

★ CHERRY TREE ★

IF GOD OR THE ANGELS WERE TO have looked down at the A-1 mobile home park in the months before it was rearranged by a mid-summer tornado, He or they would have seen through the smoke the flat rectangle tops of thirteen trailers lined up in two crooked rows alongside a thick tangle of oak trees. He or they would have seen a hot-looking place, low to the ground, with thirteen dented roofs like old tin cans lined up and shot through with bb guns, and He or they would have seen me walking around it barefoot in a uniform of faded Superman Underoos, with a tattered towel tied around my neck.

I never wore shoes or pants in the summer unless forced by my mother for church or the grocery store, so the soles of my feet were tough as leather and tar-black. I once stepped on a tack that stayed stuck in my foot for days or maybe as long as a week before I pulled it out, quick-as-you-please, careless as a nail from a tire. The bottom of the tack was black to match the soles of my feet and scraped smooth from the road. I'd heard it down there for some time, scratching and click-

ing, but hadn't bothered to look. There was a bloodless hole in my sole when I pulled it out. Later I missed the tack's clickety-clack company and found another of equal size and shape pinning a glossy 8x10 of Kerry Von Erich to my bedroom wall. It fit snugly into the hole left by its twin.

Tater Tot, my one and only friend, blew by me on his bike and squeezed its horrible horn, a sound like a braying donkey swallowing a kazoo. He skidded to a stop and pushed himself backward with his feet to where I stood.

"Hey Cherry," he said. "You wanna go up to the Food Lion and look at comictch?" (I was called Cherry Tree then, or Cherry, or Tree, or CT, but never Matthew or Matty or Matt—not even by my mother—because I was tall for my age and thin as a rail, she said, and my hair was a mess of bright red curls, only tangentially a part of my head, that refused to be corralled or put into place.)

"Can't," I said, "Clay's comin' tomorrow. I gotta clean my room."

"Thath your brother," Tater said. It wasn't a question; it was a recitation of learned fact. He was looking down at his own feet when he said it. They were clad in disintegrating flip-flops, but no less dirty than mine. Tater was eleven years old, a grade below me in school, but he looked far younger, like an overgrown toddler without a shirt, shielding his eyes from the sun and balancing on tippy toes to keep his bike from falling. The floppy fringe of his sun-bleached bowl cut lay atop his fingers and reminded me of the thatched roof that covered a grass hut I saw in *National Geographic* while looking for pictures of breasts, and I thought of the woman who stood in front of it, her skin so black it fairly glowed,

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and the way the infant on her hip seemed to grow from her body like a tumor or a tiny twin.

“He has to come early,” I said, “on account-a he got into some trouble.”

Tater shook his head knowingly and looked around. “I counted that Methican girl’th holeth lath night,” he said, motioning with a nod toward the trailer where we’d watched her move in with her older sister and what we took to be their mother and father, but Tater told me later was really their mother and uncle. “Illegalth,” he added, with the conspiratorial tone of a man revealing the true nature of things.

We’d been sitting in the street reading comics in the fading light when their old Chevy truck, several shades of red and brown with a trash bag flapping where the rear window should have been, came around the corner and sputtered to a stop in front of Mr. Healer’s old trailer. Mr. Healer had died from a heart attack two weeks after being laid off from the plant and was carried out shirtless on a gurney in the predawn hours, according to Dad, who’d been on his way out the door when the ambulance arrived. “He cleaned out the blood tanks.” Mom said. “Inhaled too much a-that chlorine and it burnt him up from the inside out.” Mom worked in the cafeteria at the plant but Tater’s mother, when sloshed on vodka, confided in her the gory details of the factory floor, and she dutifully confided them to me.

The girls emerged from the depths of the truck’s cabin, following their mother, who was small and round, and a man in a greasy ball cap and thick black mustache. They looked like twins at first, with their oval faces and skin the color of the raw almonds offered to us from a glass bowl at one of the houses in the development

where Tater’s mother took us trick-or-treating on Halloween, hoping for better candy, but one was taller and older than the other. They spotted us watching them and giggled. For the first time in my life I felt embarrassed sitting nearly naked in the street, wearing a ragged towel for a cape. We watched them carry in a few bags of clothes and food and an exotic looking rug embroidered with a colorful image of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

“She was pretty good at it,” he added, with all seriousness and generosity.

Neither of us had ever really counted anybody’s holes, but we lied about it freely to one another with creative abandon. I knew enough at least to know by which hole God rendered copies of Himself, but Tater probably didn’t. He wasn’t fully retarded, but his mother was a drunk raising him alone and he had no brother to show him the way.