

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Devil All the Time

Donald Ray Pollock

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## About the Book

*The Devil All The Time* is a hauntingly intense portrait of America and a shattering vision of violence and redemption.

Set in rural southern Ohio and West Virginia, it follows a cast of riveting and bizarre characters from the end of the Second World War to the 1960s.

Willard Russell is a tormented veteran of the carnage in the South Pacific who can't save his beautiful wife, Charlotte, from a slow death by cancer no matter how much sacrificial blood he pours on his 'prayer log'. Carl and Sandy Henderson, a husband-and-wife team of serial killers, trawl America's highways searching for suitable models to photograph and exterminate. The spider-handling preacher Roy, and his crippled virtuoso-guitar-playing sidekick, Theodore, are running from the law. And caught in the middle of all this is Arvin Eugene Russell, Willard and Charlotte's orphaned son, who grows up to be a good but also violent man in his own right.

Donald Ray Pollock braids his plot lines into a taut, gothic narrative that will leave readers astonished and deeply moved. With his first novel, he proves himself a master storyteller in the grittiest and most uncompromising American grain.

## About the Author

Donald Ray Pollock, recipient of the 2009 PEN/Bingham Fellowship, made his literary debut in 2008 with the acclaimed story collection *Knockemstiff*. He worked as a labourer at the Mead Paper Mill in Chillicothe, Ohio, from 1973 to 2005. He holds an MFA from Ohio State University.

[www.donaldraypollock.com](http://www.donaldraypollock.com).

ALSO BY DONALD RAY POLLOCK

*Knockemstiff*

*ONCE AGAIN*  
FOR  
PATSY

**The Devil  
All the Time**



DONALD RAY POLLOCK

HARVILL SECKER LONDON

## PROLOGUE

ON A DISMAL morning near the end of a wet October, Arvin Eugene Russell hurried behind his father, Willard, along the edge of a pasture that overlooked a long and rocky holler in southern Ohio called Knockemstiff. Willard was tall and raw-boned, and Arvin had a hard time keeping up with him. The field was overgrown with brier patches and fading clumps of chickweed and thistle, and ground fog, thick as the gray clouds above, reached to the nine-year-old boy's knees. After a few minutes, they veered off into the woods and followed a narrow deer path down the hill until they came to a log lying in a small clearing, the remains of a big red oak that had fallen many years ago. A weathered cross, fitted together out of boards pried from the back of the ramshackle barn behind their farmhouse, leaned a little eastward in the soft ground a few yards below them.

Willard eased himself down on the high side of the log and motioned for his son to kneel beside him in the dead, soggy leaves. Unless he had whiskey running through his veins, Willard came to the clearing every morning and evening to talk to God. Arvin didn't know which was worse, the drinking or the praying. As far back as he could remember, it seemed that his father had fought the Devil all the time. Arvin shivered a little with the damp, pulled his coat tighter. He wished he were still in bed. Even school, with all its miseries, was better than this, but it was a Saturday and there was no way to get around it.

Through the mostly bare trees beyond the cross, Arvin could see wisps of smoke rising from a few chimneys half a mile away. Four hundred or so people lived in Knockemstiff

in 1957, nearly all of them connected by blood through one godforsaken calamity or another, be it lust or necessity or just plain ignorance. Along with the tar-papered shacks and cinder-block houses, the holler included two general stores and a Church of Christ in Christian Union and a joint known throughout the township as the Bull Pen. Though the Russells had rented the house on top of the Mitchell Flats for five years now, most of the neighbors down below still considered them outsiders. Arvin was the only kid on the school bus who wasn't somebody's relation. Three days before, he'd come home with another black eye. "I don't condone no fighting just for the hell of it, but sometimes you're just too easygoing," Willard had told him that evening. "Them boys might be bigger than you, but the next time one of 'em starts his shit, I want you to finish it." Willard was standing on the porch changing out of his work clothes. He handed Arvin the brown pants, stiff with dried blood and grease. He worked in a slaughterhouse in Greenfield, and that day sixteen hundred hogs had been butchered, a new record for R. J. Carroll Meatpacking. Though the boy didn't know yet what he wanted to do when he grew up, he was pretty sure he didn't want to kill pigs for a living.

They had just begun their prayers when the sharp crack of a branch breaking sounded behind them. As Arvin started to turn around, Willard reached over and stopped him, but not before the boy caught a glimpse of two hunters in the pale light, dirty and ragged men whom he'd seen a few times slouching in the front seat of an old sedan scabbed with rust in the parking lot of Maude Speakman's store. One carried a brown burlap sack, the bottom stained a bright red. "Don't pay them no mind," Willard said quietly. "This here is the Lord's time, not nobody else's."

Knowing that the men were close by made him nervous, but Arvin settled back down and closed his eyes. Willard considered the log as holy as any church built by man, and

the last person in the world the boy wanted to offend was his father, even though that seemed like a losing battle at times. Except for the dampness dripping from the leaves and a squirrel cutting in a tree nearby, the woods were still again. Arvin was just beginning to think the men had moved on when one of them said in a raspy voice, "Hell, they havin' them a little revival meeting."

"Keep it down," Arvin heard the other man say.

"Shit. I'm thinking now would be a good time to pay his old lady a visit. She probably laying over there in bed right now keeping it warm for me."

"Shut the fuck up, Lucas," the other said.

"What? Don't tell me you wouldn't take a piece of that. She's a looker, damned if she ain't."

Arvin glanced over uneasily at his father. Willard's eyes remained shut, his big hands woven together on top of the log. His lips moved rapidly, but the words he said were too faint for anyone but the Master to hear. The boy thought about what Willard had told him the other day, about standing up for yourself when someone gave you some shit. Evidently, those were just words, too. He had a sinking feeling that the long ride on the school bus was not going to get any better.

"Come on, you dumb sonofabitch," the other man said, "this thing's getting heavy." Arvin listened as they turned and made their way back across the hill in the direction from which they'd come. Long after their footsteps faded away, he could still hear the mouthy one laughing.

A few minutes later, Willard stood up and waited for his son to say his amens. Then they walked back to the house in silence, scraped the mud off their shoes on the porch steps, and entered the warm kitchen. Arvin's mother, Charlotte, was frying slices of bacon in an iron skillet, beating eggs with a fork in a blue bowl. She poured Willard a cup of coffee, set a glass of milk down in front of Arvin. Her black, shiny hair was pulled back in a ponytail, secured

with a rubber band, and she wore a faded pink robe and a pair of fuzzy socks, one with a hole in the heel. As Arvin watched her move about the room, he tried to imagine what might have happened if the two hunters had come on to the house instead of turning around. His mother was the prettiest woman he'd ever seen. He wondered if she would have invited them in.

As soon as Willard finished eating, he pushed back his chair and went outside with a dark look on his face. He hadn't said a word since he'd finished his prayers. Charlotte got up from the table with her coffee and stepped over to the window. She watched him stomp across the yard and go into the barn. She considered the possibility that he had an extra bottle hid out there. The one he kept under the sink hadn't been touched in several weeks. She turned and looked at Arvin. "Your daddy mad at you for something?"

Arvin shook his head. "I didn't do nothing."

"That ain't what I asked you," Charlotte said, leaning against the counter. "We both know how he can get."

For a moment, Arvin considered telling his mother what had happened at the prayer log, but the shame was too great. It made him sick to think that his father would listen to a man talk about her that way and just ignore it. "Had a little revival meeting, that's all," he said.

"Revival meeting?" Charlotte said. "Where did you get that from?"

"I don't know, just heard it somewhere." Then he got up and walked down the hallway to his bedroom. He closed the door and lay down on the bed, pulling the top blanket over him. Turning on his side, he stared at the framed picture of the crucified Jesus that Willard had hung above the scratched and battered chest of drawers. Similar pictures of the Savior's execution could be found in every room of the house except the kitchen. Charlotte had drawn the line there, the same as she'd done when he started

taking Arvin over to the woods to pray. "Only on the weekends, Willard, that's it," she'd said. The way she saw it, too much religion could be as bad as too little, maybe even worse; but moderation was just not in her husband's nature.

An hour or so later, Arvin was awakened by his father's voice in the kitchen. He jumped off the bed and smoothed the wrinkles out of the wool blanket, then went to the door and pressed his ear against it. He heard Willard ask Charlotte if she needed anything from the store. "I got to gas up the truck for work," he told her. When he heard his father's footsteps in the hall, Arvin moved quickly away from the door and across the room. He was standing by the window pretending to study an arrowhead he'd picked up from the small collection of treasures he had lying on the sill. The door opened. "Let's take a ride," Willard said. "No sense you sitting in here like a house cat all day."

As they walked out the front door, Charlotte yelled from the kitchen, "Don't forget the sugar." They got in the pickup and drove out to the end of their rutted lane and then turned down Baum Hill Road. At the stop sign, Willard made a left onto the stretch of paved road that cut through the middle of Knockemstiff. Though the trip to Maude's store never took more than five minutes, it always seemed to Arvin as if he had entered another country when they came off the Flats. At the Patterson place, a group of boys, some younger than himself, stood in the open doorway of a dilapidated garage passing cigarettes back and forth and taking turns punching a gutted deer carcass that hung from a joist. One of the boys whooped and took a couple of swings at the chilly air as they drove past, and Arvin scooted down in his seat a little. In front of Janey Wagner's house, a pink baby crawled around in the yard under a maple tree. Janey was standing on the sagging porch pointing at the baby and yelling through a broken window patched with cardboard at someone inside. She was

wearing the same outfit she wore to school every day, a red plaid skirt and a frayed white blouse. Though she was only a grade ahead of Arvin in school, Janey always sat in the rear of the bus with the older boys on the way home. He'd heard some of the other girls say that they allowed her back there because she'd spread her legs and let them play stink finger with her snatch. He hoped that maybe someday, when he was a little older, he would find out exactly what that meant.

Instead of stopping at the store, Willard made a sharp right up the gravel road called Shady Glen. He gave the truck some gas and whirled into the bald, muddy yard that surrounded the Bull Pen. It was littered with bottle caps and cigarette butts and beer cartons. An ex-railroader spotted with warty skin cancers named Snooks Snyder lived there with his sister, Agatha, an old maid who sat in an upstairs window all day dressed in black and pretending to be a grieving widow. Snooks sold beer and wine out of the front of the house, and, if your face was even vaguely familiar, something with a lot more kick out the back. For his customers' convenience, several picnic tables were set up under some tall sycamores off to the side of the house, along with a horseshoe pit and an outhouse that always appeared on the verge of collapse. The two men that Arvin had seen in the woods that morning were sitting on top of one of the tables drinking beer, their shotguns leaning against a tree behind them.

With the truck still rolling to a stop, Willard pushed the door open and leaped out. One of the hunters stood up and threw a bottle that glanced off the truck's windshield and landed with a clatter in the road. Then the man turned and started running, his filthy coat flapping behind him and his bloodshot eyes looking around wildly at the big man chasing him. Willard caught up and shoved him down into the greasy slop pooled in front of the outhouse door. Rolling him over, he pinned the man's skinny shoulders with his

knees and began pounding his bearded face with his fists. The other hunter grabbed one of the guns and hurried to a green Plymouth, a brown paper sack under his arm. He sped away, bald tires slinging gravel all the way past the church.

After a couple of minutes, Willard stopped beating the man. He shook the sting out of his hands and took a deep breath, then walked over to the table where the men had been sitting. He picked up the shotgun propped against the tree, unloaded two red shells, then swung it like a ball bat against the sycamore until it shattered into several pieces. As he turned and started for the truck, he glanced over and saw Snooks Snyder standing in the doorway with a stubby pistol pointed at him. He took a few steps toward the porch. "Old man, you want some of what he got," Willard said in a loud voice, "you just step on out here. I'll stick that gun clear up your ass." He stood waiting until Snooks closed the door.

When he got back inside the pickup, Willard reached under the seat for a rag and wiped the traces of blood off his hands. "You remember what I told you the other day?" he asked Arvin.

"About them boys on the bus?"

"Well, that's what I meant," Willard said, nodding over at the hunter. He tossed the rag out the window. "You just got to pick the right time."

"Yes, sir," Arvin said.

"They's a lot of no-good sonofabitches out there."

"More than a hundred?"

Willard laughed a little and put the truck in gear. "Yeah, at least that many." He started to ease the clutch out. "I'm thinking it best if we keep this between us, okay? No sense gettin' your mom all upset."

"No, she don't need that."

"Good," Willard said. "Now how about I buy you a candy bar?"

For a long time, Arvin would often think of that as the best day he ever spent with his father. After supper that evening, he followed Willard back over to the prayer log. The moon was rising by the time they got there, a sliver of ancient and pitted bone accompanied by a single, shimmering star. They knelt down and Arvin glanced over at his father's skinned knuckles. When she'd asked, Willard had told Charlotte that he'd hurt his hand changing a flat tire. Arvin had never heard his father lie before, but he felt certain that God would forgive him. In the still, darkening woods, the sounds traveling up the hill from the holler were especially clear that night. Down at the Bull Pen, the clanging of the horseshoes against the metal pegs sounded almost like church bells ringing, and the wild hoots and jeers of the drunks reminded the boy of the hunter lying bloody in the mud. His father had taught that man a lesson he'd never forget; and the next time somebody messed with him, Arvin was going to do the same. He closed his eyes and began to pray.



# 1

IT WAS A Wednesday afternoon in the fall of 1945, not long after the war had ended. The Greyhound made its regular stop in Meade, Ohio, a little paper-mill town an hour south of Columbus that smelled like rotten eggs. Strangers complained about the stench, but the locals liked to brag that it was the sweet smell of money. The bus driver, a soft, sawed-off man who wore elevated shoes and a limp bow tie, pulled in the alley beside the depot and announced a forty-minute break. He wished he could have a cup of coffee, but his ulcer was acting up again. He yawned and took a swig from a bottle of pink medicine he kept on the dashboard. The smokestack across town, by far the tallest structure in this part of the state, belched forth another dirty brown cloud. You could see it for miles, puffing like a volcano about to blow its skinny top.

Leaning back in his seat, the bus driver pulled his leather cap down over his eyes. He lived right outside of Philadelphia, and he thought that if he ever had to live in a place like Meade, Ohio, he'd go ahead and shoot himself. You couldn't even find a bowl of lettuce in this town. All that people seemed to eat here was grease and more grease. He'd be dead in two months eating the slop they did. His wife told her friends that he was delicate, but there was something about the tone of her voice that sometimes made him wonder if she was really being sympathetic. If it hadn't been for the ulcer, he would have gone off to fight with the rest of the men. He'd have slaughtered a whole

platoon of Germans and shown her just how goddamn delicate he was. The biggest regret was all the medals he'd missed out on. His old man once got a certificate from the railroad for not missing a single day of work in twenty years, and had pointed it out to his sickly son every time he'd seen him for the next twenty. When the old man finally croaked, the bus driver tried to talk his mother into sticking the certificate in the casket with the body so he wouldn't have to look at it anymore. But she insisted on leaving it displayed in the living room as an example of what a person could attain in this life if he didn't let a little indigestion get in his way. The funeral, an event the bus driver had looked forward to for a long time, had nearly been ruined by all the arguing over that crummy scrap of paper. He would be glad when all the discharged soldiers finally reached their destinations so he wouldn't have to look at the dumb bastards anymore. It wore on you after a while, other people's accomplishments.

Private Willard Russell had been drinking in the back of the bus with two sailors from Georgia, but one had passed out and the other had puked in their last jug. He kept thinking that if he ever got home, he'd never leave Coal Creek, West Virginia, again. He'd seen some hard things growing up in the hills, but they didn't hold a candle to what he'd witnessed in the South Pacific. On one of the Solomons, he and a couple of other men from his outfit had run across a marine skinned alive by the Japanese and nailed to a cross made out of two palm trees. The raw, bloody body was covered with black flies. They could still see the man's heart beating in his chest. His dog tags were hanging from what remained of one of his big toes: Gunnery Sergeant Miller Jones. Unable to offer anything but a little mercy, Willard shot the marine behind the ear, and they took him down and covered him with rocks at the foot of the cross. The inside of Willard's head hadn't been the same since.

When he heard the tubby bus driver yell something about a break, Willard stood up and started toward the door, disgusted with the two sailors. In his opinion, the navy was one branch of the military that should never be allowed to drink. In the three years he'd served in the army, he hadn't met a single swabby who could hold his liquor. Someone had told him that it was because of the saltpeter they were fed to keep them from going crazy and fucking each other when they were out to sea. He wandered outside the bus depot and saw a little restaurant across the street called the Wooden Spoon. There was a piece of white cardboard stuck in the window advertising a meat loaf special for thirty-five cents. His mother had fixed him a meat loaf the day before he left for the army, and he considered that a good sign. In a booth by the window, he sat down and lit a cigarette. A shelf ran around the room, lined with old bottles and antique kitchenware and cracked black-and-white photographs for the dust to collect on. Tacked to the wall by the booth was a faded newspaper account of a Meade police officer who'd been gunned down by a bank robber in front of the bus depot. Willard looked closer, saw that it was dated February 11, 1936. That would have been four days before his twelfth birthday, he calculated. An old man, the only other customer in the diner, was bent over at a table in the middle of the room slurping a bowl of green soup. His false teeth rested on top of a stick of butter in front of him.

Willard finished the cigarette and was just getting ready to leave when a dark-haired waitress finally stepped out of the kitchen. She grabbed a menu from a stack by the cash register and handed it to him. "I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't hear you come in." Looking at her high cheekbones and full lips and long, slender legs, Willard discovered, when she asked him what he wanted to eat, that the spit had dried in his mouth. He could barely speak. That had never happened to him before, not even in the middle of

the worst fighting on Bougainville. While she went to put the order in and get him a cup of coffee, the thought went through his head that just a couple of months ago he was certain that his life was going to end on some steamy, worthless rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean; and now here he was, still sucking air and just a few hours from home, being waited on by a woman who looked like a live version of one of those pinup movie angels. As best as Willard could ever tell, that was when he fell in love. It didn't matter that the meat loaf was dry and the green beans were mushy and the roll as hard as a lump of #5 coal. As far as he was concerned, she served him the best meal he ever had in his life. And after he finished it, he got back on the bus without even knowing Charlotte Willoughby's name.

Across the river in Huntington, he found a liquor store when the bus made another stop, and bought five pints of bonded whiskey that he stuck away in his pack. He sat in the front now, right behind the driver, thinking about the girl in the diner and looking for some indication that he was getting close to home. He was still a little drunk. Out of the blue, the bus driver said, "Bringing any medals back?" He glanced at Willard in the rearview mirror.

Willard shook his head. "Just this skinny old carcass I'm walking around in."

"I wanted to go, but they wouldn't take me."

"You're lucky," Willard said. The day they'd come across the marine, the fighting on the island was nearly over, and the sergeant had sent them out looking for some water fit to drink. A couple of hours after they buried Miller Jones's flayed body, four starving Japanese soldiers with fresh bloodstains on their machetes came out of the rocks with their hands up in the air and surrendered. When Willard and his two buddies started to lead them back to the location of the cross, the soldiers dropped to their knees and started begging or apologizing, he didn't know which.

"They tried to escape," Willard lied to the sergeant later in the camp. "We didn't have no choice." After they had executed the Japs, one of the men with him, a Louisiana boy who wore a swamp rat's foot around his neck to ward off slant-eyed bullets, cut their ears off with a straight razor. He had a cigar box full of ones he'd already dried. His plan was to sell the trophies for five bucks apiece once they got back to civilization.

"I got an ulcer," the bus driver said.

"You didn't miss nothing."

"I don't know," the bus driver said. "I sure would have liked to got me a medal. Maybe a couple of them. I figure I could have killed enough of those Kraut bastards for two anyway. I'm pretty quick with my hands."

Looking at the back of the bus driver's head, Willard thought about the conversation he'd had with the gloomy young priest on board the ship after he confessed that he'd shot the marine to put him out of his misery. The priest was sick of all the death he'd seen, all the prayers he'd said over rows of dead soldiers and piles of body parts. He told Willard that if even half of history was true, then the only thing this depraved and corrupt world was good for was preparing you for the next. "Did you know," Willard said to the driver, "that the Romans used to gut donkeys and sew Christians up alive inside the carcasses and leave them out in the sun to rot?" The priest had been full of such stories.

"What the hell's that got to do with a medal?"

"Just think about it. You're trussed up like a turkey in a pan with just your head sticking out a dead donkey's ass; and then the maggots eating away at you until you see the glory."

The bus driver frowned, gripped the steering wheel a little tighter. "Friend, I don't see what you're getting at. I was talking about coming home with a big medal pinned to your chest. Did these Roman fellers give out medals to

them people before they stuck 'em in the donkeys? Is that what you mean?"

Willard didn't know what he meant. According to the priest, only God could figure out the ways of men. He licked his dry lips, thought about the whiskey in his pack. "What I'm saying is that when it comes right down to it, everybody suffers in the end," Willard said.

"Well," the bus driver said, "I'd liked to have my medal before then. Heck, I got a wife at home who goes nuts every time she sees one. Talk about suffering. I worry myself sick anytime I'm out on the road she's gonna take off with a purple heart."

Willard leaned forward and the driver felt the soldier's hot breath on the back of his fat neck, smelled the whiskey fumes and the stale traces of a cheap lunch. "You think Miller Jones would give a shit if his old lady was out fucking around on him?" Willard said. "Buddy, he'd trade places with you any goddamn day."

"Who the hell is Miller Jones?"

Willard looked out the window as the hazy top of Greenbrier Mountain started to appear in the distance. His hands were trembling, his brow shiny with sweat. "Just some poor bastard who went and fought in that war they cheated you out of, that's all."

WILLARD WAS JUST GETTING READY to break down and crack open one of the pints when his uncle Earskell pulled up in his rattly Ford in front of the Greyhound station in Lewisburg at the corner of Washington and Court. He had been sitting on a bench outside for almost three hours, nursing a cold coffee in a paper cup and watching people walk by the Pioneer Drugstore. He was ashamed of the way he'd talked to the bus driver, sorry that he'd brought up the marine's name like he did; and he vowed that, though he would never forget him, he'd never mention Gunnery Sergeant Miller Jones to anyone again. Once they were on

the road, he reached into his duffel and handed Earskell one of the pints along with a German Luger. He'd traded a Japanese ceremonial sword for the pistol at the base in Maryland right before he got discharged. "That's supposed to be the gun Hitler used to blow his brains out," Willard said, trying to hold back a grin.

"Bullshit," Earskell said.

Willard laughed. "What? You think the guy lied to me?"

"Ha!" the old man said. He twisted the cap off the bottle, took a long pull, then shuddered. "Lord, this is good stuff."

"Drink up. I got three more in my kit." Willard opened another pint and lit a cigarette. He stuck his arm out the window. "How's my mother doing?"

"Well, I gotta say, when they sent Junior Carver's body back, she went a little off in the head there for a while. But she seems pretty good now." Earskell took another hit off the pint and set it between his legs. "She just been worried about you, that's all."

They climbed slowly into the hills toward Coal Creek. Earskell wanted to hear some war stories, but the only thing his nephew talked about for the next hour was some woman he'd met in Ohio. It was the most he'd ever heard Willard talk in his life. He wanted to ask if it was true that the Japs ate their own dead, like the newspaper said, but he figured that could wait. Besides, he needed to pay attention to his driving. The whiskey was going down awful smooth, and his eyes weren't as good as they used to be. Emma had been waiting on her son to return home for a long time, and it would be a shame if he wrecked and killed them both before she got to see him. Earskell chuckled a little to himself at the thought of that. His sister was one of the most God-fearing people he'd ever met, but she'd follow him straight into hell to make him pay for that one.

"WELL, WHAT IS IT EXACTLY you like about this girl?" Emma Russell asked Willard. It had been near midnight when he

and Earskell parked the Ford at the bottom of the hill and climbed the path to the small log house. When he came through the door, she carried on for quite a while, grabbing onto him and soaking the front of his uniform with her tears. He watched over her shoulder as his uncle slipped into the kitchen. Her hair had turned gray since Willard had seen her last. "I'd ask you to get down with me and thank Jesus," she said, wiping the tears from her face with the hem of her apron, "but I can smell liquor on your breath."

Willard nodded. He'd been brought up to believe that you never talked to God when you were under the influence. A man needed to be sincere with the Master at all times in case he was ever really in need. Even Willard's father, Tom Russell, a moonshiner who'd been hounded by bad luck and trouble right up to the day he died of a diseased liver in a Parkersburg jail, ascribed to that belief. No matter how desperate the situation—and his old man had been caught in plenty of those—he wouldn't ask for help from on High if he had even a spoonful in him.

"Well, come on back to the kitchen," Emma said. "You can eat and I'll put on some coffee. I made you a meat loaf."

By three in the morning, he and Earskell had killed four pints along with a cupful of shine and were working on the last bottle of store-bought. Willard's head was fuzzy, and he was having a hard time putting his words together, though evidently he'd mentioned to his mother the waitress he'd seen in the diner. "What was that you asked me?" he said to her.

"That girl you was talkin' about," she said. "What is it you like about her?" She was pouring him another cup of boiling coffee from a pan. Though his tongue was numb, he was sure he'd already burned it more than once. A kerosene lamp hanging from a beam in the ceiling lit the room. His mother's wide shadow wavered on the wall. He spilled some coffee on the oilcloth that covered the table.

Emma shook her head and reached behind her for a dishrag.

"Everything," he said. "You should see her."

Emma figured it was just the whiskey talking, but her son's announcement that he'd met a woman still made her uneasy. Mildred Carver, as good a Christian woman as ever there was in Coal Creek, had prayed for her Junior every day, but they'd still sent him home in a box. Right after she heard that the pallbearers doubted that there was even anything in the casket, as light as it was, Emma started looking for a sign that would tell her what to do to guarantee Willard's safety. She was still searching when Helen Hatton's family burned up in a house fire, leaving the poor girl all alone. Two days later, after much deliberation, Emma got down on her knees and promised God that if He would bring her son home alive, she'd make sure that he married Helen and took care of her. But now, standing in the kitchen looking at his dark, wavy hair and chiseled features, she realized she'd been crazy to ever pledge such a thing. Helen wore a dirty bonnet tied under her square chin, and her long, horsey face was the spitting image of her grandmother Rachel's, considered by many the homeliest woman who ever walked the ridges of Greenbrier County. At the time, Emma hadn't considered what might happen if she couldn't keep her promise. If only she had been blessed with an ugly son, she thought. God had some funny ideas when it came to letting people know He was displeased.

"Looks ain't everything," Emma said.

"Who says?"

"Shut up, Earskell," Emma said. "What's that girl's name again?"

Willard shrugged. He squinted at the picture of Jesus carrying the cross that hung above the door. Ever since entering the kitchen, he had avoided looking at it, for fear of ruining his homecoming with more thoughts of Miller

Jones. But now, just for a moment, he gave himself over to the image. The picture had been there as long as he could remember, spotty with age in a cheap wooden frame. It seemed almost alive in the flickering light from the lantern. He could almost hear the cracks of the whips, the taunts of Pilate's soldiers. He glanced down at the German Luger lying on the table by Earskell's plate.

"What? You don't even know her name?"

"Didn't ask," Willard said. "I left her a dollar tip, though."

"She won't forget that," Earskell said.

"Well, maybe you ought to pray about it before you go traipsing back up to Ohio," Emma said. "That's a long ways off." All her life, she had believed that people should follow the Lord's will and not their own. A person had to trust that everything turns out just as it's supposed to in this world. But then Emma had lost that faith, ended up trying to barter with God like He was nothing more than a horse trader with a plug of chew in his jaw or a ragged tinker out peddling dented wares along the road. Now, no matter how it turned out, she had to at least make an effort to uphold her part of the bargain. After that, she would leave it up to Him. "I don't think that would hurt none, do you? If you prayed on it?" She turned and started covering what was left of the meat loaf with a clean towel.

Willard blew on his coffee, then took a sip and grimaced. He thought about the waitress, the tiny, barely visible scar above her left eyebrow. Two weeks, he figured, and then he'd drive up and talk to her. He glanced over at his uncle trying to roll a cigarette. Earskell's hands were gnarled and twisted with arthritis, the knuckles big around as quarters. "No," Willard said, pouring a little whiskey into his cup, "that never hurt none at all."

WILLARD WAS HUNGOVER and shaky and sitting by himself on one of the back benches in the Coal Creek Church of the Holy Ghost Sanctified. It was nearly seven thirty on a Thursday evening, but the service hadn't started yet. It was the fourth night of the church's annual weeklong revival, aimed mostly at backsliders and those who hadn't been saved yet. Willard had been home over a week, and this was the first day he'd drawn a sober breath. Last night he and Earskell had gone to the Lewis Theater to see John Wayne in *Back to Bataan*. He walked out halfway through the movie, disgusted with the phoniness of it all, ended up in a fight at the pool hall down the street. He roused himself and looked around, flexed his sore hand. Emma was still up front visiting. Smoky lanterns hung along the walls; a dented wood stove sat halfway down the aisle off to the right. The pine benches were worn smooth by over twenty years of worship. Though the church was the same humble place it had always been, Willard was afraid that he had changed quite a bit since he had been overseas.

Reverend Albert Sykes had started the church in 1924, shortly after a coal mine collapsed and trapped him in the dark with two other men who'd been killed instantly. Both of his legs had been broken in several places. He managed to reach a pack of Five Brothers chewing tobacco in Phil Drury's pocket, but he couldn't stretch far enough to grab hold of the butter and jam sandwich he knew Burl Meadows was carrying in his coat. He said he was touched

by the Spirit on the third night. He realized he was going to soon join the men beside him, already putrid with the smell of death, but it didn't matter anymore. A few hours later, the rescuers broke through the rubble while he was asleep. For a moment, he was convinced that the light they shined in his eyes was the face of the Lord. It was a good story to tell in church, and there were always a lot of Hallelujahs when he came to that part. Willard figured he'd heard the old preacher tell it a hundred times over the years, limping back and forth in front of the varnished pulpit. At the end of the story, he always pulled the empty Five Brothers pack out of his threadbare suit coat, held it up toward the ceiling cradled in the palms of his hands. He carried it with him everywhere. Many of the women around Coal Creek, especially those who still had husbands and sons in the mines, treated it like a religious relic, kissing it whenever they got a chance. It was a fact that Mary Ellen Thompson, on her deathbed, had asked for it to be brought to her instead of the doctor.

Willard watched his mother talking to a thin woman wearing wire-rim glasses set crooked on her long, slender face, a faded blue bonnet tied under her pointy chin. After a couple of minutes, Emma grabbed the woman's hand and led her back to where Willard was sitting. "I asked Helen to sit with us," Emma told her son. He stood up and let them in, and as the girl passed by him, the odor of old sweat made his eyes water. She carried a worn leather Bible, kept her head down when Emma introduced her. Now he understood why his mother had been going on for the last few days about why good looks were not all that important. He would agree that was true in most cases, that the spirit was more important than the flesh, but hell, even his uncle Earskell washed his armpits once in a while.

Because the church had no bell, Reverend Sykes went to the open door when it was time for the service to start and shouted to those still loitering outside with their cigarettes