

Dreams of Otis

by

Tim Pompey

Other Works by Tim Pompey:

Mrs. Parsley and the Tale of Mossel's Farm

Dream-scape

One Side Leads to the Other

Down the Road

Burnt by Sun

Find Walter

Freeland

Blindspot

Deep Down

Dr. Bart's Lonely Soul Collection

The Perilous Paintings of Lily Day

Primitive Terrain

Nightfly

The Wild Chronicles

Published by Tim Pompey

ISBN: 9798662749214

Copyright © 2020 by Tim Pompey
All Rights Reserved

Cover Photo:

Erika Fletcher
Joy Shots Photography
Courtesy of Unsplash.com

Flying
Bob Crow and the River
© 1970
Used by Permission

I Think I Love You
Tony Romeo
Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC
The Partridge Family
© 1970

Urban Cowboy
Paramount Pictures
© 1980

For more author information see:

www.timpompey.com
www.facebook.com/booksbytimpompey
booksbytimpompey@gmail.com

*For April-Lynn Caouette and Melissa Elam Baffa
who wrestled with this script
and brought clarity to muddy waters*

FLYING

I look at my life, sometimes I want to scream
but like it or not, I've still got to breathe.
It may be a while till I give up the ghost
but it don't keep me from wanting what I love the most.

Refrain:

Cause I'm flying, flying, a bird in the wind
reaching for the cumulus above the river bend.
Flying, flying, don't even need to try.
I'm a free man in a blue sky flying high.

We're born and just can't help it being what we are.
Can't avoid our family. Can't avoid our scars.
But even when we're crying, there's lots of room to laugh
cause the air takes us above our rainy path.

And there's the feeling
the breeze can make us free.
And there's the wisdom
of what we know to be.
And there's the dreaming
of what we see to come.
And the choice we make
when we shoot toward the sun.

I got heavy burdens. I got bills to pay.
I got friends who hurt me. I got things to weigh.
But no words are ever needed when I feel the lift.
I just raise my arms and set my soul adrift.

— *Bob Crow and The River*

1.

Tape Recordings of Otis Barner:

Testin. Testin.

Okay. Tape's a rollin. Here goes.

Comin to you straight from Otis's castle that I built.

Yeah, I said castle. Ain't more than a house made a junk, but I did it, so that makes it *my* castle.

I'm startin this tape cause most of my life, not bein very good with words and spellin, it's been sort of hard to tell how I feel. I don't talk to a whole lot of people. I don't write down my thoughts. So, here I am with a little ol tape recorder and just me. Simple enough.

So, now that I can record, it's a lot easier to get my words out. I ain't dumb. I can speak all right, though I don't think my English teachers would agree. I talk like a hillbilly. Cain't help that. Maybe somebody smarter'n me can write it down later. But this here just makes things so I can get it done without me puttin pen to paper, and it stays permanent. Least as long as the tape lasts.

As I said, I can't spell very good, but I got a lot of things in my head, and now I got a reason to talk about em. Maybe some a ya'll don't think that's a good reason, but

they're my thoughts, my reasons, so let it fall wherever. You don't like it, do your own thing. This here happens to be mine.

My name is Otis Barner. I work as a clerk in the local grocery store, Grossman's Market. I do checkin, cleanin, stock produce, do other things as well. Keeps me busy. Keeps me employed. Keeps me out of my dad's hair, which is really a good thing for him and me since we don't get along too well.

I live in Davis. State of Tennessee. Macon County.

I been workin at Grossman's a long time. Come straight outta high school and probably, if the place lasts, I'll be here a lot more. As I said, I ain't that smart in terms of schoolin. It's hard for me to find work, so havin a job is kind of important. Not great pay, but I don't spend much either, so that's how I get along.

So why am I recordin this?

Well. I'm startin to talk today cause I think I'm in love, but got no one to tell, so maybe I make these tapes for you, Audrey. Maybe someday you'll listen.

Uh. Yeah. Audrey. That's you. Audrey Louise Reagan. I learned your middle name last Christmas. Kinda pretty, it goin with Audrey. Audrey Louise. You know you come to work here a couple years ago. So, we been gettin acquainted. As I said, I ain't much for talkin, but so far, we've managed all right. You're always nice to me. I try to be nice to you. We seem to be friends.

Audrey, I'm glad to know you. You say hi to me every day at work and don't make fun like other people. I think I like you cause a that. If I wanted to have a wife, she would have to be nice to people. She would have to be nice to me, and that ain't easy. In the words of some round here, I'm a strange duck.

I remember when we first met and you give me a candy bar. I thought that was just the nicest thing. Guess that was when I started thinkin of you, though I didn't tell you, mainly cause I didn't think you'd believe me. I didn't think you'd welcome my attentions. I still don't. You're way too pretty for me, but I keep thinkin of you, so there you have it. Otis got a crush. Ain't much I can do about it cept what I'm doin here. Just talkin.

So, I think I'm tryin to tell how I feel, not somethin I'm good at, so maybe this gets me warmed up and workin up my courage, cause it's hard to say the right thing. Specially to women.

Who knows? A man dreams of somethin, he thinks of ways to get there.

Kind of dumb to think like that for a hillbilly like me. But you never know. Man's got dreams and I got some too. So, Audrey, if ever you're listenin, I'm a gonna talk a little. Maybe more'n a little. If you ever hear this, well, this is where it started. This is how I got to love you. Hope someday you'll love me back.

And even if you don't, you should know that somebody cares for you. Not just your mama or your daddy. It's me. Otis Barner, even if this is secret. I got your back. You may never know it, but I'll be there lookin out for you. Your secret man.

2.

There were hundreds of villages in Tennessee like Davis. Set in the heart of the Cumberland Plateau just a few miles from the Kentucky border. Macon County. Small. Rural. Picturesque. With an old downtown area. A courthouse in the middle. Storefronts that lined Macon Street. Highway 25 running north and south. Parking spaces in front. Old brick buildings that seemed to float above the storefronts. Family owned businesses on all sides. Places like:

Newman's Department Store.

Grady's Pharmacy.

Western Auto.

Daisy's Diner.

Dilman's Barber Shop.

At the edge of town, Jumpin' Jack's Bar & Grill, and next to it, Jack's Liquor.

Two blocks down Macon Street, Barner's Auto Repair.

At the far edge of town, a Phillips 66 Gas Station.

Next to that, Grossman's Market.

At the other end of town, a branch of First Tennessee State Bank.

Behind the bank, one of the nicer section of homes, where the town's upper class congregated. They were the bankers, lawyers, and old money home owners.

On the east side of the downtown was the more modest middle-class section. People with steady jobs, families, two and three-bedroom houses. Teachers, business owners, county government employees, and commuters who traveled into Cookeville.

Further into the local mountains, wood-framed houses and shacks, most with aluminum siding.

Even further into the hills, dilapidated cabins and occasional mobile homes that were on their last leg. A good wind, a decent tornado, and they would be blown to Nashville.

Farms were spread throughout the valleys. Mostly corn and tobacco.

The town had been incorporated in 1874 and had stood resolute ever since. A sign of Tennessee toughness in good times and bad, and people who believed in strong American values and strong families. White families. White values. In the heart of the South.

Respectively, outsiders were not welcome unless they had a good reason to be there.

Today, the town was dressed up for the Fourth of July. There were red, white, and blue banners, parking barriers for the parade tomorrow, and in the stores some patriotic decorations to celebrate the season.

The weather was also hot and humid, with heavy afternoon rain showers almost a given.

All of which gave the town a sense of anticipation for steaks, hot dogs, hamburgers, and beer.

There would be a major fireworks show tomorrow night at the high school football field. Other local fireworks would be spread throughout the county.

Davis, not unlike other towns in the area, with one exception. None of them had Otis Barner, and Otis was busy with his own little celebration plan, a plan that had nothing to do with the town, but would cause the town to take notice.

Yes, indeed, they would talk about this holiday for years to come. How Otis came out of nowhere and stirred up such a ruckus that some folks were ready to pitch him out on his ear or throw him in jail.

The Fourth. Usually a time to celebrate our nation's history. In this case, it took on a whole new meaning. In Davis, it came to be called Otis Day.

3.

The summer before he entered high school, Otis Barner found the location for his castle. One day just out walking, he stumbled upon a hidden grove of trees with a narrow entrance, almost invisible unless you were right on it. Entrance would be too descriptive a word. More like a slim opening that Otis, being a rather large fellow, could barely squeeze through.

Otis, who regularly talked to himself, was immediately inspired.

“I got my place,” he said as if he’d discovered gold. As if he’d been on a quest without even knowing it, and by accident he had stumbled upon his very own city. His magic empire where only things Otis were allowed. Where Otis had permission to come and just be Otis.

“This is my new home,” he repeated to himself.

Home? It was a forest in a field, tucked away from any town life, a grove of trees that seemed to surround a hidden meadow. The light filtered through the trees and gave him a comfort he had not previously known. It was rough in its shape, at least when you think of home. Primitive would be a better word. But for Otis, he could

imagine it. He had a vision, like prophets from the Old Testament who heard the voice of God. Otis did not hear God. God was not in this picture. It was more like he *saw* something and formed a clear picture in his head of what he knew about this place.

“This is where I plan to be,” he declared, though at this point, it was no more than a natural patch of Tennessee landscape. Nothing about it said it was a place for a boy to find himself. But Otis had found it and, in that moment, had started a whole new journey.

He could see it in his head. The house. How it fit among the trees, how it lived with the birds and rose toward the sky like giant hands of prayer. A house built from scratch with whatever he could find. Otis had a gift for seeing things in his head, and this was something he would build from the ground up.

“I know how to do it,” he murmured to himself, though he had never constructed much beyond a couple of small-time projects with wood, nails, glue, and an occasional bolt or two.

It just came to him like a vision. It was a vision. One of many visions he had in his head. But this vision took on great importance because no one ever expected anything unique from Otis. Fact is, Otis rarely expected anything of himself. He was known to be slow in speech and none too bright. People’s expectations being what they were, they just assumed Otis would grow up dumb and poor.

But they assumed wrong, at least on the dumb part. *You can't always tell a book by its cover*, the saying goes, but most people would only take time to glance at the cover. Otis, however, was much deeper than a cover, and the house he built would prove it.

"I got it in my head," he said as he sat quietly among the trees. "This will be Otisville."

Otis, stocky, pudgy with big glasses—Hooter Eyes the kids taunted—and very shy. Some called him retarded, but Otis was anything but. Still, if you don't look for something, most likely you'll never find it. Such was the case with Otis. People assumed wrong about him right from the start.

He *was* shy. He struggled with words. He struggled in school, but not because he wasn't smart. Sometimes people learn different, and if you're not like other people, well, most people just make their own judgments. Most people didn't give Otis credit for much. Most people didn't pay much attention to him at all or just dismissed him outright as none too bright.

During that same summer, Otis would sneak away when he could get out of the house, away from his drunken father, Larry, and spend hours by himself.

"I'm a buildin a castle," he would murmur as he linked boards, chains, tin, tires, and anything else he could scavenge.

“Looka here,” he would say to his parts and pieces.
“You gonna be high in the sky. You gonna be Otisville.”

He built it from scratch. He built it high. He built it to last. And if not for forces beyond his control, it might have stayed built for centuries. As it was, for those few brief years that Otis took pride in his creation, it was beautiful.

4.

In grade school, Otis hated recess. Not because there was anything wrong with going out to play. Rather, it seemed the perfect opportunity for kids to tease him. Jeremy Flynn for one. Jeremy, bigger than Otis, and always in need of someone to pick on. That someone usually being Otis.

Jeremy, whose father was a Macon County Sheriff's Deputy, a father who expected his son to be tough and unafraid to mix things up.

It began when Otis was a 6th grader and Jeremy was in the 8th grade. It was a definite mismatch in physical strength which Jeremy always used to his advantage.

As Otis waited in a corner of the school yard by himself, Jeremy would find him and bring his friends along for the show. Otis, chunky and short. Jeremy, tall, athletic, and mean.

"Hey, there, Otis," Jeremy would laugh. "You decide to hide out in this corner again? Don't you know I'll always find you? There ain't no place you can go in this here school yard that ain't open to me."

Otis would say nothing. Just close his eyes and hope that Jeremy would go away. An idle hope. In addition to being a good student, Jeremy never missed a day of school. His father wouldn't tolerate it.

"Say something, Ooooo . . . tis," Jeremy would say provocatively, as if he were doing a hog call. "Say . . . mother . . . fucker."

Of course, Otis would refuse. He didn't curse. It was too hard to say under pressure and it never came out right. When Otis would say it, it would sound something like, "Motor fracker." Cursing was an art for some kids and Otis just didn't have the tongue for it. But when he refused, the teasing just got worse. It was an open invitation to pile on, with Otis always at the bottom of that heap. The voices surrounding him were like knives that cut him to the quick and left him to bleed.

"M-m-mother . . ." Jeremy would say with emphasis on the last syllable, as if Otis needed a speech lesson. ". . . Fffucker."

The kids would laugh, both at Jeremy and at Otis. Some of them would repeat the chant, not as loudly as Jeremy, more to themselves to prove they could say it. The words were built-in comedy for grade schoolers. Anyone bold enough to say it out loud in public to a crowd of available ears was automatically a leader of the pack.

“No,” Otis would reply, though he wished he had more courage and could spit it in Jeremy’s face. Otis simply wilted under pressure.

Jeremy would check around for teachers. If none appeared, he would press Otis against a wall, grab his shirt, and squeeze his titties. Otis, even at such a young age, was well endowed.

“Come on ya m-m-mother fffffucker.”

Otis would scream and squirm and resist as best he could, but Jeremy wouldn’t budge. He had leverage. He had strength. He had an audience. He would only squeeze harder.

“Say it, ya mother fuckin retard.”

Then he would press Otis’s face against the brick wall of the school building. Red brick. Traditional in the South. Nice to look at but rough if you’re being pummeled by a bully. Like high grade sandpaper. Like shaving with no cream.

Otis would yell bloody murder again, and this time, the sound would carry.

A teacher would sometimes come, but sometimes nobody came. The show belonged to Jeremy until he decided he was finished. Or when he just grew bored. Or the bell rang and recess was over.

“Someday you’ll say it,” Jeremy growled, as if this was both a warning and a promise of more to come.

“No,” Otis would say again, stubborn as always. He had something to prove, but it never quite occurred to him what that might be. All he knew was that he was in a fight for his life and he refused to go under without maximum resistance. Yes, Otis was weaker, but not in spirit. On the playground was where he learned to be a wall of resistance. This wall would later save his life.

Jeremy would counter with a punch to the stomach. Otis would collapse. Then Jeremy would walk away as if nothing unusual had occurred.

For Otis, the bell would ring and another round of torture would end. He would have to brush himself off, adjust his glasses, and walk into his classroom; a classroom where Jeremy sat two seats in front of him, stole glances backwards, and smiled in triumph.

But Otis dreamed and wished. Someday. For some ability to protect himself. Powers that he envied from perusing comic books. Superman’s strength. Batman’s agility. Flash’s speed. Powers that would surprise Jeremy and leave him lying on the ground wondering how Otis had done it. It was the stuff that Otis would dream about. That glorious protection which lay just out of reach. Like a child trying to pick an apple that grew too high on the tree. The wish to be bigger, stronger, to pick that apple and make it his own. To have the ability to pick it and eat it whenever he wanted.

Sometimes that wish would consume Otis and drive him deeper into himself. Pile drive him. Sear his thoughts. Leave him exhausted. But it never escaped him. It also drove his imagination, like the creativity of a great visionary artist. No, Otis was not an artist, but in the end, his imagination was his greatest gift. The thing that lifted him up, beyond even his wildest dreams. The wild force that carved his soul into a beautiful sculpture.

5.

Things were busy in Davis. It was the 4th of July. Even in a small town, there would be fireworks mixed with a lot of mischief. Not that Davis was a town with a lot of crime, but summer holidays typically meant parties and booze. Tom Leonard, the Macon County Sheriff, was under pressure to keep that mischief to a minimum.

Leonard and Deputy Jeremy Flynn sat together this evening preparing for the event. The Sheriff's office was located on the bottom floor of the Macon County Courthouse in downtown Davis. Its front entrance faced the glass doorway across the street from the County's Department of Social Services. Leonard and Flynn were in the reception area of the Sheriff's Office chilling out before the fireworks went off.

"Hell night," Leonard quipped to Flynn as the red sun was setting over the mountains.

"Ah, just a little blowin off of steam," said Flynn. "God knows I did my share when I was growin up, specially on the holidays."

"Yeah, I chased you enough," Leonard recalled. "I do remember."

“Yes, you did,” Flynn admitted, “and look where it got me.”

Leonard chuffed at the memories. “Well, keep an eye out,” he said. “Our good tax payin citizens expect nothin less.”

“Yes, sir,” said Flynn in a mock salute.

Leonard looked out the window and noticed the darkened clouds. “Probably gonna rain, so that might help you out. Least it might cool us off a bit, put out the firecrackers.”

“Probably,” Flynn said absentmindedly. His thoughts were on who he might visit later tonight. Who might he share a bed with, briefly, but with gusto?

Sheriff Leonard was a slim man in his late forties, with a cowboy persona and a manicured mustache. He looked the part of a small-town sheriff. His dark brown eyes had seen a lot in their day, particularly during his service in the Vietnam War. Blood, guts, atrocities as common as the rice paddies in the Viet Cong countryside.

Now he enjoyed the role of sheriff in a small town in an isolated part of Tennessee. Call him the Volunteer state version of Andy of Mayberry. He didn't mind the comparison. It was far from the mayhem. No major crimes to speak of, but plenty of housekeeping.

“You headed out?” he said to Flynn.

“Yep, right after I finish this coffee.” Flynn stood up, his athletic frame still evident from his high school days. The

Macon County deputies uniform looked good on him, good enough to attract some wanderlust eyes and a few late-night trysts with local housewives. Flynn didn't mind. He wasn't married and had plenty of occasion for company. Part of the job, he assumed. If husbands objected, hell, he was the one with the weapon and the authority. He could defend himself if need be.

A call came over the telephone. Leonard picked up. He had relieved Debbie Joyner so she could go home and enjoy the night with her 6-year-old son, Jason. Leonard would hold down the fort.

"Macon Sheriff," he announced.

Flynn could hear the voice from his position six feet away. A loud voice. A woman.

Leonard held the phone a few inches from his ear. "All right, ma'am. Just keep calm and we'll send someone out. Yep. I know where you live. Help's on the way."

He hung up.

"There you go, Flynn. A drunk and disorderly, and the sun ain't even set yet. Go get her, junior."

"Who?"

"You know Thelma Lewis?"

Yes, he did. One of his regulars. Her husband was a wife-abusing bastard. He would enjoy slapping him around, slipping on the cuffs, and maybe giving him a good kick in the ribs.

"Yeah. I know her."

“It’s Al, that bum ass rowdy husband of hers. Go bring him in. We’ll keep him locked up for the night.”

It was Jeremy Flynn and Craig Monroe on duty. Monroe would probably sleep somewhere in his vehicle in the woods. Even if he showed up, he wouldn’t be sober. So Flynn assumed he would be the mainstay on most of the calls tonight. That was all right. He liked to keep busy.

“All right,” Flynn answered. I’ll keep you posted.”

“You do that,” Leonard encouraged.

Flynn went out the door, got in his antiquated cop car, a ‘75 Oldsmobile 88, and headed for Latmer Street. Long night ahead, but if he played his cards right, he might have some fun.

6.

When Otis was ten years old, his father would occasionally drop him off at the Warm Springs Baptist Church in Davis. Larry, always anxious to get rid of him for a couple of hours.

It was there that Otis first heard some of the Bible stories from the Old Testament. Noah. Abraham. Moses. Jonah. Daniel in the Lion's Den. Elijah.

But the one he really enjoyed was the story of David and Goliath. David, a young shepherd, and Goliath, a mighty Philistine warrior.

Otis imagined it like a movie where he was, in his own peculiar way, David. Maybe not as smart or as strong, but still, he was the underdog and God was on his side.

While the teacher would talk about David's courage and faith, Otis would make up his own story in his head, as if he was both the writer and the story teller.

Otis was dressed in sheepskin. He lived in a tent. His father Larry was a shepherd and not unkind to him. In Otis's story, Larry was a good father.

Every night for dinner, they would have lamb chops or something else very tasty cooked by a beautiful woman named Dolly. Dolly, in addition to being a great cook, also wore skimpy clothes because when she finished, she would dance for them. Just the two of them. Her eyes would catch Otis staring and she would smile knowing what he was thinking.

Dolly had long dark hair and wide hips that she would shake all twirly like. When her hips swayed, Otis would giggle with embarrassment, but sometimes when she danced, she would pull him close and he would feel like he was diving in a warm pool. Her titties were smooth and full and Otis would enjoy the softness as she pressed his face so close his lips would brush her nipples.

"I will always love you," she said with a strange accent that to Otis's ears, was exotic and lovely.

"I will love you, too," Otis promised as he fit his fingers in her bosom creases and felt the warmth surge through his body.

One day, Goliath came and stood by their tent. He was seven-feet tall with claws for hands and large feet that could flatten anyone who got in his way. Oddly, his face reminded him of a much larger version of Jeremy Flynn. It

made Otis even more angry about how he stood just outside their tent and threatened their lives.

“I want your woman,” Goliath bellowed to Larry and Otis. “I want her to cook lamb chops for me and smoosh my face in her titties. If you don’t send her out, I will burn your tent and kill all your sheep and take her to be my wife.”

Larry, though a good father, was not a brave man. He stayed inside, shaking. He asked Dolly if she wanted to go out and be with Goliath. No, more than asked. He ordered her to go. Even if it meant no more lamb chops or other fine cooking. Even if it meant no more dancing and hips swaying.

“No,” she cried. “I want to stay here. I want to be with you. I want to hug Otis and let him sleep next to me and rub my titties with his soft little hands.”

“But if you don’t go,” said Larry, “he will burn down our tent and kill our sheep and take you anyway. This way, no one gets hurt. Not even the sheep.”

Otis stood up and took her hand.

“I will not let him take you,” he declared. “You will stay with us forever.”

“But Otis,” she said, “you are just a boy. How can you protect us?”

“I *will* protect you,” he promised. Then he kissed her hand, touched her titties one last time, and stepped through the tent door.

Waiting outside was the Philistine. He had a long spear, at least eight feet tall, which he planted in the sand. As Otis came out, Goliath grinned cruelly.

“Ready for me to torture you, O dumb one?”

“I am not dumb,” Otis said proudly. “Not anymore. Not now. Not ever again. And today you will die.”

Goliath laughed and as he did, his voice echoed throughout the desert. His laugh was harsh, like the growl of a wild beast.

“And who will kill me?” he said. “You?”

“Yes,” said Otis. “You will die and I will save my family and my sheep and Dolly. She will never leave our side.”

“How?” Goliath taunted.

“With this lamb bone,” said Otis. He held it up. It was a small rib from his dinner. Part of a lamb chop. Probably no more than four inches long, including the leftover cartilage from where he had gnawed on the bone.

Again, Goliath laughed. As he did so, he raised his spear and prepared to harpoon Otis right through the chest.

But Otis jumped to the side, spun around like a ninja, and delivered the bone like an arrow straight to Goliath’s forehead. Otis even cried out like a ninja: “Haaaya.” The bone stuck so deep in Goliath’s forehead that all anyone could see was a thin, bloody crease just above his nose.

Goliath dropped the spear. He dropped to his knees. Then he fell forward not more than six inches from Otis and lay like a dead tree trunk.

Otis stood over him and raised his hands in triumph. He danced on Goliath's huge body and kicked the back of the giant's head. He sang a song of triumph and pulled out a piece of Goliath's hair as a memento.

Then he walked back into the tent, took Dolly in his arms, sent his father to fetch more firewood, and lay down with her on a blanket where she held his head close. He fell asleep and dreamed about Dolly serving him lamb chops and an ice cream sundae. Dolly fed him the ice cream with a beautiful silver spoon. When Otis spilled ice cream on her titties, she let him lick it off.

7.

Tape Recordings of Otis Barner:

It was rainin and cold today. But I don't feel it so much these days cause the holidays are comin up. Thanksgiving. Christmas. Not that we celebrate much around the Barner house anymore. But around town, well, it starts lookin kind of nice.

Decorations in the stores and people startin to put up lights. I even got some plans to do some Christmas stuff here at my little castle.

Even at Grossman's Market where I work, we're gonna dress up the store with some decorations and pretty soon all the Christmas candy will start to come in. Mr. Grossman said he's gonna spring this year for a tree near the front door. We always raise money for orphans and put a big ol box up front where you can leave presents.

Let's see. Today Audrey wore a nice red sweater. Lately I been thinkin about her a lot. Sometimes she just floats through my head like a happy dream.

Why, today, I was moppin the center aisle and she brung me another candy bar. Hershey's. My favorite.

“You need this today to cheer you up,” she said, and she was right. It’s like she read my mind.

Don’t know why, but today I *was* kinda lonely. Thinkin about my mom. She’s been dead now for a lot of years. I can’t see her face no more. Don’t know, if she even spoke to me on the street, whether or not I’d recognize her.

I got some type of vision of my mom, a real nice lady who always tried to take care of me. I don’t always remember what she did, but I got a feelin she was the good part of my life, the happy part of my life.

I miss her sometimes. Don’t know why. She’s been gone so long. I guess I think of her like I got a big ol hole in my heart and I need her there to fill it. But you can’t fill a hole if you ain’t got nothin to fill it with. Maybe I think of Audrey kind of like my mom. She bein so cheerful. I think I remember my mom bein that way. She always makes me feel good.

As for my dad, Larry, he ain’t doin well. Don’t do nothin but drink and sleep these days. Don’t even open the shop anymore. He’s like gone into a hole and just won’t come out. Tells me he ain’t got no reason to live. Course, if I drank like he did and was mean like him, maybe I’d feel that way too. You suppose he misses his mom? Hard to tell sometimes, but maybe he misses my mom, too.

It’s kind of sad, but I know after years of tryin, I cain’t help him. He don’t want my help. He don’t want me. That’s just the high and low of it. A father who don’t want

his own son. Don't know what to make of it, but I always feel like it's my fault, so I just don't talk to him much anymore. He just makes me feel a lot worse than I already do.

Probably why I always turn my thoughts to Audrey. She's a bright spot for me.

Audrey, she's so pretty. Sometimes I wake up at night and think of her. And I can tell. I think she kind of likes me, too.

Course that might just be my daydreamin again. I got all these thoughts about her and me and holidays and happy times and maybe a kiss under some mistletoe. Good Lord. What I wouldn't give for a kiss.

Look at me, just blubberin here like I even got a shot with her. Yeah, it's real funny. Me and Audrey. Fat man and pretty woman. Ha.

Still, it's that time of year when you start to think bout presents and stuff. Wouldn't hurt to maybe get her a little somethin for Christmas.

What you think? Maybe a necklace? Ahhh, probably that's too much. Gotta give this some thought.

It's okay. I got lots of time.

8.

After several years of work, Otis had a structure in place that looked like a giant playhouse. With enough imagination, you might see the bare bones of a castle.

He built walls made from discarded pieces of tin and plywood nailed and bolted together by old boards and large sheets of plastic wrapping. It was not, however, as haphazard as one might expect.

Otis had carefully measured and cut so that the design was geometrical, pleasant, and sunny, with small squares and shades of glass that he had carefully installed into the walls to let in light. Best of all, it didn't leak and was solid enough to withstand the rain, snow, and wind of storms.

He had also built flexible vents at strategic locations high in the walls so that air could circulate through the house and heat could escape. These he had rescued from old abandoned houses on the outskirts of Davis.

At the top of the ceiling, he had installed some small windows which, with the help of a catwalk, he could open in the spring and summer so that he could see and hear the leaves, the birds, and breezes in the sky.

To transport the materials, he had taught himself to drive his father's pickup truck, the one he used at Barner's Auto Repair. Particularly when school was out for summer break, Otis traveled late at night and early in the morning. His father, who spent a good deal of time drinking, had no idea that his truck had gone missing. When he awoke from his previous night's binge, things were as normal as he could expect. Otis in the kitchen making breakfast. The day dawning. Another bottle of Jack Daniels and the usual decision he faced: whether to go to work or just hide out and disappear into his dark soul.

Otis, meanwhile, without giving any clue to his father about his project, kept on buildin it.

9.

Otis met Audrey for the first time while eating his lunch in the break room at Grossman's Market. It was what some might consider love at first sight.

With long black hair, blue eyes, and a face that resembled Priscilla Presley, she struck Otis like a truck full of hammers. She was also friendly.

"Hey, there," she said as she sat across the table from him and unwrapped a sandwich.

Otis, extremely shy around women, was tongue-tied.

"Uhh, hey," he mumbled with his eyes down.

"I'm Audrey Reagan," she announced and held out her hand to shake.

Otis was embarrassed that he had just licked mustard off his fingers. Still, he wanted to be polite, so he shook hands and hoped that no yellow stain rubbed off.

"I'm Otis. Otis Barner," he mumbled.

"I just started work here," she said.

"Well, welcome." He put down his sandwich and hoped there were no bits of turkey between his teeth.

"You local?" she asked.

"Yeah. Born and raised."

“Thought I recognized you, from high school, right? I think I was a couple years behind you.”

Otis was a bit flummoxed that she talked to him. Most of the staff just ignored him.

“Hmm, yeah, class of ‘72?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I finished in ‘75. We probably didn’t talk much, you and me. You being a big senior and all.”

Otis nodded. “Well, I don’t talk much anyway, so that’s probably right.”

“I moved to Atlanta for a year or so after I graduated, but now I’m back. I missed this place, missed my folks. Guess I’m not much of a big city girl.”

“Me neither,” said Otis and realized his mistake. Too late.

“No, you wouldn’t be,” she laughed. But it was not to make fun of him. She seemed genuinely amused.

Otis worked up the nerve to ask her a question.

“You got a boyfriend?”

Audrey seemed taken back, then smiled.

“Why, no. Are you interested?”

Otis turned red as a beet.

“I-I-I was just askin. You know us people. Small town. Always curious. Nosy. Sorry. I-I shouldn’t have asked that.”

She paused and gave him a grin. “So. You got a girlfriend?”

Otis could not look her in the eye. She was sharp, on her toes, and he was intimidated.

“No. Most girls, well, I ain’t much of a girl guy.”

“Well then, what are you?” Her eyes sparkled with playfulness.

“I-I don’t know. I’m just Otis.”

“Maybe you’re a dog person.”

“No. No dogs or cats or birds or turtles. I ain’t much of anyone, to be honest. I’m just plain ol’ Otis. By myself.”

“Well, whatever you are is okay with me. I don’t judge. People are people. We just got to get along.”

Otis wanted to fall through the floor. He also wanted to kiss her. He wanted her to be his wife. All in the space of a minute’s conversation. Most of all, he wanted to disappear and fly away. The idea of *her* talking to *him* just blew a circuit in his head. Instead, he just sat and ate his sandwich.

Audrey seemed to read his face, his mind, and her expression was kind.

“Don’t worry, Otis. We’re gonna be friends. I don’t bite, and I don’t think you do either.”

“No, ma’am,” he agreed. “Not unless you bite me first.” He cracked a subtle grin.

“Was that an Otis joke?” she gushed.

Again, Otis was embarrassed, but he liked her, so he admitted it. “Yup. Your first real Otis joke.”

“Well, I like it. And I promise not to bite.”

“Thank you.”

She reached into her purse and shuffled around. "You like Hershey Bars?"

Otis's eyes lit up. "Yeah. My favorite."

She pulled out a Hershey's Bar with almonds and handed it across the table.

"Here, take this. A sign of our friendship. You can bite this all you want."

He noticed her slim fingers, graceful and well-manicured.

"Thanks," he said. He reached in his bag. "I got an apple. You like apples?"

"I sure do," she said.

He handed her a Granny Smith apple. Perfectly round and green. Lovely as a landscape painting.

"Comes from the produce stand, but I paid for it, so don't worry. It ain't stolen."

"I would never accuse you of such a thing," she said

"I like them cause they're kind of sweet and kind of tart. Good eatin."

She rubbed it on her blouse and took a bite.

Otis thought it was the sexiest thing he had ever seen. He hoped his thighs didn't melt right on the spot.

"So, you moved back?" he said, desperate to make more conversation.

"I did," she responded. "Now I just gotta figure out what to do with my life. Can't work here forever."

“I been here pretty long,” he said. “Right outta high school.”

“You like it?”

“It’s a job. They ain’t many of them in this town, so I’m okay with it, specially for dumb crackers like me.”

She took a bite of her sandwich and delicately wiped her lips with a napkin.

Otis tried not to stare, but she was like a fine piece of crystal. He wanted to see every angle and catch her reflections in his big, wide hands.

They chatted easily the rest of lunch.

When she left, Otis knew right then and there. He was in love. Madly, though he had yet to understand how madly.

It was there he decided to change the name of his house from Otisville to Audreyville.

He had this urge to tell her, but how could he, since he was Otis and never talked to women, and she had never seen his house? And besides, she hardly knew him.

“Maybe I can tape somethin,” he murmured. His boombox was set up. He could go to Grady’s Pharmacy and get Maxells.

He started to think about what he would say that would interest her. He sat for a good five minutes pondering. Nothing immediate came to mind.

10.

Davis. A small town in the heart of the Cumberland Plateau surrounded by mountains, trees, a blue sky and an abundance of lakes and rivers.

Peaceful. Blissful. Country life. Unless you were Otis Barner. Born June 15, 1954. Parents—Larry and Nancy Barner.

For the Barners, life was not so peaceful or blissful. But life was indeed very small.

Parents poor. Father drunk. Nancy trying to stay out of Larry's way and raise a child that, in the insightful words of Larry, just "weren't normal far as I can tell."

When Otis was five, they would talk about him in front of his face while he sat at the kitchen table. As if they were discussing what to do with a used car that needed repair.

Otis would sit and listen and wonder who they were talking about. Whoever it was, he knew that this person wasn't liked. Maybe this person was in a lot of trouble.

"What we gonna do?" Nancy would ask. Plump. Grey eyes. Raven hair. With a face caved in from hardship and poverty, hunger and loneliness. Her body sagging. Her dress worn to patches. Not old, but years ahead of her time.

Larry, whose face was stuck in a permanent scowl and whose ears and jaw seemed permanently misshapen, would mumble, "Take him out in them woods and leave him, see if he come home. Lucky for us if he don't."

Larry. Back bent. Blues eyes blank. Hands hardened from too much hard work. His face lined. Hair thinning. Patience and kindness gone.

"What you mean?" she would say. "He's our child."

Then Otis would wonder: *Whose child are they talking about?*

"Wish to God he weren't," Larry would grumble. "All he does is eat, shit, and cry. Cain't see no use for him if he ain't gonna grow up and work."

Then Otis would wonder again: *Whose child are they talking about? Was it him?*

"Lord have mercy," Nancy would exclaim. "What kinda father are you?"

Larry would groan. "Not one that wants a retard for a son, that's for sure. Hard enough puttin food on the table without him eatin whatever paycheck I make."

And Otis would wonder: *Does he mean that, about him, the son? Was he the son?*

"That's just cruel to say that," she would argue. "That's just plain cruel and dumb. You're worthless, that's what you are. You're the retard. I'd rather take you out in the woods and drop you in a hole. Then him and me would move down to Cookeville or somewhere. I'd get a job."

We'd make it. I can tell you that, and he would be *my* son, and he wouldn't go nowhere, cept be with me."

"I ain't the dumb one," said Larry. "He's the dumb one. And don't call me them names, you bitch. I'll show you what dumb is like. Go look in a mirror and tell me the difference tween him and you. You both are just overinflated tires. Round mounds of yappity bitching. I think he's like you. Takes right after you and your goddamn dumbass family."

And Otis would realize. It *was* him they were talking about. He was the dumb one. AND his mother.

Larry would reach across the table and slap her. Then he would take a jab at Otis, who would fall off his chair and start crying.

Crying because the punch hurt. Crying because he was the dumb one. Otis the dummy. Otis who deserved to be slugged. Otis the round mound of yappity bitching.

Nancy, who fully understood the futility of this conversation, would reach down, pull Otis next to her, and feel pity. For her and him. They were both stuck in hell, and there was no one to help them.

And Otis would wonder: *Does mommy love me? If she does, why doesn't papa?*

A hole opened in Otis's heart. A big loss of love hole that he could never fill, because he was born this way and couldn't do anything about it. His father had identified that hole and helped to make it bigger.

Otis would spend the rest of his life patching up that hole, or at least making it smaller and less apparent to everyone. But the words of his father kept it open. "I ain't the dumb one," said Larry. "He's the dumb one."

Otis took on that title and lived as best he could under its weight.

Such was the life of Larry, Nancy, and Otis. Blissful. Peaceful. Small. Painful. Miserable. Useless.

Then, in the spring of 1960, Nancy took sick and died. And life as Otis imagined it would never be the same.

Because. At least from Larry's point of view, Otis was simply too dumb to be loved.

11.

Saturday nights were always the worst.

After work at Grossman's, after his usual Saturday night spent hanging out at Jumpin' Jacks, Otis would come home and find Larry in an ornery state of mind. Tonight was no exception.

"Where you been, dummy?" Larry said from his favorite perch at the kitchen table. Under a single light bulb, he looked like some detective from an old movie ready to interrogate a suspect. His red face and graying red hair looked ominous. His slurred tongue rolled out vowels like a gravel truck at a delivery sight.

"Nowhere, cept work and Jack's," said Otis as he prepped himself for the verbal onslaught.

"That ain't true. You just walk through the door, which means you been somewhere." Larry gave him the evil eye.

"So?" said Otis.

"It's midnight. You got some woman you bangin'?"

"No." said Otis. "I ain't. Ain't got no one, not even to talk to."

"You bang yourself?"

Otis found this question confusing and just stared at him.

“Yeah, bout the only thing you could bang. You know what a dick is? You know what to do with it?”

Otis did know, but he didn’t want to talk to Larry about his dick or anything else in his private life. It would just make things worse.

“Shut up, ya old coot,” said Otis and turned to walk toward his bedroom.

A beer bottle hit him upside the head. Otis was startled and yelled. “Ow!”

“Who ya callin a coot?” said Larry.

“What’s wrong with you?” Otis protested. “Why you so frickin mean?”

“Cause I got a retard for a son,” said Larry with a smirk.

Then Otis staggered to the living room door frame and held himself up. He touched his head to see if he was bleeding.

“Gotcha good, didn’t I?” Larry challenged. “Whatch you gonna do bout it?”

Otis, his rage now fully engaged, took two steps toward Larry.

Larry pulled out a pistol. Only a .22, but for Otis, it might as well have been a .45.

Larry grinned and shifted his stance. The gun was aimed directly at Otis’s head. “Come on, you fat son of a

bitch. Let's see what you're made of. See if you got any man left in you."

Otis knew one thing for certain. He didn't want to die. Not here in this claptrap house. Not at the hands of his drunken father, and not with a bullet to the brain. He stopped, held out his hands, and backed up.

As if this was a bad movie, the thunder and lightning outside crashed.

"Yeah. That's what I thought," Larry concluded. "Next time, don't be so late."

"It's . . . It's Saturday," Otis protested. "I got the day off tomorrow."

"I don't keer. Tomorrow's Sunday. Git up and go to church."

"I don't go to church. You don't neither. What's wrong with you?"

"Shut up. I own this house. I own this gun. By rights, I own your ass. You eat here. You sleep here. You shit here. You're my goddamn dummy of a son. You do what I ask. Simple as that. Or maybe . . ." Larry's face darkened. ". . . you should get your own goddamn place. Or is that too hard for some assface like you to understand?"

Otis had had enough. The argument was pointless. The abuse endless. He'd been listening to this his entire life. He knew there was no point in it and no way to win. He turned and walked toward his bedroom.

“I ain’t done with you,” Larry shouted. The gun went off and the bullet ripped through the living room’s small bay window. The window shattered and the storm roared through the opening.

Otis feared for his life. He grabbed some of his belongings, climbed through his bedroom window, and drove to his fort, where he could live by himself in peace and without fear for his life.

He would prove to his father that he could make it. But for now, the fort was his only safe point of refuge.

Otis was determined to survive. He never went back to the house to sleep. From this point on, he was on his own. But he knew in his heart and head. He would make it. With or without Larry.

12.

Deputy Flynn drove through downtown Davis anticipating the evening's fireworks. It was his favorite time of year. The 4th gave him a certain kind of energy boost. Not only because of the celebration, but because he was a deputy and the rest of the town had to cow tow to his orders. Get rowdy and he would throw their asses in jail.

He liked being in charge. He liked being the man about town in a uniform. His father had been respected, and now it was his turn.

Thoughts of his father floated through his head. Not always pleasant thoughts. Memories of beatings, harassment, drunken behavior. Still, he was the old man and Jeremy had followed in his father's footsteps.

Now it was his turn to step out and crack the whip. And eventually, when Leonard stepped down, he would make his move and run for office.

He arrived at Laurie Maples house. Laurie, a couple years younger than him, but while he was in high school, she had been one of his groupies. Now, after all these years, she was ripe for the picking.

The deputy knocked on the door of her second-floor apartment. River View Apartments.

She opened the door and smiled.

“Well, hello, deputy dawg,” she purred.

Laurie, employed as one of the county’s administrators. Something related to the environment or some such newfangled office. Jeremy didn’t keep track of that side of the wall. All he knew was that when he came calling, she was willing and ready.

“Laurie,” he said politely.

Laurie. Petite, blond, the way Jeremy liked them. A decent set of tits and an ass that just kept on motoring.

“You aren’t out catching bad guys?” she said as she poured them both their favorite drinks.

“Well, yeah,” he answered, “but first I need to fill the tank.”

“And I’m the fuel?” she said coyly.

“You are, baby.”

“Kind of like fireworks night?”

“Just like that, only better.”

“Won’t your big daddy sheriff miss you?”

“He might, but he might not. I’ll take my chances.”

Laurie gave him a sly look. “Animal.”

“And vegetable, and mineral.”

“All of the above.”

“Plus.”

“Plus what?”

"I'm the ignition," he said.

Laurie laughed. "No lack of confidence, huh?"

"Not where you're concerned."

He walked up and grabbed her tightly, gave her a kiss, and squeezed her ass.

Laurie felt the rockets ignite.

"Oh, deputy, you are about to burst."

"I am, young lady. Let's get to it."

Laurie had envisioned tonight as something a little more lengthy and romantic, but she would take what he gave any day and come back for more. What was a minor encounter tonight could someday be a ring on her finger. A woman could hope, though with Jeremy, she knew exactly where she stood in his line of priorities.

"Well," she said, "I do like fireworks."

"And I brought the match," he said.

As they humped like rabbits, a strange thought passed through Jeremy's mind. Out of the blue, on his way to Laurie's, he had seen Otis in a red Mustang dressed in some type of king's outfit.

Now why did this thought bother him now, just as he was about to explode?

Otis had always fascinated and baffled him, but here, tonight? Now?

He tried to push it aside and finish what he started, but the thought was like a mosquito bite, and like a swollen sore, he just couldn't ignore the itch.

When he finished with Laurie and walked out to his car, he was annoyed with the idea that someone as crazy as Otis could even enter his mind. It was a random thought, but maybe not so random. Maybe Otis was Jeremy's itch. Minor. Bothersome. Constant.

Jeremy pushed it aside and reported in.

"Where you been?" said Leonard. "I've been tryin to reach you."

"Sorry, Chief. Had to take a little break, go the men's room?"

"Yeah? Was she good?"

Leonard. You couldn't sneak anything by him.

"She was fine."

"Well, get back to work. I'm gettin calls all over the place."

"Bout what?"

"Otis Barner. Apparently, he's out tonight in some kind of costume. The Barner's house is on fire. Jenny Newberg is claimin he assaulted her. And some parent is mad cause Otis pointed a sword at a kid on Grove Street. I can't tell what's up. Get your ass over to the Barner house and see what's goin on. And no more breaks. You've already filled your quota. Keep your pants buckled and get some work done. It's what we pay you for, Deputy."

Leonard spit out the last word like he was cussing.

Oooof. Leonard was fit to be tied.

Otis. The outfit. He knew there was something wrong.
“10-4,” Jeremy called back and headed for the Barner
house.

Jeremy believed in ESP, and tonight just proved him
right.

13.

On a warm July day, Otis worked the dairy aisle stocking milk, butter, and other refrigerated items. It was a task he took pride in. Making sure all the items were lined up straight, cleaned up, and looking fresh.

Ralph Newman, the store's manager walked by and checked on his work.

"Nice job, Otis."

"Thank you, Mr. . ."

"Just Ralph is fine, Otis. We've known each other long enough. Just call me by my first name."

Otis had finally grown into adulthood. Six foot and bulging in all parts—stomach, legs, arms, neck. His face was round like a bowling ball with curly ears and small, blue eyes. He always had his hair in a crew cut. Everything was set off by a pair of glasses that might have been purchased ten years ago and were now too small for his face. They sat at an angle like a road with a 2% grade. Otis didn't care. They worked and had lasted him through some tough times. He was attached to them like a favorite stuffed animal or a well-worn pair of jeans.

“You goin to the company picnic tomorrow?” Ralph asked.

Otis said simply, “No.”

Ralph looked surprised. In truth, he knew as well as Otis that Otis never did anything outside of coming to work and taking care of his ornery father. At least nothing that involved anything in public. Ralph thought he might enjoy having some fun in the great outdoors.

“Well, why not?” he insisted. “It’s free.”

Otis did not want to tell Ralph his life’s story. Like why he was desperately shy and had no friends because he trusted no one.

“I’m just not a . . . picnic kind of guy.”

“No?”

Otis wondered if this was a good or a bad thing. Whether Ralph was being serious or joshing him. Ralph had worked here forever. Then again. So had Otis. He knew. Otis knew. Otis always kept to himself. Now Otis wondered. Why the question? After all, Ralph was not always friendly. Sometimes he was downright mean to people. Today, however . . .

“Well, hope you make it,” said Ralph and walked away.

Otis scanned his cartons again to make sure they were straight. He thought about Ralph. He thought about how he would like to go to a picnic, but not as Otis. As someone else smarter, good looking, someone who could talk without embarrassment. What would happen if he did go,

as someone else, but still Otis? What would people think? How would they react? And then, as sometimes happened, he wondered. What if?

—

Otis arrived in his souped up '68 Nova, crimson with a white racing stripe splitting the middle of the hood and tailing out the back. Spoked wheels. Engine rumbling. Everyone's eyes turned.

Otis resembled Steve McQueen. Aviator sunglasses. Green body shirt. Brown flared slacks. Two-toned pair of men's wing tips. He stood six-foot-two with not an ounce of body fat. His hair was smooth, brown, a little long but not messy.

Ralph came up to him, a shine in his eyes. As if Otis had accepted his invitation after all and he was proud that he had personally invited him.

"Hey, Otis," he gushed. "Glad you could make it." He shook Otis's hand enthusiastically and offered to show him around.

Otis could have taken an attitude, but this part was genuinely him. He never wanted to be rude to anybody. He just wanted to be friendly. In truth, he was happy that Ralph paid some attention to him.

Julie Menken was the first to eye him. She of the checkout line, usually crabby, but today, in good spirits. In

her mid-30s, married with two kids, reasonably good looking even with that middle-aged jiggle in her thighs.

“Hey, Otis,” she said in a sultry voice. “Like your car.” A married woman, but her eyes sparkled like she was in high school and on the make.

“Brand new,” said Otis. “Just drove it off the lot.”

A highlight for Otis, since normally he drove an old beat-up VW bus and couldn’t imagine ever owning a vehicle this sexy.

And then Audrey walked up to him and Otis froze. Just being in her eyesight was enough to choke up his voice permanently. But he relaxed and the words came out easy.

“Hi, Audrey. You look so nice today.” Suave. No sweat. As natural as breathing.

“Why, thank you, Otis.”

Audrey, in a jersey dress, white with bold red strips running horizontal and a symmetrical pattern of red dots. A little short, just enough to make him appreciate the knee and thigh without being too revealing.

The rest of the picnic just melted away. With Audrey in the picture, nothing else mattered. The others were just onlookers. Like a live, television show, the camera panned in on the two of them, Otis and Audrey, a closeup of their hungry eyes.

“Good to see you, Otis,” Audrey said a little shyly.

“Likewise. I’m so happy to see you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You’re always so nice to me, you know?”

Audrey blinked in surprise, as if Otis was tickling her sweet spot.

“Why, Otis, why wouldn’t I be? You’re always nice to me.”

“Not everybody’s nice to me the way you are.”

“Well, if they aren’t, I think they should be ashamed of themselves.”

“Well, they’re not ashamed, they’re mean, but you’re the exception to the rule.”

Audrey laughed. “Well, I’ve never been an exception before.”

The rest of the employees crowded towards Otis in hopes of seeking his attention. If Otis had wanted, he could have passed out autographs and made everybody happy. But he wasn’t here for their attention. He was here for Audrey, and he wasn’t waiting for any picnic lunch. He was ready to take her — now — and have his own private party.

“Get in,” he told her.

“Get in?” she said, a little puzzled.

“That car over there,” he pointed out. “That’s for you and me. And from here, we’re goin to Memphis. We’re goin to visit Graceland. And then, maybe if we have enough fun, we’ll get married and move to California. Live right on the beach. Maybe see a Hollywood star or two. Who knows? I might even *be* a Hollywood star.”

Audrey's mouth gaped open as if he had just offered her the chance of a lifetime.

They ran to the Nova. He fired it up, rolled back the convertible roof, and drove out of the parking lot as they waved at everybody. Otis blew a cloud of exhaust from the tailpipe and they both laughed about it. The music swelled. The car rolled out on the long open road headed east to Graceland. Across a wide-shot screen panned the words: They Lived Happily Ever After. The End.

Cut to fade.

Otis had gotten his girl.

14.

Tape Recordings of Otis Barber:

I'm just sittin in my house today and thinkin.

It's a nice day, for sure, and my favorite mockingbird is busy, just singin to beat the band. Like he ain't got nothin else to do but make music. What a life.

I like spring the best of all the seasons. Everything is green and my castle kind of glows that same way. Somethin bout the light through the leaves that gets my attention. Can't tell you what it is, but it's special.

I love my windows. Kind of feels like church sometimes without all the holy roller stuff. If church were just sittin in the pew and enjoyin the light through the windows, I'd probably go more. It's all the other crap that gets me.

My house is kind of the same way. Makes me feel like I'm close to God, or at least close to the light of God. Only thing is, I wish that there was someone here sides me. It's okay to sit in a church for a while by yourself. But here in my house, even when I'm enjoyin just bein here, would be nice to have someone to talk to.

Hadn't heard nothin from my daddy, which is probably a good thing. Lord, he sure stays drunk and when he does, he's mean. I ain't seen him in a while, not since he took a gun to me and fired. Not puttin myself in that boat again. No, sir.

Ain't sure if Audrey is interested in me. I try to stay friendly, but we're busy at work and there ain't always time for chattin. Sides, she got her own life and we just see each other at Grossman's. So, what can you tell if you're workin and not takin any other time to get to know the person? Is that what you call friendship? I don't know. I try not to think about it, but dagnabbit, she done shot an arrow through my heart without even aimin.

I don't know what it means to have a girlfriend either. Nobody ever interested in me that way. No clue what to say. Oh, hi, I'm the big dude that kind of likes you. The one with the funny glasses, kind of fat, talks funny sometimes, people say not nice things about. Would you like to go out with me?

Huh. That's like a stray dog askin a stranger for a warm bed. People just say get on outta here, you lousy mutt. That's me. Otis the mutt.

What do women want? It ain't clear to me and never has been. I think they like someone good lookin. Cain't blame em. I like pretty, so what's the difference? Hickledoo, would I want to go out with someone like me? Duh. Doubt it.

But on a day like today, a man gets restless without someone around. Sun shinin, birds singin, a whole new world comin and me just lookin up in the trees at a big empty sky.

Still, better here than bein home and gettin shot at. I built this with my own hands, so it's my house. If nothin else, I got the birds for company.

Women like a guy who's funny and maybe got some money. Has a nice car. Maybe a movie star. Hey, I just made a rhyme.

See, I ain't got none of that. Looks, money. For sure, I ain't nobody's star. I don't see why what I got ain't good enough, but then I look at me and see what's not there. There's plenty of me, just not the right me, and that's not gonna change.

So, what do I say to her? Hey, Audrey. I know I ain't what you want, but would you want to come to my house for dinner? I got some music on the radio. I could pick up some fried chicken. Sorry I ain't got no kitchen to cook it with, but I could show you my dance. My Otis dance.

Yeah. I know. Everybody says don't stop your dreamin, but I look at me and say, why shouldn't I?

Well. I look in the mirror and see why not.

I tell you. It's lonesome.

So, Audrey Louise Reagan, would you . . .

Yeah. All right. Just thought I'd ask.

15.

Otis's schooling could best be described as a mixed bag.

While grades were standard as part of a normal child's education, Otis was a special case. Initially placed in a class with kids who were considered slow learners, he was mainstreamed back into regular school at the insistence of his mother. From that point, he was simply left to himself to get along as best he could. As a result, his grades were always dismal except for one subject. Otis was a whiz at math.

By the time he reached the 8th grade, most thought that he would simply drop out of school and find some other path of employment. Enter Mr. Husky, his 8th grade math teacher.

Mr. Husky recognized Otis's talent and his almost supernatural ability to do an Algebra equation in his head. Minus pen and paper, Otis could simply see the answer to the problem and respond within seconds.

Mr. Husky determined that a gift like this deserved to be nourished. Damn the other subjects. Mr. Husky believed that if you could do math, you had a place in the world.

The problem he faced was not the school system which, as a veteran faculty member of Davis Elementary, he knew inside and out. The problem was with Otis.

Extremely shy and unwilling to participate in any sort of class discussion, Otis required extra attention from Mr. Husky to finish his homework, take tests, and reluctantly acknowledge that he liked math.

Even at the end of 8th grade, when Mr. Husky asked about his future, Otis shrugged and responded quietly: "Dunno."

When Mr. Husky visited Otis's father, Larry responded to Mr. Husky's questions by asking: "What do you care?"

Mr. Husky took it as a personal challenge. He contacted the local high school math teachers, talked to Mr. Coe, the principal of Andrew Jackson High School, and spent a good part of the summer talking to Otis over long visits at the Barner House. He gave him books to look through and showed him solutions to Algebra and other advanced math problems. Otis caught on quickly.

With a little tutoring, Otis responded by solving whatever was thrown in front of him. He even took some advanced placement tests and might have been eligible to take local college classes at Tennessee Technical University in nearby Cookeville.

Except. Otis didn't want to go. He didn't want to leave home. Most of all, he didn't want to be with strangers, especially if it meant living somewhere else.

And so, Otis went to high school, made lousy grades, and occupied his normal isolated space. He was tolerated because he never bothered anyone. He did well in algebra, geometry, and calculus classes. The rest he simply endured because he was supposed to be in school. At graduation time, he was even given his own little diploma by the school's math instructors, though he never walked through a line.

Mr. Husky visited him often during Otis's high school years and marveled at his math ingenuity. He believed that Otis might be a great scientist or architect. But Otis didn't believe anything of the sort, and neither did anybody else in the school. They thought Mr. Husky was crazy, and maybe a bit odd to spend the time he did with Otis.

Otis thanked Mr. Husky after a last visit to his house, then went for a walk in the woods.

His thoughts as he headed towards his fortress.

I'm a gonna build it. His mantra. His obsession in life. His own house dreamt in his head and constructed from basic materials retrieved from the trash.

All that math did encourage him. He now believed he was smart enough to finish the job. His house. His castle.

And so, with newfound confidence and extraordinary math skills, Otis kept a buildin it.

16.

Just out of high school, Otis started work at Grossman's Grocery Store. At first, part-time, so he would walk from his house to the market. But eventually Mr. Grossman liked his work and wanted him to stay full time.

And that's when Otis realized he needed a car. His father being the owner of Barner's Auto Repair on the edge of Davis, it would have been logical to ask him for help. But Otis knew better. His father had given him nothing for years except a roof and occasionally food. To ask for a car would have been unthinkable. For Larry to just flat out give it to him. Uh-uh. But maybe, if Otis thought about it, there might be a way to convince the old varmint of the value of giving his son transportation or at least striking up some kind of partnership to help finance the deal.

Perhaps it was kismet that Otis, on his way home from work one hot July afternoon, saw an old VW van on the grass of Mr. Daily's lawn.

Curious, Otis walked up to the van and peered inside. Mr. Daily, sitting on his porch nursing a beer, noticed Otis's attention.

“She’s a ‘65,” he called out. “Used it for camping years ago, but then my son got a hold of it. You can see the end result. Needs work, but your daddy could help.”

Otis asked, “How much work?”

Mr. Daily looked at Otis with some sympathy and decided to tell him the truth.

“Needs a LOT of work. Maybe somethin just a little short of a miracle. My son, he don’t leave nothin runnin when he gets hold of a car.”

Otis knew what that meant. The van was a wreck. But the body was intact as well as the front interior. As it was, the van needed tires, brakes, new engine, basic overhaul. But with potential for transport and even escape when necessary, Otis thought it had possibilities. Wheels to work. Camping. Moving stuff when he needed it. No more sneaking around in his father’s truck.

“How much?” said Otis.

“Hunnurt dollars,” said Mr. Daily.

Otis had that much cash saved in his tree house. He was a thrifty sort. Saved all his nickels and dimes. It was a reasonable offer. All he had to do was get this junker hauled to his father’s garage. Therein was the rub.

Next step. Talking to his father.

Otis cornered him that night during dinner.

"I need a car," he said while Larry chewed on a chicken wing.

As predicted, Larry was skeptical. "What you need a car for?"

"Get me to work and back," Otis insisted.

"What's wrong with your legs? You can't walk to work?"

"Nothin's wrong with my legs. It'd just be easier to get there with a car," said Otis.

Larry gave it some thought. "I'll trade ya," he answered with a smug grin on his face.

"For what?" said Otis suspiciously.

"For Kim Novak," he said.

Otis was startled. "Who's that?"

"Who's that? Who's that?" Larry taunted. "God, what would you know about women anyway? Someone as pretty as Kim Novak? Nothing. You know nothing. You're a womanus ignoramus."

"Well, I can't help it," said Otis. "I don't know her. That's all. Does she live in town?"

"Oh, good God," said Larry.

"What?" Otis answered in his own defense.

"No, she don't live here in town. She lives up on that big screen comes out of Hollywood. Movie star, boy. Outta reach of both of us."

Larry shook his head in disgust. "Truth is, you don't know any women. That's your big problem. You gonna spend your whole life dickless and clueless. Ain't no woman ever gonna let you poke her cause you're just too damn dumb to know what to do. Probably stick your dick in her ear and think that's sexy. Damn, boy. You're hopeless."

Otis had heard this plenty and wanted to avoid this conversation. To do so, he simply went silent.

Larry continued to gnaw on his wing. "So, no deal, huh?"

"What?"

"I get you a car, you get me Kim Novak."

"I don't know her. I already told you that. Neither do you."

"No. You don't. Your loss. Guess you just got to walk to work for the rest of your damned life."

Otis stared at him. Larry chewed on his wing and stared back.

"I get a car," Otis said, "I can pay you back. I got a job."

"How bout I get you a car, you move out?"

Larry laid down the wing. His grin returned.

"Well, where would I go?" said Otis.

"Hell, I don't care. You got smarts enough. You can build your own house."

"With what?"

"I seen you stealin stuff out of my trash. You gone for days sometimes. I know you got somewhere you're hidin. Maybe livin with some horse somewhere in a barn. Go there."

Otis looked guilty. Larry had made his point.

Larry probed further. "Where's that you hidin, anyway? Sneak out all hours like a jail break."

Otis said, "I ain't tellin you. For all I know, you'd burn the place down."

"Fuck, no. If it means you're movin out? Hell, I'd pitch in and help. I already give you my trash. You need boards, nails, hammer? Just let me know."

"I don't need a house. I need a car."

Larry grinned. "Now. You know. You move out, you'd miss me."

"Would not," Otis grunted.

"Would."

Otis stopped and caught his breath. Back to the subject.

"Old Mr. Daily got an old VW bus on his lawn. Hunnert dollars if I haul it off."

"Hunnert dollars, huh?" Larry appeared interested. "What's it need?"

Otis sighed. "Pret near everythin."

"You got money for parts?"

Otis knew what was at stake. "I got a job. Ol' man Grossman wants to make me full-time. I could pay you as I go."

“Shiit,” said Larry. “Engine. Tires. Transmission. I’d be ninety years old by the time you pay me off, specially workin for that ol skin flint. Probably pays you in pennies.”

And there it was. The irresistible force meets the immovable object.

Larry resumed eating his chicken wing. Then the next one. He appeared to have lost interest in the conversation.

Otis rose to go to his room for the night. Once again, his father had thwarted him.

“Geet her hauled,” said Larry. “I’ll have her done in a couple weeks.”

Otis smiled and started to thank him.

“It’s all right. You can pay me till I’m ninety. I’ll take yer money.” Larry returned Otis’s glance with a triumphant grin. “Hell, you owe me big time, anyway. What’s a few thousand dollars more?”

Otis stopped in his tracks. He looked at his father. His father, steely-eyed, looked back at him.

“Well, okay,” Otis sighed.

“How you gonna drive it?” said Larry.

“Like anyone else, just get in and go.”

Otis was tempted to share his secret; that he already knew how to drive. But he didn’t want to jinx his chances of buying the bus. He kept mum and played along.

“You got money for registration?”

Otis came up short.

“You need a license to drive. Someone to teach your sorry ass. And insurance. All that costs money.”

Otis felt the bricks pile on his back.

“Pay me as you go,” said Larry. “I’ll figure it out and get back to you. What Grossman pays you, you can pay me. Say half.”

Half of Otis’s meager paycheck. Otis groaned inwardly. Might as well not work. But if he didn’t work, he’d have to stay here, and that thought drove him to accept the deal.

“And talk to Dave,” he continued. “He’ll teach you how to use a stick.”

Dave Maples, Larry’s sometimes drinking buddy, who owned the Western Auto store in downtown Davis.

Otis wondered how he could fake learning to drive. That would be a challenge.

Otis moved slowly to his room and realized the cost of his deal and how, for the price of wheels, he had just made a devil’s bargain.

17.

It was a proud day for the Barner family when Otis was born. His father bragged to all his buddies that he had a son, someone to carry on the Barner name like his father and his granddad. They were both dead, but Larry felt satisfied that he had fulfilled a duty to his family.

When he first saw the boy laying with Nancy in their old house, he felt as if he possessed a great treasure. Nancy beamed at him, knowing how much it meant for Larry to have a son.

“We got ourselves a family,” she said.

“Yes, we do,” he answered and sat with Otis in his arms for a good hour in the nearby rocking chair.

It didn’t take long, though, for things to go sour.

Otis had some complications: breathing problems, colic, other things that made him cry endlessly.

They finally took him to a hospital where a doctor said Otis had lung issues and might even be mentally retarded from lack of oxygen to his poor little brain. Of course, in those days, that was bad news for a child, especially a child in a poor family.

The bills piled up because Otis required special medical care and the Barners didn't have health insurance.

After a couple of years, they were desperate to keep from being plowed under by their medical bills.

"What we gonna do?" said Nancy one night after Otis finally fell asleep.

Larry was drunk and not in a mood to be sympathetic.

"Do?" he said. "I can think of some things you do with a retarded kid. Would be more of a mercy than anything."

"He ain't retarded," said Nancy. "He's just a little slower than most."

"Yeah, like mud to a creek."

"Stop it," she cried. "He's our boy."

"He's your boy. Ain't none of mine."

Still, like good mountain folk, the Barners just steeled themselves and carried on. Nancy did the best she could and eventually Otis calmed down and turned into a happy kid, though he was slow to walk and talk, and he had a hard time keeping up with some of his cousins.

At age three, he finally said his first clear word.

"Hungry," he cried out in two slow syllables.

Larry looked at him and said, "Well, ain't that just dandy. Least after all this time, we finally know what he wants. Lord have mercy."

Nancy tried to shield him and give him encouragement and Otis responded with smiles and happy laughs.

Eventually he was diagnosed with astigmatism and nearsightedness and had to wear glasses. Another expense piled on top of the bills they were still paying off.

Larry owned his own car repair business and spent more time there than at home. Nancy suspected he was drinking and maybe running around on her. He certainly wasn't happy at home.

She wondered if she'd done something wrong, if Otis's developmental problems were somehow her fault. She wondered a lot of things about her small boy. Most of all she worried whether he'd make it to adulthood, and if he did, would Otis ever know that he was loved?

Her only source of encouragement was his chubby little hands that wrapped around her when she put him to bed at night. And the word "Mama" that he said to her.

"Mama, night," he would say and she would believe, just in that moment, that he knew and loved her. It was her one moment of solace in a short life of misery.

18.

It started innocently enough with an unexpected party invitation from Jenny Newberg.

“Hey, Otis,” she called out as she stopped him in the hallway.

Otis was a junior in high school with a long track record of being shunned. He was taken off-guard by her invitation. Jenny was slim, blond, and pretty as a picture. She always dressed nicely and seemed to wear clothing that set off her growing figure and blue eyes. Otis never imagined she would talk to him, let alone ask him to a party.

Otis turned to her, but said nothing. What could he say? She was a girl. He was Otis.

“Aren’t you gonna say hi?” she said in a sweet voice.

Otis was flummoxed. “Uh, hi,” he said compliantly.

“I came to give you something.” She offered him a note card. “Party at my house tonight. You should come.”

Otis blinked rapidly, his brain on overload.

“I-I-I don’t go to parties.”

“Why not?” she said as she stood a little closer and gave him a case of the warm fuzzies.

Otis debated with himself. This was not normal. He wondered why this invitation was being offered. Why now? He sensed a trick, or at least something in the universe gone off track.

“Well. Nobody’s ever asked me. I didn’t even know you knew me.”

“Well, now you know,” she said. “You got any idea where I live?”

“No.”

“324 Leaf Street. It’s right on the card. Be there at 8:00.”

She smiled, patted him on the shoulder, and walked away.

Otis was stunned. He turned the card in his hand and even smelled it to see if her scent had lingered. He put it in his pocket and walked to his next class. He thought about it the rest of the day.

—

Otis arrived a little late to the party. He had argued with himself the whole way there, whether he should go, why he had been asked, and if Jenny genuinely wanted him to be there.

Otis’s sixth sense suspected something. He had lost faith in people generally. In particular, the kids from Andrew Jackson High School had never shown him any kindness. So what had changed from yesterday to today?

When he did arrive, he was surprised to be welcomed by Jenny herself. What's more, when everybody gathered, there were only four people (not counting Otis) in the living room. Jenny Newberg. Jeremy Flynn. Ralph Caviglia. Dennis Watson. All members of the high school football team. Jenny was a cheerleader.

There were no adults.

"Where's your parents?" Otis asked.

"Oh, they're out of town," said Jenny. "We got the whole house to ourselves. Can do whatever we want."

She winked at him provocatively.

Otis realized he had stepped into a risky situation, especially given his history with Jeremy. He never ever wanted to be in the same room as Jeremy. Now his arch enemy stood only three feet from him. Bad news.

Otis started to walk out, but Jenny blocked his way.

"Where you going?" she pleaded. "You just got here."

Otis looked at her desperately. She was six inches from his face. Her blue eyes begged him to stay.

She was radiant in her light blue A-line dress, floral patterned, sleeveless, with a scooped neck and matching headband. The buttons down her chest clung to her figure like tiny pearls. She was the epitome of cute and Otis's heart began to bang.

She pouted at him. Flirted with him. He knew he was trapped. And then the drinking started.

Otis had never indulged in alcohol. His experience with Larry had colored his view of the habit. But, as usual, he wanted to be cooperative, and since everyone else had a bottle or a drink, he decided to give it a try.

It didn't take long for his head to spin and his stomach to churn. He had to excuse himself several times to upchuck in the bathroom.

"Somethin wrong, Otis?" said Jeremy as Otis returned to the party. Jeremy with that old familiar grin on his face. Jeremy, whom Otis suspected knew something that he didn't.

"Not feelin too good," Otis slurred. He held out his hand and balanced himself against a wall.

"Well, that's too bad." Still, Jeremy offered him another drink. Something sweet tasting. Something called a Rum and Coke.

"Here," he said cheerfully. "Try this. May help settle your stomach."

Otis kept at it until he collapsed on the floor of the living room. He had a dream that he was surrounded by four smiling ghostly faces, perhaps waiting for him to die. It was the last thing he remembered before waking up the following day.

When he came to, the sun was shining in the living room. He was sprawled on the floor. He called out, but no one answered. The sunshine hurt his eyes.

He immediately ran to the bathroom and puked up his guts. His head was pounding and his tongue felt swollen. It was the worst misery he had ever felt.

In a state of half-death, he walked home and spent the rest of the weekend in bed. He had a bad feeling. Not just because he had a hangover. He knew something else was up. It was just a matter of time before he figured out what that was. Whatever, it would not be something he was proud of. All weekend, he lived with constant dread. If it were up to him, he would never ever go back to school.

—

On Monday, as he walked to his first class, he noticed that students in the hall were staring at him and smiling.

What the hickledoo? he wondered.

By midmorning, all this unwanted attention, all these sideline glances started to wear on him.

Then he saw Jenny in the hallway and cringed. He tried to swerve around, but she stopped him with a greeting.

“Hey, Otis, did you have a good time at my party?”

Otis knew it was a loaded question. She was asking this pleasantly enough, but another more unpleasant reveal was coming.

“What happened?” he said. “I woke up and you weren’t there. Everybody was gone.”

“You were an animal,” she exclaimed. “I never knew you were so wild. Singing, dancing. Got a little touchy-feely with me there for a bit, but no big deal. It was all in good fun. So, eventually you just passed out and we couldn’t wake you up. We went out for breakfast the next day. You were still out, so we had to leave you to sleep it off. Sorry.”

Otis braced himself. She was not sorry. She was smiling.

“Want to see?” she said slyly. She pulled out a pile of Kodak Polaroids and started to sort through them.

“See here,” she said. “You got no clothes on. How come that happened?”

One by one, she riffled through pictures of Otis in various nude poses. She crimped her lips and gave him a curious eye.

“You act like this at home?”

Otis was stunned. More so because he had been right about the party but had failed to trust his instincts. Now that he knew, this was the price he paid. Never. Never. Never. Trust these people. Why had he done it? It was Jenny. The once in a lifetime chance to be with her.

“Y-y-you are mean,” said Otis as he held back a sob and struggled to keep from breaking down in front of her.

“Mean?” she said in mock protest. “I’m the one who invited you. You’re the one who took off your clothes. How is that mean?”

“No,” he responded. “I-I didn’t.”

“Well, who did, then? The tooth fairy?”

Otis grabbed for the pictures but she was too quick.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “These are mine. You want some, go get your own. Maybe ask some of the other kids. They might let you borrow. But I’m keeping these.”

She smiled and winked. “Permanent record. My night with Otis. Good thing you didn’t try to feel me up. Might have had to call the law.”

She tapped him on the nose with the pictures and walked away.

Otis knew what was coming, but he would never forget. In his mind, he stored those pictures like information in a database. He remembered who took them. He remembered who participated. He would never forgive any of them either. Never. In the whole of his life, these pictures were permanently seared in his memory banks.

19.

Otis collected comic books. Even as an adult, he was an avid fan of The Hulk, Flash, and Wonder Woman. The latter because she was extremely pretty, super powerful, and had long black hair. He thought if he could marry a woman like her, he would never have to worry again about being teased or tormented.

On Tuesdays, when the new comics came in, he would take his afternoon break from Grossman's and hang out at Grady's Pharmacy. Mr. Grady usually chased kids out for browsing without buying, but he made an exception for Otis. Maybe out of pity. Maybe thinking that at least he was reading.

Otis had a lot of daydreams during these afternoons. Away from work. Away from anyone's prying eyes. Away from his father, Larry. Just him and the comics. He was a slow reader, but he liked the pictures and sometimes made up his own stories as he looked through them.

And so, one hot August afternoon in Grady's Pharmacy, Otis got lost in one of his dreams.

Otis's particular super power was what he called "super shield." If anyone tried to attack him, they would thump up against his invisible barrier, a barrier that covered him head to foot like a glass dome. It also applied to bullets, fire, and speeding automobiles. Also fathers and bullies and any villain who might try to sneak up on him. Nothing could penetrate Otis's super shield. Whatever the impact, the shield would not budge.

His favorite T.V. star from the 1970s was Susan Dey from *The Partridge Family*. He thought she was quite cute and a good singer. His favorite song from the show was "I Think I Love You."

As he walked down Macon Street, he spotted Susan being harassed by some strange man who looked oddly enough like his father, Larry. Otis was confused at first. After all, why would his father be out in public bothering Susan Dey? His father rarely left the house these days, rarely stayed sober, and had no acquaintance with such a famous star.

Otis in his dream was tall and good looking, dressed in bell bottoms, a rainbow paisley shirt, and a pair of shoes that looked like they were built in the next century. Sleek. Red. They made him run fast.

He saw the man try to force Susan into a car against her will.

"Help," she screamed. But no one would help her. No one that is except Otis.

Otis ran to the car and confronted the stranger, who more and more did look like his father. Red headed. Nasty looking with a scar on his cheek. But this man wore black clothes and had a mustache. Who knows? Maybe it was his father's brother.

Otis approached and called out, "Stop!"

"Beat it, kid," said the stranger without giving him so much as a glance.

Stepping next to Susan, Otis stood all of his six-foot-four and pulled her next to his side. Then he launched his super shield power.

When the man fought back, he was surprised, to say the least. Super shield? Who had ever heard of such a thing? It was, after all, the only super power of its kind.

"Leave her alone," Otis commanded.

The man pulled a gun. Susan saw it and begged Otis to run. But Otis knew his power and was not the least bit afraid. The man fired. The bullet bounced off his super shield and pierced the side of the man's car. A big car. Maybe a classic Lincoln Continental. Black.

The thing about Otis's power was that he could use it while walking, which meant that if he used it as leverage, he could push people out of the way. He proceeded to do just that. He put his arm around Susan and pushed the man out into the street. Out into oncoming traffic, which in Otis's dream, was speeding up and down Macon Street.

The man resisted, but it was futile. Suddenly a bus came flying out of nowhere. Otis pushed just slightly again. The bus flashed by and took the man with it. Straight between its large commercial headlights. It never stopped, either. Just kept going on its scheduled route. But for sure, the man was dead and Otis had saved Susan from an awful fate.

“Oh,” said Susan. “Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Otis,” he said casually and gave her a friendly grin.

She flashed her grey-blue eyes and smiled that famous smile with the adorable little overbite. “You’re really brave, Otis. How can I thank you?”

Otis gave this some thought. He knew what he wanted—her hand in marriage. But he wasn’t sure she would be willing to go that far, even though he had just saved her life. She was after all, a major celebrity and probably had a boyfriend who was rich and famous. Still, he had to say something. What could he request from Susan Dey on the spur of the moment?

“Sing ‘I Think I Love You,’” he said.

And she did. By herself. Just for him. The whole song. And he thought maybe, just maybe she really meant it.

20.

Tape Recordings of Otis Barber:

Uh. Yeah. I got a little bit of good news today. I was standin in the drink aisle and who should come by? Audrey.

I always get nervous when she's around. But she helped me finish unloadin sodas and we talked a little. She was real nice.

I asked her favorite color. She said blue. "Mine too," I said.

I think blue is the perfect color. If I actually had a house, a normal house, I would paint it blue like the sky.

I think I feel colors. Don't ask me why. Some colors cheer me up. Some just scare me. It's like I can see inside the color, like it has its own mind and I can tell what it's thinkin.

Specially purple. There's somethin inside of purple that sort of freaks me out. I always feel like when I see purple, something scary is starin back at me.

I like green cause it always reminds me of spring and the way the mountains seem to cheer up after a long

winter. Like puttin on a pretty dress to go out. A girl walks down a stairway gettin ready for a prom. Spring feels that way to me.

Audrey's kind of like that. She just knows how to cheer me up, whatever color she wears. Not many people do that to me. Not many people spend time talkin. I get it. I don't talk much either, but Audrey seems to get it out of me. Don't know how. Maybe she's got some kind of super power in her, like Wonder Women. Only she don't use too much power. Just the right amount to get me talkin.

Anyway, I'm just goin on here.

I still wonder if she has a boyfriend. She once told me "no," but a girl like that, no boyfriend? Lord, can't picture it. If it were me, and it is me, I would ask her to marry me right then and there. Wouldn't let someone else get the chance to snatch her away.

But what kind of craziness is this? Me, Otis, askin her to marry me?

Still, the way she talks to me and is always friendly, I do wonder if she at least likes me. Maybe just a little?

She sure seems nice.

21.

In his senior year of high school, Otis would bring his little portable radio to his castle and listen to WGLN, a locally owned FM station out of Gallatin. Otis loved their music, the blend of folk, country, and rock and roll that took the U.S. by storm in the late '60s and early '70s. Neil Young, Emmylou Harris, the Eagles, Linda Ronstadt, Waylon Jennings, and Pure Prairie League. In particular, he liked the gritty song by the Nashville-based band Bob Crow and the River: "Flying."

Otis identified with the song and the country-rock two-step stomp and the loud guitar. The words seemed to match Otis's thoughts:

*I look at my life, sometimes I want to scream
but like it or not, I've still got to breathe.
It may be a while till I give up the ghost
but it don't keep me from wanting what I love the most.*

He liked the chords, especially the bass. He could sing the bass pattern by heart without any drums or guitar.

People thought it rather strange when they heard him. A kid humming something they couldn't recognize. A tune without words. Was it a tune? Was he mumbling? They had no idea what he was doing. But Otis heard it all in his head and he shared it exactly as the song progressed.

In his fort, when the song came on, he would run to the center of his scarecrow dream house and start what he called the "Otis dance." Otis had built himself a small stage just for this purpose. He had a whole choreography mapped out in detail right down to the final proclamation, when he would cry out like a preacher from a pulpit:

I'm a free man in a blue sky flying high.

He imagined his house was the door to that blue sky and that someday he would build it high enough to touch the sun.

"I'm a gonna build it," he chanted with a hammer in his hand and a bunch of old rusted nails, pieces of tin, plywood, and old boards. Pound, pound. Assemble. Dream big.

Then he would stop to make sure no one was listening. He didn't want anyone to know what he was doing. He didn't want anyone to make fun of him.

"I'm a gonna build it," he would say quietly to the empty trees. "And it's gonna be a beaut. I'm a gonna build

my castle in the sky, climb up to heaven. Yep. Yep. I'm a gonna build it. Be a free man in a blue sky flyin high."

And when it was finished, Otis imagined that he would sit on his throne, hum his tune, and find his happy place. A man without trouble, without torment, without anyone to call him dumb or harass him for being Otis. A man who could be himself in his own house and his own world.

His fort became his childhood and his dream world, and it continued throughout his adulthood until that one fateful day when Otis made a decision, *the decision*, about what to do with his life, how exactly to be *a free man in a blue sky flying high*.

22.

Jumpin' Jack's, Davis local watering hole, featured a pinball machine. A novelty item to be sure from back in the '50s, but for Otis, it was his favorite form of entertainment. Placed strategically in the back, he would finish his shift on Saturday at Grossman's, then sit at a rear table nursing a beer. He always sat by himself, never in a hurry, and just waited.

All the customers knew the deal. Otis would let anyone play for as long as they wanted. When there were no more takers, he would lumber over and begin. Then everyone knew. The machine now belonged to Otis.

Otis was good at it. For someone as clumsy and uncoordinated as he was in sports, his reflexes were sharp and his aim better than anyone in Davis. He would run up scores that no one on this planet would ever beat. It was, for Otis, his moment in the sun, and everyone in this small bar conceded his prowess. Everyone needed something to be good at. Otis discovered his talent and the patrons of Jumpin' Jack's courteously stepped aside. Some were secretly proud of his accomplishments. A man who never

bothered anyone, did his work, kept to himself. This was his time, and most folks just let him be.

Tonight, Otis was well into his game when Dave Van Owen came into the bar. Dave had been a classmate of Otis in high school, a friend of his antagonist Jeremy Flynn, and, like Jeremy, Dave enjoyed harassing Otis whenever possible.

Ordering a beer, he kept a low profile as he edged toward the corner where Otis played like a man possessed.

Otis was about to post a new scoring record when Dave shouted, "Otis. Watch out!"

Otis flinched and ducked. His hands left the paddles. The ball fell harmlessly in the gutter and his game was over.

"I got next," said Dave. He stepped up to take the paddles.

Otis just stared at him.

"What, four eyes?" Dave said. Dave, once a proud athlete, had been ravaged by drink and cigarettes, but he still considered himself Otis's superior. He pushed back his thinning blond hair stretched long into a pony tail, stuck out his chin, and gave him his best warrior eyes.

Otis never flinched. Nor did he give up his game position.

"You willing to take me on?" Dave challenged. "We can go outside if you want. I don't mind kickin your ass."

Otis ignored him. He took a quarter out of his pocket and began another game.

The audience oooed a bit as grins broke out across the tavern. Dave's face turned several shades of purple.

"Hey, dick face. I'm talkin to you," he shouted so that everyone in the joint could hear.

What he didn't see just as the ball was launched was a full roundhouse from Otis that came lightning fast and hit him square in the nose. It sent him lurching backwards over a couple of tables and onto the floor. The smack of the punch was like the sound of a ball hit off a baseball bat. Immediately the patrons scattered to the sides. Without buying expensive tickets, they had inherited ringside seats to a major brawl.

Otis never missed a beat and continued to play.

Dave lay there for a minute or two. His nose bleeding. His dignity punctured. He wobbled up and prepared to go after Otis, but a voice from behind spoke first. It was Jack Delwin, the owner. The so noted Jumpin' Jack.

"Can't you see the man is busy?" he said as he weaved around the upturned furniture and stood in front of Dave. Jack. Six-foot-four and all of it muscle. Equal in all areas to Dave. He drank little and worked out regularly with weights. As well as being the owner of the bar, he was also his own bouncer.

Dave waved his arms in the air in protest. "You gonna let him get away with assault?"

Jack just stood like a metal gate.

“Yeah. I think I will tonight,” he said. “Seems to me you had it comin.” He scanned the patrons of the bar who waited patiently for the next act. “I don’t see anyone else who objects.”

Dave eyed him up and down and realized the odds weren’t in his favor. Already humiliated, he didn’t see the need to be tossed out the door. That would have deflated his dignity beyond repair.

“I ain’t comin back here, never,” he threatened. As if his drink money all by its lonesome helped shore up the bar’s economy.

“That’s probably a good idea,” said Jack, “specially on Saturday night when Otis plays pinball.”

“You don’t want my business?”

“Not if you intend to annoy my other customers. Man deserves to drink and play pinball in peace. I ain’t got no beef with that, and I don’t like other people who do. So, go find yourself another hole, if that be yer choosin.”

“He ain’t no man,” Dave spit out.

“He ain’t the one with the bloody nose,” said Jack, who gave Dave a wicked grin.

Dave was whupped. He slowly turned, looked at the other unsympathetic customers, and left. Everyone righted the furniture as best they could and returned to their original seats. Everyone that is, except Otis, who continued to run up the score.

The bar returned to normal drinking and conversing. Some murmured among themselves about the lesson learned tonight: *Lord have mercy*, they chuckled under their breathes. *Don't mess with Otis when he plays pinball.*

And Jack was right. No one objected to that in the least.

23.

Nancy Barner turned ill suddenly. Probably on account of the old drafty house in which they lived. It was November 1960 and they had struggled for years just to keep food on the table. To make matters worse, it had turned cold and rainy. The house only had a single stove for warmth. They all slept together in the house's master bedroom just to stay warm.

One night, Nancy just fell ill. Larry, drunk as usual, didn't pay her much mind until he woke up the next morning and found her dead. Cause of death listed on her certificate: Natural causes. Actual cause of death: Being poor.

Her passing left Larry with the responsibility to bury his wife and tend to a small boy for whom he had no affection. If there was stress before, his burden had suddenly multiplied.

A week after her death, he sat at his table and looked at the boy playing on the floor. Otis was dirty from inattention and hungry from lack of food, but he was used to being alone, so he didn't complain.

“What the hell am I gonna do with you?” Larry murmured. Otis just looked at him and played with some blocks.

Then he surprised his father by growling back in a deep voice: “What the hell am I gonna do with you?”

Larry was astounded at how it sounded like him. It shook him a bit to think this was his boy and he would grow up to be just another Larry. Only fatter and blinder. This thought disturbed Larry even more.

He rose, grabbed the boy by the stomach, and carried him under his right arm out to the old barn and shop he kept as his personal garage.

In the middle of that barn, he sat him on the floor and walked back to the house. There he sat silently for several hours, until the house turned dark.

Larry didn't want any lights. He didn't want any sound. He just wanted to be swallowed up into nothingness.

Finally, Larry came to his senses and realized what he'd done. He turned on the kitchen light, fixed himself some dinner, then went out to the barn, hoping that maybe Otis had crawled off into the forest. Maybe animals would get him and Larry would be off the hook.

Larry went out to collect Otis. Slowly, he traipsed across the driveway and stopped at the open door. He stared in the dark garage. He listened for any sound, but none was forthcoming. His hope rose. Also his guilt. Who would believe him if he said the boy just crawled off and died?

“Goddamn it,” he cursed. “Ain’t no luck in my life.”

A statement about his state of mind and his belief that God and the universe just stood off and let bad things happen to him.

Reluctantly, he turned on the old light bulb he used for his workshop.

There Otis lay asleep with a tool in his hand, some kind of socket wrench. Larry couldn’t tell right off if it was U.S. or Metric, and what difference did it make anyway?

Next to Otis was a small assembly of some sort, bolts and pieces of metal hooked together in a symmetrical pattern. How had that come to be? Otis apparently had shuffled around the garage in the dark and found the right parts and the right tool. Larry was flabbergasted.

Larry realized then and there. Otis wasn’t retarded. He was simply different. But different how? And how could Larry understand it? That was the part that left him baffled.

With the light on, Otis woke up, smiled, and held his new toy. Then he said in the same deep voice: “What the hell am I gonna do with this?” Then he laughed, as if he found his father amusing.

Larry cut loose with a small grin. He had to admit. The boy had him down. “Funny man,” he said.

Otis repeated back in the same voice: “Funny man.”

Larry dared not say anything else lest it come back to haunt him. His own talking parrot. Blood on blood.

Otis held out his arms and Larry bent over to pick him up. He walked back to the house and sighed. Then he put Otis to bed on the side where Nancy used to lay.

As he sat back at the table, minus the one woman who understood both Otis and Larry, he grimaced at the loss. Nonetheless, Larry knew at that point, like it or not, they were in this for the long haul.

24.

Otis was halfway through his shift at Grossman's. Fourth of July was just around the corner and there was excitement in the air about upcoming fireworks. Otis was thinking about his own plans for the Fourth. For once, he had the day off. He thought of Audrey and his desire to bring her to Audreyville.

As he finished bagging groceries for elderly Mrs. Lafollette, he noticed a familiar face walk through the front door. Jenny Newberg, now Mrs. Jenny Williams. Though recently divorced, she had done well for herself in a choice of a husband and was now firmly planted in a nice mountain house on the outskirts of town. Far from any social circles that were familiar to Otis. She was, as they say, living the good life.

As she passed, she called out, "Well, hey there, Otis."

Otis recognized her, but he did not want to talk to her. Not now. Not ever. Though it had been years since high school and the horrible prank she had pulled on him, he had not forgotten. Not for a minute. The time that had passed since then seemed but a moment to him. Even if it had been nearly nine years, the memory was still painful,

She stopped in her tracks and stared at him.

“Not friendly today?”

Otis noticed that Audrey was watching. She stood by her cash register and took in the whole scene.

Otis turned to Jenny and for a moment, they were eye to eye.

“Guess you forgot me, didn’t you?” she said playfully.

Jenny usually shopped at the newer store that had just opened the next town over. A Byrd’s Grocery Store that had become popular in nearby Ash Grove. Apparently, she was here for a few quick items. Maybe to stock up for the Fourth.

She gave him her best smile. Was this friendly? Otis thought not.

“Yeah, how time flies,” she said. “But we had fun, didn’t we?”

Otis did not answer.

“You still mad?” she said with a sly grin.

Otis turned around, faced a cashier, and waited for another customer to be checked through.

Audrey spoke. “Otis, you all right?”

“No,” he said.

Jenny frowned for a moment, then decided to finish her business in the store. She walked away as if Otis had been just a momentary diversion.

Otis did not intend to wait around and take the chance that he would be the one to bag her groceries.

"I'll be in the back," he said to Margaret the cashier.

Margaret noticed a strange expression on Otis's face. His crooked glasses seemed to mirror terror, rage, and sorrow in his owlish eyes.

"Sure, Otis," she said. "Go ahead. It's slow. Take your break."

But Otis had already started to walk away.

By chance, as he headed for the back-storage area, they crossed paths again. Jenny looking for milk. Otis looking for escape.

She caught his eye. "You following me?" she said flirtatiously. "I know you like me but . . ."

Otis pulled up and stood straight. He turned and glared at her. "No. I don't."

"Don't what?" she answered.

"Like you."

"Really?"

"No."

"Not ever?"

"No."

"Well, you came to my party."

Otis maintained his silence.

"Gee, Otis," she said. "I'm disappointed."

Otis decided to head into the back and sit on some unpacked boxes of groceries. He had his hands on the door when she spoke.

"I still have the pictures, you know. They're kind of funny. You think people here would like them?"

Otis stood with his back to her. She could not see his expression. Eyes shut tight. Red-faced.

"I'll bring them next time," she offered. "Might be fun to remember old times."

Otis turned slowly and walked up to her. Though his body lumbered, his shoulders were straight and his eyes sliced like knives.

"Don't. Do. That."

"Why not?" she joked. "You don't think people would want to know what you did at my house?"

A switch clicked. Power surged. A persona emerged previously unknown, even to Otis. It transformed a hulking, shy man into someone willing to strike back. Dangerous. He stood eye to eye and leaned into her face.

"If you do," he said clearly, "I'll kill you."

For the first time, Jenny looked concerned. "Otis?"

He turned and walked away, through the storage door, into the back of the store.

Jenny started to shake. She dropped the pound of butter in her hand. Then she decided to go to the police. But who would believe her? Gentle Otis who hardly said boo to people and wouldn't hurt a fly? They would probably just laugh her out of the Sheriff's office.

Then she decided maybe it was best if she just left the store and never came back.

But the damage was done. Like it or not, she had resurrected Otis's humiliation. A memory that should have stayed buried.

Now Otis had been reminded of one of the worst moments in his life. It was not a moment he would soon forget. In the back of the store, an idea began to take shape.

25.

Otis had thought long and hard about today. Now as he sat in a chair in Audreyville on this lovely Fourth of July, his heart was racing.

He had decided to give Audrey a royal welcome, and what better way to do that than get dressed in a royal outfit? And so, he had worked for several months to secure the kind of clothing that a king might wear. It was a bit odd, made up from Otis's imagination. A purple bathrobe. A black pair of running pants. A crown that he had ordered from a catalog. A pair of leather sandals.

But the pride and joy of it all was a sword that he had searched and paid for. A genuine Japanese Samurai sword. Or at least the owner of the pawn shop in Cookeville had claimed it was real. For \$150. It was sharp. Otis had sliced several watermelons to test it. Clean as a whistle.

Now, as Otis sat by himself in his house and donned his kingly garb, he wondered if she would come. He wondered if he could convince her to come. After all this time working together, they had a good friendship. Even if she just agreed to come and visit, that would be something. A strand of hope surged through him.

“Will she? Won’t she?” said Otis to the birds in the trees. He chose to believe she would.

She must come to see his palace. If she just knew the real man, she would have no choice but to fall in love. If she saw him do his Bob Crow dance, how could she not be impressed?

He made up his mind to try. A dream was only a dream unless you made it happen in real life, and no dream happened without effort. This was his dream. That she would understand him as the real-life Otis. The man who built Audreyville.

He rose with a plan in his head and hope in his heart. But his plan was not without risk. It had to be executed with courage and conviction. It had parts to it. It had scores to settle. It had a story to tell. He would have to expose who he was to the town and to those who had made fun of him all these years. It was the rise of Otis to his own peculiar coronation. As a king, if you must, and kings had to deliver justice before they could claim the throne.

So, dressed in his kingly garb, encouraged by his genuine sword, Otis set out in his royal bus on a mission that would change his life forever.

26.

Otis was a great admirer of birds. He could sit for hours in his little fort and watch them fly. He dreamed himself of flying. He could not imagine any better way to be free than taking to the air just to ride the wind. He often wished he *was* a bird.

On this spring day, many birds were returning from their winter habitats. By now, Otis had completed the top perch in his house. It allowed him to scan the countryside and keep track of the local flocks. Hawks, eagles, ospreys. Geese, swans, ducks. Blackbirds, finches, sparrows. A pair of mourning doves had occupied his oak tree with their nest for the last several years, and of course, he welcomed the songs of the pesky mockingbird.

Otis knew them all. His memory was excellent and he made himself a list of all the local birds so he could identify them both visually and by their sounds. He sometimes went to the library and looked at pictures so he could remember them by their proper names. He even learned to imitate some of their calls.

Today, binoculars in hand, he had seen a few of the more colorful species. A redheaded woodpecker. A scarlet tanager. An Indigo bunting.

He thought to himself of the superheroes who could fly. If he had that power, what kind of costume would he wear? How fast could he go? How high could he fly?

He found himself drifting off.

—

From Turbo's secret fort atop Hard Scratch Hill, a call for help came over his high-powered radio. A comet was headed straight for Nashville. One of the largest ever witnessed by scientists. So powerful, it might take out a large portion of Nashville and central Tennessee, including the small town of Davis.

Turbo listened to the radio and calculated how he might help. He pulled out some maps and did some quick math. With his speed, he might be able to swing the comet out of Earth's orbit and into outer space.

Turbo was in a bright red costume with a lightning bolt across the front. It covered every inch of his body. From his hood extended a yellow pair of wings. He wore a gleaming pair of gold shoes.

He took a quick moment to see if he could spot the comet. Comet Haleon it was called. As he peered up, his Turbo phone went off. It was the President of the United

States, President Baxter, for whom Turbo had voted in the last election. Turbo answered his phone.

“Yes, sir,” said Turbo. They had a brief conversation and Turbo hung up. The President taken a few moments to offer words of encouragement. Now it was time to get to work.

On his perch across the room was his traveling companion, Sonic, a Peregrine Falcon, the fastest animal in the world. Sonic knew something was up and gave a short screech. Turbo put on his air suit. Then he quickly dressed Sonic in his own falcon suit with fitted wings and tiny air tanks. They would need to work together to save the Earth.

When he was done, Turbo said, “Right, Sonic. We’ve got work to do.”

And off they flew into the upper atmosphere.

Turbo carried a weapon he had designed, a gun that would send out a lightweight cable. The cable was designed to extend fifty light years if needed and was so flexible it could turn on a dime. Together Turbo and Sonic planned to wrap the cable around Haleon and turn it away. But the comet was extremely hot and corralling it would take a lot of precision.

Turbo had been doing calculations on this plan before he left. In his other life, he was a great mathematician and astronomer at Vanderbilt University. Now he had to put all his talent and skills to work to save Tennessee.

Turbo fired the gun and a cable shot out 6 feet. He attached a metal alloy caribiner to the end. Then he attached the caribiner to Sonic's suit. Sonic hovered and prepared to fly at Turbo's instruction.

Turbo flew backwards at Mach 4, roughly 3,000 mph, with the cable unreeling in his hand. As he approached the upper edge of Haleon, he circled around the comet. This was the tricky part. Flying near the heat and around the rough edges of the comet without getting burned. He needed to surround the comet with the cable.

"3, 2, 1," he counted and swung right. "3, 2, 1," he counted again and made another right. Now he had to hurry. If he waited too long, Sonic would be in the comet's dangerous path.

Hurling at Mach 4 again he spotted Sonic bravely waiting for him.

"Sonic," he called through his space radio. "When I count, you go right and I'll go left. We'll cross each other and squeeze this comet until it slows down."

Again, Turbo counted, "3, 2, 1. Now!"

Turbo and Sonic crossed the lines. Turbo felt the cable tighten. Then he came to a sudden halt and pulled hard. He wondered if he had asked Sonic to do too much, if the falcon had enough strength to hold on tight.

"Pull, Sonic, pull," cried Turbo.

They both strained against the strength of the comet. For a moment, Turbo felt his speed slip backwards. But he pulled harder. He hoped Sonic was holding his own.

Suddenly, he felt some give. The comet had slowed. Then he felt the cable loosen. He turned to see what had happened.

Haleon had stopped and was now floating in space. He did some quick calculations in the small computer in his suit. Mathematical figures flashed across his face mask. Turbo decided that a small pull to the left would move the comet's orbit away from the Earth.

"Hold on, Sonic," Turbo said over the radio. "This time, we're going to pull in the same direction. I'll join you and we'll work together."

Turbo flew next to Sonic.

"Easy now. Just a little one. 3, 2, 1, pull. Yep, that's just right. Good boy, Sonic. I think we're done here."

The Earth had been saved. Nashville and Central Tennessee had been saved. Turbo took satisfaction that he had done his job and saved the lives of thousands of people. Innocent people who could go about their lives while Turbo kept watch.

When he reeled in the cable and attached the gun back to his waist, Turbo and Sonic watched the comet slowly, safely move in a direction away from the Earth.

Back in the hideout, Sonic was given an extra helping of fresh chicken as a reward for a fine job.

Turbo answered the emergency phone. He knew the President was calling to congratulate him.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “Next week? Of course, I’ll be happy to visit your office. And yes, I’ll bring Sonic.”

He sat back in his chair and smiled. “It’s good to be fast,” he said to Sonic.

Sonic screeched in agreement.

27.

Tape Recordings of Otis Barner:

Well. Today was my birthday. I'm 26-years-old.

I got such a nice surprise. A card from Audrey. I didn't even know she knew it *was* my birthday. Now how bout that?

No one else remembered. Not even my daddy.

Fact, no one's remembered my birthday in years. Can't remember the last time *I* celebrated.

So, I'm readin here. The card, it says:

Happy birthday. Another year older. Hope you remembered, cause I spent money to buy this damn card. Don't waste it.

(Otis chuckling): I thought it was kinda funny.

AND. She give me another Hershey bar. I think she knows they're my favorite.

Lord, I wish she was my girl. I would show her my house and her picture on the wall.

But anyway. I got the candy bar. Now all I need is a cake. Course, I could buy one, but homemade is the best. Somethin with strawberries in it, and chocolate frostin.

Gadzooks, I would eat it all in one sitting, grow so fat I wouldn't be able to walk.

Course I'm near that now, but it's my birthday. So what?

Yeah, a birthday all right, but I got no one to celebrate with. I wonder if this is gonna be my life when I get old.

I dream of Audrey. Guess I got the bug bad. Got to work up the courage if I'm gonna do somethin about it. Yeah. Like I would ever. Like she would ever want to marry me.

But, still, I think about it. If I had my choice, I sure as tootin would marry her. No doubt.

But she got to choose as well.

Ain't no math I could use to calculate those odds.

Might as well be livin on Mars.

Or, just sittin in my house like I am now.

Wish I could invite her.

(Otis sighs): I sure am lonesome.

(Pause): Hickledoo. Happy birthday to me.

28.

Larry Barner was in for the night. Sitting alone in his ramshackle two-bedroom house, he was not inclined to celebrate anything that had to do with the Fourth of July. But he was inclined to drink, and he was well into a fifth of Jack Daniels as the sun set.

He wasn't expecting company. Otis had moved out a couple of years ago after Larry had fired his gun at him. Larry was on his own. More and more, he had left his little car repair service closed and become a recluse. Tonight was no exception.

He occupied his favorite spot at the kitchen table where he toasted to himself and to all the ghosts in his life. They were all he had left. Some pictures on the walls. Faint memories of a different time when people wanted his company. No more. Everyone had forsaken him.

He was into another shot when he heard a noise outside. It sounded like Otis's van. That clattering piston sound from the air-cooled engine.

He stood up, wobbly, and proceeded to walk out the front. His mind was cluttered and his senses were

inebriated. If it was Otis, he was ready to give him a piece of his mind.

Otis stepped out of his VW and walked up to Larry.

Larry looked at him as if he had just stepped off a space ship. For good reason. Otis had dressed in a costume. Purple robe. Crown. Sandals. Plus one hell of a long sword. Was this his son? He thought it might be. Then again, it might not.

“What are you?” he slurred.

“I’m king of Audreyville,” said Otis, standing proudly with his sword planted.

“What?”

“Never mind. I come to ask you somethin.”

“Where you been all this time?” Larry inquired.

“Doesn’t matter. I came to ask a favor.”

Otis looked nervous. But this was not his regular nervous. This was about something else.

“Really?” said Larry, already convinced that he would say *no* regardless of the ask. “You been gone all this time and now you want a favor? Ha. Go ahead. Ask. See what answer you get.”

“I came . . . to borrow your car.”

“Whaaaat?” said Larry, his speech deteriorating. His balance tipped him like an old fence post.

Otis didn’t budge, but he did point a sword at Larry, then swung it slowly toward the old garage.

Larry stared at him blankly. Then his face brightened. "Ah, you want my Mustang." Larry's pride and joy. Even living like a drunken pauper, he had scrimped and saved to restore a '68 Mustang GT 350, red with white paneling on each side. Convertible. Mag tires. Spoked rims. It was under a tarp in the garage. Rarely driven these days since Larry spent most of his time drinking. The thought of driving rarely occurred to him. But the thought of Otis driving his baby had *never* occurred to him.

"Fuck you," he exploded. "You ain't touchin that car. I fight you if you think you gonna take my car. Nooooo way."

Otis stirred. "It's just for tonight."

The anger swirled in Otis. All he had endured with Larry. Now, on the night when he needed help, his own father was being his usual ornery self. An obstacle in the way of Otis's plan.

"Hell, no," Larry slurred with an evil grin. "You got yer own car, which I done helped you buy. Don't bother thankin me." He looked at Otis curiously. "What you need it for?"

Otis was unsure if he should answer this question. He suspected how his father would react. But he realized he needed to be brave. This was his chance to impress Audrey and nothing would stand in his way, especially his father.

"I need . . . to . . . pick up . . . Audrey."

"Audrey? Who's Audrey?"

“S-s-she’s a girl I know.”

“Girl?” Larry guffawed. “You mean a woman? You want to pick up a woman? Like on a date? Lover’s lane? Kissy kissy? Get yourself a poke and a plug?”

They both stood and stared at each other.

“Ain’t no woman ever gonna touch you, retard,” Larry snorted. “The closest you get to ass and pussy is goin down to Cookeville to buy you a night. Even then, I bet they charge you an arm and a leg. Retard tax.”

Otis felt the anger rise. Maybe in part because his father spoke the blunt truth. Maybe because he felt a sense of betrayal. A father was supposed to help his son achieve his dream, but Larry was pouring cold water on the idea, as he always did. When it came to Otis, Larry was a dream killer.

Larry’s eyes were defiant.

“I wouldn’t give you a bicycle with one broke wheel,” he said belligerently.

Then he started laughing so hard he fell backwards, rolled in the dirt, and kept laughing. He didn’t see Otis approach. It hadn’t occurred to him that the sword Otis carried was real. Not until Otis had the tip of the blade positioned at his throat.

“You are *not* my real father,” Otis declared. The point of the sword tickled Larry’s Adam’s apple.

Larry lay silently, unsure if his son would go through with the deed. Otis had a deranged look in his eye. He sounded mad enough to plunge the point straight into his

body or cut off his head off with a mighty swing. Larry could see the blind anger. He knew his life hung in the balance. The question Larry considered: How much did he really care? Turned out, Larry cared a lot.

“Well, hell, son, you want it that bad, take the keys,” he said. He loved the car, but it wasn’t worth his life. He could always find another one. “You know where they’re at, in the kitchen.” He pointed toward the house.

Otis stood solid, the sword poised. Then he lowered it. He hovered over his father like an angel of death.

“Geesh, Dad. That’s all I wanted,” he said. Then he bent down and looked him in the eyes. “You know, you, you, you’re gonna die alone some day,” he declared, “you miserable old bastard.”

Otis walked to the garage and pulled the cover off the Mustang. He put the sword in the back and retrieved a can of gasoline. He walked into the house, poured the gasoline over the dining room, lit a match, and set it on fire. Then he pulled the Mustang’s keys off the wall and walked back to the garage.

Before he eased into the car, he said, “You and I are done.”

Otis slowly fell into the bucket seat of the Mustang as the house blazed. It was with satisfaction that he put the keys in the ignition, backed out of the garage, and slowly drove away with his arm proudly perched on the window frame.

He was going to find his woman. He was going to bring her back to Audreyville. She would ride in the royal Mustang like the queen she was. Together, they would make a royal procession, and no one, not even his father, would stand in their way.

“Here’s the keys to the bus,” he said as he drove by slowly and threw them at Larry. “Case you need a ride.”
As if, tonight, he had declared his independence.

29.

Otis felt the wind in his hair as he drove through Davis. The heavy humidity rushed past his face. The last remnants of the Tennessee sunset glowed on the edges of the hills.

Something had occurred to him as he left the house. This idea that he was an adult now and no longer in need of his family's security. The speed of the Mustang accelerated his escape from his past and pushed him forward into a brand-new future. He basked in the power of the engine that had launched his freedom from his father.

He began to hum the bass lines for "Flying." The image he had was of someone climbing up from the bondage of Earth to a higher existence. That seemed to mirror Otis's feeling at this exact moment.

On the other hand, he was going to find Audrey. Eventually he would end up on her doorstep. He would take the risk of asking her for . . . something. Not clear yet what, but something that was deeply personal. Something to do with love and honor. Something that Otis had never thought possible.

“I’m a free man in a blue sky flyin high,” he sang into the teeth of the wind.

As he drove through Davis, he passed Deputy Jeremy Flynn headed in the opposite direction. He waved at Flynn and hit the accelerator as if daring Flynn to chase him

Feeling like one of the birds he loved to watch, the heat of the evening buoyed him up. The wind of the speeding car gave him wings.

He felt like he had waited for this forever, waited without knowing what he was waiting for, but now, having arrived, he was sure this was where he was supposed to be. Otis was about to claim his royal destiny.

“I’m a free man in a blue sky flyin high,” he sang a little louder and pressed a little harder on the accelerator. He was whizzing through town, against the law, but Flynn had not taken the dare and there was no one else to stop him, and even if they tried, he doubted they could catch him.

For the first time in his life, Otis knew what it was like to fly, and tonight he would race into the arms of the one he loved. At least that was his dream.

But first, some unfinished business.

30.

Jenny Newberg lived in one of the nicer neighborhoods of Davis. Southern brick house with white columns. A beveled chandelier hanging from the top of the porch. Large living room, gold carpet, interior decorated country style with plants and floral arrangements throughout the house, paintings of local mountain scenes, some of them with barns and log cabins.

Jenny was recently divorced, but had gotten a substantial settlement and for the moment, was sorting through her life's options. She had the house in her name and a few dollars in her bank account. She had been freed to do what she liked. Now she just had to figure out what that was.

Tonight, however, this Fourth of July, she was just content to stay home and watch T.V. She expected no visitors and wasn't enamored with the idea of being anywhere near loud fireworks, though if she wanted, she could see the high school show from her backyard. But tonight, she was content to drink a glass of wine and watch fireflies from the lovely confines of her back patio.

When she heard the doorbell ring, she debated whether to answer. Whoever it was, they weren't invited and she could give a good goddamn about any company, even if the person at the door was someone she knew. Still, when the doorbell rang a second time, she knew that whoever it was would probably stay there until she got up to answer.

Barefoot, dressed in her favorite jeans and a white tank top, she walked to the front door and opened it. There stood Otis, or someone who looked like Otis dressed in some type of costume, wearing a crown and carrying a sword.

"Otis?" she said curiously.

"Jenny," he answered.

She stood. He stood. They were both startled into silence. It was Jenny who broke the ice.

"Otis," she said. "It's the Fourth, not Halloween. Why the hell are you dressed like that?"

Otis stood motionless, as if he was debating with himself how exactly to answer that question.

"Well?" she insisted.

"I'm here to ask you."

Jenny's head was buzzing. Not from the alcohol. From bewilderment. From the idea that Otis Barner was on her stoop. Otis, the same man who just yesterday had threatened to kill her. Maybe he was here to finish that threat. But Otis being Otis, he certainly didn't look threatening. Except for that damn sword. That looked real.

“Ask me what?” she said, stalling for time to process the whole idea of Otis standing on her front porch

Otis remained hesitant. Then he finally spoke.

“I . . . want . . . those pictures.”

A light went off in Jenny’s head and she smiled, ever so subtly.

“You mean the ones I have of you with no clothes on, in my house, doing something nasty? Those pictures? You came all the way out here for those pictures? Jesus, Otis, I must have gotten under your skin, huh? Seems like a long way to drive for a few photos, old ones at that.”

“Yes,” he said simply. “Those pictures. I want them.”

“Otis, that was, what, nine, ten years ago? We were in high school just having fun. You still worried about those pictures?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Oh, God, Otis. Get over it. Nobody cares about those pictures. I got em somewhere in my closet but I haven’t opened up those books in ages. What’s the big deal?”

For the first time, Otis’s gaze sharpened. “I want those pictures.”

“Oh for god’s sake, I’m not going to do anything to you. Honest. And nobody in Davis, I promise you, is going to see them either. Whatever I may have said, I was just yanking your chain. You know. I like to tease people. That’s just my way.”

Otis did not budge. Nor did he trust Jenny. That bond had been broken ages ago and Otis had been her victim. He had endured public humiliation of a sort that she would never understand. The fact that she still had them was reason enough to confront her. The fact that she mentioned them at all meant she would always dangle them over his head. Jenny liked to humiliate people. *That* was her way.

His voice was sturdy. "Give them to me."

"Fuck you and your pictures," she exclaimed and started to close the door, but Otis stood in the frame and banged it open. He spread his arms across the doorway. There would be no shutting the door in his face and no chance that he would let her off the hook. Not tonight.

"Otis," she said. "If you don't leave, I'm calling the police."

"Call them," he replied. He stepped through the frame and pushed her backward with his bulky body, and that sword that he held, as if he was a big, fat King Arthur. He bumped her with the blade. She acknowledged. It sure felt real.

Jenny grew frightened. "Otis, get out of my house."

"No," he said firmly. "Not without the pictures."

"I ain't givin you no pictures," she blurted in her old hillbilly dialect. The sophisticated veneer was off. She was now a scratching, feral cat.

Otis bumped into her a second time and knocked her to the living room carpet. Then he raised his sword above her head.

“Otis, what you gonna do?” she cried out. “Kill me? Over pictures?”

“If I have to.”

The look in his eyes told Jenny he was serious. Otis had cracked and this other person had emerged. This wild-eyed person with a sword. This madman in her living room.

“All right, all right,” she shouted. “Goddamnit, let me up and I’ll get you your fuckin pictures. Then I’m gonna call the police and file charges. Trespassing. Attempted murder. Sexual battery. I can dream up others, too, if you want, you four-eyed freak.”

Otis towered over her with the sword pointed it right at her belly.

“Get them.”

Otis lifted the sword.

She stood and hustled up a stairway. Otis, laying his sword on the carpet, was right behind her. She was now afraid of what else he might do. Rape. Murder. Chop her into pieces. Her thoughts floundered in chaos.

Flipping a light switch, opening a hall closet, she pulled out a plastic bucket filled with pictures and other paraphernalia. It was her high school tchotchke box.

Digging around, she came upon a small stack of the pictures from the party.

“These what you want?” she sneered as she held them up for him to see.

Otis sifted through the pictures, half a dozen or so, old Polaroids of Otis nude and unconscious. That was them. He tossed them in the box, lifted and began to carry it downstairs.

“Wait a minute,” she protested. “Those are my high school things. You can’t have those. Just take the pictures. Leave the rest. Otis!”

Otis ignored her and carried the bucket to the kitchen. She ran behind him and beat on his back. “You goddamn sonofabitch,” she screamed. But Otis acted as if she wasn’t there.

“I’m gonna get my gun,” she said and hurried back up the stairs. “I’ll shoot you, you fuckin bastard. Nobody’ll blame me either. Nobody’ll miss you, ya fuckin retard.”

Otis threw the bucket on a large table and began to riffle through pictures, mementos, old souvenirs from high school.

Then he found something else interesting. More Polaroids. These were pictures of her and Jeremy. In the nude. Full nude. Full exposure. Breasts. Penis. Butt. Vagina. Grins all around. Sexual chicanery from their high school days. Might even have been at the same party.

Jenny scurried down the stairs brandishing a nine-millimeter pistol.

She rushed into the dining room and saw Otis holding her nude pictures. Her and Jeremy. Old lovers. Risqué lovers. Exposed lovers. She stopped in her tracks.

Again, they stood in silence.

"You've been a bad girl," said Otis with just a trace of a smile.

"Those are private property," she hissed.

"Not anymore." Otis broke into a full grin. "Mine now. I think we're even."

"See this gun?" she said and pointed it at Otis. "Either get out of my house or die. Take your choice. So put down those pictures—all of them—and get the fuck out of my house."

Otis stared at her, no fear in his eyes. "No," he said. He waited as her hands shook from rage. "Go ahead. Shoot me."

Jenny's hands wavered as she put her finger on the trigger. She pulled and nothing happened. She had forgotten to take off the safety.

Otis reached down and tucked the box under one arm. "I'm gonna keep this," he announced and walked through the house, stopping on his way to pick up the sword.

Jenny collapsed on the floor. "What're you . . . what're you gonna do with it?" she said tearfully.

Otis spoke as he walked out the door. "Keep it. In my new house. Maybe put these pictures on a wall. Let my guests see them."

Jenny stood in the front doorway as Otis carried her things to the car.

He popped the trunk and hoisted in the box. Then he slammed the lid shut and slipped into the driver's seat. Laying out the sword next to him, he turned the ignition and glanced back at Jenny. "Don't ever talk to me again."

She said nothing in response. Otis slowly backed out of the driveway and disappeared into the darkness.

31.

Nearly dark now and the celebrants were out in full force. One of the hot spots tonight. Grove Street, where the middle-class houses sat and people were eager to set off fireworks in their yards.

There were the usual sparklers and Black Cats. Roman candles. In the distance, a few M-80s exploded. Homeowners were passing out beers and tropical drinks. The grills were in full force with smoke drifting over the treetops. Some had their radios going. Mostly country and rock. Queen's "Crazy Little Thing." Blondie's "Call Me." The Oak Ridge Boys' "Trying to Love Two Women."

Then there was this strange sight. Among the children and parents wandering the streets, a full-grown adult dressed in a bathrobe and sandals, wearing a crown and carrying a sword. Not the fake one made from plastic. A *real* sword that could do *real* damage.

Otis had parked the Mustang on Grove Street and was simply walking down the middle of the road as if he expected traffic to swerve and avoid him.

Some people stared at the man. Some people protested. Some called him weirdo.

They all recognized him as Otis Barner, but he wasn't Otis. He was someone else posing as Otis. A crazy Otis. Still, there he was, big as a tree in the middle of the street. A huge tree with a dangerous sword.

One kid stopped him and asked: "Are you a queer?"

Otis looked down at him with his sword posed in front, two hands on the hilt.

"Hello, Dale," he said. "I know your mom and dad."

"You do?" the boy replied, surprised that his parents would hang out with someone this strange.

"Yes. I do."

The boy hesitated. "But I asked if you were queer."

"No," said Otis. "I'm a king."

The boy backed up a step. His eyes widened and then a grin crawled across his face.

"No, you're not. You're Otis Barner." He looked up and down at Otis. "And you're a queer."

Otis frowned and looked down at the boy like Zeus come from the heavens. "There's nothin queer about bein a king," he asserted.

"There is the way you look," Dale smirked.

Otis's eyes shifted downward. Not a friendly glance. He lifted his sword and placed the point directly in the child's chest. Through his T-shirt, Dale could feel the sharp point. He voiced a silent, "Ouch."

The child realized the sword was genuine. The grin disappeared.

“Not queer,” said Otis. “I’m a king.”

Dale was spooked. “I’m gonna get my mom,” he cried out and ran down the street as if lions were after him.

Other parents witnessed Otis pointing the sword at Dale, but nobody wanted to challenge that sword or get in a fight with a crazy person. Not on the Fourth of July. Instead they huddled their children and passed him by. One or two ran to a nearby neighbor to call the police.

It wasn’t a secret who was doing this, but they were confused about *who* was doing this. Otis was not his usual self. This person was whacked out, maybe on drugs, and he certainly wasn’t the Otis people had grown to know. The Otis who rarely spoke or bothered anyone. The Otis everyone thought was unusually backward and none too smart.

Otis sighed. His intent was simply to introduce himself. But this plan had not gone the way he expected and he knew it was time to leave. Time at last to go get Audrey.

“Hickledoo,” said Otis as he returned to his car and drove away, leaving a crowd of onlookers bewildered. More so because Otis was driving a Mustang, not his usual VW bus.

Otis paid them no mind. Time was wasting and he was more determined than ever to get on with his business. The rest of Davis could just go to hell.

But first. The queen. He had made up his mind. It was coronation night. It was time to coronate.

32.

In a small town like Davis, word of anything unusual spread quickly and it usually ended up in some form or fashion at the Macon County Sheriff's Office. Either with a visit, or in this case, via telephone.

It was raining now, hard, and the number of calls lighting up the switchboard was surprising.

Even more surprising. All the calls were about Otis Barner. Apparently, Otis was out tonight in his bathrobe bothering people, but the disturbing part was the news about the sword. Otis had accosted a child in the street. Threatened the child's life. Leonard knew that would create a ruckus in the hen house.

"Damnation," he said as he hung up the phone. "What's gotten into him?"

Otis. Usually a quiet man, a shy man. But Leonard surmised that you never knew when someone was going to jump the fence and go loco. He knew his old man, Larry. One hell of an ornery hillbilly. Larry, who had spent more than his share of nights here in the drunk tank. If anyone was so inclined, Otis would be a prime candidate to crack up.

Leonard got on the radio.

“Flynn,” he called out.

There was no answer.

Where the hell was everyone when he needed them?

Leonard expected this kind of behavior from Monroe, but Flynn? Where the hell was he?

Then another call. This one serious.

The Barner house was on fire.

The volunteer fire department was on the scene, but even more serious, they claimed that Otis had started the fire.

“Goddamn,” said Leonard. “What the hell is goin on?”

He called again for Flynn.

Still no answer.

Just as Leonard got off the radio, *another* call in. From Jenny Newberg. Otis had been at her house. Threatened her with a sword. Stolen her property. Assaulted her.

Leonard sat in his chair and steamed. “Damnation,” he said as he hung up the phone. Otis was busy tonight.

33.

Audrey sat on her porch in her quiet neighborhood in an old part of Davis.

Her parents' house. White two-story with a large front porch. Old Southern architecture. Very staid. Like her parents. Father, a banker. Mother, a school teacher.

And daughter? Well, still a work in progress. A clerk at a grocery store. Not what her folks had hoped, but at least she was employed and stable. A good girl. Not married. Not even dating. Waiting, they supposed, for the right man.

Tonight was a quiet one for her. She had had a couple of party invitations, but turned them all down. Not in the mood. She was happy for the calm before the storm. That moment, usually around nine or so, when everyone decided to let off their fireworks. She liked peaceful summer evenings. She liked fireflies and the sound of crickets. She liked time to herself.

Her parents had left for the grand fireworks show at the high school. Audrey, however, was content just for this moment. In the dark. Soaking in the humidity and the last

remnants of a sunset. She lit a joint, took a swig of her Budweiser, and relaxed.

A car pulled up in front and parked in the street. A red Mustang, driven by none other than Otis Barner. Otis, her buddy from work. Her Hershey's Bar compadre. Otis, the shy one whom she enjoyed chatting with. A quiet man, but sweet and always considerate.

Otis, whom she had patiently worked on to get a peek behind his curtain, and what she saw impressed her. More intelligence than people were willing to admit. All shielded by his backward nature. Otis, giving her a surprise visit. Not an unpleasant thought.

Except this was a different Otis. This Otis looked as if he was going to a Halloween party. Wrong season. Maybe the wrong Otis. Maybe he had an odd twin brother.

He smiled as she watched him climb out of a red Mustang and wave at her. Now where had he gotten *that* vehicle?

"Hello, Audrey," he said.

Well, this was the real Otis all right. Just not the usual Otis.

He walked up the sidewalk dressed in a purple bathrobe, a crown on his head, carrying, what the hell, a sword? What was that thing? Not the usual Otis. She took a drag and sat back. Maybe this would be entertaining. A different side of the man. She was intrigued.

“Otis,” she greeted. “You going to a costume party tonight?”

Otis smiled at her. “No,” he said bashfully. “Tonight, I’m a king.”

“You are?” she said. “King of what?”

Otis hesitated. Then he walked up the porch and announced: “Audreyville.”

“What?” she exclaimed.

His smile grew broader. “I-I built you a house.”

Audrey looked puzzled. “A house? A real house? As in some place to live?”

“Yes. Sort of.”

“You didn’t.”

“I . . . did. I’ve been buildin this for a long time. I named it Audreyville.”

“What on earth for? I already have a house.”

Otis stopped. He seemed reluctant to continue. Audrey wondered if he was joking or simply crazy. Still, he was sweet, whatever he was. A man builds a house for someone. His wife. His girlfriend. That must count for something.

“Why’d you build me a house?”

“This . . . is an Otis house. Only one like it. I built it, and I named it.”

Audrey was taken back. She had never thought of Otis as being a creative type. But, as it turns out, she was wrong. At least according to Otis.

“Well. Where is this house?” she asked.

“Harper’s Hollow,” he said. “Waaaay back in the trees. Ain’t no one knows it’s there but me, and now . . . you.”

“What kind of house?”

He smiled again. “I told you. It’s an Otis house.”

Audrey laughed. Images ran through her mind. A miniature house? A dog house? A log cabin? Maybe just a tool shed. Something you might build in your back yard for your kids, or for a place to hang out and read. Except she doubted Otis read much.

She took another swig of beer. “Your own special place, huh?”

“I’ve been workin on it for lots of years.”

“Years? Is it big?”

“Yes, alllll the wayyyy up in the trees.”

Audrey’s picture started to change. What kind of house could Otis build that was in the trees? A tree house? That sounded dangerous. None of this made sense to her.

She concluded that it must have been what he did when he wasn’t working. Instead of going out to party, Otis went out to build a house, a house that he named in her honor. It was all a bit stranger to think about.

“And you say, you named it Audreyville? Lord, Otis. Pretty bold thing to do and not tell me about it. Especially if it’s some place you expect me to live in. I should have some say in it, don’t you think?”

Otis hesitated. He hadn't thought of this. He didn't answer her question.

Audrey rubbed her cheeks with the palms of her hands. "Well, how come you never said anything before? You never mentioned it at work. We're good friends. I would expect a friend to tell me something like that."

"It-It . . . was a surprise."

"Good God," she said. She took another drag and sat back. He didn't seem crazy and he didn't act drunk. So, what did this mean? Had she misjudged him because of how he looked and talked? She tried to wrap her thoughts around this new Otis. But frankly, he didn't make it easy.

"So, you know if you build a house for a girl, usually you tell them first. Usually you try to find out if the girl wants a house. Then you ask the girl what kind of house she wants. Pretty important point. You know that's the way things are supposed to work. You kind of got it backwards."

Otis stood straight with his sword in front of him.

"Maybe," he said quietly. "I'm guess I'm just, just not very good at this."

"Good at what, Otis?"

"Talkin to a girl. I don't always know what to ask."

Then it dawned on Audrey how difficult this must be for him. A man like Otis, who may have never had a friend in his entire life. Doing the only thing knew to do for someone he liked. Build something.

Yeah, he kind of had it backwards, but she understood why. She understood that his intentions were good, even if his method was a little flawed. She suspected he suffered from a crush on her. Maybe he had had that crush for a long time and never knew how to ask her out, or, in this case, talk about what she wanted in a house. He just assumed that if he built something, she would come.

Well, before she knew all that he had told her tonight about Audreyville, would she have considered Otis more than a friend? Good question. What would she have said if he had announced to her that he was building her a house?

Otis stood quietly in his king's costume, a man bewildered.

She was also bewildered.

Otis's eyes shifted out to the lawn, as if he had something to say, but couldn't bear to say it. She sensed what he was about to ask.

"You want me to come with you and see this place?" Otis looked relieved. She pressed him gently. "To come to Audreyville?"

"Yes," he said.

She finished her beer and smashed her joint in an ashtray. Then she stood up.

"All right, Otis. Here's the rules. You put that damn sword away. It's making me nervous. We're going to look at your house, but that's all. I'm not your girlfriend and I

don't plan on getting married anytime soon. So, hands to yourself, be a gentleman, and we go for a ride. Okay?"

Otis paused. "Okay."

Audrey walked past him and down the sidewalk. She waited for him to catch up.

"Nice, Otis. You didn't steal this did you?"

Otis fumbled with his answer. What emerged was a little white lie.

"No," he mumbled. "It's my dad's. Or was my dad's."

"Oh, yeah. Your dad's a mechanic. Right?"

"Yeah. I borrowed it. Sort of."

"Okay. Nice wheels. So. Come on. Hop in. Let's go. Let's go see Audreyville."

Otis got in the driver's seat and sat for a moment catching his breath. He seemed pleased. Then he turned the ignition, put his hands on the wheel, and did a U-turn.

Beyond his wildest dreams, Otis and Audrey were headed to his dream house.

34.

Both Leonard and Flynn were now engaged in investigating Otis related activities.

Flynn went to the Barner's house. The volunteer fire department had arrived, but the place was so old and ramshackle that no one even bothered to turn a hose on it. Larry stood in disgust, cursed his son, and made sure that the fire department knew exactly who started the blaze. And by the way, his car had also been stolen by you know who.

The firemen just stood helplessly and watched. The fire was too hot, too far gone, and the house sat in ruins after half an hour. The fact that Otis had taken the Mustang was out of their jurisdiction. Secretly, they hoped that he would skip town in it. In their minds, Otis deserved the car.

At Grove Street, Leonard was hearing about Otis's sword based on his encounter with little Dale Whitehead. Plus descriptions of that weird costume and the continuous charge by the boy (and picked up by his parents) that Otis was queer. The implication being that the latter was against the law and definitely against the Lord, especially in front of children.

Leonard then went to investigate the break-in at Jenny Newberg's house, which by now had been embellished to include rioting, looting, and a charge of Otis doing a striptease in her house.

When he arrived, she was just short of hysterical. It took him a bit of time to calm her down and try to get her story straight. Even so, it didn't make much sense. Not given what Leonard knew about Otis. Even brandishing a sword, he doubted Otis intended to do any serious damage. Jenny's description, in his mind, was a whole lot of crazy.

Otis's carousing was amplified by the fact that it was raining cats and dogs and full of thunder and lightning. Trouble in the air in little, peaceful Davis. Leonard wondered if the devil had come to town disguised as Otis Barner.

So much for a peaceful damn holiday. Leonard couldn't wait to get the real Otis into custody.

35.

Otis and Audrey were on Route 25 headed out of town. He had stopped briefly to attach the convertible roof to the windshield to protect them from the elements. To his delight, Audrey seemed to be happy riding in a Mustang in the rain.

“Pretty cool car, Otis,” she proclaimed. “Never been in one of these.”

Otis sat back in his seat, a proud driver of a cool car with a pretty woman. How many daydreams had he had of this scenario? Too many to count. He didn’t even turn on the radio. He just wanted to enjoy her company quietly, peacefully, without outside interference.

Otis was taking her to his house. Their house. The estate of Audreyville. Yes, she had made it clear that they were not going to get married, but so what? The fact that she would come was more than he had hoped for. Otis was used to getting his heart broken. But Audrey had agreed to at least witness his hard work. He could live with this as long as she was happy. If tomorrow, she wanted to do something else, that was fine, too. Or next week. Or next month. He would take whatever she offered.

What he didn't count on was a Sheriff's Deputy spoiling his fun. But there he was, behind them, flashing his lights, signaling for them to pull over.

"Hickledoo," said Otis as he slowed and pulled off to the side.

There was a moment of discouragement for Otis as the deputy's vehicle sat with its lights flashing. Time stalled, time wasted, time come to a standstill while Otis and Audrey waited. The officer certainly seemed to be taking his time.

Then the slam of a door and a man walked to their car. He bent down and peered through the window. Rain ran off his deputy's hat.

Otis saw him and his despair grew even deeper. Jeremy Flynn. Now a Sheriff's Deputy and at this moment, Otis's legal adversary.

Jeremy tapped on the glass. Otis rolled it down.

"Evening, Otis," said Jeremy as if they were just having a casual chat. "Seems like you been busy tonight."

He shined a flashlight through the car and noticed Audrey Reagan. Not a close acquaintance, but he had seen her around town. They all had gone to the same high school, but Audrey had been in a lower class. Freshmen, sophomore, something like that. Jeremy had never paid her much attention.

"Evening, Ms. Audrey," he said in the same casual tone.

"Jeremy," she answered.

Jeremy got down to business. "Well, now we have a problem here, don't we Otis? Hmm, last I heard, maybe several problems."

Otis finally spoke up. "I-I-I'm just drivin'," he said. "Was I speedin?"

"No, Otis," said Jeremy. "That's the one thing you haven't done tonight, but there's a list of things you *have* done that requires some attention."

"Like?" Otis said innocently, though he could guess a few of them.

"Well, let's start with this car. You got a license and registration?"

Otis was flustered. He hadn't thought about this and had no idea where his dad kept any paperwork. He wasn't even sure the car was legal to drive. Knowing his father, he probably didn't want to pay the state the money for the registration. In the eyes of Larry, everyone who worked for the government was a crook. He refused to pay for any more than he absolutely had to. Where did this car rank in his father's demented list of priorities?

"I-I got my license," said Otis in a blatant stall for time.

"Need both, Otis." Jeremy gave him a steely look, the kind of look he used to give him in elementary school. Otis hoped that he didn't reach through the window and squeeze his titties.

"I ain't got both," he announced glumly.

"Okay. Well, that's problem number one."

“All right,” said Otis. “I can go back and get it. Might take me some time cuz, as you know, I borrowed this car from my dad. He would have to track down the paperwork . . . and there may be a question as to whether or not he has it.” Otis’s voice trailed off.

“It don’t work that way, Otis. You got to have both when I ask for it, which is now, and you don’t, so that’s one violation to account for.”

Otis felt his heart fall. No paperwork. No Audrey. No house.

“And then there’s the little issue of theft and arson.”

“Arson!” said Audrey.

“Yeah. It seems Otis stole this car and then set his dad’s house on fire. Ain’t that right, Otis?”

Otis sunk further in his seat.

“Otis?” said Audrey.

“He, he wouldn’t give me the keys,” Otis said sullenly.

“Well,” said Jeremy. “That’s a good reason to take the car. Not sure, though, about the house fire. That seems a little drastic.”

By now, Otis had added everything up and realized that Jeremy was going to haul him to jail. The deputy was just making Otis squirm like he always did. Drawing things out. It was *déjà vu* for Otis. Those moments when Jeremy jabbed him, pinched him, made him suffer. Otis looked into his eyes and saw the pleasure that Jeremy took. That same crooked grin. That same look he had when he

bullied him in the school yard. The cruel pleasure you have when you pull the wings off a butterfly.

And Audrey. She was going to leave. He could feel it. He was going to lose her, even if she had only agreed to a temporary visit. She would learn the truth and never talk to him again. He would go to prison and never have the chance to see her. No more Hershey's bars or visits on break. And any chance of showing her Audreyville. Gone.

Otis's brain started to fizzle. He was growing desperate. Audrey needed to see the house. He had spent years preparing it. He needed to show it to her. He needed to free himself from Jeremy.

"You know everything, don't you?" he said to Jeremy.

"I do, Otis. As I said, you've been a busy man and quite the little law breaker. Assault. Arson. Theft. List goes on. It's gonna take a while to sort this out. You better come with me. Sit in my car for a while. We'll take a nice drive to the jail. We got a cell waitin for you. Just leave this car you stole parked on the side of the road. I'll give Audrey a ride home when we drop you off for booking. Then we'll arrange for a tow."

"But you don't know where my house is, do you?"

"You mean the one you burnt down?"

"No," said Otis. "Not that one."

Jeremy squinted at him. "What the hell you talkin about?"

Otis realized it was time to shut up and get going.

“Never mind,” he sighed. Time to add to his long list of wrong doings. Jeremy had been right. Otis *had* been busy, and the night was still young.

In that moment, he made a crucial decision. It was do or die. His last chance. Audrey was still in the car. He was still in charge of this car. The engine would do exactly what he told it to do. He was still a free man. Barely. He could still make his own choices.

“Fuck you,” he said to Jeremy and hit the accelerator so fast, Jeremy jumped back and tripped in the road. The tires squealed. Smoke drifted up, along with mud and water. The tail lights disappeared in the darkness.

In a moment, a blink really, Otis had disappeared. The only sound left was the rain falling, the thunder, and the noise coming from Jeremy’s engine and windshield wipers.

Jeremy lay for a moment quietly in the road before he got up, brushed himself off, and proceeded to call out an APB for one Otis Barner.

Unfortunately, Jeremy had not gotten the license plate. A basic rookie mistake. He had been way too casual about this encounter. Took Otis’s usual dumb nature for granted. He knew that, given Otis’s criminal activity that evening, Leonard would not be happy about this protocol. Truth be told, Jeremy was not too happy either. As he finished the radio work and drove off in pursuit, he had one thought on his mind: The little shit would pay for this.

36.

Sheriff Leonard had just returned to his office from his interview with Jenny Newberg. No sooner had he landed in his chair, then Larry Barner, having borrowed Otis's van, stormed through the door, three sheets to the wind and ranting.

"When you gonna arrest my son?" he demanded.

Leonard, who was on his last ounce of patience with the Barners tonight, tried to maintain his composure.

"We're lookin for him right now, Larry. Got an APB out. Soon as we catch him, he'll be spendin a little time here at the jail. You just gotta hang in there till we find him."

"He's just drivin around town," said Larry, exasperated. "He ain't got the sense to run. Probably don't know he did nothin wrong. How hard can it be to spot someone in a red souped-up Mustang? Town ain't no bigger'n a postage stamp."

"It takes time, Larry. He done shot away from one of my deputies in that car. So there goes your postage stamp theory. He's on the run, but we're gonna catch him and bring him in. Otis ain't goin far. You and I know that.

Anyway, sorry about your house. You need a place to sleep? I got a nice comfy cell here for you."

"What, you gonna throw *me* in jail?"

"Just makin the offer, Larry. Don't want you drivin in this weather in your condition."

"And what condition is that?"

"Drunk and ornery, like you normally are. How bout you just calm down and wait like the rest of us, till we find your son and bring him in?"

"Calm down?" Larry said. "It ain't your house that just burnt to the ground. How bout you speed up and find that no good son of a bitch son of mine. Though tonight I might consider just turnin him out altogether. Him a total disgrace to the family. Car thief. House burner. Retarded pig-faced . . ."

"Larry, there ain't no call to curse your own son. I done told you. We're lookin for him. You breathin fire in my face ain't gonna help. So, find someplace else to go besides my desk. The Cumberland Motel might take you. Ain't but two blocks down the road. I done made an offer on my part. Your choice. But go somewhere else. I got enough to worry about at the moment."

"You ain't done nothin yet to help."

"Larry. I got handcuffs and a jail cell if I need to use them. Don't make me."

Larry got the idea, but he wasn't happy about it.

“Walk. Don’t drive,” said Leonard. “I don’t want to have to haul your ass back in here. I’d say you’re already walkin a fine line.”

“Thanks,” said Larry. “You been soooo helpful.”

“Doin the best I can,” said Leonard. “If I was you, I might consider makin myself scarce for a night or two.”

Larry gave him a cross stare and walked out the door.

“Don’t forget your umbrella,” Leonard mumbled under his breath.

He gave a radio call out to Flynn asking for progress.

“Nothing yet,” he answered back.

Barners everywhere tonight the Sheriff thought to himself. Like a pack of mangy dogs, and him left to clean up the mess. Happy holidays.

37.

A five-minute drive. That's all Otis needed to get to his house.

Audrey was silent and not smiling. As Otis took the corner from the highway onto the small trail he used to get to Audreyville, he was very aware that he had crossed a line. He waited for her response. The anger. The demand to take her home. The final act of giving him the boot.

He pulled up to the house and turned off the engine.

"This it?" she said.

"Yes."

"It doesn't look like a house."

"It's . . . hidden."

She paused and looked at him.

"What have you done tonight?"

Otis could not imagine a scenario in which he could explain himself adequately. It was the great challenge of his life. Speaking slow, halting, while his head was spinning with ideas and thoughts. Like the Mustang on this rainy night, his interior tires spun and burned.

Otis sighed. "Wanna see?" he offered.

"Might as well," she said. "I'm already here."

Then unexpectedly, she smiled at him. "Lawbreaker," she joked. "You're gonna catch hell at work for this, that is, if they ever let you out of the slammer, and Grossman ever lets you back. You know he's not fond of his employees being thrown in jail."

Otis remained quiet.

"I'm gonna tell them the whole story," she added. "No one's gonna believe me. You know that, right?"

Otis hung his head. "Probably not."

"Otis, on the run, breakin the law." She smiled broadly as if this was one hell of a great tale. She looked at him and cracked a grin. "Best night ever, Otis."

Otis felt a weight off his shoulders. "Lawbreaker. Yeah. I guess I am tonight." He smiled back at her. "First time, too."

"Well, congratulations," she said.

The rain had stopped, but the thunder and lightning continued.

Otis stepped out of the car and walked to the small entryway he had built. It was a door frame, just like a regular house. He opened the door and motioned for her to enter.

It was dark, so Otis began to light the various oil lamps he had collected over the years. All different kinds of lamps, hurricane and otherwise. As the light filtered through the house, it was like an unveiling. Each lamp revealed a different part. Bedroom. Kitchen. His music

room with the small stage. Even a viewing room with a window.

As Audrey stepped through, she was startled by the complexity of the building. No, it wasn't classic architecture she saw. Not in the formal sense. But it was unique, a creative way to use secondhand materials to make a home. It was rough, sometimes a little awkward, but having been built by hand, also a work of art with a roof that extended up inside the trees and a ladder that she assumed went all the way to the top. The light from the lamps reflected off the windows and gave the house a multicolored hue.

Outside was wet. Inside, it was dry and airy. She could hear the wind through the trees. It was like music.

"How long have you worked on this?" she said.

"Since I was a kid," he answered.

"Your parents let you do this?"

Otis waited. A shadow crossed his face. "My mom is dead. My dad don't like me. I live here mostly. My dad, he tried to shoot me."

"What?"

"Yeah. A .22. He missed and I moved out."

"Good Lord," she murmured. "I guess that's lucky for you."

She scanned the main floor of the house and was impressed.

"I've never seen anything like this."

"It's . . . Audreyville."

As she sat in a simple wood chair in the makeshift kitchen, she noticed her picture on the wall.

"Where'd you get that?"

Otis walked over and stroked the photo. "Out of the paper."

"Oh, yeah, I was the chair of the Holiday Gift Wrap Committee a couple years ago. We were raising money for Boy Scouts. Oh, God. You kept it all this time?"

"I found it, lookin in some papers in the library. I had to sneak out the picture. I sliced it out with a box cutter." Otis had a guilty grin on his face.

"Hmm. Add that to your list of crimes," she said.

Audrey began to understand something about Otis. His passion. His creativity. His loyalty. All trapped in a body that could barely talk. She wondered what that must be like. Like being in a prison cell, or worse. This was the true Otis, and it helped her see why he might have created trouble for himself just to get her here. For Otis, this was a major life event.

It began to rain again and the thunder and lightning were directly overhead. The rain pattered on the homemade roof in a light hissing that sounded like voices whispering. She had to admit. There was magic in these walls.

“So,” she said. “I don’t get why you call this Audreyville. We barely know each other. I don’t see you outside of work. What’s up with that?”

Otis pulled up another chair and sat down. His bulky frame filled the seat and threatened to crack the back.

“You’re nice to me.”

“So? I’m nice to a lot of people. I try to be that way to everybody.”

“You’re nice to me. Other people aren’t.”

Audrey looked him in the eye. “Otis, you deserve to be treated nice. You’re nice to me, but I don’t go home and name my room Otis because of that. I just assume it’s normal to be nice. It’s the way my parents taught me.”

“No,” he said flatly. “People aren’t nice to me, cause I’m . . . I’m Otis.”

Audrey gave this some thought. From her experience, she had seen this play out at work. A few employees occasionally ragging on him.

“Damn, Otis. That’s kind of sad. Never thought about it that way.”

“No one does.”

“No one’s nice to you?”

“No.”

Audrey realized. This was a man in solitary confinement. A secret house. A life alone. A mother dead. A son estranged. A name given just because she was nice to him. She had done it all in passing without any forethought

or intention. She hadn't considered Otis as anything more than a person on her periphery, a casual word here and there. An attempt to break his shyness. A chance for friendship. Normal human curiosity.

But this was just the way things were in her life. She passed people all the time and gave it little thought, except it was polite to be nice to people and she enjoyed being friendly. She took it for granted that most people acted the same way. Then again, most people weren't Otis.

"Well, Otis, I'm impressed, and a little surprised. I don't know quite what to think. I gotta say, it's pretty strange to me. You coming up to my house and all, and all this conversation about Audreyville. I don't know how to react. Except I'm sorry people aren't nice to you. I'm glad at least that I was. But what do you want? I told you, I would come to see the house. I don't know what else you expect. Plus you being chased by the law doesn't help. You know what I mean?"

Otis's face remained the same. She could tell, he was also trying to understand. She hoped he would keep calm and consider her point of view.

She didn't feel threatened. She wasn't afraid. But what was she? The word *overwhelmed* sounded about right.

Otis piped up. "I got a radio. You wanna listen?"

"Sure. You got anything to drink?" She could use a beer about now.

“Otis sun tea is all. No power yet to keep things cold. No beer or pop. Sorry.”

“Okay. Fine. I’ll take it.”

Otis went to a shelf and pulled down a large glass container with flowers on it. He grabbed an iced tea glass and poured. Then he hurried to her and took off for his music room. She followed behind and heard the music start before she arrived.

Otis was standing on his small stage.

“What’s that for?” she asked.

“I dance, sometimes.”

“You dance?”

“Yes. Specially to Bob Crow and the River.”

“Oh, I love that band. What’s the song that they play? Flight? Fly? Something like that.”

As if in coordination, the radio announcer called out Otis’s favorite song. *Flying*.

Otis began all the moves he had rehearsed. Audrey sat back and watched in amazement. He was a large man, but in his choreography, he was well rehearsed and had given the dance a lot of thought. He reminded her of the new movie just out this summer with John Travolta: “Urban Cowboy.” Of course, Otis did not have Travolta’s looks, but he was determined and sharp in his moves. He knew exactly what he was doing.

As the guitars rang out, Otis spun on stage, his arms whirling and his legs stomping out the beat. Finally, the last lyric: "I'm a free man in a blue sky flying high."

There was accompaniment outside with thunder and lightning. The storm directly overhead. All choreographed like a professional ballet.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash and Audrey was thrown backwards. Her head hit a wall. A bright light flashed and there was the smell of fire and smoke. The oak tree lit up as if it had Christmas lights. A large branch fell between her and Otis. The house was on fire. The roar of flames jumped at her like a raging animal.

Where was Otis? she wondered. Then a strange thought ran through her head. A sense of sorrow and the words that she could not speak because of her injury. *Audreyville is on fire.*

The last she remembered, she saw Otis sprawled in a heap with flames dancing around the stage. As if Bob Crow himself had created the imagery. A man dancing, on fire, dying. *What would they call this song?* she asked herself.

Then she passed out.

38.

Leonard had had his fill of Barner shenanigans tonight. Having Larry in his office didn't help the situation. The tales that Jenny told were simply beyond the scope of rational belief. He didn't believe Otis could do any of the stuff she described. But Leonard was the law, and as such he intended to function by the book. If Otis needed to be arrested, so be it.

Then a call came over the radio from Deputy Flynn.

"Uh, Sheriff, we got a 10-70 out here at the old Palm farm. Big tree on fire. But no need for the fire department. Lightning strike. No structures in danger. Rain will probably put it out pretty quick."

"10-4. You need any assistance?"

"Uh, yeah, I think we're gonna need a couple of ambulances."

"Ambulances?"

"Yeah, I found Otis . . . and Audrey Reagan. They're both in pretty bad shape."

"What?"

“Well, I don’t know the what for, and they’re both unconscious, so for now we need medical assistance stat. Can you make the call?”

“Sure,” said Leonard. “Are they alive?”

“One of them at least. I’m not sure about Otis. Seems to have been struck by lightning.”

Leonard grimaced. “10-4, I’ll have them out soon. What’s your 10-20?”

“I’ll need to flag them down. Tell them to drive slow near Thomkins and Route 25. Bout a quarter mile east, near Harper’s Hollow. Little dirt road. I’ll try to put flares along the way.”

“10-4.”

Leonard exhaled. Never had he had a night like tonight. Lord. What on earth had gotten into Otis? And what the hell was Audrey Reagan doing with him? And now this.

He made the call for EMTs out of Cumberland Gap Regional Medical Center. Got confirmation. Grabbed his hat and took off. He had to see this for himself.

39.

Otis and Audrey were loaded into separate ambulances and transported to Cumberland Gap Regional Medical Center.

In Otis's ambulance, the EMTs administered emergency CPR and tried to revive him.

"Come on, guy," said George Bains, who knew Otis from high school.

Otis did not respond. His face looked gray and his body was covered with burns. George kept pumping, though he had serious doubts as to whether a man with this kind of damage could survive.

Then suddenly, Otis stirred and groaned. He was alive.

A single word came from his lips, raspy and faint.

"Audrey," he whispered.

"Yeah, buddy," said George as he kept track of Otis's pulse. "Be sure and call on her."

Otis groaned again, though George could not tell if he was aware of his surroundings.

"God must be with you, buddy," he said. "Ain't many could survive this."

Otis whispered again, "Audrey."

Taking heart, George kept at it, giving him oxygen and pumping all the way to the hospital.

—

When Otis was stabilized, he had to be rushed to Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

While the heat from the lightning had done its damage to his skin, it was the power surges from the electricity that had nearly wrecked his heart. On the way, the EMTs again wondered whether he would survive.

Upon arrival, Otis was immediately rushed to the critical care burn unit.

Everyone who saw him and worked on him knew that for Otis, his life hung in the balance.

"Touch and go," the doctors said to each other.

When they went to check on his family, they found no one waiting. Otis was alone and in danger of dying that way.

The nurses in the burn ward immediately adopted him and made sure that someone was always by his side.

"We're not going to let this boy die alone," said Emily Brown, the nurse in charge of the burn unit.

That's what they all anticipated. That Otis would eventually die. They tended to him as caretakers preparing for his funeral.

But he didn't die. His heart kept beating. His pulse kept pounding.

"Damn, he's a tough son of a gun," said Emily, and after three days, they started to believe he might have a chance after all.

He did survive, but it was a tough row to hoe and as painful as any human could ever suffer. Countless skin grafts, pain meds, and a lot of screaming from Otis, who probably didn't know where he was, although he was aware of the pain.

And always, the one word on his lips when he was partially conscious: "Audrey."

"Who's Audrey?" they wondered, but Otis was in too much pain to tell them.

40.

Otis sat in a kitchen in a house not unlike the one he grew up in, except it was bigger, and completely empty. Otis could tell. No one lived here. There was no furniture, no food, nothing that would hint that anyone had occupied this place in months or years. Just a house, a table, and a chair in the kitchen. All by their lonesome.

Otis wondered how he had gotten here and more important, why he waited, or more accurately, for *whom* he waited. Last he remembered, he had been dancing at Audreyville. Now suddenly he was here in a strange place. He wasn't sure if this was really someone's house or a dream.

"Hello," he called out, in hopes that somebody would respond.

He thought it strange that he was here, in a house, but that house seemed to be planted in the middle of a literal nowhere. No outside view through the windows. No trees. No noises of animals or birds. No sounds of traffic. The house seemed to in a white vacuum. Everything still except for the sound of his voice.

"Hello," he said again, a little louder.

He grew impatient.

“Hello,” he called out a third time.

Again, no answer.

Otis decided he was waiting for nothing and nobody and stood up to walk out the door. But instead of standing on the floor as he expected, Otis floated up as if he was a balloon. He bounced off the ceiling a couple of times, delicately, like a man filled with helium, and then back down to the floor where he stretched out his arms and did an acrobatic flip head to toe. He stabilized and floated halfway between the floor and ceiling like a parade decoration at Macy’s on Thanksgiving.

“Hickledoo,” he mumbled in amazement. He had never floated before. It made him a little dizzy.

Otis realized he wasn’t in Tennessee or anywhere else he recognized, and he didn’t think he was dead. Not that he knew what heaven looked like, but he didn’t believe there were cabins like this in the heavenly city of gold. He had always been taught in Sunday School that heaven was a very ritzy city filled with a lot of glittering white people. Plus angels. Plus Jesus himself in a shiny robe, mostly faceless because he had gone up to heaven and was now so bright no one could look him in the eyes.

Otis now waited again in the room. He flipped again, his scalp against the floor and his feet extended toward the ceiling. Oddly enough, he didn’t feel his blood rush to his head. In this house, his position seemed perfectly normal.

“Now, this is just strange,” he said. “How am I supposed to walk?”

“You don’t walk normal here,” said a voice behind him. A woman’s voice, very gentle, very Southern. “You have to think walk. It has to come from your soul.”

Otis would have spun around if he had known how. But drifting upside down, he obviously hadn’t got the knack of “think walking.”

“What?” he said in surprise. “I ain’t got no idea what you’re talkin about.”

“Naw,” she answered. “You wouldn’t yet, and you ain’t gonna be here long enough for me to teach you, but I heard you ask, so I just thought I’d tell ya. Besides, you’re smart. You’ll figure it out soon enough.”

Otis closed his eyes and to his surprise “thought walked” himself until his feet touched the floor and his body faced the voice.

He saw the woman— young, pretty, dark haired, smoky grey eyes. Not more than eighteen. He felt like he recognized her. Maybe someone he went to school with.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Don’t need to know that neither,” she said and smiled. It was an innocent smile, freed of anything dark, painful, or evil. It was the smile of someone who had been freed from the Earth. It was a joyful smile from someone who was completely happy.

“Well, what do I need to know?” he replied. “I ain’t got a clue as to why I’m here, and I keep askin questions that no one wants to answer. So, can you help me at all, or do I just wait here and bide my time?”

“Well. Here’s somethin for you. I can tell you you’re where you belong for the moment and that your burdens are in a safe place.”

Otis looked at her skeptically. “Well, that don’t tell me nothin. I know I’m here, and I ain’t carryin around no burdens. So what else do you know?”

“It tells you everythin you need to know . . . for right now. There’s more to come, but it ain’t the right time. You’re in a good place. Stay here for a while until it’s time to wake up.”

“I ain’t asleep,” said Otis.

“No, you’re not, but where you’re at is kind of like bein asleep. It’s actually a whole lot nicer, considerin.”

“Considerin what?”

She looked at him sympathetically but didn’t answer.

“You don’t remember me, do ya?” she asked gently.

Otis stopped and stared at her. He tried to picture her as a young woman. He went through the names of people he knew that looked like her. Audrey for one.

Then it struck him. If he was somewhere not on this Earth, maybe he too was changed. Maybe he had assumed a body that didn’t have the burdens of an Earthly existence.

Maybe that's why he floated. But he didn't have a mirror, so he couldn't compare his body to hers.

He sighed. "I'm kinda lost here."

"No you ain't," she said. "If you was lost, you wouldn't be here. This is the place where people who come here belong here. There are other worse places, but you ain't there. You're here."

"And this ain't heaven?"

"No," she said. "Not yet. But it ain't hell neither."

"Well," he concluded. "I guess that's good news."

"It ain't news, neither. It's not anything to do with time. It's more like waitin, and bein taken care of while you wait, by someone who cares for you."

Otis was completely baffled, but not worried. How could he worry when she was here with him? He wasn't alone. He wasn't hurting. He wasn't hungry. He wasn't anything like his usual self. He was just . . . waiting.

She started to sing a song, a little hill tune from the mountains.

Otis recognized it. Something from his childhood. Something his . . .

"Mama?"

"Yup. I been sent. It's just the two of us now, for the time bein. So, just sit back and relax. Besides. We ain't done this in many a year. I kind of like it this way. Just the two of us, peaceful like. Nobody yellin. How about you?"

Otis now moved from baffled to astounded, as if there was a difference, but in Otis's mind there was.

Otis stopped asking questions, since he assumed whatever he asked had no answers anyway. Instead, he took his mother's advice. He thought-willed himself to sit down at the table.

To his surprise, another chair appeared, and she sat with him.

He put his hands on the table. She covered his hands with hers. Delicate fingers. Something in their touch communicated love and kindness.

Together they waited and enjoyed each other's company until it was time to no longer wait.

41.

When Otis came out of his coma, he was only marginally aware of his surroundings. The doctors wondered what faculties would be effected. His sight, his sense of smell, his response to touch, his brain?

It was a long road to recovery. Lengthy surgeries, meds, nights of moaning, endless pain. Through it all, Otis fought to survive.

The nurses supported him as best they could. Whatever he needed, they went out of their way to provide.

Then one day, a surprise visit.

Audrey came to see him one Sunday afternoon.

Everyone on duty was happy to see her.

"Otis just thinks the world of you," the nurses gushed.

"He remembers me?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," said the head nurse of the ward, Emily Brown. "Every day, he says your name, almost like he was praying."

"Wow. Didn't know if he'd even recognize me."

"He will," the nurse encouraged.

"He built me a house," she answered and everyone involved was extremely impressed.

“Are you his wife?” Emily asked, wondering to herself where this woman fit in Otis’s life.

“No,” said Audrey. “We’re just good friends, and we work together.”

Audrey wondered why the nurse looked puzzled.

Otis’s kin had been something of a mystery to the hospital staff. No one from his immediate family had been present when he arrived, and no one up to this point had even come to visit him. Now suddenly, Otis had a friend. A woman. Who was she, and why did Otis keep asking for her? The appearance of Audrey only added to that mystery. The nurses buzzed about their so-called friendship. It was the center of ward gossip.

As Audrey stepped to Otis’s bedroom window and waved at him, he was immediately aware of her. When she entered the room, his pulse picked up, and he moved his right hand. She reached out and held it gingerly. It was covered in bandages.

He gave her a slight smile and uttered the words: “I’m a gonna make it.”

“You do that, Otis,” Audrey said with tears in her eyes.

“Don’t you give up on me neither,” he said.

“I would never,” she promised.

They took a moment to look at one another. Otis seemed especially pleased.

“How you doin?” he asked.

“Ah, hanging in there. Had a bad concussion, and that took a little while to recover from. Tore a tendon in my right shoulder. That required surgery. I’m still healing. Still, all in all, I think I’m pretty fortunate.”

Otis gave a huge sigh. “I got some months ahead of me.”

Audrey sat down beside him.

“Doctors think I’m lucky to be alive,” he added.

“I think so,” she said. “Last I saw of you, you were on fire, and I don’t mean from the dancing.”

Otis gave a weak laugh. “Ah. Yeah. You got to see the Otis dance.”

“Yeah. You brought down the house my friend.”

“Yeah. Probably shouldn’t dance when it’s raining.”

Otis asked for some water. Audrey reached for a cup with a straw in it and fussed over him for a while.

“I always think of you,” he told her.

Audrey paused. There was a bond between them, but there was also an obstacle. Otis was in no shape to think about her. He needed to think about himself. What should she tell him? How much of the truth could he handle?

Never make promises you can’t keep her mother had told her. But when had her mother ever dealt with something this severe? With a man in such dire conditions?

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. “Just take care of yourself.”

Otis rested for a moment and closed his eyes. Audrey thought maybe he was tired and wanted to sleep. When she rose to leave, he reached out his hand as best he could.

“Don’t go,” he asked. “Just stay here for a bit. I kind of go in and out sometimes, but I like it when you’re here.”

Audrey sat with him for an hour, just biding her time and being happy with the fact that he was alive. Whatever came down the road, it would happen when it happened. Otis wasn’t going anywhere, and he wouldn’t be making any major decisions for a long time. Better to just let him heal.

Otis fell asleep. Audrey rose to go and looked at his scarred face, all the bandages on his body. She tried to imagine the pain he was in. All that suffering because he took her to Audreyville on a rainy night. It was something he had to do. But still, such a tragic ending.

Audrey’s guilt kicked in. She wondered if this was her fault. Had she done something to lead him on? To make him believe that they could be a couple? How could she know that giving him candy bars would be something more than just being friendly?

Well, could they be a couple?

Audrey could not answer that question.

She gave Otis a gentle kiss on the forehead and said her goodbyes. She gave the nurses her phone number in case they needed to reach her.

“He doesn’t have any family,” she said, “so maybe I can call and just be like his family for a while. Maybe just check on him.”

The nurses agreed to keep her posted. They were happy just to have someone who was connected to him. It was hard to fathom that he had no one in the world except this one friend.

On her way back to Davis, Audrey cried for most of the trip.

42.

Otis fought his way through six months of care and rehab before he was strong enough to return to Davis. By then, his father had moved to Alabama, his father's house was still in a state of burned disrepair, and Otis had nowhere to stay.

Audrey volunteered to have him come to her house, where she and her parents worked patiently to help him regain mobility and heal in his skin and in his soul.

Her parents, a little baffled by this new disfigured stranger in Audrey's life, wondered what the attraction was between them, but feeling compassion for his situation, and willing to trust their daughter, they did not argue and pitched in to help.

"You can stay as long as you need," said Laura Reagan, a petite woman with graying dark hair and a lively smile. She wore her glasses on her nose, just like a teacher.

Otis sat on the living room couch next to a walker and a sack full of medications.

"I wouldn't bother you," he said, "but I ain't got nowhere else to go."

“It’s not a bother, Otis. Pretend for right now we’re your family. We’ll make sure you get the help you need.”

“It’s a lot of work,” said Otis. “People are goin to be comin in and out, and right now, I don’t sleep too well.”

Laura took all this in with a measured smile. She realized he was right, and she wondered if she could take care of him as he needed. But, having been raised in the Church, she took seriously the story from the Book of Luke about the Good Samaritan. She asked herself point blank: What would Jesus do? And the answer always came out the same. Be a good Samaritan.

“Otis, you said yourself, you’ve got no other place to go, right?”

“Yeah,” he said reluctantly.

“So, when the good Lord sends you an answer to prayer, what do you say?”

Otis stopped. He hadn’t thought much about religion in his adult life. He hadn’t been to church since he was a kid, so this subject required a little thought.

“Well, I guess I say thank the Lord?”

Laura nodded. “There you go. Just keep saying that and we’ll get through this together.”

“Well, I’m mighty grateful.”

“I know you are. Just keep working at getting better. That’s all I ask. This here is temporary because you’re going to make a full recovery and one day, you’ll have your own place. And when the time arrives for you to

leave, we'll be there to make sure you've got somewhere to go."

Otis glanced at Audrey, who was sitting in the dining area listening to the conversation. He smiled at her.

"Gee, your mom is nice."

"She's the best," said Audrey. "And my dad, too. We'll all be there for you."

Otis seemed pleased that he had found not just a place to stay, but a home. A place where people were nice to one another. It was not something he was used to in his own life. He hoped that he could be helpful in some way. He knew what lay ahead.

"All right. I'll do my best to be a good patient."

"We're going to adopt you in the family," said Laura. "By the time you leave here, I'll expect you to call me Mama Reagan."

"Mama Reagan," Otis murmured. "I ain't had a mama in nearly 20 years. That sounds real good."

Otis began to unwind and see hope in his future.

Mama Reagan. Audrey. Love and comfort.

Otis took this in as if he was eating ice cream for the very first time.

43.

One night, Otis woke to a full August moon shining through his bedroom window. Big and bright, one of those late summer phenomena in Tennessee. Everything outdoors lit as if the moon itself was a giant silver lamp.

Otis rose from his bed and stood by the window. His eyes had sharpened. His glasses were no longer necessary. His strength had returned and for the first time in months, he felt normal. That is, if you didn't count the scars all over his face and body. Otis realized those would never go away, but he was thankful that his mind was intact and tonight especially, he felt energy surge through him.

He thought of the words to his favorite song:

I got heavy burdens. I got bills to pay.

I got friends who hurt me. I got things to weigh.

But no words are ever needed when I feel the lift.

I just raise my arms and set my soul adrift.

Bills to pay. Yes. The hospital had called last week and asked what he could afford to pay. Terms were being negotiated and he had resigned himself to the fact that he

would be on the hook to the hospital for the rest of his life. Whatever money he had would be spent before he even had time to cash the check. He calculated in his mathematical mind what that would amount to over a lifetime, and still he knew he could never afford to clear the balance.

But staring out at the moon, it was as if none of this existed. There was just him, the dark sky, the moon, the heavy air, the night noises, and his own thoughts.

Suddenly, a shadow swooped across the lawn and landed on a tree branch not more than ten feet from where he stood. A large shadow. An owl. The largest owl he had ever seen. Great horned, he guessed, with emphasis on *great*.

He stared at the giant bird. The owl stared back. The owl having the advantage of not having to blink. His gaze holding Otis in a trance. His feathered ears perched high. His pale yellow orbs fixed like a hypnotist.

Otis gave out a typical owl greeting. Two quick bursts. Two long endings: *Hoo hoo. Hoo . . . hoo.*

"That's very good," said the owl in a low, smooth voice.

Otis was startled. He had listened to many bird calls over the years. None of them had ever spoken his language.

"What?" said Otis.

"What?" the owl repeated. "Not who, but what? Is that your own peculiar call?"

"You're . . . talking."

"So are you," the owl replied.

"But . . . how?"

"Well," said the owl. "How does anyone talk?"

The question stumped Otis.

"Does it really matter?" the owl asked.

Otis had to agree. "Probably not."

"Well, then, let us proceed."

"Proceed to what?"

"Well, if I'm sitting here talking, there must be a point. How often do you get to converse with an owl? We don't talk to just anybody."

Again, Otis conceded. A talking owl was not something you usually encountered. If an owl was talking, there was probably a reason for it.

"Okay," said Otis. "I guess you got somethin to say."

"As do you," said the owl.

"So . . ." Otis offered.

"You've always wanted to fly," the owl responded.

Otis considered this.

"Yeah."

"So . . . do it."

"Do what?"

"Fly."

"Fly?"

"Yes. Stop talking about it. Stop listening to a song that talks about it. Just . . . do it."

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

Otis was startled into silence. As if the bird was speaking beyond his mind, somewhere deeper, perhaps to his soul. Still, he was perplexed.

“Well, you’re a bird, and I’m just Otis. I ain’t got no wings.”

The bird crooked his head. “You don’t need wings. You just need faith.”

Otis sighed. “Easy for you to say.”

“Yes. It is. Because when I stretch my wings, I have faith. If I didn’t have any faith, my wings would be useless. Every time I jump off a branch, I assume I can fly. If I didn’t know that, if I didn’t really believe it, I’d drop like a stone.”

“Well,” said Otis. “I ain’t got that kind of faith. I’m just a man, and a hurt one at that.”

“Then you’ll never fly.”

That conclusion left Otis depressed. But why? Did he believe he could really fly? Was the owl right to question his faith? If he crawled up a tree and jumped out, what would happen? Otis shuddered to think about it, especially after his long recuperation.

The conversation was strange as it was, but the idea of Otis flying like an owl was even stranger. He found it impossible to imagine, though there had been times when he had wished it. Watching hawks and other birds.

Listening to the doves. Enjoying the light through the trees. It made him desire to be somewhere other than Earth bound. But the actual act of flying. For Otis, a big man, featherless, damaged by fire. It just wasn't possible.

"What the hickledoo you talkin about?" Otis protested. "I ain't never heard such gobbledygook. And it ain't fair that you question me when I know better."

"So I'm being unfair?" said the owl.

"Yeah. I think so."

There was silence between them. Otis expected the owl to be insulted and fly away. Instead he waited and watched Otis, as if inside Otis was an answer that Otis had simply never thought about. The owl was digging deep, helping him recover the answer. Helping him uncover his inner bird, so to speak.

Finally, the owl spoke up.

"Think about it. The best way I can explain it. When you learn to fly, your other life is only an attachment. If you can fly, you can go anywhere at any time and be anyone. Up to now, you've only imagined your own life. It's time to take those dreams and sail away into other lives. After all, if you can fly, you can go anywhere your mind takes you."

Otis could not argue with the bird. Not because he didn't want to, but because he simply didn't understand.

"Well, thanks for the advice," he said flatly.

"You're welcome."

Raising his giant wings, the owl lifted into the air and flew off like a giant dark cloud.

“So long,” said Otis.

Puzzled, he crawled back into bed, or so he thought.

The next moment, he woke up and wondered.

“Did I dream this?” he murmured. “Did I really see a talking owl?”

He couldn’t decide, but the words stuck in his head. A conversation with a giant talking owl. Didn’t make any sense. Either the talking or the advice.

At the same time, Otis wondered if he had simply missed the point. What if he could increase his faith? But how?

It thought long and hard about it, even as he cleaned up and went down to breakfast.

While he ate, he seemed distracted as Mama Reagan chatted with him.

“Otis?” she asked. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” he answered. “Just thinkin.”

“About what?”

“Birds,” he said. “Owls.”

“Oh,” she said. “Did you see one last night?”

“I don’t know,” he said and took a rather large bite of toast.

Mama Reagan looked at him puzzled, but Otis, being a man who only spoke sparingly, continued with his

breakfast. He finished his eggs and bacon and went back to his room to think some more.

Mama Reagan assumed that if he had anything to say, he'd tell her when he was good and ready.

44.

After breakfast, Otis and Audrey piled in his VW bus and took a trip back to Audreyville. They scrounged around for any item worth keeping. Most of his belongings were severely damaged. But what he found intact was considered more valuable than money.

His tapes that he had recorded were preserved. He gave them to Audrey as a gift.

“One of these days, you might want to listen to them,” he told her. “But don’t do it while I’m at your house.”

“What are they about?” Audrey asked.

“Hmm, mostly you,” he said sheepishly.

“Me?”

“Yeah. I told you. I liked you. I talked about you a lot on these tapes. So, maybe you’ll remember when you hear me. Way back when Otis took you to Audreyville and did his dance for you.”

They were all in a shoe box. She tucked them under her arm for safekeeping. It made what she had to say that much harder. But, given where they were at, she decided to tell him the truth. She sat on the floor of what was left of the old kitchen with the box of tapes nestled next to her.

“So, Otis, I got some news today I need to tell you.”

Otis sat across from her. His looks had changed drastically. No more glasses, but the scars on his face were made more prominent by the light filtering into the house. His arms were also damaged. Overall, Otis looked as if he had returned from a war.

His eyes, however, were sharp. Something had changed in Otis’s demeanor. No longer the sleepy-eyed dough boy from his earlier days. No longer the crewcut country boy that wandered the aisles of Grossman’s. He looked present, more awake, as if the lightning had done its damage, but also left its print on his demeanor.

“I’m moving,” she said. “You’re doing fine, and pretty soon, I think, you’ll be good enough to look for your own apartment. I know you got a little money coming in from your disability checks. And me, I got a plan now for my life, and it’s time to take it on.”

“Plan?” Otis questioned.

“Yeah. After all these years. I finally have a plan.”

Otis remained pensive. Audrey could tell his wheels were spinning.

“Otis, we will forever remain friends, but you and I . . .”

He waited patiently.

“Well, it’s time we moved on with our lives.”

“You mean . . .”

“Yes. I’m going to move to Knoxville. I’ve enrolled at UT. I’m starting there in the fall. I think I’m going to major in special ed. So, it’s time I told you goodbye.”

Otis didn’t speak.

Audrey could tell the news was running through him like the electricity that had hit him when he was dancing.

“Well, I think that’s good for you,” he said hesitantly.

“I’m going to come back and visit, but we don’t have a future, not as boyfriend girlfriend anyway. We’re just friends. And I hope we’ll always be friends.”

Again, Otis hesitated. “Always,” he said quietly. “That ain’t never gonna change. Not as long as you want to.”

“I’ll take these tapes and listen to them. I promise to keep them safe.”

“Yeah. I hope you do. Then again, I’m a little embarrassed . . . now.”

“Don’t be.”

“Cain’t really help it. I said some pretty mushy stuff.”

Audrey couldn’t respond. Anything more and she would break down.

Otis stood up and wandered around the house.

“Sure is sad to see this place burnt.”

Audrey gazed around and noticed her charred picture on the wall.

“Well, I don’t think anyone’s claimed this property. Maybe someday you can buy it and build another house.”

“Yeah,” he said weakly. Then he turned to her. “I’m a gonna build it?” It was framed as a question.

“You’re gonna,” she said.

Otis walked to his old dance stage. It was the most damaged area of the house. The large branch that had fallen still covered the stage. It was too large to move and the area surrounding it was nothing but blackened boards.

“No more Otis dance,” he said sadly.

“There will always be a place for Otis to dance,” she answered. “You could dance in this kitchen if you wanted. You could dance at our house. Anyplace is a good place for an Otis dance.”

“Not without you.”

She bent a little as if he had struck her. She took a moment to recover and regain her train of thought.

“The Otis dance belongs to you, Otis. You don’t need me to Otis dance. Do the dance because you’re . . . Otis.”

“And Audreyville?”

“Not Audreyville. Otisville. Again, it’s *your* house. You built this. This place is your home. You started it long before you ever met me. Take it back. Make it yours again.”

Otis gave this some serious thought.

“I’m tryin to understand. I guess I’m a little slow in thought. Some of these things are hard for me.”

“You’re not slow, Otis. You’re smart and capable. You just have to have faith in yourself.”

Otis looked startled.

“What?” she said.

“That’s what the owl said.”

“The owl?”

“Yeah, he came to visit me last night. He said I needed to fly, and in order to fly, I had to have faith.”

Now it was Audrey’s turn to be puzzled. “What owl?”

Otis stopped in his tracks. “Ah, I don’t think you would understand. Truth is, I don’t understand neither. But that’s what he said. Then again, I don’t know who believes in a talkin owl. I’m just goin on like I’m the crazy one.”

“Otis, that is a very strange story.”

Otis smiled. “Yeah. Ain’t that the story of my life. I ain’t nothin but weird. My brain is weird. I don’t see things like most people. That’s the problem. I don’t know how to live in your world. My world, it’s . . .”

He stopped explaining.

Perplexed, Audrey stood up. “Otis, I think it’s time to go home.”

“Yeah, I agree,” said Otis.

They walked out in silence.

They drove home in silence.

For the next three days, Otis didn’t say a word. As if he had locked his head in a struggle to make sense of his own statement, and words were not to be wasted. He needed time and space to drill down and find the owl’s meaning. And only Otis could make sense of that.

45.

A week later, Otis returned to Audreyville.

Nothing had changed since he and Audrey had visited. Only this time, he was alone.

Otis had thought about all the words that had been shared with him over the last week. He thought about what he might do with his life now that Audrey was leaving.

He looked around the place, that towering palace that he had built board by board, scrap by scrap.

In its heyday, it had its own sense of character. It was not unified like other houses. The parts were still parts, but he had constructed it to be just that. Small parts of a whole, like his life, built from pain, loneliness, imagination, joy, and the grit of the land.

The fire hadn't changed that. It may have damaged the structure but not the character. It was still Otisville, as Audrey had suggested. It was still part of his memories.

Yes, the house had been burned by fire, but the rain had helped reduce the fire's severity. It was up to him whether he wanted to repair it or build another Otisville somewhere else. But first, he had to find his faith. The house was a part

of that, but he had to take the next step. He had to learn to fly.

As for the oak tree, it had been split but survived, and from Otis's view, there was new growth taking place. Like Otis himself, the tree seemed to be recovering from certain death. He felt a bond in their common plight.

The stage was charred but the kitchen was intact. Audrey had suggested this. And so . . .

Otis had brought a boom box. He had bought the tape. Bob Crow and the River. The album with the eagle spread across the front cover. He cleared out the kitchen and prepared to dance.

The guitar strummed. When the vocals began, Otis sang in a clear voice. "I look at my life, sometimes I want to scream . . ."

Otis revealed to the birds and leaves and the wind that he could sing. Just like Bob. His voice reverberated throughout the meadow as his feet moved and his arms waved. "We're born and just can't help it, being what we are . . ."

Otis sang every word. At this moment in time, in this isolated place, he was the front man for The River. He finished the final phrase. "I'm a free man in a blue sky flying high."

Otis lifted his head to the ceiling, raised his arms, and acknowledged the visible and invisible audience. He took a stage bow.

“Thank you,” he said to anyone listening. He had grown his hair long and curly. He looked like a larger version of Crow himself.

He turned off the tape and sat quietly in the kitchen.

This was a different Otis. Clear-eyed and certain of himself. Damaged from the fire, but not destroyed. The old Otis in his king’s costume had been transformed into someone entirely different.

No, this was certainly not the old Otis. The jeans and T-shirt Otis. Whatever the effects of the lightning, it had certainly changed the man. If the town stood and examined him, they would not recognize who he was. Perhaps a professor. Perhaps an architect. Perhaps a lawyer. Perhaps a famous rock star. Not the man who worked at Grossman’s Market.

So, what of his life now? What about having the faith to fly? Well, that was something he had thought about for quite some time. The owl had simply reminded him of the importance of the subject. More than thinking about flying, Otis needed to *really* fly. Not in his mind. In the air. In the sky.

One moment that he had told nobody about while he was rehabbing, something he had discovered quite by accident one afternoon while he sat by himself in a wheel chair in a yard at Vanderbilt.

In a moment of meditation, he felt his body lift from the chair and rise. Not far. Not long. But it was the first

moment that Otis had realized the damage from the lightning had also created something else in his body. He had been gifted with another talent, unbeknownst to him or anyone else, and it had taken all this time for him to acknowledge what had happened. Had the lightning been responsible for this? Had he been super charged in a way that he had only seen in the movies or read in the comics?

Yes, he thought. Something good had happened to him and for months, he had waited for the right moment to test it out. The owl had confirmed it. The owl had silenced his doubts. Now, he decided that the owl was right. It was time to exercise that dream.

He stood and found the ladder that rose up the tree to his spy hole. He tested to make sure it was intact. A little shaky, but Otis, slimmed down from all his therapy and a definite change in diet, thought it would hold him.

He climbed slowly, taking each step carefully, lest he lose his grip and fall. His heart raced. He began to sweat.

Up at the top, he stood and watched the birds sail in the clear blue sky. Today there were sparrows and swallows and crows in abundance. Across the horizon, a red-tailed hawk.

He followed the hawk. His vision had improved to 20-20. He calculated in his head how fast the bird traveled. He noticed the tiny brown squares under its wings, and from those wings, more feathers extended like gentle fingers. It

swooped and swirled high above, riding the wind's currents.

Otis raised his arms like wings and closed his eyes. From twenty-five feet in the air, he stood on his tiptoes and sensed the wind beneath his feet. He rose slowly. He was the picture of a Mexican god with the sun to his back.

Up he rose, then tilted like the hawk itself and flew off into the blue sky. To join the hawk perhaps, or to simply dream of being something else. An eagle or a falcon. Whatever that may be, it was obvious that from this moment on, Otis Barner was a free man.