

DIXIE DAWN

A RIFF ON LEWIS NORDAN'S MUSIC OF THE SWAMP

I give the knob of the kitchen spigot a twist, and I've a feeling this'll be the night when the water never stops. It'll flow over the sink and fill the room, and it'll carry me out of the house. It'll carry out my bottles of Old Crow and Wild Irish Rose. It'll carry out my carpentry tools. It'll carry out my old record player, Bessie Smith singing *muddy water 'round my feet*, and the tap water, turning muddy, will carry me into the Delta, Bessie singing *muddy water in my shoes*. My wrist-cuttin' knife, the one my wife done hid from me, will float by, but I'll have no need of it because the water'll do the trick.

Claudette, my wife, shuts the water off. And if the truth be knew, I feel some relief. But if the water ain't going to take me tonight, I have a need to at least hear Bessie sing of it.

I go to my room, and I turn on my old record player, and I go toward my chair. But I see my closet door is open, just a sliver, and I know that ain't my doing because I fear the kinds of things that can slink out of a closet if you don't keep it closed.

I open the door wide, just to check out the situation. Down from the shelf comes a box, a wood box bigger'n a shoe box. It hits me below the eye, cuts me, knocks me to the floor. I crawl to my chest-of-drawers and get out a bottle of Old Crow and take a few good slugs just to ease the pain. *my mama says I'm reckless*, Bessie is singing, *my daddy says I'm wild*, and nobody knows better'n me what it means to be reckless and wild. Pretty soon Bessie and me have near finished the Old Crow, and I push my fingers all around my face, and I can't feel none of it.

I crawl to the box, for I can't remember having such a box. I lift out a rust-colored feather

a feller at the Cock-N-Bull bar told me once poked out of Bessie's hat, though these years later it looks like an ordinary Rhode Island Red rooster feather. I lift out a handful of empty hotel mini-bar whiskey bottles. I lift out a newspaper clipping of Augie McNeer's funeral, Augie's picture torn away. Dixie Dawn McNeer's face shows, though. Dixie Dawn, then thirteen, sung at her daddy's funeral.

The clipping takes me back a time, a time a handful of years back, and I'm back at the funeral. Not that I went. No one went 'cept the McNeers. Iola drug herself there because she had to because she's the wife. Dixie Dawn didn't drug though. She marched along, head high, like she was ready to give the performance of her life.

And as far as I know, as far as anyone knows, I guess, she did.

I'd been passing by the church on the way to the Cock-N-Bull. Iola and Dixie Dawn stood outside the church, not yet gone in for the funeral.

"Hey, Mr. Stovall," Dixie Dawn said. "Come listen, Mr. Stovall," Dixie Dawn said. "I'm singing a duet."

Dixie Dawn. Now, me, I prefer Bessie Smith's voice, a powerful voice, a voice rising up out of the muddy waters. But Dixie Dawn's singing is something, too. A big voice that lifts you to the sky, right up to the everlasting sky. Everybody knows Dixie Dawn wants to sing soprano in the Metrie-polytan Opera. She's fat like an opera singer—even at thirteen she was fat with a big opera bosom on her.

But a duet? I looked around. Just us and a scrawny dog limping past. And Iola carried a tune like a frog suffering tonsillitis, and I sang like a mouse with hiccups. Besides, Dixie Dawn sang in foreign.

"It's from Don Giovanni," Dixie Dawn said. "Donna Anna makes her boyfriend, Ottavio,

swear revenge against the low-down scoundrel what killed her daddy. Only, Donna Anna and Ottavio don't know who the murderer is and Ottavio don't never succeed."

"The moon was peach-basket-size last night," I said. "Lit up the whole Mississippi sky."

"But the murderer gets his, he surely does," Dixie Dawn said. "A big statue sits on Donna Anna's daddy's grave, and when the murderer skulks by, the statue sinks into the earth and sucks him down to *hell*."

"The Delta is filled up with death," I said. I turned and made for the Cock-N-Bull, taking the long way.

DeeDee, her cheeks flushed with excitement, or maybe with Four Roses bourbon, was leaning toward me over the bar counter, displaying her charms. She poured me a shot of Early Times. I downed it and chased it with another. "Flo says," DeeDee said—

Flo is her boy, and he and my son, Eb, are best friends. White-blond, blue-eyed, freckle-faced boys. Everybody says they look near enough alike to be sisters.

"Flo says Eb told him he saw Augie take a garden hoe to Dixie Dawn last week."

"Tell the truth," Willie the Bartender said.

Willie the Bartender, his hair Brylcreemed up high like Elvis Presley and silver rings on the three fingers of his left hand. For the first seven years of my boy Eb's life, I'd had a nag in my head that Willie might be Flo's daddy, for Willie had been round to see DeeDee after I'd been round to see DeeDee after DeeDee's no-count husband Roy had gone off and not come round no more. But then I found a box up on my closet shelf—come to think of it, might be the same box I found today—and in the box I found baby pictures of Eb and Flo. I'd seen in those baby pictures that DeeDee's Flo bore no resemblance to Willie. But I'd squinted real good, and for the first time I'd seen that both boys, DeeDee's Flo and my Eb, might bear a resemblance to

DeeDee's no-count husband Roy. So it just shows to go you.

“On 'count of Dixie Dawn's singing,” DeeDee said. “Augie McNeer near chopped his own daughter's head off.”

“Augie always was tone-deaf as armadillo,” Willie crooned, Elvis-like.

“And then,” DeeDee said to me, “not two days later, our own Eb and Flo find Augie in Lake Roebuck!” DeeDee ragged the counter right smartly, leaned over so far in her low-cut blouse I could about see down to China.

Willie the Bartender said, “Augie's bare feet and legs stuck straight up out of the water. That's what Big Boy Chisholm told me.”

After Eb and Flo found dead Augie McNeer, Big Boy Chisholm, the lawman, brung Eb home, and Flo with him. And though I'd told those boys to hush and listen to Bessie—*my mama says I'm reckless*, Bessie sang, *my daddy says I'm wild*, and nobody knew better'n me what it meant to be reckless and wild—they didn't hush. Eb told me all about the dead man with his bare feet and legs stuck up, the rest of Augie snagged upside down in the water in a drift of bush. And Flo told me, “When I saw that dead man with his bare feet and legs stuck up, I thought it might be my daddy.” And Eb told me, “Last week I seen Mr. McNeer chopping at Dixie Dawn with a garden hoe.” And I said, “Hush now, boys, and listen to Bessie.” I hadn't meant to tell those boys, those scared boys, to hush. That was the last thing in the world I meant to do. I meant to tell those boys there were worse things than finding a dead man with his feet and legs stuck up out of the swamp, worse things than your daddy running off, or not run off but might as well run off, because God knew who Flo's daddy was, who Eb's daddy was, and there were worse things than your daddy coming chopping at you with a hoe. A worse thing was your daddy chopping up your dreams, and worst of all was turning into a daddy who chopped up your child's dreams,

sometimes just by sitting there with a bottle of Early Times in your hand and telling your child to hush.

No, I hadn't needed to hear the boys go on about the dead body. And I didn't need to hear DeeDee tell me now about Eb seeing Augie take a garden hoe to Dixie Dawn. No sirree, I didn't need to hear it, not from Eb last week and not DeeDee now. For I seen it myself.

"Another shot," I said to DeeDee. I downed it.

It'd been mid-morning and I'd been heading for the Cock-N-Bull for a carpentry break. My path took me right past the McNeer's, a house off by itself at the end of a cotton field, a long green cotton field, the smell of cotton flowers on the wind. I was a distance away, but I could see Augie, a drunk, a mean drunk who worked all night in the Rose Oil service station, and he was in his side yard working the vegetable patch with a hoe. He was staggering around with that hoe, a drunk's dance, and he was drinking from a flask. He was dirty with dirt, and his big belly bulged out from his undershirt. Dixie Dawn came out onto the porch with a tall glass, maybe water, maybe lemonade, who could tell at that distance. She came out to her daddy and offered the glass, and with her other hand she reached for the flask, her daddy just then lowering it from his lips. Augie knocked her one, and the water, or lemonade, who could tell, flew out of her hand. Dixie Dawn got up from where he'd knocked her, and she backed on down the squash row. And for no good reason at all, she opened her mouth and sang foreign. In her big voice, a voice that lifted you right up to the sky, a voice that could stir a peach-basket-size moon from its orbit, I tell you. Her voice stopped me in my tracks. It'd stopped me in my tracks quite a few nights, for I'd always passed this way after finishing up at the Cock-N-Bull, and if it wasn't too late, she'd be in her bedroom, her window open to catch a little breeze, a little spring or summer or fall breeze, and she'd be singing. Right now at that very moment she was singing her song to the

squashes and her daddy.

Augie cursed her. He walked to her through the squashes and beans and hit her over the head with the shaft of the hoe. She staggered. She turned and ran and he chased her.

That's when I seen Eb. I was still a ways off, but Eb was right across the street from McNeer's. A baseball lot sat not too far away, and maybe he was on his way there or maybe on his way back. Eb was ten, then. Augie was chasing Dixie Dawn, and he hit her again with the hoe, on her shoulder. Eb ran, opposite direction as Dixie, opposite direction as me, I don't know where to, not far enough away, not far enough away from the Delta, not far enough away from the muddy waters rising round his feet. And Augie was chasing Dixie Dawn and hitting her on the head and shoulders, just beating that child with the hoe. And I was seeing my own daddy, my own mean drunk daddy, beating on my sister and my little brother and beating on me, beating and a-beating, and somehow I was across Augie's yard yanking at his hoe.

I am not a big man, only five foot six. But Augie was drunker'n drunk, and I wasn't, not yet. I yanked, and Augie tumbled forward and hit his head on the porch edge.

"He dead?" Dixie Dawn said. Her blond hair was mucked with blood. Her seersucker dress was ruined.

"Naw," I said.

"Maybe," I said.

"I believe so," I said.

"Good!" Dixie Dawn said. "Now Mama will let me go to Uncle Charles's. He's a rich man in New Orleans, Mama says. A good, hardworking man, Mama says. Nothing like your no-count daddy, Mama says. Uncle Charles will surely get me to the Metrie-polytan Opera."

"May fortune shine upon you," I said. I toed the corpse. "I reckon I should call Big Boy."

“Aw, ain’t no need to drag the marshal init,” Dixie Dawn said. “Daddy has the night off tonight,” Dixie Dawn said. “Daddy was going night fishing,” Dixie Dawn said. “We’ll take Daddy fishing tonight,” Dixie Dawn said. She drugged her daddy under the porch by his ankles.

And so that night, with a waxing moon sailing through the clouds, after I’d got me a little fortification at the Cock-N-Bull, Dixie Dawn and I loaded her daddy into my truck, among the paint cans and paint brushes and under a paint tarp, and I drove her daddy down Lonely Street to the wooded shores of Roebuck Lake. I waited on a pier, the very pier my boy, or maybe he ain’t my boy, Eb, had built, and Dixie Dawn went off. Soon enough, she paddled up in her daddy’s boat, and Dixie Dawn and me lugged her daddy down to the pier. Augie had turned into a stiff, which made for awkwardness, I tell you. And his smell hadn’t fared none too well, not after baking under the porch in the Mississippi heat all this July day long.

Dixie Dawn and me loaded him into her daddy’s boat, and in my head Bessie sang *my mama says I’m reckless, my daddy says I’m wild*, and nobody knew better’n me what it meant to be reckless and wild. Dixie Dawn rowed out her daddy’s boat, and I rowed out Eb’s boat, and we rowed far, far down the lake. And that fat girl with the opera bosom pushed her daddy over the side. She climbed into Eb’s boat, and I rowed her home over the smooth, black waters of the Roebuck, all the lidless fish eyes watching us, the bream, the gar, the bass. It was sheer bad luck, it surely was, that my own son, or sons, or maybe not my own son, or sons, found Augie, the cussed mean drunk who’d got his head all tangled up in a drift with his bare legs and feet stuck up.

I smooth the old funeral newspaper clipping with my fingers and slug down the bottle’s last drop of Old Crow. There’s one more scrap of the memory. A few days before the funeral, Dixie Dawn’s Uncle Charles said he didn’t want her, didn’t want to help her to the Metrie-

polytan Opera. And for some reason, who can say about these things, Dixie Dawn turned against me, and she blamed me for her Uncle Charles's no-saying, or maybe she blamed me for taking away her daddy, her mean drunk daddy, who maybe she both loved and hated, like I'd both loved and hated my own mean drunk daddy, who can say.

I still pass by the McNeer's every night after I finish at the Cock-N-Bull. And if it ain't too late, Dixie Dawn, fatter now than even an opera singer, is in her bedroom, her window open from spring through summer through fall, and she is singing foreign.

My old path to and from the Cock-N-Bull used to pass me by the Methodist cemetery. But ever since Dixie Dawn told me about grave statues plotting to sink down into the earth and suck down the low-down scoundrel what murdered Donna Anna's daddy, I take the long-cut.

END