

Echeconnee Creek*Fiction*

It was love they done it for. Love that plunged them in, with the hope, the fear and the losing churning in a boil that started loud and went silent fast — leaving the racket of them grackles Alvin liked to flush out the trees with stones and them screaming cicadas that in the summer heat went on like they'd never stop.

Seemed there should of been only quiet. Like the world gone dead or time stuck in some moment where only a silence would be right. But them birds and cicadas went on like nothing changed. Invisible to the eye, but there — in the cover of the trees.

It was love they done it for — one, and then two and three.

And me just *there*.

There, alone, at the edge of a Georgia creek. The day I turned twelve. May 21, 1969. Not six months after the fire that took Aunt Mave, took my voice with her. Not two months after the floods that brought the snakes onto our porch, sent waters pounding and scouring through rivers and creeks, changing them in ways we couldn't see.

Me just there, alone beside the water — little sister, younger cousin no more. Still without voice.

They done it for love. And me just there, frozen. Like Eula said to stay.

“Moccasin.” Jed’s pointing up the creek into the glare of the late-morning sun.

I stand up and see it. The black head cutting through the white film on the water. Body winding behind. I sit back down on the little beach — a spit of gravel and sand jutting into a bend in the creek. I dig in my heels in search of coolness, watching that snake until I can't no more. I look away and feel a shiver.

Echeconnee Creek.

Sitting there on that little spit of beach, it all looked different. Pollen floating thick across the water. The spit higher now. Higher than last year. Like someone piled up a new mound of sand and gravel and stones. There was a pine tree lying across it — roots, branches and all — like someone ripped it out of the ground and just left it. I didn't pay much of it any heed. None of us did.

“The floods,” cousin Eula says. She's climbed to the top of the spit and is sitting on that sideways pine.

Across the water, the gray remains of a tree rise up smooth out of a tangle of scrub. An osprey — one of them fish hawks — was perched on it when we'd busted out of the woods, my twin brothers Jed and



Alvin singing my birthday song, smiling and laughing through their favorite part (*you look like a monkey . . . and you smell like one too*), Eula laughing too, popping them in the head when they sing that, me smiling along hard. But the osprey's gone now, Alvin throwing stones across the creek, trying to hit that dead tree.

"Jesus!" Jed turns and glares at Alvin. "That one nearly got me. Hit me with one of them rocks and it'll be the last one you throw."

"I ain't gonna hit you." Alvin bends down and picks up another.

"Alvin, you be careful," Eula says. "Don't need no eyes being put out or nothing." She's climbed down off the tree and come over next to me. Sitting down, she gives a twitch of her head in my brothers' direction and rolls her eyes. "Just you and me, Jacie. Just you and me." In her smile, Aunt Mave's there, clear as day.

"Water seems black under there," Alvin says. "Can't hardly see my feet."

Jed's sitting on the bank now, his legs gangly and stretching into the water, that white pollen streaking off his shins. He had a good three inches on Alvin. Alvin, who was six minutes older – six minutes he prized and lorded over Jed when he felt the need or the want. Alvin, who didn't take kindly to being the shorter of the two.

From up the creek comes the thud of metal on metal and the sound of men talking. Growing louder. We wait and watch them come around the bend, watch from the corners of our eyes while they drift along, toward us — two white men in a metal canoe. Them in that canoe floating in the pollen film. Red-faced, wearing dark glasses. The one in front holding a fishing pole and sipping a beer.

"Ya'll kids be careful, now," the one in back says. I watch him dip his paddle and pull back a stretch of black water that gives way to gray eddies. Little swirls of that film.

"We will," Eula says. Alvin and Jed don't say nothing. Just look across the water.

When the canoe gets close and starts turning the bend – around that spit where Eula and me are sitting — the man with the paddle gives me a smile.

"Y'all take care. Creek's all changed since that flood."

The man's paddle thuds against the canoe and then they're past, their voices going mumbly and then fading off to where I can't hear them over the noise of them grackles. In a patch of woods across the creek, them little black birds are making a fit.

"Damn cracker ought to mind his business," Alvin says, looking across the water. "Talking like we can't even swim."

"We can't."

It's Eula who says it, matter-of-fact-like, Alvin turning and looking at her sharp.

"Yeah, but *he* don't know that," he says, Jed sitting-by quiet, not saying a thing.



Them grackles are still carrying on a few minutes later when Alvin picks up a handful of gravel and tosses it high — the pebbles flying up in the air, then plopping in, punching a patchwork of black holes in that floating scum. I'm watching them black holes creep along, disappear, when Alvin pipes up again.

"Bet a quarter I can hit that snag two out of three throws." He's looking at Jed, pointing to that osprey tree across the creek.

"I ain't got a quarter. And if I did, wouldn't be a smart bet for me."

We watch while Alvin searches out the stones — three that are just right. Then we watch while he lets the first of them fly. The dead tree gives off a *thwack* — loud and hollow — and for a second it's like them grackles might actually stop their jabbering.

"There's *one*," he says.

"I ain't betting you," Jed says back.

Alvin stands near the water and lets the second one fly, the rock going wide. Into the scrub.

I clap my hands, him getting ready for his third throw.

With this one, he steps into it, following-through like some pitcher throwing for strikes, the *thwack* of stone-meeting-wood echoing for a second, then swallowed up by the splashing and thrashing of Alvin stumbling into the creek, sliding into that pollen-filmed water, it breaking-up black.

I jumped to my feet.

"Alvin!" Jed and Eula shouted, me standing there mute, none of us seeing him or knowing where he'd gone nor why he wouldn't just stand up.

"Alvin!" they shouted again, the water going still.

I stood there frozen — not knowing why he wouldn't come up, Jed and Eula pacing the edge of the creek shouting Alvin's name, shouting and then screaming it, all of us trying to catch a glimpse through the pollen and glare on the water.

I looked to where I last saw him. Nothing. Just still water. Like he was never there. Them grackles going on.

And then went Jed.

He crashed out into the water, where we'd waded just last year, and went right under.

I stood there frozen, watching. A foot came up, farther out than I'd of expected. Kicking, splashing, all the while the sound of him crashing in swirling in my head, drowning out them grackles. Then through that noise in my head came Eula's screaming, the two of us there, watching, the water swelling just a bit, the water moving with little ripples speckled white, Eula screaming out their names, me wanting to scream too, my words stuck deep down, not about to come out.

"Jed!Alvin!" Eula yelled for us both.



I ran to her, the two of us peering in. I ran to her knowing what was coming, what was next, wanting to say no, don't go, but that seal there strong in my throat.

"Alvin! Jed!" she screamed, the sound of the water gone from my head. Just the noise of them grackles and Eula's voice busting through.

And then it was all stillness, like soon the blackness of that water would film over.

And then Eula grabbed me by the shoulders. Squared them up. And it was just what I knew it would be.

"You stay here," she says. "No matter — you stay."

I shook my head, the tears hot on my face to where I couldn't hardly see her, me trying to shout out. Trying to say no, grabbing onto her to keep her out.

"You stay here, Jacie," she says again. Calm. Like she'd be right back.

Then she tore my hands off her and jumped to where I couldn't reach her, and in she went, shimmering in my tears while she waded toward where they should of been — squatting low, arms out, feeling.

And then she was gone. Like off some shelf.

I stood there, feet stuck in the hot gravel, clawing away the tears to try to see, the noise of cicadas all around, rising sharp in my head. I thought I saw a foot come up, maybe a hand, it busting through the surface, disappearing. Thought I saw the water ruffle from underneath, that thick film of pollen not far off, closing in. Clawed at my eyes to pull away the tears. Stood frozen and watched — listening for something, anything, over the chatter of them grackles and the shrill of cicadas searing in my brain, the dark water sealing-over white.

I felt the dust of the road like for the first time. Felt it soft as talc between my black toes while I made my way down the road, my chest sore from the heaving. Felt it even through the thick-as-leather soles of my feet — feet run bare to the Georgia woods over them ten or so years since getting up from all fours.

Maybe it was the blindness that made me feel it. Not the pitch-black kind of blindness, but that liquid melting of shadow and light. The cool, damp-like shade of the oaks and scrub pines, the scorching brightness of mid-day like knives through them trees. The dark and the light pooling and mixing in my tears. In the sting of my eyes.

From ahead, a car came along — tires quiet in the dust, motor thrumming, slowing almost to a stop next to me. The silver of the car, and the silver hair of the white lady behind the wheel — maybe a man — streamed together through my tears. I kept on my way, that car tapping ahead to leave me to myself, then stopping again like it had a mind of its own.

It drove on.



I passed that hubcap hanging from the dead branch of a sycamore, the hubcap rusty, never to be claimed, that sycamore hulking and dark and blurry — all shadow, no leaves — with the palmettos down low, stretching along the road, keeping their coarse rustling to their selves in the still heat. I didn't turn to see it, that hubcap off in the shadows. But I heard it, like it just happened. Still ringing in my head. The *ping* of the rock Alvin threw not long before.

I padded on. Looking down. Seeing my dust-covered feet stepping out one-at-a-time, out from under the hem of my dress. Feeling through them with each step, that dirt like soft powder. Seeing them, one and then the other, them somehow seeming not my own. Hearing the drone of deer flies — a swarm off in a thicket of locust trees. Almost there.

When I walk into a patch of sun, a watery patch of glare, the smell of honeysuckle is like syrup. Sweet and heavy to where I can hardly breathe. I stop. Bend over with my hands on my knees. Look at the ground while it all goes through my head again. Not slow, like it'd felt, but fast: Alvin crashing in and being gone and the quick wondering and yelling then Jed crashing in then Eula screaming and me holding her back and her pushing me off and telling me stay — no matter, you stay — and Eula wading in and then gone and not coming back and me there with that sand and gravel hot under my feet. Me not going in, like she said. Not doing nothing. Just there.

I straighten up and try to breathe. I look off ahead. Look through the watery glare, the shadow of the oak not far off. That oak with the black branches over our house. Mama there, waiting, and the sound of cicadas screaming away again like they done followed me the whole way. I double up again and for the third time in that walk from the creek, I step off the road and retch.

“Jacie-girl, you know you ain't supposed to be walking back on your own.” The shout comes from the porch, light on the air. “Your brothers give you trouble?”

I was walking up from the road, under the arms of that black oak.

“Jacie!” she says, sudden and sharp this time, like she'd just looked up from looking down. Just seen me laboring along, me breathing hard and big and the tears still streaming.

Two hollow thumps and she's down the wooden steps, her dark shape coming toward me quick. Then her arms are on me, around me with their softness, me smelling the smell of my mama through my tears. All too hot with them cicadas still shrilling.

“You okay? Where they at?” She was holding me by the shoulders now, face-to-face, eyes peering in. “Where are they?” she asks, me gulping on air, my ribs on fire from the heaving.

First was Alvin.



I pointed to where I'd come from, like she didn't already know, and then I feel her hands off my shoulders, hear her feet thudding away — across the dirt under that oak, toward the road.

First was Alvin, then went Jed and Eula — *one, then two and three.*

The dark shape of Mama floats in my tears, like floating on some river of light. I watch it grow thin and small. Disappear into the shadows. Into the darkness from them locust trees.

For three days after they found them — two caught in a downed pine a quarter-mile down the creek, one floating in a pool — her moanings went on. For three days, broken only by the patches of sleep she'd snatch before the terrors came back. Terrors that woke me with her screams, got me running into her room to pull her up and see the panic in her eyes, see that panic fade, then hear that moaning of loss pick up again like she didn't have nothing else to hold on to.

Three days. On the second, I wake in the dark of our room — room that was mine and Eula's — and feel a burning in my throat, chills that make me tremble. I run for the kitchen sink, not sure if I'm starving or going to puke. I gulp from the faucet, the water tasting of metal while it goes down, me gulping at it still. I stand up, feel a rolling in my stomach, see the morning light dull through the window, make my way out back, still trembling.

In a gray mist that's brought a big spider web to sight, made it sag with silver droplets, I devour handfuls of peas off tangled vines. Pods and all. Not tasting any sweetness, just feeling the pulp of it and the crackling coolness. Chomping them to my stomach. Thinking of Mama inside. Thinking of Mama to keep from thinking about the creek. About Alvin and Jed and Eula. One, then two and three. I stand in the gray light eating one pea pod after another, the shaking easing up. Then I go to the coop, gather the only eggs to be found, three in all. I take them inside, hard-boil them like Eula showed me. Next time Mama woke, I'd get her to eat.

Third day, she went on sleeping. Went on waking with sunken eyes — confused and panicked and shaking her head *no* when I tried to get some food in. Went on curled-up and moaning until the sleep came back, and then the terrors. I found another egg from the coop that day and ate one of them first three I'd boiled, it going down dry, but keeping them chills away; chasing off the shakes before they could come back. I pulled weeds in the garden in a quiet rain and tended to the coop, working around the chickens while they clucked about in their fake busy-ness. Sat on the porch when it poured. All the while staying out of the darkness of inside. All the while listening for Mama, in earshot of them screams, running back in when they came.



Then she stopped. Morning of the fourth day I found her in the kitchen, slumped and staring out the window, glass of water in her hand. Looking into the gray early light, she stood there with her back to me telling her dream about being down in the town square and them pigeons that line the granite ledge over the courthouse doors.

“They were up there in a line, cooing and blue-gray. Moving in a line. Mechanical-like. Across that ledge. And dropping one by one to the ground. A pile of little dead bodies.”

She stopped. Sipped at the glass of water in her hand.

“That pile of bodies was at my feet, each of them birds falling right past me. Me trying to catch them. Every one of them. And every one of them falling past my hands, through my arms, to the ground and that pile.”

She stood there, her back to me still. Stood there staring out the window. And then she spoke of Aunt Mave.

“She was there. Her and a bunch of folks all in black, looking up at those birds, watching them fall. Looking at me and wondering why. She was there, looking-on hardest.”

When she told it, she told it with a far-off voice, without tears. Like through that moaning she’d dug into the darkness and found some switch to turn off. And after she’d told it, she just stood there, still turned away from me. And then she speaks the words hard and cold, hard and certain. Words I’d never forget.

“I can’t never hear nor say their names again.”

There’s only quiet.

“I can’t, and I won’t.”

I stand there looking at her back, and then they’re in my head.

Alvin. Jed. Eula.

I cling hard to the names. Hear them in my head like some God-filled hymn — *AlvinJedEula*. I’m standing there with them names ringing, trying to remember past that day of dark speckled water and the smell of rot. Trying to picture their faces somewhere else, sometime before, Mama’s back to me while she looks out the window. I try to hear their voices and their laughing over that hymn of their names. Try to, but can’t.

Once there were nine chickens — eight hens and a rooster — and then there were six. And then Eula looped and tightened the wires and it held and we kept on with them six for a while. Six that were still here, with me checking them wires every day now. Checking for eggs. Weeding the garden. Me outside; Mama in the house. Her inside, always. Her barely talking, and me not at all. Day after day. Like in some kind of fog.

Then one night there’s a screaming, and I wake into it. Thought I’d wake out of it, that it was a screaming in a dream. But I wake into it,



the sound of it shrill and strange while I open my eyes to the dark. Mama? I bolt up, the screaming still going, me running toward her room. Then I hear it from the other way, and I run to the back door and out, to the chickens and the noise of it all. I run to the coop clapping my hands, and I see the shadow move, too fast to know if it's a big weasel or a little fox, the shadow slinking and blurring into the dark of the woods. Slinking and blurring and gone.

I stand there outside the coop listening to them in their panic, counting the hens in the moonlight. One, two, still there, moving around. Three, a silent lump I think is a rock at first but isn't. Four, another silent lump, up against the wire fence. Five, six, nowhere to be seen. I walk around the coop, looking in every way, looking for them last two. Gone.

That night, I watched the moon go down in the thick of the trees, me on one side of that wire, the hens on the other, them two hens settling down but awake and moving. Not stopping. I sat listening to them in the shadows in the moonlight and in the dark that followed, wondering if Mama would clean and cook them two that were dead, those silent lumps like rocks on the ground. I sat listening to the nervous cluckings and the outside sounds in the night, not thinking of Mama, not thinking of the creek, just hearing them sounds and feeling Mave's cross off near the edge of the woods. Feeling her there in the dark. Mave, with the eyes that smiled. With skin like night that shone like some black pearl, gathering light even in the darkest dark. Mave, mother of Eula.

Eula, who pounded on our door in the night, who pulled me out of my house, breathless in the dark, toward the fire that burned big and bright in the winter night, licking them oak branches while we ran toward it, screaming and knowing. Eula, who shouldn't of seen it — the body in the smoldering ash when Mama couldn't keep her away. Eula, who kept her voice, kept on talking and singing, laughing even, once she got the screaming and crying out. Who kept her voice and became mine when that lump swelled in my throat to where I thought it would burst. That lump that flattened out. Sealed my pipe. Sealed my words away.

Aunt Mave, mother of Eula. Both of them mothers of me.

When Mama's up, I go inside with them dead hens. She looks at them hanging limp from my hands, one in each, then she looks at me and just shakes her head no. I go back outside. The feathers won't budge when I pull at them. I think of the hatchet in the little shed and of Mama — sometimes Mave, later Eula — killing and cleaning, and then the cooking. The sound had never bothered me — the thud of that little ax coming down. Coming down in one of their hands. But now the



thought of it makes me feel sick, even with them hens not alive. Then the thought comes into my head that I can just walk them to the edge of the woods; just chuck those bodies in. But I know I can't. All that's in my head is the sound and smell of them cooking.

I pull at the feathers some more, them not wanting to come out, the birds dead too long through the night. The smell of the cooking in my head, like there's no way it's going to leave, I boil some water and dunk them in for a minute or two. Then the feathers come, still tough but coming out, and I go outside and find the hatchet and cut through the necks. Then, inside, I find the sharp knife and gut and wash them and cut off the little slabs of meat — tough and stringy. I drop them in a hot pan, the smell of it filling the house like I remembered. The last meat we'd have.

After that, it was just eggs from them last two hens, and what more I could get from the garden. And the whole time, day after day through the summer heat, Mama inside. Me in there some, too, but mostly outside, sitting through the days, checking and re-checking them wires, wishing we had just one rooster to make more chickens. More hens for more eggs. Roosters to kill.

Day after day, the same. Mama inside, barely talking. Starting not to make sense, especially after the day we walked to town, me with them crosses. Not making sense when she yells at me one night — yells and cries thinking I've been in Jed and Alvin's room. Not making sense when she comes in my room another time, talking serious and confused all at once, asking about Mave and Eula: "Why don't they come over no more?"

This time he was in his sheriff's uniform, boots thumping up the steps, boots hollow across the porch. Hadn't been that Sunday a few months ago: that day when he'd babied the door of his truck shut with a *click* and walked from the road — head-down, like he was treading someplace holy — to where we were sitting on the porch, waiting for what we knew was coming. What they'd found at the creek.

"Everything here okay," Mama said across the inside darkness.

"Ma'am, I'm just checking in," the sheriff said from the porch. He stepped back from the screen door, back to where I could see him through the window, his gray beard trimmed close, him looking older than I remembered. He was holding his sheriff's hat in his hand while he talked through the door, saying folks at school were asking after me, it being late September and all. Saying how he hoped he and my mama could talk.

"Everything here okay," Mama said again.

A few days later and he's back, this time with a young white lady carrying a new-looking briefcase over her shoulder. She looks nervous



stepping up to the porch with the sheriff, eyes darting around while she tries not to peer through the screen door into the inside dark. Darkness around Mama.

“You can go,” Mama says from her chair before the sheriff has a chance to knock. “I thank you for checking in, but you can go now. Everything okay.”

“I’m from the county, Ma’am.” That lady’s voice rises up, like she’s asking a question, the sheriff standing-by with his hat in his hand, like the other day. They’re looking down at the porch floor while she talks through the door, that lady — with freckles and a pale face — looking too young for her briefcase. “Calling on y’all to see how you and your child are doing, and when your child will be back to school.”

Mama looks at me with tired eyes. I go to the door and open it.

That lady must of been used to things, but I heard a short gasp from the sheriff when they stepped in and his eyes came-to in the darkness, him seeing me. Them last two hens hadn’t been enough, and I’d been a bean-pole to start.

The sheriff — gray beard, kind eyes — gestures to Mama and follows me out back to where he stands fidgeting, shuffling around, looking down at his feet and up at the sky, me lingering near the door pretending not to strain to hear them talking inside.

“She hasn’t been to school, and it looks like you’ve been having a difficult time.” It’s that lady’s voice — rising, like she’s not quite sure about things. Mama mumbles something back. Something I can’t hear.

Then comes the sheriff’s voice, calm and clear, him probably trying to get me away from the door. “I’m real sorry about your brothers and your cousin.” I look at him and give a bit of a smile. “Creeks were a mess after that flood. A real shame.”

I just stand there with that smile, not knowing what else to do, wanting to ask why that lady was here. Wondering if he knew about my words — them being gone.

A few minutes later and that lady’s calling us back in.

“Things are going to get better.” That voice rising again.

I look at Mama, her looking away.

And then they’re gone.

In the night, I hear it soft from Mama’s room. Hear it while I lay in bed, my back to where Eula would of been, eyes closed to the darkness. Hear it while I drift in and out of sleep in the stillness of a night that goes on without end. That deep melody of moaning.

It hums. Not loud, but easy enough to hear, almost feel. Like a whisper across the peach-fuzz on my ears. It hums like some sad lullaby through the slats in the pine wall-boards, gliding smooth across worn and dusty floors, filling the spaces in that empty small



house, gathering in a corner of our room — mine and Eula’s — where it crouches in the dark, watching me through a night of gray dreams I won’t remember.

The moaning keeps on without stop this night, unbroken by sleep, unbroken by terrors, by them screams and the confused coming-awake of her sunken eyes. And this time, I know it’s for me.

That morning, got out of bed early, went out back and looked over the chicken coop, gave a pull on the chicken wire, tightened it down hard to keep them last two safe. Pulled some weeds — slow, with just the right pulling to go extra deep and keep them away longer, make the job last. Stayed outside long as I could, seeing that pink light of morning pushing hard against the gray mist, trying to bust through.

Saw Mama’s head in the kitchen window. Looking out toward me. Like looking at me and past me all at the same time.

Then I go inside and she explains it. “First Mave, and now. . . .” Explains what has to happen next, talking with words dull and rumbling. Saying what I already knew from that moaning through the night. What it whispered into my dreams.

And then that shiny leather briefcase is at the door. The sheriff with her again with his hat in his hand. All of them talking quiet and hushed and then that lady leading me out to the porch, out past that black oak, down to the road, me looking back at the house, small under the black branches of the oak, the porch empty, Mama inside, the sheriff behind us, Mama inside, us getting into the truck, me in the middle, that lady with her hand on my knee, and me turning back, Mama inside, the truck moving forward, and all of us gone.

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