

Robert Morgan

## The Calm

When Daddy said he'd shoot me if I didn't leave him alone I had to make an impossible choice: let him get sicker still, or risk being killed myself. He had the pistol in bed with him and was so mad he might well use it. And he had a bottle of vodka too; in fact he had several bottles on the night stand beside the bed. It was so dark in the bedroom I couldn't really count the bottles. He probably had others too, under the bed or in the closet. The Mexicans who worked for him in the fields brought him the liquor when I wasn't around and there didn't seem to be any way to stop it.

"I love you, Daddy," I said. "And I think you should go to the hospital."

"You leave me where I am," he said. "Touch me and I'll kill you."

"Just want to help."

"You can help me by leaving me alone." Daddy laid the .44 magnum on the covers in front of him.

Daddy had always been bad to drink, especially on weekends and holidays. He and his buddies would get a six-pack or two and drive around in their pickup trucks and drink. And he liked to go down to South Carolina and buy white lightning, before there was an ABC store in Hendersonville. After that he could get all the legal liquor he wanted just by driving to town.

When I was a boy I cringed to see him come home drunk, hollering at Mama and throwing things around.

And then after Mama left him and took my sister Mary to live with her folks down at Tryon, Daddy drank even more. I stayed with Grandpa and Grandma most of the time. And I pretended not to be embarrassed when Daddy got arrested for DWI and his name was in the paper and my friends at school would tease me. "Your daddy is famous," they'd say and laugh, and I would laugh loudest.

Grandpa would be so mad at Daddy after he was arrested he wouldn't even talk to him. When they were watching television and Daddy would sit down on the couch Grandpa would go out and sit in his car and listen to the radio. During election time Daddy made fun of Grandpa for being a Democrat. Daddy and Grandma were Republicans.

But when things really got bad for Daddy was after he was diagnosed with arthritis. I don't know if it was the bean dust that caused it, or the drinking, or something else. But after he turned forty-five he got these awful pains in his joints and swelling that wouldn't go away. Pain medicine didn't do much good for long, and his joints hurt so bad it was hard to move. He got too stiff all over to work much, and he couldn't sleep either. That's when he started drinking on week day nights, and then in the daytime too.

The doctor in Asheville said there was a treatment with gold that might help him, though he'd have to go down to Duke for that. But the gold could have bad side effects too. Some people had even died when they took the gold treatment. Even so it was his best hope. The doctor gave Daddy a brochure that described the gold therapy and he showed it around to people and asked their advice. But the side effects scared Daddy, and instead of going down to Duke he just drank

more.

About the same time Grandpa died of a heart attack. It was a surprise to us, no warning at all. Grandpa just stopped his tractor in the field and got down saying he didn't feel good. He dropped to the ground right at my feet by a bag of fertilizer, and I tried to wake him up but he was already gone. He was laying right there beside me, but he was gone.

Though he'd quarreled and cussed Grandpa, Daddy took his death the hardest. Grandma and I grieved, but we grieved quietly. Daddy cried at the funeral and he kissed Grandpa on the lips in the coffin. And he sobbed up at the graveyard too like he couldn't help himself. And then after the funeral it was like Daddy got mad that Grandpa was gone. Grandpa had always run the farm and looked after business. Now Daddy would have to keep up with things in spite of his arthritis and his drinking.

"Human life don't mean nothing," Daddy said. "You're born and live and die just like that, and it don't mean a thing."

Daddy bought grandpa the most expensive tombstone he could find, and he brooded for months. And he cussed the preacher when he came by to visit. "Don't talk to me about no heaven," Daddy said. "I'd rather listen to my hound dogs holler after a possum or coon than hear a sermon."

Grandma would try to stop Daddy from drinking. She'd try to talk to Daddy the way Grandpa had. "Throw that bottle away or I'll throw it out for you," she'd say. But Daddy would just ignore her, or he'd snarl, "Don't nobody touch my medicine," for he called vodka his medicine.

I'd gone off to North Carolina State to study agriculture, and every summer I came back to work on the farm. It's a good thing I did for Daddy was drinking so much he couldn't really look

after the Mexican work crews or the equipment or bookkeeping. Grandma did all she could, but I had to keep track of the payroll, carrying produce to market, keeping machinery repaired. Daddy would sit in his truck watching us work and sipping from his bottle.

After the arthritis got worse, Daddy didn't go to the field anymore. He'd drive down to the store and sit on a bench, or drive around in his truck with one of his buddies. They'd go up on Pinnacle and sit and drink and look down on the county spread out below them. And sometimes they'd drive to bars in Greenville or Atlanta. But as the arthritis got worse he didn't even do that. Mostly he just stayed at home and nursed himself with a bottle.

After Daddy threatened me with the pistol I stayed away that day. The Mexican crews were stretching wire in the bean fields down on Gap Creek and I had to be there anyway. And then I had to run to town to get more wire for them to stretch the next day. By the time I returned to the house it was near dark. When I walked into the living room and turned on the light I saw Daddy laying on the couch.

He'd passed out holding a bottle to his chest, and the pistol had fallen to the floor. I thought I would hide the pistol, before carrying him to the bedroom. But when I reached down for the gun his hand shot off his chest and grabbed my wrist.

"Don't you touch that," he said.

The vodka bottle fell to the floor and he let it go, and took the pistol instead.

"You need to go to bed," I said.

"Can't you goddamn leave me alone?" Daddy said.

"You need a doctor."

“You call a doctor and I’ll blow your damn college brains out,” Daddy said.

“I’ll just carry you to the bedroom.”

“I can walk,” Daddy said. I stepped back and he tried to sit up. He held the gun in his right hand and pushed himself with his left. But he was too weak or drunk to raise himself. And I could see the pain in his face. He winced with the force of the pain. He lifted himself a little and then fell back. I reached to help him but he waved me away with the .44 magnum. There were tears in his eyes.

When Daddy fell back on the couch he tried one more time to raise himself and failed. He started to sob and turned his face away to the back of the couch. “Don’t call the goddamn ambulance,” he said.

“I won’t, but I have to put you to bed.”

It was all I could do to lift him off the couch. He was dead drunken weight. Once I got him in my arms I almost tripped over the bottle which rolled on the floor. Walking carefully I carried him into the dark bedroom and laid him on the bed. He was still crying as I wrapped the covers around him.

“Can I get you something to eat?” I said. “You need to eat.”

‘Get out of here,’ he said.

It would not be fair to say that Daddy always avoided work. It’s true that when tedious things like tying bean strings or hoeing corn had to be done he always found something else to do. Back before we had Mexican hands, we all of us had to work in the fields, Mama and Mary, Grandma and Grandpa. Daddy would drive us to the field in the morning and say he had to go after

something, more poles or string or fuel for the tractor. And he'd go to the store and drink Co-Colas and talk to his buddies until it was dinner time. And then he'd bring us hotdogs and drinks and candy bars and peanuts to eat before he disappeared again.

But what Daddy liked to do, the work he enjoyed, was anything to do with machines. Whether it was oiling a planter or fixing a posthole digger, he'd let nobody else touch it. He seemed to have a natural talent for machines and tools. And what he preferred more than anything else was driving the tractor, any kind of tractor, from a garden tractor to a Farmall Cub. But it was the big diesel tractor he loved most. In the spring he could hardly wait to get it cranked up again, blowing out blue smoke and winter farts, driving it like a prancing horse down to the bottomland along the river.

Sinking plow blades into the winter stubble he turned the moist soil two big ropes at a time. Sometimes he liked to plow at night and sing so loud you could hear his voice over the roar of the diesel. Round and round the field he went, more times than a driver at the Daytona 500. By morning the field was turned over all new and looked like fresh corduroy.

Daddy had a knack with mechanical things. Even when drinking he could fix anything, lawn mower motor or a gearbox. Anything made out of metal with an engine delighted him. He could start a chainsaw when nobody else could. He said motors ran on gasoline or diesel the way he ran on vodka.

I don't know if Grandma called the preacher or if he just stopped by the house the following afternoon. But when I came in from work there was a Buick in the driveway and in the living room there was the preacher talking to Grandma. Preacher Bob looked and talked like a car

salesman. In fact he had once been a car salesman in Greenville.

“Brother Ray,” he said and shook my hand. “I’ve come by to see your daddy.”

“I don’t think he’s well enough to see anybody,” I said. We never mentioned Daddy’s drinking to anybody outside the family.

“Perhaps I could just pray with him,” Preacher Bob said. “A short prayer might do him good.”

I knew it was impolite to disagree with the preacher or try to turn him away. But I didn’t want anybody to see Daddy in the shape he was in. And I certainly didn’t want Daddy to point his pistol at the preacher or maybe even try to shoot him.

“Uh, maybe another time,” I said.

“A prayer might ease his mind,” Preacher Bob said.

Now Daddy hadn’t been to church in years, and he had a special scorn for preachers. The last person I wanted there was Preacher Bob. But while I was thinking about what to say Grandma told the preacher, “You go on in and say a few words.”

It was dark in the bedroom and as we shuffled in Grandma flicked on the light. Daddy must have been sleeping but he opened his eyes and winced at the glare.

“How are you, Brother Howard?” Preacher Bob said. “I dropped in to see about you.”

My stomach felt like it was full of sharp-edged rocks. I knew I was an idiot for letting this scene happen.

“Who are you?” Daddy said.

“I’m Preacher Bob, the pastor. Can I offer up a prayer for you?”

“Is this a hospital?” Daddy said, looking around at me and Grandma.

“You’re at home,” I said.

“I just want to offer up a prayer,” Preacher Bob said.

Daddy’s hand came from under the covers, holding the .44 magnum. His arm was so weak the gun trembled. “Get your praying ass out of here,” he said.

Preacher Bob reached out his hand like he was protecting himself, but he backed toward the door. We followed him into the living room.

“I will pray for him,” Preacher Bob said and slipped out the front door.

Grandma fixed soup and cornbread that evening and as we sat at the table in the kitchen I pondered what could be done. If I could get the pistol away from Daddy I could call the ambulance and take him to the hospital. It would be the only way to save him. That was my moral duty and possibly my legal duty too. It would be against all his wishes. I didn’t know exactly what was the right thing to do and there was nobody to help me. Did Daddy have a right to die any way he wanted to? What was my ultimate responsibility? Was Daddy in his right mind enough to know what he was doing? Was I guilty already for not taking the pistol away from him?

By the time I finished the soup I was determined to get the pistol away from him and call the ambulance. There was no use to call the ambulance until the .44 magnum was out of his hands. If I didn’t get Daddy to the doctor I’d blame myself for the rest of my life. You don’t really have a choice, I told myself. I’d have to take the gun and somehow the rest would fall in place.

But I didn’t want to get shot myself. In his pain Daddy was a light sleeper. It would be almost impossible to slip up on him, and even if I did the pistol would be in his hand. Soon as I touched the gun he’d wake up and point it at me. I was just going to have to take my chance, grab the



pistol from Daddy and hope he wouldn't shoot me. For I thought he didn't really want to hurt me. It was a risk I had to take.

"I'm going to get the pistol," I said to Grandma.

"Don't do that," she said. She was so embarrassed by the preacher's visit she'd hardly said anything through supper.

"It's the only way," I said.

My plan was to slip into the bedroom and put my hand on Daddy's hand before he knew what I was doing. I'd jerk the gun away and throw it as far as I could before he realized what was happening. Then when he was unarmed I'd hold him down and yell to Grandma to call 911. Sick as Daddy was I could hold him there until the First Responders arrived.

I was so tense I hardly breathed as I approached the bedroom. I stopped at the door to listen but heard nothing. Are you making the worst mistake of your life? I said to myself. But I'd made up my mind and there was nothing to do but go through with it. Stepping quietly as I could I hurried to the bed and put my hand where I thought Daddy's hand would be under the covers. Sure enough, I felt the barrel of the pistol and gripped it hard.

But there was no resistance. The .44 magnum came loose in my hand and I flung it toward the door. I expected Daddy to grab me or hit me, but he was still.

"Daddy, are you all right?" I said. I could smell vodka. There was no sound from the pillow. I shook his shoulder but there was no response.