

"That *chick* was a cop," she said.

He crumpled the ticket, threw it into the back seat, and

passed the vape device to Caroline. She declined.

“Smoking just one won’t hurt you. My mom smoked with me.”

Caroline just looked at him.

She went back to her book, trying hard to be a hundred million light-years away from here. It was, however, impossible to be far away while trapped inside a Honda with Tater’s rap music playing at an earsplitting volume. The volume knob to the stereo was broken, stuck in the wide-open position, requiring needle-nose pliers to operate. Thus, American rapper Pitbull was rapping in Español at a volume loud enough to qualify as a misdemeanor.

Caroline clicked off the stereo.

“Hey,” said Tater. “I was listening to that.”

“Gary doesn’t like the noise.”

Tater looked at the goldfish jar perched on the dashboard. Gary swam in circles, flicking his tail. She carried Gary everywhere. It was part of being a foster kid. You carried your possessions with you because you never knew when you might be on the move again.

“Fish can’t hear music,” said Tater.

“Yes, they can.”

“Fish ain’t got no ears.”

“They absolutely have ears.”

Tater wrinkled his forehead. He peered into the jar, squinting. Gary was opening his mouth and gills.

“Bull crap.”

She closed her book. “You’re eloquent, you know that?”

“How do they hear without ears?”

“They have internal ears connected to a gas bladder. They’re tiny bones and hairs that amplify vibrations in their surroundings. It’s complicated. I really don’t have the energy to explain it right now. I’m sorry they didn’t teach you this in high school biology.”

“Ears connected to a bladder? Like for peeing?”

She sighed. “The movement of the swim bladder moves sensory cells in their head, and the fish’s brains translate the movement as sound. In some ways, they can hear better than humans can. It’s actually very fascinating.”

If you were to have looked into Tater’s eyes, you could have seen the back of his skull.

“Bull crap,” he restated.

“Another excellent point.” She grinned, then showed some teeth. “You should go into litigation.”

“Flying planes?”

“Oh my God.”

Caroline used this opportunity to feed Gary. Gary was pecking the food while Tater looked on in amazement. Tater had no idea, of course, that Caroline was demonstrating goldfish auditory perception. Gary heard the vibrations of food hitting the water, and that’s how he knew it was time to eat.

“You really think Gary can hear Pitbull?”

Caroline nodded. “And he doesn’t like the music, I can tell.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s violent.”

“You don’t even know what they’re saying. It’s in Spanish.”

“I speak Spanish.”

He laughed. “Since when?”

She rolled her eyes. “Where have you been? We use Spanish at work all the time. Everyone I work with is a Spanish-speaker.”

“Prove it.”

She looked at him. “*Eres un zurullo.*”

“What’s that mean?”

“Means I love you.”

He took another puff from his pen.

She cranked down her near-shattered window to let the vape

escape from the hotbox. “Now hurry up and finish your taquito. I need you to take me somewhere.”

Tater just looked at her. “I’m not going to that bath and body store for your stupid friend.”

“Not there.”

He gagged the vape device. “And I’m not going to Target either.”

Caroline altered her demeanor. She leaned inward and gave him a big, disarming smile. “I have a feeling you’d change your mind if you knew what I was going to be buying.”

He furrowed his brow.

“Because it’s a surprise. For you.”

Tater’s whole mood changed. He looked both mystified by this and excited. He took a monster hit from the cartridge. When he exhaled, the interior of the vehicle looked like the inside of a bong.

“What kind of surprise?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

A smirk crept onto his face. “You’re getting me a PlayStation Five, aren’t you?”

She said nothing.

“*Aren’t* you?”

She batted her eyes.

“Caroline?”

She confiscated his phone and put the address into his GPS.

“No peeking.”

Tater looked on with great interest as she entered the information. He was a little kid on Santa’s knee.

“Is that a new necklace?” he said.

She touched the golden pendant on her neck. “No.”

About the Author



Photo by Sean Murphy

Sean Dietrich is a columnist, novelist, and stand-up storyteller known for his commentary on life in the American South. His work has appeared in *Newsweek*, *Southern Living*, *Reader's Digest*, *Garden and Gun*, and the *Birmingham News*, and his column appears in newspapers throughout the US. He has authored sixteen books, is the creator of the *Sean of the South* podcast, and makes appearances on the *Grand Ole Opry*.

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