

# 1

She passed a dead dog on her way to the tenant shack. It was already stiff, the legs poker-straight in rigor. It had been a big dog, maybe dun-colored; with only a quick glimpse, Catherine could not be sure. It was covered in the fine powdery dust that every passing vehicle threw up from the dirt road in the dry Delta summer.

In her rearview mirror she saw the cloud raised by her passage hanging in the air after she had passed, a cloud dividing endless rows of cotton. But the road was too poor to allow many backward glances.

She wondered briefly why someone had been driving so fast on the caked and rutted dirt that he had not seen the dog in time to swerve.

A sideways look at the cotton told Catherine that it would make a sad crop this year. The heat had lasted too long, unbroken by rain.

This land was Catherine's, had been her great grandfather's; but Catherine rented it out as her father had done. She was glad she did as she recalled her grandfather's irascibility in bad years, when she had ridden with him across 'the place,' as cotton planters called their acres.

She didn't remember the heat of those dim summers equaling the ferocity of this one. Even this early in the morning, with dawn not too long past, Catherine was

beginning to sweat. Later in the day the glare would be intolerable, without considerable protection, to all but the swarthiest. To someone of Catherine's whiteness of skin it would be disastrous.

She pulled to a stop under an oak, killed the motor and got out. The oak was the only tree to break the stretch of the fields for miles. She stood in its sprawling shadow with her eyes closed, the heat and silence enveloping her. She wrapped herself in them gladly.

The silence came alive. A grasshopper thudded its way across the road from one stand of cotton to the next. A locust rattled at her feet.

She opened her eyes reluctantly and, after reaching into the car for the things she had brought with her, began to walk down the road to the empty tenant shack standing to one side of the intersection of two dirt roads.

The fields were empty of tractors and farm hands. Nothing stirred in the vast brilliant flatness but Catherine.

The sack in her left hand clanked as she walked. The gun in her right hand reflected the sun.

Her mother had raised her to be a lady. Her father had taught her how to shoot.

Catherine laid the gun on a stump in the packed-dirt yard of the tenant house. The bare wood of the house was shiny with age and weathering. A few traces of red paint still clung in the cracks between the planks.

It'll all fall down soon, she thought.

The outhouse behind the shack had collapsed months ago.

Under the spell of the drugging heat and hush, she made an effort to move quietly. The clank of the empty cans was jarring as she pulled them out of the sack and set them in a neat row across the broad stump.

She hardly glanced at the black doorless hole of the shack's entrance. She did notice that the sagging porch

seemed even closer to deserting the rest of the house than it had the last time she had driven out of town to shoot.

The dust plumed under her feet as she paced away from the stump. She counted under her breath.

A trickle of sweat started down the nape of her neck, and she was irritated that she had forgotten to bring an elastic band to lift the black hair off her shoulders.

The twinge of irritation faded as she turned to face the stump. Her head bowed. She concentrated on her body's memory of the gun.

In one motion, her head snapped back, her knees bent slightly, her left hand swung up to grip her rising right forearm, and she fired.

A can flew up in the air, landing with a hollow jangle under the steps rising to the porch. Then another. And another.

By the time only one can was left, Catherine was mildly pleased with herself. She dampened her self-congratulations with the reflection that she was, after all, firing from short range. But then, a .32 was not meant for distance shooting.

The last can proved stubborn. Catherine emptied the remaining bullets from the gun at it. She cursed mildly under her breath when the can remained obstinately unpunctured and upright.

It's a good time for a break, she decided.

She trudged back to the stump and collapsed, with her back against its roughness. Pulling a plastic bullet box from a pocket in her blue jeans, she set it on the ground beside her. She eased the pin from the chamber, letting it fall into her hand. She reloaded lazily, full of the languorous peace that follows catharsis.

When the gun was ready, she didn't feel like rising.

Let the can sit, she thought. It deserves to stay on the stump.

She was enjoying the rare moment of relaxation. She

laced her fingers across her stomach and noticed that they were leaving smudges on her white T-shirt. Her jeans were coated with dust now. She slapped her thigh lightly and watched the motes fly up.

I'll go home, she thought comfortably, and pop every stitch I have on into the washer. And I'll take a long, long shower. And then—

There was no 'then.'

But I'm better, she continued, smoothly gliding over the faint uneasiness that had ruffled her peace. I'm better now.

A horsefly landed on her arm, and she slapped at it automatically. It buzzed away in pique, only to be replaced in short order by one of its companions.

'Damn flies,' she muttered.

There sure are a lot of them, she thought in some surprise, as another landed on her knee. Attracted by my sweat, I guess.

That settled it. She would gather up the cans and go back to Lowfield, back to her cool quiet house.

Catherine rose and walked toward the dilapidated porch briskly, slapping at her arms as she went.

The flies were whirring in and out of the open doorway, creating a drone in the stillness. The boarded-up windows of the house and the overhanging roof of its porch combined to make a dark cave of the interior. The sun penetrated only a foot into the entrance, so the darkness seemed impenetrable by contrast.

She stooped to pick up the first can she had hit, which was lodged under the lopsided steps. The stoop leveled her with the raised floor of the house, built high to avoid flooding in the heavy Delta rains. As she reached for the punctured can, something caught at the corner of her eye, an image so odd that she froze, doubled over, her hand extended for the can.