

Rebecca Lyle Skains
lyle@lyleskains.com

about 101,000 words

CHASING DUST DEVILS

by

Lyle Skains

PROLOGUE

"Dr. Fuller?"

"Yuh-huh?"

"I can't...I dunno what I'm s'posed to say here." The caller paused, his voice gravelly with misery and dirt.

"She asked me to call you soon as... She wanted you to come to El Paso."

"She who?"

"Chrissy."

That was the word last night that brought me instantly awake.

I sat up in bed, waving at Fern to go back to sleep. The connection wasn't great, and I had no idea who this man was or why he was calling me at 3:16 in the morning, but he sure as hell knew the magic name.

Chrissy. I hadn't heard from her in probably ten years, save for two or three postcards featuring jackalopes

and cacti with sunglasses. Regardless, when the man called, I jumped, leaving my disapproving wife, my three confused daughters, and my struggling medical practice while I galloped madly across Lone Star country to my childhood soulmate.

The state of Texas, from the Panhandle to Corpus Christi, from the Rio Grande to Texarkhana, has given birth to so many singular breeds of men it's a wonder we haven't formed our own separate species. Homo tejanos, you can call us. We run the gamut from yippee-ki-yay rodeo cowboys to snakeskin-booted oil barons, from straw-gnawing farm boys to small-town doctors like me, competing against the local horse vet for patients.

No matter what tribe of Texan a man runs with, the trait that binds us all is a steady belief in the independent republic of Texas. That faith extends to the dubious political connections, the bumbling snow-bunny ambassadors we send out every winter, even the famed electric chair in Huntsville. Make no doubt about it, if you mess with Texas, we will mess with you. We consider ourselves natives of our own country.

The only problem is, a great deal of Texas resembles a third world country. Oh, sure, you've got the great metropolis of Dallas/Fort Worth, the bohemian capital of

Austin, and the industrial filth that is Houston. But for the most part the great vastness of the land is populated by little gray-dot communities thriving off a single gas station. They throw parades if a highway gets rerouted near them. That's Mather, where I grew up, and a thousand other bumps in the road.

El Paso is the bastard child. It's a border city. It's a passage to and from Mexico, and it's still got that stench of old west outlaw. Folks who grew up there got out as fast as they could before they lost life and limb on the oil pipelines. Those coming to El Paso from the south are looking to start a new life, looking for new hope and better opportunities for their children. For those from the north, it's the last elephant walk, the trudge to complete abandonment of hope. They buy cheap trailers with Astroturf porches and wait for the sun and wind to wear them away to nothing.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the sand, sun and sorrow. I don't want to know that Chrissy lives here. I don't want to see the inside of her shanty, or her trailer, or her camper, or whatever it is that she sleeps in. This isn't what I want to have branded on my brain. This place is quicksand, and I'd prefer it just swallowed the whole thing up. She was gone years ago; she never came here, not

in my version of her life. So what the hell am I doing here?

I'm rumbling past oilfields on a packed-dirt lane, sitting in the passenger seat of a pickup that should have been put out of its misery about twenty years ago. I grab the oh-shit handle, steadying my body and my stomach. I'm glad for the open windows, otherwise the stench of the driver, and all his years of pipeline-sweat embedded in the ragged upholstery, would humiliate me by making me pass out or vomit. On the other hand, puke might freshen the air in here.

"It's just out here a couple more miles," my driver says. "Few weeks ago, she just didn't want to live nowhere near nobody no more, so we hauled the trailer out here. I got a coupla acres leftover from my granddaddy's piece."

Bo. He couldn't have a more fitting name. A big, muscled, tanned, hard-worked man. His maybe forty years have been cruel to his face, weathering it like acid rain on limestone.

"You live out here with her?" I ask.

Bo thinks about my question for a minute.

"I did," he finally replies, chewing on his lip.

"Don't tell me," I joke half-heartedly. "She conquered you and your trailer, then kicked you out for

laughs." Anything for amusement, that's Chrissy. I laugh it off cynically, but cut it short when Bo doesn't join me. I cough to cover my awkward chuckle.

"Not really." Bo takes his foot off the gas, and pulls over to the side of the road. Dirt clouds around the vehicle, briefly obscuring the army of oil derricks pumping ceaselessly behind their chain-link fences.

"See, I couldn't tell you on the phone," Bo says, staring intently at his knuckles clutching the steering wheel. "She wouldn't let me tell you. Said you had to be here. I promised her."

I turn to face him, immersing myself totally in the truck aroma. "Tell me what?" I ask.

His mouth gapes as he struggles for words, and I know it is not good news welling up in his throat. He's not announcing a wedding, not about to show off a new horse or even a bastard baby. This is tear-in-my-beer kind of news, and I am not surprised.

On the other hand, maybe this man doesn't know Chrissy at all. Maybe it's all a clever ruse to draw me out to the middle of nowhere, stick a bullet in my craw, and bury my body in an oil field. That ground is never turned. No one will ever put a housing development out here. I'll never be found, just some poor, missing sap who fell for a con

man and murderer's line, while dear old Bo here steals my identity and all my credit cards and lives the high life in Monte Carlo. My family will assume I've run off for good, and hate me forever, intending to charge me for all their therapist's fees - if I ever turn up.

Then I see it. A tear rolling through the dust and beaded sweat on Bo's face. It's a rare con man who can cry on command, and suddenly I want to hug the guy, like I do my youngest daughter Delia when she dreams about the boogeyman in her closet. I settle for clenching my stomach and my fists in anticipation and repeating softly, "Tell me what, Bo?"

"She's gone, Doc," he sighs, barely uttering the words. "Died last Tuesday."

Stunning, the force words like that can hit you with. My lungs suddenly close up, like he hit me in the chest with his massive fist. I blink and suck for air. She's 38 years old. She's a goose who migrates wherever she pleases. She's always gone, but never is she gone. I gaze at an oil derrick, pumping light years faster than my astonished heart. Can't be true.

Air returns to my body, and I look back at Bo. A second tear rolls down his face, and I know this man is as incapable of lying as I am of riding a bull for longer than

a split second. He probably wouldn't have shed a tear when his own father passed, probably just got piss-drunk and rowdy if a brother or close friend bought it in a pipeline explosion, but here he is, quietly crying over my cousin.

Hot tears coat my eyes, but I hold on to them. My tears would put Bo's to shame, and they would set in stone what he has just told me. If I don't let them out, then the possibility remains that this is Chrissy's elaborate prank, and she is even now laughing her ass off at me. That would be wonderful.

Rubbing my eyes furiously, I clear my throat and focus forward, trying to convince myself it could be true, that this could just be an elaborate prank. I study Bo out of the corner of my eye; maybe he can lie, maybe the Academy is missing the boat on this burly bear-man. In my chest, in the tightening there, I know I'm full of bull, but my head forges on anyway, imagining all the scenarios save the one that is the truth.

Bo wipes at his face with a rag. He's pretty good, with the tears and all that. I wonder how far she might carry it. Will we get to the trailer and find a body, bloated and covered in flies and maggots? Will we go through a funeral, complete with casket and mourners? Then, when we get to the graveyard, and we're about ready

to dump the first shovelful of dirt on our beloved Christine, will she throw open the casket and holler "Gotcha!"?

I force myself to smile slightly, determined to uphold this pretense of a joke that I know is not a joke. I shift in the swampy interior of Bo's pickup. His face is now dry; he is once again the swarthy pipe-man, big and strong. He puts the truck in gear and we raise another choking dust cloud as we pull out onto the rutted lane.

"How?" I ask. I'm playing along, I tell myself. Just playing along.

"Pancreatic infection." His voice creaks over this, mucous still clotted in his throat. He clears it away. "About six months ago, right when I first met her, she came down with pneumonia. Never really got much better. So when the pancreatitic - pancreasitic—"

"Pancreatitis," I supply quietly.

"Yeah. When that set in, she didn't have no strength to fight it." He scratches the back of his neck, a raw, dry sound that makes my ears curl. I dig my fingernails into my jeans. "She didn't want her family to see her while she was sick."

"No," I agree. Never a sign of weakness. Never allow a witness to tears or illness. In a lot of ways, Chrissy

is more Fuller than I am.

It's a nice touch, the pancreatitis. A disease difficult for a roughneck to pronounce. Following on the heels of pneumonia. Indications of something deeper, darker, a weakness that Chrissy would never admit, a defenselessness of the body. Pneumonia doesn't just pop up in healthy women in their thirties. It hits the old, the very young, the physically distressed and the weak. I have no space in my skull for a Chrissy who can't fight off something as insignificant as a germ. It must be something she picked up along the way, in a night club or a seedy hotel, from a man I would kick to death if I could find his name and know his face.

Bo says nothing for a long while, and the oil fields stretch out endlessly. A couple of miles on a corrugated dirt road is an eternity. My kidneys are like as not starting to bleed from the jarring.

Finally he pulls up next to a tiny lot jammed between derricks. A sagging brown mobile home squats diagonally across the lot, piles of wood and random car parts completing the aesthetic design. I can smell the west Texas dirt still hanging in the air from the last time I was in a place like this with my cousin: Her father's trailer, totaled by a dust storm, an evil hole gutted by

nature that we perused and picked through until the fear of the place and the man were lessened by the crudity and wretchedness of his possessions and his life.

I know what I will find here. Nothing. Nothing of my girl. She wouldn't leave anything behind.

Bo parks, and I follow him through the junk in the yard to the trailer, massaging my truck-tortured back. Up to the porch littered with broken, plastic lawn furniture and through a pock-marked screen door.

Inside, it is dark. Bo hangs his keys on a little rack made from horseshoes and horseshoe nails. A piece of rusted old barbwire hangs in the living room, a ranch antiquity. The relatives will be fighting over that one.

I almost laugh. Chrissy and I could have had a blast with this place. She would have loved to bring her fashion-conscious mama here to show off the portrait of a Hereford bull. That's true art right there. The boots and spurs pattern on the couch is an especially nice touch. Aunt Suzie would have had a coronary if she'd known her daughter lived here for any length of time. I want to take pictures to show her, just for the satisfying expression of horror on her face. But then I figure the death of her daughter will be enough for both of us.

"Hold on here a sec and I'll just..." Bo trails off. He

heads back into the dungeon-like bedroom hallway to retrieve my inheritance.

He comes out with a shoebox. It is mostly empty but for three things: a stuffed envelope, a key, and the urn.

The grating living room fades away, yet strangely I still want to laugh. I maniacally tell myself she must have filled the urn with cocoa powder, maybe even the flavored sugar from those Dipsticks candy packages we used to get from Oscar Barnes at the corner store. I have to fight back the urge to un-stopper the urn, dip my finger in and have a taste.

"She didn't want no funeral," Bo offers as I gingerly pick up the urn. "Said it was stupid since you and me was the only ones that gave a good goddamn."

I nod. If this were truly the joke I wish it were, cremation would be the logical choice. No funeral to fake, making the elaborate prank remarkably less elaborate. But it's not a prank, not a gaffer, not even remotely funny-ha-ha. I stare at the urn. It's not ceramic or glass, just a little wooden box, with her name penciled on the bottom. And it's sure as hell not filled with powdered sugar. Jesus Christ. My mouth convulses and I cough to get my throat open again.

All humor drains out of me, leaving me sickened and

weak. Bo retreats into his kitchen, granting me privacy for my reunion with Chrissy. I sink into the couch, and somewhere in my brain I realize it smells just like his truck in here, only fainter. This is his world, not hers. He brought her into it and even moved it farther out in the wastelands for her, just so she could be more comfortable.

I open the envelope, my hands barely strong enough to rip it. The paper is torn from a spiral notebook, its edges littering confetti on my lap. The first sheet is what I can only imagine as her last will and testament. She says she wants to be cremated. She says I should be contacted, dragged out here bodily if need be, and given the contents of this box, including her ashes.

The rest is a letter to me.

Jake,

You know I'm not much for writing, but after all I figured you deserved more than a postcard. That, and I ran out of the Jackalope ones. Hope you don't mind.

Nope, this isn't a joke. Sorry. It would have been a good one, huh? Commence with the grief.

I have to set the paper down on my lap for a moment,

if only to wipe the betraying moisture from my field of vision. Damned if she hadn't known what my immediate reaction would be and called me on it, wagging her fingers at me from the other side of the graveyard.

You would have had fun with me out here. I spent a lot of time at the track, a lot of time in Mexico, and a lot of time flat on my back. Ha ha.

You probably figured out a long time ago that I'm not in Costa Rica. I missed my flight, couldn't catch a bus, car broke down, whatever. Doesn't really make a difference now.

The key is for you. The key to the holy grail you've been lusting after your entire life.

Don't argue, you know what it is, and you know you're drooling at the thought of it. It's all yours.

As for what's left of me, it'd be okay if you dumped me in a duster and flew over Papa Fuller's old fields, the one with the tank, remember? That always cracked me up.

I'll be seeing you.

Chrissy

P.S. Seriously, I'm dead. Don't go looking

around for me. And don't act to Bo like it's a joke.
He's a sweet man, but a little slow on his feet, you
know. It'd just confuse him. I'm dead, have fun at
the wake. Eat some fried chicken for me.

P.P.S. If you wanted, you could save a little of
me to mix in some fried chicken batter. Don't eat me,
of course.

I fold the letter back inside the envelope. The key is small, with a safety pin for a keychain. She's right about this, too. I know exactly what it is and what I'll find.

My desperate need for this to be joke collapses into solid, undeniable knowledge. She is not about to spring out of her little wooden urn in the shoebox and chalk up another imaginary score for herself. My girl, my partner-in-crime, my first love, the eternal thorn in my side is dead.

I hold her letter, seeing her as I did the day she left me for Central America. Standing there on that melting asphalt, I should have known. Hell, I did know, and I stood there like a rube in that truck stop parking lot, gulping down the half-truths she fed me like they were

as tasty and solid as the crackles my grandmother used to make from leftover chicken batter.

Now, I gag as it comes to me. She never made it to Costa Rica. She came south to El Paso because she'd already received her death sentence. Alone, she'd slowly faded away in this sweaty hole while I blithely swaggered through my empty storybook life.

I leap up, shove the shoebox onto the wagon wheel coffee table and scramble out the screen door, banging it against the side of the trailer. I know I'm going to puke, and it will likely not improve relations with Bo if I spew in his living room with the barbed wire and cowboy couch. I reach the sagging chain-link fence surrounding the nearest derrick and cling to it, retching. My stomach empties of last night's spaghetti and this morning's Egg McMuffin. It keeps going even after it's emptied of every speck of nourishment and bile it can dredge up.

My stomach and intestines finally settle. The kaleidoscope of images that shower through my mind are of her in trouble, manipulating me, laughing at me, walking away from me, but alive. Snapping a picture of my naked ass in a cow pasture. Fluttering her eyelashes demurely at my new bride. Giggling in a Sunday school dress covered with childish drawings as her mother explodes like a

volcano.

I'm glad her things aren't here. I'm glad I can't see her here. I gather the strength to turn back to that dilapidated trailer.

Bo is standing in the doorway, his huge noggin brushing the top of the jamb. He squints at me as I shuffle up the steps.

"You're welcome to stay here long as you want. Though I imagine you'll be wanting to get back home to your family."

I nod and follow him into the house, trying to wipe the bile from my mouth.

"I got some meatloaf," he continues, heading toward the kitchen. "Or I could whip up some pork chops and green beans. I'm a pretty good cook."

"Bo."

He stops and looks back at me. I run my tongue over my dry teeth, smelling the puke on my breath. "Thank you."

"Oh, it's no problem. I like to cook, and I got plenty of room here."

"No, I mean, thank you for taking care of her."

Bo looks down at his big, meaty hands. This is a hellhole to me, but this man must have been an angel to her. Someone finally took care of her, and she finally let

him.

Bo nods and meets my eyes. "I wished I coulda known her before...before. I wished I coulda married her, met you and her folks. But she wouldn't let me."

My throat constricts, making my words tight and almost inaudible. "I wish that, too, Bo."

We cannot meet each others' eyes. Even if I had the heart to look up at him, I wouldn't be able to see him through the blurry sheen of tears stampeding through my eyes.

He clears his throat, a mucous-filled grunt that makes me want to hug him all over again. "I'll just nuke that meatloaf," he says softly. "Won't take but a minute."

I sit back down on the couch. Its upholstery doesn't seem so humorous to me now. Now it's endearing, the evidence of a man trying to provide what comfort he can to a woman he's fairly certain the world should stop turning for. It isn't even remotely fair that this is all he is left with.

I can only imagine this will not be the last time I will see Bo, her final caretaker. Struggling to atone for my selfishness with Chrissy, I'll make excuses to visit El Paso, to have a beer with him, to talk with him about Chrissy and the pipeline and trips they might have taken to

Juarez. Next year he'll come to Thanksgiving at my house, and my wife Fern will kindly let him cook beans in her crockpot, and he'll give bronco rides to my laughing/screaming daughters. Fern and I will have many worried discussions about him, about how to get him back out in the world again, how to keep the loneliness at bay for him, and Fern will even invite full-bosomed single women to our infrequent family gatherings to dangle in front of him. Bo will never take the bait, though, and I will understand.

In the end, he loved her far better than I did. Bo wasn't the one who gave up on her. I was.

CHAPTER 1

I had never seen anything like her. Granny would have called her a heathen child, pursing her nicotine-cracked lips at the girl's tangle of hair, the un-ladylike smudges of dirt on her bubbly cheeks, the wild-weed squint in her blue eyes telling me, "I'm gonna knock you flat, boy, and when I'm done, you'll holler like a two-bit preacher singin' hallelujah for a month of Sundays." I couldn't wait to land smack on my butt, just so she could smile at me and do it again.

Of course, I was only four years old, so I had very limited experience at that time. For just a mere urchin, though, I was right on target about my new cousin Chrissy.

My Uncle Rick brought her fishing not long after he and Aunt Suzie got married. Chrissy came to the pond because she thought she might get a glimpse of her new step-daddy Rick walking on water. But he just sat next to

Daddy, grunting about the cows in Denver City and the cotton north of town while Daddy harrumphed at him and told us kids to go play over yonder.

Daddy and I had been sitting on the little pier that jutted into the pond just outside of town, poles stuck out over the mucky water. Daddy fished quietly, like he always did and I always wanted to. I was fidgety and squirmy, though, rolling around on those old wood planks till Daddy hollered at me that I was going to get splinters up my rear.

It was a tiny pond, scummy and muddy and completely man-made. The city maintained the pond and its surrounding park, stocking it with catfish and carp just so little boys like me could have Sundays with their daddies. There weren't many big fish and the ones that were there were perfectly ordinary, but I just knew there was a huge shark or striper in there for me to haul in. I'd get my picture in the Mather County Chronicle and be a fishing hero at the tender age of four. Mostly, though, I fished for five minutes till I got bored, then I pulled up tangled pond weeds and ran around collecting cattails to pop at the ducks.

By the time Uncle Rick showed up with Chrissy, I'd already gotten bored and had stripped the bank of as many

pond weeds as I could carry, hugging them to my chest and blinking the shower of pollen off my eyelashes. Uncle Rick pushed Chrissy in my direction and sat down next to Daddy, the toe of his cowboy boot trailing cow muck in the water. Chrissy sniffed at me, shrugged, and went about the business of digging in the moss-encrusted mud.

I clutched my precious perfect cattails and stood over Chrissy, crouching with her head down and not acknowledging my existence in the least. She was bigger than me, though Daddy'd said she was just my age. Her blond hair straggled out of the pink clasps on the sides of her head, and her corduroys were rolled up at the knees to keep them out of the mud.

"You diggin' for worms?" I asked. "Me and Daddy got some nightcrawlers. You c'n have some."

She didn't even look up, just kept mashing dirt around. "I am not looking for worms. They're gross."

"They ain't gross."

"Are too. They crawl around in the dirt all day."

I stood and watched her shove her rough hands into the mud. She made a little castle, more like a hut, then stood back to admire it. It slid wetly into a heap, too mushy to hold any shape.

Chrissy gathered up steam, bent her knees until her

butt almost touched the ground, then hopped right into the middle of it, splashing mud all over me.

I spent a moment trying to decide if I should cry. I finally decided to laugh, and I hopped on the castle with her. She cracked a smile back at me, and the crinkly sparkle would have made swallowing a lungful of the stuff worthwhile.

"Hey," I said, "you wanna get them geese?" I pointed to the crowd of ducks and geese waiting at a distance for the nice people to throw them bread crumbs.

She tipped her head toward the poultry, a wisp of fine yellow hair reaching out to me like a tentacle. Grinning like a bank robber in an unguarded vault, she plopped a handful of mud onto my head and ran off.

"Dadgum it!" I spewed my father's favorite curses, hardly knowing what they meant, as Chrissy plowed through the middle of all the hungry geese. The birds squawked indignantly. I ran after her with my cattails waving like a quiver of arrows.

One old goose, the big gray one who'd been fishing in this pond ever since Daddy first brought me, turned around and let out a huge honk at me.

"Honk!" I hollered back.

"Honk," he honked. He spread his flapping wings,

stabbed his gaping beak at me, and charged.

I froze for a terrifying moment, then threw my bouquet of cattails at him and ran, screaming.

When I got to the pier, still screaming and with no sign of a goose behind me, Daddy and Uncle Rick stood up and folded their arms.

"Whatsa matter, boy, 'at girl scare you out your britches?" Uncle Rick asked, setting his cap back on his head.

"A goose, Daddy, he got me, he wanted to eat me for dinner like on the TV and I threw my cattails and he flew and he's taller than me—"

"Hush," Daddy said sharply. "Quit that cryin'."

I snuffled and hiccupped.

"Are you broke?" Daddy asked. "Are you bleeding?"

I shook my head.

"Well then you're not hurt. Quit that bawling."

Uncle Rick grinned. "Them geese are nasty little suckers, ain't they? I bet he coulda swallowed you in one bite."

I caught my breath and looked down to assure myself I was whole. I didn't think geese really ate little boys, but that gray one had lived for a really long time on something.

Chrissy stood quietly behind me. "Come on," she whispered.

I shook my head. I'd nearly gotten eaten playing with her.

"Come on," she insisted.

I hesitated, then followed, leaving Daddy and Uncle Rick to argue over heifers and crop yields. I noticed then that Chrissy was using her shirt for a bowl, carrying a cake dough bowl's worth of soupy mud. She tiptoed into a cache of cattails, weaving through the little forest to the shore. From behind her I saw the big gray goose fluffing himself on the bank, safe and stupidly oblivious.

Amazingly, Chrissy got right up behind him, almost close enough to touch his tail feathers, before he saw her and swung around flapping and squawking. Her entire upper body flung the shirt-bowl of mud on him, and he instantly deflated, shaking his head and slipping down into the pond with a splash of muddy gray feathers. He swam off to his friends, ashamed and embarrassed.

Chrissy slapped the grime off her palms, then turned to me.

"Gimme your shirt," she demanded.

"Why?"

"Mine's dirty. I want yours."

"Okay."

I yanked my shirt off over my head and took hers. Once the trade was completed, neither of us was any cleaner than when we had started, but the novelty of wearing someone else's dirty laundry was good enough for us. Both of our mothers would scream and let us no farther than the mudroom once we got home, making the entire day worthwhile.

It also somehow connected us at the hip. My mama had a hard time keeping us from even going to the bathroom together. We didn't care. We were best friends, thanks to that goose.

CHAPTER 2

Once we started school, Chrissy and I were left with only one day a week for all-out heathenism: Saturdays. All week long our mothers had to pry us out of bed to get us to school on time, cajoling and threatening to call our daddies if we didn't shape up. But on Saturdays we were up almost before the sun, catching the best of the morning's cartoons before migrating outside to hunt for frogs, build forts, and plot attacks against the Campbell kids up the street. We'd come home exhausted, filthy, scraped up, and happy as hogs in mud.

On Sundays, we had to make up for all that fun.

"Get your happy butt up, Jake," my daddy barked from the kitchen. "I'm not gonna tell you again."

I lay there, my face buried in my Texas Aggie bed sheets, hoping for once my parents would overlook me in their preparations for church. I was six years old, and I'd already decided I knew all I needed to know about

Jesus. Putting a "Sunday" in front of "school" didn't make it any less school.

"Jacob Marshall Fuller the Third." The nearness of Mama's sharp voice startled me to a sitting position. "If you don't get out of that bed right now, I'm going to make darn sure Granny doesn't make enough Big Red pancakes for you. You can watch Chrissy eat all by her lonesome."

I slithered out of bed lickety-split. The only thing that ever got me through an hour of preaching and an hour of singing "Jesus Loves Me" while my Sunday go-to-meeting suit scratched at my wrists and choked my throat was the prospect of the red cream soda-sweetened flapjacks Granny always whipped up after church. Nothing at Luby's could hold a candle to my grandma's Big Red pancakes.

By the time Mama'd stuffed me into my suit - which after two months was already getting short in the sleeves - and gotten Daddy away from the sports page, we were too late to get the "good seats," at least by Mama's standards. We were relegated to the very back row of the First Baptist Church of Mather, too far away to truly feel the heat of Pastor John's sermon. It was just fine by me and Daddy, though, since we could snooze and play rock-paper-scissors all we wanted without anybody accusing us of going straight to hell.

Chrissy must have had a hard time getting moving that morning, too. The only three seats left for us were right next to Aunt Suzie and Uncle Rick, Chrissy smushed between them. I could only have imagined what had happened to make them late, seeing as how Chrissy was barely visible between the folds of a brand new fluffy, ruffled, bows-and-ribbons pink dolly dress. Even her patent leather shoes, poking out the bottom of the voluminous petticoats, were tied with matching pink laces. She resembled less a little girl all dressed up for church than an Easter Day marshmallow peep.

I snorted at her as I took my seat, earning a fresh scowl from her.

Mama leaned over me and whispered to Aunt Suzie, "Chrissy looks just adorable today, Suzanne. Just like a little lady." She winked and patted Chrissy on the knee - assuming she could find her knee. Mama'd always wanted a little girl to dress up and teach to cook and go shopping with, but I'd been so convoluted and fat when I was born that she couldn't have another. She lived as vicariously as she could through Suzanne and Chrissy, not that Chrissy was much more of a daughter than I was.

Daddy just raised his eyebrows at Uncle Rick, who shook his head as if to say "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

By the time all the kids were released for Sunday school, Chrissy's face had progressed through blushing rose and angry red all the way to the mottled scarlet of choked rage. Her countenance only darkened when Mrs. Dixon, our Sunday school teacher, fluffed a poofy sleeve and exclaimed, "Good heavens, child, don't you just look precious in your new dress. Your mama has gone and done you up right, hasn't she?"

Chrissy looked near tears, so I leaned into her and mimicked, "'Oooh, you look just precious, just like a little lady.'"

She whipped around and delivered a knuckle shot to my thigh before I could jump out of the way. Limping, I followed her to our regular table.

We sang a few rounds of "Jesus Loves Me" and "This Little Light of Mine." Mrs. Dixon was attempting to teach us the accompanying sign language to go along with the songs, but I was too fascinated by the generous flaps of tissue cascading from the undersides of her arms every time she gestured to pay any attention to the actual hand signs. Mrs. Dixon weighed more than some of my uncle's prize heifers.

Every time I glanced over at Chrissy, she was faking the sign language with one hand and gnawing on the

hangnails of the other. She'd draw blood, watch it pool up in the raw flesh, then gleefully swipe it on the skirt of her dress.

"Your mama's gonna tan your hide," I whispered, completely neglecting to let my little light shine.

"Least I won't have to wear this dress no more," she whispered back, pressing a particularly gruesome thumb into the bow encircling her waist.

Mrs. Dixon discovered Chrissy's oozing digits in the transition between song hour and Bible study, clucking her tongue and enveloping my cousin somewhere in her bulk. She whisked her off to the bathroom to apply bandaids to all ten of Chrissy's fingers.

When they got back, we all listened to Mrs. Dixon read the story of Daniel and the lion's den while we colored the same scene. I added a dash of red crayon, figuring there was no way Daniel got out of that den without some amount of blood and disfigurement. Chrissy refused to color in her picture with anything but a black crayon, which she used to completely fill in the entire page until it was nothing but a black hole.

"You're outside the lines," May Campbell told her urgently. May always outlined each figure before filling it in, her drawings always precise and perfect. Her Sunday

dress was sky blue, perfectly pleated, and she paused between crayons to straighten her skirt and air her ruffles.

Chrissy stuck her tongue out at May and began to color off of the page, leaving long scratches of black wax on the Formica table.

A knock on the classroom door made us all jump, except for May, who frowned at the intrusion and used the distraction to swipe the red crayon from me. The door creaked open and Mr. Dixon poked his enormous head through, ducking under the door frame. Where Mrs. Dixon was fat, Mr. Dixon was tall, his head brushing the ceiling in every room he entered. My daddy told me once that the Dixons used to work for a circus as the fat lady and the world's tallest man, before they'd found God and come to Mather to retire and spread the word of the Lord. I wasn't sure I believed him, mostly because my mama always rolled her eyes when he told me, but for a while it seemed like a pretty plausible story to me.

"Mornin', kids," Mr. Dixon boomed down at us. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought it was the voice of God himself, hollering down from the heavens. "Y'all learning about Jesus today?"

"We're learning about Daniel," May responded in

exasperation, as if any idiot who hadn't been in a circus would know that.

Mr. Dixon smiled at her, then turned to his wife. "Murpha, can I have a minute?"

Mrs. Dixon nodded. "Children, you just go on ahead and finish your pictures. Make sure you sign your names so's we can put them up on the wall for all your mamas and daddies to see."

The hush of quiet, pious children lasted about as long as it took for Mrs. Dixon to close the door behind her. May kept her head down, furiously darkening her lions' manes, but Chrissy quickly took advantage of the opportunity. She scooted her chair back, its legs shuddering across the cheap industrial carpet, and raced over to what Mrs. Dixon called the "Art Center": a long rectangular folding table covered with a plastic sheet. Old coffee mugs and plastic cups from the Dairy Queen held scores of tatted paintbrushes, broken crayons, and chunks of pastels. Chrissy grabbed a DQ Blizzard cup full of markers, most of which still had caps, and returned to our table.

"You're supposed to use crayons," May told her, raising her voice over the growing din of unsupervised giggles and whispers. "Mrs. Dixon didn't say we could use

markers.”

“‘You’re supposed to use crayons,’” Chrissy mimicked, her voice high and cruel. She flobbered her tongue at May, and the laughter that followed caused May to duck her head down again.

Chrissy climbed up on her chair, her Sunday shoes scraping across the pebbled plastic. She held the markers out to us, splaying the colors like a carnie offering darts, three for a dollar, everybody wins.

She gathered five or six of us around her (imagine, some of the kids actually bought into that whole “be good little children on Sundays” stuff, and stayed in their seats). The good little boys and girls peered curiously at us, wishing they had the nerve to join us, but fearing that as soon as they did, Mrs. Dixon would march back through the door and snuff out all their little lights. Or tell their mamas; I’m not sure which was worse.

We all grabbed a marker. I tussled with Benny Ramirez over the brand new green Crayola and lost because my hands were too sweaty. I wound up with a generic purple highlighter, its tip mashed and its ink nearly dry. Then I stood with the others, waiting to see what I’d taken a marker for.

Chrissy didn’t say a word. She just popped the top

off a black sharpie and proceeded to draw a great big upside-down smiley face on the belly of her dress.

"Ummm," I hummed. "Aunt Suzie is gonna be mad at you."

Chrissy grinned. "Come on, hurry up before the teacher gets back."

They descended on her like coyotes on a carcass. Benny caught the edge of her skirt and drew a bunch of zombies (or was that a family portrait? Hard to tell). LuAnn Tremore bit her lip and fashioned a fat smiling sun on the left sleeve. Artie Harris just scribbled a lot.

I looked enviously at Benny's green marker that sent wells of dark ink flowing into the pale pink fabric with every touch of its tight, perfect point. I gripped my ugly purple highlighter and smashed it on the back of Chrissy's dress, half-hoping it would be dry as a bone. Somewhere in my brain a flashing neon sign was screaming "Danger!" I was going to get into trouble for this, I knew it. Aunt Suzie was going to scream at me just as much as Chrissy. My mama would heave that heavy sigh, and my daddy would deliver the "We're disappointed in you, Jake, we thought you could be more of a grown up" speech. Granny would hold off on the Big Red pancakes, and if we got to eat them at all they'd be cold and the butter wouldn't melt into them.

Papa Fuller might even snake off his belt and snap it at my bottom a couple of times. The only person besides me and Chrissy who might think it was funny was Uncle Rick. He'd be eating pancakes and grinning at us while the rest of the grown ups frowned and delivered our punishments.

Then I looked at Chrissy. She was grinning, strangely resembling her stepdaddy Rick, and her brand new dress was already covered with grade-school graffiti. She looked like a kindergarten bulletin board, with stick dogs and blue trees and red smiley faces cavorting all over her. We were already in trouble, and nobody was going to believe I didn't have a hand in it. So I figured I might as well get in on it while the getting was good.

A purple tractor isn't exactly true-to-life, but seeing as how Benny wouldn't give up the green one for love nor money, I had to make do. I think I must have left an impression of it on Chrissy's skin, I had to press so hard to get any juice out of the felt tip. I was pretty proud of it, anyway. It looked just like the real John Deere I'd helped Uncle Rick fix the week before, except for the color.

"What is going on in here? You children need to stay in your- dear God, Christina Fuller, what have you done?"

The obscuring herd of children's bodies surrounding my

cousin guiltily dispersed, slinking back to their seats, praying Mrs. Dixon hadn't had the presence of mind to note which ones had participated in the melee. Chrissy was left standing on her chair like a street performer, grinning and admiring the piece of art she had become.

Mrs. Dixon's broad face reddened to match the giant flower Annie DuBose had etched on Chrissy's backside. She huffed over to us and snatched all the markers away from Chrissy, even grabbing the pathetic purple highlighter out of my hand. I stood there, unwilling to sit and abandon Chrissy to her fate, yet completely unable to utter a single word in her defense. I could offer nothing other than a weak explanation of the ongoing battle against Aunt Suzie's sanity. I didn't think that would go over very well there in church, in front of God and everybody.

"Christina, you get down offa that chair right now," Mrs. Dixon sputtered, spraying spittle over me.

Chrissy hopped down, still beaming with accomplishment.

"You will sit in the corner for the rest of Sunday school, and believe you me, little girl, I'm going to have a talk with your mama about this." Mrs. Dixon had hold of Chrissy's arm now, hauling her to the tiny stool she used for timeouts. "This behavior cannot continue in my class.

You are keeping your friends from the true light of the Lord, and I won't have it. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Chrissy chirped, not chastened at all.

Mrs. Dixon deposited Chrissy on the stool, the girl's marker-smudged nose poking into the bare corner. Chrissy resumed gnawing on her cuticles and wiping the fluids on her ruined dress.

"And you, Jacob Fuller," Mrs. Dixon snapped, glowering at me. "You know better than to let your heathen cousin lead you into temptation. What the devil gets into you?"

"I-I-I don't know," I stammered, straining not to giggle and reply that it was the devil getting into me. The devil in a pink dress. Couldn't resist her if I was Daniel himself. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Dixon."

She crossed her arms and stood over me, her graham-cracker scent filling my lungs and belying the ire eeking out of her pores.

"I've half a mind to spank you myself," she informed me, "but I've got a good notion your granddaddy's going to be more than willing to serve you both your punishment."

I looked wildly over at Chrissy, who looked wildly over at me. Aunt Suzie we'd considered and dismissed, but we'd completely forgotten about Papa Fuller. He was scarier than Chrissy's mama by a pretty fair margin.

As it was, once Aunt Suzie caught sight of the damage Chrissy had inflicted upon her new dress, you could hear the screech in three counties. I mean it was a real live Night of the Living Dead scream, right there in the church foyer. Mrs. Dixon handed us over to our parents with a tight-lipped frown and an "I trust you will see to it that this sort of behavior never goes on in my classroom again," completely shaming my mother.

"Goddammit, Christina, why can't you just act like a normal child for two hours in a row?" Aunt Suzie hissed at Chrissy, her anger bringing her serpentine words to a pitch that echoed off the walls and glass of the open area. "I paid fifty dollars for that dress. Fifty dollars!!! Do you know how many chores you're going to have to do to make up fifty damn dollars? Huh? Do you?"

Uncle Rick had to shake Aunt Suzie a bit to get her to stop hollering at Chrissy in front of the entire town. She settled for sending stabbing glares at her daughter while they hustled us off to the cars, not sticking around to chat it up with the rest of the parishioners like they usually did.

By the time the two cars got to Granny and Papa Fuller's house for Sunday lunch, my dad had gotten over the initial shock and was guffawing over the whole thing. "You

gotta admit," he kept saying, "It's a good way to get out of ever wearing something goofy like that again. I wish I could do that with all these damn suits and ties." Mama didn't find it so amusing, mostly because she wished I was a girl she could dress up in a frilly pink dress, and she'd have been heartbroken if it'd happened to her.

Granny, who never went to church anymore because she said she'd come to an understanding with God, met us at the front door, smiling and letting all the yummy pancake vapors out of the house. She was pretty happy to see us till she took in Aunt Suzie's anger-mutated face and Chrissy's marker-annihilated dress.

"Uh-oh," she said. "I'll go put the pancakes in the oven to keep warm."

We all followed her guiltily into the dining area just off the kitchen, where Papa Fuller sat drinking a cup of black coffee and smoking Winston-Salems while he read the weekly High Plains Journal. Papa Fuller didn't go to church, either, but I wasn't too sure he had any kind of understanding with God. I thought maybe God was scared of him, just like everybody else.

I peeked anxiously at his belt, relieved to find it was the one with his name on the back. That one didn't hurt too bad. Not like the snappy belt. The snappy belt

had been known to require ice and udder cream after its use on a tender backside.

Aunt Suzie directed Chrissy to sit in a chair, turning it to face all of us. I slipped back behind the grown ups, trying to avoid a similar fate.

"Now, missy," Aunt Suzie stated, her voice hard as ten-penny nails, "I want you to explain to all of us just why on earth you would do something like this."

Before she replied Chrissy peered at each one of them in turn: her mom, arms folded, foot tapping; Uncle Rick, walking the line between a smirk and complete exasperation; my parents and Granny, trying to stay out of it; and Papa Fuller, frighteningly calm.

"I don't like dresses," Chrissy began. "I don't like dresses, or pink, or lace, or ruffles, or bows."

"You are a young lady," Aunt Suzie informed her. "Young ladies have to wear dresses from time to time. They do not act like heathens, and they do not draw on their best Sunday outfits."

"I don't like it," Chrissy repeated stubbornly.

"Say you're sorry," Uncle Rick suggested helpfully. "It ain't nice to treat your mama like that, 'specially when she bought you something nice to wear."

"But I'm not sorry," Chrissy insisted, her eyes

imploring. "I hate it."

"That's it." Aunt Suzie stomped one rhinestone-encrusted shoe and grabbed for Chrissy. "We are going home right now. No pancakes. You're going to get a spanking you won't believe."

Papa Fuller folded his magazine and cleared his throat. The entire room froze, and Aunt Suzie stopped dead in her tracks before she could drag Chrissy out of the house to have her way with her.

"Got me a call this morning," Papa Fuller drawled, holding his smoking cigarette up by his ear and lounging back in the ornate dining chair. "Right b'fore y'all drove up. Pastor John sayin' Murpha Dixon was beside herself, and Suzanne was blaspheming right there in church. Is 'at right, Suzanne?"

"It is none of Murpha Dixon or Pastor John's business what I do with my child," Aunt Suzie replied quickly, but I could hear a quiver in her voice.

"Mayhap not," Papa Fuller admitted. "But you damn sure make it their business flapping your mouth in the middle of the foyer. And you make it my business when you set that child at my kitchen table and holler your fool head off at her."

Daddy and Uncle Rick both took involuntary steps back.

Having had a lifetime of experience with Papa Fuller, I figured they knew best what was coming, and I slunk back with them.

"Well, I apologize for bringing my family into your home," Aunt Suzie ground out, clenching her teeth. "It's a mistake you can be damn sure I won't do again."

"Shut your mouth," Papa Fuller said, his voice still eerily calm and even. "You and that girl are Fuller now, and I expect you'll keep that in mind next time you decide to open your mouth in public. You hear?"

"I hear you fine."

"Now, Chrissy," he said, turning his full attention on the girl in the folk-art dress. "Your mama's gonna whip you good this time, but you mind me now: next time you get y'self outta line, you're gonna answer to me. Savvy?"

Chrissy nodded, her eyes finally welling up with tears.

"What's that? I can't hear you," he said sharply.

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

"A'ight then. Go on." And with that, he picked up his journal again, took a long drag off his cigarette, and dismissed all of us.

Aunt Suzie plucked Chrissy off the chair, most of her ill-will now directed toward my grandfather. She tucked

Chrissy under one arm and turned to my mother.

"I trust you'll do something to get your boy under control as well, Maryann," she spat, searching for a new target.

"Pardon?" Mama replied indignantly.

"Jake just eggs her on, and you know it. You better give that boy what-for."

Mama drew herself up to her full height, what little of it there was. "Suzanne, I have never told you how to raise your child, and believe me, I could give you a pointer or two. So I'll thank you not to tell me how to raise mine." Aunt Suzie opened her mouth for another punch, but Mama beat her to it. "You all have a good afternoon now."

Mama turned on her heel and strode into the kitchen, strapping on an apron to help Granny batter some calf fries.

"Suzanne," Uncle Rick said carefully, "I imagine we better be gettin' on home before you tick off the rest of my family."

Aunt Suzie took his advice, though the expression on her face made me think Uncle Rick would be paying for that comment later. They left without getting any Big Red pancakes at all.

My daddy breathed a relieved sigh and squinted down at me. "Well?" he asked.

I shrugged, fearing no matter what response I gave, I'd be in trouble.

"You think you need a whupping?" Daddy asked.

I looked at Papa Fuller before I answered, wondering if I could ask which one of them was going to be delivering it. Daddy never used anything harder than his own hand, which beat even the name belt any day.

"I don't want one," I said.

"I didn't ask you that."

I thought hard. There had to be a way to get out of this.

"I shouldn'ta drawn on her," I said by way of apology. "Even though everybody else already was."

"Uh-huh." Daddy waited.

"I guess, um..." I stalled. "I guess maybe one little spanking. But can I still eat pancakes?"

Daddy considered this. I glanced at Mama, who was watching us out of the corner of her eye. She didn't look like she was going to save me, but I thought maybe she was rooting for me.

"Sounds like a deal to me," Daddy finally said. "You ready?"

I nodded solemnly, and bravely turned around for the whack. He steadied his hand on my shoulder and thumped me hard enough to bring stinging tears to my eyes. But it was only one, and then I got to eat mine and Chrissy's share of Big Red pancakes, so I got over it pretty quick.

Chrissy wouldn't ever tell me how bad her punishment was, but I got a good idea of it the next Sunday. And the Sunday after that, and the Sunday after that. Every Sunday for a month of Sundays, Chrissy showed up to church in a frilly, pastel-colored go-to-meeting dress. And every Sunday she pouted and moped and grumbled, but never did a thing to so much as soil the hem.

I doubt it was Aunt Suzie keeping her in line. More likely by far was the fact that Papa Fuller took to wearing the snappy belt every Sunday. Whatever it was, Chrissy got to eat her share of pancakes for a long while.