

SINGING LOCUSTS

Anita Stubbs

Les Darnel drifts in and out of his hospital room. His slack, bloodless face appears waxen against the starched white linen, as close to death as anyone the Reverend Whitefield has ever seen. The preacher shakes his head and chuckles.

Darnel's three-day growth of black stubble reminds Whitefield of the magnetic shavings he has seen the kids manipulate beneath their little plastic covered drawing boards, using a metal-tipped pen. The feathery pieces of flint would fly to the pencil, the black bristles clumping together under the haphazard direction of a child's hand, usually taking the form of a black-bearded caricature. Now, his head resting helplessly on a pillow, Darnel's whiskered face needs shaving as his black-bearded soul totters over the brink of Hell. Brother Whitefield intends to take care of both, the shaving and the saving. Contemplating the rejoicing Darnel's baptism will bring, the preacher can actually feel the flutter of dove wings against his shoulder. "The victory will be mine," he says under his breath, gently tucking a towel under Darnel's scratchy chin.

The patient's black eyes push their thick, heavy lids open and penetrate the ceiling. Whitefield presses a hot steaming cloth around Darnel's face, and busies himself with arranging the razor, the brush, and shaving soap handily on the bedside table. The sun pours into the tiny green cubicle like a blessing, spilling over the shoulder of the fiery-headed minister. Darnel feels its warmth through the hot rag on his face.

"Sure been wantin' to go huntin', Lester. Hope you won't mind if I borrow your little ol' dog again. That's the treein'est little rascal I ever seen!" Whitefield sniggers. The pastor uses his everyday voice with Lester Darnel, a man with no tolerance for churchy airs.

The muzzled face moves slightly in agreement as the large body stretches gingerly toward the foot of the bed. The bandages covering his upper torso protect Darnel's stitched up back from the stiffness of the sheets. Soon, he floats out the window again, into the previous night, leaving the quiet little room to Whitefield and the raspy sounds of the scraping razor.

The smell of hay, mixed with manure and whiskey, fills Darnel's head. He can see nothing for the barn envelops him in darkness. He feels wetness. His blood spills out of him, puddles around him, warm and sticky. *Washed in the blood, washed in the blood, washed in the blood of the Lamb.* He tries to sing, but no sound leaves his lips.

Sweet Jesus, don't let me bleed to death. Where'd ever'body go? How come my bottle's layin' way over there? He stretches his hand toward the whiskey, but his strength is gone. *The sonsabitches, how'd the hell they 'pect me to reach that far.* He tries to touch his back again. He remembers laying his swollen fingers into the slashed open flesh, pushing his hand into the gaping wound, into the muscle, feeling no pain. *When was that? I can't reach it now. Way too weak.*

He lies there on the dirt floor of the silent barn and listens. An insomniac dog, its solitary yelping probably intended to attract attention, barks somewhere. *He's just tryin' to out-sing all them goddamn locusts! Where's all them little buggers at in the daytime?* He wonders if they just hide out in the trees, sleeping under the leaves, exhausted from too much singing. He remembers the knife, flashing in the moonlight, its blade slicing him.

"Good mornin', Grace. You doin' better this mornin'?" Whitefield's dripping voice snatches Darnel away from the rat-infested, blood-soaked hay barn, back into the cool, clean bed. "We just got shaved. Looks like a new man, don't he?" The preacher pats Darnel's broad barreled chest as it moves up and down, up and down.

Darnel's dark eyes struggle. Aided by the raising of black bushy brows, the hooded lids open again. He looks into the worried face of his wife leaning over him but she says nothing. She just stands beside his bed, her face almost as drawn and white as his, her blue eyes heavy with sorrow, with shame. Praying silently, she grips the strap of her old black purse.

"Sure do 'preciate you comin' up here like this, Brother Whitefield, but no need to stay now," Grace says. Putting down her purse, she follows her nervous fingers around the bed, as they tuck and tug at the covers. Her poking and patting hands attempt to smooth out the wrinkles. Finally, her fingers light on her husband's forehead.

Les's clammy skin feels cold, like a peeled Irish potato. Grace remembers her mother used to say that touching a corpse was like touching a potato. A shiver runs through her body. The smell of the shaving soap comforts her, its familiarity soothes her anxiety somewhat. Les's shaving routine always makes Grace happy. When Les is shaving, he is sober.

Grace thinks back three days. He sits on the dresser stool in their bedroom. Her mother's old blue porcelain wash pan filled with steaming water sits in front of him on the dresser, fogging the mirror. Grace smiles, as he plasters the smoking washcloth onto his face. Pressing it firmly, leaning forward into strong hairy hands, his elbows resting on the dresser, Les waits patiently for the steam to soften the bristles for the razor. His dark eyes tease her through the dim mirror, cajoling her into security.

Everybody tells Grace you can't ask for a better man than Lester Darnel, when he's not drinking. They always add that last part. *Well, he's not drinking now. Cold sober, he is. Near death. Maybe now he'll stop for good. Oh, how many times have I thought that?* Grace scans her memory as though searching a library shelf for a rare book—one entitled *Happy Moments*. Finding it, not more than a pamphlet really, she flips through the pages, lingering on the ones filled with gentle laughter and carefree living, relishing days unsaturated with Les's alcoholism, free of the scent of whiskey.

"Missed you at Prayer Meetin' last night," Whitefield says, disturbing Grace's thoughts.

"Was there a good crowd?" she asks.

"Sure was. Ever'body 'cept Joe and Polly. Their kiddoes are all down with the mumps." Whitefield puts away the shaving kit.

Their voices drift around Darnel's head like a mist that will not dissipate. His eyes—weary from being chased by Grace's dotting, forgiving gaze—close again like heavy velvet curtains.

"We took up a love offering," Whitefield says, his face reddening even more as he tries to overcome his shyness. Nervously, the preacher runs one small, freckled hand over his carrot-colored hair. "It's not much, but we all want to help out." He hands an envelope to Grace, glancing uncomfortably toward her husband.

"Please thank ever'body for me, if I don't get the chance first," Grace says, blinking her eyes rapidly.

"Well," Whitefield says, looking about the room awkwardly, patting his pockets as though checking to make sure he has everything. "God bless ya, Grace, and I'll be back later."

Breakfast comes. Nurses lift Darnel, roll him over, medicate him, and change his bandages. Swift, sure fingers tend him, help him, without lingering, tucking, fidgeting, or prying. He slips away again.

What the hell, the goddamn sonsabitches. He slams his fist into both of them, pounding them away, knocking them across the barn. They keep coming back. He pounds their faces, every time he can, as hard as he can. Nobody helps him. Crabtree just keeps on drinking. *Click.* The blade flashes, and then slashes out at him. One of the sonsabitches lunges into him, knocking him down. The other one falls on top of him, rams the knife into him, opening him up like a ripe watermelon. Then again, only deeper. *How much deeper?* They laugh at him, kick him.

Where'd they go? Hey. I need some help. Anybody hear me? Crabtree? What the shit's that goddamn dog barkin' at? Where's Hollie? Where's ever'body at?

Then, the ghostly bulb hangs above him, glowing yellow. He rests on his stomach, his back to the eerie light. Doc examines whatever it is pulsating inside the red, slimy cushion of muscle and fat. "Just missed the lung," Doc says. "Sliced right past it." *Doc sounds sleepy. It's 4 a.m., he's sayin', and I like to never got to sleep in the first place. Says he hates bein' jerked out of his bed like this, to come down here to this goddamn emergency room to sew up some drunk bastard.*

The bastard snores loudly. Alone with him now, Grace sits, staring into his face, willing his eyes to open again, to look at her. How long since I slept so soundly, Grace wonders. She had been wide-awake when Hollie and another man came for her, in the middle of last night. She never slept when Les was on a drunk, and this time he had been gone over two days. When the knock on her door finally came, she was waiting for it.

Headlights had invaded the four-room house, washing over the ceiling and the walls like a search light, waking Grace's daughters, all three sleeping in the same bed. Grace remembers fumbling with the buttons on her dress, a chore made ridiculously difficult by her trembling fingers. "Daddy's sick," she had told the girls.

Fighting back tears, she hates thinking about the faces of her daughters, gripped in fear. "Go back to sleep," she had told them. "Aunt Judy'll be here soon to get you on the school bus."

Finally, the headlights moved away from the house. Grace rode in the back seat of the car, and cried. "We'll be at the hospital in a minute," Hollie had told her. "We just left him up there. You better watch out, that seat's covered in blood." Grace remembers running her hands across the fabric to see if it was wet. It was dry, but stiff.

"We didn't know what to do when it happened. We's all drunk. You know how it is, your thinkin's just not clear, or nothin'." Grace had stared at the back of Hollie's head while he kept on talking, more to himself than to her. The other man slept, his head resting against the window. "Ever'body kinda just scattered. But I couldn't quit thinkin' 'bout ol' Lester layin' out there, bleedin'. I think we musta went back 'fore too long." Hollie's bony shoulders shook as he sobbed, "They sure cut him bad." The car smelled like whiskey, but Grace recalls how clear-headed its driver had seemed.

It is early evening now, and the pale green room is filling with familiar faces and subdued voices. Eyes dart back and forth, inevitably flicking across Lester Darnel's face,

which, if not for the stubborn shadow of the dark beard, the unruly hair and eyebrows, is barely distinguishable from the pillowcase.

"He's so pale, looks like a corpse," Darnel hears someone saying. "My, my, my."

"Those his sisters out'n the hall?"

"Who's that other preacher over there? His brother? Well, go figure that one out."

"Has the girls been yet? Bless their little ol' hearts. Sad, sad, sad."

"Dear God, let him live," Darnel hears Grace praying. "Just let it be a lesson this time, but let him live." Darnel opens his eyes but refuses to look into his wife's swimming above him, amid the sea of concerned, neighborly faces.

"Lester don't know how lucky he is," someone says.

"No, he don't. He sure don't."

Darnel stirs under his pain. "Hey, Doc, I need somethin'," he says, focusing on the face at the foot of his bed. "Hurts awful bad, Doc. A shot of somethin', I need a shot," he pleads, his voice dry and gravelly. He drags his bandaged knuckles across his face in his misery. The sound of the gauze rubbing across the whiskers reminds Whitefield to come back early in the morning.

"You bet, ol' buddy," Doc says, motioning to the nurse. "We'll get you fixed up."

Then, addressing no one in particular, Doc says, "You good folks are going to have to clear out pretty soon, this man needs his rest." Turning to Grace, he adds, "No need in you staying, either. Go on home to your girls, get some sleep." Then, pulling gently on Darnel's big toe, the doctor speaks directly to his patient, "Lester's going to be just fine." Darnel feels the slight sting of the hypodermic needle.

Grace sighs deeply, thrusting out her chin bravely as neighbors and relatives file by to pat, hug, and praise her. The room empties again except for Grace, Darnel, and the preacher. She asks Whitefield to offer thanks before he leaves.

"Our Heavenly Father." Whitefield falls on cue, into his Sunday morning voice.

"Today, you've granted Brother Darnel here, life, Father, and for that we're so very, very grateful. Now, we stand before you, Lord, prayin' that you stay on Brother Lester here, night and day, Father, and we beg you, Lord, hear our prayer, and don't let up on him, night or day, til he's turned his soul over to you."

Darnel feels his pain subsiding, as he drifts in and out of the thick fog hanging over him, in and out of Whitefield's praying. "Father," the preacher goes on, "Just give us the words—

Where'd the sonsabitches go? Goddamn it, I need a drink. The moon spotlights the whiskey bottle. Darnel can see its clear liquid sparkling, just out of reach. The dirt beneath him is turning into slime, slick with blood. He pushes his body through the mud, digging in his elbows. He slides toward the bottle. Its liquid shimmers in the silver light. The dog starts to howl. *Hey, you goddamn locusts, shut the fuck up.* Far away, voices mumble. *Is that a car?* He stretches, reaches as far as he can. He grits his teeth. His heart pumps out more blood, and he inches closer. Finally, he touches the neck of the bottle. He grasps it. Pulling it to his mouth, it touches his lips.

"And Father, give us the strength. . ."

The whiskey burns his tongue as he sucks it down his throat. Trickling off into meandering little tributaries, Darnel feels the liquor bubbling through his veins. He feels warm all over. He feels joy seeping through his body, and begins to sing, "Merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a—

"And," Whitfield raises his voice above Darnel's mumbling, "we thank you, Father—
"Row, row, row your boat, gently. . ." Darnel licks his bruised, swollen lips. "Down
the stream." He drifts away, hearing nothing.

"In the name of your only begotten son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, from
whom every blessing flows. Amen."

"Amen," Grace whispers.

Darnel snores.