

Riverside Blues

Erik Tomblin

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Introduction

The South has its secrets.

Some are good. Some are bad.

And some are darker than the Devil's soul.

Erik Tomblin knows about the latter—about the darkest, most sinister secrets of the South—and he plans to tell you all about them in *Riverside Blues*.

From the very first page of *Riverside Blues*, you will know you are in for a treat. To say that this story drips atmosphere is the understatement of the decade. In Tomblin's wickedly beautiful prose, I could *feel* the sweltering heat of a Georgia summer. I could *smell* the dust kicked up on a lonesome back road by a battered old pick-up truck, as well as the oil leaking from that old truck's rusty undercarriage. I could *hear* the bullfrogs calling out their low, melancholy song from a nearby river, the shrill chorus of crickets chirping in a distant meadow, and the sighing of a warm breeze through the treetops. I winced beneath the bites of evening mosquitoes hungry for my blood, and perhaps I even slapped at those invisible pests on more than one occasion as I lost myself in the world of *Riverside Blues*.

Tomblin knows all about atmosphere, and he imbues his writing with so much atmosphere you'll feel like you are there.

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Like a twisted cross between Flannery O' Connor and Joe R. Lansdale, Erik doesn't just tell us about the deep South in *Riverside Blues*...he takes us there. While reading *Riverside Blues*, we are immersed in the lonely world of a poor old man whose existence is defined by the grief that still grips his soul following the loss of his first love half a century ago. We watch, wishing we could ease this poor man's suffering, as he begins to metaphorically clear a path to his own mental well-being fifty years too late...only to discover something that has stepped from both his wildest dreams as well as his darkest nightmares. We know his grief. We share his terror. And we feel his rage as old sins make themselves known bit by terrible bit.

Riverside Blues unfolds itself slowly, like the unhurried opening of a chrysalis in the gray morning hours before sunrise. Like the lazy passing of summer's most scorching dog days—or, as some might argue, like the lackadaisical way many of us speak, beneath the Mason-Dixon line—Tomblin's novella takes its sweet time letting the story tell itself. The author never gets in the way of allowing it to do so, and not a precious word is wasted.

And when wicked revelations come to light, you will find it was well worth the wait.

Read *Riverside Blues*.

Dig it.

I know I did.

In fact, I believe I'll read it again right now. On my back porch. Beneath the setting sun. With a cold beer between my legs. As the cicadas chatter in the distance, like alien beings singing a chorus of discontent.

I just pray, as I settle down to revisit this world Erik Tomblin has created, that I do not hear the chuffing of a shovel into earth

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somewhere close by...or the wet, smacking sounds of something from beyond the grave feeding in the pond behind my house.

These are the sounds of the South.

The sounds of its myriad dark secrets.

And sometimes, they hit a little too close to home.

—James Newman
Hendersonville, NC
March 15, 2005

“Well I know my baby, if I see her in the dark...”
—Led Zeppelin

Chapter 1

"You need anything while I'm out?"

Gordon grins and raises an eyebrow. "Nothing you can get in town," he answers.

Lily smiles and winks at her husband, sliding one of her long, smooth legs up the edge of the front door.

"Here," he adds and flips her a shiny new penny from his pocket. "Get yourself something pretty." She laughs even though the joke is one he manages to slip in whenever possible.

"Don't forget me while I'm gone," she purrs, disappearing from view. He doesn't.

Fifty years of sleeping in the den had long ago taken its toll on Gordon Lyles's spine. He woke from the same dream every morning, reliving the final moments with his young bride. This time it was no different. Grunting through the spasms that jerked his back muscles like taffy, he rose from the same couch he and Lily had picked out a week before they were married. Tiny eruptions of dust burst from the upholstery and played in a single beam of morning sunlight. Gordon rubbed his eyes, clearing the filmy trace of days gone by from his vision.

The wooden floor was blessedly cool on the soles of his tender feet. Already the South Georgia spring was threatening to unleash summer, waking Gordon with a warm wet kiss between his skin and clothing. He pinched the neckline of his yellowed T-shirt with one hand, pumping it like a bellows to relieve the sticky sensation from the humidity. He checked the scattering of Old Milwaukee cans atop the coffee table with his other hand, looking to rinse the taste of history from his mouth.

Gordon stood, bracing his hands on his knees and pausing halfway up. His back muscles tightened then slowly relaxed as he pushed himself upright, groaning with a mixture of pain and pleasure. He stepped around the table and into the kitchen, his knee joints popping and creaking, imitating the wood floor. Gordon opened the fridge, his eyes relaxing in the weaker light from the kitchen windows which faced west. He had learned to ignore the barren field he once farmed (Lily had loved fresh garden tomatoes), which stared at him from behind the faded yellow curtains.

Gordon pulled a can of beer from the refrigerator and rolled it along his pale, scruffy face. It was temporary relief from the warm morning that would soon blossom into a scorching afternoon. Had it always been like this? This miserably hot and humid, even in the spring? He was sure this question came up several times a year, but he never sought an answer. Any answer he could muster would only make him think about the past, about Lily.

After a few liberal swallows he placed the beer back in the fridge to become a warm-up for lunch. He shuffled down the dark hall. The string from the attic fan brushed across the top of his scalp like a spider web, breaking the flesh of his neck out in bumps. It was pointless to turn it on now. Maybe he would remember tonight.

Gordon entered the second door on the right. It was once a guest room and bath, complete with fancy soaps and frilly hand towels. Now it was his room, or rather, the place he kept his clothes and showered. The bed was unmade, the sheets and comforter twisted from one of the rare restless nights he chose not to sleep on the couch.

In the small bathroom Gordon started the shower. He had enough time to brush his teeth ("You have such a great smile," she had told him once) before the water was warm. The weather never quite got hot enough for Gordon to brave the freezing temperatures of deep-well water. He rinsed, gargled with something that made him think of licking a hospital floor, then slid the shower curtain back.

There was no soap. Gordon was sure there were no fresh bars under the sink, but he checked anyway. *Damn*. His weekly trip to

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town would be pushed up a few days unless he settled for washing with shampoo, which always set him to scratching himself for hours. He clucked his tongue quietly and thought about the beer in the fridge.

The bathroom in the master bedroom was a possibility, but Gordon went there less frequently than the guest bedroom. The bed was still as Lily had made it the last day he saw her. The night of her disappearance Gordon fell asleep on the couch waiting for her. He didn't sleep much for many nights after that. Gordon found that spending his evenings in the den was like an ex-smoker having that "one" smoke with a beer. The habit crept in and nested.

But if there was soap in there, it couldn't possibly be good by now. *Does soap go bad?* Gordon couldn't imagine why but fifty years was a long time. His curiosity was piqued and before his conscience could argue he was standing outside the master bedroom door, his fingertips resting on the doorknob. He turned the knob and cringed as the hinges squealed, hopefully queuing some lost memories to scatter and hide before they were discovered.

The smell inside the room made Gordon gasp. He suddenly felt himself sucked back into those first wondrous months with his beautiful new wife. There was a touch of her perfume, the laundry detergent she used, and a hint of her own smell, the one Gordon would press his nose against her forehead to revel in. It smelled like the beach on a summer morning with a whisper of fresh cut pine. Gordon realized he was holding his breath, savoring this lingering scent of a past life.

He finally exhaled, and breathed in the dank, lonely reality of his life. Cursing his imagination under his breath, Gordon walked quickly to the door across the room and into the master bathroom. A small amount of light filtered through the window and curtain, though not enough to see with. Gordon fumbled along the wall for the light switch, found two and flicked them both. The fan set into the ceiling rumbled to life, protesting loudly and sending Gordon back a few steps. It ground to a halt just before he flicked the switch off, shedding a few clumps of dust.

This room was mostly untouched as well, except for the

personal items he had removed upon taking the guest bedroom. Lily's hairbrush lay next to the sink, silky dark strands woven in and out of the teeth. She would be gray by now, Gordon was sure. The prettiest gray he could imagine. He lifted a small spray bottle from the shelf on his right, wondering if he dare taunt more memories to the surface. He took a quick whiff, smelled nothing, then squeezed the little ball to force out the perfume. The pump was brittle and broke between his fingers before he realized any liquid once in the bottle had long ago evaporated.

Gordon frowned, chastising himself for dawdling. He groaned and stooped over to look under the sink for soap. There were three bars, all Ivory, and he quickly grabbed one before his knees gave out. He unwrapped the soap and was surprised to find it still intact and possibly useful, though a bit cracked and dry. He closed the cabinet and turned to leave the bathroom, his hand on the light switch.

Gordon.

Just a whisper, like a single dry leaf brushing against his ear before falling into silence. He looked into the bedroom, his pulse quickening. It was still dark, but nothing moved and everything looked the same.

A puff of cool air, so slight he must have imagined it, tickled Gordon's left ear and he turned. The window gawked at him, muted by the dingy curtain. He raised a hand, slid the panel to one side and looked out into the backyard, an overgrown tangle of muscadine vines and weeds. Barely visible in the thick greenery lay the path he and Delbert had cleared the winter the house was built. In between pounding nails and hoisting two-by-fours, Gordon and his brother would work off their lunches, taking turns chopping through the brittle remains of summer's havoc with machetes. It took three weeks to reach the river. Its teasing trickle had called to their sweat-drenched bodies, louder and louder as they approached. In the end they had rewarded themselves with a quick dip in its clear water.

How long had it been since Gordon was last there? He and Lily had beaten the path into submission, loving the cool embrace of the

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shadows and shelter from the blazing sun. They would sit on the steep bank, under a tree that threatened to topple into the river's soothing current, their feet dangling in the water. Many times they had fallen into a glorious slumber, lulled by the murmur of the water in the otherwise silent summer afternoon. So much happiness in such little time seemed impossible now.

Sweat gathered in the furrows of Gordon's brow then dripped past his vision onto the bathroom floor. Suddenly he felt as if he'd defiled consecrated ground with his perspiration. After a brief moment of panic, Gordon forced a chuckle and wiped the remaining perspiration from his face with his shirt. The damned heat was getting to his brain. A dip in the river just might cool off an old dog such as himself.

Soap in hand, Gordon turned off the light and made a quick exit.

Chapter 2

It took another three weeks of steadily increasing heat to coax Gordon into the backyard. He stood at the head of the trail, marked by two large rocks Lily had chosen for him to haul from the river. Several large hardwoods scattered around the weed-choked lawn kept the sun from his pale skin, already basted in a sheen of sweat. It wasn't even noon and that bastard with the perfect teeth on television forecasted another ten degrees higher by late afternoon.

Had the rocks not been there, barely visible behind the ground brush advancing from the tree line, Gordon might never have found the trailhead. Slithering, thorny vines and wisps of ferns had converged to hide the once well-worn path, possessively keeping their secret like a lost Eden. The trail was more visible from the house; from that elevation and distance it was easier to see the saturation difference in the greenery. But from this vantage point the trail stayed hidden to anyone unfamiliar with the yard.

Gordon looked up through the trees. Unless the foliage had changed so dramatically, he would remain in the shade once he made his way into the wiry mass of encroaching brush. From memory, he estimated the river lay a good two hundred yards ahead, almost a straight line except for a few curves around ancient trees standing sentinel long before he had bought this hundred-acre plot. Though he'd had the help of his brother the first time, perhaps their handiwork had made enough of an impression on the land to make an easier job of clearing the trail this time around. It wasn't as if Gordon had plans other than the occasional run to town for food and essentials.

Braving a brief stint through the sunlight, Gordon walked to the decaying wooden shed at the edge of the yard. He swung open the door and the top hinge broke free, giving him a scare as the door tilted then came to rest on the corner of the top step. Pausing

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just inside the shed, Gordon leaned against the doorframe to allow his eyes to adjust and ride out the shot of adrenaline buzzing through his muscles. He stepped further inside, dry rat droppings crumbling under the soles of his heavy work boots. The building smelled of earth and decay, sunny dreams laid to rest under eons of dust. The air rolled into his lungs like cool riverbed silt, stagnant and bitter.

Gordon walked toward the rear of the shed and glanced to his left where an old grindstone sat atop a worktable. A can of oil sat next to the table, right where it should be. Gordon once prided himself on his efficient organization skills. *Everything in its place*. He smirked and wondered how such little things had meant so much to him at one time. At least he wouldn't have to dig around for it now.

On the wall to his right, Gordon spotted the old machete, now tanned with rust. The leather wrapped around the handle was tattered and loose, probably nibbled away by rats. He would have to fix that, or possibly buy gloves. His hands had become tender since retiring from the textile mill. Aluminum beer cans didn't exactly build calluses, except maybe on his liver.

He pulled down the machete and inspected the blade. Other than the thin layer of rust it appeared suitable. There were no chips, dents or pits. Gordon's brother had brought it back from Korea and given it to him as a birthday present. If it weren't for Lily, Gordon might have been issued one himself. But love was a strong incentive for any young man to stick around. He was also his mother's only other son, and the fearful look in her eyes when he ruminated joining the fight always put a lump in his throat.

A little oil and elbow grease would easily have the machete gleaming like new. Delbert would have been proud had his second tour not claimed his life in a vicious fight for a seven-mile stretch of hills; another reason the trail to the river still warmed his soul a little when he thought about it. The summer he and his brother had built the house and cleared the trail felt like a true Tom-and-Huck adventure to Gordon. Not long after, he drove his brother to the bus station never to see him alive again. It was almost as bad as his

wife disappearing. At least Gordon was spared the mystery with his brother, whose body was not fit for viewing after the battle smoke cleared. From what Gordon gathered, they could only identify Delbert by his tags.

Gordon didn't realize he was crying until he saw the fat, dark drops on the machete blade. *Silly old man*, he chided and wiped away the tears with the back of his free hand.

Grabbing the can of oil, Gordon set to work bringing new life to an old friend.

At the end of the first week Gordon felt and looked like he'd gotten between two brawling mountain cats. A multitude of scratches crisscrossed his arms, hands and face. A few of the more serious ones had turned an angry red, puffy with infection. He would doctor those with the peroxide and antibiotic cream he would pick up on his latest run to town.

The clerk at Walgreen's—a young man he didn't recognize—watched him warily, anxious to get Gordon out of his checkout line. Once outside the store Gordon ran into Sheriff Earl Douglas. He had gone to high school with Gordon and Lily. He was also the first one out to Gordon's place when Lily disappeared, though he was a greenhorn deputy at the time. Earl had plenty of run-ins with the law before implementing the old "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" motto.

They were the same age, seventy-two, long past retirement age, but in a sleepy town like Holden being sheriff didn't take too much of a toll on a person's mind and spirit. He'd maintained his tall, lanky stature throughout the years, mostly by staying on patrol even after his election as sheriff allowed him to sit behind a desk and grow a potbelly if he'd wanted to. He wore his belt low like a true gunslinger, a police issue pistol hanging at his hip as an unspoken threat. The oiled leather holster matched his tan complexion, rugged and sturdy. Earl's crystal blue eyes smiled at Gordon from twenty feet away.

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"How you been, Gordon?" Earl called from across the parking lot. He made his way over with that same slow saunter he'd had since school. Up close, Earl got a good look at the patchwork of scratches on Gordon's face and chuckled. "Damn, son. You been playing Brer Rabbit again?"

Gordon smiled and shook Earl's hand. "How are you?" he asked, not sure why he avoided the sheriff's question. Something inside urged him to keep quiet about his venture into the woods. Perhaps he felt possessive of the place he was working so hard to get back to, a place that held so many memories he had forced himself to forget.

"Not bad," Earl said, pumping Gordon's hand with the fervor of a politician. His questioning nature could not be deterred. "So what's with the scratches? Brushing your teeth with a cactus?" Earl smiled larger, a trick he'd employed many a time to appear more affable to stubborn suspects.

Gordon swallowed involuntarily and glanced around the parking lot. "Just clearing some brush out in the yard. Damn stuff has started to take over like a plague." He juggled his bag of purchases from one hand to the other.

Earl looked off at the horizon and wiped at his forehead with the cuff of his dress shirt then turned back to Gordon and smiled. "Better be careful in this heat. You don't wanna pass out and have your brains cooking in your skull all afternoon."

"Ain't that the truth," Gordon said and tapped his old friend on the shoulder, cueing an end to the conversation. If Earl had recognized the hint, he didn't bite.

"Headed to the grocery? Mack's got a special on pork ribs this week. Make for some good grillin'."

"I might just grab some," Gordon answered and stepped around Earl to get to his truck. "I'll see you around, Earl."

Earl's smile wavered; he wasn't used to being so obviously jilted when it came to small talk. "Okay, then. You take care."

Gordon gave a curt wave then backed his truck away from the curb, keeping his eyes up front. For the life of him he couldn't figure out why he had held his breath until he was back on the road

headed toward the grocery store. Earl was as good a friend as Gordon had—it was not as though he believed Earl had ever suspected him of foul play in Lily’s disappearance.

Gordon forced himself to relax, convinced his state of mind was a result of so many memories rising to the surface of his murky mind for the first time in fifty years. He’d never had anything to hide other than his emotions, and he felt sure those would never be fully resurrected. Not if he could help it.

Earl gripped the steering wheel in front of him, his slippery palms squeaking on the leather wrapping. He hadn’t started the patrol car’s engine just yet, but knew if he wanted to avoid contact with anyone for the next few minutes, take a little time to get his thoughts together, then he would have to get out of the parking lot soon. His face twitched when he saw how shaky his hand was reaching for the key in the ignition. Finally on the road, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Gordon had been nervous. And for the life of him, Earl couldn’t figure out why the hell that made *him* nervous. Not only was Gordon squirming under Earl’s gaze, but he had been lying as well. It wasn’t Earl’s expertise as a law enforcement officer that made it so obvious to him, though it helped. They had been friends for around sixty years now, so Earl knew damn well when Gordon was telling the truth or trying to slip a fat lie by someone. He also knew that Gordon only lied when it was absolutely necessary, which was never (except, of course, when Gordon took the fall for the banana in the principal’s tailpipe back in high school, thus keeping Earl from finally being kicked out for good).

Now, Earl knew how to lie. He also knew that lying *all* the time eventually got you caught, so lies were best saved for when you really needed them. The lies he told when Lily disappeared met his quota for a good fifteen years, until he happened upon a young man with car trouble who happened to be carrying five pounds of pot and roughly \$20,000 in cash, all of which was unbelievably

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sitting right there in the rear floorboard. Officially, the man pulled a gun on him and Earl was fortunate enough to get off the first shot. The mayor was pleased to learn Earl had gotten five pounds of marijuana off the streets and \$5,000 they could put toward the deteriorating three-room jailhouse.

Earl turned down a small alley between the bank and the pawnshop where he occasionally sat and watched for out-of-town speeders. He kept the engine running and the AC on; it was too hot otherwise and he was sweating enough as it was. *Jesus Christ, what was wrong with him?* So what if Gordon was lying? Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he had a case of the green apple splits and was in a hurry to get back home. Any man going through that could appear under great duress. There was certainly no reason Earl should feel disturbed by Gordon's behavior. Lily was long gone, hardly a problem to begin with, and definitely not something to worry about fifty years later.

Still, it was fifteen minutes before Earl stopped sweating and could hold his hand steady enough to drink some coffee from earlier that day, now cold and stale. Even though he had convinced himself there was nothing to worry about, he decided to ride out to Gordon's sometime soon, just to set himself completely at ease. He felt confident Gordon would be back in good spirits, friendly as always, and Earl's unease would be forgotten like that worthless drug dealer or the long dead wife of his best friend.

Chapter 3

Two weeks of sporadic laboring through the steamy woods passed before Gordon could finally hear the comforting murmur of the river. Each morning after a meager breakfast of toast, maybe some bacon, and the occasional beer to quell his hangover, Gordon wandered down to the path and began chopping away at the twisted, woven barrier blocking his way. The first few days were the worst. His hands became raw and blistered from the constant motion of the machete, his back muscles taunt and spastic. He only worked an hour at most with several breaks interspersed. By the time the watery whispers could be heard over the chattering crickets and whippoorwills, Gordon was managing close to two-hour spurts of swinging the blade before needing to rest atop a fallen tree or make his way back home to the porch swing.

Gordon sat on the ground with his back against the base of a large oak, surrounded by bulbous mushrooms still slimy from the morning dew. He blinked the sweat out of his eyes, swearing he could see steam rising from the little crop of fungi. Gordon caught the occasional glimpse of sunlight on water when he squinted through the leaves where his handiwork stopped and the overgrowth resumed. He leaned his head back against the tree, closed his eyes and sighed. The combination of hearing and seeing the river so close threatened to bring memories to the surface, memories he had kept locked away for good reason. Emotions had no purpose for the solitary man; they were wasted.

Instead, Gordon let the rich, earthy smells and slight breeze distract his mind and coerce him into an unexpected slumber.

Slices of moonlight pierced the darkness, falling around Gordon

like slivers of glass. The crickets had started up again, harmonizing with a choir of tree frogs. There was no breeze but the temperature had mercifully dropped several degrees; his skin was dry and comfortable. Gordon lay still, enchanted by the magical combination of elements surrounding him.

The same instant Gordon realized he could not move he noticed a shift in the moonlight. Several beams seem to meld together near a mass of ferns across the trail from him. They formed a backlit silhouette, a man crouching in the darkness. One arm held a piece of broken branch, shifting the mulch of the forest floor in slow graceful swaths. The other rested atop the figure's knee, hand dangling with a casual air. The man's head was lowered as he watched the movement of his hand, back and forth through the debris of the previous autumn.

Gordon opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"So whaddya know, little bro?" the man spoke, raising his head.

Gordon caught the glint of a smile and the starlit twinkle of two familiar eyes. "Del?" he managed before paralysis washed back over him in a wave of numbness.

"That's okay, bro. I'm not here to chat. I just need you to listen." The shadow stood and moved closer, bending down close to Gordon's ear. His eyes closed involuntarily and the noise of the night faded out until all Gordon could hear was his brother's faint, papery breathing. It sounded so close he expected to feel a warm tickle against his ear but did not.

"Looks like you've been trying to kill yourself lately," Delbert chuckled. Gordon felt the twitch of an unrealized smile upon his lips. A tear gathered at the corner of one eye and was blotted away by the feather-light touch of an unseen hand.

"I don't want to take up too much of your play time, so I'll cut to the chase." Delbert paused and Gordon could feel a bittersweet vibration pass between them. "I know what you're after. You may not, but I do. But you need to understand, Gordon, *you never lost it.*"

Gordon felt his face straining to reflect his confusion.

"It's not that you ever forgot," Delbert sighed and Gordon

thought for a brief moment he could feel his older brother's hand resting on his head. "You just never remembered."

When the sensations of the forest gathered back around Gordon, he realized his brother was gone. He had been dreaming, drenched in a lazy afternoon sweat. Testing his mobility, Gordon raised his left arm to check his watch. Thankfully the date had not changed, but he had been out for three hours. His legs and back itched from the heat pressing up from the earth.

Gordon braced his hands against the ground and hoisted his sleep-addled body to its feet. He rubbed at the back of his thighs, the itch slowly dissipating. The machete lay buried a few inches deep in a rotted stump near where he had slept. Had he put it there? Of course he had. The fatigue he battled with sleep had apparently been a tougher foe than expected.

Pulling the blade from the stump, Gordon limped to the end of the trail and began chopping away. Perhaps with a little rest under his belt he would be able to squeeze out another hour or two before giving in to the sweltering midday heat and returning home. The rhythmic swing of the machete lulled his mind into thought. The dream was still fresh, his brother's cryptic words echoing between his ears and begging for attention.

You just never remembered.

Surely Delbert hadn't been referring to himself. Gordon thought about his brother every day, wondering if he'd been thinking of his little brother as his life seeped out of him a half a world away. Gordon's reveries were quick and fleeting, but present nonetheless. He felt an echo of sorrow thinking that his brother, in whatever spiritual form he existed, believed Gordon had forgotten about him.

He shook away the idea and increased the speed of his swing, slicing through the thorny bramble that hung before him like the fog clouding his heart. Could Delbert have been speaking of Lily? The same applied with his beloved wife. The sun never passed

overhead without Gordon thinking of Lily at least once an hour; remembering the way her bangs fell in front of her eyes, curtaining the playful twinkle that stirred something deep inside of him. Her throaty laugh when he told her a good joke. How could Delbert even suggest Gordon had forgotten the love of his life? It was laughable.

Lily was his breath, his song. She was his guardian from the stresses of work, of illness and pain. Their time together eclipsed the rest of the world. Without her, the death of his brother a year after her disappearance almost sent Gordon into a spiraling path of drunken self-destruction. But the lingering memory of Lily curbed his taste for alcohol just enough to keep him alive. When they were together, she had sustained him and kept his emotions warm with life. She *was* his life and the only thing he could possibly have forgotten without Lily by his side was how to live.

Gordon's arm paused next to his head, the next swing down halted with this sudden revelation. It made sense, so much so that Gordon's initial instinct was to push the idea as far and deep into his subconscious as possible. The urge itself only verified the truth of the matter, and Gordon could feel a tightness building in his chest. A familiar sensation tickled the back of his throat; a momentum building at the base of his esophagus as he tried desperately to choke back the residue of long repressed feelings.

"God damn you, Del," he blurted out, his voice slurred with grief.

"Gordon?"

Every muscle in Gordon's body cinched tight and he swung around, the machete held high. He fully expected to see his brother standing there in the light of day, war-torn and smirking in the way he always had, even in the saddest of times. Instead he found Earl, his features drawn into a sour look of puzzlement, one hand moving quickly to the butt of his revolver.

Gordon relaxed, letting his hand drop to his side and he tried to smile, his haggard face trembling with the initial shock of hearing his name. Earl relaxed as well, his gun hand floating up to rub his chin, molding an apprehensive grin into place. The brim of

his hat shaded his eyes, but Gordon could make out a tint of worry in them. Unease hung between them from a noose of silence until Earl finally spoke.

"You okay, pal? You look like you just saw a ghost." He chuckled, his voice unsteady.

Gordon sighed and wiped the drops of sweat dangling from his brow. "Yeah, I'm just a little tired." He motioned to the tangle of brush behind him.

The lingering stiffness in the sheriff's shoulders sloughed off with another chuckle. "I can see why. Is this why you missed your weekly drive through?"

"Huh?" Gordon was beginning to feel light-headed, the adrenaline taking its toll on his senses.

"Teri down at Walgreen's said she hadn't seen you this week. I asked about you, since you looked kind of worse for the wear the last time I saw you."

"Guess I've been a little preoccupied with this trail," Gordon said and buried the machete back into the tree trunk.

Earl looked around, glancing the way he'd come and then up to where Gordon had stopped. He scratched his chin (always clean-shaven) and pointed to the end of Gordon's progress. "What made you decide to cut a trail?" Earl asked. He was trying to make it sound more like a friendly question than an interrogation and Gordon could tell. Being in Earl's line of work, it wasn't always easy to shift from professional mode.

Gordon rested against the tree next to the blade and stretched his back, grimacing at the burning tendrils of pain that slithered through his muscles.

"It's an old trail. Me and Del cleared it back when we were building the house. I haven't used it since..." and Gordon stopped, hoping he wouldn't have to say her name out loud. Fortunately, Earl was quick. The sheriff's eyes darted away politely.

"Looks like you've had your work cut out for you," Earl said then paused, his eyes returning to Gordon. They seemed to be searching for something. The right words, perhaps; a method to this apparent madness. "What made you decide to clear it again?"

"I don't know," Gordon lied, though he felt there was some truth to his answer. "Guess I just got tired of sitting on my ass in that oven back there." He waved his hand in the direction of the house.

Earl nodded, saying nothing but obviously expecting more.

"There used to be a nice little swimming spot back at the river," Gordon continued, his nerve wavering under Earl's stare. He forced out the next few words in hopes of cueing an early departure for the sheriff. "Lily and I used to cool off there a lot, though I'm guessing it's probably clogged up or full of cottonmouths by now."

Earl let his stare drop and Gordon exhaled. Surely Earl wouldn't want to get dragged into a mire of nostalgia over his friend's missing wife.

"She was a good woman," Earl said, surprising Gordon. "The three of us in school...man, I don't think I've ever been as happy as in those days." His watery gaze met Gordon's and for a brief instant Gordon felt angry that any man would dare share in his grief for Lily. But Earl smiled, his face playful and warm, reminding Gordon of the hot summer nights when their highjinx would end with Lily rolling in hysterical laughter, lighting up Gordon's soul.

Still caught off guard by Earl's words, Gordon remained speechless and he let his gaze fall to the rich topsoil beneath his feet. Finally Earl stepped closer, patting Gordon's damp back with one hand to intimate his departure.

"All right, then. Just make sure you don't kill yourself out here." Earl's face lit up, the cloud of his reverie lifted. "I don't want to deal with the paperwork."

Gordon laughed, nodding his appreciation for the joke. As Earl walked back up the trail, his sun-dappled back blurred in Gordon's misty vision. It was time to call it a day.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Earl pulled out of Gordon's driveway, his mind raging with fear that would occasionally swoon toward anger. One moment he

was afraid Gordon knew something, something he had failed to account for the night he took Lily's life. Then suddenly Earl would be mad at himself for letting Gordon's change in behavior and demeanor turn his brain topsy-turvy.

But it was inevitable. If you can take a life in secret and get away with it, you'll either have to live with the guilt, eating away at your core, or forever fear being caught. Earl thought he was in the clear in both instances considering he never felt the first twinge of real guilt, nor was he ever a suspect in Lily's disappearance, in Gordon's eyes or with the State boys. But now something was happening and he hadn't felt this nervous since that night so long ago when he took what he'd always wanted from Gordon.

Earl resisted the urge to pull to the side of the dirt road as he went over the facts in his addled head. First, Gordon had lied about doing the yard work. Okay, so maybe that's pushing it. But he *had* said he was cleaning up the yard, nothing about the trail or the swimming hole he and Lily had loved so much. Then there was the fact that Gordon had even mentioned Lily. Gordon *never* mentioned Lily, and Earl had followed suit, out of respect for Gordon. It also helped reinforce Earl's self-preservation.

So what the hell is going on? Earl wondered, smacking a fist against the steering wheel and causing the car to swerve toward the ditch. He corrected too quickly and the car fishtailed a bit before straightening back out. He scolded himself for the display; self-control was not an asset he could afford to lose, ever.

Maybe it was nothing to worry about. Sure, he'd gone through this whole line of reasoning after his last meeting with Gordon, but maybe he was looking at it from the wrong perspective (*That of a guilty man*, he mused) and all he needed to do was step back from the picture and look at it from a less emotional angle.

Gordon brought up the subject of his dead wife. Though it was something he rarely did, it was not something that gave cause to run to the nearest bomb shelter. Obviously, Gordon was probably feeling a little blue and nostalgic from clearing the path. It was understandable in the context of his actions and their conversation. Lily's name was bound to come up in that situation.

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So why was he even there, in the woods, clearing that trail? That was a more valid question. Earl knew Gordon hadn't so much as lifted a finger around that place in far too long. When Gordon retired, it just meant he could spend more time drinking, watching television, and sleeping. The drinking was never a big deal; Earl actually monitored Gordon's beverage purchases through the clerks at the grocer, just to make sure his friend wasn't going overboard. It was close, especially lately, but still not to the point Earl felt it necessary to intervene. But something had put an idea into Gordon's head to go chopping about in the woods behind the house. Maybe he was fed up with the heat and really just wanted to get some time in the river to cool off. Maybe he was sitting around pining for his brother when he decided to pay Delbert homage by re-clearing the trail.

Or maybe, Earl thought, his teeth rubbing tightly against each other, *maybe he is looking for something.*

Earl pulled out onto the main highway, hardly pausing to look for oncoming traffic. He wanted a drink. He wanted to get his nerves under control. And, most importantly, he wanted some time to think about any contingency plan he may need if Gordon's trip down memory lane started stirring up bad feelings, clouding their friendship like feet dragging through a riverbed.