

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Fay

Larry Brown

About the Book

Meet Fay Jones. She's come down from the hills as night is falling, wearing her only dress and her rotting sneakers. A seventeen-year-old runaway, she's fleeing some family horror in a backwater of Oxford, Mississippi, and heading South on foot with half a pack of cigarettes and two dollar bills stuffed into her bra. Resourceful but utterly naïve, Fay embarks on her odyssey armed only with a lush, God-given beauty, the power of which she does not yet fully comprehend.

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Also by Larry Brown

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Fay

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BLACK SWAN

For my uncle in all ways but blood: Harry Crews.

Book 1

SHE CAME DOWN out of the hills that were growing black with night, and in the dusty road her feet found small broken stones that made her wince. Alone for the first time in the world and full dark coming quickly. House lights winked through the trees as she walked and swung her purse from her hand. She could hear cars passing down the asphalt but she was still a long way from that.

More than once she stopped and looked back up into the ridges that stood behind her, thinking things over, but each time she shook her head and went on.

South seemed best. She had vague ideas about a coast. She knew it would be warmer in the winter and that one thing drove her in that direction more than anything else. She imagined groves of citrus trees and sunny days picking the fruit and a tiny house where she would have her own groceries and watch television whenever she wanted to. She imagined one solid place where she could stay and maybe she could somehow send for the others then. Or ride a bicycle up and down the flat land with the water always shining out there beyond the shore and birds soaring like in the pictures she had seen of places like that. She kept her head down as she walked and she listened to the night things that called in the ditches and out past the stands of cane and in the clumps of trees that rose from the river bottom.

Once she stopped to rest on a narrow bridge and sat down on a timber studded with nailheads. A creek ran over snapped pilings and faintly gleaming rocks below her. She was thirsty but she feared picking her way down the muddy bank and the snakes she could not see. She sat hugging her knees and watching the specks of stars in the sky above

her. All of it so still and unmoving, the stars so bright. She turned her head to the singing woods again. To go back would not take long. She got up and went on down the road.

Cows watched her progress from a quiet pasture like cows made of stone. She was afraid of them but she walked on by them. She didn't have a watch but she knew she'd been walking for about an hour.

When she rounded the last curve there was another bridge and she stopped again to rest before reaching a place where somebody might pick her up. She sat down and crossed her legs inside the skirt and opened the clasp of her purse. She rummaged through the few things that were in there and found the two dollar bills and pulled them out, smoothed the wrinkles, looked at them. She folded them and folded them again and undid the top button of her blouse and slid them into the left cup of the raveling bra, tucked them snugly in there and buttoned her blouse. Then she pushed herself up from the tarred wood with its hardened drippings of black goo and walked across it and out into the dusty gravel again. The moon was coming out.

She was afraid of the dogs that barked from the yards and sometimes came to the ends of the driveways and bared their teeth, but none came after her. She walked past a building set well back from the road and saw a dark cross set into the wood high up near the gable. She stopped. There was a light somewhere inside, a yellow beam that shone through stained glass windows. She wondered if there might be a water tap in the yard or on the side of the house. She turned down a neat drive covered with pea gravel, brushing the strands of her hair back from her face with her fingers. There was a light on a pole at the back and she could see a low wire fence and outcroppings of polished stones inside it. A whirling dance of insects hung around the pole. The light hummed with a low, steady drone and it cast

a gauzy veil over everything. Crickets sounded from the dark woods back there.

She went cautiously even though there were no cars in the parking lot. Her steps were loud to her in the gravel. The west wall lay in shadow and there was a brick border for flowers near the entrance. She walked closer and saw a coil of garden hose in the damp grass and saw where it ended, a faucet protruding from a corner of the foundation. She went over to it and turned it on.

The water was cool and sweet. She was standing there drinking from the end of the hose when she heard it growling and turned her head to see a speckled knot of hair and bones with its head hung low between its shoulder blades standing thirty feet away. It moved closer and an odd clanking moved with it. She knew better than to run, so she let the hose drop from her hand and faced it. The dog seemed propped on its legs and a bit of drool swung from its jaw. The canines were bared in a bloody muzzle and its eyes were sick. Another ragged growl escaped it and it seemed hard-pressed to draw each breath. The foot that was caught in the rusty trap was nearly severed and the dog tried to hold it aloft as it came toward her, half whining, maybe for help. She backed toward the front porch and stepped onto it. There was a decorative iron column on each corner, leaves and vines hammered and painted, cool beneath her hands. The dog came closer. She turned to the double doors, the dark wood and the heavy brass knob. The door on the left opened when she twisted the knob and she stepped quickly inside, slammed it and stood with her back against it. The dog whined once and then there was nothing but the slight rattle of metal against gravel as the chain and trap were dragged away. She listened for a while but she couldn't hear anything else. She stepped away from the door and put the strap of her purse up over her shoulder. She went forward reluctantly, uneasy in a stranger's home.

A room like none she'd ever been in. A carpeted hallway that only whispered beneath her tennis shoes and long polished benches of wood shining faintly in the half gloom. She walked slowly, touching the dark brown pine. The ceiling pointed upward with long beams and chubby babies dressed in flowing swatches of cloth danced on air amid fields of flowers in a long painting across the back of the room or gathered at the feet of Jesus in a robe with a beard and long hair, seated on a stone. The tips of her fingers touched small brass plaques at the ends of the rows. The walls were lined with windows like the ones in front, beaded chips of glass in blue and red and gold, and at the front there sat a table holding bowls of polished metal. A white lace tablecloth. There were other paintings of Jesus and people, children, were always gathered about him. In all the paintings he wore a look of sorrow. There was no sound in that vast room at all. She wondered if the dog had gone away. She hoped it had. She thought it might be best to stay in here for a while, give it time to go somewhere else.

The long benches were covered with soft material that felt good under her hand. A small stage was beyond the table and on it stood a dark wooden platform. She opened a little side gate with a click and then went up the two steps to stand in front of the rows and rows of benches facing her. A Bible lay open before her, bound in leather, the pages so thin. She riffled through them, let them slide from her fingers. Somebody had to stand up here and talk to all these people.

'It's a church for rich folks,' she said. The sound of her voice reverberated in the room, echoed quietly off the walls. She stepped away from the book and went back down the steps, out through the gate, around the rail. There was a door set into the rear wall and she opened it and found herself in a kitchen. Only a dim light burned over a stove. Rows of long tables and metal folding chairs shoulder to shoulder.

There was a wall switch beside the door and she flipped it up. The lights in the ceiling flickered for a moment and then came on strong, a bright glare that showed dishes racked beside a sink and cans of coffee left on a counter and cabinets that lined the back side of the room. A white refrigerator.

She set her purse on the counter and opened the door to see milk in cartons, covered dishes with casseroles and fried chicken, sliced ham. The lights hummed in the ceiling.

She found a plate and a fork in one of the cabinets and a loaf of bread in a corner of the counter and heaped the plate with food and poured a glass of milk. She sat down at one of the long tables and began to eat. The chicken was dry but she didn't care. Crumbs fell to the table on each side of the plate. She wished she'd known of this place on those nights back in the woods when there was nothing to rock against her empty belly except for her knees, those times they'd waited for the old man to come in with something to eat and waited all night many nights and he never did.

After a while she got up and poured herself another glass of milk and rummaged through the cabinets again. There were some fresh doughnuts in a cardboard box. She got three of them and sat back down and ate them one by one and licked the icing from her fingers when she was done.

In her purse she found the mangled pack of cigarettes that her brother Gary had given her and she got one out, holding it between her fingers while she searched for the matches, that she found finally beneath tubes of cheap lipstick and plastic combs and hairbands, things she'd saved for years. She lit the cigarette and waved the match out and dropped it into her purse and then pulled out another chair to prop her feet on and stretched out, blowing smoke lazily at the ceiling, thumping the ashes into the chicken bones on her plate. There was only one more thing she could have asked for.

The instant coffee was in a drawer and she heated water in a pan, found sugar and stirred it into the swirling coffee and sat down again with the steaming cup in front of her. She had one more cigarette, but by then she felt she'd already been there too long. She put the dishes she'd taken food from back into the refrigerator and scraped the scraps into a trash can with a lid. She ran hot water into the sink and added detergent that was there and washed the plate and the glass and the cup and the spoon and the fork, put them back where they had been. Wiped the crumbs from the table with a paper towel. She put the chairs back in their places and put the pan away. When she was done, she got her purse and checked one last time to see that everything was as it had been. Then she turned the light off and went out.

In the middle of the big room she stopped again. Jesus seemed to gaze down upon her with his painted eyes. She looked at the table and the empty bowls. Even though she felt just from the expression on his face that he wouldn't mind her taking the food and eating it, she turned and went back up the quiet aisle to the table and reached inside her blouse for the folded money tucked into the bra. She unfolded the money, put one bill in a bowl, the other one back into the bra.

Nothing changed inside the room. It crossed her mind to find a corner to sleep in but she was still too close to the place she had left. When she cracked the heavy door open and peeked out, the dog had gone. She pulled the door shut behind her and went on up the drive toward the blacktop. And then she remembered that the water was still running at the side of the building and went back down there and turned it off.

THE ROAD CLIMBED over hills where distant fields lay spread below her and the yard lights of houses were spots of blue shining and the red moving tails of cars crept along a far-off highway with only a hint of noise. The traffic was sparse and the two cars that passed her neither slowed nor stopped. An old country road where the pavement was lumpy with patches of hot mix and crumbled along the edges where tall grass grew. The dogs always barked when she walked past the houses. Through the big front window of one house she could see people moving, sitting down at a table, a man, a woman, a boy and a girl. She stopped for a minute and watched them. There were bicycles in the yard, a swing set. The man was laughing in his T-shirt and his glasses. The woman passed behind him carrying a bowl and she put one hand on his shoulder when she leaned over and set it on the table. The boy and the girl were helping their plates. It was like something she had seen once on a television in the window of a store somewhere in Florida and she remembered standing there looking at it until her father came back and jerked her by the arm and told her to come on. These people were almost like the people in that television show, a nice house, good clothes, plenty of food on the table. There were other things she wondered about, the father and his daughter. Did she lie awake, trying to keep the sleep away, and did she try to hide herself somewhere he could not find her before she closed her eyes? She turned away from the family and went on up the road.

The long muscles in her legs said they would be sore in the morning from pulling the hills. But she seemed to be nearing the last one. Off to the north lay a low glow among

the trees nestled at the top of the world and she knew it had to be a town. She thought it might be Oxford. She had heard her father mention that place. She thought that was where he went to get his whiskey, but she'd never been there. They had come in from the southeast, through Georgia and Alabama, the two-lane roads, the sleepy towns off the interstates where they spent the nights in the parks rolled in quilts or just stretched out on the grass. And back before he'd lost the truck, in the cab and the bed of it. But she was used to walking, a road in front of her. This one no different from any other in that they all led somewhere.

Biloxi. That was the name of the place. She was sure of it now. That was where she would tell people she was going. Biloxi.

She tried not to think about being alone as she walked. She hoped there wouldn't be any more dogs. But that dog had been hurting, wanting the trap taken off his foot. It had probably been half crazy with the pain. It might have been a good dog once, before it got into the trap. Maybe even somebody's pet. But she'd been bitten too many times to feel safe around any dog now. Maybe later when she got settled somewhere she could get a puppy, learn how to be friends with a dog.

She kept walking up the hill. She could see a lake off to the right in a deep clean hollow dotted with white forms that had to be sleeping cows. The moon was a hanging ball on the surface of the water and she knew the river was down there somewhere in that bottom. She couldn't think of the name of it. She'd cross it eventually, maybe even on the other side of this last hill. She was closer to the red lights of the cars now and she stopped suddenly to see if she could hear one. There was just the faintest sound coming to her as she watched another set of lights go through the trees. She wondered how far she'd come. Probably three or four miles and no way of knowing how much time had passed.

She started walking again, up toward the top of the hill where a new house was just being finished, the bricks still sitting stacked in the yard and lumber propped on sawhorses, a new concrete driveway that curved away from the old asphalt road. A low noise began to grow behind her and she looked over her shoulder to see light beginning to touch the roadside grasses and grow in intensity as the noise got louder and she could hear the motor straining. She stepped to the edge of the grass and kept walking. Whoever was driving let off the gas before it got to her and she turned her head when it went by, a Ford pickup with one taillight, a boy's face in the window watching her. It kept slowing and went on up the road fifty feet more and then it stopped. She stopped too. The brake light was shining red and there was a boat in the back end, resting against the cab. A light flashed in the lens and the truck started backing toward her. She stood there and waited for it.

There were three boys in the truck. The one looking out the window had blond hair and a thin beard that she could see dimly. The other two were dark, indistinct. Some music was playing inside the cab but the driver reached over and turned it down.

'Hey,' the boy in the window said.

'Hey,' she answered.

The one in the middle and the driver were having a discussion. The blond boy looked her up and down and took a long drink of his beer, then stuck his head out and hung both arms down the side of the truck. She couldn't tell much about his face. He had a tattoo on his left forearm. The truck rattled as it idled.

She heard one of them tell the blond boy to ask her where she was going. And then she heard the other one tell him to ask her if she wanted to fuck.

'Where you headed?' the blond boy said.

She wished she could see his face better so that maybe she could tell something about him. She never had talked to

a whole lot of boys.

'Biloxi,' she said.

The one in the middle muttered something and leaned forward a little. The blond boy took another drink of his beer.

'Well you a long ways from there,' he said. 'What, your car tore up?'

'I ain't got no car,' she said.

The driver killed the motor. The headlights showed stubby pine trees and rotted fence and the front edge of the road going out into nothing before he pushed them off. The truck rolled back a few inches. But she wasn't afraid yet. She figured she could always run if something looked like it was about to happen.

'We been down on the river fishin,' the blond boy said. 'We got some lines out down there. You live around here?'

She pointed back down the dark road to the hills she'd left behind.

'I lived back over yonder. I want to go to Biloxi. Are y'all goin that way?'

The blond boy laughed softly and scratched at the side of his jaw. She liked him even when he shook his head.

'We ain't headed to Biloxi. You know how far that is?'

'No. Is it a long way?'

'I don't know how many miles it is. You got to go down through the whole state.'

She raised her eyes to the bottom of the sky where the wide soft light still glowed within the distant trees.

'Is that Oxford up there?' she said.

'Up where?'

She nodded toward the hills.

'Up there. Where you can see them lights.'

The boy glanced that way and she saw his head move quickly up and down.

'Aw. Yeah, that's Oxford.'

'Is that the way to go?'

He pulled back from the window and opened the door. When he got out and stood up, she took one step back. The middle boy slid over in the seat but he didn't get out. She could feel him watching her but she couldn't see his eyes. She thought he was the one who'd said what he said. The blond boy pointed with his beer toward the lights. He was tall and he had big muscles in his arms and she could smell the scent of fish on him.

'You can go through there,' he said. 'But you'd need to get on over to Batesville and then get on Fifty-five highway and go all the way down. It runs clean to Louisiana. You'd be pretty close to Biloxi if you got down there.'

He turned back to her and she noticed that he was barefoot.

'My name's Jerry,' he said. 'What's yours?'

'Fay,' she said. 'Fay Jones.'

'Well. You want a beer, Fay Jones?'

'I reckon so. If y'all got plenty.'

It was breezy in the back of the truck and the wind kept her hair in her face. He sat beside her with his shoulders against the rear glass of the cab and he had trouble getting his cigarettes lit. There were two coolers in the boat, and they perched on the stern seat and propped their feet on one.

He was recently out of the navy and he talked about all the places he had been, Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila. He told her he lived with the two other boys in a trailer near town and that they all worked the second shift at Georgia-Pacific, made plywood. They'd been on vacation three days, he said, and had four more to go, counting the weekend.

At first she wouldn't hold his hand and then after a while she did. She let him kiss her a few times, but when he tried to touch her titties she pushed his hand away. Sometimes she wished they were smaller. People were always looking at her, men, boys like this. He didn't protest. She held her knees together and tried to hold her hair.

She drank one beer quickly and he opened another one for her. She could see the muscles in his back through the threadbare shirt he wore. After he gave her the beer he leaned over and kissed her again. She let him.

The road reeled out behind them and the white center line dotted out beyond the tailgate, faded, fell into darkness. Houses they passed growing smaller and smaller in the night. His body was warm next to her and the wind had become chilly on her skin, little pimples of flesh standing erect like her puckered nipples she could feel inside the bra. She didn't know what they would do when they got to where they were going. She didn't want the other boys around and she told him she'd heard what one of them had said.

'He's just drunk,' he said.

They halted at a red light and she crossed her legs on the boat seat as cars pulled in behind them. The truck turned and went down a long hill past shopping centers and video stores and fast food joints. At another red light a cop in a cruiser never took his eyes off them, but the blond boy had already told her to hold her beer down while they were in town. The cop watched them until they pulled away and she was afraid he would pull in behind them, but he didn't.

They went up the next hill in light traffic, kids in Jeeps and Japanese pickups cruising up and down the street. She wondered how kids got money for new vehicles like that. They seemed to be everywhere, pulled up in parking lots talking to others like them, gathered in groups laughing and leaning out the windows.

'What are all these kids up to?' she said.

'Aw they just hangin out. They ain't got nothin better to do I don't reckon.'

He seemed quieter now that they were in town. The pickup rumbled beneath them and turned and went up another street and then slowed to travel halfway around a massive white building lit by floodlights and surrounded by

tall oaks. Going away from it and watching it she said, 'What's that?'

'Courthouse,' he said. 'Ain't you ever been to town?'

'Not this town.'

The truck gained speed and now the wind was colder. She leaned in closer to him for warmth, her hair fluttering on her cheek and her eyes closed sometimes. His hand rubbed her back and her ribs. She could feel his fingers pause to outline the shape of a bone and she was ashamed of how thin she was and didn't want anybody to see.

Then they were moving again, out of town, down a bumpy road with unlighted buildings and kudzu gullies where mangled cars were piled high behind chain link fences. A blue water tank stood high on blue legs, bathed in smoky light like the cars in the parking lot beneath it, steam rising from a flat factory roof. Walls of pine trees rushing past. They swayed on the boat seat in the curves, not talking much, just hiding from the slap of the wind and drinking their beer in small sips. The truck was going faster now and it went down into a hollow of black trees and wooden fences running out down the road behind them as far as she could see into the darkness chasing them. The brake light began to cast a dim red pall over the fence posts and patches of tar in the road. The truck slowed, screeched once, and turned into a dirt driveway. Tree limbs hung down and green leaves brushed the top of the cab and the truck lurched and swayed over holes and bumps in the drive. Beer sloshed from the can in her hand onto her skirt and one dark spot made a cold place on her leg.

'I need to go to the bathroom,' she said.

'Yeah. Just a minute.'

He took his arm from around her and sat straighter against the cab and turned up the last of the beer and tossed the can into the bushes they were going past. They made a swift little circle and the truck stopped with a jerk. The blond boy got up and went over the side of the bed and

said something to the middle boy as he was shutting his door. She looked at the place they had come to. It was a grove of young pines with a double-wide trailer sitting in the middle of it. Sawn stumps still showed beneath it. A droplight wired to one of the trees lit a half-finished wooden deck littered with sawdust and wood scraps, a sawhorse where planks leaned. She could hear a baby crying and music blaring inside the aluminum walls.

She stood up. The blond boy had his arms uplifted to help her down. She put her legs over the side of the bed and half jumped, half slid, his hard hands holding her by the ribs until he lowered her feet to the gravel. He stood watching her for a moment. Then he stepped away and leaned over the side of the bed and tugged on one of the big coolers. The driver climbed up in the boat and stepped down between the seats and got ahold of the other handle and together they lifted it up onto the side of the bed. The blond boy held it there until the middle boy came over and helped him set it on the ground.

‘We got to dress all these fish,’ the blond boy said.

‘We got one in there weighs about ten pounds,’ the middle boy said. ‘You want to see him?’

‘Yeah,’ she said.

They moved it closer to the light and the middle boy raised the lid so that she could see down into the crushed ice where slick catfish lay black and shiny with their whiskered mouths and their dead eyes.

‘Lord what a mess of fish,’ she said. ‘What y’all gonna do with that many?’

The driver had gotten down from the truck and walked up beside them. The middle boy was sorting through the slimed bodies, trying to find the big one to show her.

‘We gonna have a fish fry one night,’ he said, grinning at her over his shoulder. ‘Drink some beer. Have a party. You like to party?’

'I reckon so,' she said. She smiled at them and took another sip of her beer. Her purse was hanging on her arm and she really needed to get to the bathroom, but she didn't want to ask in front of everybody. From the depths of the cooler the middle boy pulled the curved and ice-cold corpse of a flathead nearly two feet long and held the dripping thing out to her like a present.

'He's a nice one, ain't he?'

'Sure is,' she said. She touched the slick flesh with her fingertip and then the boy dropped it back into the ice and wiped his hands on his pants.

'You can go on in if you want to,' the blond boy said.

She moved closer to him and stood there until the other two had picked up the cooler and started moving away with it.

'Where's the bathroom at?' she said.

He turned and pointed toward the south end of the trailer.

'It's down the hall. Linda's in there but just tell her you're with us. We'll be on in after we get through with these fish.'

He didn't wait for an answer but went to a toolbox on the deck and started looking through it. She saw him take out something and walk down toward the other two where they had gone around the end of the trailer. One of them had a flashlight and she could see glimpses of a rough table and the legs of their blue jeans.

She stood there alone and took another drink of her beer. Linda. And there was a baby but she didn't hear it now. The music was still going inside, some strange guitar like none she'd ever heard, but then she hadn't heard much, just what was on the radio when they had the truck or sometimes when the fruit pickers they used to work with brought a radio down to the groves. She'd always wanted one to carry around with her like she'd seen people do.

There was a path made from white stone chips leading up to the steps and somebody had spent some time laying a wooden border along both sides of it and there were posts

stubbed up in front of the trailer where she guessed the rest of the deck would go. She stepped across the orange extension cords and around a broken Big Wheel and up to the steps. She didn't know whether to knock or not so she just opened the door and went up the steps, poking her head in, looking around. There was carpet in the living room and shiny paneling on the walls. A cluttered kitchen to the right and something in a pan steaming on the stove. She stepped inside and pulled the door shut behind her. The strange and uneasy wail of the baby started up again somewhere. Down the hall to her left. But he'd pointed to the right.

A big stereo system stood against the back wall of the living room beside a television and music was coming from the speakers, loud and strong, the bass booming. She looked at the new furniture and all the record albums they had and saw how thick the carpet was and how nice everything was and knew now that she had done the right thing by leaving except that already she missed her brother.

She set her beer on a counter and started down the hall. It was narrow, and as she turned to edge past a folding clothes rack she bumped directly into a chubby young woman who screamed in her face and fell back against the wall with scared eyes and an awful look.

'Who in the hell are you?' she said, and Fay backed up.

'I was huntin the bathroom. He said it was down the hall.'

'Who said? You like to scared the living shit out of me.'

Fay motioned toward the front.

'Jerry? That boy out there? They got a big mess of fish they caught.'

The baby wailed louder at the other end of the trailer, a sound of anguish that trailed off under the thunder of the guitars screaming in the living room.

'I think that music woke him up,' Fay said.

The woman went past her and muttered, 'What do you know about it?'

Fay turned to watch her go. 'I don't know nothin about it,' she said to her back. 'I just wanted to go to the bathroom.'

She stood watching the woman go across the living room and down the hall to the other end of the trailer and then a door shut somewhere and there was nothing to hear but the music pounding in there. She didn't know what to do. She was used to going in the woods but those boys were back there and she was afraid they would see her. So she just waited. A minute passed and then the woman came out of a room down there carrying a baby dressed in a sleeper. When she came by the stereo she reached out and turned it down. She stopped at the edge of the hall and rubbed the child's back, jostled it up and down. The child was looking at Fay with its fingers in its mouth.

'It's down the hall there,' the woman said. 'Two doors down.'

Fay didn't say anything. She turned and went down there and saw the commode and stepped inside and shut the door, raised her skirt and lowered her panties to her knees and sat down. She closed her eyes and breathed a long sigh of relief and leaned forward until she was through. It smelled kind of funny in the bathroom and there were float toys for the child lined up on the floor in front of the tub, pajamas and socks folded neatly on a shelf. She dabbed at herself with some tissue she pulled off the roll and got up and fixed her clothes and flushed the commode. She never had turned loose of her purse.

When she stepped back out into the hall she didn't see anybody. The rest of her beer was still sitting on the counter and she picked it up and took another drink of it, but now it was warm and tasted flat. She didn't feel like she ought to go and sit on the couch. What she wanted was to lie down somewhere for a while and find out what to do next.

She went into the living room and listened to the music for a few minutes. There were a few framed pictures of the woman on the walls, taken when she was younger, thinner,

her hair a lighter color. A .22 rifle leaned in one corner, the stock painted red. Magazines were piled beside the couch, spilling onto the floor.

She sipped her beer again and saw a window in the back wall beside the stereo and walked over there. By cupping her hand over her eyes and pressing her face close to the glass she could see the boys out back, working their pliers at the fish hanging on the trees by their heads, stripping the skin away, the light dancing and moving on bloody hands, bloody meat. She pulled back lest they see her watching them and went across the room again.

She opened the door and went down the steps and closed the door behind her. The woman was sitting in a lawn chair beside the path, letting the child stand, or try to. It didn't appear to be old enough to walk yet.

'Hey,' Fay said. 'I'm sorry if I scared you.'

'I don't never know who's here and who ain't,' the woman said.

'I caught a ride with them.'

'Where'd they pick you up at, across the river?'

'Yeah.'

'I don't know what they want to bring all their whores over here for.'

'I ain't no whore.'

The woman turned her head to something out across the dark trees. The floodlight was shining on her face and her eyes were red. The child tried to take a step and she turned loose of it, but it almost fell and grabbed her by the knee.

'If you're gonna stay here you'll have to help with the bills,' the woman said. 'And I've done eat tonight. If you want anything you'll have to fix it yourself.'

'I've done eat.'

The woman nodded to herself as if this seemed to satisfy her.

'They drunk?'

'I don't believe they are. I couldn't tell it if they was.'

‘How many fish did they ketch?’

‘They got a whole mess of em. They got one weighs about ten pound.’

‘You ain’t got a cigarette on you, have you?’

Fay turned to the light and opened her purse and dug in there for the crumpled pack. She pulled it out. There were two or three left. She shook one loose and stepped closer to her, held it out. The woman took it and put it in her lips and stretched one leg out, feeling around in her pocket.

‘Shit. Left it in the house.’

‘I got some matches,’ Fay said, and searched through her purse again until she found them. When she handed them over, the woman turned loose of the baby and the baby was startled and waved its arms for a second and then fell. Even though it was too late to jump for it Fay almost did. The baby was lying on the ground and the woman was trying to get her cigarette lit.

‘Shit,’ she said. She picked the baby up and held it standing between her knees and finally got her smoke going and passed the matches back to Fay.

‘Is that your baby?’

‘Yeah. Stays sick half the time. I just about had it asleep when you come in.’

Fay could see a few stars shining through the branches of the sheltering pines. She could hear traffic on the road out front. She looked around for a place to sit but there didn’t seem to be any more chairs. The baby had put part of its hand in its mouth and was watching her shyly, almost smiling, and she couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl. It had been a long time she’d been this close to a baby, and she smiled back at it.

‘Well I don’t know where we gonna put em,’ the woman said. ‘I told Charles he needed to buy another deep freeze and he said we ain’t got no place to put it and I said well build somethin cause the one we got’s full of deer meat

already and I've done eat that till it's running out my ears. They's a chair over yonder if you want to sit down.'

'Where bouts?'

'Right over there. That blue and white one. Which one you with?' the woman said.

'You mean . . . which one of them boys?'

The woman glared at her and pulled hard on her cigarette. Fay didn't like the look in her eyes.

'Well I know you ain't with Charles. You by God better not be. If that son of a bitch has picked up and brought you over here I'll snatch him baldheaded. I've done missed two ball games cause of this fishin trip.'

'I was kind of talkin to Jerry,' Fay said. 'He set with me on the way up here.'

'Huh,' she said. 'You better be glad Brenda ain't over here.'

'Who's Brenda?'

'His wife. She's on my ball team. She plays shortstop and I play second base. You ever go to the ball games?'

'I don't guess so,' Fay said. The woman had turned in her seat and she wasn't watching the baby. It was trying to take a step or two, coming out from between her legs.

'We play for Rent-All,' the woman said. 'We're the Rent-All Lady Rambos, me, Brenda, Jo Ann, Rachel, Heather Patterson, and Kuwanda Starr, she's a black girl but she's got a good arm on her but she can't run too good cause she got run over by a car when her boyfriend was trying to kill her. Now last Thursday we was in a game with Handy Andy and Rachel was on second and I was on third and Kuwanda popped one over center field that went almost all the way to the fence and I come home but Rachel didn't.'

The baby had lifted its arms, maybe for balance, and was swaying on its feet as if it moved to some private melody, its feet turned in toward each other. It looked up at Fay and tried to move toward her.

‘They asked me to coach next year,’ the woman said. ‘I told em I’d do it but they was gonna have to get us some better uniforms.’ She took the last drag from her smoke and flung it across the yard. She gazed up at the sky for a moment and leaned back in the chair. The baby had gone past the safety of her knee.

‘I used to play for Northeast,’ she said. ‘But I didn’t like the league we was in cause we didn’t play nothin but niggers and had to go play tournaments in Holly Springs and there was always trouble. I told Ken, I said Ken, I ain’t got nothin against a nigger if he’ll act right. I ain’t prejudice and I’ve been to lots of company picnics and stuff with Kuwanda and I run into her all the time at Wal-Mart. But I told Ken, If you think I’m gonna get my throat cut in Holly Springs by a bunch of spearchuckers over a damn ball trophy fuck you and the horse you rode in on. Are they not through back there yet?’

She turned in the chair to look over her shoulder and when the baby fell Fay could hear the ugly sound its head made when it landed on the wooden border. She got up.

‘Can I hold it?’ she said.

The woman turned back around in the chair and looked at her. She seemed to be sizing her up. Then she leaned up and lifted the child and handed it over.

‘I guess so,’ she said. ‘Just don’t drop it.’

‘I wouldn’t drop your baby,’ Fay said, and then the baby was on her leg and she had her hands around its stomach and she was looking down into its pale face. It was chewing something.

‘I’m gonna go around here and see whataill they caught,’ the woman said, and got out of the chair. She went up the path and beside the pickup and her wide ass faded into the darkness on the other side of the trailer.

Fay put her finger into the baby’s mouth and ran it along the soft and wet lower lip and hooked the tiny rock, but it slid into the smooth crevice in front of the gum and she

peered down in there, pushing the mouth open with her finger, pulled it out, dropped it on the ground.

‘You better not be eatin rocks,’ she told the baby. She had decided now that it was a girl. She jiggled it on her knee a little and the baby laughed in a happily surprised way and swayed. The small chubby hands with the dimples just back of the knuckles, she remembered that from a long time ago. How good their hair smelled after a bath. The hair on this baby was a light wispy brown and she kissed it on the side of its face.

‘I wish you’s mine,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t let you fall down.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Or trade you for a car neither.’

The woman stayed gone for a long time. She heard some arguing one time, voices raised in protest, and she could sometimes see the beam of a flashlight shining on the ground past the corner of the trailer where masonry blocks held the frame aloft. They never had taken the wheels off and she wondered at how they had gotten it down in here. The baby started to fuss but she hugged it tighter and then when it started to cry she held it up to her chest and patted it on the back until it settled down and after a long while she could tell that it was asleep. There was laughter coming from the darkness now and she wondered if this Brenda would come over and if she had anything to fear from her if she did. Tomorrow was still too far away to think about how it would be or what she would eat. And no money much. She looked down at the torn tennis shoes on her feet, the laces broken and reknotted.

She shifted the baby in her arms and without waking it lowered it gently onto her lap and turned it on its side, rested its head on her thigh. The fat hands in her fingers were cool and unwrinkled. She looked at the tiny nails and the eyelids closed now, a thin trail of drool shining down its chin that she wiped away with the ball of her thumb.

‘Wouldn’t let nothin happen to you,’ she said in a whisper. Out there beyond the pine trees there was nothing but the

night.

There was a single lamp burning now in the living room and the music was a live thing that moved through the air and touched Fay's skin. She'd never before been able to hear the individual notes so clearly, the strings and the drums and the horns and the piano keys. She was sitting cross-legged beside the coffee table, laughing easily, the beer at her fingertips still holding bits of ice on the sides of the can. They kept passing the pipe to her and she knew now that she was right to leave what she'd left behind her. It seemed almost like nothing more than a bad dream now, another life, one she'd had for a time before she found this one, and she'd never known that it was possible for a person to feel this good, to feel this loved and protected and happy. Last night she'd been sitting in that rotting black cabin in the woods. Now she was here, with music, and friends, and she was safe.

There was plenty to eat on the table: chips and dip and pretzels, and the blond boy and the middle boy had fileted some of the catfish and were frying them on the stove. She could smell the fish cooking and she could hear the oil sizzling and whenever she looked over at the blond boy he winked at her. She watched the muscles in his arms and the shapes of his legs in the blue jeans as he moved at the stove. But she needed to ask him about this Brenda. There was plenty of time to get to that. He'd already said she could spend the night. There would be plenty of time to talk. Right now all she wanted to do was keep drinking cold beer and listening to the music and feeling it in the marrow of her bones, the way it floated over the room and spoke from the corners.

'You want another bowl?' the driver said. He was on the floor sitting next to her with his back against the couch and Linda was in a chair by the door, singing along with the music, her eyes closed. At some point she'd taken the baby

back to a bedroom and stayed with it for a while. And at some other point she had reappeared in the living room and had been there ever since.

‘Sure,’ Fay said. He handed her the bag and the pipe and set them down in front of her and took another drink of the beer. There was a bottle of whiskey on the table, too.

‘You want a shot?’ The driver picked up the bottle and held it out to her.

‘Might as well,’ she said. She took it and turned it up to her mouth, took a big drink. It was hot and it burned her mouth and then her stomach as she swallowed and she made a face and handed it back. It seemed to jolt something inside her and she let out a big breath, fanned her hand in front of her mouth.

‘Rough, huh?’ he said. He laughed at her and set the bottle back on the table. There was something playing on the television but she couldn’t keep up with it. She reached into the bag and pinched up some of the grass and put it into the bowl. The driver was watching her. Some of the stuff fell off the edge of the bowl and landed on her skirt. She looked down at it. She reached and brushed it off onto the carpet.

‘*Goddamn,*’ he said over the music. ‘That shit’s fifty dollars a lid. Don’t throw it on the fuckin floor.’

She looked up at him and saw real anger on his face.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘You got a light?’

He slapped a lighter down in front of her and glared at the television screen. Linda rocked on in her recliner.

She got the pipe up to her mouth just as the blond boy sat down beside her. She half turned to him and struck the lighter and held the flame to the bowl, sucked on the mouthpiece, felt the sharp smoke going into her lungs and held it like they’d told her to.

‘Let me have a hit,’ he said, and took the pipe and the lighter from her.