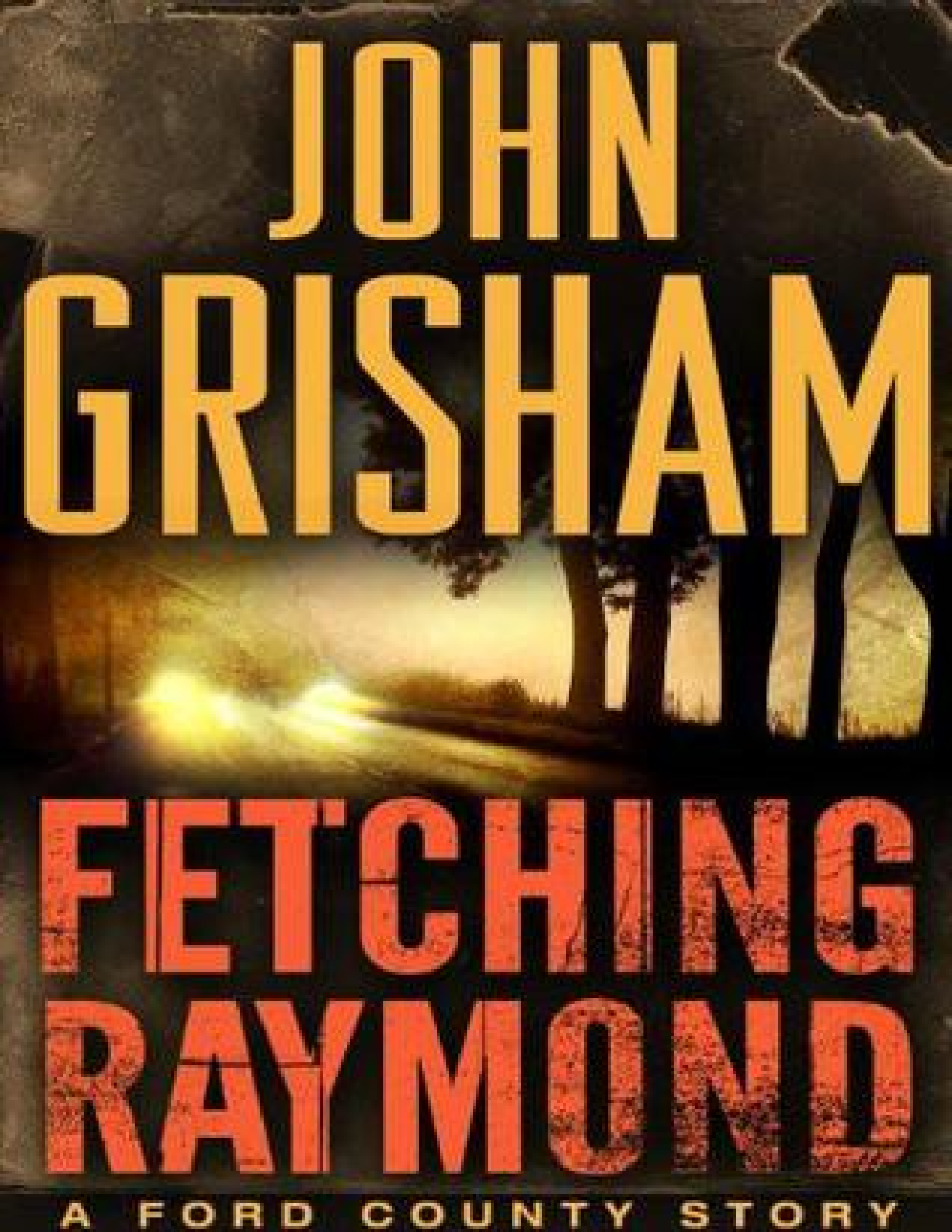
JOHN
GRISHAM
FETCHING
RAYMOND
A FORD COUNTY STORY

Fetching Raymond

A Ford County Story

John Grisham

Dell

New York

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Fetching Raymond

Mr. McBride ran his upholstery shop in the old icehouse on Lee Street, a few blocks off the square in downtown Clanton. To haul the sofas and chairs back and forth, he used a white Ford cargo van with “McBride Upholstery” stenciled in thick black letters above a phone number and the address on Lee. The van, always clean and never in a hurry, was a common sight in Clanton, and Mr. McBride was fairly well-known because he was the only upholsterer in town. He rarely lent his van to anyone, though the requests were more frequent than he would have liked. His usual response was a polite “No, I have some deliveries.”

He said yes to Leon Graney, though, and did so for two reasons. First, the circumstances surrounding the request were quite unusual, and, second, Leon’s boss at the lamp factory was Mr. McBride’s third cousin. Small-town relationships being what they are, Leon Graney arrived at the upholstery shop as scheduled at four o’clock on a hot Wednesday afternoon in late July.

Most of Ford County was listening to the radio, and it was widely known that things were not going well for the Graney family.

Mr. McBride walked with Leon to the van, handed over the key, and said, “You take care of it, now.”

Leon took the key and said, “I’m much obliged.”

“I filled up the tank. Should be plenty to get you there and back.”

“How much do I owe?”

Mr. McBride shook his head and spat on the gravel beside the van. “Nothing. It’s on me. Just bring it back with a full tank.”

“I’d feel better if I could pay something,” Leon protested.

“No.”

“Well, thank you, then.”

“I need it back by noon tomorrow.”

“It’ll be here. Mind if I leave my truck?” Leon nodded to an old Japanese pickup wedged between two cars across the lot.

“That’ll be fine.”

Leon opened the door and got inside the van. He started the engine, adjusted the seat and the mirrors. Mr. McBride walked to the driver’s door, lit an unfiltered cigarette, and watched Leon. “You know, some folks don’t like this,” he said.

“Thank you, but most folks around here don’t care,” Leon replied. He was preoccupied and not in the mood for small talk.

“Me, I think it’s wrong.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back before noon,” Leon said softly, then backed away and disappeared down the street. He settled into the seat, tested the brakes, slowly gunned the engine to check the power. Twenty minutes later he was far from Clanton, deep in the hills of northern Ford County. Out from the settlement of Pleasant Ridge, the road became gravel, the homes smaller and farther apart. Leon turned in to a short driveway that stopped at a boxlike house with weeds at the doors and an asphalt shingle roof in need of replacement. It was the Graney home, the place he’d been raised along with his brothers, the only constant in their sad and chaotic lives. A jerry-rigged plywood ramp ran to the side door so that his mother, Inez Graney, could come and go in her wheelchair.

By the time Leon turned off the engine, the side door was open and Inez was rolling out and onto the ramp. Behind her was the hulking mass of her middle son, Butch, who still lived with his mother because he’d never lived anywhere else, at least not in the free world. Sixteen of his forty-six years had been behind bars, and he looked the part of the career criminal—long ponytail, studs in his ears, all manner of facial hair, massive biceps, and a collection of cheap tattoos a prison artist had sold him for cigarettes. In spite of his past, Butch handled his mother and her wheelchair with great tenderness and care, speaking softly to her as they negotiated the ramp.

Leon watched and waited, then walked to the rear of the van and opened its double doors. He and Butch gently lifted their mother up

and sat her inside the van. Butch pushed her forward to the console that separated the two bucket seats bolted into the floor. Leon latched the wheelchair into place with strips of packing twine someone at McBride's had left in the van, and when Inez was secure, her boys got settled in their seats. The journey began. Within minutes they were back on the asphalt and headed for a long night.

Inez was seventy-two, a mother of three, grandmother of at least four, a lonely old woman in failing health who couldn't remember her last bit of good luck. Though she'd considered herself single for almost thirty years, she was not, at least to her knowledge, officially divorced from the miserable creature who'd practically raped her when she was seventeen, married her when she was eighteen, fathered her three boys, then mercifully disappeared from the face of the earth. When she prayed on occasion, she never failed to toss in an earnest request that Ernie be kept away from her, be kept wherever his miserable life had taken him, if in fact his life had not already ended in some painful manner, which was really what she dreamed of but didn't have the audacity to ask of the Lord. Ernie was still blamed for everything—for her bad health and poverty, her reduced status in life, her seclusion, her lack of friends, even the scorn of her own family. But her harshest condemnation of Ernie was for his despicable treatment of his three sons. Abandoning them was far more merciful than beating them.

By the time they reached the highway, all three needed a cigarette. "Reckon McBride'll mind if we smoke?" Butch said. At three packs a day he was always reaching for a pocket.

"Somebody's been smokin' in here," Inez said. "Smells like a tar pit. Is the air conditioner on, Leon?"

"Yes, but you can't tell it if the windows are down."

With little concern for Mr. McBride's preferences on smoking in his van, they were soon puffing away with the windows down, the warm wind rushing in and swirling about. Once inside the van, the wind had no exit, no other windows, no vents, nothing to let it out, so it roared back toward the front and engulfed the three Graneys, who were staring at the road, smoking intently, seemingly oblivious to everything as the van moved along the county road. Butch and

Leon casually flicked their ashes out of the windows. Inez gently tapped hers into her cupped left hand.

"How much did McBride charge you?" Butch asked from the passenger's seat.

Leon shook his head. "Nothing. Even filled up the tank. Said he didn't agree with this. Claimed a lot of folks don't like it."

"I'm not sure I believe that."

"I don't."

When the three cigarettes were finished, Leon and Butch rolled up their windows and fiddled with the air conditioner and the vents. Hot air shot out and minutes passed before the heat was broken. All three were sweating.

"You okay back there?" Leon asked, glancing over his shoulder and smiling at his mother.

"I'm fine. Thank you. Does the air conditioner work?"

"Yes, it's gettin' cooler now."

"I can't feel a thang."

"You wanna stop for a soda or something?"

"No. Let's hurry along."

"I'd like a beer," Butch said, and, as if this was expected, Leon immediately shook his head in the negative and Inez shot forth with an emphatic "No."

"There'll be no drinking," she said, and the issue was laid to rest. When Ernie abandoned the family years earlier, he'd taken nothing but his shotgun, a few clothes, and all the liquor from his private supply. He'd been a violent drunk, and his boys still carried the scars, emotional and physical. Leon, the oldest, had felt more of the brutality than his younger brothers, and as a small boy equated alcohol with the horrors of an abusive father. He had never taken a drink, though with time had found his own vices. Butch, on the other hand, had drunk heavily since his early teens, though he'd never been tempted to sneak alcohol into his mother's home. Raymond, the youngest, had chosen to follow the example of Butch rather than of Leon.

To shift away from such an unpleasant topic, Leon asked his mother about the latest news from a friend down the road, an old

spinster who'd been dying of cancer for years. Inez, as always, perked up when discussing the ailments and treatments of her neighbors, and herself as well. The air conditioner finally broke through, and the thick humidity inside the van began to subside. When he stopped sweating, Butch reached for his pocket, fished out a cigarette, lit it, then cracked the window. The temperature rose immediately. Soon all three were smoking, and the windows went lower and lower until the air was again thick with heat and nicotine.

When they finished, Inez said to Leon, "Raymond called two hours ago."

This was no surprise. Raymond had been making calls, collect, for days now, and not only to his mother. Leon's phone was ringing so often that his (third) wife refused to answer it. Others around town were also declining to accept charges.

"What'd he say?" Leon asked, but only because he had to reply. He knew exactly what Raymond had said, maybe not verbatim, but certainly in general.

"Said thangs are lookin' real good, said he'd probably have to fire the team of lawyers he has now so he can hire another team of lawyers. You know Raymond. He's tellin' the lawyers what to do and they're just fallin' all over themselves."

Without turning his head, Butch cut his eyes at Leon, and Leon returned the glance. Nothing was said because words were not necessary.

"Said his new team comes from a firm in Chicago with a thousand lawyers. Can you imagine? A thousand lawyers workin' for Raymond. And he's tellin' 'em what to do."

Another glance between driver and right-side passenger. Inez had cataracts, and her peripheral vision had declined. If she had seen the looks being passed between her two oldest, she would not have been pleased.

"Said they've just discovered some new evidence that shoulda been produced at trial but wasn't because the cops and the prosecutors covered it up, and with this new evidence Raymond feels real good about gettin' a new trial back here in Clanton,

though he's not sure he wants it here, so he might move it somewhere else. He's thinkin' about somewhere in the Delta because the Delta juries have more blacks and he says that blacks are more sympathetic in cases like this. What do you thank about that, Leon?"

"There are definitely more blacks in the Delta," Leon said. Butch grunted and mumbled, but his words were not clear.

"Said he don't trust anyone in Ford County, especially the law and the judges. God knows they've never given us a break."

Leon and Butch nodded in silent agreement. Both had been chewed up by the law in Ford County, Butch much more so than Leon. And though they had pled guilty to their crimes in negotiated deals, they had always believed they were persecuted simply because they were Graneys.

"Don't know if I can stand another trial, though," she said, and her words trailed off.

Leon wanted to say that Raymond's chances of getting a new trial were worse than slim, and that he'd been making noise about a new trial for over a decade. Butch wanted to say pretty much the same thing, but he would've added that he was sick of Raymond's jailhouse bullshit about lawyers and trials and new evidence and that it was past time for the boy to stop blaming everybody else and take his medicine like a man.

But neither said a word.

"Said the both of you ain't sent him his stipends for last month," she said. "That true?"

Five miles passed before another word was spoken.

"Ya'll hear me up there?" Inez said. "Raymond says ya'll ain't mailed in his stipends for the month of June, and now it's already July. Ya'll forget about it?"

Leon went first, and unloaded. "Forget about it? How can we forget about it? That's all he talks about. I get a letter every day, sometimes two, not that I read 'em all, but every letter mentions the stipend. 'Thanks for the money, bro.' 'Don't forget the money, Leon, I'm counting on you, big brother.' 'Gotta have the money to pay the lawyers, you know how much those bloodsuckers can charge.' 'Ain't seen the stipend this month, bro.' "

“What the hell is a stipend?” Butch shot from the right side, his voice suddenly edgy.

“A regular or fixed payment, according to *Webster’s*,” Leon said.

“It’s just money, right?”

“Right.”

“So why can’t he just say something like, ‘Send me the damned money’? Or, ‘Where’s the damned money?’ Why does he have to use the fancy words?”

“We’ve had this conversation a thousand times,” Inez said.

“Well, you sent him a dictionary,” Leon said to Butch.

“That was ten years ago, at least. And he begged me for it.”

“Well, he’s still got it, still wearing it out looking for words we ain’t seen before.”

“I often wonder if his lawyers can keep up with his vocabulary,” Butch mused.

“Ya’ll’re tryin’ to change the subject up there,” Inez said. “Why didn’t you send him his stipends last month?”

“I thought I did,” Butch said without conviction.

“I don’t believe that,” she said.

“The check’s in the mail,” Leon said.

“I don’t believe that either. We all agreed to send him $100 each, every month, twelve months a year. It’s the least we can do. I know it’s hard, especially on me, livin’ on Social Security and all. But you boys have jobs, and the least you can do is squeeze out $100 each for your little brother so he can buy decent food and pay his lawyers.”

“Do we have to go through this again?” Leon asked.

“I hear it every day,” Butch said. “If I don’t hear from Raymond, on the phone or through the mail, then I hear it from Momma.”

“Is that a complaint?” she asked. “Got a problem with your livin’ arrangements? Stayin’ in my house for free, and yet you want to complain?”

“Come on,” Leon said.

“Who’ll take care of you?” Butch offered in his defense.

“Knock it off, you two. This gets so old.”

All three took a deep breath, then began reaching for the cigarettes. After a long, quiet smoke, they settled in for another round. Inez got things started with a pleasant “Me, I never miss a month. And, if you’ll recall, I never missed a month when the both of you was locked up at Parchman.”

Leon grunted, slapped the wheel, and said angrily, “Momma, that was twenty-five years ago. Why bring it up now? I ain’t had so much as a speedin’ ticket since I got paroled.” Butch, whose life in crime had been much more colorful than Leon’s, and who was still on parole, said nothing.

“I never missed a month,” she said.

“Come on.”

“And sometimes it was $200 a month ’cause I had two of you there at one time, as I recall. Guess I was lucky I never had all three behind bars. Couldn’t’ve paid my light bill.”

“I thought those lawyers worked for free,” Butch said in an effort to deflect attention from himself and hopefully direct it toward a target outside the family.

“They do,” Leon said. “It’s called pro bono work, and all lawyers are supposed to do some of it. As far as I know, these big firms who come in on cases like this don’t expect to get paid.”

“Then what’s Raymond doin’ with $300 a month if he ain’t payin’ his lawyers?”

“We’ve had this conversation,” Inez said.

“I’m sure he spends a fortune on pens, paper, envelopes, and postage,” Leon said. “He claims he writes ten letters a day. Hell, that’s over $100 a month right there.”

“Plus he’s written eight novels,” Butch added quickly. “Or is it nine, Momma? I can’t remember.”

“Nine.”

“Nine novels, several volumes of poetry, bunch of short stories, hundreds of songs. Just think of all the paper he goes through,” Butch said.

“Are you pokin’ fun at Raymond?” she asked.

“Never.”

“He sold a short story once,” she said.

“Of course he did. What was the magazine? *Hot Rodder*? Paid him forty bucks for a story about a man who stole a thousand hubcaps. They say you write what you know.”

“How many stories have you sold?” she asked.

“None, because I haven’t written any, and the reason I haven’t written any is because I realize that I don’t have the talent to write. If my little brother would also realize that he has no artistic talents whatsoever, then he could save some money and hundreds of people would not be subjected to his nonsense.”

“That’s very cruel.”

“No, Momma, it’s very honest. And if you’d been honest with him a long time ago, then maybe he would’ve stopped writing. But no. You read his books and his poetry and his short stories and told him the stuff was great. So he wrote more, with longer words, longer sentences, longer paragraphs, and got to the point to where now we can hardly understand a damned thang he writes.”

“So it’s all my fault?”

“Not 100 percent, no.”

“He writes for therapy.”

“I’ve been there. I don’t see how writin’ helps any.”

“He says it helps.”

“Are these books handwritten or typed up?” Leon asked, interrupting.

“Typed,” Butch said.

“Who types ’em?”

“He has to pay some guy over in the law library,” Inez said. “A dollar a page, and one of the books was over eight hundred pages. I read it, though, ever’ word.”

“Did you understand ever’ word?” Butch asked.

“Most of ’em. A dictionary helps. Lord, I don’t know where that boy finds those words.”

“And Raymond sent these books up to New York to get published, right?” Leon asked, pressing on.

“Yes, and they sent ’em right back,” she said. “I guess they couldn’t understand all his words either.”

“You’d think those people in New York would understand what he’s sayin’,” Leon said.

“No one understands what he’s sayin’,” Butch said. “That’s the problem with Raymond the novelist, and Raymond the poet, and Raymond the political prisoner, and Raymond the songwriter, and Raymond the lawyer. No person in his right mind could possibly have any idea what Raymond says when he starts writin’.”

“So, if I understand this correctly,” Leon said, “a large portion of Raymond’s overhead has been spent to finance his literary career. Paper, postage, typing, copying, shipping to New York and back. That right, Momma?”

“I guess.”

“And it’s doubtful if his stipends have actually gone to pay his lawyers,” Leon said.

“Very doubtful,” Butch said. “And don’t forget his music career. He spends money on guitar strings and sheet music. Plus, they now allow the prisoners to rent tapes. That’s how Raymond became a blues singer. He listened to B. B. King and Muddy Waters, and, according to Raymond, he now entertains his colleagues on death row with late-night sessions of the blues.”

“Oh, I know. He’s told me about it in his letters.”

“He always had a good voice,” Inez said.

“I never heard ’im sang,” Leon said.

“Me neither,” Butch added.

They were on the bypass around Oxford, two hours away from Parchman. The upholstery van seemed to run best at sixty miles an hour; anything faster and the front tires shook a bit. There was no hurry. West of Oxford the hills began to flatten; the Delta was not far away. Inez recognized a little white country church off to the right, next to a cemetery, and it occurred to her that the church had not changed in all the many years she had made this journey to the state penitentiary. She asked herself how many other women in Ford County had made as many of these trips, but she knew the answer. Leon had started the tradition many years earlier with a thirty-month incarceration, and back then the rules allowed her to visit on the first Sunday of each month. Sometimes Butch drove her

and sometimes she paid a neighbor's son, but she never missed a visitation and she always took peanut butter fudge and extra toothpaste. Six months after Leon was paroled, he was driving her so she could visit Butch. Then it was Butch and Raymond, but in different units with different rules.

Then Raymond killed the deputy, and they locked him down on death row, which had its own rules.

With practice, most unpleasant tasks become bearable, and Inez Graney had learned to look forward to the visits. Her sons had been condemned by the rest of the county, but their mother would never abandon them. She was there when they were born, and she was there when they were beaten. She had suffered through their court appearances and parole hearings, and she had told anyone who would listen that they were good boys who'd been abused by the man she'd chosen to marry. All of it was her fault. If she'd married a decent man, her children might have had normal lives.

"Reckon that woman'll be there?" Leon asked.

"Lord, Lord," Inez groaned.

"Why would she miss the show?" Butch said. "I'm sure she'll be around somewhere."

"Lord, Lord."

That woman was Tallulah, a fruitcake who'd entered their lives a few years earlier and managed to make a bad situation much worse. Through one of the abolitionist groups, she'd made contact with Raymond, who responded in typical fashion with a lengthy letter filled with claims of innocence and maltreatment and the usual drivel about his budding literary and music careers. He sent her some poems, love sonnets, and she became obsessed with him. They met in the visitation room at death row and, through a thick metal screen window, fell in love. Raymond sang a few blues tunes, and Tallulah was swept away. There was talk of a marriage, but those plans were put on hold until Tallulah's then-current husband was executed by the State of Georgia. After a brief period of mourning, she traveled to Parchman for a bizarre ceremony that was recognized by no identifiable state law or religious doctrine. Anyway, Raymond was in love, and, thus inspired, his prodigious

letter writing reached new heights. The family was forewarned that Tallulah was anxious to visit Ford County and see her new in-laws. She indeed arrived, but when they refused to acknowledge her, she instead paid a visit to the *Ford County Times*, where she shared her rambling thoughts, her insights into the plight of poor Raymond Graney, and her promises that new evidence would clear him in the death of the deputy. She also announced that she was pregnant with Raymond's child, a result of several conjugal visits now available to death row inmates.

Tallulah made the front page, photo and all, but the reporter had been wise enough to check with Parchman. Conjugal visits were not allowed for the inmates, especially those on death row. And there was no official record of a marriage. Undaunted, Tallulah continued to wave Raymond's flag, and even went so far as to haul several of his bulky manuscripts to New York, where they were again rejected by publishers with little vision. With time she faded away, though Inez, Leon, and Butch lived with the horror that another Graney might soon be born, somewhere. In spite of the rules regarding conjugal visits, they knew Raymond. He could find a way.

After two years, Raymond informed the family that he and Tallulah would be seeking a divorce and, to properly obtain one, he needed $500. This touched off another nasty episode of bickering and name-calling, and the money was raised only after he threatened suicide, and not for the first time. Not long after the checks had been mailed, Raymond wrote with the great news that he and Tallulah had reconciled. He did not offer to return the money to Inez, Butch, and Leon, though all three suggested that he do so. Raymond declined on the grounds that his new team of lawyers needed the money to hire experts and investigators.

What irked Leon and Butch was their brother's sense of entitlement, as though they, the family, owed him the money because of his persecution. In the early days of his imprisonment, both Leon and Butch had reminded Raymond that he had not sent them the first penny when they were behind bars and he was not. This had led to another nasty episode that Inez had been forced to mediate.

She sat bent and unmoving in her wheelchair, with a large canvas bag in her lap. As the thoughts of Tallulah began to fade, she opened the bag and withdrew a letter from Raymond, his latest. She opened the envelope, plain and white with his swirling cursive writing all over the front, and unfolded two sheets of yellow tablet paper.

Dearest Mother:

It is becoming increasingly obvious and apparent that the cumbersome and unwieldy yes even lethargic machinations of our inequitable and dishonorable yes even corrupt judicial system have inevitably and irrevocably trained their loathsome and despicable eyes upon me.

Inez took a breath, then read the sentence again. Most of the words looked familiar. After years of reading with a letter in one hand and a dictionary in the other, she was amazed at how much her vocabulary had expanded.

Butch glanced back, saw the letter, shook his head, but said nothing.

However, the State of Mississippi will once again be thwarted and stymied and left in thorough and consummate degradation in its resolution to extract blood from Raymond T. Graney. For I have procured and retained the services of a young lawyer with astonishing skills, an extraordinary advocate judiciously chosen by me from the innumerable legions of barristers quite literally throwing themselves at my feet.

Another pause, another quick rereading. Inez was barely hanging on.

Not surprisingly, a lawyer of such exquisite and superlative yes even singular proficiencies and dexterities cannot labor and

effectively advocate on my behalf without appropriate recompense.

"What's recompense?" she asked.

"Spell it," Butch said.

She spelled it slowly, and the three pondered the word. This exercise in language skills had become as routine as talking about the weather.

"How's it used?" Butch asked, so she read the sentence.

"Money," Butch said, and Leon quickly agreed. Raymond's mysterious words often had something to do with money.

"Let me guess. He's got a new lawyer and needs some extra money to pay him."

Inez ignored him and kept reading.

It is with great reluctance even trepidation that I desperately beseech you and implore you to procure the quite reasonable sum of $1,500 which will forthrightly find application in my defense and undoubtedly extricate me and emancipate me and otherwise save my ass. Come on, Momma, now is the hour for the family to join hands and metaphorically circle the wagons. Your reluctance yes even your recalcitrance will be deemed pernicious neglect.

"What's recalcitrance?" she asked.

"Spell it," Leon said. She spelled "recalcitrance," then "pernicious," and after a halfhearted debate it was obvious that none of the three had a clue.

One final note before I move on to more pressing correspondence—Butch and Leon have again neglected my stipends. Their latest perfidies concern the month of June, and it's already halfway through July. Please torment, harass, vex, heckle, and badger those two blockheads until they honor their commitments to my defense fund.

Love, as always, from your dearest and
favorite son, Raymond

Each letter sent to a death row inmate was read by someone in the mail room at Parchman, and each outgoing letter was likewise scrutinized. Inez had often pitied the poor soul assigned to read Raymond's missives. They never failed to tire Inez, primarily because they required work. She was afraid she would miss something important.

The letters drained her. The lyrics put her to sleep. The novels produced migraines. The poetry could not be penetrated.

She wrote back twice a week, without fail, because if she neglected her youngest by even a day or so, she could expect a torrent of abuse, a four-pager or maybe a five-pager with blistering language that contained words often not found in a dictionary. And even the slightest delay in mailing in her stipend would cause unpleasant collect phone calls.

Of the three, Raymond had been the best student, though none had finished high school. Leon had been the better athlete, Butch the better musician, but little Raymond got the brains. And he made it all the way to the eleventh grade before he got caught with a stolen motorcycle and spent sixty days in a juvenile facility. He was sixteen, five years younger than Butch and ten younger than Leon, and already the Graney boys were developing the reputation as skillful car thieves. Raymond joined the family business and forgot about school.

"So how much does he want this time?" Butch asked.

"Fifteen hundred, for a new lawyer. Said you two ain't sent his stipends for last month."

"Drop it, Momma," Leon said harshly, and for a long time nothing else was said.

When the first car theft ring was broken, Leon took the fall and did his time at Parchman. Upon his release, he married his second wife and managed to go straight. Butch and Raymond made no effort at going straight; in fact, they expanded their activities. They

fenced stolen guns and appliances, dabbled in the marijuana trade, ran moonshine, and of course stole cars and sold them to various chop shops in north Mississippi. Butch got busted when he stole an 18-wheeler that was supposed to be full of Sony televisions but in fact was a load of chain-link fencing. Televisions are easy to move on the black market. Chain link proved far more difficult. In the course of events the sheriff raided Butch's hiding place and found the contraband, useless as it was. He pleaded to eighteen months, his first stint at Parchman. Raymond avoided indictment and lived to steal again. He stuck to his first love—cars and pickups—and prospered nicely, though all profits were wasted on booze, gambling, and an astounding string of bad women.

From the beginning of their careers as thieves, the Graney boys were hounded by an obnoxious deputy named Coy Childers. Coy suspected them in every misdemeanor and felony in Ford County. He watched them, followed them, threatened them, harassed them, and at various times arrested them for good cause or for no cause whatsoever. All three had been beaten by Coy in the depths of the Ford County jail. They had complained bitterly to the sheriff, Coy's boss, but no one listens to the whining of known criminals. And the Graneys became quite well-known.

For revenge, Raymond stole Coy's patrol car and sold it to a chop shop in Memphis. He kept the police radio and mailed it back to Coy in an unmarked parcel. Raymond was arrested and would've been beaten but for the intervention of his court-appointed lawyer. There was no proof at all, nothing to link him to the crime except some well-founded suspicion. Two months later, after Raymond had been released, Coy bought his wife a new Chevrolet Impala. Raymond promptly stole it from a church parking lot during Wednesday night prayer meeting and sold it to a chop shop near Tupelo. By then, Coy was openly vowing to kill Raymond Graney.

There were no witnesses to the actual killing, or at least none who would come forward. It happened late on a Friday night, on a gravel road not far from a double-wide trailer Raymond was sharing with his latest girlfriend. The prosecution's theory was that Coy had parked his car and was approaching quietly on foot, alone, with the

plan to confront Raymond and perhaps even arrest him. Coy was found after sunrise by some deer hunters. He'd been shot twice in the forehead by a high-powered rifle, and he was positioned in a slight dip in the gravel road, which allowed a large amount of blood to accumulate around his body. The crime scene photos caused two jurors to vomit.

Raymond and his girl claimed to be away at a honky-tonk, but evidently they had been the only customers because no other alibi witnesses could be found. Ballistics traced the bullets to a stolen rifle fenced through one of Raymond's longtime underworld associates, and though there was no proof that Raymond had ever owned, stolen, borrowed, or possessed the rifle, the suspicion was enough. The prosecutor convinced the jury that Raymond had motive—he hated Coy, and he was, after all, a convicted felon; he had opportunity—Coy was found near Raymond's trailer, and there were no neighbors within miles; and he had the means—the alleged murder weapon was waved around the courtroom, complete with an army-issue scope that may have allowed the killer to see through the darkness, though there was no evidence the scope was actually attached to the rifle when it was used to kill Coy.

Raymond's alibi was weak. His girlfriend, too, had a criminal record and made a lousy witness. His court-appointed defense lawyer subpoenaed three people who were supposed to testify that they had heard Coy vow to kill Raymond Graney. All three faltered under the pressure of sitting in the witness chair and being glared at by the sheriff and at least ten of his uniformed deputies. It was a questionable defense strategy to begin with. If Raymond believed Coy was coming to kill him, then did he, Raymond, act in self-defense? Was Raymond admitting to the crime? No, he was not. He insisted he knew nothing about it and was dancing in a bar when someone else took care of Coy.

In spite of the overwhelming public pressure to convict Raymond, the jury stayed out for two days before finally doing so.

A year later, the Feds broke up a methamphetamine ring, and in the aftermath of a dozen hasty plea bargains it was learned that Deputy Coy Childers had been heavily involved in the drug-

distribution syndicate. Two other murders, very similar in details, had taken place over in Marshall County, sixty miles away. Coy's stellar reputation among the locals was badly tarnished. The gossip began to fester about who really killed him, though Raymond remained the favorite suspect.

His conviction and death sentence were unanimously affirmed by the state's supreme court. More appeals led to more affirmations, and now, eleven years later, the case was winding down.

West of Batesville, the hills finally yielded to the flatlands, and the highway cut through fields thick with midsummer cotton and soybeans. Farmers on their green John Deeres poked along the highway as if it had been built for tractors and not automobiles. But the Graneys were in no hurry. The van moved on, past an idle cotton gin, abandoned shotgun shacks, new double-wide trailers with satellite dishes and big trucks parked at the doors, and an occasional fine home set back to keep the traffic away from the landowners. At the town of Marks, Leon turned south, and they moved deeper into the Delta.

"I reckon Charlene'll be there," Inez said.

"Most certainly," Leon said.

"She wouldn't miss it for anything," Butch said.

Charlene was Coy's widow, a long-suffering woman who had embraced the martyrdom of her husband with unusual enthusiasm. Over the years she had joined every victims' group she could find, state and national. She threatened lawsuits against the newspaper and anybody else who questioned Coy's integrity. She had written long letters to the editor demanding speedier justice for Raymond Graney. And she had missed not one court hearing along the way, even traveling as far as New Orleans when the federal Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals had the case.

"She's been prayin' for this day," Leon said.

"Well, she better keep prayin' 'cause Raymond said it ain't gonna happen," Inez said. "He promised me his lawyers are much better than the state's lawyers and that they're filin' papers by the truckload."

Leon glanced at Butch, who made eye contact, then gazed at the cotton fields. They passed through the farm settlements of Vance, Tutwiler, and Rome as the sun was finally fading. Dusk brought the swarms of insects that hit the hood and windshield. They smoked with the windows down, and said little. The approach to Parchman always subdued the Graneys—Butch and Leon for obvious reasons, and Inez because it reminded her of her shortcomings as a mother.

Parchman was an infamous prison, but it was also a farm, a plantation, that sprawled over eighteen thousand acres of rich black soil that had produced cotton and profits for the state for decades until the federal courts got involved and pretty much abolished slave labor. In another lawsuit, another federal court ended the segregated conditions. More litigation had made life slightly better, though violence was worse.

For Leon, thirty months there turned him away from crime, and that was what the law-abiding citizens demanded of a prison. For Butch, his first sentence proved that he could survive another, and no car or truck was safe in Ford County.

Highway 3 ran straight and flat, and there was little traffic. It was almost dark when the van passed the small green highway sign that simply said “Parchman.” Ahead there were lights, activity, something unusual happening. To the right were the white stone front gates of the prison, and across the highway in a gravel lot a circus was under way. Death penalty protesters were busy. Some knelt in a circle and prayed. Some walked a tight formation with handmade posters supporting Ray Graney. Another group sang a hymn. Another knelt around a priest and held candles. Farther down the highway, a smaller group chanted pro-death slogans and tossed insults at the supporters of Graney. Uniformed deputies kept the peace. Television news crews were busy recording it all.

Leon stopped at the guardhouse, which was crawling with prison guards and anxious security personnel. A guard with a clipboard stepped to the driver’s door and said, “Your name?”

“Graney, family of Mr. Raymond Graney. Leon, Butch, and our mother, Inez.”

The guard wrote nothing, took a step back, managed to say “Wait a minute,” then left them. Three guards stood directly in front of the van, at a barricade across the entry road.

“He’s gone to get Fitch,” Butch said. “Wanna bet?”

“No,” Leon replied.

Fitch was an assistant warden of some variety, a career prison employee whose dead-end job was brightened only by an escape or an execution. In cowboy boots and fake Stetson, and with a large pistol on his hip, he swaggered around Parchman as if he owned it. Fitch had outlasted a dozen wardens and had survived that many lawsuits. As he approached the van, he said loudly, “Well, well, the Graney boys’re back where they belong. Here for a little furniture repair, boys? We have an old electric chair ya’ll can reupholster.” He laughed at his own humor, and there was more laughter behind him.

“Evenin’, Mr. Fitch,” Leon said. “We have our mother with us.”

“Evenin’, ma’am,” Fitch said as he glanced inside the van. Inez did not respond.

“Where’d you get this van?” Fitch asked.

“We borrowed it,” Leon answered. Butch stared straight ahead and refused to look at Fitch.

“Borrowed my ass. When’s the last time you boys borrowed anything? I’m sure Mr. McBride is lookin’ for his van right now. Might give him a call.”

“You do that, Fitch,” Leon said.

“It’s Mr. Fitch to you.”

“Whatever you say.”

Fitch unloaded a mouthful of spit. He nodded ahead as if he and he alone controlled the details. “I reckon you boys know where you’re goin’,” he said. “God knows you been here enough. Follow that car back to max security. They’ll do the search there.” He waved at the guards at the barricade. An opening was created, and they left Fitch without another word. For a few minutes, they followed an unmarked car filled with armed men. They passed one unit after another, each entirely separate, each encircled by chain link topped with razor wire. Butch gazed at the unit where he’d

surrendered several years of his life. In a well-lit open area, the "playground," as they called it, he saw the inevitable basketball game with shirtless men drenched in sweat, always one hard foul away from another mindless brawl. He saw the calmer ones sitting on picnic tables, waiting for the 10:00 p.m. bed check, waiting for the heat to break because the barracks air units seldom worked, especially in July.

As usual, Leon glanced at his old unit but did not dwell on his time there. After so many years, he had been able to tuck away the emotional scars of physical abuse. The inmate population was 80 percent black, and Parchman was one of the few places in Mississippi where the whites did not make the rules.

The maximum security unit was a 1950s-style flat-roofed building, one level, redbrick, much like countless elementary schools built back then. It, too, was wrapped in chain link and razor wire and watched by guards lounging in towers, though on this night everyone in uniform was awake and excited. Leon parked where he was directed, then he and Butch were thoroughly searched by a small battalion of unsmiling guards. Inez was lifted out, rolled to a makeshift checkpoint, and carefully inspected by two female guards. They were escorted inside the building, through a series of heavy doors, past more guards, and finally to a small room they had never seen before. The visitors' room was elsewhere. Two guards stayed with them as they settled in. The room had a sofa, two folding chairs, a row of ancient file cabinets, and the look of an office that belonged to some trifling bureaucrat who'd been chased away for the night.

The two prison guards weighed at least 250 pounds each, had twenty-four-inch necks and the obligatory shaved heads. After five awkward minutes in the room with the family, Butch had had enough. He took a few steps and challenged them with a bold "What, exactly, are you two doing in here?"

"Following orders," one said.

"Whose orders?"

"The warden's."

“Do you realize how stupid you look? Here we are, the family of the condemned man, waiting to spend a few minutes with our brother, in this tiny shit hole of a room, with no windows, cinder-block walls, only one door, and you’re standing here guarding us as if we’re dangerous. Do you realize how stupid this is?”

Both necks seemed to expand. Both faces turned scarlet. Had Butch been an inmate, he would have been beaten, but he wasn’t. He was a citizen, a former convict who hated every cop, trooper, guard, agent, and security type he’d ever seen. Every man in a uniform was his enemy.

“Sir, please sit down,” one said coolly.

“In case you idiots don’t realize it, you can guard this room from the other side of that door just as easily as you can from this side. I swear. It’s true. I know you probably haven’t been trained enough to realize this, but if you just walked through the door and parked your big asses on the other side, then ever’thang would still be secure and we’d have some privacy. We could talk to our little brother without worryin’ about you clowns eavesdroppin’.”

“You’d better knock it off, pal.”

“Go ahead, just step through the door, close it, stare at it, guard it. I know you boys can handle it. I know you can keep us safe in here.”

Of course the guards didn’t move, and Butch eventually sat in a folding chair close to his mother. After a thirty-minute wait that seemed to last forever, the warden entered with his entourage and introduced himself. “The execution is still planned for one minute after midnight,” he said officially, as if he were discussing a routine meeting with his staff. “We’ve been told not to expect a last-minute call from the governor’s office.” There was no hint of compassion.

Inez placed both hands over her face and began crying softly.

He continued, “The lawyers are busy with all the last-minute stuff they always do, but our lawyers tell us a reprieve is unlikely.”

Leon and Butch stared at the floor.

“We relax the rules a little for these events. You’re free to stay in here as long as you like, and we’ll bring in Raymond shortly. I’m sorry it’s come down to this. If I can do anything, just let me know.”

“Get those two jackasses outta here,” Butch said, pointing to the guards. “We’d like some privacy.”

The warden hesitated, looked around the room, then said, “No problem.” He left and took the guards with him. Fifteen minutes later, the door opened again, and Raymond bounced in with a big smile and went straight for his mother. After a long hug and a few tears, he bear-hugged his brothers and told them things were moving in their favor. They pulled the chairs close to the sofa and sat in a small huddle, with Raymond clutching his mother’s hands.

“We got these sumbitches on the run,” he said, still smiling, the picture of confidence. “My lawyers are filin’ a truckload of habeas corpus petitions as we speak, and they’re quite certain the U.S. Supreme Court will grant certiorari within the hour.”

“What does that mean?” Inez asked.

“Means the Supreme Court will agree to hear the case, and it’s an automatic delay. Means we’ll probably get a new trial in Ford County, though I’m not sure I want it there.”

He was wearing prison whites, no socks, and a pair of cheap rubber sandals. And it was clear that Raymond was packing on the pounds. His cheeks were round and puffy. A spare tire hung over his belt. They had not seen him in almost six weeks, and his weight gain was noticeable. As usual, he prattled on about matters they did not understand and did not believe, at least as far as Butch and Leon were concerned. Raymond had been born with a vivid imagination, a quick tongue, and an innate inability to tell the truth.

The boy could lie.

“Got two dozen lawyers scramblin’ right now,” he said. “State can’t keep up with ’em.”

“When do you hear somethin’ from the court?” Inez asked.

“Any minute now. I got federal judges in Jackson, in New Orleans, and in Washington sittin’ by, just ready to kick the state’s ass.”

After eleven years of having his ass thoroughly kicked by the state, it was difficult to believe that Raymond had now, at this late hour, managed to turn the tide. Leon and Butch nodded gravely, as if they bought this and believed that the inevitable was not about to

happen. They had known for many years that their little brother had ambushed Coy and practically blown his head off with a stolen rifle. Raymond had told Butch years earlier, long after he'd landed on death row, that he'd been so stoned he could hardly remember the killing.

"Plus we got some big-shot lawyers in Jackson puttin' pressure on the governor, just in case the Supreme Court chickens out again," he said.

All three nodded, but no one mentioned the comments from the warden.

"You got my last letter, Momma? The one about the new lawyer?"

"Sure did. Read it drivin' over here," she said, nodding.

"I'd like to hire him as soon as we get an order for the new trial. He's from Mobile, and he is one bad boy, lemme tell you. But we can talk about him later."

"Sure, son."

"Thank you. Look, Momma, I know this is hard, but you gotta have faith in me and my lawyers. I been runnin' my own defense for a year now, bossin' the lawyers around 'cause that's what you gotta do these days, and thangs're gonna work out, Momma. Trust me."

"I do, I do."

Raymond jumped to his feet and thrust his arms high above, stretching with his eyes closed. "I'm into yoga now, did I tell ya'll about it?"

All three nodded. His letters had been loaded with the details of his latest fascination. Over the years the family had suffered through Raymond's breathless accounts of his conversion to Buddhism, then Islam, then Hinduism, and his discoveries of meditation, kung fu, aerobics, weight lifting, fasting, and of course his quest to become a poet, novelist, singer, and musician. Little had been spared in his letters home.

Whatever the current passion, it was obvious that the fasting and aerobics had been abandoned. Raymond was so fat his britches strained in the seat.

"Did you bring the brownies?" he asked his mother. He loved her pecan brownies.

“No, honey, I’m sorry. I’ve been so tore up over this.”

“You always bring the brownies.”

“I’m sorry.”

Just like Raymond. Berating his mother over nothing just hours before his final walk.

“Well, don’t forget them again.”

“I won’t, honey.”

“And another thang. Tallulah is supposed to be here any minute. She’d love to meet ya’ll because ya’ll have always rejected her. She’s part of the family regardless of what ya’ll thank. As a favor at this unfortunate moment in my life, I ask that ya’ll accept her and be nice.”

Leon and Butch could not respond, but Inez managed to say “Yes, dear.”

“When I get outta this damned place, we’re movin’ to Hawaii and havin’ ten kids. No way I’m stayin’ in Mississippi, not after all this. So she’ll be part of the family from now on.”

For the first time Leon glanced at his watch with the thought that relief was just over two hours away. Butch was thinking too, but his thoughts were far different. The idea of choking Raymond to death before the state could kill him posed an interesting dilemma.

Raymond suddenly stood and said, “Well, look, I gotta go meet with the lawyers. I’ll be back in half an hour.” He walked to the door, opened it, then thrust out his arms for the handcuffs. The door closed, and Inez said, “I guess thangs’re okay.”

“Look, Momma, we’d best listen to the warden,” Leon said.

“Raymond’s kiddin’ himself,” Butch added. She started crying again.

The chaplain was a Catholic priest, Father Leland, and he quietly introduced himself to the family. They asked him to have a seat.

“I’m deeply sorry about this,” he said somberly. “It’s the worst part of my job.”

Catholics were rare in Ford County, and the Graneys certainly didn’t know any. They looked suspiciously at the white collar around his neck.

“I’ve tried to talk to Raymond,” Father Leland continued. “But he has little interest in the Christian faith. Said he hadn’t been to church since he was a little boy.”

“I shoulda took him more,” Inez said, lamenting.

“In fact, he claims to be an atheist.”

“Lord, Lord.”

Of course, the three Graneys had known for some time that Raymond had renounced all religious beliefs and had proclaimed that there was no God. This, too, they had read about in excruciating detail in his lengthy letters.

“We’re not church people,” Leon admitted.

“I’ll be praying for you.”

“Raymond stole the deputy’s wife’s new car outta the church parking lot,” Butch said. “Did he tell you that?”

“No. We’ve talked a lot lately, and he’s told me many stories. But not that one.”

“Thank you, sir, for bein’ so nice to Raymond,” Inez said.

“I’ll be with him until the end.”

“So, they’re really gonna do it?” she asked.

“It’ll take a miracle to stop things now.”

“Lord, help us,” she said.

“Let’s pray,” Father Leland said. He closed his eyes, folded his hands together, and began: “Dear Heavenly Father, please look down upon us at this hour and let your Holy Spirit enter this place and give us peace. Give strength and wisdom to the lawyers and judges who are laboring diligently at this moment. Give courage to Raymond as he makes his preparations.” Father Leland paused for a second and barely opened his left eye. All three Graneys were staring at him as if he had two heads. Rattled, he closed his eye and wrapped things up quickly with: “And, Father, grant grace and forgiveness to the officials and the people of Mississippi, for they know not what they’re doing. Amen.”

He said good-bye, and they waited a few minutes before Raymond returned. He had his guitar, and as soon as he settled into the sofa he strummed a few chords. He closed his eyes and began to hum, then he sang:

I got time to see you baby
I got time to come on by
I got time to stay forever
'Cause I got no time to die.

"It's an old tune by Mudcat Malone," he explained. "One of my favorites."

I got time to see you smilin'
I got time to see you cry
I got time to hold you baby
'Cause I got no time to die.

The song was unlike any they'd heard before. Butch had once picked the banjo in a bluegrass band, but had given up music many years earlier. He had no voice whatsoever, a family trait shared by his younger brother. Raymond crooned in a painful guttural lurch, an affected attempt to sound like a black blues singer, apparently one in severe distress.

I got time to be yo' daddy
I got time to be yo' guy
I got time to be yo' lover
'Cause I got no time to die.

When the words stopped, he kept strumming and did a passable job of playing a tune. Butch, though, couldn't help but think that after eleven years of practice in his cell, his guitar playing was rudimentary.

"That's so nice," Inez said.

"Thanks, Momma. Here's one from Little Bennie Burke, probably the greatest of all. He's from Indianola, you know that?" They did not know. Like most white hill folks, they knew nothing about the blues and cared even less.

Raymond's face contorted again. He hit the strings harder.

I packed my bags on Monday
Tuesday said so long
Wednesday saw my baby
Thursday she was gone
Got paid this Friday mornin'
Man said I's all right
Told him he could shove it
I'm walkin' out tonight.

Leon glanced at his watch. It was almost 11:00 p.m., just over an hour to go. He wasn't sure he could listen to the blues for another hour, but resigned himself. The singing unnerved Butch as well, but he managed to sit still with his eyes closed, as if soothed by the words and music.

I'm tired of pickin' cotton
I'm tired of shootin' dice
I'm tired of gettin' hassled
I'm tired of tryin' to be nice
I'm tired of workin' for nothing
I'm tired of havin' to fight
Everything's behind me now
I'm walkin' out tonight.

Raymond then forgot the words, but continued with his humming. When he finally stopped, he sat with his eyes closed for a minute or so, as if the music had transported him to another world, to a much more pleasant place.

"What time is it, bro?" he asked Leon.

"Eleven straight up."

"I gotta go check with the lawyers. They're expectin' a ruling right about now."

He placed his guitar in a corner, then knocked on the door and stepped through it. The guards handcuffed him and led him away. Within minutes a crew from the kitchen arrived with armed escort. Hurriedly, they unfolded a square card table and covered it with a rather large amount of food. The smells were immediately thick in the room, and Leon and Butch were weak with hunger. They had not eaten since noon. Inez was too distraught to think about food, though she did examine the spread. Fried catfish, French-fried potatoes, hush puppies, coleslaw, all in the center of the table. To the right was a mammoth cheeseburger, with another order of fries and one of onion rings. To the left was a medium-size pizza with pepperoni and hot, bubbling cheese. Directly in front of the catfish was a huge slice of what appeared to be lemon pie, and next to it was a dessert plate covered with chocolate cake. A bowl of vanilla ice cream was wedged along the edge of the table.

As the three Graneys gawked at the food, one of the guards said, “For the last meal, he gets anything he wants.”

“Lord, Lord,” Inez said and began crying again.

When they were alone, Butch and Leon tried to ignore the food, which they could almost touch, but the aromas were overwhelming. Catfish battered and fried in corn oil. Fried onion rings. Pepperoni. The air in the small room was thick with the competing yet delicious smells.

The feast could easily accommodate four people.

At 11:15, Raymond made a noisy entry. He was griping at the guards and complaining incoherently about his lawyers. When he saw the food, he forgot about his problems and his family and took the only seat at the table. Using primarily his fingers, he crammed in a few loads of fries and onion rings and began talking. “Fifth Circuit just turned us down, the idiots. Our habeas petition was beautiful, wrote it myself. We’re on the way to Washington, to the Supreme Court. Got a whole law firm up there ready to attack. Thangs look good.” He managed to deftly shove food into his mouth, and chew it, while talking. Inez stared at her feet and wiped tears. Butch and Leon appeared to listen patiently while studying the tiled floor.

“Ya’ll seen Tallulah?” Raymond asked, still chomping after a gulp of iced tea.

“No,” Leon said.

“Bitch. She just wants the book rights to my life story. That’s all. But it ain’t gonna happen. I’m leavin’ all literary rights with the three of ya’ll. What about that?”

“Nice,” said Leon.

“Great,” said Butch.

The final chapter of his life was now close at hand. Raymond had already written his autobiography—two hundred pages—and it had been rejected by every publisher in America.

He chomped away, wreaking havoc with the catfish, burger, and pizza in no particular order. His fork and fingers moved around the table, often headed in different directions, poking, stabbing, grabbing, and shoveling food into his mouth as fast as he could swallow it. A starving hog at a trough would have made less noise. Inez had never spent much time with table manners, and her boys had learned all the bad habits. But eleven years on death row had taken Raymond to new depths of crude behavior.

Leon’s third wife, though, had been properly raised. He snapped ten minutes into the last meal. “Do you have to smack like that?” he barked.

“Damn, son, you’re makin’ more noise than a horse eatin’ corn,” Butch piled on instantly.

Raymond froze, glared at both of his brothers, and for a few long tense seconds the situation could’ve gone either way. It could’ve erupted into a classic Graney brawl with lots of cursing and personal insults. Over the years, there had been several ugly spats in the visitors’ room at death row, all painful, all memorable. But Raymond, to his credit, took a softer approach.

“It’s my last meal,” he said. “And my own family’s bitchin’ at me.”

“I’m not,” Inez said.

“Thank you, Momma.”

Leon held his hands wide in surrender and said, “I’m sorry. We’re all a little tense.”

“Tense?” Raymond said. “You think you’re tense?”

“I’m sorry, Ray.”

“Me too,” Butch said, but only because it was expected.

“You want a hush puppy?” Ray said, offering one to Butch.

A few minutes earlier the last meal had been an irresistible feast. Now, though, after Raymond’s frenzied assault, the table was in ruins. In spite of this, Butch was craving some fries and a hush puppy, but he declined. There was something eerily wrong with nibbling off the edges of a man’s last meal. “No, thanks,” he said.

After catching his breath, Raymond plowed ahead, albeit at a slower and quieter pace. He finished off the lemon pie and chocolate cake, with ice cream, belched, and laughed about it, then said, “Ain’t my last meal, I can promise you that.”

There was a knock on the door, and a guard stepped in and said, “Mr. Tanner would like to see you.”

“Send him in,” Raymond said. “My chief lawyer,” he announced proudly to his family.

Mr. Tanner was a slight, balding young man in a faded navy jacket, old khakis, and even older tennis shoes. He wore no tie. He carried a thick stack of papers. His face was gaunt and pale, and he looked as if he needed a long rest. Raymond quickly introduced him to his family, but Mr. Tanner showed no interest in meeting new people at that moment.

“The Supreme Court just turned us down,” he announced gravely to Raymond.

Raymond swallowed hard, and the room was silent.

“What about the governor?” Leon asked. “And all those lawyers down there talkin’ to him?”

Tanner shot a blank look at Raymond, who said, “I fired them.”

“What about all those lawyers in Washington?” Butch asked.

“I fired them too.”

“What about that big firm from Chicago?” Leon asked.

“I fired them too.”

Tanner looked back and forth among the Graneys.

“Seems like a bad time to be firin’ your lawyers,” Leon said.

“What lawyers?” Tanner asked. “I’m the only lawyer working on this case.”

“You’re fired too,” Raymond said, and violently slapped his glass of tea off the card table, sending ice and liquid splashing against a wall. “Go ahead and kill me!” he screamed. “I don’t care anymore.”

No one breathed for a few seconds, then the door opened suddenly and the warden was back, with his entourage. “It’s time, Raymond,” he said, somewhat impatiently. “The appeals are over, and the governor’s gone to bed.”

There was a long heavy pause as the finality sank in. Inez was crying. Leon was staring blankly at the wall where the tea and ice were sliding to the floor. Butch was looking forlornly at the last two hush puppies. Tanner appeared ready to faint.

Raymond cleared his throat and said, “I’d like to see that Catholic guy. We need to pray.”

“I’ll get him,” the warden said. “You can have one last moment with your family, then it’s time to go.”

The warden left with his assistants. Tanner quickly followed them.

Raymond’s shoulders slumped, and his face was pale. All defiance and bravado vanished. He walked slowly to his mother, fell to his knees in front of her, and put his head in her lap. She rubbed it, wiped her eyes, and kept saying, “Lord, Lord.”

“I’m so sorry, Momma,” Raymond mumbled. “I’m so sorry.”

They cried together for a moment while Leon and Butch stood silently by. Father Leland entered the room, and Raymond slowly stood. His eyes were wet and red, and his voice was soft and weak. “I guess it’s over,” he said to the priest, who nodded sadly and patted his shoulder. “I’ll be with you in the isolation room, Raymond,” he said. “We’ll have a final prayer, if you wish.”

“Probably not a bad idea.”

The door opened again, and the warden was back. He addressed the Graneys and Father Leland. “Please listen to me,” he said. “This is my fourth execution, and I’ve learned a few things. One is that it is a bad idea for the mother to witness the execution. I strongly suggest, Mrs. Graney, that you remain here, in this room, for the next hour or so, until it’s over. We have a nurse who will sit with you, and she has a sedative that I recommend. Please.” He looked at Leon and Butch and pleaded with his eyes. Both got the message.

“I’ll be there till the end,” Inez said, then wailed so loudly that even the warden had a flash of goose bumps.

Butch stepped next to her and stroked her shoulder.

“You need to stay here, Momma,” Leon said. Inez wailed again.

“She’ll stay,” Leon said to the warden. “Just get her that pill.”

Raymond hugged both of his brothers, and for the first time ever said that he loved them, an act that was difficult even at that awful moment. He kissed his mother on the cheek and said good-bye.

“Be a man,” Butch said with clenched teeth and wet eyes, and they embraced for the final time.

They led him away, and the nurse entered the room. She handed Inez a pill and a cup of water, and within minutes she was slumped in her wheelchair. The nurse sat beside her and said “I’m very sorry” to Butch and Leon.

At 12:15, the door opened and a guard said, “Come with me.” The brothers were led from the room, into the hallway that was packed with guards and officials and many other curious onlookers lucky enough to gain access, and then back through the front entrance. Outside, the air was heavy, and the heat had not broken. They quickly lit cigarettes as they walked along a narrow sidewalk next to the west wing of the maximum security unit, past the open windows covered with thick black bars, and as they moved casually to the death room, they could hear the other condemned men banging their cell doors, yelling in protest, all making whatever noise they could in a last-minute farewell to one of their own.

Butch and Leon smoked furiously and wanted to yell something of their own, something in support of the inmates. But neither said a word. They turned a corner and saw a small, flat redbrick building with guards and others milling around its door. There was an ambulance beside it. Their escort led them through a side door to a cramped witness room, and upon entering, they saw faces they expected, but had no interest in seeing. Sheriff Walls was there because the law required it. The prosecutor was there, by choice. Charlene, Coy’s long-suffering widow, sat next to the sheriff. She was joined by two hefty young gals who were no doubt her daughters. The victims’ side of the witness room was separated by a

wall of Plexiglas that allowed them to glare at the condemned man's family but prevented them from speaking, or cursing. Butch and Leon sat in plastic chairs. Strangers shuffled in behind them, and when everyone was in place, the door was closed. The witness room was packed and hot.

They stared at nothing. The windows before them were shielded by black curtains so that they could not see the sinister preparations under way on the other side. There were sounds, indistinguishable movements. Suddenly the curtains were yanked open, and they were looking at the death room, twelve feet by fifteen, with a freshly painted concrete floor. In the center of it was the gas chamber, an octagon-shaped silver cylinder with windows of its own to allow proper witnessing and verification of death.

And, there was Raymond, strapped to a chair inside the gas chamber, his head secured with some hideous brace that forced him to look ahead and prevented him from seeing the witnesses. At that moment he seemed to be looking up as the warden spoke to him. The prison attorney was present, as were some guards and of course the executioner and his assistant. All went about their tasks, whatever they were supposed to be doing, with grim determined looks, as if they were bothered by this ritual. In fact, all were volunteers, except for the warden and the attorney.

A small speaker hung from a nail in the witness room and conveyed the final sounds.

The attorney stepped close to the chamber door and said: "Raymond, by law I'm required to read your death warrant." He lifted a sheet of paper and continued: "Pursuant to a verdict of guilty and a sentence of death returned against you in the Circuit Court of Ford County, you are hereby sentenced to death by lethal gas in the gas chamber of the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. May God have mercy on your soul." He then stepped away and lifted a telephone from its receiver on the wall. He listened, then said, "No stays."

The warden said, "Any reason why this execution should not go forward?"

"No," said the attorney.

“Any last words, Raymond?”

Raymond’s voice was barely audible, but in the perfect stillness of the witness room he was heard: “I am sorry for what I did. I ask the forgiveness of the family of Coy Childers. I have been forgiven by my Lord. Let’s get this over with.”

The guards left the death room, leaving the warden and the attorney, who shuffled backward as far from Raymond as possible. The executioner stepped forward and closed the narrow chamber door. His assistant checked the seals around it. When the chamber was ready, they glanced around the death room—a quick inspection. No problems. The executioner disappeared into a small closet, the chemical room, where he controlled his valves.

Long seconds passed. The witnesses gawked in horror and fascination and held their breaths. Raymond held his too, but not for long.

The executioner placed a plastic container of sulfuric acid into a tube that ran from the chemical room to a bowl in the bottom of the chamber, just under the chair that Raymond now occupied. He pulled a lever to release the canister. A clicking sound occurred, and most of those watching flinched. Raymond flinched too. His fingers clutched the arms of the chair. His spine stiffened. Seconds passed, then the sulfuric acid mixed with a collection of cyanide pellets already in the bowl, and the lethal steam began rising. When Raymond finally exhaled, when he could no longer hold his breath, he sucked in as much poison as possible to speed things along. His entire body reacted instantly with jolts and gyrations. His shoulders jumped back. His chin and forehead fought mightily against the leather head brace. His hands, arms, and legs shook violently as the steam rose and grew thicker.

His body reacted and fought for a minute or so, then the cyanide took control. The convulsions slowed. His head became still. His fingers loosened their death grip on the arms of the chair. The air continued to thicken as Raymond’s breathing slowed, then stopped. Some final twitching, a jolt in his chest muscles, a vibration in his hands, and finally it was over.

He was pronounced dead at 12:31 a.m. The black curtains were closed, and the witnesses hustled from the room. Outside, Butch and Leon leaned on a corner of the redbrick building and smoked a cigarette.

Inside the death room, a vent above the chamber was opened, and the gas escaped into the sticky air over Parchman. Fifteen minutes later, guards with gloves unshackled Raymond and wrestled his body out of the chamber. His clothing was cut off, to be burned. His corpse was hosed off with cold water, then dried with kitchen towels, reclothed in prison whites, and laid inside a cheap pine coffin.

Leon and Butch sat with their mother and waited for the warden. Inez was still sedated, but she clearly understood what had taken place in the last few minutes. Her head was buried in her hands, and she cried softly, mumbling occasionally. A guard entered and asked for the keys to Mr. McBride's van. An hour dragged by.

The warden, fresh from his press announcement, finally entered the room. He offered some sappy condolences, managed to look sad and sympathetic, then asked Leon to sign some forms. He explained that Raymond left almost $1,000 in his prison account, and a check would be sent within a week. He said the van was loaded with the coffin and four boxes of Raymond's belongings—his guitar, clothing, books, correspondence, legal materials, and manuscripts. They were free to go.

The coffin was moved to one side so Inez could be rolled through the back of the van, and when she touched it, she broke down again. Leon and Butch rearranged boxes, secured the wheelchair, then moved the coffin again. When everything was in its place, they followed a car full of guards back to the front of the prison, through the entrance, and when they turned onto Highway 3, they drove past the last of the protesters. The television crews were gone. Leon and Butch lit cigarettes, but Inez was too emotional to smoke. No one spoke for miles as they hurried through the cotton and soybean fields. Near the town of Marks, Leon spotted an all-night convenience store. He bought a soda for Butch and tall coffees for his mother and himself.

When the Delta yielded to the hill country, they felt better.

"What did he say last?" Inez asked, her tongue thick.

"He apologized," Butch said. "Asked Charlene for forgiveness."

"So she watched it?"

"Oh yes. You didn't think she'd miss it."

"I should've seen it."

"No, Momma," Leon said. "You can be thankful for the rest of your days that you didn't witness the execution. Your last memory of Raymond was a long hug and a nice farewell. Please don't think you missed anything."

"It was horrible," Butch said.

"I should've seen it."

In the town of Batesville they passed a fast-food place that advertised chicken biscuits and twenty-four-hour service. Leon turned around. "I could use the ladies' room," Inez said. There were no other customers inside at 3:15 in the morning. Butch rolled his mother to a table near the front, and they ate in silence. The van with Raymond's coffin was less than thirty feet away.

Inez managed a few bites, then lost her appetite. Butch and Leon ate like refugees.

They entered Ford County just after 5:00 a.m., and it was still very dark, the roads empty. They drove to Pleasant Ridge in the north end of the county, to a small Pentecostal church where they parked in the gravel lot, and waited. At the first hint of sunlight, they heard an engine start somewhere in the distance.

"Wait here," Leon said to Butch, then left the van and disappeared. Behind the church there was a cemetery, and at the far end of it a backhoe had just begun digging the grave. The backhoe was owned by a cousin's boss. At 6:30, several men from the church arrived and went to the grave site. Leon drove the van down a dirt trail and stopped near the backhoe, which had finished its digging and was now just waiting. The men pulled the coffin from the van. Butch and Leon gently placed their mother's wheelchair on the ground and pushed her as they followed the coffin.

They lowered it with ropes, and when it settled onto the four-by-four studs at the bottom, they withdrew the ropes. The preacher

read a short verse of Scripture, then said a prayer. Leon and Butch shoveled some dirt onto the coffin, then thanked the men for their assistance.

As they drove away, the backhoe was refilling the grave.

The house was empty—no concerned neighbors waiting, no relatives there to mourn. They unloaded Inez and rolled her into the house and into her bedroom. She was soon fast asleep. The four boxes were placed in a storage shed, where their contents would weather and fade along with the memories of Raymond.

It was decided that Butch would stay home that day to care for Inez, and to ward off the reporters. There had been many calls in the past week, and someone was bound to show up with a camera. He worked at a sawmill, and his boss would understand.

Leon drove to Clanton and stopped on the edge of town to fill up with gas. At 8:00 a.m. sharp he pulled in to the lot at McBride Upholstery and returned the van. An employee explained that Mr. McBride wasn't in yet, was probably still at the coffee shop, and usually got to work around 9:00. Leon handed over the keys, thanked the employee, and left.

He drove to the lamp factory east of town, and punched the clock at 8:30, as always.

If you liked *Fetching Raymond*, don't miss the full collection of stories: John Grisham's #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Ford County*.

In *Ford County*, Grisham returns to the scene of his beloved first novel, *A Time to Kill*, with stories that will enthrall you and characters you will never forget. In this wholly surprising collection of novellas, Grisham finds both pathos and humor in the trials, legal and otherwise, of people passing through—and living in—indelible Ford County, Mississippi.

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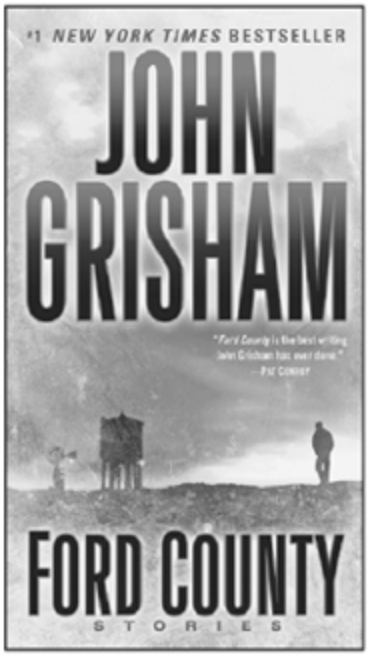

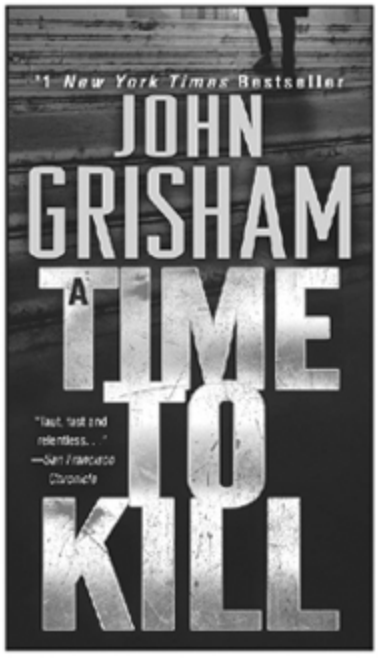


DELL BOOKS

Read on for an excerpt from John Grisham's

A Time to Kill

1

Billy Ray Cobb was the younger and smaller of the two rednecks. At twenty-three he was already a three-year veteran of the state penitentiary at Parchman. Possession, with intent to sell. He was a lean, tough little punk who had survived prison by somehow maintaining a ready supply of drugs that he sold and sometimes gave to the blacks and the guards for protection. In the year since his release he had continued to prosper, and his small-time narcotics business had elevated him to the position of one of the more affluent rednecks in Ford County. He was a businessman, with employees, obligations, deals, everything but taxes. Down at the Ford place in Clanton he was known as the last man in recent history to pay cash for a new pickup truck. Sixteen thousand cash, for a custom-built, four-wheel drive, canary yellow, luxury Ford pickup. The fancy chrome wheels and mudgrip racing tires had been received in a business deal. The rebel flag hanging across the rear window had been stolen by Cobb from a drunken fraternity boy at an Ole Miss football game. The pickup was Billy Ray's most prized possession. He sat on the tailgate drinking a beer, smoking a joint, watching his friend Willard take his turn with the black girl.

Willard was four years older and a dozen years slower. He was generally a harmless sort who had never been in serious trouble and had never been seriously employed. Maybe an occasional fight with a night in jail, but nothing that would distinguish him. He called himself a pulpwood cutter, but a bad back customarily kept him out of the woods. He had hurt his back working on an offshore rig somewhere in the Gulf, and the oil company paid him a nice settlement, which he lost when his ex-wife cleaned him out. His primary vocation was that of a part-time employee of Billy Ray

Cobb, who didn't pay much but was liberal with his dope. For the first time in years Willard could always get his hands on something. And he always needed something. He'd been that way since he hurt his back.

She was ten, and small for her age. She lay on her elbows, which were stuck and bound together with yellow nylon rope. Her legs were spread grotesquely with the right foot tied tight to an oak sapling and the left to a rotting, leaning post of a long-neglected fence. The ski rope had cut into her ankles and the blood ran down her legs. Her face was bloody and swollen, with one eye bulging and closed and the other eye half open so she could see the other white man sitting on the truck. She did not look at the man on top of her. He was breathing hard and sweating and cursing. He was hurting her.

When he finished, he slapped her and laughed, and the other man laughed in return, then they laughed harder and rolled around the grass by the truck like two crazy men, screaming and laughing. She turned away from them and cried softly, careful to keep herself quiet. She had been slapped earlier for crying and screaming. They promised to kill her if she didn't keep quiet.

They grew tired of laughing and pulled themselves onto the tailgate, where Willard cleaned himself with the little nigger's shirt, which by now was soaked with blood and sweat. Cobb handed him a cold beer from the cooler and commented on the humidity. They watched her as she sobbed and made strange, quiet sounds, then became still. Cobb's beer was half empty, and it was not cold anymore. He threw it at the girl. It hit her in the stomach, splashing white foam, and it rolled off in the dirt near some other cans, all of which had originated from the same cooler. For two six-packs now they had thrown their half-empty cans at her and laughed. Willard had trouble with the target, but Cobb was fairly accurate. They were not ones to waste beer, but the heavier cans could be felt better and it was great fun to watch the foam shoot everywhere.

The warm beer mixed with the dark blood and ran down her face and neck into a puddle behind her head. She did not move.

Willard asked Cobb if he thought she was dead. Cobb opened another beer and explained that she was not dead because niggers generally could not be killed by kicking and beating and raping. It took much more, something like a knife or a gun or a rope to dispose of a nigger. Although he had never taken part in such a killing, he had lived with a bunch of niggers in prison and knew all about them. They were always killing each other, and they always used a weapon of some sort. Those who were just beaten and raped never died. Some of the whites were beaten and raped, and some of them died. But none of the niggers. Their heads were harder. Willard seemed satisfied.

Willard asked what he planned to do now that they were through with her. Cobb sucked on his joint, chased it with beer, and said he wasn't through. He bounced from the tailgate and staggered across the small clearing to where she was tied. He cursed her and screamed at her to wake up, then he poured cold beer in her face, laughing like a crazy man.

She watched him as he walked around the tree on her right side, and she stared at him as he stared between her legs. When he lowered his pants she turned to the left and closed her eyes. He was hurting her again.

She looked out through the woods and saw something—a man running wildly through the vines and underbrush. It was her daddy, yelling and pointing at her and coming desperately to save her. She cried out for him, and he disappeared. She fell asleep.

When she awoke one of the men was lying under the tailgate, the other under a tree. They were asleep. Her arms and legs were numb. The blood and beer and urine had mixed with the dirt underneath her to form a sticky paste that glued her small body to the ground and crackled when she moved and wiggled. Escape, she thought, but her mightiest efforts moved her only a few inches to the right. Her feet were tied so high her buttocks barely touched the ground. Her legs and arms were so deadened they refused to move.

She searched the woods for her daddy and quietly called his name. She waited, then slept again.

When she awoke the second time they were up and moving around. The tall one staggered to her with a small knife. He grabbed her left ankle and sawed furiously on the rope until it gave way. Then he freed the right leg, and she curled into a fetal position with her back to them.

Cobb strung a length of quarter-inch ski rope over a limb and tied a loop in one end with a slip knot. He grabbed her and put the noose around her head, then walked across the clearing with the other end of the rope and sat on the tailgate, where Willard was smoking a fresh joint and grinning at Cobb for what he was about to do. Cobb pulled the rope tight, then gave a vicious yank, bouncing the little nude body along the ground and stopping it directly under the limb. She gagged and coughed, so he kindly loosened the rope to spare her a few more minutes. He tied the rope to the bumper and opened another beer.

They sat on the tailgate drinking, smoking, and staring at her. They had been at the lake most of the day, where Cobb had a friend with a boat and some extra girls who were supposed to be easy but turned out to be untouchable. Cobb had been generous with his drugs and beer, but the girls did not reciprocate. Frustrated, they left the lake and were driving to no place in particular when they happened across the girl. She was walking along a gravel road with a sack of groceries when Willard nailed her in the back of the head with a beer can.

“You gonna do it?” asked Willard, his eyes red and glazed.

Cobb hesitated. “Naw, I’ll let you do it. It was your idea.”

Willard took a drag on his joint, then spit and said, “Wasn’t my idea. You’re the expert on killin’ niggers. Do it.”

Cobb untied the rope from the bumper and pulled it tight. It peeled bark from the limb and sprinkled fine bits of elm around the girl, who was watching them carefully now. She coughed.

Suddenly, she heard something—like a car with loud pipes. The two men turned quickly and looked down the dirt road to the highway in the distance. They cursed and scrambled around, one

slamming the tailgate and the other running toward her. He tripped and landed near her. They cursed each other while they grabbed her, removed the rope from her neck, dragged her to the pickup and threw her over the tailgate into the bed of the truck. Cobb slapped her and threatened to kill her if she did not lie still and keep quiet. He said he would take her home if she stayed down and did as told; otherwise, they would kill her. They slammed the doors and sped onto the dirt road. She was going home. She passed out.

Cobb and Willard waved at the Firebird with the loud pipes as it passed them on the narrow dirt road. Willard checked the back to make sure the little nigger was lying down. Cobb turned onto the highway and raced away.

"What now?" Willard asked nervously.

"Don't know," Cobb answered nervously. "But we gotta do something fast before she gets blood all over my truck. Look at her back there, she's bleedin' all over the place."

Willard thought for a minute while he finished a beer. "Let's throw her off a bridge," he said proudly.

"Good idea. Damned good idea." Cobb slammed on the brakes. "Gimme a beer," he ordered Willard, who stumbled out of the truck and fetched two beers from the back.

"She's even got blood on the cooler," he reported as they raced off again.

Gwen Hailey sensed something horrible. Normally she would have sent one of the three boys to the store, but they were being punished by their father and had been sentenced to weed-pulling in the garden. Tonya had been to the store before by herself—it was only a mile away—and had proven reliable. But after two hours Gwen sent the boys to look for their little sister. They figured she was down at the Pounders' house playing with the many Pounders kids, or maybe she had ventured past the store to visit her best friend, Bessie Pierson.

Mr. Bates at the store said she had come and gone an hour earlier. Jarvis, the middle boy, found a sack of groceries beside the road.

Gwen called her husband at the paper mill, then loaded Carl Lee, Jr., into the car and began driving the gravel roads around the store. They drove to a settlement of ancient shotgun houses on Graham Plantation to check with an aunt. They stopped at Broadway's store a mile from Bates Grocery and were told by a group of old black men that she had not been seen. They crisscrossed the gravel roads and dusty field roads for three square miles around their house.

Cobb could not find a bridge unoccupied by niggers with fishing poles. Every bridge they approached had four or five niggers hanging off the sides with large straw hats and cane poles, and under every bridge on the banks there would be another group sitting on buckets with the same straw hats and cane poles, motionless except for an occasional swat at a fly or a slap at a mosquito.

He was scared now. Willard had passed out and was of no help, and he was left alone to dispose of the girl in such a way that she could never tell. Willard snored as he frantically drove the gravel roads and county roads in search of a bridge or ramp on some river where he could stop and toss her without being seen by half a dozen niggers with straw hats. He looked in the mirror and saw her trying to stand. He slammed his brakes, and she crashed into the front of the bed, just under the window. Willard ricocheted off the dash into the floorboard, where he continued to snore. Cobb cursed them both equally.

Lake Chatulla was nothing more than a huge, shallow, man-made mudhole with a grass-covered dam running exactly one mile along one end. It sat in the far southwest corner of Ford County, with a few acres in Van Buren County. In the spring it would hold the distinction of being the largest body of water in Mississippi. But by late summer the rains were long gone, and the sun would cook the shallow water until the lake would dehydrate. Its once ambitious shorelines would retreat and move much closer together, creating a depthless basin of reddish brown water. It was fed from all directions by innumerable streams, creeks, sloughs, and a couple of

currents large enough to be named rivers. The existence of all these tributaries necessarily gave rise to a good number of bridges near the lake.

It was over these bridges the yellow pickup flew in an all-out effort to find a suitable place to unload an unwanted passenger. Cobb was desperate. He knew of one other bridge, a narrow wooden one over Foggy Creek. As he approached, he saw niggers with cane poles, so he turned off a side road and stopped the truck. He lowered the tailgate, dragged her out, and threw her in a small ravine lined with kudzu.

Carl Lee Hailey did not hurry home. Gwen was easily excited, and she had called the mill numerous times when she thought the children had been kidnapped. He punched out at quitting time, and made the thirty-minute drive home in thirty minutes. Anxiety hit him when he turned onto his gravel drive and saw the patrol car parked next to the front porch. Other cars belonging to Gwen's family were scattered along the long drive and in the yard, and there was one car he didn't recognize. It had cane poles sticking out the side windows, and there were at least seven straw hats sitting in it.

Where were Tonya and the boys?

As he opened the front door he heard Gwen crying. To his right in the small living room he found a crowd huddled above a small figure lying on the couch. The child was covered with wet towels and surrounded by crying relatives. As he moved to the couch the crying stopped and the crowd backed away. Only Gwen stayed by the girl. She softly stroked her hair. He knelt beside the couch and touched the girl's shoulder. He spoke to his daughter, and she tried to smile. Her face was bloody pulp covered with knots and lacerations. Both eyes were swollen shut and bleeding. His eyes watered as he looked at her tiny body, completely wrapped in towels and bleeding from ankles to forehead.

Carl Lee asked Gwen what happened. She began shaking and wailing, and was led to the kitchen by her brother. Carl Lee stood

and turned to the crowd and demanded to know what happened.

Silence.

He asked for the third time. The deputy, Willie Hastings, one of Gwen's cousins, stepped forward and told Carl Lee that some people were fishing down by Foggy Creek when they saw Tonya lying in the middle of the road. She told them her daddy's name, and they brought her home.

Hastings shut up and stared at his feet.

Carl Lee stared at him and waited. Everyone else stopped breathing and watched the floor.

"What happened, Willie?" Carl Lee yelled as he stared at the deputy.

Hastings spoke slowly, and while staring out the window repeated what Tonya had told her mother about the white men and their pickup, and the rope and the trees, and being hurt when they got on her. Hastings stopped when he heard the siren from the ambulance.

The crowd filed solemnly through the front door and waited on the porch, where they watched the crew unload a stretcher and head for the house.

The paramedics stopped in the yard when the front door opened and Carl Lee walked out with his daughter in his arms. He whispered gently to her as huge tears dripped from his chin. He walked to the rear of the ambulance and stepped inside. The paramedics closed the door and carefully removed her from his embrace.

For almost a quarter of a century, John Grisham's *A Time To Kill* has captivated readers with its raw exploration of race, retribution, and justice. Now, its hero, Jake Brigance, returns to the courtroom in a dramatic showdown as Ford County again confronts its tortured history. Filled with the intrigue, suspense and plot twists that are the hallmarks of America's favorite storyteller, SYCAMORE ROW is the thrilling story of the elusive search for justice in a small Southern town.

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