

The Second Chance Home for Girls

Table of Contents

I. Death.....	1
II. Birth	67
III. Initiation.....	109
IV. Ripening.....	170
V. Reflection	203

I

Death

As soon as Lorilee walked in, I saw them girls eyeballing her, sniffing her over like dogs. I knew they was up to something. You know how girls are. Always plotting and sneaking. These girls were no different, even though Sallyanne believed that every one of them could be reformed. They all nodded their heads in Group, chanted their affirmations at vespers, and swore up and down that they'd seen the Light and they'd never ever, ever, want another drop of booze or snort or shoot nothing into those young, precious bodies.

But you know how girls are. Bunch of liars. And these were a bunch of hoodlums when it came right down to it. Didn't matter that some had things and some didn't. So it was up to me. I had to be the one to keep an eye on them. See what kind of mischief they was fixin' to do. By the time spring started to dawn, their boredom had gotten the best of them, out-riding their homesickness, 'specially since most of them had kicked in the fall or winter—some nearly the summer before. These girls sweated it out in their detoxes, but they was just too fucked up to go home yet. That's when we'd get them. They run the risk, Sallyanne always said, of

relapse. Of returning to the old ways. People, places, things, she said, called them back and they was weak. Sometimes Sallyanne could just only see the bright side. They was weak, but the Lord was good, she'd say. But I knew better. I could see what was in these girls. They was restless, empty, and just plain old mean. Sometimes I thought just a good, swift kick in the ass would set them straight.

At Second Chance, we kept a tight ship. Up early, chores, church, Group, and recovery meetings. Girls had to go to them—in-house meetings, so nobody'd leave the premises. Help 'em step to recovery, all 12 steps. But we never kept the girls long enough to hit numero twelve-o. The money usually ran out before we got there, so we'd have to ship them off to the state. Then there was school. They had to do that. State of Texas mandated. But they never left for their lessons neither. We drug a trailer out back and set up schooltime. We gave them school all year round: there weren't no sense of time at Second Chance, one day bleeding into the next. Everybody's stayed in they own grade and they got two hours a week of learning with Miss AnnaMae, who drove allaway here from Euleless. Not sure where Sallyanne found her, not sure she was a real teacher, with her big hair-do and housedresses, but the girls loved her. I ain't even sure what she taught them every week. Some of them seemed nearly retarded or hadn't been in a school in years. And shit, I knew at least two of them girls could barely read.

But they wasn't here for the reading and what- have-you. These girls needed to straighten their shit out.

Nobody comes here by accident, Sallyanne used to say.

I should know. One day I'm heading to jail for dealing crank, next thing I know I am living here in one of the

backrooms, cooking and cleaning and watching. Sometimes a few girls got homesickness something fierce or them wounds from the past just broke open and the memories wouldn't stop bleeding out. That's when Sallyanne sent them to me in the kitchen and I put them to work, which is probably the only cure they all needed— no group therapy, no program, no hugs nor affirmations and whatnot. Just work. But they always slowed me down. Not one of them had known a day of work in her life.

Of course, sometimes the girls brung major attitudes with them from the streets, or the old anger flared up sometimes like they were living with they's mamas and daddies. When the leftover defiance come out and some she-devil thought she was going to get one over on Sallyanne or ole Starlene, thought she was smarter than she really was, we disciplined her out at the back fence, made her kneel for a few hours on that old gravel out there, till them knees started getting all bloody and pulpy-like. But if some heifer was real bad and ain't nothing was going to break her, we slept her out in the doghouse by the back fence—right near where she'd been kneeling. Sallyanne insisted on chaining them to the doghouse, so they cain't run away. If she's gonna act like an animal, we're gonna treat her like one, Sallyanne would say about some she-devil getting what was coming to her. And then she'd say, It's in the Lord's hands now. And while I ain't never been sure what she meant by that, it sounded like if some heifer lived or died out there, it weren't her problem, so I'd always breathe easier-like when I saw them girls dragging some other girl's ass back in the house the morning after. All scrunched up-like in that old shitty doghouse, a girl never walked straight right away. And between you and me, girls never came back the same from an

overnight out in that shit house. But that ain't neither here nor there.

But for the Grace of God, there I go. That's what I say now. But for the Grace of God. Because one day—one of them godawful hellish, hot spring days, the kind only Texas knows—in comes Salvation, wearing a navy jacket- and- shorts set, with little white socks turned over at the ankle, like she was going to private school and not just out of rehab and here, with the rest of them little bitches, at the Second Chance Home for Girls. They were like the cats and Lorilee was their ball of yarn. Well. At first it seemed that way. Then, I don't know, nobody was sure who was the cat and who was the yarn. Things got mighty confusing once that girl showed up. Maybe it was just her coming made the number of girls go up from twelve to thirteen, and y'all know what thirteen means: that's some bad luck right there. That girl done showed up in that picture suit and ain't nothing was ever the same again.

Some Salvation.

Lorilee comes in that first day like it's some kind of cake walk. The girls were scrubbing windowsills with toothbrushes that morning. The blond one who looked like a cheerleader wiped the sweat from her eyes. She was the queen, even though she had a wrinkly old lady face from all that crystal meth. She done wiped the sweat from her forehead, and I swear if I didn't see them eyes narrow at Lorilee. Her eyes did all the talking. Girls across the room in their nasty sweatpants and too-small tank tops communicating like with no sound. We had a couple of Indian girls back then. Magda was one of them and she was always trying to pass as Mexicana, but she weren't fooling ole Starlene: I could see what she was in her face bones. Ain't nobody foolin' me.

You know what they say: you can sober up a horse thief, but then you still got a horse thief—don't make no difference if it's a Mexican, Indian, or American one. A horse thief is a horse thief. And an Indian is an Indian. Still Magda and them other Indian girls moved and talked like the rest of them vile bitches. Moving around Lorilee without moving. Not a hello or a howdy, nothing, and then all them girls got back to scrubbing.

That was the first sign. Them little she-devils didn't never just work. A simple job like sweeping the Group room took like two hours longer than it would take a normal human being. Just so lazy. So that's how I knew something was up. Something just wasn't right.

Nobody did the usual bullying stuff. Like no pushing Lorilee when they thought nobody's looking. Nobody stole her stuff. The days went by and Sallyanne gave me one of her Christian looks, nodding and saying, *See? The Lord is Good*. Her eyes rolling around the Group room, while some stray was sharing, dropping a brick, we used to call it, like when someone tells a deep dark secret that never was told before. This one was talking about her teacher molesting her, and the tears was just pouring down her face and I like couldn't hear everything she was saying, but it don't really matter: it's always the same story. They all wind up here, round the circle on them folding chairs, from Lord knows where, telling their stories, crying, and then the meanness swallowing them up as soon as they out the room.

Lorilee didn't fool me neither. She comes into the kitchen when I'm making pancakes and puts on an apron. Sallyanne put her on kitchen duty. I don't say nothing, so she sits and starts to talk. I'm fixin' to make a soup later, so I hand her some carrots, and when she reaches for the peeler,

I seen the track marks on the insides of her arms. She ain't wearing that picture suit no more. She looks like one of the other girls, more or less, except her sandy hair's all done up different, like her head's ready to go to the prom.

She wants to know if I got any kids and so I tell her I have a girl. I do not tell her about my boy.

"She's thirteen now and lives with her Grammy and Pop-pop."

"Yeah?" she says. "How come?"

"Sugar," I say. "Ain't you figured out where you are?"

Lorilee looks at me all blank. Her big pan face shining like the moon.

"They got custody after I got arrested the last time. Me and my husband used to cook up crank in the kitchen, in like big garbage cans."

Empty moon face. Shit, sometimes they seem so young. But I knew better. I seen the tracks.

"Life in the fast lane," I say to her. "You know, like the song says?" Again, blank. "The freeway? No? OK. So anyway. My husband, he was screwing my cousin and using all my shit and one day I just hit like rock bottom. Couldn't take it anymore. Gimme that spatula over there, Sugar."

Lorilee reaches and hands it to me, never leaving her stool. She don't say nothing, so I keep going. "I was living the junkie's life, like Sallyanne says, living fast and getting nowhere. And my little girl, she woke me up one day wanting breakfast and she came like real close to my face and said, 'Mama, why you got so many scabs on your mouth?' and I was like, she's fucking right. I need to turn my life around."

"That's what you said?"

"What?"

“You’re going to burn those.” Miss Smartypants Heroin Tracks points to the pancakes I’m cooking. “Is that what you said?”

“No. I probably said something like, Shut up, you little shit. Because that’s the kind of person I’d become. But for the Grace of God, there go I.”

“What?”

“What, Sug?”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I got lucky and turned my life around. And so can you, Sugar.”

“Where is your husband now?” She puts the peeler down, sharp side up, and steps next to me and takes the spatula from my hand. I hear the griddle hiss.

“Gone,” I say after a time and I start stirring the batter some more.

“Gone where?”

“Gone-gone, Nosey.”

“He’s dead?” She flips the pancakes onto the plate next to the stove.

“Yes. Where you learn to cook like that?”

Lorilee acts like she don’t hear my question. “I guess we all get lucky sometimes.”

Somehow it feels like this girl knows what I done. But that just ain’t possible. Don’t nobody know. For all anybody knows, that man had a mighty unfortunate accident—almost inevitable-like, since he was high all the time, twenty-four seven—y’all know what I mean. But Lorilee’s looking at me, waiting-like, as if she knows what I done. What I *had* to do. So I don’t know what to say because my throat gets tight and I am afraid if I say another word I will be not be able to breathe at all.

“When did it happen?” She takes the ladle from the counter, the batter all over the place, and dips in the bowl I’m stirring. “When did you get sober?” This question brings me back. I breathe.

“Last year.” I hold up my blue recovery chip around my neck. “I’ve done a 360.”

“180, you mean.”

“Don’t make a damn bit a difference how many,” I say and I take the ladle from her.

Miss Heroin Moonface gives me a funny look. And I could see why them girls didn’t like her.

It took weeks until the other girls started including Lorilee in their stupid games, bored calves that they were. But it still wasn’t right. Something just didn’t feel right. One day they was all drinking Big Red and no sooner than the girls started to laugh—who the fuck knows what they were laughing about, I couldn’t hear shit from the kitchen—then Lorilee, who was trying not to laugh, started pouring out red fizzy pop from her mouth. Well, the other girls took to laughing even harder and soon just about every one of them had Big Red dripping down on their t-shirts, which they would have to wash themselves and good luck getting that dye out. They all looked like they was bleeding from their mouths. And just for like a second I got the shivers.

Animals, I thought. Not young calves but vipers. Because I knew that they were only leading Lorilee on. Leading her on to the inevitable end. Building the trust. Making her come to them like a lonely bird. The end closer than it seemed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lorilee wore her navy blue shorts, like she was going to prep school, and a

white blouse, tidier than anything I'd ever had. Her finger on my good arm.

"That's my Paul Booth." I touched the tattoo with my other hand and got flour over the ventricle of the Devil's heart.

"That supposed to mean something?"

"That, my girl. That is art."

"You mean it is *illustration*."

"The Devil ain't no illusion."

Lorilee snorted. I shoved her pokey hand away from me so I could finish making the bread for the devils who lived right under that roof.

"I ain't afraid of the Devil. Now *that* is an illusion." She rubbed flour from the pile on the counter into her palms and picked up a ball of dough. Puffs of white made blooms on her sleeves. But she didn't seem to see them or care if she did. She just kneaded that dough as if she were folding Time itself.

Next day in Group them girls got something going on. I could see it. Nobody's talking at first. As usual, they're waiting until someone gets up the nerve to talk about their lives, their hurts, their ain't-nobody-loved me stories. Their bullshit, is what I say. I sit on the steps that lead up to the dining room so I can watch, like I got the high seats at the circus. I sit with my elbows on my knees bent and open like a man on the commode. This is better than afternoon TV. Everyday I'm perched on the stairs and no one cares that I'm watching them spill their guts. Then the Cheerleader straightens up and calls on Lorilee to share. She says it in this like mean-girl voice, as if she's outin' Lorilee or something.

Lorilee looks around and then looks at me, and I know she don't want to but the Truth will set you free, so

I'm nodding go ahead, even though I know these girls are up to no good. And I don't know. Maybe I feel some meanness coming on too. I just feel like I want to see it, like seeing an animal get hurt, like getting hit and drug by cars on a highway. I want to see her bleed out, spill the hurt out onto the road, where she can't act like she don't feel nothing.

Sallyanne, who, bless her heart, is so fucking oblivious, says, "Go on, child. Tell us your Big Secret. Share your burden."

Lorilee looks around. She's a junkie through and through, calculating like, looking for the way out, but she knows right away there ain't no way out of this one. I'm not sure, but I think I seen her crack the tiniest smile at me. Then she starts.