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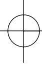
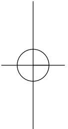
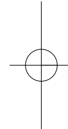
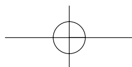


Tim Gautreaux

Born and raised in Louisiana, Tim Gautreaux lives there still and is writer in residence at Southeastern Louisiana University. His work has appeared in *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *GQ*, *Zoetrope*, *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, and *Best American Short Stories*, and he is the author of two short story collections, now published in one volume as *Waiting for the Evening News*. His first novel, *The Next Step in the Dance*, was published in 1999 and won the SEBA Book Award. It was followed by the widely acclaimed *The Clearing* in 2003 and *The Missing* in 2009.







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'Gautreaux writes with sustained grace and creates memorable characters . . . What really sets *The Missing* apart, though, is his remarkable ability to realise the period . . . a rare and rather uncanny achievement: a novel about the South in the early Twenties that reads as though it was actually written there and then' John Dugdale, *Literary Review*

'A novelist aims for the payoff between forward narrative and the inbuilt magic of the text . . . Gautreaux always achieves this. From the soup of a gripping, almost cinematic plot are lifted the dripping bones of a poetic literary experience . . . . The anticipation clutching your throat makes you race towards the novel's climax.' Alan Warner, *Guardian*

'Full of vivid evocations of the sights, sounds and smells of the South. As Simoneaux pursues his morally driven detective mission the scent of the steaming mud of the cypress swamps and the sound of 1920s New Orleans jazz rise off the page' Claire Prentice, *Scotsman*

'A joy to read' Barclay McBain, *Herald*

'Gautreaux has placed each character and scene – every comma – with the care and skill of a master . . . *The Missing* is a culmination of his excellent body of work. It is a riveting, neat-but-never-tidy joy of a story that readers should savour but will more likely devour.'
Jennifer Levasseur, *The Australian*

'A prodigious book by a talent who deserves wider recognition and unstinting praise' Mark Thomas, *Canberra Times*

'Gautreaux's paragraphs linger like a Southern afternoon, warm and languorous . . . this book is that rare thing: a needful lesson that nourishes and delights' Laurel Maury, *San Francisco Chronicle*

'Gautreaux has a mythic sense of plot, a keen ear for dialect and vivid powers of description . . . Make no mistake, vengeance begets vengeance. But love is an equally powerful force in this novel, which comes to a moving and resonant conclusion as Sam's life and the missing girl's converge in an unexpected way.' Malena Watrous, *New York Times*

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Tim Gautreaux

The Missing

SCEPTRE

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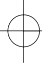
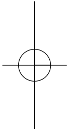
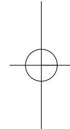
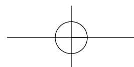






For my father,
Minos Lee Gautreaux,
who taught me to love children and steamboats



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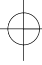

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Sam Simoneaux leaned against the ship's rail, holding on in the snarling wind as his lieutenant struggled toward him through the spray, grabbing latches, guy wires, valve handles.

'Pretty bad belowdecks,' the lieutenant cried out against the blow.

'That's a fact. Stinks too bad to eat.'

'I noticed you have a bit of an accent. Where are you from?'

Sam felt sorry for him. The lieutenant was trying to be popular with his men, but none of them could imagine such a white-blond beanpole from a farm in Indiana leading anyone into battle. 'I don't think I have an accent. But you do.'

The lieutenant gave him a startled look. 'Me?'

'Yeah. Where I was raised in south Louisiana, nobody talks like you.'

The lieutenant smiled. 'Everybody's got an accent, then.'

Sam looked at the spray running over the man's pale freckles, thinking that in a heavy frost he'd be nearly invisible. 'You come up on a farm?'

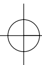
'Yeah, sure. My family moved down from Canada about twenty years ago.'

'I was raised on a farm but figured I could do better,' Sam yelled. 'The lady down the road from us had a piano and she taught it to me. Moved to New Orleans when I was sixteen to be close to the music.'

The lieutenant bent into the next blast of wind. 'I'm with you there. I can't throw bales far enough to farm.'

'How many days till we get to France?'

'The colonel says three more, the captain, two, the pilot, four.'



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Sam nodded. 'Nobody knows what's goin' on, like usual.'

'Well, it's a big war,' the lieutenant said. They watched a huge swell climb the side of the rusty ship and engulf a machine-gun crew hunkered down below them in a makeshift nest of sandbags, the deluge flushing men out on deck, where they slid on their bellies in the foam.

The next few days were a lurching penance of bad ocean, flint-topped rollers breaking against the bows and spray blowing by the portholes like broken glass. Inside the ship, Sam slept among the thousands of complaining, groaning, and heaving men, but spent his waking hours at the rails, sometimes with his friend Melvin Robicheaux, a tough little fellow from outside of Baton Rouge. On November 11, 1918, their steamer escaped the mountainous Atlantic and landed at Saint-Nazaire, where the wharves were jammed with people cheering, some dancing together, others running in wild rings.

Robicheaux pointed down over the rusty side of the ship. 'How come everybody's dancin'? They all got a bottle of wine. You think they glad to see us?'

Tugboats and dock locomotives were blowing their whistles through a hanging gauze of coal smoke. As he watched the celebration, Sam felt happy that he'd shown up with his rifle. The French looked like desperate people ecstatic about an approaching rescue. However, as the tugboats whistled and pushed the ship against the dock, he sensed the festival wasn't for this boatload of soldiers but for some more important event. Hardly anybody was waving at the ship.

Four thousand troops unloaded onto the dock, and when all the men were lined up under the freight sheds and out of the wind, a colonel climbed onto a pile of ammunition crates and announced through a megaphone that an armistice had just been signed and the war was over.

Many cheered, but a portion of the young recruits seemed disappointed that they wouldn't get to shoot at anybody. The weapons hanging on them, the ammunition stacked around in wooden

crates, the cannons still being unloaded by the puffing dock cranes were suddenly redundant. Sam wondered what he would tell his friends back home of his war experience. The most valuable trophies of war were the stories, and this one was good only for a derisive laugh.

Robicheaux poked him in the back with the tip of his bayonet scabbard. 'This like that time you tried workin' at Stein's?'

'What?'

'Stein, the shoe man.'

'Oh. I guess so.' He had tried for two weeks to get a job at Stein's Shoe Emporium on Canal Street, but the morning after the old man had finally decided to take him on, Sam showed up for work only to find a wreath on the door and a typed note announcing the death of Solomon Stein and the permanent closure of his shop.

He stood in his ranks for an hour feeling awkward and unnecessary while the officers tried to figure what to do with all these soldiers and their tons of gear. Sam's long suit was patience, or at least an ability to wait for something good to happen, so he stood there, watching the civilians cheer as the men around him grumbled that they might have to file onto the ship for a lurching voyage back to New Orleans. It was cold, and he was hungry. After a long while, boys pushing carts of food came up and fed each man a miniature loaf of hard bread with a slice of cheese hanging out like a pale tongue. Then they were marched five miles to the edge of the city, where they pitched camp in a bald field that, judging by the stumps and posturing bronze statues, must once have been a landscaped park. An icy breeze flowed down a boulevard feeding into the camp, and Sam fastened the top button on his tunic and closed his coat. He had never felt a wind that cold in his life.

That night he was sure he would freeze to death. Robicheaux, his tent mate, lay on his cot talking nonstop.

'Hey, Simoneaux, I'm thinkin' of a warm fire, me. Hot potatoes in each pocket. How about you?'

'I'm thinkin' about those recruiting posters. They made joining up look like a good idea,' he said glumly.

'I liked the one with the Hun molesting them Belgian women.'

Sam raised his head from his cot and looked at him. 'You liked it?'

'I mean it made me mad. Made me want to come over and help 'em out.'

'You wanted to make them Belgian women grateful, huh?'

'You bet.'

Sam covered his head. 'Sometimes I think about the music. I was sales clerk at Gruenwald's when I joined up, and we got in all this sheet music full of sunshine, like "Over There," "Somewhere in France Is Daddy," "Keep Your Head Down, Fritzie Boy"'

Robicheaux sniffed. 'You didn't think you'd need to keep your head down between your legs to keep your ears from freezin' off.'

'So far,' Sam said dreamily, 'it's not a happy song.' At home, the war had seemed a colorful musical production, a gay fox-trot in the key of C, but the voyage on the *Alex Denkman* changed all that. The *Denkman* was a round-bottom, coal-burning nausea machine, its hull so fouled with giant streamers of rust that the government decided painting a camouflage pattern on it was unnecessary. A boy who'd grown up in Sam's hometown had died en route of a burst appendix and was buried at sea after a perfunctory prayer. Sam and several other Louisiana men had stood in snow flurries on the fantail and watched the shrouded figure bob in the ship's rolling wake, refusing to sink, as though the corpse itself didn't feel right about the lead-cold sea and was trying to drift back toward the warm soil of a Louisiana graveyard. He was a Duplechen boy, his father a wiry little farmer who was good with mules. Sam knew the man and could imagine his sorrow, the vacant place at his table, the forever-broken link. This cold camp seemed a minor inconvenience next to that, and he turned over and went to sleep.

One morning, after a week of camping among the statues, he watched a group of officers drive up in an open motorcar and

choose squads of ten to travel to Paris and work in hospitals. Sam drew this duty and was put in charge of guarding a narcotics dispensary. Sometimes he was sent through the pungent wards to deliver a dose of morphine to a nurse, and the things he saw on these errands aged him. The amputations, the groaning, the smell of infection and illness were proof of how little he knew about the meanness of warfare. At the end of each day, he felt humbled and simple.

Sometimes he and his contingent would walk to a café where there was a very bad piano, and Sam would practice for an hour straight. The men didn't talk about the things they had seen in the wards, because all of it was beyond words. Sam was afraid that talking about it would make pictures stick in his head forever. They all worked in the ward for those too sick to move, and it was so huge that the ten of them combined had never seen half of it, much less the satellite buildings and compounds. There were French hospitals. English hospitals. American hospitals. Nothing in the patriotic posters or sheet music hinted at the blown-away jawbones, the baked eyeballs, or the trembling black rubber tubes dripping pus.

Eventually, because he could speak Cajun French, which to the Parisians sounded like a very bad seventeenth-century patois from the south of France, he was asked to perform some rudimentary interpreting. But every Frenchman he talked to raised his eyebrows in alarm, studied his pleasant face, and asked which colony he came from.

In January he was pulled off hospital duty and teamed up with eight fellow Louisianans under the Indiana lieutenant, for battlefield cleanup in the Argonne. They were told they were going to a forest, and Robicheaux picked up his rifle and said, 'Hot damn, maybe we can shoot us a deer and get some good meat.' But days later, when they jumped off the muddy, open truck, they saw a dead and ice-glazed countryside convulsed with shell craters and stippled with exploded trees, a vast, botched junkscape of

shot-apart wagons, upended tanks, and frost-etched ordnance of every description. They were given a map and told to police two square miles of it.

Sam stepped off the frozen track and his boot broke through a crust of ice, sinking deep into a foul-smelling brook. He pulled free and looked back at his lieutenant, tall, pale-eyed, barely there, his boyish midwestern face full of obedience and confusion.

'Sir, what exactly do they want us to do?'

The lieutenant put a foot up on an abandoned water-cooled machine gun. 'I think it's pretty simple. We should look for the most dangerous ordnance and detonate it.' His voice was thin, and Sam remembered hearing that he was highly educated and had never seen combat. They all looked over the immense battlefield, unable to comprehend any of it. Even in the cold, a stink rose out of the earth, and bristling everywhere were rusted hummocks of barbed wire.

They set up a camp of sorts, erecting a small tent for their supplies, and two hours after they'd arrived, a plodding noise came from the west, and they turned to see the head of an infantryman rise up from a steep swale and then the rest of him, his right hand towing the reins of five saddled horses over the remnant of a road. He plodded on deliberately – like a horse himself, and stopped next to the truck. 'I have orders to let you have these here animals,' he drawled.

'What on earth for?' the lieutenant asked.

The soldier shrugged. 'Each demolition group gets a team.'

Sam pointed over the chaos of no-man's-land. 'They don't expect us to ride these out there, do they?'

'Good idea!' the lieutenant exclaimed, his face brightening. He dismissed the soldier and took the reins, tying them to the truck's side rails. 'From horseback you'll be able to find the shells much better. That's the first thing to go after. The big projectiles. We can stack them and blow them up.' He gestured toward the truck bed. 'We've been sent out with a detonator, electrical wire, and cases of dynamite.'

Sam had been issued a pair of field glasses and was studying a hill to the north, his stomach heavy with foreboding. 'What about the grenades? They're out there like gravel.' He put down the glasses and looked over at the lieutenant.

'I know enough not to handle them. Some might go off with just a nudge. I think we should try shooting them with our Springfields.'

Melvin Robicheaux took off his helmet. 'Will that set them things off?'

The lieutenant raised his shoulders and turned up his hands. 'Pick one and shoot at it. Sort of an experiment.'

Sam again peered through his field glasses. 'I wouldn't do it.'

The lieutenant rose up on the balls of his feet. 'We'll give it a try.'

Robicheaux got his rifle from the rear of the truck and worked the bolt. He glanced over his shoulder. 'Them horses, they been in the fightin' or they like us?'

The lieutenant turned toward the animals. 'I'd guess the gimpy pair and that one with the scarred rump are veterans. The others, I don't know. Maybe they just came up from a transport.' He turned, put his hands behind his back, and looked up the hill. 'Go ahead and shoot one.'

Robicheaux adjusted the sights of the rifle, aimed at a grenade on the lip of a shell crater seventy yards away, and fired. He missed, but at the crack of the rifle one of the horses whinnied and reared, pulling loose from the truck and taking off in a zigzag gallop across the galled field and up the hill. Sam grabbed the bridles of two of the shying horses, and the other pair stood steaming in the light snow as if nothing at all had happened. The men watched the spooked horse run up the far rise for half a mile, dodging stumps and jumping craters and then stepping on God knows what, disappearing at once in a monstrous pink fireball. The ear-flattening concussion roared back across the field like a clap of thunder and they all ran behind the truck, scanning the sky for falling debris.

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Once the sound of the explosion had echoed away, the lieutenant turned around and pointed to Dupuis, the only veteran among them. 'What did that animal step on?'

Dupuis, a dour older man from Arnaudville, said, 'I don't know, Cap. I been here a whole year and don't understand none of it.'

A twenty-pound piece of shrapnel came straight down out of the clouds and banged through the hood of the truck. Crouched next to a tire, Sam stared at where the horse had been vaporized and then up at the sky, unable to imagine this cause-and-effect, the power involved, or what they were doing here. Up on the hill, a crater smoked like an entrance to a burning mine.

They fanned out over the blasted countryside shooting at grenades, about half of which exploded. Sam adjusted his sights and began setting off German stick grenades that went up with ear-cutting thuds, both dull and sharp at the same time. After an hour he felt something like a hammer blow on his helmet. Examining a long coppery crease, he guessed it was caused by a stray shot from another man's rifle, for other teams were working adjacent quadrants. After that, he worked in the low places, sighting in from the edge of trenches. Walking along a poisoned trickle of a stream, the water blue and stinking, he looked up the bank and saw a thighbone protruding from the earth. Downstream five German helmets sat as inert as dead turtles. Farther on he saw a mortar hitched to a team of killed horses frozen hard in their harness, and his thoughts began to balk against the math of the place; there were enough unexploded grenades of all nationalities to keep him busy for a hundred years. The smell was a walking presence and a mockery of what he had imagined of war, now blasted out of his mind forever. He understood how brutally the illusion of warfare had ended for the hundreds of thousands who'd struggled here. 'What a damned lie,' he said aloud. Climbing out of the stream, he worked the bolt and fired at a French pear grenade, which tumbled away but didn't detonate.

Suddenly an infantryman raised his head over the next hillock.

'Son of a bitch, didn't they give you a compass? You're not supposed to fire to the northwest.'

They walked toward each other until only a naked ravine graveled with spent machine-gun casings separated them.

'You with a disposal unit?' Sam called.

The man was coated with mud and his helmet was missing. 'What's left of one. Two of us were killed outright this morning when they kicked over grenades. Another caught a bullet in the ass, and we don't even know who did it.'

'I been sure of my backdrop when I took a shot.'

The man held his arms up against the sky and let them drop. He looked behind him into his own sector and then back at Sam. 'Nobody's ever done anything like this before.' Bareheaded, sickly small, he seemed lost and befuddled.

Sam spat into the ravine. 'It's a bitch, all right.'

'A trainload of bitches,' the infantryman said, turning back down the hill.

It took them all afternoon to build a stack of German three-inch shells to the size of a cord of wood, set the dynamite charges, and pay out wire to the detonating machine. They had no idea how far to back off. The lieutenant found a long trench a hundred yards away, and the ten of them piled into it. After Dupuis wired the machine, the lieutenant pushed the plunger. The explosion was astounding, and at the end of the row a man from Lafayette cried out when a chunk of shell came down and fractured his collarbone. Sam crawled through a rain of falling dirt and found that the man's heavy coat had saved his shoulder from being cut off, but that some terrible wound was bleeding under the cloth.

He laid him flat in the trench and as gently as he could, pulled his arm straight down by his side. The soldier roared at the hot star of pain in his shoulder, and Sam, who had never seen such hurt, felt foolish and near tears himself. He turned to the lieutenant. 'What can we do for him?'

The lieutenant's voice rose half an octave. 'Well, I don't know.'

He looked up over the lip of the trench. ‘We’re not supposed to get hurt.’

Sam opened his canteen and tilted it toward the injured man’s white, clenched lips. ‘Maybe you could send somebody to that other bunch in the northwest. Maybe their truck works and they can come get him.’

The lieutenant remained silent. Dupuis volunteered to climb over the ridge to find another unit, and the man from Lafayette began screaming about his bones grinding together.

‘What can I do, bud?’ Sam asked.

The soldier’s eyes opened wide and looked past Sam out of a narrow, stubbled face wrinkled even in youth. ‘Hit me in the head with somethin’,’ he rasped.

The rest of the men gathered close, as though the heat of their bodies would collect and offer comfort. The wounded soldier began to fill the trench with his moans, and Sam sensed how minuscule this pain was compared to the vast agonies of the death field they were in. He looked out and saw half a million soldiers going at each other in a freezing rain, their bodies shredded by artillery, their faces torn off, their knees disintegrated into snowy red pulp, their lungs boiled out by poison gas, and all of this for four years, spread out as far and wide as the continent itself.

That night, after the wounded man had been picked up by an ambulance wagon, the rest of them bedded down around their ruined truck. Robicheaux had hobbled the horses but they shuffled among the men all night and one of them stepped on Sam’s hand as he slept. In the morning his wrist was swollen and stiff, and he had trouble unbuttoning his trousers. The men washed their rations down with water and started out again, shooting not only at hand grenades, but also a certain type of four-and-a-half-inch shell that would explode if hit near the nose. For these, the lieutenant ordered them to lie flat at least seventy-five yards away before firing so the shrapnel would fly over their backs. They shot until a man named LeBoeuf was hit in the elbow by a fragment and had to be hauled hollering out to the road to wait for the

ambulance. The remaining seven continued, gamely picking up grenades now and arranging them like ducks in a shooting gallery. They shot ineffectively at mortar rounds, and even large artillery duds. The sky faired off late, and they went on firing until sundown, their faces smudged gray with gunpowder. Between explosions they could hear teams in other sectors shooting as well, blowing up large caches, all of it a silly echo of the war itself. When the light gave out, Sam's ears were ringing like struck anvils. Taking one last look at the darkening land, he felt fortunate and, at the same time, deeply saddened.

Robicheaux had found a crock jug of brandy in the cellar of a destroyed house, and after everybody finished eating, he brought it from under the truck and passed it around, the men taking swallows with trembling hands and savoring the fine liquid heat. One by one, five of them fell asleep in their blankets. A half-moon came up, glazing the high points of the frost-struck battlefield, the stumps and armaments taking on the muted glow of tombstones. Sam and his friend sat back against the front tire, watching the field gradually luminesce.

Robicheaux took off his helmet, hung it on the bumper, and adjusted his wool cap. 'I'm glad we missed the big dance.' He was a robust man, all muscle, a high-school footballer who'd also worked the New Orleans docks unloading sacks of coffee.

'Ain't you cold?' Sam asked.

'It's all right. The house I grew up in had so many cracks in the wallboards you could read a newspaper by the sunlight leakin' in.'

'You married?'

Robicheaux started to answer in French, but Sam waved him off. 'Talk American.'

'Pourquoi?'

'I moved to the city so I could learn to talk better, pronounce my words, dress nicer, you know. I don't talk like some college boy, but at least people don't think I'm a fool. If you talk French in town people look at you like you're stupid. You notice that?'

Robicheaux nodded. 'You want a indoor job.'

'You got that right.'

'Your old man, he's tanned like a brick from workin' a cane farm, right?'

'I was raised by my uncle Claude and he farmed sweet potatoes.'

'Patates douces,' Robicheaux said dreamily.

'Sweet potatoes.'

'I am.'

'What?'

'Married. I got two little boys up in Baton Rouge. You?'

'Yes.'

'Kids?'

Sam took a pull of the brandy and set the jug down between them. 'I had a son. Oscar. He got a bad fever about two years old and didn't make it.'

Robicheaux turned his head away. 'That's rough.'

'Plenty rough. My uncle came to town for the funeral. He told me he'd lost a boy and a girl before the rest of us came along. He was trying to give me some comfort, I guess. Came to New Orleans and sat in my little rent house and talked, talked, talked. Damned if in the middle of all that comforting he didn't start crying himself about the babies he'd lost, my cousins. Then he starts telling me about his brothers and sisters he'd never seen, about my own brother, sister, mother, and father, people I never knew.'

Robicheaux stretched his legs out over the ground. 'They say mosquitoes cause most of that fever. You got to screen in your cistern. Pour oil in the ditches.'

'I do now. And we got city water.'

'You'll just have to make some more, you and your wife.'

Sam looked up at the craters in the moon and buttoned his tunic and then his overcoat. 'They're not like loaves of bread you give to a neighbor. You remember them.'

Robicheaux put the cork in the jug. 'I know. One minute they're here and the next they ain't, but they don't go away. They're in your head. '

Sam briefly raised an arm. 'I'm looking out at this chopped-up place they sent us. I'm glad I don't know anybody that got killed here, because I'd feel like I was walking on his grave.' He stood up and gathered his blanket from the truck, then knocked the dried mud off his boots and climbed onto the front seat. He wondered briefly how much of the mud was composed of atomized blood and shell-fractured bone, how much was relic of a cause made sacred for no reason other than the sacrifice itself. He thought of how the dead men's families were maimed by the loss that for some would surely grow larger over time, the absence more palpable than the presence. He remembered his dead child and cast a long look over the dim killing fields.

He began to think of his uncle Claude back on the sweet-potato-and-sugar-cane farm, promising himself he'd go way out in the country to see him when he returned. It was a long trip over swampy roads, but he would make it to sit in the kerosene-smelling kitchen and tell him how it was over here, how it wasn't like they'd expected, that the dead men were heroes but also pieces cut forever out of the lives of their families. He thought of his uncle's simple kitchen table, purchased along with six chairs, how he'd moved one chair out to the back porch when Sam had left the farm so they could remember him by its absence.

He settled across the seat, closed his eyes, and began to piece together the many missing parts of his childhood – father, mother, brother, and sister. The details of stories he'd heard whispered around him since infancy formed a whole mural in his mind, a speaking picture – words above everyone's head. His people were from southwest Louisiana and had run cattle there since the 1700s, after the Attakapas cannibals had been civilized. These Acadian *vachers* knew animals well and valued trained beasts as minor souls among them. Sam's father raised and trained oxen and leased the teams to lumber companies in Texas that were beginning to clear out the big stands of longleaf pines in the low country where only an animal could go. One day, this father he never met was waiting outside a saloon in the village of Troumal on the Texas

border with his cousins the Ongerons, waiting with two teams he would turn over to lumbermen. They were smoking, sitting on a mud sled, their willow ox whips wedged upright in the box, chatting in French and waiting for drovers to show up, when a drunk little timber-lease buyer came out through the swinging doors and stood staring at them. A week of black stubble ran up to his eye sockets, and his teeth were little yellow stones. An ox shifted his head toward his greasy trousers, took a sniff, and turned away, blowing the stink out of his snout. The man leaned against a porch post and scratched his rear with his gun hand. After a moment he spat on the nearest ox and snapped, 'Why don't you mushmouths talk American? You sound like a bunch of pigeons in a tub.'

The Ongerons had seen him once before and were too smart to fight him. Sam's father had no interest in the bluster of an Arkansas drunk, yet he was the one to answer. 'What you want to know, you?'

'I want some sharp spurs with big rowels. Where do they sell such as that in this shithole town?'

The father's eyes went to the flanks of the drunk's horse, which were scuffed raw and hairless. Around Troumal no one made spurs or anything else. The general store sold what a man could put in his stomach or under a plowshare, but little else. Ten miles away was a poor excuse for a railroad that could take him somewhere, but none of them had ever seen it, though they'd heard the whistle when the wind was out of the south. 'Maybe in Beaumont.'

'That's a forty-mile ride, you idjet.'

The Ongerons were looking at the drunk's horse, which was well formed and bright eyed, though muddy and cut in several places as if forced to jump barbed wire. One of them said, 'Sharp spurs won't work on a smart horse, no.'

The Arkansas man stepped down into the ankle-deep slop surrounding the porch and untied his animal. Sam's father saw the rusty, long-spined Mexican rowels, and he watched the horse's

eyes roll in expectation. The man got up and doubled the reins in a gloved fist. The oxmen regarded his movements closely, waiting for him to lean rearward in the saddle and back the animal away from the porch. What he did instead was to give a neck-twisting haul on the reins, bringing the horse's head all the way up, and the backwards stumbling and rearing was hard for them to tolerate. The drunk cursed and rattled the bit in the horse's mouth, jerking the reins high again and again, and the animal began to whinny and lower its hindquarters like a whipped dog. At this point Sam's father reached out with his ox twitch and stung the Arkansas man on the back of his crosshatched neck for being the dumb brute he was. The drunk dropped the reins in surprise, lost his balance as the horse gave a leap, and tumbled backwards out of the saddle, doubling his neck on the edge of the porch.

The saloonkeeper had seen what happened and pushed through the door. Sam's father and the Ongerons, five brothers, joined in a circle and bent down to where the man was quivering toward death. One of them pinched the mud out of the drunk's nose, and two others jiggled his shoulders with their open palms, as if he were hot to the touch. Finally the saloonkeeper jerked down the drunk's collar for a look, and they all straightened up.

'Eh bien,' one of the Ongerons said.

'Quel est son nom?' Sam's father asked.

'I don't know,' said the saloonkeeper, who understood but didn't speak the local dialect. 'I think he was buying timber rights for some people in Arkansas. But his business ain't around here. I guess he was just passing through.'

The Ongeron brothers were indistinguishable except by age. Their mother made their clothes on a house loom, and they wove their own hats out of palmetto leaves. The youngest asked if someone should go for the sheriff. They all agreed it would be a good idea, but the sheriff was a day's ride and the messenger would have to swim his animal across three bayous. Another Ongeron pointed out that the sheriff wouldn't give a damn since the drunk wasn't from the parish.

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Just then five men rode out of the woods on mules, not arriving on the road but struggling out of the tallow trees and stickers on the west side of the saloon. These were the Texans coming for the eight oxen.

One wore store-bought clothes and was obviously in charge. He glanced at the dead man, then up at the saloon. 'Is these ox ready to be bought?'

Sam's father walked over and cast his gray eyes up to him. 'I'm Simoneaux.'

'Here.' The man tossed down a tobacco sack. 'Count your money. Just lookin', I can see these animals is made right. They look like they could pull down a courthouse. Can I have your twitch?'

Sam's father looked at the slender rod in his hand for a moment and then handed it up. The man tapped the left ear of the near ox yoked in a pair, and the animal stepped left. 'All right.'

The Texans got down, mounted the porch, and sat on the bench. They were all the color of schoolhouse brick. The head man looked over the hitch rail. 'Why's he sleepin' in the road?'

'He fell off his horse and died,' the saloonkeeper told him. 'You know him?'

The man turned his head sideways and studied the body's face. 'Naw. And I'm glad of it. You got beer?'

'It's warm.'

'It's still beer, ain't it?'

After the men went inside, the Ongerons and Sam's father stood talking above the dead man and decided they should ride to the priest's house and ask him what to do. They all got in the *traneau*, and the two dark mules lunged into their collars to free the runners and began pulling down the mud path to the south.

The priest was a dour, half-senile man with no teeth or manners, an Estonian exiled to the Louisiana prairie. He stood in the high grass outside his little box of a rectory and yelled out, because he was mostly deaf, 'Is the body Catholic?'

'*Je crois que non,*' the oldest Ongeron answered.

The priest cupped a hand behind an ear. 'How did he die?'

Simoneaux stepped out of the mud sled and explained in French what had happened.

'Ah, violence. Simoneaux, will you confess this?'

'Mais oui. Quand tu veux.'

The priest shook his head slowly. 'Well, he can't be put inside the fence because he's not Catholic and met a bad end, unconfessed. But you can put him outside the fence in the back.'

'All right.'

The priest held out a hand. 'The plot costs a dollar.'

Sam's father looked into his bag and fished out a silver coin. *'Combien s'il est catholique?'*

'Fifty cents.'

He looked sorrowfully at the coin and examined it front and back. *'Tu peux pas lui baptiser?'*

The priest gently took the dollar. 'Simoneaux, you can't buy a ticket after the boat has sailed.'

And Sam's father knew this was right, that something had been done that could not be undone. He and the Ongerons silently went back to the saloon, loaded the body into the sled, and buried it behind the churchyard. The priest watched from the window but did not come out, only opened the door when one of the men returned his shovel. They removed the saddle and bloody bit from the horse and put him in the shed next to the priest's mare, and then they all went home for supper.

That night, Sam's father was the last one to bed, and for the first time he waited at the dark front window to listen for something other than the coarse respirations of his animals. It was like this every night from then on, watchfulness and worry after dark. Whether the song of a night bird or the breaking of a stick, he listened to every sound as if for the beat of a sick heart.

And two months later, when the three children were playing in the house and his wife was washing supper dishes in a pan at the kitchen window, the moonless night stirred with the sound of

hooves. He expected to be called out, and maybe he thought for half a moment about seizing his three-dollar shotgun rusting behind the door, but as family stories let it be known in the years to come, there was only enough time for the thing to happen and none for preparation. The house was made of weatherboard nailed on studs, and the insect noise of gun hammers being set in the yard on shotguns loaded with double-ought buckshot, on long-barreled Colt .45 revolvers, on Winchesters and Marlins preceded the coming apart of the building in a splintering volley that swept the rooms with a swarm of deforming lead, the boy and girl killed outright, the mother running toward them knocked back into the next world, and he himself catching a slug under the rib cage that didn't kill him at once, giving him a moment to reach the six-month-old baby lying on the floor, grab him by the foot, sling him through the open door of the cold potbellied stove, and bat it shut as the slugs sailed through the smokestack without even shaking it, rang against a skillet, exploded the mantel clock, pounded through Sam's father's skull, and beat that stove like an anvil until everyone in the dark yard had emptied magazines, breeches, and cylinders of their revenge. The door came off the hinges under the kick of a soggy boot, though the lock hadn't been set in years. The overhead lantern had its globe shot out, but the flame still burned enough for them to check their work in its infernal glow, the assassins hearing in their ringing ears only the muffled mewing of the family cat. They prowled through the house like feral hogs, then mounted up to flee back to Arkansas or Mississippi or North Louisiana, from wherever these wronged blood kin had been drawn. No one afterward knew exactly who they were.

The next morning at daybreak, a lean, sandy-haired man rode up on his mule to help his brother put in seed cane. Claude found them all and sat down on the one standing chair and bawled, looking at the forms on the floor and holding out a hand to each, crying out again and then hearing a miniature echo of his grief begin to rise out of the stove. He opened the door and saw the

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baby furry with ash, its face black but for the lightning strikes of its tears.

Sam looked up out of the stove, stopped crying, and smiled at his uncle's face caught in the square of light that was the world.