Summer in Dooley County tasted like dust.

That’s what I remember. Red dust that got baked and kicked up from that kind of unforgivin’ heat Georgia is famous for … ya know, the muggy kinda summer that never lets yer hair dry completely after ya got outta the tub. Even if ya wore an undershirt, yer shirt would be soaked through b’fore ya ever made it out the front door. An’ once the dust commenced to attachin’ itself to ya, ya ended up lookin’ kinda grimy an’ unwashed. So I never wore an undershirt. Us’ally not even a shirt. Not durin’ the summer anyhow.

It was 1936. Nothin’ was very hopeful – the people, the economy… a whole lot of waitin’ around fer things to turn the corner, which a’course never happened.

“Just Around The Corner, there’s a rainbow in the sky…”

I was fifteen that summer. I was just fifteen ‘cause I was a June baby. Things seemed purty hopeful to me – no matter what everybody else was feelin’ at the time. School was over an’ the summer stretched out b’fore me like a pair of friendly arms an’ I ran headlong into it. Fifteen an’ no summer school meant I’d prob’ly be able to work my old job at the mercantile an’ still have enough time to do whatever I put my young mind to – which was us’ally no good.

Growin’ up I didn’t have a whole lotta friends but I didn’t never feel I needed more’n one or two. My best friend was Jimmy Moseby. He an’ I practic’ly grew up t’gether. His pa had the farm ’cross the road from us. Jimmy was a June baby too – same year as me. So we was like brothers – actually, better’n brothers, ‘cause Jimmy an’ me never fought. Just never did. We always seemed to see eye to eye on purty much ev’rything. Even finished the other’s sentences now an’ again. Folks would hardly ever say his name without sayin’ mine.

“Why, I saw Jimmy an’ Clay at the pitchers yesterday.”

“Jimmy an’ Clay stole a pie right off’n my back porch!”

“Wait’ll I get my hans on Jimmy an’ Clay!”

It was like that.

My other friend was Tommy Rettinger. I didn’t see Tommy all that much ‘cause he was a little older ‘n me an’ he was responsible fer runnin’ the fam’ly farm an’ takin’ care of his mom an’ his brothers ‘n sisters. He was only two years ahead-a me but his pa run off… “disappeared”… when Tommy was only thirteen. He dropped outta school an’ just took over an’ did a purty good job an’ practic’ly never complained. His ma did enough complainin’ fer the whole fam’ly so it woulda been pointless anyhow if he had bitched about what a bum deal he got. In 1936 there was no jobs to be had in town so if you was a farmer at least ya could eat. The Rettingers never went without supper on the table ‘cause-a Tommy. I don’t think they ever ’preciated him, though. But I did.
Fer as much as Jimmy an’ me was alike, Tommy an’ me was complete opposites. Jimmy was towheaded an’ blue-eyed an’ scrawny – an’ I wasn’t all that diff’rent, ‘cept I was maybe a little bit taller… a little bit broader. But we “coulda been cut from the same bolt-a fabric”. That’s what our ma’s always said.

Tommy, though. Tommy was like one of them photo negatives of me. Dark hair… dark eyes… bigger… a little tougher… but he also had a couple years on me an’ a lotta hard work under his belt. Don’t get me wrong. I did my fair share around the farm, but I had two older brothers who was gonna take over one day anyhow so I figgered I’d let them do most-a the work. I didn’t have much int’rest in farmin’ anyhow an’ my pa knowed it.

So, I should prob’ly start back a ways… a few years b’fore that summer… so you can get an idea of why what I hafta say is so important for me to get said and then be done with it. I guess you can decide fer yerself what to make of it when ya get to the end-a my story.

It was the wintertime… an’ I was thirteen… an’ we had been hit with a snowstorm. That’s right. A snowstorm in Georgia! I remember my pa sayin’ that in all his years he’d never even seen a snowflake an’ then we was hit with this thick blanket-a white that practic’ly paralyzed Dooley County fer nearly three days. Some folks was scared to go out in it, but not us kids. School was called off an’ the town purty much shut down – so’s us kids had the whole community to ourselves.

We didn’t have sleds. Who needed a sled in Georgia? But we fashioned makeshift sleds made outta old doors or hog troughs an’ even an old baby bassinet. We spent mosta that first day wearin’ ‘way the white on every hillside in sight. It was fun like we’d never had b’fore… an’ really not all that cold. Cold enough fer the snow to stick and the creek to freeze over but not so much as to chill ya to the core.

This was the first time I could remember that Tommy was able to spend a whole day off-a the farm an’ just be a kid. It was also the first time in a long time that I could remember that my two friends an’ me was t’gether.

It was also the last… well, nearly the last…

The two of ‘em started off friendly enough. Hell, they knowed each other from day one but they never did mix well. Somethin’ funny about the chemistry between the two of ‘em, which always confounded me ‘cause, like I said, Jimmy an’ me was carbon copies. Maybe – an’ I think I’m right – the two of ‘em were a little jealous of one ‘nother. Of them both bein’ friends with me an’ all. Jimmy was a little more territorial I guess. They never came to blows or anything, but as the day went on it was clear to anyone who cared to notice that they was about to have it out. Little sideways comments or challenges thrown out here an’ there. I tried to laugh it off with ‘em… ya know… keep the peace… but they was always just this side-a wailin’ on one ‘nother. It was in the air. An’ it was a kinda ridiculous thought anyhow when it come right down to it ‘cause Tommy coulda whupped Jimmy with one han’ tied behind… no… both hans tied b’hind his back. Blindfolded. An’ sittin’.
So, here’s how I remember it.

There was a huge hill just outside-a a town on the Mawry’s farm. It was off RR1 an’ it began just off the side-a the road an’ it was real steep. At the time it looked like a complete 90 degree drop, but in hindsight it was prob’ly only like… 85. Ha! It was steep – trust me. The idea was to see if we could get down the slope to where it grad’lly tapered off an’ then wound ‘round a creek bed. We figgered if we navigated just right it would lan’ us at the beginnin’ of the Mawry’s driveway. Or so we reckoned.

Only five of us made the trip out to that hillside that afternoon. Some-a the others we was with had got tired an’ went home fer lunch. Some of ‘em didn’t have somethin’ to sled on. An’ some of ‘em was just too plain scared to try it.

Tommy was the one who thought it up. It was his idea. I woulda done anything Tommy tolle me to so ’course I was up fer whatever he said was a good time. He was, to me, what my older brothers shoulda been. Jimmy… well, he just come along ’cause I was goin’ an’, to be honest, I think he didn’t like the idea of me spendin’ any more time with Tommy less’n he was along. Like maybe I would end up choosin’ sides or somethin’ if’n he wasn’t around to watch over things.

The other two boys were brothers. They were kinda whiny… the Whitleys… Craig an’ Billy. Nice enough, they was, but whiny. They wasn’t gonna do it but they was gonna watch. An’ whine.

I remember, standing there at the crest-a that hill and how crisp the air was. An’ I remember breathin’ in the pines an’ thinkin’ ‘bout how Christmasy it smelt… even though it was already passed.

“I’m goin’ first!” Tommy called out.

He said he’d go first ‘cause it was his idea. He should-a gone first. But then Jimmy, for some reason, jumped in an’ said, “No, I’m gonna go first! I got the best sled.”

He did. It was a long wooden door… narrow like it’d come off-a closet or somethin’… an’ he’d taken off the hinges an’ knobs an’ fastened a rope on either side to hang on to. It was real slick on the snow but ya couldn’t steer it none. Tommy didn’t say nothin’. He sneered a bit, but he just kinda made a gesture an’ let Jimmy go ahead-a him.

Jimmy hunkered down an’ got his sled in position. He was balancin’ kinda half on ‘n half off the ledge of the hill. It was gonna practic’ly be straight down fer the first fifty feet or so an’ there really wasn’t much fer him to hold on to ‘ceptin’ that rope – so he laid kinda flat an’ hooked the toe-a his boots on the back-a the door.

Now, I was there. I remember purty much ev’ry detail but this one. If ya’d asked me then I’d-a been no clearer about it than I am now. But… understan’… I don’t remember seein’ Tommy give Jimmy a shove off. I just don’t. I know Tommy didn’t squat down an’ push him or anything… I’d-a remembered that much. But whether or not he put a foot on the board an’
pushed it some, I can’t say. All I know is, Jimmy shot a look back at Tommy as he started down
the hill, full tilt, as if to say, “I wasn’t ready!” — but didn’t say it.

Anyhow, it was too late. He was headed down that snowy hillside at full speed an’
c clingin’ on fer dear life. I thought fer sure that he’d lose his grip an’ wipe out, but he never did.
He kept purty much on course, headin’ like a demon to the place where the hill leveled off some
an’ then ran ‘longside the creek.

Like I said, that door was slick an’ the ropes didn’t allow him to steer none, so sure
’nough, when it come time to try an’ make a right angle along the bed of the creek, I saw Jimmy
lean an’ try to get the thing to go in the right direction but it just barreled straight forward, like a
rocket, an’ Jimmy hit a rock an’ the thing sailed up – him still on it – an’ came crashing down
on the ice of the creek. Even though the creek wasn’t that deep, we knewed the ice on the
surface couldn’t-a took his weight… not with that kinda impact… an’, sure ‘nough, he broke
right through an’ disappeared ‘neath the surface.

By now Tommy an’ me was fallin’ all over ourselfs to get down that hill – slidin’ an’
tumblin’ – racin’ to get to the creek bed. I didn’t see Jimmy anywhere. The board popped up but
he didn’t. Tommy an’ me was covered in white like two snowmen makin’ our way as fast as we
could over the drifts to where the ravine was. When we got there Tommy didn’t think twiced
about it. He just jumped in where the ice had broke through – clothes ‘n’ all – an’ he too
disappeared fer a minute. Then he shot out like a jack-in-the-box, took a quick breath an’ looked
at me an’ said, “Don’t come in, Clay! Find a vine or a branch ‘er somethin’!” an’ then he was
gone again.

I scrambled ‘round lookin’ fer somethin’ I could use to pull ‘em in. I remember glancin’
up to the top-a the hill an’ the whiners was nowhere to be seen. I figgered they’d run back to
town to get help. Turns out I had figgered wrong.

About the time I found a gnarly ol’ branch long enough an’ strong enough to reach the
hole in the surface-a the creek, I heard some splashin’ an’ crackin’ of ice. It was Tommy an’ this
time it looked like he had somethin’ in his arms – like a limp bundle–a clothes ‘er somethin’ –
that’s what I thought. ‘Course I knewed it was Jimmy but there wasn’t anything resemblin’ him
that I could see. His head was still under the water.

I got down to the bank an’ laid the branch out far enough fer Tommy to grab a-hold with
his one arm an’ then I started to pull as best I could. He was scramblin’ to get hisself an’ Jimmy
up onto the ice. It was breakin’ ‘way some but event’lly he slid up onto his belly an’ managed to
pull Jimmy up alongside-a him an’ I kept pullin’ an’ pullin’ ’til they was close enough fer me to
grab ahold’ve ‘em both.

We rolled Jimmy over onto his back an’ saw his face – ice white an’ starin’ up at us – an’
fer a minute I thought, “Oh, thank God! He’s alive!” But lookin’ closer I could see he wasn’t
takin’ a breath. He was dead still. An’ Tommy, who was kneelin’ over him, commenced to
shakin’ him an’ callin’ out his name. I felt helpless ‘cause all I could do is watch him, thinkin’
how strange it seemed to be witnessin’ this in a sorta distant way. Like I wasn’t really there.
Like I was watchin’ a pitcher show. It just didn’t seem real. But I kept focused… fascinated…
an’ Tommy began poundin’ on Jimmy’s chest an’ pushin’ on his belly an’ stuff. But see, we
didn’t know the first thing about revivin’ someone who drowned. Not really. That wasn’t
somethin’ we was taught or ever really thought about. We was all purty good swimmers. No
such thing as a lifeguard at a country swimmin’ hole or a creek.

Anyhow, if the Whitley boys had run to get help, which I was prayin’ they had, no one
had showed up yet. I kept lookin’ but no one was on the horizon. Tommy wasn’t lookin’ at
anything but Jimmy an’ Jimmy was just lookin’ straight up. A little bit-a water was tricklin’
outta the side-a his mouth an’ I remember thinkin’ that was a good sign. But then nothin’ else.
Fin’ly Tommy, not stoppin’ whatever it was he was tryin’ to do, yelled, “Go get help, Clay!
Get to town NOW!”

An’ without missin’ a beat I was up over the bank an’ headin’ ’cross the field runnin’ fer
Jimmy’s life. I wasn’t panicked. I know I should-a been. I knowed how serious it was but I
wasn’t scared. I was still kinda excited by it all, still believin’ that it would somehow be okay
because this sorta thing never happened. Not really. Only in stories we’d heard.

I kept slidin’ down the hill ev’ry time I tried to get up it, but I eventually made progress
by goin’ up kinda sideways. Then I hit the road an’ ran with all I had in me toward town. I
couldn’t hear a sound ‘cept my feet on the snow an’ gravel. Everything else was unfamiliar to
my ear… hushed… carpeted… dull. An’ then I heard somethin’ I don’t remember ever hearin’
b’fore – or since. A thudding sound… a fast, steady thudding in my ears… an’ it took me a
moment b’fore I realized it was the sound-a my own heart beatin’. It was poundin’! Kinda like
the way Tommy was, back there, poundin’ on Jimmy’s chest. It struck me so odd that I had
picked this moment of all moments to tune into the sound-a my own heartbeat.

After I hit town, I grabbed ahold of the nearest adult… I can’t even remember who it
was… someone I knewed… someone’s mom… an’ I was so outta breath it took me a couple-a
tries to make it clear what was goin’ on, but once I did she took off in the direction of the
sheriff’s office an’ I kinda fell down on my knees an’, I guess, passed out. At least fer a few
seconds. The snow in my face brought me aroun’ purty quick an’ I heard some commotion…
an’ I heard the sound of an engine startin’ up an’ then headin’ towards me. It was the sheriff’s
truck an’ in it was him an’ the deputy an’ the doctor. They stopped an’ pulled me in the back an’
I showed ‘em where to go.

The rest is purty much jumbled up in my mind. When we got to the spot they tole me to
stay in the truck an’ they took off down the hill, the doctor still in his suit coat, no overcoat or
boots or gloves, his bag in his han’. I got outta the truck an’ watched from the top-a the hill.
Honestly I wasn’t sure I had anything left in me, anyhow, that woulda got me down again an’
over to where Tommy an’ Jimmy was.

Tommy called out an’ they heard him an’ got over to the bank. Then they, all three of
‘em, disappeared into the ravine an’ it was what seemed like hours b’fore I saw a head appear as
someone came up over the bank. It was Doc Parker. An’ he was takin’ his time an’ I thought to
myself that it couldn’t be good if he was comin’ up without Jimmy. My heart – still beatin’
’way in my chest an’ my ears – stopped. Just like someone had closed a catcher’s mitt ’round it.
Jimmy Moseby was dead.

At the wake, Jimmy’s family was all seated in the front row… right near the casket where he lay. I see foggy details of the events ‘round his drownin’. The front parlor of the Moseby’s house where he was laid out…. an’ the cemetery, all muddy an’ gray with the meltin’ snow. But I see things in my mind’s eye like I seen ‘em then – like an ol’ blurry, faded’ photograph. Like that.

I can see Jimmy layin’ there in his coffin. I can smell the smell of sickly sweet flowers in the room. Tuberoses. I think that’s what they was.

No one was really cryin’. I thought that was strange. Not his ma’ nor his pa’. Maybe they had done cried theirselves out. His little brother an’ sisters sat there, really well-behaved, but not quite understandin’ what Jimmy was doin’ asleep in the livin’ room in a box with a housefull-a comp’ny. His older sister, Nettta… she was cryin’. She was always cryin’, that one. But espec’ly that day. An’ I didn’t blame her none. I cried too only not in front-a no one. My brothers never woulda let me live that down.

It was the first time I had seen my pa in his suit since my Aunt Jenny’s weddin’. She was his oldest sister an’ she had been a spinster her whole life an’ then she up and met this salesman an’ he proposed to her an’ they was married – just like that. Like within’ two weeks. An’ Pa got hisself a suit an’ stood up fer his sister Jenny. Ugliest bride ya’d ever seen, but happier than any one woman had the right to be.

He left her – the salesman did – not long after they was married. But it didn’t really seem to matter to her none. She had the ring… she had the license… she had a pitcher took in her dress with a man on her arm. She had had her weddin’ an’ was no longer an old maid.

An’ pa had a suit.

But back to Jimmy.

Ev’ryone showed up at their house that day. Ev’ryone from town an’ from the farms around Dooley County. Relatives came in from Atlanta an’ Macon. Even Mrs. Rettinger an’ her herd-a kids came.

But not Tommy.

Tommy didn’t show up at the Moseby’s house. I guess ev’ryone thought he was too tore up to come, but I knowed that it wasn’t just grief that kept him ‘way that day. It was guilt. I don’t think he should-a felt guilty about nothin’ but I knowed he did.

Back at the creek, when they was carryin’ up Jimmy’s body an’ loadin’ it into the back-a the truck, Tommy was right behind everyone – soakin’ wet but kinda frosted over by then – an’ he was shiverin’ an’ shakin’ but he never once blinked. I remember thinkin’ if he’d-a blinked, little frost crystals woulda cut his eyeballs. He was beyond feelin’. Numb an’ unreachable. I tried to talk to him but he didn’t hear me none. He seemed to be runnin’ somethin’ over an’ over
again in his mind. It would seem likely that he was tryin’ to come up with some way he mighta
saved Jimmy… ya know… like maybe he didn’t do enough while I was runnin’ to town. I don’t
know. But I had a feelin’ that’s not what he was playin’ in his head. I’m sure of it. I’d practic’ly
swear that Tommy was seein’ his foot on the back-a Jimmy’s sled (if it ever really was there)
an’ convincin’ hisself that that one little extra shove he may have given had been what caused
Jimmy to hit wrong an’ fly over the bank an’ drown. Or maybe he was thinkin’ that Jimmy
didn’t get a chance to back outta doin’ it… an’ that look over his shoulder… that last b’wildered
look… was him sayin’, “Why’d ya let me go? I was only bluffin’, Tommy. YOU was s’posed to
go first!”

See… now that’s what I was thinkin’ he was thinkin’. I wouldn’t ordinarily assume to
know another person’s thoughts, but Tommy was a real easy soul to read. I knowed his mind. I
knowed his heart. An’ I knowed why he couldn’t bring hisself to face the Moseby fam’ly that
Sunday afternoon in February of 1934.

So… now… two years forward an’ it’s summer.

By then it didn’t hurt me nearly as much as it had to think back on all the good times I
had had with Jimmy. When I first saw his ma after the funeral I couldn’t get myself to where I
could look her in the eye. I tried… but I knowed if I did I would burst into tears ‘cause Jimmy
had his mama’s eyes. She was a blue-eyed, blonde-headed woman who had had the wearisome
burden of buryin’ her oldest son an’ I woulda seen her pain… felt it…‘cause I was like that as a
kid. Still am. I can feel another’s pain as sharp as my own. I just can.

After a while though I started goin’ over there… helpin’ out when I could with chores I
knowed Jimmy had used-ta do. Mr. Moseby was always ‘preciative… maybe even touched by
my doin’ what I did. Mrs. Moseby never let me leave without given me somethin’ good to eat –
an’ that was a big deal on her part ‘cause that family didn’t have two pennies to rub t’gether –
an’ then she’d give me a big ol’ hug. At first I felt good about those hugs. She was a sweet
woman an’ she was a woman who prob’ly coulda used a hug more often than she got. But I
started gettin’ uncomfortable with ‘em. I started to sense that she was really huggin’ Jimmy an’
not me. An’ when I would be there in her arms an’ she would be holdin’ me, I could feel her
breathin’ in real deep… like she was sniffin’ my hair or somethin’. I know it sounds silly but
that’s how it felt an’ I started goin’ over less an’ less ‘til fin’lly I didn’t go over no more. It was
just too creepy. I think they healed ‘bout as good as any fam’ly ever does heal after they lose
someone dear to them. Hope so anyway.

Jimmy was dear to me too though. I walk around to this day with a hole in my heart
knowin’ that I lost the only real and true brother I ever had – or loved. My own brothers, thick
as they was, could tell that I was purty tore up by Jimmy drownin’ so from then on’ they was
always more mindful of my feelins… not so quick to make fun-a me or gimme grief. I guess it
was sorta sweet but at the time it just made me feel unnatural around ‘em cause they wasn’t
built like that. Time eventually wore on an’ their niceties wore off. They was back to flickin’
my ear as they passed my chair to sit down fer breakfast or tryin’ to bounce a rock off-a my head when I walked down the driveway fer school. No love lost there.

An’ as fer Tommy…

Well, he didn’t hardly ever come off-a the farm no more. Not after that winter. When he did it was to get things from the store or to make a delivery or some such business. He didn’t attend church in town no more neither. He would drive his ma an’ the kids an’ pick ‘em up but he wouldn’t go in. I guess, in his mind, he thought the congregation blamed him fer Jimmy’s death. I know good an’ well that they didn’t. No one did. Not even the Moseby’s. Ev’ry time they’d bring up Jimmy they would always mention Tommy an’ fall all over themselves sayin’ what a hero he was an’ such.

I was really the only one who Tommy would make a point of spendin’ any time with. I was glad fer that. I was afraid fer a while that he would shut me out of his life too ‘cause I had been there an’ I was a constant reminder to him of that afternoon. An’ because he knowed how special Jimmy was to me it was prob’y doubly hard fer him to face me – especially at first. But it was, an’ I’m purty sure I’m right, the fact that I was there that day that formed a sort of kinship between us where the friendship had once been. I was there so I knowed what he had done to try to save him. I was there so I knowed how hard he had tried an’ never gave up. But, likewise, I was there so if he had given Jimmy a shove I could have – if ya think about it – been his judge or his savior. But that subject never came up about what I had seen or not seen an’ fer that I’m thankful. Yet it was always danglin’ there, just outside of ev’ry conversation we had, like a scarecrow on a noose. After a while I just stopped talkin’ about Jimmy alt’gether when I was around him.

School had let out on a Friday an’ the very first Saturday of freedom I had made plans to go fishin’ with Tommy. Even though he had purty much taken to only work an’ more work, maybe as a sort of penance or some such notion, he would still allow hisself a chance to get away with me to do somethin’ that boys just do. An’ one thing they do, in Georgia least-wise, is fish. An’ he could justify it by sayin’ he was catchin’ fish fer the fam’ly supper.

So, dawn comes that Saturday an’ I’m downstairs eatin’ my breakfast an’ gettin’ my ears flicked an’ I see Tommy outside the back porch window. He would never knock but I would always know when he was there. We was like that. We had a sense about one another. When Ma would see him she would always say somethin’ about him bein’ a Huck Finn to my Tom Sawyer an’ to make sure that I didn’t let him get me into no trouble. He wasn’t a bad kid an’ Ma knowed that but I guess ‘cause he was older an’ kinda broodin’ an’ not much on the social graces that she thought stuff like that – out loud.

We took off over the back pasture an’ headed over to Moreland Lake. We figgered by leavin’ at sunrise we would get a jump on the two old codgers who always tried to claim the west side of the lake fer theirselves – where all the big daddies lied in waitin’. Sure enough, we
was right to leave as early as we did cause when we got to the lake an’ in the boat we still hadn’t seen a sign of Mr. Johnstone or Mr. Hare – the codgers.

We paddled out to the west side. The water was calm an’ dark an’ there was still the sound of katydids an’ frogs in the marsh, as if they wasn’t quite sure it was mornin’ or sunset. The lake always smelled just a little green to me…. if that makes any sense to ya. Just a little green. It smelled that way that mornin’ espec’lly so.

Once we was driftin’ an’ had our poles in the water, we settled back an’ watched the sun come up over the other side-a the water. It was a purty an’ gentle pink sunrise. A pink sky us’ally meant clear weather an’ a hot noon. That suited me just fine.

“Gonna work at Petry’s this summer, ya reckon?”
“Yup. Think so. Yup.”
“Did ya ask?”
“No.”
“Well, how’dya know he’s gonna wantcha back?”
“Don’t know. Figger he will though.”
“What if he won’t?”
“Then he won’t.”
“Well, whatta ya gonna do fer money?”

The conversation went purty much like that fer awhile. It was a kinda exercise in logic an’ jaw flappin’ all mixed into one. He’d ask somethin’, stupid or not, an’ I’d answer him in a way that he’d hafta ask another question an’ we’d just keep that up ’til we wore each other out.

I don’t know how long we was driftin’… silent an’ privately enjoyin’ the sunrise… when fer some reason, an’ I don’t know how come, we both looked over the side of the rowboat at the same time – just like we had planned it, only we hadn’t.

What I saw scared the livin’ Christ outta me! I swear I seen it. I know I did… an’ there’s no doubt that Tommy saw the same thing as me.

There, just underneath the surface of the water, starin’ up at us with a face as blank an’ pale as flour was Jimmy. I swear it! It was the same face we saw when we pulled him outta the creek two winters b’fore. His eyes was dull… lifeless… an’ there was no expression on his face. But he was lookin’ at us… no question about it. The rest-a his body wasn’t showin’… just his head… like he was standin’ on the bottom of the lake an’ lookin’ up at us. An’ just as quick as he was there he was gone with the ripple of a wave against the boat.

My first thought was to jump the hell outta the boat an’ swim to shore but then I had a pitcher in my mind of Jimmy swimmin’ after me… pullin’ me under… an’ I don’t know why I thought that. Jimmy’d never that do that. Never in a million years. But I was scared shitless an’ so was Tommy. I could see it in his eyes – but he didn’t flinch. He just looked kinda like he was givin’ in to it – if ya can imagine. It was like he expected it.

It took me a right good while b’fore I could make myself talk but when I did, the first thing I asked was, “Ya did see what I just saw, didn’tcha, Tommy?”
He just nodded his head but didn’t look up from the water – like he was waitin’ fer him to come back again.

“So it wasn’t a reflection or somethin’ like a… well, I don’t know… Was it really Jimmy just then, Tommy?”

He didn’t say nothin’. He looked like he was gonna, but then didn’t. He sat there, still starin’ ahead, still quiet… but I waited ‘cause I knowed Tommy an’ I knowed he would ruminate about somethin’ ‘til he had it just right in his head b’fore he would come right out an’ say it.

The boat was gently rockin’. The frogs had all quit croakin’ an’ the birds had taken over their song. The smell of the lake was ripe in my nose. I listened fer my heartbeat but I didn’t hear it – but I could feel it strong against my chest. I waited some more an’ then Tommy fin’ly turned to look at me. His eyes were dark, deep brown… deeper that day than I had ever seen ‘em… an’ older too. Much older.

He drew in a breath… a breath that took my own away… an’ he said in a sorta monotone voice, “This ain’t the first time I seen Jimmy.”

“What?”

“This ain’t the first time. I seen him all over.”

“What’cha mean ‘all over’, Tommy?”

“I mean that he’s showed up on the farm. He’s showed up at the well. He’s showed up at the foot-a my bed.”

“Yer lyin’!”

“Do ya really think I’m makin’ this up, Clay?”

“No.” I decided. “I guess I don’t. But why fer God’s sake haven’tcha tole me about it?”

“Wouldya’ve believed me if’n I did?”

I had to admit that I likely wouldn’t. I hardly believed my own eyes. I still was kinda hopin’ that what we had seen was like what some scientists call “mass hypnosis” or somethin’ like that. Ya know, where we both saw the same thing at the same time that wasn’t really there. I didn’t wanna believe it was Jimmy ‘cause I didn’t wanna think-a him not bein’ at rest. Not at peace wherever it was he went. I reckoned if what Tommy had said was so, Jimmy hadn’t gone very far a’ all.

When I think ’bout what I’m writin’ just now there’s a part-a me that wants to say that I was ready to leap outta my skin with fear. But that wasn’t truly so. I mean, shit yeah! I was knocked fer a loop but I guess ‘cause Jimmy was my buddy I didn’t lose it. Ya know? I sure as hell didn’t wanna see what I had just seen ever again… but because it was Jimmy an’ not some spooky little dead girl or zombie or somethin’ it was a little better. I could handle it. I couldn’t explain it, but I could handle it.

Tommy, on the other han’, looked to me like someone who was bein’ pushed to the edge. Not ’cause he was all panicky an’ what have ya… he wasn’t. He was just, well… like I had said b’fore… surrenderin’ to what we’d seen. Like it was his lot… like he had it comin’ to him, this
hauntin’ or whatever it was. Jimmy didn’t seem to be at rest so he wasn’t lettin’ Tommy rest none neither.

I don’t know.

Fishin’ was over. We rowed back to shore an’ we started walkin’ ‘cross the field an’ I knewed that Tommy was gonna try to leave me off at my house an’ take off on his own. He always did that sorta thing whenever he had to ponder somethin’. This was one time I wasn’t gonna let him exclude me ‘cause now it was my ghost too.

“I’ll see ya ’round. I’m gonna head back—”

“No, Tommy. I’m goin’ with ya.”

“I’d rather ya didn’t, Clay. Not now.”

“Tommy, I’ll be damned if I’m gonna just walk off an’ let ya be with yer thoughts when ya know good an’ well we’re havin’ the same thoughts right now. I’m goin’ with ya ‘cause I don’t want to be alone just yet even if’n you do.”

“Suit yerself.”

I knowed he was pleased even though he tried to act like he wasn’t. He no more wanted to be solitary than I did, he just wasn’t able to come up with the nerve to admit it an’ ask me to tag along.

We dropped off our poles at our barn and walked out past where the tobacco fields was. Out past where his family’s property ended an’ the pine forest commenced. We just walked along, side by side, not sayin’ anything… not needin’ to… just bein’ t’gether an’ not alone.

We climbed a few hills – some of ‘em steep, most of ‘em hills I hadn’t been on b’fore. We came up on the ridge-a one of ‘em an’ stopped. From that point on the side-a that particular hill you could see a good fifty miles or more. It wasn’t even nine o’clock, I’ll bet, but the sun shined down on us like it was noon. The view calmed me some. Bein’ with Tommy did too. Tommy wasn’t the kinda friend to me that Jimmy had been but I didn’t never think of him as less dear. Just diff’rent. An’ he was. He was diff’rent than any guy I knowed. It wasn’t ‘cause he was sorta darkish an’ tan… like maybe he coulda been part Indian or a gypsy even. It wasn’t ‘cause-a that. It was the way he carried hisself… tall an’ sure. An’ burdened. Yeah, burdened. Fer as imposin’ as he might-a looked to someone who didn’t know him like I did, I sometimes thought he might as well had a cross on his back a-draggin’ it along fer all the weight it seemed he bore on his shoulders.

We sat down on a flat piece-a rock… a boulder I guess it was… that stuck out from the side-a this overlook. Once we was down an’ feelin’ the cool of the rock against our backs, Tommy pulled off his boots an’ stretched out, a-lookin’ up at the branches that shaded us. He had his arms b’hind his head an’ he seemed like he was okay again… a little less troubled… a little more hisself. I knowed he was fixin’ to speak so I just waited. I was good like that. I just waited.

“I’m glad yer here, Clay.”

“Ya are?”

“Yeah, I am.”
“Me too.”
That made me feel good. I had been purty sure my bein’ there would make him feel a
might easier.
“Y’know…” he stopped.
“What?”
Another long stretch.
“Y’know… I didn’t push him, Clay.”
Now... I didn’t expect that to come from his lips. That was the last thing I ever expected
to hear Tommy say – an’ yet I hafta admit that it was a real good thing that he did. It was never
really a question in my own mind that, even if he had given Jimmy a shove off-a the edge-a that
hill, it woulda made no diff’rence whatsoever in the outcome. He’d-a gone off like a bat outta
hell regardless.
“I had my foot on the back-a his sled, Clay, but I never shoved him. I had my foot on it
cause I was holdin’ it down while he got hisself set. He leaned forward, Clay, an’ I let go. I
didn’t shove him.”
“I never thought ya’ had, Tommy.”
“Ya promise ya didn’t?”
“I promise.” Then it was my turn to think a spell b’fore I fin’ly said, “I thought somethin’
has been weighin’ on yer mind, though. I figgered it might-a been, ya know… guilt… fer…
well…”
“Fer not savin’ his life?” he asked me in a whisper.
“No! God no, Tommy! That’s not what I was gonna say a’talk!”
“But ya’ve thought that, haven’tcha?”
“No! I swear, Tommy! I never have. No one has. No one! I’ve never heard a soul say
anythin’ ‘ceptin’ that you was a hero, Tommy, an’ that’s the Gospel truth!”
He didn’t seem to want to respond. He either didn’t believe me or this was somethin’ that
took him by surprise.
“I thought…”
He stopped. He sounded like he was about to cry so I didn’t look over at him. I gave him
his dignity an’ I waited.
He cleared his throat an’ tried again.
“I thought that I could do it, Clay. I did. I really did. I thought I could save Jimmy. I
knowed he had took in water an’ was cold an’ all but I figgered I could get him to choke it up
an’ start breathin’ again. An’ I tried. Clay, I swear t’ya, I never stopped tryin’! An’ all the while
he just kept… starin’… ya know, like he was sayin’, “Do somethin’, Tommy. Save me!” I
couldn’t do it though. I couldn’t save him. An’ I didn’t shove him, neither. I want ya to know
that.”
I knowed that what he had just said was huge fer him. It was also prob’ly the longest he
had ever spoke in one shot fer as long as I had knowed him. He wasn’t tellin’ me nothin’ I
didn’t already know in my gut. I could tell how much he was pained inside an’ I could only imagine what kinda load this musta been on him fer the past two years.

His breathin’ was uneven. I didn’t hafta look to see that he was cryin’. It was a good thing. I knewed what it was like to need to cry an’ not bein’ able to fer fear of bein’ made fun of. He felt safe with me, I guess… I hope. I reached over to pat him on the arm an’ let him know I understood. When I did he grabbed my han’ with his an’ just held it… squeezed it tight… an’ didn’t let go. I was glad I had reached out to him ‘cause it was plain to see he needed someone to hold on to right then.

An’ now is where things changed in a way I never woulda guessed they could. I didn’t even really notice what was happenin’ ‘cause it all kinda flowed into the next moment… kinda normal an’ all. He had a hold-a my han’, still, so I looked over at him to see if’n he was okay an’ he was lookin’ over at me. Sure ‘nough, he had big ol’ crocodile tears runnin’ down his cheek an’ my heart hurt fer him… it felt like hurt anyhow. An’, like I said, it wasn’t just one thing but a whole bunch-a things that led to him pullin’ me down gently an’ bringin’ me over to where he was layin’ an’, without our lookin’ ‘way from one another fer a second, we was kissin’ like it was the most nat’ral thing in the world fer two boys to do. I had never kissed another soul in my life – boy or girl. Not on the lips anyhow. Not like we was kissin’! An’ yet I felt that hurt in my heart explode. I felt like a powder keg had ignited in my chest. It hit me that what I thought was hurt I was feelin’ was really love… I loved Tommy so much fer so many years an’ it took that kiss fer me to know it fer what it was.

I didn’t have a real good idea of what a homosexual was. I had heard the word fag b’fore. I knewed somethin’ about what a pansy or a fairy was… a guy who went around actin’ like a girl an’ kissin’ on other boys an’ stuff. But I had never seen a fag or knowed one. It never occurred to me that I might-a been one, an’ yet there I was in broad daylight underneath a stretch of Georgia pines kissin’ Tommy Rettinger an’ feelin’ the most alive I’d ever felt in my fifteen years on this earth. Next thing I knowed I was cryin’ too an’ I was tellin’ Tommy how much I loved him. Just like that. No shame. No second thoughts.

“I love ya, too, Clay. I always have. I always will.”

Now he really had me cryin’! I had never felt like that… never knowed what it was to have that rush in my loins that came from the touch of someone close to me. Any thoughts I had had of sex b’fore that had been swept under a rug an’ filed under “mortal sins” an’ never dwelt upon. The birds an’ the bees nonsense was all just a part of what I had watched growin’ up on a farm. I knewed how babies was made but I never knowed about love an’ sexual feelins’. I had never really had any – not really. One wet dream that I could recall. I thought I had pissed myself. Shoot, I had just barely discovered diddlin’ with myself the year b’fore an’ would only give into that on an occasion when I was particularly weak of spirit. But in the heat of the moment, with my lips on his an’ his hans all over my body, an’ bein’ up alongside-a him like I was, I was on fire with a want I hadn’t never dreamed was possible.
Nothin’ more happened than just that. We kissed. But we kissed fer what seemed like hours... an’ the only time we stopped was when we opened up an’ shared somethin’ we felt we needed to say.

“I thought ya didn’t care fer me like I did fer you, Clay. Ya never gave me a clue.”

“Tommy, I always treated ya the same as I did Jimmy. You know that. I didn’t play favorites with the two-a ya.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What then?”

“I knowed we was friends. An’ I was never jealous of you an’ Jimmy. I was glad you guys was close ‘cause I wasn’t aroun’ much to keep ya outta trouble. An’ he was a good kid and all. But that wasn’t it.”

“Ya mean ya really liked Jimmy?”

“Sure I did!”

“Well, that woulda be news to him. It is to me. You always picked on him an’ never was nice to him fer as long as I can remember.”

“That’s ‘cause he couldn’t take a tease. You can. Yer no fun. But Jimmy… well, it’d be a game with me to see how fast I could get a rise outta him. It never took very long”

“Yer just plain mean, ya know that?” I laughed.

“Yes, I know. But I didn’t hate Jimmy. Just picked on him fer sport.”

“So what’d ya mean by yer thinkin’ I didn’t like ya, then, Tommy. What’d I do wrong?”

“Ya didn’t do nothin’ wrong, Clay. I just…”

“What?”

“I just thought that ya didn’t think… well…”

“What?”

He sighed. “I didn’t think ya thought I was nice lookin’. I thought ya was attracted to girls. To Nedda in particular.”

“Nedda Moseby?”

“Yeah.”

“Ewww! God no! Why in tarnation would ya think I’d get with her?”

“I don’t know. Jimmy said somethin’ about her bein’ sweet on ya.”

“Jimmy always said stuff like that to tick me off. I never liked her. Never. She’s got a mule face.”

Then he laughed too.

“Guess she does at that.”

“So you was worried about me not likin’ the way ya look? I don’t care how my friends look, Tommy.”

“It’s not like I wanted ya t’… aww, skip it.”

“No. Tell me.”

“It’s stupid.”

“Can’t be stupid if yer wantin’ to say it.”
“Well it is.”
“Just up an’ say it, Tommy!” I punched him in the arm.
“Well, I was gonna say that it wasn’t like I expected ya to think-a me as somethin’ more than a friend an’… well, to feel about me like I do about you… how I always have done… ’cause I’ve knowed all along that I wasn’t quite right.”
“What ya mean?”
“Ya know… because I’m…”
“Oh.”
“You.”
“Ain’t sure ya are?”
“Hunner’d percent.”
I thought a mite ’bout what he said. “How d’ya know fer sure?”
“’Cause I tried it with a girl.”
“No ya didn’t!”
“I did so!”
“Who?” I asked him, laughin’.
“I ain’t sayin’.”
“Why not? I’d tell you!”
“That’s ‘cause you ain’t a gentleman.” He punched me back.
“Oww!” I took a minute, then asked him, “Was it someone I know?”
“I ain’t sayin’.”
“That’s ‘cause it never happened.”
“Yes it did… an’ didn’t.”
“Oh. Ya mean ya didn’t like her.”
“No. Not even a little. I didn’t like her with her clothes on… an’ when she took ‘em off, I like her even less.”
“Was she fat?”
“No…”
“What then?”
“I don’t know…” he said, kinda deflated. “Let’s change the subject.”
“What? Ugly?”
He was lookin’ up at the trees and said kinda soft, “Her body was ugly, yeah. But she wasn’t fat. I think it’s just that it didn’t seem nat’ral to me. I don’t like the way a woman’s body looks.” He looked over at me. “Do you?”
I had to think about it. Never had given it any thought, really, b’fore that. Then I started doin’ a quick inventory of the times I had played with myself an’ what I had thought about. It had never been about a girl… but I guess it hadn’t really been about a boy neither. But then I thought about the times that Jimmy an’ me an’ the whiners would go skinny dippin’ in the creek an’ how I always felt a little embarrassed ‘cause my tallywacker’d always get hard. They’d laugh an’ stuff but I always tole ’em it was ‘cause the water was so cold – which a-course didn’t
make any sense. If yer a guy ya’d know that. I was excited, I guess, an’ really comfortable bein’ naked around other guys but I never thought that it was ‘cause I might-a liked boys in that way.

When I tole this to Tommy he just nodded an’ took it all in. He didn’t try to tell me that I might be a homosexual. That was somethin’ I always admired about Tommy. Fer a farm boy from Georgia he had somethin’ genteeel about him. He wouldn’t lecture me none… ever. An’ he wouldn’t try to tell me what I should think about somethin’. He’d just plant a seed an’ let it be… an’ if I gave it enough attention, why… he’d help me grow that thought a mite more later on.

Well, what happened that afternoon purty much changed my life fer good. If there ever’d been a question ‘bout my likin’ boys or girls it was answered then an’ there. Where there had once been a friendship there was now somethin’ differnt. I didn’t know what to call it, but I wanted to call Tommy my boyfriend – but it sounded so silly. A guy havin’ a boyfriend. Kinda unnat’ral… an’ yet kinda not.

On the way home Tommy let me hold his han’ ‘til we reached the clearin’ an’ then we let go an’ just walked side by side… silent… just like we had walked into them woods earlier. As we headed toward his farm I asked him what he thought Jimmy wanted an’ why he wasn’t at peace with hisself.

“I don’t rightly know. I thought that when people died they went on, ya know, to heaven or wherever. In Jimmy’s case it’d be heaven – no doubt. I also thought that we was s’posed to be wiser, somehow, an’ understandin’ about worldly things once we passed on. Ya know?”

“Ya mean kinda like we’re s’posed to forgive an’ ferget an’ move on?”

“Well, yeah… like that. Just be able to let the cares of the world fall behind ya. An’ he’s not doin’ that. He keeps comin’ ‘round me… an’ it’s him, Clay, it’s not my imagination. I know that now ‘cause you saw’m too.”

“No question. I saw’m alright.”

“Well, all I know is it spooks me some an’ it tears at me ‘cause I think maybe he hasn’t been able to let go of whatever it is that he’s begrudgin’ me, ya know?”

“But ya did everything ya could to save Jimmy. An’ ya just said ya didn’t push the sled none.”

“Yeah… but he won’t let me be.”

We decided that we wouldn’t tell no one ‘bout what we’d seen an’ what’d been goin’ on with Tommy fer all that time. Figgered there weren’t no ears fit to hear it anyhow. Not in Dooley County, leastwise.

B’fore he took up the gravel drive to his place, Tommy asked me if I wanted him to come over that night.

“Fer supper?”

“No.” He blushed some. “After.”

“After?” He looked at me. Locked eyes with me. Then I knowed what he meant.

“Oh…”

He tole me that he’d come by onced ever’one was asleep.
I hardly touched my supper that night. Ma asked if I was feelin’ okay an’ I tole her I was. Pa asked if we had catched anything an’ I tole him they wasn’t bitin’. My brothers didn’t pick on me none at the table – nor after – so I guess they sensed what I was feelin’. I felt differnt an’ they was treatin’ me differnt.

About a half-hour after the lights was out in our house I knewed that Tommy was outside my bedroom window. Like I tole ya, it’s just how it was. I went to it an’ started to climb out but he stopped me.

“Lemme come in, Clay.”

“Oh… okay.”

He climbed in an’ came over to me an’ took me in his arms. I just melted… like soft candy… right like that. He took my han’ an’ led me over to the bed an’ he started to take my boots offa me, one by one… then my socks. He held my feet in his hans an’ he rubbed ‘em real good… massaged ‘em… an’ that felt great. Nobody’d ever done that fer me b’fore. But I was always kinda self-conscious about my feet. Don’t know why. Then he kissed each foot an’ it made me wish I had washed ‘em first, but he didn’t seem to mind. I kinda felt foolish but I liked it just the same.

Tommy stood up an’ took off his shirt. In the low light-a my room he looked like a bronze statue all tanned an’ chiseled an’ perfect. There wasn’t an ounce-a fat on his body. I felt kinda puny alongside-a him when I took mine off. I was still kinda boyish compared to him.

Well, eventually we got down to our skivvies an’ then he climbed in bed with me an’, even though it was hot, we got under the sheets. I was real nervous an’ real excited all at the same time. I didn’t know what to do but I was countin’ on Tommy to teach me what was what. I could tell he was slidin’ his shorts off an’ that drove me nearly crazy. I did the same an’ then I felt, all of a sudden, real shy. He must-a sensed it ‘cause Tommy took me in his arms an’ we just laid there, me with my head on his chest, for a good long while. And that was just fine with me. Just like that. I felt safe an’ I wasn’t nearly as sheepish anymore ‘cause I remembered that it was Tommy who was a-holdin’ me… an’ that I loved him.

I don’t know how good I was that night, but Tommy sure never complained none. As a matter-a fact we both had’ta keep it down ‘cause there was always a chance someone’d hear us. My room was on the back-a the house, though, an’ no one was over us so that was a mercy.

When he tole me what he was fixin’ to do to me I tole him I wasn’t really keen on the idea… but he wasn’t us’ally one to take ‘no’ fer an answer. It took a coupl’a tries – ‘cause Tommy was a big boy – but once I got used to it, it got to where it felt purty damn good. But what I liked the most about it was that I could tell how much he liked it. Sounds corny, but I felt that I was helpin’ Tommy to find some joy an’ some love in his life an’ he was bein’ intimate with me in a way that only people who love one ‘nother can be. So all was right with the world that night. I loved Tommy an’ he loved me. He was all that mattered to me after that.

When we was finished… fer a third time... we was both noddin’ off. We didn’t want to. We just wanted to stay up close to one another an’ talk an’ kiss, but we was wore out. I was just closin’ my eyes when I happen to look over at the mirror on the back-a my bedroom door. I
could see a face in the mirror that weren’t neither one-a ours. Tommy was behind me, his head on the pillow an’ his arm an’ leg flung ’cross me. He must-a felt me stiffen up an’ freeze ‘cause he pulled hisself up to check on me an’ when he did he saw the face in the mirror too. It was Jimmy. ‘Course it was.

Now we was really in a predicament ‘cause there was no way I could yell out – an’ you better believe that was my first notion! If I had an’ my pa or one-a my brothers woulda flung the door open to find out what the commotion was, they’d-a pushed Jimmy aside an’ found a whole other situation. The idea of that was almost as scary as seein’ Jimmy’s ghost again.

I figgered I’d be okay so long as Tommy was with me. I knewed he wasn’t gonna bail an’ take off out the window on me. I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t but I knewed he wouldn’t. I was hopin’ that, like earlier that mornin’, Jimmy would just go ’way as quick as he showed up. But that wasn’t what happened. Wish it had been… ‘cause the next thing we knowed Jimmy’d stepped outta the mirror an’ was comin’ over toward the bed. Swear to God!

By now I was about to have a heart attack. That’s what it felt like. I was froze stiff – like ya are sometimes as a kid in a really bad dream. Ya wanna scream but ya can’t. Ya wanna run but yer legs is useless. An’ whatever it is that’s after ya keeps gettin’ closer an’ closer. All I could do was back up against Tommy an’ scoot as far ’way from the edge-a the bed as I could. He reeled me in close an’ tight… an’ I could tell he wasn’t breathin’ none neither.

Jimmy didn’t appear to be walkin’ toward us… but he wasn’t floatin’ neither. An he didn’t look like ya’d think a ghost’d look like. I mean, you couldn’t rightly see through him, but there was somethin’ about him that made ya know he wasn’t of this world. A glow. There was a glow about him but not like a halo or nothin’. Just kinda reminded me of the tail of a lightnin’ bug. Like that.

He got to the edge-a the bed and I figgered what was next is I’d feel a pair-a cold, clammy hans on my neck an’ Jimmy’d strangle me. Fer fornicatin’ with his mortal enemy. Like a jealous wife with a shotgun or somethin’. That’s what I was thinkin’ – but I was wrong.

Fer a while Jimmy just stood there shimmerin’. He was still starin’ ahead, his eyes dull and milky like a day old carp, but not starin’ at us. Almost like he didn’t really see us. But then somethin’ happened that was even more incredible. That death mask-a his he was wearin’… the last face Tommy an’ me saw on him that horrible winter afternoon… it kinda melted away. Thawed maybe. What I mean is, it was sorta like lookin’ at candle wax slidin’ down the side of a candle. When it fell ’way, there was Jimmy. Plain ol’ Jimmy. Just like he’d been in life. An’ this time he was lookin’ at us an’ seein’ us. Not starin’. Not really creepy anymore. Just Jimmy.

He sorta smiled that little smirk he was knowed fer – like he was up to somethin’ all the time – an’ he sat down on the mattress an’ Tommy an’ me both felt the mattress give some an’ heard the springs creak a mite. So he was there alright in the room with us an’ sittin’ on the bed just as real a boy as you please.

An’ that was the thing. The fact that he was still thirteen an’ not fifteen like me that made me realize he couldn’t be really real – or he’d-a growed since then. He was stuck bein’ thirteen, I guess, an’ from what I could see he didn’t seem to mind bein’ dead.
Then he started to talk. Just like he always had. He didn’t sound no differnt than he had when he was alive. He sounded normal.

“Hey there, Clay. Hey, Tommy.”

Neither of us answered.

He went just on. “You guys look purty funny right now, ya know it? Ya look like ya seen a ghost’r somethin’.”

An’ then he laughed… an’ he laughed kinda loud. I almost tole him to hush ‘cause I didn’t want him to wake the folks but then I bit my tongue – outta respect fer the dead or somethin’. I remembered he was ‘dead Jimmy’ an’ not ‘livin’ Jimmy’ an’ I wasn’t sure if he’d still listen to me like he used-ta so I didn’t say nothin’.

“But ya’ll don’t look half as funny as ya did a little while back. Ya’ll looked like two ol’ farm dogs havin’ at it. I thought I was gonna hafta turn the hose on ya to get ya unstuck!”

Well now he seemed like ‘livin’ Jimmy’ an’ I did tell him to hush up.

“Mine yer own beeswax, Jimmy Moseby! What right have you to be spyin’ on us like that?”

“I’m dead. I got lotsa rights.”

“But ya shouldn’t poke aroun’ in someone’s private stuff.”

“Tommy was the one doin’ the pokin’ in private stuff from where I could see!”

That Tommy laugh. Made me laugh too.

Jimmy cocked his head a mite. “Did it hurt?”

I couldn’t believe I was havin’ this conversation with a ghost. I mean, it’d be bad enough if’n it really was him an’ he’d seen us like that, but he was dead an’ we was still havin’ to be humiliated by a wiseass spook.

He asked me again, “Did it hurt, Clay?”

This time I answered. “Yeah. At first.” I didn’t wanna hurt Tommy’s feelins, but it did hurt!

“But ya liked it, right?”

“Jimmy, shut up!”

“I could tell ya liked it ‘cause ya was askin’ him to keep a-goin’”

“Jimmy, I swear if you wasn’t dead already I’d kill ya right now!”

An’ then the three of us was laughin’ an’ I thought fer sure that we was gonna be hearin’ footsteps comin’ toward the bedroom an’ my pa yellan’, “Who ya got in there, boy?” an me answerin’, “Oh, just my homosexual boyfriend Tommy Rettinger an’ my dead best friend Jimmy Moseby.”

Fin’ly I asked, “Why are ya here, Jimmy? Why ain’t ya gone on to yer reward like yer s’posed to?”

“’Cause I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“’Cause-a him.” Jimmy was lookin’ over at Tommy who still hadn’t said nothin’. Only laughed some.
“What’d Tommy do?”
“Tommy didn’t do nothin’.”
“Well if he didn’t do nothin’, then why aren’t ya gone yet… to heaven or… well, wherever.”
“Clay, do ya really think that when ya die ya just float up to the clouds an’ go through pearly gates an’ get a harp an’ a dress an’ sing in a choir?” Jimmy rolled his eyes some when he finished.
“Hell, Jimmy, I don’t know… but I thought that ya went somewheres an’ didn’t stick around an’ scare the be-Jesus outta yer friends fer a good time.”
“I ain’t doin’ nothin’ fer a laugh, Clay. Believe it or not there’s better things I got to do over there than to be here. I’m here ‘cause Tommy ain’t lettin’ me go.”
Jimmy looked away fer a little while an’ I didn’t wanna say nothin’ ‘cause I wasn’t sure it was my place to say anything anymore. I figgered it was between the two-a them now. I also figgered Tommy wouldn’t say nothin’ first. And he didn’t.
Fin’lly Jimmy looked back over at Tommy with that same forlorn look he had shot over his shoulder goin’ down that hill. His wicked smile was gone an’ so was the sparkle in his eyes. He just looked kinda sorrowful.
“If ya let it go, Tommy, I can move on.”
Tommy fin’lly did speak. “Let what go, Jimmy?”
“Yer guilt.” An’ he just kept lookin’ at Tommy, makin’ sure it sank in. Tommy’s chest was heavin’ again. I could feel it up against my back.
“Ya didn’t do nothin’ wrong, Tommy. Ya didn’t. I know that. I was there, ’member? I was watchin’ the whole thing… standin’ right b’side ya. You was workin’ on me, tryin’ to get me back, only ya’ know what? I didn’t wanna come back. Truth. I had got a taste-a what it was like not to be in my body, which was so cold by then, an’ I didn’t want back in.”
“But Jimmy, you was only thirteen. It wasn’t yer time yet. Couldn’t-a been.”
“It was, Tommy. It was my time.”
“But if ya hadn’t-a gone first…” Tommy stammered like.
“But I did go first. I was s’posed to go first. I knowed it. I didn’t know why, but I knowed it an’ that’s why I tole ya I was gonna go first.”
“It shoulda been me, Jimmy, not you. It was my idea to go down that stupid hill anyhow.”
“Tommy, if’n it was s’posed to be you you’d-a gone through the ice instead-a me. I knowed as soon as I hit the snow that I was gonna die – I just felt it. I looked back at you two to tell ya so but I couldn’t get the words out.”
Jimmy was quiet fer a spell and then looked at us square and said, “I know now there’s a plan. An’ the plan didn’t include yer dyin’, Tommy. Ya got other business ahead-a ya yet.”
Tommy perked up a mite. “So the plan includes you comin’ back an’ hauntin’ me?”
“Hauntin’ ya? Ya think that’s what I’m doin’?”
“Think about it, Jimmy. What would you call it? Comin’ at me with that dead white face-a yers, showin’ up whenever ya please. Sounds like hauntin’ to me!”
“Tommy, it never was about me showin’ up whenever I please. It was whenever you was thinkin’-a me. I’m right, ain’t I? There weren’t a single time I was there when you wasn’t already dwellin’ on me, right?”

Tommy nodded his head. I hadn’t even thought that it coulda been the other way around.

“An’ as fer my face… Tommy, you saw what ya wanted to see. When you think-a me, you think-a me bein’ alongside that creek, fresh outta the ice. You don’t see me when I was runnin’ aroun’ or drivin’ my pa’s tractor or swimmin’ an such. You see me dead. You see what ya wanna see. The reason I look like I do now is ‘cause Clay sees me fer Jimmy – his friend. Not the dead kid. So yer image-a me fell away ‘cause this is who I really am. Still am.”

“But Jimmy, I never called ya back. I never asked ya to be here,” Tommy tole him.

“Didn’t hafta. That’s not how it works, anyhow. Yer carryin’ aroun’ this big ol’ dose-a guilt that weighs you down like a ton-a rocks. Ya feel it, I know ya do – but so do I. Those rocks, Tommy, weigh me down too. They tie me to you. They got me stuck to the earth.”

Tommy sounded so pitiful when he tole Jimmy, “I didn’t mean—”

“I know ya didn’t Tommy,” Jimmy said back, smilin’. ‘But ya’ve had enough time to figger out that it weren’t yer fault. Yer ma tole ya’, the Reverend tole’ ya, my folks tole ya in that letter they sent ya – since they couldn’t tell ya in person ‘cause ya never showed up at my funeral, asshole! An’ as if it weren’t enough that everyone else tole ya, Clay tole ya! Yer boyfriend, Tommy!”

An’ that started us all laughin’ again.

Jimmy just let Tommy lay there thinkin’ ‘bout what he said. He wasn’t gonna go on, I could tell, ‘til his words had sank in.

There was a part-a me that wanted to reach out an try’n touch Jimmy. Part of it was curiosity I s’pose. I mean, how often does someone get that close to a ghost in their life? I wanted to see what he felt like – or if my han’d just go through him. An’ then another part-a me, an’ I like to think the better part-a me, wanted to touch him ‘cause he was my friend an’ I missed him an’ I needed to know that he was really there b’side me again.

Fin’llly Jimmy spoke up ‘cause he knowed as well as I did that Tommy’s gift hadn’t been the gift-a gab.

“Are ya ready to let it go now, Tommy? Let me go?”

“’Course I am, Jimmy. I didn’t mean ta ‘cause ya no grief.”

“But ya have, Tommy… ‘cause ya done ‘caused yerself an’ yer fam’ly an’ yer friends so much grief. I was yer friend, Tommy. Still am. So natcherly I feel it too.”

“Friend? Ya mean ya ain’t sore about all the razzin’ I give ya when you was… well, ya know.”

“’Course not! Tommy, you was just doin’ it ‘cause ya could. I wasn’t never gonna tell ya this, but I was kinda glad ya teased me like ya did. You was never really mean-spirited about it. Ya did it fer fun an’ I knowed it. Doesn’t mean it didn’t get my back up now an’ then, but I wasn’t never really mad at ya’ fer bein’ a jerk to me.”
Then I asked him, “Were ya a little bit jealous though, Jimmy? Of Tommy an’ me bein’ friends?”

“Jealous? Maybe a little. I guess I was. But I knowed you an’ me was friends fer life… even longer, Clay. Even longer.”

“An’ ya ain’t upset about what Tommy an’ me done… ya know…”

“Ya mean about him corn-holin’ ya?” he smiled real big. “Hell no! I can’t say fer sure but I’m thinkin’ if’n I was still around, I’d-a corn-holed ya too, Clay – if’n you’d’a begged me real nice!”

“Jerk! Yer a jerk, Jimmy Moseby!” I almost swatted at him.

Tommy was tryin’ to stifle his laughter. I was glad to hear him happy though. I remember thinkin’ that things was gonna be better after that… even with a ghost in my bed.

“I need to be goin’, fellers. But I ain’t goin’ ‘til I know ya understan’ why I been hangin’ round, Tommy.”

Tommy took some time b’fore he answered.

“I think I do. I ’preciate knowin’ that ya fergive me, Jimmy.”

“Who said anything ’bout me fergivin’ ya?”

“Ya mean ya don’t?”

“No. I don’t.” Jimmy leaned in a little and said, “’Cause there ain’t nothin’ fer me to forgive, knucklehead! It’s you who’s gotta fergive. Not me.”

“Fergive who?”

He shook his head. “Yerself!”

Jimmy got up from the bed. He was standin’ over me an’ Tommy… lookin’ down at us. He was still smilin’. There wasn’t never gonna be another ice-white mask on his sweet face whenever we thought-a him again.

“Ya’ll are gonna be alright, ya know. Ya didn’t pick the easiest kinda love to have fer one another, but I can tell ya that as long as yer true to yer hearts an’ to each other, ya’ll will survive. How’s that fer some advice from a dead boy?”

All I could do was smile back at him. Tommy held me a little tighter.

Jimmy started to turn ‘way but then he looked over at me one last time. He had that wicked little twinkle in his eye again.

“You can touch me if ya want, Clay.”

“I can?”

“Yeah. Ya know ya want to, anyhow, so ya might as well do it.”

He knowed me so well.

I sat up on the edge-a the bed and reached out an’ touched his pants. I could feel ‘em. They was dungarees an’ they felt just like dungarees should feel. Then Jimmy put his han’ on top-a mine an’ I could feel his warm han’ touchin’ me – just like he was flesh’n blood. Then, as if he was readin’ my mind – which I guess he was – he bent over an’ let me put my arms ‘round him an’ hug him close to me. I felt, fer that moment, a sense of calm washin’ over my body. He even smelled like Jimmy, sweet like honeysuckle an’ baked bread… good things, ya know…
an’ I realized then why Mrs. Moseby had done what she done to me whenever she had give me a hug. Fer that one tiny moment Jimmy was back with me like he had never left an’ I got to do the one thing I had never thought to do when he was alive. Hold him an’ tell him, “I love ya, Jimmy.”

“I love ya, too, Clay. Always have. Always will.”

He let go. I looked over at Tommy an’ he grinned.

It was gonna be alright.

Tommy an’ me stayed t’gether up ’til the war. That was the first time we was separated. We both volunteered fer the army but I was turned down. Weak heart from rheumatic fever as a kid.

The day I dreaded would come to pass came to pass on Friday, April 30th, 1943.

When they shipped Tommy’s body back to Georgia his mama didn’t tell me nothin’. She didn’t let me know ’bout any details. Mrs. Moseby was the one who tole me ’bout the telegram that was sent sayin’ how Tommy had been killed in the line of duty. Nedda worked the telegraph machine at Western Union office so she knowed ‘bout it, natcherly, an’ tole her mama. Mrs. Moseby was also the one who tole me when the funeral was otherwise I might-a missed it.

I went – only I stayed back away from ever’one off b’hind some trees. Out of respect to his fam’ly. They maybe never respected Tommy an’ me, but I didn’t feel I had to give it back to them. Not then. Not ever.

Like I said, they never really ’preciated Tommy… not even in death. He was a hero. Decorated. He saved many lives but never tole anyone. I heard about it from one of his army buddies who knowed ’bout me an’ Tommy an’ was good enough to write me after Tommy died. His friend said that Tommy saved his whole platoon ’cause he was a scout an’ he kept them from certain death by blowin’ ‘way three bunkers of Nazis who was waitin’ to ambush the his outfit. Jimmy had been right. Tommy had had other business to ‘tend to.

I would have dearly loved to have had the flag that had covered his coffin but I woulda never asked fer it. I had the mem’ries. That was enough. An’ all our mem’ries were good ones. We had somethin’ special, Tommy an’ me. We shared so much in the short time we had with one ’nother. It wasn’t long enough, but what ever is? All I know is Jimmy’s death brought him an’ me t’gether in a way we might never have done otherwise.

A few weeks after the funeral I was workin’ out back-a the house Tommy an’ me had built up in a stretch of pines on a hill overlookin’ Dooley County. We loved them trees and how they’d whisper to us through open windows late at night.
Jimmy’s mama, Mrs. Moseby, came up ‘round back an’ she looked like she had been cryin’. She had a envelope in her han’. She handed it to me. I opened it an’ read it:

Dear Missus Moseby
Its me. Tommy Rettinger.
I know this letter is long in coming but I havint never knowed wat to say to ya about yore boy Jimmy an the winter we lossed him. I was feeling sorry for myself and sad and gilty. All kinda feelings was goin threw my head at the time and I did not hav the good sens to think of wat you and yore family was going threw at the same time. I know now that I was sellfish for not being there for you at yore time of need. I was the lassed one who was with Jimmy at the end. I mite have bin a comfirt to you but I was so cot up in my own greef that I cawzed you evun more I know.

I juss want you to know that evun tho I did everthing I could Jimmy wuz gon all reddy by the time Clay and me had pullt him outta the creek. Wen Clay run back to get help and I tried to do wat ever I cood evun tho I knewed he was gawn. I thawt about wat you wood do if you was there with yore boy and so I never gave up till the docter come and tole me it was to late.

Missus Moseby, Jimmy never sufferd none. He prob’ly didn’t evun feel any thing onced he was in the watter. I know how cold it was cawz I was in it and I just about drownded to.

His eyes was clozed and his face looked all peace full and Clay and me was with him at the end. He wernt alone. And it wernt no ones falt. Not yores. Not Clay’s. Not mine. Mayby it was juss his time.

Im sorry I didint tell ya these things in persson and such. Im not one for words as I gess you can see. But I am thinking allot about death lately. There is so much of it round me evry day. Jimmy was the first persson I ever lost. But I want you to know something. He never reelly went so far away from any of us. I know that for a fact. I know that Jimmy is heer with me wen I need him to be. At nite I can tell hes with me and trying to eeze my mind and I will tell ya wat. I feel him and I feel better knowing he is heer with me. I hope that you feel him with you to.

Anyhow thats wat I wanted to say. I hope that wen I am back in Dooley County I can meet with you and we can make up for lossed time.

Pleese give my regards to yore family. I hope you forgive me for being y0ung and not so gennerus as I mite have bin.

Sincerely,
Tommy
I handed the letter back to Mrs. Moseby but she said, “No, you keep it, Clay. Put it with the rest-a his letters. I know what ya was to one another. I know.”

She kissed me on the cheek an’ took off back down the hill. She an’ I had stayed close through the years an’ she was one-a the only ones who still had much of anything to do with me, outside-a my brothers an’ my ma now and again. Pa died without ever really knowin’ ’bout Tommy an’ me… maybe he knowed… but if’n he did he never said nothin’.

I ain’t never tole anyone this b’fore, but on the night that Tommy was killed… February 14th… Valentine’s day… I had a dream. It was the three of us… Tommy, Jimmy an’ me… an’ we was back on that snowy hill out at the Mawry’s farm. We was surveyin’ the lan’ an’ figgerin’ out what the best route would be an then Jimmy said, “I’m goin’ first!” just like he had done all them years b’fore.

An’ Tommy piped up an’ said, “No, I’m gonna go first. It was my idea.” An’ he took off down the hill.

Then I woke up. And I knowed that Tommy was dead.

I’m prob’ly never gonna give up this house or leave Dooley County. Folks purty much leave me be. Now an’ then I’ll go into town an’ I’ll get some scornful looks from some of the town folks or some boys might say somethin’ mean… but it just rolls off-a my back anymore. This is my home. These are my people, an’ like it or not, this is where my roots are. My fam’ly helped build this town. I was born here. I found my love here an’ buried my love here. Where else would I go?

B’ sides, when it’s my turn – whenever that day might be – if’n I left Dooley County Tommy an’ Jimmy might not know where to find me so that they can be waitin’ at the bottom of the hill.

To catch me.

THE END