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*Simple*  
SIMON

WILLIAM POE

# Simple Simon

William Poe

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Simple Simon met a pieman,  
Going to the fair.  
Said Simple Simon to the pieman,  
“Let me taste your ware.”

Said the pieman unto Simon,  
“Show me first your penny.”  
Said Simple Simon to the pieman,  
“Indeed I have not any.”

Simple Simon went a-fishing,  
For to catch a whale;  
But all the water he had got  
Was in his mother’s pail.

Simple Simon went to look,  
If plums grew on a thistle;  
He pricked his fingers very much,  
Which made poor Simon whistle.

He went for water in a sieve,  
But soon it all fell through;  
And now poor Simple Simon  
Bids you all adieu.

—Traditional

## CHAPTER ONE

Cocaine overtook the lives of many people during the 1980s. That seemed especially true in the Hollywood gay scene, where I was something of a fixture in the bars, especially the seedy ones. I drank too much in addition to doing drugs, and picked up one male hustler after another in a string of meaningless encounters.

I ended up strung out, broke, and nearly insane. The one good thing that came out of it all was my current lover, Thad. His full name was Thaddeus, but he hated people calling him that. His parents pronounced the “th” in his name, but he preferred “tad.” Thad and I were lovers on and off for years before I went into rehab. At times, our heated relationship led to fights that ended in our nearly killing each other. I once headed off to a bar where I knew I could find him, meat cleaver in hand. I jumped from the car and ran inside with murderous thoughts. The bartender, who knew both of us, calmed me down enough to give Thad a chance to escape. I was mad because the drunken night before, Thad had disappeared with our Boston terrier to get even with me for accusing him of flirting with another guy. When Thad sobered up at a friend’s place, he went to the bar and was going to call me, but I found out he was there first, and stormed from the house in a rage.

Thad and I had already split when I decided one night to simply drive away from Hollywood with Sean, my boyfriend of the day. My idea was to go to New York to start a career as an artist—as if a person just drives into Manhattan and announces himself. But that was the vanity

and craziness of cocaine. Sean and I did drugs in every city along the way and never made it any farther than my hometown of Sibley, a hamlet just outside of Little Rock, Arkansas. I hit my low point when Sean disappeared, and eventually checked into rehab.

Thad was the first to get sober, at a state-sponsored facility in San Diego. When he graduated from the program, he realized that I was the love of his life and that he had almost lost me for good. Thad offered to load my furniture and other belongings into a truck and bring them to Sibley, using the opportunity to rekindle our relationship—and to get me to check into Riverdell Recovery Center, literally holding my hand as I signed papers declaring myself a penniless ward of the state.

My mother, Vivian, never used words to convey it, but she knew that Thad and I were in a relationship. Thad was living with her at our home in Sibley, waiting for me to complete the program.

Getting sober my first week at Riverdell, I felt like someone who had run a marathon. I was exhausted, mentally and physically. Even so, it was hard to rest. Every time I tried to stretch out and relax, I felt a terrible urge to score some coke and rarely managed more than a catnap. If drug cravings and men snoring didn't keep me awake, then a disturbing dream would do the trick. One night, I tossed and turned until I crashed onto the Vietnam veteran sleeping in the bunk below mine.

"What's wrong with you?" the man growled as he slipped on a pair of jeans and headed for the kitchen. He often went downstairs for a late-night snack.

"Pipe down," someone called out.

Climbing into my bunk and pulling the covers over my head, I was again in the midst of a dream as five-year-old Bubby, running in circles in a sandbox, dragging a sharpened stick behind me to furrow a spiral in the sand.

Grandmother Mandy watches from the porch. "Come inside," she pleads. "Let's play Old Maid."

Little Bubby races toward the chain-link fence surrounding the yard and holds fast. Mandy hooks an arthritic finger through a belt loop.

"Leave me alone!" Bubby calls out.

My counselor at Riverdell, a man named Harris, encouraged me to talk to him about the dream. He thought it must be significant since it

recurred, in one form or another, nearly every night. Harris was a handsome, muscular fellow with a rough-hewn but trustworthy face. At a morning session, I asked him why my dream would be about trying to escape the grasp of someone who loved me. Harris, who had already discovered my creative side, thought that writing might help me understand.

"Use writing to explore the route you took to Riverdell," Harris suggested. "What were the decisions you made along the way? What drove them?" Before I could comment, he got a box of pencils and a legal pad from his desk drawer. "Start at the beginning," Harris instructed. "Tell me about Mandy."

I wasn't at all sure that writing about my experiences would help me recover from drug abuse, but I trusted Harris. On the first day at Riverdell, he had convinced me that life was worth living, and that I should stay and try his methods. The first few hours after committing myself, all it had taken was for someone to accuse me of being a faggot and I was ready to jump off a bridge. Harris called Thad and Vivian to help me realize that people who mattered loved me. Their presence was enough to keep me going on day one, but now I had to face the future.

After the evening meal, I found a quiet spot in the dorm. At first, I just stared at the lined, yellow paper. *Start at the beginning*, Harris had said. I thought about my grandmother and considered what it was like growing up in Sibley.

\* \* \*

Mandy was elderly by the time I was born, probably in her seventies, but no one knew for sure. During moments when Mandy's mind was clear, I enjoyed sitting in her lap as she thumbed through old photo albums and told me stories. Mandy was born fifteen years after the Civil War—the War of Northern Aggression, as I grew up knowing it. She told me family tales from that era as if she had lived through them herself. I learned that my ancestors came to Arkansas by wagon train and that one of my grandfathers, James Thomas "JT" Powell, was "strung up" by a band of marauders who accused him of being a Northern sympathizer because he nursed a wounded Union soldier in his home until the troops arrived to claim him. When she told the story, Mandy's face would contort into a

grimace and she'd say, "The very idea that a good Southerner shouldn't help someone in need, even if he was a thieving Yankee!"

My grandfather, Simon Bartholomew Powell, began courting Mandy during business trips to Little Rock. He owned the general store in Sibley, a small community about thirteen miles away and an arduous trip along a rutted stagecoach road. Mandy was the only daughter of a furniture manufacturer. She must have truly loved Bart, because moving with him to Sibley after they married was a step down on the social ladder. Little Rock may not have been a metropolis in the early twentieth century, but Sibley barely qualified as a village. Our family house, a timber structure built by slaves who came with the Powells from Alabama, was the largest building for miles around. We affectionately referred to it as "the mansion," though its size was the only grand thing about it. Mandy and Bart lived there for several years, and I imagine it was due to Mandy's pleas that they eventually relocated to Little Rock. Bart opened a mercantile store close to the capitol building along the main road that farmers used to bring produce to market.

Sibley retained a strong pull on my father, who took us to live in the mansion before I started school. I shared Mandy's room there, which was crammed with furniture and memorabilia that had accumulated during her long life. I slept on one of two Jenny Lind beds and kept my toys in the bottom drawer of a mahogany armoire where Mandy stored the clothes she had worn as a young woman. The long dresses with high collars and black button-up shoes eventually found use as witches' costumes at Halloween carnivals. A fox stole laid out on a special shelf made of cedar took pride of place. The wrap was so tattered that it looked like roadkill. Even so, Mandy would brush its fur and make it presentable when she felt obligated to appear at a relative's funeral, or on the infrequent occasions when someone took her into Little Rock to attend Sunday services at Immanuel Baptist Church, where Bart had been a deacon.

As a young boy, I would raid Mandy's armoire and prance around the room in her old dresses, admiring myself in the gilded full-length mirror. One afternoon, she found me sitting at the vanity in my pajamas with the fox stole draped over my shoulders. I had put on lipstick and powdered my face.

"You look adorable," Mandy cooed. "You would have made a sweet little girl." Her voice trailed off, and she sat down on the edge of her

Jenny Lind bed. She stared vacantly at the floor and mused, "We wanted a girl after the twins died."

Mandy often spoke of her twins, stillborn males buried in an unmarked grave at the family cemetery across the street from the mansion.

Though such memories brought unbearable sadness to Mandy, as a boy I preferred her pensive moments to the times she became obsessed with the idea that Bart had put bonds in a safety-deposit box during the Great Depression and that she had to find them. Mandy would get on the phone, a party line during those days, and call every bank in Little Rock. The clerks knew the Powell name and assured her that no accounts remained open. Because of the party line, every resident of Sibley knew of Mandy's obsession.

Bart was in a direct line of inheritance that stretched at least to the early 1700s. He was a wealthy man when he married the debutante Miss Amanda "Mandy" Sharp. The Great Depression was the final blow that ended the family's fortunes. By the time I came along, no one had any money. My father, Leonard "Lenny" Powell, barely survived as a plumber, and my mother, Vivian, earned a living as a bookkeeper at the local grocery store.

The circumstances of Bart's demise were legendary. Anytime I whined about Vivian letting out the hem of my pants instead of buying me new clothes, I heard the myth repeated. When farmers were struggling, Bart loaned them money. In the depths of the Depression, the farmers went bankrupt.

"Why didn't Bart take their farms?" I'd ask on cue, eliciting the well-rehearsed statement *Better that one family suffers than for many to do without*.

We were good people because Bart was willing to sacrifice.

"Let's have iced tea," I said, hoping to draw Mandy out of her stupor. While she remained on the bed, watching me, I rubbed off the lipstick and powder with a wad of tissues and put on jeans and a T-shirt. I jumped on the bed and draped the fox stole around Mandy's shoulders. She stood and took my hands. We waltzed to the rhythms of imagined music.

"Time for that tea," Mandy said, out of breath.

Mandy gripped the banister as I followed her downstairs. Once we were in the kitchen, she grasped the counter to steady herself. I dragged a chair to the refrigerator so I could reach the freezer compartment and get the ice tray. I managed to lift its metal arm and release the cubes into our

glasses. Mandy poured the tea. We sat at the table in front of the dinette window and watched our two horses standing in the corral where they had found shade under an oak tree. Their tails swished furiously as they fended off a swarm of flies.

Finishing my glass of tea, I dashed upstairs to get a deck of cards. Mandy and I played a few hands of Old Maid, but it didn't take long for her concentration to fade. I suggested a game of Hearts, but Mandy stared out the window as if she hadn't heard me.

The rest of the afternoon, Mandy studied the faces of heat-baked sunflowers that drooped in the garden near the back porch. I returned to the armoire and played dress up, occasionally going downstairs to check on her. Even as a preschooler, I was as much Mandy's guardian as she was mine.

On those long summer days, I usually rose with the sun and went outside to go exploring. Beyond the horse corral, a creek-fed pond merged with a cypress swamp that stretched for miles beyond our property. Those early mornings were treasured moments, when I didn't have to worry about Mandy, when Vivian and Lenny weren't arguing, and when my sister Connie, ten years my senior, wasn't around to harass me.

I always returned to the house before Vivian began preparing everyone's breakfast, though I usually satisfied myself with a bowl of Sugar Pops that I ate while sitting on a stool at the counter that separated the kitchen from the dinette. Lenny ate simple breakfasts, racing downstairs at the last minute for a fried egg on toast and a cup of coffee. Without acknowledging anyone, he'd hurry out the door and drive away in his Econoline van filled with plumbing supplies.

A glass of orange juice sufficed for Connie, who claimed she was fat when Vivian insisted she eat a full breakfast. "You're too thin," Vivian repeated, almost daily.

Connie would saunter across the front yard, heading to the main road, unconcerned about getting to the road in time to catch a ride with her girlfriend to their summer job.

Before leaving for the grocery store, Vivian always hollered upstairs to rouse Mandy. After hearing her open the bedroom door, Vivian would turn to me and say, "Be good, Bubby. Watch out for Mandy."

When everyone was gone, Mandy liked to eat a slice of buttered toast and sit at the dinette window, where she'd remain all day if I didn't help her back upstairs or engage her in a game of cards.

Left alone, I entertained myself by dressing up or imagining adventures with my friends Dingo and Wacket—two teddy bears that I got for Christmas one year.

I sensed when Vivian's car turned up the driveway late in the afternoon and would run out to greet her. She often scolded me for running toward a moving vehicle, but smiled when I offered to help carry the groceries inside. After putting things away, Vivian would check on Mandy.

It seemed that Lenny arrived home earlier with each passing day, parking in the dirt driveway visible out the kitchen window. He would be struggling to catch his breath by the time he made it to the den and sank into his favorite chair, a La-Z-Boy recliner. Vivian worried when he insisted that his chest pain was "nothing but pleurisy." Bart had died of heart trouble, and so did his father before him. Once settled in his chair, Lenny would turn on the television and light a cigarette, the first in a chain of Lucky Strikes he'd smoke until bedtime.

Despite working a long day at the store, which ended with a tiring stint at the checkout counter, Vivian didn't rest after caring for Mandy—she started supper right away. Sometimes she tried to slip Lenny a TV dinner, but if he suspected, Lenny would dig through the garbage to find the box and prove the deception. Sometimes Vivian had me take the packaging out to the incinerator barrel near the barn and say I was burning old newspapers. Lenny would grumble when he didn't find his evidence, and begrudgingly eat the food.

Whether it was a TV dinner or Vivian's own cooking, Lenny always complained. The Salisbury steak was tough as hide, the mashed potatoes were lumpy, and the butter beans ice-cold. Vivian dutifully took her position on the couch each night, sitting beside the La-Z-Boy and reading Harlequin romances once the kitchen work was complete. Lenny waged an ongoing battle to get a TV signal, having attached so many branches of tinfoil to the rabbit-ear antennas that it was like having an aluminum Christmas tree set up year-round. Lenny's blood pressure exploded if he missed an episode of *Gunsmoke* or *Wagon Train*.

After her nap, Mandy and I often sat on the porch swing. She'd read *Grimm's Fairy Tales* to me. Some evenings, she retold stories about the

Powell family that I had heard since I was old enough to walk. I most enjoyed the one about the marauders who came to the mansion after the Civil War and hanged our ancestor, JT, from a tree. "That one, right there," Mandy would say, pointing toward a mighty oak where the limb used for the hanging now supported a tire swing. I planned to climb the tree when I got older to look for evidence of the hanging, but it didn't matter if any existed or not; I was convinced that it had really happened.

Other evenings, when Mandy wasn't clearheaded enough to read to me or tell stories, I sprawled in front of the television with my floppy TV dog. Vivian kept a supply of construction paper that I drew on with Crayola crayons. When I finished my artwork, she would place her romance novel facedown in her lap and ask me to show her what I had drawn. I'd explain that the images told of my adventures with Dingo and Wacket. Vivian never pointed out that I used so many colors, and drew so many characters on the page, that I ended up with an indecipherable mess.

Lenny would snore if Vivian spoke too loudly. He wasn't actually asleep; he just wanted us to be quiet.

\* \* \*

"What have you got so far?" Harris asked at the beginning of the first morning session after I had started writing.

"Nothing that matters," I said. "It's hard to remember anything important." I handed him several sheets of paper torn from the legal pad.

"From the look of this stack, I'd say you remembered plenty." Harris paused to read a few pages, and then commented, "Your parents didn't have much of a marriage, did they?"

"Good as any, I suppose. I'm not sure I'd recognize 'much of a marriage' if I saw one. My own marriage wasn't anything to brag about."

Immediately, I regretted the statement. I didn't want Harris to probe my feelings about having been married. Trying to change the subject, I said, "Vivian had a difficult childhood. I'm not sure she ever got over it."

Harris arched his eyebrows, prodding me to say more.

"When she was thirteen, her father horsewhipped Vivian's younger brother. The boy died of infection." I wasn't sure Wesley was a topic I wanted to discuss either, but it was better than discussing marriage.

"Vivian says I'm like her brother Wesley. He was left-handed like me, and he wanted to be an artist."

"What happened after Wesley died?" Harris asked.

"Vivian's mother left the small town of Magnolia. She took the children to Little Rock and stayed with relatives. After a few years, she returned. Vivian refused to go. She said that as long as her father was alive, she'd never set foot in her hometown."

I studied Harris while he read more pages of my manuscript. It gave me an opportunity to study his face. Harris looked younger and more innocent than the scar etched on his forehead might otherwise indicate. During one of our first counseling sessions, Harris told me that he had once been a member of the Nation of Islam. Eventually, he lost his religion and became a heroin dealer. His experiences helped us make a connection, since I was a former member of an unpopular religion who had done plenty of drugs.

Harris finished reading, but didn't ask more questions, simply encouraging me to "keep writing."

I went back to the desk upstairs, watched the slow crawl of the Arkansas River outside the window, and listened to the disturbing sound of a wrecking ball as it pounded a building on the far bank in Little Rock.

\* \* \*

Christmas morning, when we still lived in the tiny house in Little Rock, I woke up everyone and dragged them into the living room. Vivian had told me to expect something special, and my anticipation was great.

In front of the tree stood a miniature world of plastic trees and houses, roads, and even a little church with a steeple. A railroad track ran through this fantasy world with a locomotive pulling several types of cars. One held logs ready to unload into a chute. A refrigerator car allowed an automated worker to push silver milk canisters onto a platform.

Lenny had spent months building the diorama from a Lionel train kit, working in a cousin's garage at night and on weekends. Lenny sat me in his lap and threw a lever on the transformer. The train billowed steam and began to course through the make-believe town. Pushing a red button made the locomotive's whistle blow. On one go-around, we unloaded



logs at a depot, and on another, the automated worker pushed out milk canisters.

“Let me do it,” I said. I wanted to work the controls on my own.

“You’re liable to break something,” Lenny warned.

Dejected, I turned away to open presents that Vivian took from under the tree.

“These are gifts from Santa,” Vivian explained. “The train set is for your father.”

At least, that’s what my young mind heard. I’m sure Vivian said, “The train set is *from* your father.”

All afternoon, Lenny’s coworkers dropped by to see the train set they had heard so much about. Lenny spent hours entertaining them without acknowledging my presence as I sat on the couch with Mandy. Santa had given me two oversized teddy bears that I named Dingo and Wacket. I watched Lenny and his friends from the couch, nestled in their embrace.

“Isn’t that wonderful!” Mandy clapped when Lenny made the locomotive blare its horn.

Lenny was her little boy, enjoying Christmas. Looking back, I wonder who I was.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lenny regretted two things about his childhood: not owning a train set and never getting the pony his father had promised. The first was satisfied by my Christmas present. The second had to wait until we moved to Sibley.

I was quite young when Lenny took Connie and me to the mansion for the first time. Vivian refused to go and tried to convince Lenny to leave me with her. But I pleaded. It would be my first chance to see the place that Mandy had mentioned so often. I also wanted to meet Aunt Opal, Bart’s sister, who had lived there much of her life. I only knew Aunt Opal from photographs in the albums that Mandy went through with me as she told stories.

Vivian and Lenny argued up to the last minute, locked in their bedroom. When Lenny came out, he told me to get ready—I was going to see the mansion and meet Opal “before she was gone,” and that was that. Lenny’s real motivation was to see how much repair work the mansion needed, since he had already decided to move us to Sibley. Vivian thought Lenny’s reason was unwarranted. He wanted to ensure that Connie and I attended all-white schools.

During the integration of Little Rock High School in 1957, Lenny had been the ringleader of a group of alumni who shouted epithets from the sidelines as National Guardsmen escorted nine black students into the school. Vivian had tried to stop him from going at the time. She would also fail to keep him from moving us to Sibley.

Connie had her own reasons for objecting to the move. She would lose her friends and be labeled a “country bumpkin.” It killed her to think about it. Lenny insisted she come on the exploratory visit. She protested by sticking her head out the window and hollering her complaints to the winds as we traveled the two-lane blacktop out of Little Rock. The road soon turned to gravel and in the last stretch became nothing but dirt.

Aunt Opal stood at the door, sensing our arrival—or figuring out that we were close from the brown dust cloud that followed us. She wore an ankle-length taupe dress that buttoned down the front. A white chiffon scarf helped control her frizzy gray hair. She waved at us energetically.

Once we settled inside the house, Opal brought out a candy dish filled with lemon drops. I took several of them and followed her into the living room, where she sat on a wingback chair and lifted me onto her lap. Lenny and Opal talked about distant relatives still residing in the area, and about those recently departed, both from Sibley and from life itself. I sucked on the lemon drops and looked out the window at the big tree in the front yard, imagining that the tire swing hanging from one of the sturdiest limbs was the body of our murdered ancestor.

Lenny said he wanted to look at the rest of the house, indicating that he was worried there might be water damage upstairs since he spotted missing roof tiles as we drove up. He asked Connie to remain with Aunt Opal.

With Lenny holding my hand, we climbed the steep stairs to the upper floor. The rooms had an eerie quality about them, as if people had decided to leave on the spur of the moment. Closet doors were ajar. Clothes were scattered on beds or thrown over the backs of chairs. The patina of dust that covered everything was the only indication that time had passed since people inhabited the rooms. Opal’s lumbago kept her downstairs. She slept in a small guest room and took her meals in the dinette. Our visit may have been her only company in months, if not years. Opal was something of an outcast, and anyway, relatives didn’t like being associated with the mansion, which looked more like a haunted house than a place to raise one’s family.

After jotting notes in the ever-present pad that he kept in his shirt pocket, Lenny took me outside. The fields were exactly as Mandy had described them. There was the pond used for watering the livestock. Algae were beginning to cover the surface of the water, which was as brown as

sassafras tea. Near the pond stood the old barn built of weathered cedar planks with a corrugated metal roof, streaked with rust. Muscadine vines obscured the remains of the corral. Wagon ruts, barely visible through the underbrush, led from the barn and disappeared at a line of trees, which had replaced the original fields of cotton. Lenny surveyed the landscape with sadness that was perceptible even to my young eyes. He waved his arm in a broad arc and said, “Our ancestors once owned this land as far as you can see.”

Connie was helping Aunt Opal prepare a pitcher of Kool-Aid when Lenny and I returned to the house. Connie tugged on Lenny’s shirtsleeve and pleaded to go home. But he was in no hurry. After finishing his glass, Lenny took me with him to the basement. Shelves of mason jars lined the stairway leading down to the concrete floor. An old couch and chair, dozens of crates, and endless stacks of cardboard boxes cluttered the room. Spiderwebs, like lace doilies, hovered in the air. Navigating the space was difficult, but Lenny spent considerable time looking at crate labels, moving boxes, and examining the furniture. He pounded on walls as if to determine their sturdiness.

On the way upstairs, a stack of boxes fell behind us.

“JT!” I screamed.

“That can’t be the old man,” Lenny laughed. “JT’s behind that wall there. Didn’t you hear him when I knocked on the wood?” Lenny leaned down and pointed toward one of the inner walls.

I scampered up the stairs, sure that I heard footsteps behind us. When we were safely past the threshold, I slammed the door shut. The story was as fresh as the day Mandy had first told it to me. The Powells were so incensed after the marauders killed JT that, each Halloween, they hanged an effigy from the tree in the front yard as a warning to stay off the property. Local legend said that if you played a trick on the Powell family, JT’s ghost would haunt you until the next Halloween. Many people believed the effigy was the mummified corpse of the old man and that we kept the body in our basement the remainder of the year.

Aunt Opal was in her room napping. Lenny became upset that Connie had wandered off and especially perturbed when he found her talking to a couple of boys in a black mustang, detailed with orange-and-red flames, which had stopped in front of the house. I didn’t understand that they

were flirting, but Lenny sure did. He pulled his lips taut with two fingers and issued an earsplitting whistle. Connie came running toward us as the boys sped away in a cloud of dust.

Lenny roused Aunt Opal to let her know we were leaving. We waited for her in the foyer. Aunt Opal came from her room dressed more casually than before. Without the confining scarf, her hair flew in all directions. She smiled at me and I saw that she'd taken out her false teeth. I liked my eccentric Aunt Opal. It made me sad to be leaving so soon.

On the way out the front door, Aunt Opal gave me a hug and pressed a worn-out Standing Liberty quarter into the palm of my hand. She closed my fingers around it and whispered, "That's a lucky coin, Simon. Don't be losing it."

"I won't, Aunt Opal," I told her, slipping the lucky quarter into my pocket.

Shortly after our visit, well past her ninetieth birthday, Aunt Opal died. Her passing was an unlucky turn of events for Vivian if she thought she might prevail against moving to Sibley. An old will made it nearly impossible to sell the mansion, and no one else wanted to live in it. Lenny had ownership of the mansion transferred into his name: Leonard Bartholomew Powell.

Lenny spent many weekends in Sibley doing repair work. He reinforced the mansion's front porch and replaced the broken roof tiles. Two columns had once added a sense of majesty to the house, but weathering had split one down a seam, and woodpeckers had nested in the other. Expert application of putty and a new paint job took care of both problems. Lenny cut squares of tinted glass and replaced cracked panes in the windows of the tripartite door at the entrance. Before long, the house didn't seem so decrepit.

After we moved in, Vivian labored for days hauling out mildewed bed linens from upstairs. The furniture was still in good condition, once a vacuum had sucked out the dust. The bedroom I had shared with Mandy during the first few years of my life seemed small and cramped with the armoire, the Jenny Lind beds, Mandy's vanity, and the heavy gilded mirror; the new room I shared with her at the mansion was cavernous by comparison.

Connie stopped complaining about having to leave Little Rock when she realized that being so far away gave her an excuse to sleep over at her best friend's house, thereby escaping Lenny's watchful eye.

Vivian and Lenny didn't take me to Aunt Opal's funeral; no one even explained that she had died. When we moved into the mansion, I kept asking where she had gone. Vivian and Lenny avoided telling me the truth, saying things such as "You really made an impression on Opal" or "Aunt Opal will be away for a long time." It wasn't until Connie walked me across the street to the family graveyard one afternoon and pointed to a freshly carved headstone that I learned the truth and stopped thinking Aunt Opal was mad and didn't want to see me.

"You can come here and talk to Aunt Opal," Connie said.

I wasn't stupid. I knew what cemeteries meant. While I stood before the headstone with its carved angel, I rubbed the quarter in my pocket to let Aunt Opal know I still had it.

With the house in good shape, Lenny began hacking away the vines that had overtaken the corral. Some of our cousins took interest in Lenny's efforts and came by to help whenever they could. I watched in amazement one Sunday as Lenny and a group of men set a controlled fire to clear a particularly thick section of underbrush near the pond. Each man soaked a tow sack in the water and beat the ground before the advancing flames.

With the area cleared, it was possible from the back porch to see the cypress knees protruding from the surface of the shallow swamp. Wispy Spanish moss draped the low-hanging limbs of the parent trees. Occasionally, a snapping turtle warmed itself on a flat rock at the far bank of the pond. Beyond was a grove of pecan trees that once bordered the largest cotton field. Tangles of honeysuckle overgrew most of the old trails. Only one of the paths still cut through the landscape, crossing the creek at a narrow point and leading to our closest neighbors, the Corley family.

Finally, Lenny was ready to get the horses he had longed to own. He fixed up Aunt Opal's roadster that for years had been stored under a tarp in the barn and contacted a neighbor willing to trade it for two quarter horses. Lenny rode into the woods every day after coming home from work. He must have been elated about fulfilling his childhood dream. Then his chest pains started making it difficult to lift the saddle. Vivian

insisted that he see a doctor, who told him that unless he quit smoking and cut back on work, a heart attack was imminent.

Lenny didn't listen. "Doctors be damned," he grumbled, lighting the first in the evening's chain of cigarettes.

Despite his obstinacy, the chest pains forced him to slow down. For a couple of years, Bracelet the mare and Storm the gelding spent their days standing in the corral swatting flies. I wanted to ride them, but Vivian wouldn't allow it. So I fed and watered them every day and combed their manes with wire brushes. Sparky, a collie that I received as a puppy on my second birthday, usually stood guard.

I spent much of my time watching Mandy. When she took one of her frequent naps, I would sneak off with Sparky and go exploring. The outer boundary of my world was the dangerous fringes of the swamp, where I hoped to find a snake, or even an alligator. Sparky never left my side and always managed to lead us safely back home.

Occasionally, Mandy talked one of our relatives into driving us to Little Rock. By that time, she was in the full throes of her fantasy that Bart had left stocks and bonds in a safety-deposit box. We would go from bank to bank talking to tellers who, with great patience, assured her that they had no box rented in the name Bartholomew Powell. Mandy eventually gave up the quest, becoming more possessive of me as a result.

"What if I fall?" Mandy would say, pointing a crooked finger at my face when she feared I was about to sneak off. "Be a good boy and stay with Mandy."

If I couldn't escape, I amused myself by applying makeup and prancing around the bedroom in her dresses. If I went outside to play with Sparky, Mandy would sit at the window and stare out. Sometimes, I wondered if she realized where she was. I never mentioned to Vivian that Mandy spoke to people I couldn't see or that sometimes she mistook me for Bart.

Shuffling through the downstairs rooms searching for me, she would call out in a desperate voice, "Bar-tholo-mew! Bar-tholo-mew!"

\* \* \*

Harris and I sat on benches outside the rehab center as he read the new pages I had written. It was a warm day, heralding the arrival of an early spring that year.

"Sibley is a far cry from Chicago," Harris said.

"A Yankee like you wouldn't be welcome there, even today," I said with a smile. Among the labels borne over the years by African American Harris, someone calling him a Yankee was probably a first.

"Johnny Reb," Harris replied with a smile, adding, "I do seem to recall my own grandmother saying something about our folks having fought in the Union Army."

The other counselors scowled more often than they laughed with their clients. I was glad that Harris seemed genuinely interested in my story and that he could find points of similarity with his own experience.

"Was Lenny close to his father?" Harris asked, thumbing to one of the yellow sheets.

"Bart was a saint who walked on water, as far as Lenny was concerned."

"But how did he feel about Bart?" Harris pressed.

The question bothered me, but I wasn't sure why.

"Vivian used to say that Lenny was spoiled, that he didn't learn the value of money. That never made sense to me. Bart lost his store when Lenny was young. He would have hardly remembered when the family had money."

Harris cleared his throat as a reminder that I had not answered his question.

"All I know is that Lenny worshipped his father. I guess I don't know how he *really* felt. Lenny took to heart the family motto that everyone attributed to Bart: 'Better that one family suffers than for many to do without.'"

Harris rolled his eyes. "I assumed you made that up. That's really what you were taught?"

"They were probably the first words I ever heard. Lenny never understood why I didn't have the same respect for him that he had for Bart. Lenny wanted adulation, and I refused to give it."

"What did Vivian want from you?"

"I don't know. She had a terrible fear of losing the things she loved." I smiled to myself.

"What?" Harris asked.

"I wonder how much Lenny's lack of affection contributed to my leaving home the way I did."

"You might understand better when you write about it."

"Vivian was as unhappy as I was, you know. I don't think Lenny paid her any more attention than he did to me."

Harris and I sat in silence for a while, listening to the squirrels rustling through the leaves as they sought out the spots where they had buried acorns the prior autumn. In the distance, a horn bellowed from a barge traveling down the Arkansas River. My thoughts drifted to Wesley. I hadn't experienced physical abuse the way he had, but Vivian must have understood that Lenny's neglect had damaged me, nonetheless.

Harris studied my expression for a few minutes. "When did you know you were gay?"

The question hit a nerve. As a boy, I had been terrified that Lenny would find out what I was doing with my best friend, and hate me because of it. Later, in high school, I dreaded Lenny finding out I was dating a guy.

"I've always known I was gay," I admitted. "I was a young boy when I started messing around with my best friend. When we reached puberty, he only seemed interested in how I could get him off. I wanted more than that. I was in love with him. When he started dating girls, I could hardly bear it."

"Have you ever thought you could be straight?"

"Have you ever thought you could be gay?" I asked in return.

"Touché," Harris replied.

I gathered up the papers that Harris had been reading. "Telling my story is—what's the word?—cathartic."

Harris walked to the edge of the woods. He picked up a twig and began stripping off the bark. "It's a Gestalt thing," he said. "Cathartic's the right word."

I went back to my writing desk. Soon, a fellow named Joshua approached me. I had noticed him before, during group meetings.

"Ought to be reading the Big Book," he said.

Joshua's counselor strictly adhered to the Twelve Steps. I wanted to tell the young man to shove off, but he was cute and I was lonely. At least Joshua had spoken to me. Most of the other guys kept their distance.

When Joshua went on his way, I returned to my writing.

\* \* \*

The first summer at the mansion, Vivian planted a vegetable garden near the back of the house, but nothing would grow. Lenny referred to the soil there as sandy loam and told Vivian she ought to plant her garden closer to the pond. Vivian didn't want to cross the chigger-invested field, so she persisted, using a wheelbarrow to haul loads of soil from around the barn. After the evening meal, Vivian tended the garden, spending hours on her hands and knees pulling weeds and kneading the soil with her gloved fingers. It was hard work, but she seemed to enjoy it, no doubt relishing the chance to escape Mandy's needs and Lenny's criticisms.

Lenny eventually added his own touch to the garden, constructing a long trellis of one-by-twos and planting grapevines. When most of the garden plants were mature, I watched Lenny and Vivian from a hiding place among the eggplants whose leaves were as large as my face. Vivian plucked tomato worms with a wad of Kleenex and dropped them into a pail of kerosene. Satisfied that she had found all the colorful pests, she started weeding. Fuzzy-leafed plants with lavender star-shaped flowers had overtaken the garden's edges. They were particularly prevalent near a row of okra. I wanted to help and found a similar plant growing near the tomatoes. I tugged with all my weight, but the plant held tight. All I managed to do was shred its leaves as my hands slipped along the stem.

Vivian called out, "What are you doing, Bubby?" In her rush to get to me, she knocked over the pail of dead worms. "Damn," she said, using a rare curse. "That kerosene might kill the tomato plants."

I was confused. Why was Vivian upset?

"That's a yellow bell pepper!" Vivian said, grabbing my arm. "What were you thinking?"

"I just wanted to help," I said with trembling lips.

Lenny, who had been tying grapevine runners to the trellis, heard Vivian's voice and came over to see what was going on. He pulled off his work gloves and yanked up the bell pepper by its roots, showering Vivian and me with dirt as he shook the soil over the garden and tossed the remains into the yard. Lenny towered over me with his hands on his hips. His words, "I'm ashamed of you, Bubby," went straight to my heart.

All I had wanted to do was help. Suddenly, nothing made sense. Why save one weed over another? The plants looked the same—the only difference was the name that Vivian gave the plant I had struggled to uproot.

Sparky ran beside me as I rushed toward the house. He tried his best to slow me down, nudging my side with his long snout. Mandy waited at the back door. "What's wrong, Bubby? What did that woman say to you?"

"I did something stupid," I said, racing upstairs to lock myself in the bathroom. I heard the soft soles of Mandy's house slippers shuffling on the hardwood floor and noticed the change in light under the threshold when she began pecking on the door. I turned on the water in the sink, not wanting her to hear me crying.

The words kept repeating in my head.

*I'm ashamed of you, Bubby.*

## CHAPTER THREE

One afternoon, a boy my own age appeared out of nowhere on the other side of the chain-link fence that Lenny had built around the backyard, hoping to prevent Sparky and me from roaming off without permission. Ernie had escaped from his mother's watchful eye and wandered through the brambles that separated our houses. I'd never seen anyone with hair as white as his or with eyes so blue. We each had crew cuts, though my hair fell flat, while Ernie's stood up straight with the help of Butch Wax. The August sun had browned us both "dark as Indians," as people said of us boys who went all summer wearing nothing but cutoff blue jeans.

Mandy came to the kitchen window and called out, "Get away from here," as if shoos away a stray dog.

"Who's that?" Ernie asked. We had been sizing each other up through the fence, but hadn't said anything until then. When I didn't answer, Ernie said, "She looks like a ghost. Is your house haunted?"

"That's my grandmother. She sees ghosts, but I don't think they're real."

Just then, we heard someone calling, a faint voice rising above the din of blue jays conducting an aerial battle. Mrs. Corley called out as she crossed the creek, stepping gingerly on the flat stones that rose above the surface. She paused to put her shoes back on, and then continued up the hill toward the fence. Mrs. Corley still possessed the youthful smile of Miss Pulaski County 1941.