



# *Our 13<sup>th</sup> Divorce*

*A Novel*

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And a note: for readers who may speculate whether some version of any of the fictional characters you'll meet henceforth is based upon a living soul, I'd offer this: your imagination has been engaged. Every sentence, even the weather, is fiction. Honest.

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brothers and sisters, we need 'em.

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## *Chapter 1*

### *Jude*

*August 2, 1999*

The headlights bouncing down my gravel road belonged to a battered old truck pulling a U-Haul trailer, so I knew at once that it was him—my first love and my first heartbreak, father of my only child, king of the bad-luck blues—and I knew he was desperate now, thirty years after I divorced him, for a place to stay. I wanted to drop my garden hose and run inside and turn off all the lights. I was in no shape for the sob story I knew he'd be eager to unload. My three dogs didn't want him either. They lifted their snouts and cocked their ears toward the road, ready to rise and repel, which I was ready to let them do.

His truck was a clue, but the U-Haul was the clincher. Certain objects get attached to people, and moving equipment has been hooked to Buddy Owen since 1957, when (as his first sob story goes) he dropped out of high school, stole his uncle's hearse and drove to Hollywood to become a movie star. A week later, he joined the Army. I had no interest in listening to his latest story. I was fifty-six years old, and I was making progress, finally, on salvaging my own life.

He stopped at the end of my driveway, forty yards away, and even in the near-darkness, I could see him leaning over his steering wheel as if collecting the courage to come ahead. The dogs growled in his direction. I imagined him clinging to some hope that I'd be sympathetic. I could see him betting that I'd live up to the nickname my mother had given me long ago: Jude, after the patron saint of lost causes, helper of the hopeless.

Harold, our thirty-two year-old child, had told me just two days ago that Buddy was nearly suicidal: he was jobless, his fifth wife had kicked him out of her North Carolina home, his health was worsening. And now I saw that Harold had been preparing me for this very moment, when his father would show up after driving eight hours to south Georgia on the same day





(some coincidence) that Harold emptied the backyard “condo” and drove his own U-Haul to Atlanta for his first teaching job.

I watered a hydrangea and did not look toward his idling truck. Did he think he was lost? And that was the thought that made my sympathies betray me. I decided then—before I told him no and gently turned him away—that I would take the high road and offer him a mercy hug. The soft and forgiving dusk was partly to blame. I would take pity and stay strong and still say no. Following the hug, I’d look him in the eye, *say bello, so sorry you’re homeless, good luck, so long*. I had no intention of letting him ruin the peaceful place I’d waited so long to have to myself. He deserved worse, but I knew where the high road was.

I watered a bougainvillea and looked his way. Once his wheels rolled over the oyster-shell driveway, the dogs jumped and charged and barked as if the Devil himself were coming. Sister Alice barked high, Saint Jerome barked low, and Father Cletus yelped, a trio of ugly notes that shattered what had, until now, been a beautiful evening. I watered my peach tree and resolved to remain peaceful.

But he came too fast and drove too far, which made me spray the side of his truck.

“You’re on my grass,” I yelled.

He turned off his rumbling engine and stared through his window, a drop of water on his chin. I yelled for the dogs to hush, and they did, of course, though Sister Alice continued to show her teeth. He looked old. He was unshaved a week, unshowered a couple days at least, fatter, white hair, thicker glasses, dollar-store frames, puffy bags beneath the eyes. I’d last seen him ten years ago, after Harold’s college graduation in Asheville, and it depressed me even then to see how all his disappointments had caught up with him and collected inside his tired eyes. Now, he looked worse. He looked like he’d spent the last six years sleeping in a lawn chair.

“*Well*,” he said. “I expected worse.”

“I suppose you’re just passing through,” I said.

“I’m headed to Palm Beach. I figured I’d retire there.”

I laughed at this, a little too loudly, I’m afraid.

When he opened his door, a beer can fell out. When he bent for it, his dentures fell from his shirt pocket to the ground. He bent and groaned, picked up the can and his teeth, bumped his head on the door’s arm rest,





and said, “Goddamnit” just as calmly as if he suffered a head injury every night about this time. He threw the can on his seat, popped his teeth into his mouth, smiled and spread his arms like some old-time comedian at the end of a bad joke.

“Well?” he said. “How ’bout a hug for your favorite ex-husband?”

I no longer wanted to hug him. But I took pity. I dropped my hose and stepped into the smell of beer and dirt and sweat. I’d forgotten his 6’-5” height, which meant my nose went a little too close to his armpit. His shirt was soaked. When he let go, I took a long step back, stared at my hands and wiped them on my shorts.

He said, “My air conditioner died about 40,000 miles ago.”

We looked each other over. We looked for damage behind the eyes, we looked to see how much of the past was present, and we looked to see if anything new was living there. When he asked me for a place to stay, I would tell him no. I didn’t want him living out his final years in my back yard.

He stared over the top of his glasses, studying *me* for signs of aging, no doubt, judging my appearance now, after a day of mowing and burning brush. My arms, face and legs were streaked with windblown ashes I’d smudged like charcoal while fighting off mosquitoes. I wore the same work clothes I’d worn since 1976—a t-shirt featuring the peanut-shaped smile of Jimmy Carter beneath the slogan, “The Grin Will Win,” and a pair of paint-speckled shorts Harold outgrew when he was nine. My straw hat, string beneath the chin, was a sweat-stained hand-me-down from my father, and my short hair swelled from every side. I made no apologies and offered no excuses. It felt good to no longer care about such things in the presence of any man.

“You’re looking better than ever,” he said.

I shook my head at his first lie.

He looked at the ground, took a breath, looked back at me. He said, “I was wondering if you might happen to know where a homeless man could find some shelter for just one night.”

I looked him in the eye. I said, “Not around here I don’t.” I paused to let it sink in. I did not look away.

He leaned against the front of his truck and looked over the back yard toward the marsh.





He said, "I was just hoping to camp out somewhere for a night. Maybe I could pitch a tent. Or sleep with the dogs or something. Then I'd be up and gone before anybody even knew I was here."

"No," I said. "Sorry."

I looked at the studio apartment Harold vacated that morning. Buddy looked there, too. My second husband helped me convert it from a dirt floor shed, big as a single-wide garage. We poured and leveled concrete, used a backhoe to dig a septic tank, plumbed, wired, insulated, ran a gas line, hung sheetrock and paneling, added two windows. My third husband helped me build a porch big enough for a chair. We hung a screen door and a wooden door and nailed a new layer of tin over the old tin roof. My fourth husband helped me install a wall-unit gas heater and a window-unit air conditioner. We boxed off a closet, carved a small bookcase into one wall, added a linen closet in the bathroom, put down second-hand carpet, nailed strips of finish around the edges, caulked every pinhole, installed a used stove, refrigerator, water heater. Sprayed for termites. Called it "The Condo."

Harold never knew this, but I built it with him in mind, thinking he'd one day need a place to return to. While he went through college I rented it (very cheaply) to my drug-addicted niece after her first divorce, then to a one-legged AM disc jockey after his divorce, then to a woman in her fifties after her divorce. Then, sure enough, Harold lived there for a year after he dropped out of his Ph.D program and came back home. I had no intention of letting Buddy Owen demolish it.

He said, "I don't mean to be a burden. I'll find something." He scratched the stubble on his chin and stared at the ground. He sounded sincere. He didn't want to be a burden.

I said, "You got nowhere else to go?"

He looked back toward the road. He said, "I'll find something."

I paused. I cursed myself. I said, "Just for one night?"

"So help me, God."

So it was happening. The lost cause was winning; the helper of the hopeless was helping. Still, I refused to be taken advantage of. I told him the truth about the condo's condition and offered no amenities.

"Harold took the bed," I told him.

"I slept on the ground in the Army. I can sleep on the floor."

*A*





“There are roaches and maybe rats and snakes, since Harold wasn’t the best housekeeper, one of many things he may have learned from you.”

“I probably wouldn’t notice.”

“You’re out of propane,” I said. “Which means no hot water.”

“Does the refrigerator work?”

“It stinks like hell and it’s full of fungus.”

“I just need a place to store my insulin. That’s all I need.”

“It should work for one night—one night and maybe half the morning.”

“You don’t know how much this means to me.”

I shrugged, afraid he was headed toward a long and depressing story about another dead marriage, which I had no interest, just then, in hearing. I wondered how long it would take me to get to sleep. Too often lately, while courting sleep, the men in my life intruded. I saw, for example, my fifth husband (Buddy’s own brother, no less) a man sick with paranoia, who played with his handguns in his North Carolina basement, wearing his holster over his underwear, pulling a gun on himself while he faced the mirror. I’d see Charlie Clarkson, a man I loved but did not marry, who died from cancer, skin peeling off in my hands while I bathed him. I’d see my fourth husband, J.D., crying endlessly over his dead mother, isolated in the houseboat on the Altamaha River he lived in before he lived with me. I’d see my third husband, Lewis Foster, the son of farmers who never forgave me my single indiscretion, and then I’d see my second husband, Johnny Tate, who loved Harold, at least, and then I’d see Buddy Owen, a reckless man I once loved madly who loved to drink too much, and then I’d see the room I rented from his mother in Asheville where I’d gone after leaving my own mother because I was going to be different from her and live a life full of adventures. Then I’d see a picture of a picture—Buddy, wearing an ill-fitted suit (baptism/1967) holding Harold in the crook of his arm, his other hand spread across his back, watching his son and not the camera, looking for all the world like he might fool everyone and grow into being a good father.

I said, “If you need a shower, you can borrow mine tomorrow on your way out.”

“I appreciate it,” he said. “It’s been a rough year. You just don’t know.”

I knew. Tomorrow, we might talk, or we might not. For now, I’d be a





friend. I could do that much for one night and half a day. He stared at the ground.

“Are you hungry?” I said.

“You have no idea.”

I told him to wait, then went inside. When I came back, he was rubbing Saint Jerome’s belly. I handed him a spoon, a paper towel, and a container of Brunswick stew, left from a recent batch my mother made.

He said, “You’ve saved my life. If I don’t die in the night, I’ll wake up stronger.”

“Don’t get carried away,” I told him. “It’s just one night.”

Four months later, the dogs still barked at him. I’d added another dachshund and another stray—five dogs total, and they were barking now, at noon, which meant Buddy was strolling across the yard toward my kitchen door, carrying his first cup of coffee and the classifieds. His voice got louder as he climbed the porch steps and spoke to Sister Agnes, the landfill mutt with the soulful eyes who had been sleeping lately on Buddy’s porch.

It was Christmas Eve. I was not in the best mood, just now, for his daily intrusion. I was hungry, my back hurt from being crouched at my desk since seven a.m., and I did *not* want to discuss the topic that had kept me from sleeping: Harold was coming later tonight with his fiancée, his first serious girlfriend, a therapist who grew up in New York City, who was bringing her chihuahua.

I’d been crouched at my desk since seven a.m. because I’d been trying to organize another funeral dinner (as Chair of the St. Sebastian Bereavement Committee) while balancing the end-of-month, end-of-quarter, and end-of-year books for Bruce Hill, owner of Hill’s Heating and Air Conditioning, now \$30,000 in debt. Six and a half years ago, when Bruce’s mother died, I felt sorry for him and accepted his marriage proposal. We’d been engaged ever since. Harold, on the other hand, was rushing into his first marriage. They’d been dating only a few months, and their wedding was set for June. Clearly, he hadn’t learned enough by watching his father’s failures, or one or two of my own.

The best part of my day, the first hour, was long gone. At daybreak, I had checked the river, as I did each morning, and saw the sun rising on a tide so high that water lay in the far edge of the yard. Soft light splashed





around the trees and the moss hung toward the water like strips of fur. I looked for passing dolphins or alligators, as I did each morning, and I looked again, briefly, at the spot where, twenty-five years ago, Harold, then seven, found his five year-old cousin's drowned body. Is that the thing that made him so fragile? I'm sure it didn't help. I checked my parents' porch light to make sure they'd survived their sleep. And I looked at my sister Carol's house, then my sister Mary's house, and counted us lucky, again, for having grown up with five hundred acres around us, down to twelve now, though the pine trees shielded us from the subdivision on the other side. I knew Harold would want to raise his children here, but I worried his fiancée favored the concrete, the skyscrapers, the pollution, and the noise of New York. And I feared she would win any argument with Harold, who hated any hint of conflict. He'd spent so much of his life trying to avoid it that he stayed on the verge of a breakdown. His voice had even trembled over the phone when he'd asked whether Libby could please bring her little dog, who would need newspapers spread on the kitchen floor because she was too delicate to be outside among other dogs. I worried over what would happen to him when it didn't work out with her. I feared his father's genes would talk him into drinking himself to death or jumping off a bridge.

And here was Harold's father now, stepping through my kitchen door like a burglar gearing up to ask a question.

"Anybody naked?" he yelled.

I didn't answer him.

"Can I borrow your phone?" he asked.

Again, I didn't answer. My right hand drummed numbers on an adding machine while my left hand lifted invoices. A stranger with a discerning eye might see I once had a talent for piano. The discerning stranger with some intuition might infer that I could have been a concert pianist if only a few key moments of my early life had played out differently—if I hadn't married too young, for example, to the non-discerning man with the dead memory who was marching now across my living room.

He plopped into the recliner, whipped out the footrest and released a sigh he'd been holding for fifty years. It was more of a moan, with a sigh singing backup, his body recovering from the hike he'd begun in the backyard. I'd heard a similar sigh from Harold on the phone just this morning,





and I ordered him to cease that habit immediately. Buddy set his coffee cup on the table and stared at CNN, where two men in suits argued over the Y2K computer-induced economic apocalypse they both agreed would arrive January 1.

“Please use a coaster,” I said.

He did. In his lap, he dropped his classifieds, two paragraphs circled in red ink.

“Merry Christmas,” he told me. With alarming sincerity, it seemed.

“Will you be staying long?” This, my quiet joke he never seemed to get.

The men in suits raised their voices simultaneously. One said, “You’re crazy. You don’t know your history.” The other said, “*I’m* crazy? You think *I’m* crazy? *You’re* crazy.”

Buddy said, “Where’s the remote control?”

“None of your business.”

“I’m having trouble hearing you,” he said.

“I need to concentrate on this for a moment, please.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll go to the bathroom.” He released the footrest and lurched his way to the kitchen, sighing like a child, clomping his size 16 Florsheims (with tassels) across the tile. He pulled down my Jacksonville paper from the top of my refrigerator and carried it down the hall into my bathroom.

My thoughts returned to Harold, who was too young for marriage. Thirty-two, yes, but still too young. No matter how long he lived, he’d be too young. He’d been a late starter and a slow learner, not uttering his first word (“bye”) until he was four. When he turned three, I took him to a specialist who checked his hearing and set some toys in front of him, but Harold just spent a half-hour staring out the window. On the way home, he cried. When he was six, just after I divorced Johnny Tate, he sank into a deeper silence, so I took him to another therapist. He spent a half-hour staring at the ceiling. On the way home, in the longest sentence of his young life, where he very suddenly appeared like an old philosopher, he said, “I don’t understand the point of talking because we all end up alone anyway.” I tried desperately to keep him talking, but nothing worked. I tried to make him less fragile, but maybe I tried too hard. Where I failed the most, I’m sure, was waiting too long to divorce his father (a full year





after Harold's birth), and then, later, letting Harold spend time with him in the summers, where he learned too much.

Buddy moaned from the bathroom, then sighed, then flushed.

Some afternoons I saw Buddy sitting beside the river in a kitchen chair, leaning forward like a fisherman without a pole, St. Agnes beside him, staring at the same invisible cork. I kept my eyes on him when he sat like that, convinced he was ready to throw himself in the river at the same spot where Harold's cousin drowned. I imagined him nursing his history and fearing for his future, and I imagined Harold doing the same wherever he was sitting. They both worried too much, but Buddy did it with his back to you. It was worse to see the worry in Harold's face—the brow-wrinkle that grew deeper between his eyes, which grew darker as he kept worrying.

Buddy came whistling back down the hall, plopped into the recliner again, whipped out the foot rest, and launched a yawn-moan combo that stretched into reverberating waves, like a geriatric Tarzan calling across the continent.

“Jesus H. *Christ*,” I said.

“What's wrong?” He looked around the room, suddenly alarmed.

“Didn't your phone get reconnected?” I said.

“I can't make long distance calls. And I like for people to hear your adding machine in the background. It makes it sound like I'm in an office and you're crunching my sales numbers.”

I didn't answer. I convinced myself, again, that Harold had learned more from me than he'd learned from Buddy. One thing I tried to teach him, was that he shouldn't be scared of living alone. In fact, as soon as Buddy barged in, I'd reminded myself how much I liked living alone, free of the obligation to hash out the day's itinerary—decisions about breakfast, errands, bills, lunch, house work, yard work, dinner, television viewing, sleep. Harold hated to be alone, which I feared would be his downfall. I planned to talk to him about it at the first opportunity, if I could get him away from Libby long enough.

From my recliner, Buddy coughed and hacked and moaned while CNN replayed footage of an Iowa family stocking its bomb shelter with beans, board games, and Bibles. I said, “Please be on your best behavior tomorrow for the Christmas party. Harold will be nervous, and she will be nervous, and—”





“I know,” Buddy said. “He called me last night. He’s kind of anxious about—”

“He called *you*?”

“He’s anxious about bringing her here and about getting married, and—”

“And he called *you*? Dear God, what did you tell him?”

“I just tried to listen. I think he’d been drinking, and he was kind of whispering. He has this foolish idea that he’s cursed, like he inherited some kind of divorce gene, but I told him that was silly. I told him—”

“It’s not *completely* silly.”

“I told him we’d have a long talk when he got here. I’ll set him straight.”

I laughed, then tried to stop.

“What’s so funny?”

I couldn’t stop laughing. And I realized, if Buddy wasn’t around, I might miss him. Most days we got along like siblings who no longer needed to point out their scars. We each knew we’d collected enough regret and sorrow for several lifetimes, so we did not (except for occasional slips on *his* part) need to bring up history or cast aspersions. We were surviving our mistakes. On our best days, in fact, we relied on each other like war buddies who spoke different languages.

I stopped laughing. Then started again. I added numbers, tore and stapled tape, laughed, stopped laughing, then laughed again.

He said, “I know as much about being married as you do. You’ve been married five times, I’ve been married five times—there’s a lot of wisdom in this room.”

“Four times.”

“No, I’ve been married five times.”

“Me. *I*’ve been married four times. I don’t count the first one because it was your fault.”

“It wasn’t *all* my fault,” he said.

“Yes it was. Which is one of many reasons you should give Harold no advice.”

“Maybe so. Maybe you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.”

“I just said you were right. I’m the least qualified person I know to give advice. What advice do *you* plan to give him?”

