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Dirty South

It started the way things always started, with the list.

How had we ever survived without the list, we wondered; how had we ever advertised our yard sales or found our lost pets or passed along our castoff IKEA furniture? Without it, how would we hire our nannies, our landscapers, our plumbers, or the housecleaners whom even the most politically incorrect among us knew better than to call *maids*?

Maids, that shameful history! Maids, who fifty years ago had taken the bus up Peachtree Street, who belonged to our grandparents' generation. Our housecleaners worked in pairs, they pulled up at curbs throughout the neighborhood in secondhand Toyotas with missing hubcaps, and then they sprinted up driveways with their caddies of cleaning supplies because—because time was of the essence.

How had we ever survived without the list? Sometimes our question was an almost zen-like koan posted on the list itself. If a tree fell in a forest did it make a sound if there was no one to hear it? What *was* the sound of one hand clapping?

Without the list, how could we shame our neighbors, who ran stop signs, and shot squirrels in their backyards with BB guns, and deposited dog shit in *our* Herby Curbies, all from the safe remove of our desks at work, twenty miles away?

Without the list, how could we touch a match to the brittle tinder of our fears and set them alight?

Just as guns did not kill people (*people* killed people, an axiom that appeared on the list whenever the front door of a house in the neighborhood was kicked in), the list itself was neither good nor evil. The list was just a tool ("Used by tools," grumbled 1075 Sherman Avenue to 933 Walker Street, over beers after the neighborhood softball practice), one that most of the time facilitated community.

Occasionally, it could even be a force for good. What other than the list, 933 Walker countered to 1075 Sherman, had mustered the army of volunteers to paint over the obscene graffiti sprayed on vacant buildings owned by “the Bank”? How it had rallied us, after the freak windstorm upended fifty of the majestic oak trees that had been planted along the winding streets a hundred years ago!

Before they fell, those oaks had been tall enough to shade all those maids as they waited so patiently for the bus, on the same streets where, by the time we came along, bus service no longer existed.

Even the cranks among us had to agree: The fact that buses no longer trundled through the neighborhood, that no one had *maids*, was, ultimately, a good thing.

Once, long ago, soldiers barely more than boys had picketed their horses on the ridge that bisected the neighborhood. They had huddled around their campfires, and then, at some point during the next few hot July afternoons, they’d lain down on the ground and died. Right *here*—where streets would one day curve, named after the generals in charge of the carnage.

And once, less long ago, farmers had stood in the cotton fields where our houses would be built and assessed the sky. Because, back then, any person who could read that bland, indifferent face could divine things. When to plant, when to harvest. When to provide supplemental water, when to head for the cellar. When to dust one’s hands of the whole business and call in an auctioneer.

We, on the other hand, had mortgages that required that we work in windowless offices. We got in our Siennas and Highlanders and drove away from our houses at dawn. We pulled back in our driveways at dusk. Without the list, we might live next to our neighbors for decades and not know their names.

The list was the only instrument we had—for taking our collective pulse. On it, passions ebbed and flowed with comforting regularity. Particular times of year begat certain stridencies (the first week of the school year, we debated traffic; the last week of school, we argued over crime). Other seasons becalmed us in their doldrums (the month of December; holiday weekends).

“Have you noticed how you can practically set your watch by it?” 1075 Sherman pointed out as he and 933 Walker lingered over their pints at the Eastside Burglar Bar, the brewpub at the edge of the

neighborhood that had opened the previous spring. Since cleats were not allowed inside the restaurant, they were sitting on the patio. Mid-July: Only fools and smokers and middle-aged men begrimed with a mixture of sweat and red dust gained from unnecessarily sliding in at home plate (*unnecessarily* because who were we kidding? It was softball we were playing, not professional ball.) would choose to sit outside. The sticky air blowing off the thoroughfare running past the patio was a heady mixture of tar and exhaust and sunbaked clay and garbage the City hadn't bothered to pick up for over two weeks. What Sherman meant was: The list had its own seasons, its own rhythms. Whenever it was wracked by a vicious exchange that got participants taking sides, or refusing to speak when they met in person, or—worst case scenario—*unsubscribing*, a bystander, some person who up to that moment hadn't even participated in the conversation at all would *always* pipe up and suggest:

We should all meet IRL.

IRL.

In real life.

—*We should have a party!*

—*We should block off a street and somebody should get the Burglar Bar to sponsor us and donate some kegs!*

—*The vacant lot would make a great place to do that.*

“There’s always somebody who’s like a character from one of those old Judy Garland/Mickey Rooney movies,” said Sherman. “You know—*Hey, I’ve got an idea! Let’s put on a show! I’ll build the set! You can take tickets!* Like it’s so easy. Like any of us really wants to spend a whole Saturday morning clearing crap out of a vacant lot.”

Walker had no clue what kind of movie Sherman was talking about. He wasn't sure *Sherman* was even old enough to remember the sort of movie he meant. Sometimes he thought Sherman (who lived four doors around the corner from him, though he hadn't realized this until they started playing on the same softball team) was all three of the sorts who frequented the patio at the brewpub: a fool, a smoker, a middle-aged man bent on reliving his glory days through athletics. Who on earth smelled of smoke these days? Most of the time, Sherman smelled like the inside of a chimney, a quality that, coupled with his shaved pate and neat goatee, gave him an almost satanic mien.

“You gonna go, man?” he said, interrupting Sherman’s monologue.

"I don't know." Sherman paused and thought. "My wife already volunteered me to help. So, yeah, I guess so."

The vacant lot in the middle of our neighborhood had always been there. Had always been vacant.

"Always is a really, really long time," Sherman said to his wife as the two of them stowed tools in the cargo hold of their Explorer the next morning: rakes, loppers, clippers, chainsaw, yard waste bags.

"Yes, it is, Mister Master of the Obvious," said his wife. She smiled, taking the sting from her words. Her nose crinkled as she looked up at him. That crinkle, the oversized, paint-spattered Pointer overalls she wore (a deliberate irony, from Tractor Supply Co.), the red bandanna that held back her hair, taken together, they made her resemble—not just the girl he had almost, *almost* been able to glimpse twenty years ago in the efficient, career-minded businesswoman he had married, but also Mary Ann from *Gilligan's Island*.

The vacant lot was an eyesore. Always had been.

"Always is a really ..."

Sherman's wife shot him a reproving look. The night before, he had told Walker she'd volunteered him to assist with clearing the vacant lot ("a public health hazard," 243 Hardee Street had reminded everyone when the idea of a party held there had first been bandied about on the list), but he'd managed to forget that by the time their morose, tattooed waitperson circled back to the table to see if they wanted a second, and then a third, pint. He was paying for that forgetfulness now, just as he was paying for having such a civic-minded wife, one who scanned the list and separated the chaff from the wheat and cut through the bullshit, the same way she did at work.

"There'll be doughnuts and coffee." Her tone of voice implied that the doughnuts were a deliberate *sop*, one thrown to the vocal minority on the list who had suggested a keg and a party.

"Doughnuts?" their son said, looking up from where he squatted beside the driveway. He had been poking at the anthill that marred their front yard, an elaborate earthen edifice Sherman had admired as he started carrying tools out to the SUV.

"Not for you," Sherman's wife said, looking down at him. "I already packed you your own snack. To take with us. One even better."

Sometimes Sherman thought his wife saw their son as an equation she hoped to solve, a code she would crack, a knot that could be teased

apart, if her fingers were just nimble, just clever, just patient enough. *Artificial dyes*, she'd speculated at first, and then, more desperately: *Do you think the problem might be gluten?* "It's like a power bar," she told their son. "But with dates in it. You like dates. Remember?"

Sherman slammed the Explorer's hatch and patted her arm. Twenty years of marriage allowed him to hear the thready *wisp* of discouragement in her voice, which resembled the flare of a kitchen match, or, maybe more accurately, the temporary smoke as it was shook out, extinguished. Their son was once again intent upon his anthill, knees practically pulled to his chest as he crouched in front of it, mesmerized by the ants' frantic movements.

When Sherman had been his son's age, the immolation of the fire ants that had just started marching relentlessly north from Florida—*Solenopsis invicta*, his own erratic, ant-like mind supplied—had occupied the whole summer he was eleven. He and his friends had discussed strategies, marshaled forces, and mounted a two-pronged attack. Of fire and then water, brought to the mounds in buckets. Where had they gotten their hands on *gasoline*? Sherman wondered. Or matches? His son had never once struck a match in his life. "Come on, son," he said. "Let's leave that for right now. The ants aren't going anywhere. The ants'll be there when we get home."

Through the cracked front door came the sound of quarreling voices. His wife walked back out. "Tough," she said over her shoulder. "We're all going. Together."

Sherman's daughter appeared in the doorway. At some point in the past few weeks he had woken up to find her transformed. Suddenly, she was a corona of wild hair, a slouch, a beauty marred with the same sort of alert, almost scientific curiosity his son focused, laser-like, on things like anthills. Who knew just *what* might boil out of his daughter as a result of her brutal self-scrutiny?

Puberty, his wife hazarded.

Was that what this was? It pained him.

"There'll be doughnuts," Sherman said, to all of them. To none of them. Because *bribery* was what life came down to in the long run. As he pulled open the driver's side door, his son turned away from the car and marched back up the walk. Sherman stared at his back.

"Where's he going?"

"He forgot his stuff." Sherman's daughter's voice from inside the car was oddly patient, oddly adult.

“What stuff?”

What could he need? They were going to a neighborhood cleanup.

“His *stuff*, Dad. That deck of cards he takes everywhere. He needs you to unlock the front door so he can go back inside and get it.”

There were certain people in the neighborhood, we agreed among ourselves, who had *missed the memo*.

What *was* the memo?

You could argue that there were a number of memos. One being, *don't have kids when you're old*. There were those among us who wondered, not publicly of course, not *on the list*, because even though the internet was the root of all evil, there were certain things we refrained from saying even there, but we wondered sometimes if Sherman's son might have been less ... quirky ... if he and his wife had gotten down to business earlier. (We had read studies.)

But the main memo was—*things have changed*.

Things had changed. Most of all, we didn't want to meet IRL—in *real life*. We preferred the list that so neatly encapsulated the narrative of our lives. On the list, the sky was always the limit. On it, the overgrown lot that straggled down the ridge and drove a wedge of blight into the heart of the neighborhood had already been transformed by the power of suggestion into a park, a school, an outdoor movie theater, a bocce ball court, a community garden, an organic market, and a food truck court.

Dream big! someone had egged us on, so we had. Somebody else knew somebody who lived someplace where their neighborhood had actually *reclaimed DOT right of way* and turned it into a park. Or maybe they'd planted community gardens around the scaffolding of the power transformers. Or was it that they had turned an abandoned City alley into a pedestrian walkway?

We couldn't help but agree (and this was a first, because the list didn't lend itself to agreement) that there would be a certain poetic justice to taking such a useless piece of property, of value to no one, and turning it into something that would bring the entire neighborhood together.

First things first, though: We had to clear it.

All of us were all from somewhere else.

Although more and more often, the *somewhere else* we were from hardly existed. It had been swallowed up. By what? We hardly even knew ourselves. All the same, that *somewhere else* was still our template.

There had been cul-de-sacs there, we thought (a dim memory), and newspapers tossed onto lawns at four o'clock each afternoon, by a boy older than us who had had a good bike and a pitcher's squint.

There had been nothing to do.

There had been sprinklers.

We had rushed from that *somewhere else* to this place, and on our way we'd sped past billboards advertising things that were just up the road, and eroded red-clay gullies, and mare's nests of barbed wire and discarded tires. All knit together by a green tangle of vegetation that had gotten out of hand.

The lumpy green blanket of kudzu that covered everything was our birthright. We had read our James Dickey back at Georgia and Auburn and Tech and Alabama, and we knew about the land we'd inherited. We knew it was a falsehood, that if you opened your windows at night (a thing none of us had done since we had lived in the un-air-conditioned *somewhere else* of our childhoods), you could hear it growing. It was a falsehood that its broad, handed leaves smelled of the Kool-Aid we hadn't drunk since then either. Or that in the dark it sent questing fingers over the blacktop of county-maintained roads.

We knew all these things. But none of us had ever seen what lay underneath it.

The lot was shoehorned in between the ridge where those long-ago gallant laddies in gray had laid down their lives and Lee Elementary School and an overmuscled, two-story neo-traditional painted Bunglehouse Blue.

The house had been built during the few heady months pre-downtown when the neighborhood smelled of paint and lumber, when it rang with the ricochet of nail guns, back when it was worthwhile to take an old house down to its studs and then build it back up with an extra story and a garage and stainless and granite and cherry and miles of glossy subway tile.

In fact, it was the woman who had bought the house after it was foreclosed on who first focused our attention on the vacant lot. She

logged onto the list and said: The kudzu that covered the vacant lot kept crossing her property line. In the night, it felt for the seams in the rectangles of zoysia sod that had been unrolled to cover the clay. When she walked out to her car in the morning, she was greeted by a brutal red checkerboard where *lawn* had been the afternoon before. She'd cut the vines back with loppers, and she'd cut the vines back with a weed whacker. She'd sprayed Roundup.

All she wanted to know now was—*who could she call?*

We tried not to hold it against her, but we all still remembered the way the developer who built the house on spec had cut down a giant magnolia and half a dozen perfectly healthy oak trees. We tried not to remind ourselves of how, the morning after the trees vanished into the chipper, the guy who lived in the house on Simpson Street with the *Don't Tread on Me* flag had argued BETTER TO BEG FORGIVENESS THAN TO ASK PERMISSION, starting the extended argument that led to his decision to put his house on the market the following month.

The list was neither bad nor good. We all knew that.

All the same, we had to go through our usual back-and-forth.

First, we denigrated City services, so often nonexistent.

Then we reminisced about the old days, when stolen cars and piles of bald tires had been ditched in the same lot. Didn't she (the Original Poster) know how lucky she was, with her little First-World problem, of kudzu?

In the end, Sherman's wife, who worked for the City we so maligned, had looked up the parcel and determined that it had been in a limbo of back taxes and title for years. Who owned it?

Who knew?

The fact was, we could do whatever we wanted.

And what we wanted to do was to clear every vine, every tendril, every sprout, every *speck*, of kudzu away, until all that remained was a pristine surface.

"What do you think makes it so *lumpy*?" Sherman's daughter said to Walker, unhooking a bright red lozenge of earbud from the side of her head closest to him. The two of them stood at the edge of the lot.

"Bushes," Walker suggested. "Trees?" You had to admire the kudzu's green spillage. It cascaded down the hillside from the railroad tracks; it rose in pillars. Its spires made him think of photographs he'd seen in *National Geographic*, of Machu Picchu.

Despite the midsummer heat, Sherman's daughter was dressed entirely in black, save for her forest-green Doc Martens. She gave Walker a look tinged with contempt and lowered her eyes to the oblong of phone in her hand. Tiny beads of perspiration had gathered at her hairline. The curve of her upper lip was so tender—

How could an *oaf*-like Sherman possess such beautiful offspring?

Someone had at least had the foresight to bring a canopy. It had been erected over a folding table holding a single box of doughnuts and a case of bottled water. Maybe not foresight, Walker amended. Maybe just optimism. Because there were only three bent-over figures toiling on the hillside beyond the awning. Three! Out of the cast of thousands on the list who'd professed their love for the idea of clearing the lot. A fourth person sat cross-legged on the ground in the meager patch of shade thrown by the awning. A child, Walker saw, no one you could count. It had rained during the night, after he and Sherman had said their goodbyes at the Burglar Bar, sometime after he'd driven home and left his clay-crusted cleats outside his front door. The sun didn't have a chance against the humidity that made a sopping sponge of the air. It would never be able to burn it off.

Walker regretted coming.

"Don't you wish you weren't ... here?" Sherman's daughter said loudly beside him.

The question was so obviously rhetorical that Walker knew better than to answer. One of the figures out in the lot, having spotted him, straightened.

"The more the merrier." Sherman's wife hurried toward him. Her forced gaiety told Walker everything he needed to know. *She* was the one who'd brought the doughnuts and water. She stood beside him with her hands on her hips, redolent of bug spray.

"We got kind of a system going on now," she explained.

On the other side, her daughter snorted.

"Cut, yank, grub out the roots where you can." Sherman's wife's voice rose. "Leave the vines in a pile for Grace. She's putting them into leaf bags for us."

"I can take over that," Walker offered, looking at Sherman's daughter's black getup. "Too bad there's nothing you can *do* with it."

"Do with it?"

"I don't know—like, burn it for fuel or build houses for poor people from bricks made out of it or something."

“Or eat it,” a voice supplied. Walker looked down at the boy who’d been sitting under the awning, a miniature Sherman if there ever was one: same stocky build, same sandy eyebrows, same hair cropped close enough to reveal the pale scalp underneath. The boy and Sherman must go to the barbershop together. “Humans should eat it.”

“Or smoke it,” suggested the girl. She shoved a ropy mat of wilting vegetation into a bag. Walker waited for a reprimand, but Sherman’s wife didn’t hear. Or maybe she was already exhausted. Or maybe she’d long ago discovered that it was wisest to just choose your battles. It was possible that all three of those options coexisted in the slump of her shoulders.

“Guess I’ll get to work,” he said to her back.

“Watch this first,” the boy said to him. “Pick a card, any card.” He held out a deck.

“He counts them,” the girl explained. “Like Rain Man.”

“Pick a card, any card,” the boy repeated. His eyes glittered.

The card Walker plucked from the fanned sheaf felt furred by long handling.

“An ace,” the boy chanted. “An ace, an ace, an ace.”

We *got* it. We knew the list was a blunt instrument—but it was all we had.

Besides, there were things the list was very good at. On it, we found contractors and babysitters and dog walkers and underemployed neighbors willing to wait in line at the DMV for us. Joint statements posted to it requested our kindness when marriages went south, and thus, we knew which houses would soon be on the market. The list was the one thing that told us when a hoodie-clad stranger walking down the street had activated the *Spidey* sense of one of our neighbors that indicated (as far as they were concerned) that the walker was *up to no good*.

The list was pretty good at showing us which way the wind blew.

Sherman’s wife beckoned, and the third figure straightened and shaded its eyes with one hand and then waded through the knee-high vines toward them. The third figure’s name was Pete, Walker learned, no street address given. His job: to beat at the matted overgrowth with the handle of a rake. Because—*why?* Sherman’s wife handed Walker a pair of leather work gloves.

Because who knew—just what was down in there.

Walker recoiled before he could stop himself. “There’s got to be a better way,” he said. “There used to be some guy with goats,” Pete agreed. “He trucked them down from his place in the mountains. But nobody could find him on the list. I guess he just went out of business.”

“It goes faster than you’d think.” Sherman’s wife handed Walker a pair of loppers. “Just let Pete work ahead of you.”

Elegy. *Elegy* had been done to death long before the list came along. *Elegy* wasn’t anything we had much time for.

Besides, what was there to be elegiac about?

Shrimpers, whose hand-over-hand rhythm as they pulled in their nets near Savannah was similar to Walker’s as he set himself to the vines, reeling them in? Laborers, who similarly stooped in the furrows of fields outside Waycross and Perry?

The shrimp were mostly gone, also the shrimpers; likewise the crops. And the farmers. We’d missed all but the tail-end of that time, and who needed the sluice of sweat so heavy as you worked that you had to stop and blink it from your stinging eyes over and over again? We gained our calluses at the gym. Who wanted the oppressive, full-bodied reek that Walker was beginning to notice coming from the ground underneath him, not bad, exactly, not of something rotten (the relief he felt made him realize he’d feared this) but earthy and overblown, threaded through with—what? Grape? Last night’s rain? He straightened and swiped sweat from his forehead. The boy still sat cross-legged under the sunshade, placing a row of cards on the ground in front of him. The girl stared up at the sky and fiddled with her iPhone. Yard waste bags stuffed full of kudzu stretched down the sidewalk like a row of bodies, dead, sleeping, who knew?

Sherman’s wife was a type: She preferred order to chaos. Sherman and Pete attacked vines; yanked; retreated. Except for a pause to drain a water bottle under the awning and to pick a card from the deck his son held out to him, Sherman worked steadily. Walker found this industry surprising—was this the same middle-aged guy who hardly broke into a jog on the softball field? He usually walked the bases.

The sun was at its zenith, but they had made headway.

In high school, Walker had ambled along trails worn into the less frequented parts of his hometown. By the time he did so, all that was

left of the warehouses those paths led to were their foundations, overrun by vines like these, perfect spots to smoke pot. Which he had. With his best friend, a person he lost touch with, whose father had tried to force him on the straight-and-narrow in the manner of Southern fathers since time immemorial. Only not with switches but with whiplike lengths of orange Hot Wheels track.

A few years later, when Walker headed up to UGA, the infamous fraternity where the brothers celebrated Old South Day in full Confederate regalia had just been torn down.

Loathing battled with love in his heart. In elementary school, he had stared dreamily out the car window during long trips, certain that you could pitch a tent in this stuff, that it would be cozy underneath its green canopy, like a fort made out of bedclothes.

You couldn't get rid of it, you couldn't bundle it away. To occupy himself, he started making lists in his head. Of things it made him think of: the slick blue coil of intestines slithering from the belly of a deer when you field dressed it. Downed power lines sparking in the street after tornadoes. The snakes that knotted themselves under the paving stones set outside his house by the people who'd owned it before him; when he decided to move them, he'd seen the distinctive Hershey's Kiss pattern that meant *copperhead* before he even spotted the triangular head.

Absorbed in the memory of that clean slice of the shovel, he mistook the sudden surprised shout that rang out across the lot for part of his reverie.

"Jesus Lord," Sherman swore, a long, reverent exhale. Hearing him, Walker's first thought was *yes, yes, what other profanity can you expect from some guy who suggested The Crackers as a suitable name for the neighborhood softball team?* That had been one of the debates that had died down and then been fanned back into flames: the name of the team; was it offensive to call the police helicopter whose searchlight raked their backyards at night *the Ghetto Bird?* Who cared if somebody referred to the house where the owners never mowed the grass as *Boo Radley's?*

"Damn, man," Sherman said. "Get the hell over here and *help* us."

Walker trotted over, expecting to see the greenery speckled with red. The sling blade Pete wielded had been an accident waiting to happen, none of them knew what the hell they were doing, coming out here had

been a stupid idea in the first place. Pete was on his hands and knees pawing at the leaves. “Shit,” Sherman said, staring down at the lumpy green bulge in front of them. Maybe he always cursed in front of his daughter, maybe he’d just forgotten himself. She and his wife had drawn close, to look at what lay there in the kudzu.

Pete yanked at the vines like he was pulling a quilt off a bed. Revealing a jacket, a pair of pants, the tarnish on a row of brass buttons. Sherman stooped. Who knew what color the jacket was? It had been out in the weather so long it had gone mossy.

The old man wearing it sat up and blinked.

“Mother *fuck*.” Walker backed away.

Somewhere along the way, he’d grabbed up the hoe Sherman had dropped, thinking *snakes*. He still held it extended in one hand. Pete was already brushing leaf mold from the old man’s shoulders, as ceremoniously as a body servant with a clothes brush. The old man peered at them from one rheumy eye. The other was just a massed scar, an indentation, nothing more than socket. The dashing cavalry-style mustache that drooped over the old man’s upper lip had yellowed; it needed, Walker found himself thinking, a good laundering.

Sherman’s son ducked underneath Walker’s outstretched hand.

“Would you like to come sit in the shade?” he said in a piping, formal voice. He took the old man by the elbow and helped him to his feet.

Walker’s head throbbed. A hawk wheeled overhead. He took one last look at the space they had cleared and made a beeline for the awning.

Somebody had come up with a folding chair for the old man. Walker suspected Sherman’s wife had extracted it from the back of the Explorer, where she stood storing tools, the stiff set of her back a message—no way would she be a party to *this*. Sherman’s daughter was already on the front seat, leaning toward the radio.

Pete threw back his head and downed a bottle of water, his Adam’s apple working. “Pretty good day’s work,” he addressed them all as he crumpled the plastic bottle and dropped it on the ground. “Wouldn’t you say?”

Their efforts had left the lot denuded and clean. The vines would come back pretty quick, unless they sowed the vacant lot with—what was it they had used in the Bible?

Sherman had already found himself a place atop the table. He sat there, swinging his feet, a doughnut in one hand, his lips sandy with sugar. His son stood at the old man's knee. "Pick a card, any card," the boy said. His voice was patient, persistent. "It won't take but a second." He reached out and tugged at the sleeve of the old man's jacket, dislodging dirt, revealing a glint of—*what?* Walker wondered—gold braid?

What was it they had sowed the ground with in the Bible? He thought back to his childhood of fire and brimstone. Salt. They had sowed some patch of land with *salt* and then nothing would grow there.

Or maybe there was some industrial strength herbicide they could get ahold of, kin to Agent Orange.

"Christ." Sherman abruptly slid off the table. "Leave him be, son."

Staring at him, Walker thought, *This could go either way*. Sherman might snatch up the deck of cards and toss it in the air. Or he might pick a card from it. He might lay a gentle, dirty hand atop the boy's buzzcut—but then on the other hand, he might just take the boy by the shoulders and shake him and shake him and shake him, until his head lolled.

"Nobody wants to mess with those damn cards." Sherman's voice was harsh. "How many times have I got to tell you? Quit that fooling—"

But his intentions, whatever they might have been, were arrested. A coughing fit hunched the old man, shaking his shoulders. The four of them watched as he fished in one breast pocket with a hand spotted with dirt. It shook with palsy as it raised a pocket square to his lips and hacked into it.

The old man lowered the handkerchief. He unfolded it, allowing them to see the lump of lead in the center of the white square.

Picking up the bullet between his thumb and one finger, he turned and offered it to the boy with old-fashioned courtesy, a gift that, so magically coughed up, was the single thing that had the power to silence them all.