

In the front room, Phaedra Carter stares out the bay window of her aunt's huge old rambling ranch house. The yard is a blasted heath of gray cracked soil, sparse yellow grass and pine straw. Above it, the ominous sky is three shades lighter gray than her eyes. Like sluggish blacksnakes shrugging off a long winter sleep, her ponytail has begun to slip its moorings in spots. Her pullover rides low on one scarecrow shoulder where the flesh has only just begun to grow back after a year.

"You're still too thin," the doctors down at the free clinic in town tell her. But she eats like a horse nowadays, and sleeps eight hours a night. And she has more energy now than she's had since memory permits.

Around the fire of her eyes lies scorched earth in phosphorescent skin, and her cheekbones still have not lost the sunken edge. ("Tall wind'd blow ye down," her Daddy was fond of saying, before they cut her off.)

But by God, it's day 375 and she's sober. It feels so incurably strange to her to be back in the frying pan without the grease that was her poison of choice.

Phaedra has no God, no Higher Power from the NA meetings, she skates through on bare will and aversion therapy. And yet when the phone rings, something tells her exactly who it is.

"To what do I owe the honuh, suh?" she says in an icy mock Scarlett drawl. Her voice is cold and compacted, a voice that had known everything about nineteen before it ever hit twelve.

Her clammy hand latches to the phone. The small thumb stretches, instinctively searching for the plunger. Some habits never die.

She crosses her bluejeaned legs in search of comfort, a constant search her aching nerves overcompensate for. That search used to end in the shooting galleries downtown. Now, the ends are open, but every cell still struggles with the same impulse.

Phaedra shifts the side-hack of Wrigley Spearmint to just between cheek and gum around the razor wire of her tongue. But her ex sounds backed against the wall, in between the lines of his drunken mumble that has changed pitch.

"Don't you hang up on me." The voice swallows hard, the sound of it ringing in a skinny chicken neck. "Get down here as soon's ye can. Again, the swallowing sound. "I'd be obliged."

"Ten minutes." Phaedra rolls her eyes.

By the time she gets to the Claypool farm, she is mostly okay. The chickens are everywhere, breaking the brooding calm of the gravel dooryard. It looks like it's going to come a gully-buster, and she wants to be inside when it does. No matter what.

The chickens move silently, fearfully, their eyes downcast. The storm is playing hell with their heads. Phaedra's aunt says that it's the death-watch, too, that shuts birds up like that, and then they raise hell when the soul goes on to the next life. That is a little over her ken, but Phaedra can sense a lot that is familiar in the silence outside the farmhouse.

Her eyes drift round that dull, barren ground where lawn ornaments and Rhode Island hens run free. The steering wheel of a '58 Studebaker still hangs like alien wreckage in the dogwood tree out front, fallout from an Eisenhower flying saucer that bellied in after Pappy Claypool learned not to mix white lightning and Mexican mushrooms. The car itself was gone. In its place, another barren patch of ground that had grown only shell casings and beer bottles since ole Pappy bought the farm and Buck took it over.

Phaedra leans the seat back, making her cigarette last. The storm coalesces in the west, out beyond the ugly scrub that barely hides the flat stretch of Route 41.

Cold flat rain begins to fall like chandelier crystals, dancing on the roof of her pickemup truck. Buck's is bigger, a used half-ton with no back window and a rebel flag vanity plate.

Behind his truck, the weathered stone farmhouse looms against the savage Georgia sky, unmoved by the lightning all around. Behind the dooryard, the roof of the old barn has imploded decades since, left for the chickens now run wild to peck for grubs in the beams.

With a deep sigh, she snuffs out her cigarette in the ashtray, opens her door, steps out and slams it shut.

She finds that her legs are shaking and rubbery as she forces the thirteen steps up the walk and onto the porch, down the middle of the mangy front yard. Her sneakers crunch in the gravel, announcing her arrival.

The rain comes fast, in golf ball sized drops. Phaedra's hair sponges up the rain, leaving the drops it doesn't catch to spatter her sweater. Buck's old red bike leans against the banister like a whipped dog.

All this time.... and coming back, old ghosts with big guns stroke her spine with skeletal fingers of People, Places and Things atrophied without her, times, spaces and faces of ill repute left out there in the storm. Old memories show in the brush of her consciousness like the corpses of birds and rodents that a much younger Buck pegged with a bb gun back yonder, leaning in close to watch the light wink out of their eyes.

She has moved beyond this old, sad corner of time. She is learning all sorts of things at community college on the public till, and being a part-time gofer right across the tracks from her Aunt's. She is Keeping It Simple. She is living One Day At A Time. She is Letting Go.

But all that fades the second she moves onto the porch...she is seventeen and thirty pounds underweight...and dope-sick like the time her blood pressure approached stroke potential and she rode the lightning like a catfish on the line, doing the fish dance on Buck's bedroom floor.

Dope-sick like the worst flu ever filtered through this storm. Her stomach is clenching and her skin crawls like fire and ice fighting for control. The ghosts heat, bend and crack her spine, reminding her of all the wonderful fun of the kick.

Though her eyes smart and sting, she cannot yet cry. Her sponsor told her it was seven years before she could, and best not to jump the gun.

Phaedra has begun to clear away the wreckage. But the house and grounds have brought back the Bad Old Days. It seems like it takes ten minutes for her to reach out and twist the cold copper doorknob. The creak of the hinges is louder than God, and the house still smells like a zoo.

"I...I waited until about ten minutes before I called ye." Buck says quietly and clearly from the shadowy parlor. His voice in the battered Barcalounger is childlike and dead, back in the megalopolis of piled mess. "But she ain't budged. Not since the last..." He takes a deep breath but does not finish the sentence.

Phaedra's eyes are adjusting to the gloom. All she can see is red. She reaches for another cigarette.

"Well," she manages through clenched teeth, coming into the parlor and kicking back on the threadbare sofa as she peers at Buck from around the boxes of mail piled three deep on the coffee table. "Did you call the paramedics?"

Buck sighs and shakes his head, beady eyes glittering around that gigantic honker. He wears a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, tattered jeans and no shoes. The three-day growth of platinum stubble on his chinless

face makes him look paradoxically younger. His eyes look somehow flattened, and in the old days when the two of them shot up in the back bedroom, he had told her dead-pan that his mother had dropped him on his head.

“That’s what I called you for.” His eyes drop to the floor, and Phaedra realizes exactly what he is talking about. Her own eyes shine with flat praying mantis light, and she leans forward, gazing at him anxiously.

“Where have you been cookin’ up?” she asks, but he is shaking his head very quickly. And the pain on his face makes her look closer.

She notices the oil slick of sweat that has made Buck glow with temporary color. He does not look good..but better than Phaedra remembers. She notices the pile of dishes and Chinese food cartons piled by an empty shopping bag to take out to the sink, the overflowing ashtrays, the old Philco black-and-white...and something else. A high, sharp smell hangs in the air, strong as battery acid in the room. She sniffs again. Jack Daniels’.

Her eyes grow wide in the roar of the rain.

“You been kickin’ on y’own.” Phaedra breathes softly. “How m—“

“Near ‘bout a week now.” Buck says defensively, holding up one hand.