

Hillary Jordan

Mudbound

JAMIE

Henry and I dug the hole seven feet deep. Any shallower and the corpse was liable to come rising up during the next big flood: *Howdy boys! Remember me?* The thought of it kept us digging even after the blisters on our palms had burst, reformed and burst again. Every shovelful was an agony?—?the old man, getting in his last licks. Still, I was glad of the pain. It shoved away thought and memory.

When the hole got too deep for our shovels to reach bottom, I climbed down into it and kept digging while Henry paced and watched the sky. The soil was so wet from all the rain it was like digging into raw meat. I scraped it off the blade by hand, cursing at the delay. This was the first break we'd had in the weather in three days and could be our last chance for some while to get the body in the ground.

"Better hurry it up," Henry said.

I looked at the sky. The clouds overhead were the color of ash, but there was a vast black mass of them to the north, and it was headed our way. Fast.

"We're not gonna make it," I said.

"We will," he said.

That was Henry for you: absolutely certain that whatever he wanted to happen would happen. The body would get buried before the storm hit. The weather would dry out in time to resow the cotton. Next year would be a better year. His



little brother would never betray him.

I dug faster, wincing with every stroke. I knew I could stop at any time and Henry would take my place without a word of complaint?—?never mind he had nearly fifty years on his bones to my twenty-nine. Out of pride or stubbornness or both, I kept digging. By the time he said, "All right, my turn," my muscles were on fire and I was wheezing like an engine full of old gas. When he pulled me up out of the hole, I gritted my teeth so I wouldn't cry out. My body still ached in a dozen places from all the kicks and blows, but Henry didn't know about that.

Henry could never know about that.

I knelt by the side of the hole and watched him dig. His face and hands were so caked with mud a passerby might have taken him for a Negro. No doubt I was just as filthy, but in my case the red hair would have given me away. My father's hair, copper spun so fine women's fingers itch to run through it. I've always hated it. It might as well be a pyre blazing on top of my head, shouting to the world that he's in me. Shouting it to me every time I look in the mirror.

Around four feet, Henry's blade hit something hard.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Piece of rock, I think."

But it wasn't rock, it was bone?—?a human

skull, missing a big chunk in back. "Damn," Henry said, holding it up to the light.

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know."

We both looked to the north. The black was growing, eating up the sky.

"We can't start over," I said. "It could be days before the rain lets up again."

"I don't like it," Henry said. "It's not right."

He kept digging anyway, using his hands, passing the bones up to me as he unearthed them: ribs, arms, pelvis. When he got to the lower legs, there was a clink of metal. He held up a tibia and I saw the crude, rusted iron shackle encircling the bone. A broken chain dangled from it.

"Jesus Christ," Henry said. "This is a slave's grave."

"You don't know that."

He picked up the broken skull. "See here? He was shot in the head. Must've been a runaway." Henry shook his head. "That settles it."

"Settles what?"

"We can't bury our father in a nigger's grave," Henry said. "There's nothing he'd have hated more. Now help me out of here." He extended one grimy hand.

"It could have been an escaped convict," I said. "A white man." It could have been, but I was betting it wasn't. Henry hesitated, and I said, "The penitentiary's what, just six or seven miles from here?"

"More like ten," he said. But he let his hand fall to his side.

"Come on," I said, holding out my own hand. "Take a break. I'll dig awhile." When he reached up and clasped it, I had to stop myself from smiling. Henry was right: there was nothing our father would have hated more.

Henry was back to digging again when I saw Laura coming toward us, picking her way across the drowned fields with a bucket in each hand. I fished in my pocket for my handkerchief and used it to wipe some of the mud off my face. Vanity?—?that's another thing I got from my father.

"Laura's coming," I said.

"Pull me up," Henry said.

I grabbed his hands and pulled, grunting with the effort, dragging him over the lip of the grave. He struggled to his knees, breathing harshly. He bent his head and his hat came off, revealing a wide swath of pink skin on top. The sight of it gave me a sharp, unexpected pang. *He's getting old*, I thought. *I won't always have him*.

He looked up, searching for Laura. When his eyes found her they lit with emotions so private I was embarrassed to see them: longing, hope, a tinge of worry. "I'd better keep at it," I said, turning away and picking up the shovel. I half jumped, half slid down into the hole. It was deep enough now that I couldn't see out. Just as well.

"How's it coming?" I heard Laura say. As always, her voice coursed through me like cold, clear water. It was a voice that belonged rightfully to some ethereal creature, a siren or an angel, not to a middle-aged Mississippi farmwife.

"We're almost finished," said Henry. "Another foot or so will see it done."

"I've brought food and water," she said.

"Water!" Henry let out a bitter laugh. "That's just what we need, is more water." I heard the scrape of the dipper against the pail and the sound of him swallowing, then Laura's head appeared over the side of the hole. She handed the dipper down to me. "Here," she said, "have a drink."

I gulped it down, wishing it were whiskey instead. I'd run out three days ago, just before the bridge flooded, cutting us off from town. I reckoned the river had gone down enough by now that I could have gotten across?—?if I hadn't been stuck in that damned hole.

I thanked her and handed the dipper back up to her, but Laura wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were fixed on the other side of the grave, where we'd laid the bones.

"Good Lord, are those human?" she said.

"It couldn't be helped," Henry said. "We were already four feet down when we found them."

I saw her lips twitch as her eyes took in the shackles and chains. She covered her mouth with her hand, then turned to Henry. "Make sure you move them so the children don't see," she said.

WHEN the top of the grave was more than a foot over my head, I stopped digging. "Come take a look," I called out. "I think this is plenty deep."

Henry's face appeared above me, upside down.

He nodded. "Yep. That should do it." I handed him the shovel, but when he tried to pull me up, it was no use. I was too far down, and our hands and the walls of the hole were too slick. "I'll fetch the ladder," he said.

"Hurry."

I waited in the hole. Around me was mud, stinking and oozing. Overhead a rectangle of darkening gray. I stood with my neck bent back, listening for the returning squelch of Henry's boots, wondering what was taking him so goddamn long. *If something happened to him and Laura*, I thought, *no one would know I was here*. I clutched the edge of the hole and tried to pull myself up, but my fingers just slid through the mud.

Then I felt the first drops of rain hit my face. "Henry!" I yelled.

The rain was falling lightly now, but before long it would be a downpour. The water would start filling up the hole. I'd feel it creeping up my legs to my thighs. To my chest. To my neck. "Henry! Laura!"

I threw myself at the walls of the grave like a maddened bear in a pit. Part of me was outside myself, shaking my head at my own foolishness, but the man was powerless to help the bear. It wasn't the confinement; I'd spent hundreds of hours in cockpits with no problem at all. It was the water. During the war I'd avoided flying over the open ocean whenever I could, even if it meant facing flak from the ground. It was how I won all those medals for bravery: from being so scared of that vast, hungry blue that I drove straight into the thick of German anti-aircraft fire.

I was yelling so hard I didn't hear Henry until he was standing right over me. "I'm here, Jamie!"

I'm here!" he shouted. He lowered the ladder into the hole and I scrambled up it. He tried to take hold of my arm, but I waved him off. I bent over, my hands on my knees, trying to slow the tripping of my heart.

"You all right?" he asked.

I didn't look at him, but I didn't have to. I knew his forehead would be puckered and his mouth pursed?—his "my brother, the lunatic" look.

"I thought maybe you'd decided to leave me down there," I said, with a forced laugh.

"Why would I do that?"

"I'm just kidding, Henry." I went and took up the ladder, tucking it under one arm. "Come on, let's get this over with." We hurried across the fields, stopping at the pump to wash the mud off our hands and faces, then headed to the barn to get the coffin. It was a sorry-looking thing, made of mismatched scrap wood, but it was the best we'd been able to do with the materials we had. Henry frowned as he picked up one end. "I wish to hell we'd been able to get to town," he said.

"Me too," I said, thinking of the whiskey.

We carried the coffin up onto the porch. When we went past the open window Laura called out, "You'll want hot coffee and a change of clothes before we bury him."

"No," said Henry. "There's no time. Storm's coming."

We took the coffin into the lean-to and set it on the rough plank floor. Henry lifted the sheet to look at our father's face one last time. Pappy's expression was tranquil. There was nothing to show that his death was anything other than

the natural, timely passing of an old man.

I lifted the feet and Henry took the head. "Gently now," he said.

"Right," I said, "we wouldn't want to hurt him."

"That's not the point," Henry snapped.

"Sorry, brother. I'm just tired."

With ludicrous care, we lowered the corpse into the coffin. Henry reached for the lid. "I'll finish up here," he said. "You go make sure Laura and the girls are ready."

"All right."

As I walked into the house I heard the hammer strike the first nail, a sweet and final sound. It made the children jump. "What's that banging, Mama?" asked Amanda Leigh.

"That's your daddy, nailing Pappy's coffin shut," Laura said.

"Will it make him mad?" Bella's voice was a scared whisper.

Laura shot me a quick, fierce glance. "No, darling," she said. "Pappy's dead. He can't get mad at anyone ever again. Now, let's get you into your coats and boots. It's time to lay your grandfather to rest."

I was glad Henry wasn't there to hear the satisfaction in her voice.