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Firenze Books

In a Small Town (Called America)

It's getting worse, and Jake finished his beer, and together they listened to the rain on the tin roof of the drive-shed. The receptiveness of its falling. The comfort within its echoing.

And he said, things are lookin up.

Damn straight, said Jared.

I mean, now that things are great again, things are lookin up, and Jake stood and walked to the fridge and grabbed two more beers. He passed one to Jared and sat back down on the block of cracked white oak. He took a sip and looked at his younger brother. I went and saw the doc.

Oh?

Said I'm shooting blanks.

Shit, Jake. I'm sorry to hear that. Have ya told Sugar?

Last night.

How'd that go?

'Bout as good as you'd think. Ya know how much she wants kids. Not that I don't—I mean, you got your two and they're doin okay, right?

Right.

Thing is, I don't wanna adopt some stranger's baby and say it's mine. Sugar don't neither.

We could get her artificially knocked up, but—

What?

Jake shrugged and took another sip.

They got DNA.

I know they got DNA, but nothin's perfect, and it might work out you're paying for somethin a little less than what you'd hoped for, ya know what I mean?

I guess.

And then you're just fucked.

So what'ya thinkin'?

Well ... and Jake paused, thinking for a moment. I want you to do it.

You what?

You heard me.

Are you askin me to fuck Sugar?

Yup.

Really?

Yup.

Have you lost your goddamn mind?

Jake lifted his John Deere ball cap, scratched the top of his balding head, and said, nope.

Does Sugar know?

We talked about it.

You talked about it?

Yup.

And what'ya think, Alice is gonna be okay with me walkin next door and havin a go with Sugar? Cause I got news for ya, she won't be.

She don't gotta know.

What'ya mean she don't gotta know? How the hell is she not gonna know?

Cause we ain't gonna tell her, that's how.

For fuck's sake, this is nuts, I can't fuck Sugar.

What'ya mean you can't fuck Sugar? She looks good still. Hell, she's a lot better lookin than that girl you were fuckin back in high school.

She wasn't that bad.

The hell she wasn't.

C'mon, Jake, get serious, you don't mean this shit?

I'm as serious as the day is long, little brother. Hell, it won't take more than a time or two. Didn't ya always tell me all you had to do to knock up Alice was to hang your pants on the bed post?

True enough, but still—.

At least this way the kid'll be a Burluson. Jake finished his beer and threw the empty at the garbage can. Besides, ya don't gotta worry 'bout a thing. We'll just get up a little early, you walk to my place, and I'll come here. After you're done, you come back here like nothing ever happened, and I'll head back home. Jake stood. Just think about it. He walked to the door and looked back. Oh, and by the way, Sugar says she'll be droppin eggs in the next day or two.

She'll be what?

That's what she said.

You talked about it?

Yup, we talked about it. Later.

Yeah, said Jared. Fuck me.

Jake opened the door and walked to the fridge and grabbed a beer. How'd it go?

Standing at the workbench cleaning an engine part Jared looked back.

Ya got it done, right?

Yeah, I got it done, but I had to turn her around.

What? Why? She looks good still.

No, I mean, to do it, ya know.

I guess, and Jake tipped back his beer.

Maybe cause she's your wife, or somethin like that, what'ya think?

How long ya been married?

Eleven years.

Do ya love her still?

What? Yeah, I guess. How the hell am I supposed to know?

It's hard to know, ain't it?

Yeah, it's not easy.

Ya think she still loves you?

Of course she does. Why wouldn't she?

I didn't say she didn't. What about Sugar?

What about her?

Think she still loves me?

Hell, I don't know. Why?

It's just something ya wonder about, ya know? That's all. It's not like it's not possible. It happens all the time.

I guess.

Do ya think it matters?

What?

Love.

I don't know—for fuck's sake, Jake.

Jake tossed his empty at the garbage can. I think it does. He walked to the door and looked back. We'd best try again tomorrow, while things are goin good that way.

Goin good?

Yeah, said Jake. See ya.

Yeah, said Jared. Later.

Sugar walked out the door, her flip-flops smacking her heels, her white short dress tight all the way down.

She crossed the adjoining properties and reached the gravel driveway. She looked away, somewhere, and took a drag of her cigarette. She tossed it to the gravel and toed it out and she opened the drive-shed door.

Her eyes adjusting to the dim light she walked to the fridge and grabbed a beer. She looked at the calendar hanging on the wall, some girl with less than little on draped over the hood of a shiny red car. They make good money, ya know. She opened the beer and looked back at the poster. A blonde, like her. It's not just the money, it's the connections. Ya know that, right?

She walked to the workbench and pulled herself onto a high metal stool. She crossed her legs, her one foot bouncing—a nervous energy of how she was hinged, much like this place itself. I suppose ya talked about it?

Not much we did, no.

She took a sip of beer and leaned back, her thin milky-white forearms resting on the workbench, her dress high up on her long legs, and she tilted her head, the thickness of her blonde hair falling to one side and catching the light, just right, and she knew it, and did so without having to. What'd he say?

She looked at her chipped red nail polish.

He wanted to know if it went okay.

And?

And what?

What'ya say?

Not much.

Not much?

No. Can we not talk about this?

Why don't ya wanna talk about it?

What's the point?

The point? She uncrossed her legs and crossed them the other way, her foot starting to bounce. Why's it gotta be so hot in here? What's wrong with that damn fan? She leaned forward. The point is, we need to figure this out, and right this goddamn minute we do.

Jared grabbed a rag and began to wipe his hands. What's with you?

Did ya not hear us last night? I'd be surprised if ya didn't.

A little, I did. What was up? He walked to the fridge and grabbed a beer.

I told him, I ain't no puppy-mill slut, and I ain't sleeping with you no more.

Jared stopped. You're what?

What?

They looked at one another.

You ain't sleeping with me no more?

Of course I am, I just ain't doin it for him no more.

That makes no sense.

Are you dumb? There's a world of difference between my wanting to sleep with you and him wanting me to. And I can tell you this much, we had better figure this out, and I mean now.

Jared leaned against the bench and sipped his beer. How long we been together?

I don't know, a couple of years. Why?

In all that time we been doin it, were ya never worried about getting pregnant? Or were ya just hoping ya would and say it was Jake's?

Ya don't get it, do you? All this damn talk of babies, I can hardly take it.

What'ya mean?

She put her beer down and got up and began to pace in her flip-flops. It's the last thing I'm ever gonna do, do understand that?

What?

This world is a hard world, Jared Burleson, and it gets no easier being a woman, that's for damn sure. She picked up her beer and took a sip. And if you think I'm gonna get dropped down another rung or two by having either yours or your brother's damn babies, ya gotta another thing comin. Besides, it plays absolute havoc with your body, destroys it completely. She looked at Jared. Is that what you want?

Hold on, Sugar, are you telling me all this time you've been on birth control?

That is correct, smart boy, yes I have.

And all this time Jake thought you were trying to get pregnant?

Correct.

And then it turns out, he's sterile? What would ya have done if he hadn't been?

I don't know. I'd of figured somethin out.

And now he's got me doin ya to get ya pregnant even though I already am and you're on birth control?

She pulled herself back up onto the stool. As it turns out, yes. She took a sip of beer.

Jared pushed off the workbench and stood in front of Sugar, his hands reaching past her to the workbench. You're somethin, Sugar. I don't know what, but you're definitely somethin.

The small fan in the window began to rattle and it blew warm sticky air.

Sweat from his forehead dropped to her thigh.

She looked at her leg, at the drop, and she put her finger to it, and it ran like a tear.

She felt the smooth touch of her dress, moving up, and she pushed herself forward on the stool, just a little, just enough, a lazy southern cat stretching its underbelly to the warming sun.

Sugar.

I know, baby, and she put her arms around his neck and she looked out the small window. At the scrubby land. At the coming heat. A small bird came to the window. Maybe a starling? She didn't know. She did once, when she was just a little girl.