MILLIE'S HOUSE

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Keith pointed across the highway toward a cluster of shacks that formed a rough circle at the edge of a dusty field, the distant Sierra barely visible through the thick haze of the Central Valley. The endless furrows of the dry fields formed a brown corduroy that reached all the way to the base of the jagged peaks. Cows lumbered aimlessly about the landscape.

I eased the car up the exit ramp, drove across the bridge over the highway to the other side, and turned down the frontage road toward Millie's house.

"Which one?" I asked Keith as we sped down the dirt road, pebbles loudly battering the underside of the rental car and leaving dust plumes floating behind. A dilapidated fence— really no more than a series of cracked, grayish, weather-beaten posts set at uneven intervals and strung together with errant strands of rusty barbed wire— paralleled the road across a shallow, overgrown ditch. A dirt bridge over a corrugated drainage pipe forded the ditch; an opening in the fence allowed access to the weather-beaten dwellings.

"That one," he replied, indicating the first of five tiny houses. "That's Millie's."

Millie was Tommy Williams' mother. Tommy was on death row in California, and Keith was his attorney. I was Tommy's investigator.

The houses were identical: simple, square structures with weathered clapboard facades in varying degrees of disrepair, roofs with cheap, peeling shingles, all built too close in predominantly barren surroundings, save for the

brownish fields at the edge of the makeshift compound. In front of the houses, just beyond the frontage road, cars and trucks roared by on the highway. Beyond that was the even greater din of giant diesel train engines pushing and pulling tons of material and people along miles of railroad track, all of which coalesced into an irritating dissonance. Those forced to dwell in this bleak landscape—which combined the worst of rural and urban, past and present—held out little hope for escape, yet that slim hope, the possibility of change, of an American dream fulfilled, is exactly what enabled them to persist, to inject a little hope into lives of quiet desperation.

The original purpose of these dwellings was to house the migrant workers, mostly Mexicans, who toiled in the intense heat of the valley summers in the nutrient-rich fields of the Delta. It was back-breaking, spirit-sapping labor, much like the work Millie did as a child in the Texas cotton fields a couple of generations back. Not a whole lot had changed in that time, except that now the laborers, when there was any work to be had, were at the mercy of the big farming corporations with benign names like Farm-Gro and AmeriCrop, corporations like any other whose bottom line was far less forgiving than the family farmers who used to sow the land. The hard labor continued to be performed by people of color, the forgotten and neglected who lived in these ramshackle dwellings off the frontage road at the edge of the highway next to the railroad tracks.

The front door and all the windows of Millie's house were wide open. In one window a cheap fan balanced precariously on the sill, oscillating in jerky thrusts, the clackety-clack of its blades echoing lightly across the hardscrabble yard. We parked under a barren oak behind a rusty pickup truck on a dirt swale that passed for a driveway. Inside the tiny house we could see the distinctive flickering of the television, and as we got out of the car, Keith sniffed the air, smiled, and looked at me. "Millie's been barbequing."

We walked toward the house and were gently assailed by a couple of rather large mutts acting as sentry, checking us out by ever so naturally jamming their noses in our respective crotches to see if we were friend or foe.

"Git on up out there! " Millie instructed the curious canines from the front entry of her house. "Don't pay them no mind they won't bite."

Despite Millie's assurances, I stepped slowly and ever so cautiously. The visceral feel of the large mutt's cool muzzle as it pressed against my balls, and the knowledge that his fangs were mere inches away from my shrinking manhood, proved a much greater incentive and behavioral guide. "Ah, good boy," I whispered in a soothing tone, like I was coochie-cooing a child, my hand extended in a non-threatening gesture of conciliation—*can't we all just get along?* I thought. Cujo gave it a sniff and bounded off with his partner for sweeter-smelling horizons around the back of the house, and Keith and I proceeded up to Millie's.

Millie came out of the house to greet us, her flip-flops forming burrowed trails behind her as she slid across the loose and dusty yard, her coal dark skin a sudden contrast to the flowery muumuu billowing about her. She looked older than her fifty-some years, hardened by years of self-neglect. She was a short woman, her diminutive stature further

emphasized as Keith, all six-three of him, bent to give her a hug. Keith released her and looked over at me. "You remember Paul, don't you, Millie? Tommy's investigator?"

Millie looked at me and smiled. " 'Course I do," she intoned as if Keith were some kind of fool. She held out her arms and gave me a gentle hug. The skin on her arms felt hard and dry across my neck. She smelled of Marlboros and alcohol. Her gentle demeanor was in stark contrast to the woman I had come to understand after poring over thousands of documents related to her son's case, and soon I started to feel that familiar tightness in my gut that I get when visiting a client's family. A feeling of overwhelming powerlessness morphed into anger and frustration and pity and a hundred other emotions all beyond my control.

The three of us walked into Millie's house. The front entry opened directly into a small living room area, and toward the back was a tiny kitchen. A cheap kitchen table, the type popular in the sixties with the splashy yellow-white Formica and steel banding, took up a large chunk of the kitchen, and on top were a couple of Tupperware containers filled to the brim with potato salad and baked beans. The pungent aroma of the food mingled uneasily with the barroom smell of overflowing ashtrays.

In the den a plain wooden chair sat near a small table next to a tattered, pockmarked recliner, and on the other side was an overused couch beneath a cheap velvet painting. In front of the couch, on the television, a soap opera played out its little melodrama quite loudly, and I knew at that moment we'd be competing with Susan Lucci for Millie's attention.

Millie sat on the couch and invited Keith and me to take a seat. Keith started off with some small talk, glancing at the television as he spoke in the hope that Millie would catch on to his subtle allusion and either turn the volume down or off completely. She did neither, and I was resigned to the fact that she would once again fight us all the way. Despite her obstinance, we trudged on.

"Now Millie," Keith began, his soft tone an indication of his seriousness. "You know why we have to ask these questions, and I know you don't like to talk about Tommy's biological father, but...."

"I told you 'bout him," she snapped back.

"We know you have," I tried to reassure her. "But we still haven't been able to locate...."

"I told you 'bout him. I ain't talkin' no more 'bout him. No more questions 'bout him." She tapped a Pall Mall from her pack, twisted it between chapped lips, and lit it, her way of saying, let's move on.

And that was that, at least concerning Tommy's father. No matter how many times or different ways Keith or I tried to explain the importance of locating him, Millie was done with the subject. "I just don't know how that worthless man gonna help get my Tommy off death row," she said, taking a deep drag and exhaling an ample blue-gray cloud. I made a mental note to change my clothes later at the hotel, the smoke as deeply embedded in my clothes as sequoias in Yosemite. "I done told you everything I know 'bout him," she threw in for good measure.

Which may or may not have been true. Persuading a client's relatives and close friends to open up about the most unsavory details concerning their lives was a difficult proposition under the best of circumstances.

Everything we needed to make a case for sparing a client— all the hideous secrets layered deep within a family's history, the shocking minutiae that would cause most people to reel back in revulsion— are the very things that family members are most hesitant to talk about, whether out of embarrassment or self-interest.

We knew that Millie's involvement with the mysterious Frank Smith, Tommy's biological father, was tenuous and short-lived at best, abusive and violent at worst. Millie only knew his name (we weren't even sure she was right about that, and it was hardly an uncommon name), and we were having absolutely no luck tracking him down. We desperately needed information about Frank to complete a social history on Tommy, to convey to the judge an accurate portrait of Tommy and his life —the good, the bad, and the ugly. The lack of any significant medical or psychological history concerning his father would ensure that Tommy's life history could only be half-finished.

Defeated but not deterred, Keith and I exchanged familiar looks of resignation that said, Maybe next time. Unfortunately, time was at a premium, but we knew Millie, and the shorter her answers became the further and further she drifted away from us, perhaps back to those Texas cotton fields. Millie had described her childhood to us in broad outlines, but it was easy to imagine her as a young girl in the deep South, innocent, clinging to her momma's leg as baskets of freshly picked cotton rode up the conveyor, Momma's chapped, hard hand stroking Millie's baby-soft cheeks, cooing, *You awright, sugar—not too hot?* But everywhere was hot, the miragey-white sun on top of their heads beating down, relentless, sweat so common it was like an undergarment, and Millie just happy—*floating!*— to be outside with her momma, her daddy back at the big gray barn helping load cotton into Eli's invention, far away from her and Momma.

She would have been happy to be out in the searing heat because it was sunny, impossibly bright, and bad things couldn't happen in the light, could they? Not like when they finally finished for the day, and Momma's cooking filled the shack with the sweet smell of grits, all buttery and drippy smooth, like the wet sand that poured through her fingers that time they went to the big river in the borrowed pickup, she and her little sister and Momma and Daddy and another family. Millie, packed in the rusty truck bed with all the other kids and smiling, happy, feeling the cool morning air, wet with dew, enveloping her body as they blew down the dirt roads at forty miles-per-hour, one of the few times in her life that Millie was truly happy.

But the daylight always came to an end, quicker still when the fields went bare, when the leaves on the trees floated down from the branches like tiny orangey-yellow parachutes, and the last smidgen of sun sank below the horizon at the end of the fields like a ghostly red ship —light replaced by dark, goodness replaced by badness.

That's when Daddy, a good, hardworking man in the light of day, trustworthy enough to work next to the white bosses with their sunglasses and wide fedoras, became someone else. The darkness overtook him, blackening his soul, transforming him into a stranger, a demon chock full of unreasonableness and fury. The drinking and gambling and whoring were all symptoms of the illness which was the violence unleashed on Momma and

Millie and her little sister. Her daddy learned it from his daddy, and Millie carried on the tradition, which she passed onto Tommy, now wasting away on death row, the sins of the great grandfather borne out *in extremis* several generations later.

And that was just a part of the story on Millie's side of the family. Family trees branch out *ad infinitum*; the further back one travels on a genealogical curve, the more influences there are with two mothers and two fathers for every married couple –a lot of DNA at work. Entire families come together through marriage, all that history and dysfunction, all the genetic blips and burps, all the personalities and quirks and tempers mixed together in an uneasy stew, spewed out in the form of an innocent little bundle further subjected to the vagaries of family. With all these influences, the miracle is that there are so few Ted Bundys in the world. Or Einsteins, for that matter.

So we did what we could with Millie, at times probing, sometimes pushing, gently but firmly, but mostly reassuring. Keith and I eventually came to that time when we look at each other, imperceptible shoulder shrugs and quizzical looks, questioning one another with our faces, *Is that it?* And answering the same way, *I got no more questions.* Millie sensed the end of the inquisition, relief tidal-waving over her, and she got up and walked to the kitchen.

"Ya'll come over here," Millie said. "Getcha some ribs and beans and 'tater salad."

We looked at each other. Keith stood up, patting his not-insignificant belly. "Now Millie, whatcha go and do that for? My wife'll kill me if…."

"I ain't hearing no guff from you. And Paul here look like he gawna up and blow away." I smiled inwardly at the unintended compliment. "Now you boys get on over here."

About that time a lady friend of Millie's came into the house. "She been up since 5 a.m. cooking for you boys, she so excited you coming by and all," the woman whispered to us.

And that got me thinking—I had no idea she looked so forward to our visits, but it made sense, the big city lawyer and his investigator coming all the way out to hell and gone to spend time just to talk to her about her son. I pictured her, bolting upright in bed as the rooster crowed its annoying song, the charcoal briquettes carefully laid out at the bottom of the grill the previous evening, spraying the lighter fluid as dawn's red and orange rays erupted over the silhouetted peaks of the Sierra. The careful brush strokes of her homemade barbeque sauce sweeping across the ribs, hastily absorbed into the tender meat along with the smoky scent of the hickory chips, thickening into a delicate, mouth-watering glaze.

The thoughtfulness and care she bestowed upon us, relative strangers, made me think, and probably over-analyze, as I had difficulty squaring this gentle side of Millie with the selfish, alcoholic, abusive monster reflected in her son's files. Did she show Tommy this side of herself—ever? Did she say I love you– ever? Did he feel the gentle touch of her reassuring hand upon his wide-eyed little face– ever? Probably, but these were just a few frames compared to the full-length movie that was his childhood.

I rolled these thoughts over and over in my brain like a wildly spinning Rolodex, questions with no answers- Why? Why? *Goddammit, why?* And why not? Why not me? Why not Keith? What made us so special to escape snake-eyes on life's big roll? A roll of the dice. Why? Why not? Too many questions, my

cranial Rolodex whirring uncontrollably, over and over and over again.

So as Millie busied herself in the kitchen preparing plates for us to take along, I made myself focus—stop thinking, stop thinking, *stop thinking!* And I was able to grab the wheel of the Rolodex and stop it from spinning, for now at least, until the next visit.

Millie shoved the plates in our hands, piled carb high, the gastronomical treasure sheathed and protected beneath shiny aluminum foil. We thanked Millie for her time and generosity and said our goodbyes. She walked us out to the yard, leaving behind the fictional chaos on the television. We told Millie we'd be in touch, said we'd give our best to Tommy from her. She walked up to Keith and gave him a hug, then did the same for me.

As we drove down the dusty road and put miles between ourselves and the impoverished bucolic landscape, Keith and I looked at each other. I felt like shit, overdosing on middle-class guilt and too much thought. But we both smiled, content in the knowledge, however bourgeois, that we could simply get in the car and leave this place of misery and hopelessness and return to the comforts of nice homes and wives and children and pets and normality.

I only hoped that despite the obvious pain it brought Millie to talk about Tommy, she would allow herself some release from the guilt and grief in the knowledge that the words she spoke to us—descriptions odious both for their graphic nature and for the ease they spilled forth—could very well be key in securing some kind of relief for her wayward son. Perhaps this would help to shine some light into Millie's dark little corner off the frontage road at the edge of the highway next to the railroad tracks.