

The Truth

By Kyle Summerall

December 8th

11:34 p.m.

I'd had just enough beer to get me thinking and not enough left to get me to stop. I leave the room dark and the curtains pulled as I watch the shadows pass along the strand of light that shows under the door. Collin had talked about family earlier when I left the precinct, quoting daddy. Those who spoke of family, like my dad often did, didn't know shit about it beyond the spelling. They'd just seen what family looked like back home where everyone had a cheating ace up their sleeves and were more than able to slide cold steel between a brother's ribs rather than ask for something. Things were the way they were because blood and water ran the same channels in the Mississippi Delta back then. That's why it doesn't surprise me when a shadow swallows the light at the foot of the motel's door. What comes next though, takes me off guard.

December 5th

2:29 p.m.

I hang up the phone and sit. After decades of wondering, I didn't have to anymore. My secret is about to become the worlds and I am ready to share it. It had been one of those moments, not one of the first memories that comes to mind growing up, but one of those defining events that shaped who I am, who I knew my daddy to be, and what I thought of the world beyond the flats. I wonder if they'd called my brother first, or if the sheriff is talking to him now? I set the phone down, and wait for him to call.

Writing Raw

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Melody comes into the room and I tell her like I'd been wanting to tell someone since it happened but even now, there is something about family that makes me keep it to myself. "You remember that uncle I told you 'bout? The one that up and disappeared?"

She nods and tell her that they found him and that I am being called back there. She asks why, and I lie because I know the truth ain't out there yet and the only people that know either know too much or haven't figured it out yet. That's when my phone rings and Collin's name lights up on the screen.

December 7th

9:00 a.m.

To think, after all it took to get across this damn line, I'd be coming back willingly. I pull into a diner that Collin asked me to meet him at over the phone. What used to be Harleys, a long, silver trailer with what looked like space windows that bubbled away from the building is gone, replaced by a building meant to look old.

He's standing there by the tailgate of daddy's blue Ford, his eyes on me the whole way. I recognize the truck before I do him. He don't look like daddy anymore. When daddy was pushing drugs small time through the back alleys in the delta and even when he'd paid his part enough to get to places like Georgia and the west side of Louisiana, he never once used. He was built like a Pitbull after a few hard years of beatings, starvings, and fights. His father had made him mean so that's what daddy did to us. It was clear that Collin didn't have our father's ability to abstain from the crystal. He'd gone from that Pitbull to a lanky mutt that carried with him a look of unpredictability that makes me wish I hadn't come back. If anything, I knew that when you had a Pit on a roll, the one dog that'd normally come along and end it would be the one with that same mangy look Collin looks at me with.

He moves his jaw side to side like a cow chewing cud before spitting a line of tar onto

the concrete. "Damn ner took a killn' to get r back here," he says with a laugh. He comes up on me and hugs me. It might as well be a stranger.

I get the joke, but don't bother with it so I just look back at the truck. All the spots that I remember rusting from way back are either the size of my fist and black as coal or corroded through all together.

"Come'n and let's get r a bite," he says before leading me inside.

He's on his third cigarette before the coffee even comes and when that one burns down to the filter, he takes another from the pack of Lucky Strikes and leans over the table. "You believe they fon't that SOB three miles for where we buried him?"

I check the corners of my eyes for anyone listening, "River flooded not too long ago didn't it? That surprise you?"

He raises an eyebrow and grins something awful. Uneven grooves cut deep and black into his gums where most of his teeth used to be and the ones left stand out as a wet green. "Reckon not. Weird to think they'd come straight fer us though, ain't it?"

"No."

"Well shit, ain't our land no more."

"He was family though," I say.

He sits back and stretches. The black and white stubble running down from his ears to his shirt collar folds with the loose skin and makes me feel an itch.

"Nahh man, I smell something and it ain't good fer nun of us."

I drink the last of the burned coffee, "What the hell you got to worry about. Daddy's dead. Why can't we just tell them the truth?"

Collin starts smacking on his gums and his eyes fall under the shadows of his brow, "Bullshit we can."

"We were kids," I say cutting him off. "Hell, it was so long ago that even if daddy were still alive they may not have been able to make it stick."

"You talkin' like you's wearing a badge, boy."

I roll my eyes seeing this now, the way my dad and his brother used to go at it, every bit of it built on childish wants. “And you’re suggesting we hide secrets that were never ours to begin with.”

“I made a promise to deddy that’ll never talk ‘bout it. It’s ‘bout more than what was. It’s all ‘bout what is now. This is our name.” Collin swallows hard on something, “It’s all we got left. It’s all my kids got.”

I sigh, “I just don’t see the point. If we go ahead, we can right the wrongs, Collin. We were standing there when daddy shot him. Did you think we would never have to pay for our part?”

He shakes his head over his cup, “I ain’t diggin’ deddy up. He don’t deserve it.”

“You don’t have to be the one to do it.” There’s a moment there in the silence that I almost get up but he beats me to it. I watch him from the window get in daddy’s truck, and I see my old man in my mind the last time I was here a decade back, the cancer eating him alive. I look at his old truck and his son in it, and I see a lot of the same things.

I don’t see the truck when I get to the station. When I get inside, the uniform behind the desk passes me on to the sheriff who walks me down a white hall and to a small room with a coffee machine. The two men who come and sit with me apologize for everything and I’m already uneasy. A part of me I left here, trapped within these county lines, is returning and although I have no reason to be afraid, I’m tense.

We talk for a minute before they start in on the questions. My father is the main focus of the first handful of them, everyone knowing about who he was and what he’d been so good at. There was a time where he’d even had a few cops on the payroll. I’m not sure how often that came in handy for him, but saying his name to the right ones when I was in the cuffs got me out of a few jams. I have no problem telling them everything they need and want to know.

When it happened, daddy sat us both down, let us cry, and without saying it, said that this wasn’t something to ever bring up again. He’d told us what he did was for us, for our family and that sometimes even blood strayed. We were kids and I said that a few times because I’d

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realized a long time ago how selfish my dad was to allow that darkness in. I saw what it did to him and my brother. What I was doing was for the family too.

December 8th

12:17 p.m.

My phone rings and it's Collin again.

"Hey," I answer.

"Tell you what, ole damn truck ain't starting. I'm supposed to be meeting those badges again. You still in town?"

He sounds like he talking through a handful of skool and my answer only comes when I think I know what he's said. "Yeah,"

I hear him spit. "You mind comin' by the house, givin' me a ride?"

I tell him I'll be there in a few. Daddy's old house out in country went with the land when he couldn't make the payments. It was too expensive to keep and sold for less than nothing. He moved us both in town and ran his business out in the county with some friends I'm sure he paid well to stick around and keep their lips tight. Our uncle told him years ago about the land, about how he could sale it then and get enough to keep everyone fed for a good long while. Wasn't but a few weeks later, when we all went hunting, that daddy shot him where the pines grew the tallest. It had rained a few days before and it made digging easier as we took turns with the fold out army shovel dad was carrying in his pack.

The house was shit back then and it hadn't gotten no better. Blankets are set up in the two windows flanking the screen door that hangs on one hinge and the porch swing sits on the planks. White paint flakes away to reveals more white beneath and the columns running along the porch sit off kilter as if the weight of this earth resides within.

Collin comes from around the side of the house, same dirty shirt from yesterday and his

hair unwashed. He doesn't flinch when an old boxer shoots through an opening in the underpinning tin and goes for his leg. Before the dog can get his mouth open good, the leash pulls tight and the brown dog stumbles but doesn't back off.

He comes around to the passenger side and hops in, bringing with him the smell of whisky and unemptied ashtrays.

"Nice dog," I say, putting the pick up into drive.

"Yeah, she's a sweetie alright."

We take the ride to the precinct in silence. When I park next to the door he looks up from his greasy hands, "Why you marry that zipperhead?"

"The hell you mean by that?"

He laughs into his lap. "You just did everything wrong. Our grandpappy laid out the prints, dad followed in 'em, and I did my best but when the hell you get lost?"

"You been to my house?"

He continues rubbing at his hands as if grease that'd been there for the last few days was just going to come off. "You wanted no part of us and it ate at him. You turned your own damn back on the man who kept your mouth full because of what? Huh?"

I grab his wrist and pull his hands apart, "Did you go to my house?"

"How the hell else was I supposed to keep tabs on you. Deddy was too damn proud to chase you and after you left, he ain't give a shit about nunt'in else. I ain't tell him 'bout that wonky eyed yellow you'd dun shacked up with neither. Wouldn't have heard the end of it."

His eyes sit on mine, green as they can be with those small pupils that make me doubt that he has any humanity in him. He smacks his gums, acting like I didn't just hear what he said, like it had all been in his mind and I'd just read it. "Get out."

"Ain't gunna do nuthin'. And I bet you'll still be sittin' here when I get back."

I just look at him as he gets out of the car, wondering if he'd got the answer to the question burning in his mind without me having to say anything.

He walks around the car to the driver's side, his back bent like a piece metal that used to

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be straight. “You ‘member what deddy used to say, when he’d done gotten into one of those fights with Uncle Silas?” he asks through the window.

I put the car in reverse and hit the gas. The truck rocks when I hit the brakes suddenly and pop it into drive. I don’t have to hear him to know what he’s saying. *When family betrays you, there ain’t nothing left but to cut ties.*

December 8th

11:35 p.m.

The knocks come more like bangs on the door, three of them followed by an announcement that it’s the sheriff. I check the peep hole and see him standing there, blue and red lights changing him coloring.

The sheriff’s face sags as I open the door, my first thought going to Collin.

“Mr. Singleton, you mind stepping out for a second?”

I don’t and step out into the night. It’s cold and a breeze catches my breath in the air, sending it south but I don’t feel any of it. My truck, a few spots down, has a cop car with its lights rotating parked behind it. I count three more sets of spinning lights in the lot. All four doors of my truck are open and uniforms stand around it. I look back at the sheriff and remember that quote from my daddy and Collin. I’d been played earlier when he called me, telling me how the truck didn’t work. I think about his guilty hands, rubbing together as if to wash his hands of me after dropping enough crystal in my passenger door to keep a small holler in Georgia high for weeks.

My hands lay at my sides, dead as nails, as a different kind of cold reaches deep into me. I don’t fight the badge when he cuffs me with hands that’d probably been paid well by Collin, keeping with the family tradition. With what I’d done, I’d ruined our name. That’s what Collin said and now, that old trick of using it when the cuffs got too tight is about as useful as the land,

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the family, and the truth.

The End

Kyle Summerall bio: I am a recent graduate of the Mississippi University for Women and Men. My fiction has appeared twice in *The Dilletanti*, where both pieces earned either an honorable mention, and in the most recent issue, won third place overall. I've also been published in the September Edition of *WritingRaw Magazine* 2015 and *Syzygy*. This is a story about family and how the definition of that thing we hold so dear in the south is seen differently depending on where you're from.