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Desperation Road

Written by Michael Farris Smith

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DESPERATION ROAD

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NO EXIT PRESS

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For Presley and Brooklyn, may your little lights shine

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And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

– Isaiah 58:10

The past is never dead.
– William Faulkner

1

THE OLD MAN WAS NEARLY TO the Louisiana line when he saw the woman and child walking on the other side of the interstate, the woman carrying a garbage bag tossed over her shoulder and the child lagging behind. He watched them as he passed and then he watched them in his rearview mirror and he watched the cars pass them as if they were road signs. The sun was high and the sky clear and if nothing else he knew they were hot, so he pulled off at the next exit and crossed the bridge over the interstate and headed back north on I-55. He'd seen them a few miles back and as he drove he hoped there would be a damn good excuse for what they were doing.

He slowed as he approached them and they walked in the grass, the girl slapping at her bare legs with her hands and the woman slumped with the weight of the garbage bag. He pulled onto the side of the interstate and stopped behind them but neither the woman nor the girl turned around. Then he shifted the car into park and got out.

'Hey!'

They stopped and looked at him and he walked over. Their cheeks red and sweaty from the heat and traces of a sunburn beneath the streaks of the blond, almost white hair of the child. The woman and the girl both wore shorts and tank tops and

their shoulders were pink and their legs spotted with scratches and insect bites from walking in the rough grass on the side of the road. The woman dropped the garbage bag to the ground and it hit with a thud.

'What y'all doing out here?' the old man asked. He adjusted his hat and looked at the bag.

'Walking,' the woman said. She squinted as looking at the man meant facing the sun and the little girl folded her hands over her eyes and peeked between her fingers.

'You need some help? She don't look too good,' he said and he nodded toward the child.

'We're trying to get up to the truck stop. At Fernwood. You know it?'

'Yeah, I know it. Another ten miles or so. What you got there?'

'Gonna meet somebody.'

'Somebody with a car?'

'Yes sir.'

'Come on and get in. Y'all don't need to be out here like this,' he said and he reached down and picked up the garbage bag.

'It's heavy,' the woman said.

The old man grunted as he tossed it over his shoulder and the woman and child walked behind him to the long, silver Buick. He opened the trunk and set the bag in it and the woman followed the child into the backseat.

He watched the woman in the rearview mirror and tried to talk to her as they drove but she looked out the window or looked down at the child as he spoke, only giving one-word answers to questions about where they'd been or where they were going or what they were doing or what they needed or if she was sure there was gonna be somebody there to meet them at the truck stop. In the air-conditioning her face lost its color and he saw that there was a vacancy in her expression when she answered his questions and he knew that she didn't

know any more about what they were doing or where they were going than he did. The woman's face was thin and he could only see the top of the girl's head in the mirror but she seemed to look down, maybe from exhaustion or hunger or boredom or maybe some of all of it. He hadn't been around children in a long time and he guessed she was five or six. She sat quietly next to the woman, like a wornout doll. The old man finally gave up talking to the woman and let her ride in peace, figuring she was happy to be sitting down.

In minutes the sign for the truck stop appeared above the trees on the left side of the interstate and he pulled off the exit and drove into the vast parking lot, where the big trucks moved in and out. Around to the right side of the truck stop were the diesel pumps and a row of motel rooms. The old man drove to the left of the truck stop, through the gas pumps and past the gift shop and truckers' showers and changing rooms and he stopped at the door of the café, which had its own separate entrance at the back.

'This all right?' he asked the woman and she nodded.

'C'mon, baby,' she said to the girl.

The old man walked around to the trunk and lifted out the garbage bag and set it down on the concrete. Then he reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet and he picked out forty dollars and he held it out to the woman.

She bowed her head and said thank you.

He nodded and said he wished he had more but the woman told him that was plenty. She hoisted the bag and took the girl's hand and thanked the man with a half smile and he held open the door of the café for them as they walked inside. He watched them through the glass door. A countertop and row of bar stools lined the right side of the café and the little girl tapped her fingers on top of each stool as they walked past and the woman dropped the bag on the floor and dragged it

across the linoleum. He watched until a waitress took them to a table next to the window and he started to go in after them, to give them his phone number, to tell the woman to call him if her ride didn't show up and that he'd do what he could. But he didn't. Instead he got back into the Buick and he crossed over the interstate and drove along the highway, back toward home, where he parked underneath the shade of the carport and where he would then go inside and sit down with his wife at the kitchen table. He would tell her about the woman and the child and when she asked him what he'd been doing driving toward Louisiana in the first place he wouldn't be able to remember.

2

The little girl ate two grilled cheese sandwiches and a bowl of chocolate ice cream and the woman ate a plate of biscuits and gravy and they each drank several glasses of iced tea. It cost more than she wanted to spend but the way the child's face seemed to swell with each bite was satisfaction enough. If only for the moment.

After the bill was paid, they sat in the booth without talking, the girl using the crayons the waitress had given her to decorate the blank side of the paper menu. Maben counted her money and she had seventy-three dollars. She folded the bills neatly and stuck them into the front pocket of her shorts and she looked out the window across the parking lot at the row of motel rooms and she thought briefly of getting a room, taking long baths, watching television, and then sleeping with the girl next to her. Between clean sheets. With the air conditioner blowing and the door locked. The girl said look Momma and she held up the paper and showed her a blue *a* and a red something. Maybe a *b*. And either a green *c* or an *l*.

'That's good, Annalee,' Maben said. The child smiled and then she put the paper down and she drew a circle and began to create a face. The waitress walked by and asked if they needed something else.

'How much are those rooms?' Maben asked.

'About thirty-five, I think,' the waitress said. 'I'll find out for sure.'

'No,' Maben said. 'That's okay. You got a pay phone?'

'That way,' the waitress said, pointing at the door. 'Through there at the bathrooms.'

She touched the top of the girl's hand and said I'll be right back and then she followed the directions to the pay phone. A phone book hung from a metal cord and she opened it and began to try to remember the names of the people she used to know. Tried to think of a friend or some down-the-line cousin. Something. Somebody. She looked at the names in the phone book as if one might reach up and poke a finger in her eye and say hey look it's me. But it didn't happen. Too much time in between. Too much stuff in between. The kind of stuff that was supposed to make you feel good and it did in the first instant but then it only confused you or rotted you away and tricked you into thinking you needed more. Too much of it. She gave up on names and then she turned to the Yellow Pages and it took her a couple of minutes but she found a shelter that looked like it might help. On Broad Street. She thought she remembered where that was. She ripped the page from the phone book and folded it and stuck it into her pocket and she walked back to the table. It was another five miles to McComb and another two or three miles at least from the interstate to downtown and Broad Street. She didn't know if the child could go any farther today or not. And there was no guarantee that the shelter would even be there. She had tracked them down before only to get to the front door and find a faded note taped across the top explaining that due to lack of funding we regret that we have closed. Please call the police in case of an emergency.

He had said he'd be right back but she had known by the sound of it that he was lying. But he'd at least left a hundred

dollars on top of the television. And he'd left the bag filled with her clothes and the child's clothes outside the motel room door. It wasn't as bad as it'd been before. She had almost felt a small victory in being left sympathetically. But that didn't change the fact that the van was gone and he was gone and she had already forgotten his name and she and the girl had been left alone again in a room that didn't belong to them. So they'd started walking. Three days ago. Going back to Mississippi because there was nowhere else to go. New Orleans had been no good and Shreveport had been no good and all she got from Beaumont had been the creation of the little girl and she didn't know why she thought they should head for Mississippi other than that was where the trail had started. She had left with nothing and she was coming back with nothing but another mouth to feed. And now that she was back the heat rising off the asphalt didn't look any different from the heat rising off the asphalt anywhere else. She had half expected something magical to occur once they crossed the state line and maybe it had with the old man giving them a ride and forty bucks. And as she looked at the ice cream dried in the corners of the child's mouth she decided that was about as much as she could expect.

'Momma,' the girl said.

'Yes.'

'Are we in Mississippi yet?'

'Yeah, baby.'

'Can we stop walking now?'

'Almost.'

'Can we get one of those rooms?'

'Stop asking questions and come on.'

They had slept off the road, walking into clumps of forest that stood back from the interstate, their clothes spread out across the leaves and dirt, eating packages of crackers and potato chips and drinking Cokes and breathing more easily in

the cover of the night. They smelled and she knew it and once the girl was finished coloring they walked out of the café and through the gift shop and back toward the truckers' quarters. They ignored the truckers only sign and went into the women's dressing room. Maben stood next to the shower stall while the child bathed herself and after the child was finished and dressed the woman took a shower and felt a relief in the filth that ran down her body and washed down the drain. They took turns drying their hair underneath the hand dryers and the woman found clean T-shirts and shorts for them in the garbage bag. She told the girl to wait in the dressing room and she walked into the convenience store and stole a small bottle of lotion and she returned and lathered the child's red arms and face and neck and then she did the same for herself. She then washed their socks in the sink and she wrung them and dried them under the hand dryer while Annalee lay stretched across the tile floor with her head resting on the garbage bag. By the time the socks were dry the girl had fallen asleep and Maben sat down next to her and leaned her head back against the wall and prayed that no one would come into the dressing room while the child rested.

She had discovered that once things started to go bad they gathered and spread like some wild, poisonous vine, a vine that stretched across the miles and the years from the shadowy faces she had known to the lines she had crossed to the things that had been put inside her by strangers. It spread and stretched until the vine had consumed and covered her, wrapping itself around her ankles and around her thighs and around her chest and around her throat and wrists and sliding between her legs and as she looked down at the girl with her sunburned forehead and her thin arms she realized that the child was her own dirty hand reaching out of the thicket in one last desperate attempt to grab on to something good. She stroked the child's hair. Admired her small hands folded underneath her cheek. And

then she lay across the floor next to her. There were times when it was impossible to sleep as all the evil in the world seemed to gather in her thoughts and she couldn't figure out how to keep the child from it and there were other times when all the evil in the world gathered in her thoughts and exhausted her to the point where she couldn't fight it anymore and this was one of those times when she gave up and with her head across her arm and her arm against the cold tile floor, she slept.

3

THEY WERE AWAKENED BY A STOUT woman in black boots and a Waylon Jennings T-shirt. They sat up and rubbed their eyes and then they got to their feet and the woman asked them what they were doing.

'Nothing,' Maben said and she brushed at the child's hair with the palm of her hand and then she picked up the garbage bag.

'You need a ride or something? I'm going down toward New Orleans after I get some food in me.'

'We're all right,' Maben said and she took the girl's hand and they stepped out of the dressing room. They walked outside and sat down on the curb. The afternoon was falling away as they had managed to grab a couple of hours of sleep, polite or indifferent bathroom patrons stepping over and around them until the stout woman decided to ask. Maben wondered if they had time to make it to the shelter or if they would be stranded again in the night. If there would be a place for them. If they could help her get a job. If they had coloring books. If they could stay for a day or three days or a month. If.

She looked at the motel rooms across the parking lot. She looked at the girl. They had been on the side of the road or in the woods for three days.

'Come on,' she said to the girl and they walked back inside

and to the cash register in the café where the room keys hung on hooks on a wooden board nailed on the wall. The girl who had waited on them stood behind the register stacking receipts and she looked up and said I thought y'all were gone.

'Not yet,' Maben said. 'We want one of those rooms if you got it.'

'Sure,' the waitress said and she put down the receipts and she took a notebook from below the counter. She opened it and made a couple of marks and she said it looked like room 6 was free. Thirty-five dollars even.

Maben pulled the folded bills from her pocket and as she counted out the money the waitress looked down at the girl and asked her name.

'Annalee,' the girl said. Then the girl looked up at the woman and said my momma's name is Maben.

'She didn't ask that,' Maben said and she handed the money to the waitress.

The waitress turned and took a key from a hook and gave it to Maben and she smiled again at the girl. Then she said, 'Be sure and keep your door locked.'

'Why?' the girl asked but Maben told her to come on and they walked across the parking lot toward the room. They stopped to let a big rig pass in front of them and when they started again the child began to skip along, anticipating sitting on something soft and watching television.

They had watched cartoons and the weather. Sat on the bed with their shoes off and legs stretched out. Sipped cold drinks from the vending machine. And now the girl was asleep with the television screen flashing across her clean body in the dark room. Maben walked to the window and pulled back the curtain. The parking lot was lit with yellow ghoulish light and more trucks populated the lot, settling in for the night. She could see

across the lot into the windows of the café and the waitresses outnumbered the customers. She had spent more than half the money and now she felt stupid. If for whatever reason she didn't find what she hoped to find tomorrow on Broad Street, if the place was full or closed or simply not the kind of place they needed, then she had made a big mistake. Seventy-three dollars was not much money but take away thirty-five and another eight for lunch and it really wasn't much.

She walked over to the television and changed the channel to a news station and looked at the time on the bottom right of the screen. Ten after eleven. She walked back over to the window and sat down in a chair and again pulled back the curtain.

At least we don't stink anymore, she thought. Keep your door locked, she remembered the waitress saying but she didn't understand the warning. It seemed as though people were doing what they were supposed to be doing.

It was then that she noticed two girls at the edge of the parking lot who hadn't been there only a second ago. As if they had shot up from holes in the ground. One white and one black. They were dressed alike. Short denim skirts and white tank tops and flip-flops. Each held a small purse. Maybe sixteen, Maben thought. The white girl had her dark hair cut short like a boy and the black girl wore a red bandanna tied around her head. They walked together into the middle of the parking lot and then the black girl pointed at the purple truck and the white girl pointed at the black truck and then they separated. Maben watched as each girl walked to her chosen truck cab and stepped up and held on to the sideview mirror and tapped on the window. The door of the purple cab opened first and the black girl crawled inside. The white girl tapped again and adjusted her skirt and then the door of the black cab opened and she also crawled inside. The curtains of each cab were then pulled closed.

Maben counted and there were nine more trucks in the lot.

Nine times thirty. Two hundred and seventy dollars.

Nine times fifty would be four hundred and fifty.

She looked across the room at the thirty dollars wadded up on the table next to the television.

She had done it before and she hadn't thought about it in a long time, forcing herself to remove it from her memory. And as she thought about it now she felt as if it had been someone else. She had done so well forgetting it that she couldn't remember when it had been done and where it had been done or how many times it had been done but only that it had been done in a time when she had been backed into some dark and desperate corner by the rabid dogs of life.

She watched the trucks and wondered if those girls were old enough to drive. Wondered where they came from. Wondered if those men had ever once considered that those girls hadn't long ago been children. Or still were. Or maybe they never had been because they'd never had the chance. She looked at Annalee and realized what might await her if things didn't turn around and then she took a deep breath and looked back across the lot and then there was the vision of that night so many years ago. And that boy. That beautiful boy. Them sitting together on the tailgate parked on Walker's Bridge. Underneath ran the water of Shimmer Creek and alongside the creek and surrounding the bridge stood thick forest, the trees holding the bridge close, almost protecting it. The truck filling up the width of the bridge, its wooden rails leaning and rotting. Declarations of love long gone carved into the wood with pocketknives and bottle openers. The moon full and its light giving shadows through the trees and creating the illusion of an army of still ghosts lying in wait. The stars were many and beneath the music coming from the radio the crickets and frogs formed an abstract chorus over the trickle of the running water and she knew it was right. Knew he was right. So she told him to crawl up into the truck

bed and lay down. Don't ask just lay down and don't look up and he obeyed and then she stood and she moved away from the truck bed and walked to the edge of the bridge. Don't peek, she said. She looked up into the sky for reassurance then she took off her T-shirt and removed her bra and stepped out of her shorts and her panties. She knelt and piled her clothes in a loose stack on the edge of the bridge. She stood and a chill ran over her body but she opened her arms and felt the moonlight and it held her like a pair of warm hands. She looked into the truck bed at the boy who had been telling her that he loved her. And she started toward him but then the dark was interrupted by the hum of an approaching car and the glow of headlights appeared over the hill, headlights that came fast, exposing themselves in two bright bursts before she could call out to him, before she had time to pick up her clothes and the car never slowed down. And she heard herself scream out to him as she hurried off the narrow bridge and onto the side of the road and she turned around in time to see the car meet the front of the truck. She ducked with the roar of the crash and Jason's tall and lean body was shot out of the truck bed and into the night as if he were meant to fly. The sparks and the screech and sound of twisting metal and running down that rough road toward the nearest house light. Breathing hard and running harder but feeling as if she were going nowhere, as if the house light were moving away from her as she ran toward it with her clothes tucked under her arm and forgetting she was naked until she finally ran into the yard and she stopped to put on her shorts and shirt. She left her bra and panties next to the front steps and she beat on the door and beat on the door, certain they would think they were being attacked or robbed and she began screaming out words like *bridge* and *cars* and *help* and *please God* until a light came on inside and the door opened and a man with gray hair peeked at her and believed that something was horribly wrong. And then getting

in the car with him and driving down the road while his wife called somebody. Maben unable to answer his questions, only focusing ahead into the dark with anxious eyes and wanting Jason to be standing there as the headlights shined onto the bridge. She wanted to see him standing there wiping the dirt from his face and arms and saying damn that was close. But then seeing nothing and calling out and hearing nothing and then watching while the blue lights and the red lights topped the hill and then watching while the flashlights shined into the woods at the twisted and smoking heap of car and truck and then hearing them say we got a live one and telling herself it's him it's him it's got to be him and then it was the other one. The one that interrupted.

Through the haze of the years the night came back to her with clarity and punch as she stared with empty eyes across the parking lot. A car horn sounded and shook her loose and she turned and walked over and sat down at the edge of the bed and put her hand on the child's leg and watched her small chest rise and fall in a heavy sleep.

It wouldn't take long, she thought. It never had before. At least the way she remembered it. They never took long. Fifty dollars. No less. Maybe forty. The child was sleeping like the dead and would never know she was gone. She stood and put the room key in her pocket and she walked over to the sink and brushed her hair that hung limp against her head. She pushed it around with her fingers but nothing changed and then she wiped her eyes with a washrag and she kept telling herself that they didn't take long. They never take long.