

Needlework

A Novel

by

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Chapter 3

Amarillo marked the beginning of the home stretch. We'd been on the road for almost ten hours, stopping after Tulsa only once for gas and a sandwich. Daddy had driven the whole way since breakfast. I knew he was tired. I also knew that driving made him feel in control.

I heard a ssss-ssss like a snake. Erratic. Daddy hated nervous mannerisms so much that it took a while for me to figure out what anyone else would have known. He was whistling through his teeth. Then he did something even more surprising. He started to talk.

"You know," he said, "when I was a kid, Clete was so mean to me I wondered if I'd get to grow up." He shook his head. "Once he chased me down and forced my head into a bucket of water. No reason. Something to do." He smiled. "It was just being brothers. Big brothers pick on little brothers. He pretty much stopped after he got to high school." He choked on his next thought. "That's when he started teaching me to smoke. And when I was twelve, he gave me whiskey and got me drunk."

"Daddy, that's terrible."

He looked surprised at my reaction, thought about it. "It was just being brothers," he said again. "Clete gave me my first job. He always took care of me."

I let it stand. I knew who always tried to take care of who. Uncle Clete gave Daddy jobs, but Daddy took Uncle Clete home when he was too drunk to drive. And the time Aunt Lila left him and he came into the cafe waving a gun and talking about killing himself, it was Daddy who took the gun away. Everyone who saw it said Daddy was cool as a cucumber. Walked right over, didn't even flinch, and said, "Clete, give me the gun."

Maybe he could tell what I was thinking, because he went on. "I probably never told you, but when I was a little boy Clete saved my life."

I looked straight ahead. Getting words out of Daddy was like trying to coax a kitten out from under the porch. You couldn't let on that it meant anything to you.

"I was just a little guy, maybe four years old. I was supposed to stay in the yard, but I'd run off every chance I got to meet Clete and Baby coming home from school." Daddy smiled, warming to the memory. "So anyway, one day I was walking back with them, and this big dog, kind of a German shepherd, ran up barking at us. Clete tried to calm the dog down by talking to him. He held hands with Baby and me, and started walking us past the dog. He told us, 'Don't run. Just stay calm. He won't bite if you're calm.' But I took off running. I hadn't gone three steps when the dog got me down. He ripped my clothes pretty bad and took a bite out of my back. I could hear Baby screaming, and I thought I was dead. Then the dog left me alone and there were grownups all over the place trying to get the dog off Clete. Clete had jumped on the dog's back and the dog turned on him."

"Were you hurt?"

"No, not bad. But did you ever see Clete in a pair of shorts or a swim suit?"

I shook my head.

"Ever notice him limping?"

I thought for a minute, then nodded. "Sometimes."

"Well, that's because that dog took a chunk out of his leg muscle. Kept him from ever playing any sports. Kept him out of the War, too."

Two mile markers went by before Daddy spoke again. "Clete always looked after me."

I knew very little of my father's life, and what I knew came in small chunks. I thought about that for a moment. "What were you like when you were a boy? You never say anything about yourself."

"Nothing to tell." Of course. A Hopewell rule — don't talk and especially don't talk about yourself. One of the harshest judgments Daddy could make about another man was, "He's full of himself." Nobody would ever accuse Jimmy Ray Hopewell of being full of himself.

That story about Daddy and Uncle Clete explained a lot. A four-year old boy, scared to death by a dog bigger than he was, saved by his brave big brother. No wonder Daddy stuck by Uncle Clete long after everyone else gave up on him. No wonder he was loyal despite all of Mother's badgering. I remembered Mother's direction to me — "Keep him away from Clete" — and I smiled to myself. No one was going to keep Daddy away from Uncle Clete if he needed him.

I could see Daddy's jaw clenching, unclenching, clenching. In a little over an hour we'd see Uncle Clete, and we'd know how bad it was. In an hour we'd have to leave our white Oldsmobile cocoon. We'd have to act. Daddy tapped a rhythm on the steering wheel with his forefinger in time with his tuneless whistling. I could see enough of the speedometer to tell that we were going over eighty. Every minute on the road now was a minute that might make us too late, a minute in which Uncle Clete could die.

If we didn't get there in time, what would Daddy do? He never started drinking in a crisis. It was after the crisis was over that we had to worry. The night that 3,000 turkeys died in a thunderstorm, he worked all night pulling the birds off each other where they had piled in their terror, trying to save the ones not yet suffocated. The next day, he worked ten hours collecting the carcasses and moving them away. The day after that, he helped the insurance adjuster count the bodies that had been sitting in the August heat for almost two days. But the next day, after he poured gasoline over the mountain of dead turkeys and set a match to it and posted me with wet gunny sacks to beat out any grass fires that spread, he disappeared. The crisis was over and he snapped. I heard him come in at four in the morning, and smelled the whiskey sweating out of him when I helped feed the turkeys at six.

The territory we were passing through was familiar, not just because we'd driven through it so many times, but because our family history was there. It was strange to pass the family landmarks without Mother's commentary.

We drove through Canyon where Mother had attended her one semester of college. When we saw the sign pointing to West Texas State, I asked, "That's where you met Mother. Right?"

He only grunted.

I knew the story of my parents' courtship and marriage by heart. Mother told it to me like it was a fairy tale, even when they were divorced. I would lie on the couch with my head in her lap, and she would run her fingers through my hair while she talked.

“Once upon a time there was a girl who was so beautiful that they gave her a crown and called her Miss Soybean Fields. The United States Navy had a training center in the town where she went to college, and there were hundreds of boys, thousands. All the Navy men wanted to be with the beautiful girl, and one even proposed. He was a flyer, the son of a Dallas oil millionaire. And she thought she'd marry him. One night, though, when the flyer was playing the piano and the girl was sitting on it singing, a seaman third class came in. She took one look and knew she'd love him forever. He wasn't from far away, he wasn't rich, he wasn't even the handsomest man she'd ever seen. Until he smiled.” This was where Mother let me know the story was about her and Daddy, “You know your father's smile.” She always sighed here.

“He only had three weeks before he had to go to war so they got married that quick. She went to California where she waited for his ship, and she waited for the war to be over, and she waited for a baby. The magic was that everything happened almost all at once. The War ended, the fleet came in, and God sent them a beautiful baby girl. The three of us came back to Texas, and we lived happily ever after.” During the divorce, she left out the last part.

I imagined asking Daddy to tell me how he met and married Mother and smiled at the response I was sure he would give. “We met. We got married. There was a war on.”

Daddy liked the openness of the plains we were driving through. When we moved to Missouri, he said the hills and trees made him feel closed in, spooky. “I like to see what's coming up on me,” he said. That's the way people thought in West Texas. During tornado warnings, despite all the radio stations telling you not to, people ran. They got in their cars and drove, convinced that they could search the sky and see a tornado before it got them.

My reaction was different. On this endless plain, I felt exposed. Maybe you could see a tornado coming, but it could see you too. And there was nothing to keep it from getting you. The sun here beat down with more fierceness than the Missouri sun, so that now, at the end of June, everything we passed that wasn't irrigated was dry and brown. I remembered being a child unable to escape the wind that stirred up the dust, scratched my skin and burned my eyes. This was a prickly country where walking barefoot was painful, even dangerous — dry grass

and stickers called goat heads. In Missouri, wildlife meant cute fuzzy animals like raccoons and squirrels. In West Texas, it meant armadillos, rattle snakes, and scorpions.

The flatness hurt my eyes. Telephone poles went on forever along the road, disappearing at the horizon like a grade school lesson on perspective. The one natural wonder in the area was almost a joke nature had played. The town of Canyon was named for a canyon at its outskirts, but you could fall into it without having realized it was there. You could see the flat land for a hundred miles in every direction. You could not see where the ground fell away.

We came to Hereford. If Mother had been with us, she would have said, “Your dad and I came to Hereford for some of our dates.” She would have told us where the bowling alley used to be and what it cost to go roller skating in 1944, what had changed since the last time we were through. But Mother wasn’t with us, so Daddy and I drove through in silence.

Less than twenty miles to Eunice. Daddy had stopped whistling, and his knuckles were white from gripping the wheel. It looked like the speedometer was over ninety now. The speed scared me, but not as much as the thought that Daddy might miss seeing Uncle Clete before he died. Like Daddy, I stared at the road, my neck and shoulders tensing as I willed the miles by. Then I saw the grain elevator, tall and gray in the distance. “We’re almost there,” I said.

Tar paper shacks had gone up outside of town, more every time we visited. Some had to be new, but they all looked the same — old, worn, and dejected. Barefoot Mexican kids played in the packed dirt yards, and men in straw cowboy hats leaned on the porch steps smoking. Laundry whipped on clothes lines, the wind beating new dust into freshly-washed sheets.

Even farther in, Eunice was ugly. Tumbleweeds and old newspapers blew against boarded-up buildings. The light poles were still wrapped with tinsel ropes from Christmas. Some of them had come loose and blew straight out in the wind.

This was the town and the land that had formed my father. Men in this town had creases around their eyes long before they were thirty from squinting against the sun and the wind. Their skin leathered quickly. They kept their mouths shut against the dust that made everything gritty. Farmers here joked that the land you bought today could be two counties over next week. Their gaze always seemed to be on the horizon, maybe looking for that land. They were different from Missouri farmers, men like Richard and his father, who joked that the only crop you could count on was rocks, who ended up stoop-shouldered from hauling away rocks that always surfaced again the next spring.

Even in the residential area, the predominant color was brown, broken only by an occasional patch where some determined gardener had sprinkled enough to have a lawn, maybe a few

flowers. Any trees were surrounded by barren ground. The trees sucked up any moisture, so that it was impossible to grow grass around them, even with extra watering

We crossed Etter Street. “Isn’t that where we turn for Granno’s house?” I asked.

“We’re going to the hospital,” Daddy said without looking at me.

Of course. Going to the hospital was an act of faith that Uncle Clete was still alive. If we went to the hospital that’s where he’d be.

Houses closer to the hospital were nicer, newer. More lawns. Some brick

Daddy rolled down his window and turned off the air conditioner. “It’s cooling off some,” he said. It was six o’clock and the temperature had probably dropped ten degrees in the last fifteen minutes. Once the sun was gone, there was nothing to hold the heat.

He’d driven ninety miles an hour to get here, but now, when we were blocks away, he slowed to a crawl. At a stop sign with no other cars in sight, we sat for twenty seconds. We’d raced to beat death. Now we were stalling so we wouldn’t find out that we’d lost. The car pulled away from the stop sign as if it were being pushed by hand rather than powered by an engine.

I could feel Daddy’s resolve. If we went to the hospital, he’d be at the hospital. We drove past the house where Uncle Clete and Aunt Lila had always lived, where Aunt Lila now lived alone. The sprinkler was going in the front yard. A good sign. Aunt Lila wouldn’t be thinking about her grass if Uncle Clete was dead.

The trip was over. The time when we were doing all that could be done just by moving was over. The time when bad news couldn’t catch us was over.

Only three other cars were in the hospital parking lot at this time between visiting hours. Daddy rolled up the windows, cut the engine, took out the keys. Then he put his hands back in driving position and rested his head on the steering wheel. We sat like that for thirty seconds.

Daddy raised his head, squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and said, “Let’s go.”

I put my hand on his arm. “I’m glad you asked me to come with you,” I said.

He slumped back again, saying nothing. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I’m glad you’re with me too. But it was Clete who asked for you to come. He sent word for me to bring you.”