

∞ Pleasure is oft a visitant; but pain
Clings cruelly to us.

--John Keats

1

THE LINE WHERE the wall and ceiling met was indistinct, the two planes appearing to brush together haphazardly and merge into a geometric illusion that tilted first one way and then another, so that the room seemed to rock and sway like the deck of a ship on the open sea. Broder tried hard to get his bearings. He strained to focus his eyes on a point up and out, through the medical paraphernalia that hung over his bed like a tangle of gleam-ing metal and plastic vines, anxiously searching for something that looked familiar.

Powerful effigies hammered at his brain and demanded recognition. He struggled to block them, to push them aside and throw up a protective barrier against further intrusion, but they were too strong. In his mind's eye he saw Donnie Shand and Ray-Gene and Colletta, and he felt a confusing mix of euphoria and remorse. Donnie Shand and Ray-Gene were the only close friends he'd ever had. He wanted to hate them for what they did to Colletta, but how could he, when he was the one most at fault? Ray-Gene was gone now and he never expected to see Donnie Shand again, but Colletta had come back into his life, as if by magic, and things could never be the same.

She had materialized as if from nowhere: "Hey, Jimmie. I heard you had a hard landing. How ya' doin'?"

The pure and sweet Carolina accent, the soft, almost timid whisper. Even in his languid, drug-induced stupor he had known it was her. Suddenly he was fifteen again and in

Circles in the Water

love, stretched serenely in the grass beneath the delicate canopy of an ancient chinaberry tree in Colletta's backyard on a balmy spring evening in Conway. Overhead, a pale-shining moon seemed adrift in an endless starlit sky. Donnie Shand and Ray-Gene surely must be somewhere nearby.

But this was all wrong. He was supposed to be on his way to Iraq. That was the mission he had trained hard for, readying himself to jump from an airplane in the black of night and join in a swift assault against the enemy. Any enemy. Broder was a good soldier who didn't ask questions, he just followed orders. Orders were what made the Army a safe haven—no decisions to make, always somebody to tell you what to do and when to do it, just don't screw up too big or too often and you've got it made. Life as a paratrooper suited him well. Life as a paratrooper was the only life he wanted.

And then the once-in-a-thousand-jumps training accident spoiled everything. A sudden wind shift which turned his chute upside down a hundred feet above the ground, the oppressive weight of full combat gear, the thudding impact that left him battered and broken. It was a minor incident by Airborne standards, they said. Sure it was. His right leg was splintered almost beyond repair.

How long had he been here? Two days? Two weeks? He had had too many surgeries and too much morphine, living in a shadow world and slipping in and out of consciousness, barely aware of his surroundings.

What he slowly came to recognize as a human voice intruded on the silence. It seemed to come from an invisible-faced image at the foot of his bed, a silhouette backlit by the dim glow of a fixture on the wall: "Are you Broder?"

"Yes. I'm Broder."

"I'm Lieutenant Colonel Hewlett," the image said. "How are we tonight, Sergeant Broder?"

"I'm doing okay, sir." He would take the image's word. If it said it was a colonel, he would speak to it as a colonel.

Circles in the Water

"Do you know what day it is?" the image was asking.

"Maybe Wednesday, sir?"

"It's Sunday. Do you know what year it is?"

"Yes, sir. It's 2003."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Sir, I think I'm in the hospital."

"Do you know which hospital?"

"I guess I'm still at the Fort Bragg hospital, sir. I don't remember being moved."

"Yes, you're still at Fort Bragg. You've not been moved. Do you recall what got you here?"

"Sir, I had a bad jump."

"That's what I'm here to talk to you about, sergeant. That bad jump. How much of it do you remember?"

"I think it just went wrong all at once, at the last second. There was nothing I could do. Am I in trouble, sir?"

The silhouette had taken a more complete form. Broder could make out the likeness of a face, but it was unfamiliar, a face he didn't recall having seen before. The face spoke with authority, the way a colonel would speak.

"Of course not," the face replied. "Accidents happen, no matter how hard we try to avoid them. Nobody is blaming you. We always investigate training injuries."

"I understand," Broder told the face, "but I don't know if I can be of much help. I don't know what happened, but I'm afraid I didn't handle it very well, sir."

"There will be time enough to sort all that out, sergeant. I'll come back in a couple of days, after you've had time to get your head cleared up a little. And you'll be talking to Captain Oates, the safety officer. Meanwhile, get some sleep. You got a nasty break in that leg and that's all you need to worry about for now."

"Sir . . ."

"Yes, sergeant?"

"When will I be able to jump again?"

"All in good time, sergeant. For now let's just worry about

Circles in the Water

getting you up and back on your feet. Both feet! Okay?"

"Okay, sir."

The image disappeared and Broder sank back into his hazy dream world. His mind conjured the exquisite pleasures of the jump. He imagined the familiar sensations spawned by the torturous velocity of a fall through empty space and the buoyancy of floating above the earth and granted his senses free reign to revel uninhibited in the breathtaking rush of cold air and the paradoxical noise of the wind and silence of nothingness. This was the world in which he found serenity. It was a peaceful, calming world, solitary, inhabited by no strange-faced images who said they were colonels and free of disturbing effigies from his past.

When he woke the next morning, Broder would not recall speaking with Colonel Hewlett. But he would remember that Colletta had been there and that memory would bring him pain.



THE TEAM WAS at loose ends, hunched together on the back-porch steps at Ray-Gene's house and facing another monotonous day of sultry Carolina summer. Jimmie poked at the dirt with a stick and Colletta gazed off to the east, intent on a wispy cloud formation miles away, over the ocean. Donnie Shand swatted at a fly.

"Jaybo found a dead rat back there by the fence last night," Ray-Gene said, to no one in particular.

"I hate rats," Colletta declared. "They're dirty. And they eat people."

"Rats don't eat people," Donnie Shand scoffed.

"They do if they're hungry."

"No, they don't. Where did you ever hear such a thing, Colletta?"

"Yes, they do. Rats ate off my grandpa's toes and fingers and part of his nose."

"How could they? Why didn't he fight 'em off?"

"He was dead. He died and nobody knew it and he had

Circles in the Water

laid there for a long time before they found him. And the rats had been chewin' on him. My daddy said so."

The boys were still skeptical. Colletta didn't make things up, but every now and then her gullibility got her in over her head. They found her stubbornness irritating sometimes, especially when she insisted on defending positions they saw as indefensible, but on the whole they grudgingly respected her for the way she stuck to her guns.

This hadn't always been the case. When she first showed up early that summer after third grade and commenced to tag along the boys had made clear that she wasn't wanted. They were not offended by her dirty face and tousled hair, her ragged dresses, or her bare feet with soles calloused tough as leather—these things were common in their small world, and in any case not important. But she was a girl and this was a boys' team.

A less persistent girl might have been disheartened but Colletta had hung on tenaciously, her confidence undiminished. She knew she could do anything they could do, and pledged to herself that she'd hold her own with any one of the three in a fair fight, toe-to-toe and nose-to-nose. Fighting was not in her nature, though, and in fact her sweet disposition made it fun for the boys to have her around; they soon learned to tolerate her without complaint. From there it was only a matter of time before they came to take her presence for granted.

Donnie Shand had been the first to welcome her to the team, properly. "It don't matter anymore that you're a girl," he announced matter-of-factly. "We like you good enough, Colletta."

Donnie's acceptance was crucial. He was their leader. His full name was Donald Jackson Shand, and more often than not he was simply "DJ" within the group. He was the oldest of the three boys and would have been a grade ahead of the others except that he'd been held back for missing too many days of school. This didn't matter much, he insisted, because

Circles in the Water

he had a mind of his own and school didn't affect him much one way or the other. In the eyes of Ray-Gene and Jimmie and, now, Colletta, DJ could do no wrong.

As to Ray-Gene and Jimmie, they had been best friends for as long as either could remember. They took a blood oath at least once a month that they would be best friends forever, a pact that in the beginning had involved the ritual scratching of forearms and swapping of blood-smears. They had replaced that ceremony with a mere verbal pledge after Ray-Gene got a nasty infection and Grandma Freeman ordered an end to their "behavin' like mindless fools."

Their relationship no doubt was stronger because they were the only boys their age on the block, and they thought nothing of the fact that they lived on opposite sides of the street even though the grownups around them seemed to consider this enormously important. Their street was a symbolic dividing line and Conway, South Carolina, was a tranquil place where black people and white people respectfully tolerated each other in their day-to-day lives but still preferred to sleep at night in homes among their own.

"My daddy would skin me alive if he found me playing with a nigger," Colletta declared, looking straight at Ray-Gene.

"Your daddy's a good-for-nothing drunk," Jimmie said fiercely, quick to defend his friend.

"You oughtn't to say stuff like that," Donnie Shand said. His manner was stern, but softened quickly. "I know you didn't mean nothing by it but you oughtn't to say it about Ray-Gene."

Colletta looked hurt and, this time, said nothing more. She'd only hoped to change the subject from rats, which she considered filthy and disgusting. Ray-Gene took no offense. The problem was Colletta's daddy's, not hers, and Colletta had never been mean to him or said disparaging things. He could tell that she liked him and cared nothing about his skin color and he liked her, too, and already had come to feel

Circles in the Water

almost as close to her as he did to Jimmie and Donnie Shand. These were the people who mattered most to Ray-Gene, with the possible exception of Grandma Freeman, and he could easily enough ignore the slurs of the adults as long as his friends treated him as an equal.

As on any other day, skin color was not nearly as important in this little coterie as the never-ending struggle to find something interesting to do.

"Somebody needs to come up with a good idea," Donnie Shand urged. "Just settin' around here sure ain't much fun."

"I wish we had us a way to get to the beach," Ray-Gene said. "It don't seem right that we got all summer and don't have a chance to go to the beach like everybody else."

"Everybody don't get to the beach," Donnie Shand said, "but yeah, I guess it'd be fun if we could. My dad might take us some weekend, but y'all know we ain't going to get to the beach today so forget about it."

"Then maybe we could go back to the creek again."

Donnie Shand was not quick to answer. He took it as his personal responsibility to provoke his three followers, not to become a follower himself. He made a big show of weighing Ray-Gene's suggestion solemnly while the others waited hopefully. "Okay, I guess we could," he said at last. "We ain't been to the creek for a while."

Jimmie and Colletta were already up and starting around the house toward the street. Ray-Gene quickly fell in behind. Colletta paused at the sidewalk and Jimmie and Ray-Gene stopped beside her so that Donnie Shand could take the lead.

"Grandma Freeman, she sends Jaybo down to the creek to hunt frogs sometimes," Ray-Gene said. "DJ, did you ever spear a frog?"

"Of course I have. Nothing to it."

"I get confused about Jaybo, Ray-Gene," Colletta said. "I know he ain't your brother. Is he your cousin or what?"

Ray-Gene answered patiently, "Jaybo's my uncle. He has

Circles in the Water

lived with Grandma Freeman longer than me.”

“How old is he?”

“Fifteen.”

“Is he nice?”

“He used to be kind of mean to me sometimes, but now he’s not so bad.”

“How come you’re named Ray-Gene Kepley when your grandma’s named Freeman?”

“Because my daddy was Landon Kepley. My momma’s name was Freeman before she was married.”

Donnie Shand had set a quick pace. Jimmie stayed almost at his side, step by step, while Colletta and Ray-Gene were beginning to fall behind. Colletta still had questions.

“How come you live with your grandma?” she asked.

“Because my daddy’s dead and my momma lives in Detroit,” Ray-Gene said. “She’s gonna send for me and my sisters someday.”

“I’ve got a little brother named Hunter.”

“We know that, Colletta.”

“My grandma’s got owls-shiners. She don’t even know me anymore.”

“How can your own grandma not know you?”

“I told you, she’s got owls-shiners. She don’t even know my momma most of the time.”

“I never heard of anything like that,” Ray-Gene declared. “You sure you know what you’re talking about, Colletta?”

Donnie Shand turned and looked back at the two stragglers with a severe frown. “If you two don’t shut up you’ll have all the dogs in the neighborhood chasing us before we get in a mile of the creek,” he scolded. “Can’t y’all just be quiet for a while?”

The rebuke was effective. They walked silently on past the last house in town, skirted the edge of a barren slough and made their way through a thicket of scrubby live oak to the bank of the creek. The stream was slow-running and stagnant, reflecting the hot and dry summer. Donnie Shand

Circles in the Water

led them ahead toward the best wading hole.

Jimmie suddenly halted and grabbed Donnie's arm. "I saw somebody," he said, low-voiced. "Somebody's up there by them trees."

"Be quiet!" Donnie Shand said. "Walk slow and be quiet till we see who it is."

It was Jaybo. He stood with his back against the trunk of a thick cypress tree, his pants down around his knees, with a full erection pointing like a stout lance toward the approaching intruders. He barely paid them heed. The younger boys slipped silently closer. Their gaze was firmly fixed on Jaybo's penis. Colletta stayed back a step further, but also stared at Jaybo.

"Don't act like you ain't seen one before," Jaybo said, hardly looking up. "You little boys come on up close and see what a man looks like."

"I've seen yours before," Ray-Gene said. "And I know what you're doin.' You're gonna squirt like a fountain."

"Y'all just don't get too close," Jaybo warned. "I don't want nobody to get splattered. 'Cept you, little girl. You come over here and put your hand on it."

"He can't boss you, Colletta," Donnie Shand whispered. "You don't have to do what he says."

Colletta hesitated, but stepped forward bravely. "I've seen my daddy's," she told Jaybo, "and I ain't afraid of yours."

"Get hold of it then!" Jaybo demanded. He seized her small hand and forced her to grab onto his hard flesh. He made four or five quick thrusts and ejaculated in an explosion that left the four onlookers awestruck.

"Keep your mouth shut, Ray-Gene," Jaybo said. "You tell your grandma anything about this and I'll break your neck. You got me?"

"I ain't telling nobody, Jaybo."

The older boy hitched up his tattered trousers and pushed off through the underbrush toward town.

Colletta studied the milky excretion, dripping through the

Circles in the Water

blades of tall grass. "It looks like runny-nose snot," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Don't step in that, Colletta, it's nasty," Donnie warned.

"I wouldn't step in that stuff!"

"Look here, y'all," Donnie Shand said, eager to regain control, "if we're going to have any fun we'd better get at it. We ought not to be gone too long or else we'll be in trouble." He motioned his followers forward with a wave of his hand and, creeping stealthily along the creek bank, led them on to the strand of clean, usually thigh-deep water that was their target. Thick stands of cypress and willow grew right to the water's edge along most of the creek, but here a wide sand bar forced the stream away from the bank and made it easier to spot the menacing cotton mouth moccasins that lurked among the willow roots, nearly invisible.

They splashed lethargically in the water for a time, but the creek was too low to offer much respite from the dreary heat that had built up by mid-morning and the confrontation with Jaybo had dampened their spirits. When Donnie Shand said they'd better go, the others promptly fell into line without a murmur of dissent and started back the way they had come, like a little ragtag army trudging home after a defeat in battle.

An ill-defined sense that their little wilderness no longer offered sanctuary would go unspoken. It wasn't as if they had been accosted by dangerous strangers, nor even that they had been particularly offended by Jaybo's crude behavior. But he oughtn't to have made Colletta touch him, and the boys felt guilty that they had made no move to protect her.

They were half-way back to town before Ray-Gene broke the long silence: "I wish we could make us some money. There's lots of stuff we could do if we had money."

Colletta picked up quickly on Ray-Gene's proposal. If she had money she'd buy them all Baby Ruth candy bars. Maybe they could work for somebody, and she'd be willing to work for almost anybody and do just about anything for money,

Circles in the Water

and she knew there was stuff they could do, and didn't DJ think that maybe they could find work if they went out and looked? She was ready and eager to try and she knew that Ray-Gene and Jimmie were, too.

"Don't be stupid," DJ chided. "We ain't old enough to work, not for pay anyhow."

Colletta was not easily deterred. "Maybe we could sell flowers," she said. "They sell flowers all the time over by the road where people go to Myrtle Beach."

"Where would we get the flowers?" Jimmie asked.

"There's lots of Queen Anne's lace all around that cotton field over there," Colletta said, gesturing toward the west. "Nobody'd probably care if we got a ton of it."

Jimmie shook his head and frowned. "Them's just weeds," he said.

"No they're not. Queen Anne's lace is flowers, Jimmie."

Donnie Shand stopped walking and the others promptly halted, too, in lock step, and stood by while he traced a wide, smooth arc in the dust with the toe of his shoe. This was the signal his team wanted, the response they always hoped for when they needed Donnie's careful reasoning. Their leader was about to come up with a plan.

"Sometimes my mom pays me a little bit for work in the yard," DJ announced presently, his satisfaction with himself clear in his tone. "She might have some stuff for us to do if y'all wanted to help."

"I'm willing to work," Ray-Gene said.

Colletta and Jimmie agreed.

Donnie was cautious: "I ain't promising nothing, understand, but maybe she'd at least give us a dollar."

"That's more than we've got now," Ray-Gene said. "You can't get less than nothin'."

Donnie Shand set out for home, walking even faster than usual, but his followers eagerly fell into his quick pace. The sudden prospect of having money to spend brought a sense of exhilaration. Their day might turn out good, after all.

Circles in the Water

☞ *THE SHAND HOUSE*, a modest two-bedroom dwelling, was a block over from the street where the other three lived and two blocks toward downtown. The front of the house was heavily shaded by a scraggly sweetgum tree, and overgrown butterfly bushes formed a wall of textured greenery against the faded white clapboard siding. One side of the house was nearly hidden under an overburden of ivy vines. A narrow sand path led from the sidewalk to the front door.

Angling across the yard, Donnie Shand halted abruptly beside the sweetgum tree and raised a hand to signal those coming behind. They heard loud, angry words and saw DJ's mother and father, apparently oblivious to their approach, embroiled in heated argument at the doorstep.

While Donnie and his followers looked on, helpless and afraid, Langly Shand struck his wife full in the face with a closed fist and knocked her back, hard, against the door. Blood poured from her nose and she looked stunned, but only for an instant.

"You good-for-nothing son-of-a-bitch," she screamed. "I'll kill you this time, I swear I will."

She picked up a brick from beside the step and charged him, landing a blow on his head that caused his knees to buckle. She struck him again and Donnie's father slumped to the ground, blood spouting from a gash over his left ear. He tried weakly to raise himself up. She lifted her arm high and brought the brick crashing down on his skull a third time and he lay still.

Circles in the Water