

THE FIREBALL BROTHERS

A NOVEL

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ONE

He saw her reaching for the switch, hoped she wouldn't turn on the light while he had his shirt off, but it was too late. She had seen it. To her credit, she pretended not to at first, but the curious bend of a brow, however brief, gave her away. It wasn't that he thought people in their sixties shouldn't see each other naked. It was just that until that point, he had been so pinkly elated about how the date was going—how the entire relationship was going—the scar had barely entered his mind.

At their initial meeting, they'd had coffee at a shop that sold powders and tinctures he thought only existed in the witches' chant from *Macbeth*, and she'd read Tarot cards for him. These last two weeks, they'd had dinner together three times, and now here they were, feeling half or maybe even a quarter their own age, taking their clothes off in Esther Ruth's enormous house in the venerable neighborhood called Redmont Park, where she told him, "the Birmingham steel barons built their mansions on the ridge to look down on their refineries and the rough-shamble towns of their workers."

She really talked that way, and she seemed to know a lot about Birmingham. The way she told it, Esther Ruth's family history seemed to be the city's history. Back at the coffee shop, she'd said her grandfather "owned saloons back in the early wild days, back when they called it *Dirty Birmingham* and *murder capital of the world*." Her father had continued the family business on the sly through three decades of Prohibition. She asked Robert if he knew why they called Birmingham "the Magic City." He did not.

"Well, technically," she said, shuffling her tarot deck like a seasoned blackjack dealer, "it has to do with how quickly the city grew once they ran the railroads through here after the Civil War, but that's the boring version. I take it quite literally. There's magic in these little mountains, in this red clay, in the blood and sweat of the people who built it and damn near destroyed it, in the long-fought battles over human dignity and civil rights, and in the music. Especially in the music." They quickly discovered they shared

a love of music, of jazz in particular, and especially that frenetically paced, often cacophonous jazz from the decades of their youth—Bird, Miles, Coltrane, and Sun Ra, the prophetic space jazz progenitor who had his roots here in Birmingham, though he claimed to be from Saturn. In addition to jazz, Esther Ruth adored opera, while Robert's passion was folk, bluegrass, old time, and classic country.

Over dinner earlier that night, Robert told her that though he had done a good bit of traveling when he was younger, he'd done little in his life other than farm work. His family had gone through some lean times where they relied on catching squirrels or rabbits so they'd have something to eat. He and his brother had learned to get a squirrel out of a hollow tree by getting a long sapling and pushing it up into the hollow. They'd swirl that sapling around and when they pulled it out, if it had hair on the end, they'd know something was in there. Then they just kept doing that until the squirrel appeared.

"We always had dogs, for hunting. Pop loved the dogs. We'd starve before the dogs would. Of course," he added, back-pedaling a little, "we always had the land, so we were never as poor as some folks." In the '70s, he'd migrated their main crops over from corn and cotton to soybeans. That had been a lot more profitable for them. He had married but never had kids. Edwina passed away ten years ago. Now, with her gone and his parents gone, and no kids of his own, he had nobody to leave the farm to, so he sold it and downsized into a small apartment in town, just down the mountain from her on Highland Avenue. So far he hadn't met many people.

"You'll fit right in before you know it," she said.

She'd been a painter and a poet; she'd never married and had always been independent. He thought she was a treasure of contradictions and eccentric charms. She never learned to drive, had grown up with chauffeurs, but now she rode the bus by choice. She was a vegetarian, and yet she'd worn a fox stole when they went to dinner earlier that night at a white table cloth restaurant downtown. Now, in the dark of her bedroom, she smelled like butterscotch, and it made him hungry for her.

During dessert, she had asked him if he ever experienced anything unusual, and he asked her what she meant. "I've always been sensitive to things," she said. "Spirits and such. I talk to ghosts frequently. One in particular. Her name is Kate. She gives

me advice. And you know what?"

"What's that?"

"She likes you. She says you're very charming. And she likes that you let me talk a lot. And she likes the way you say your name when you call, like: 'this is Robert Mackintosh,' sort of formal but still friendly."

Robert liked hearing all this. It was true that he never had been much of a talker. He reached across the table and took her hand. The hand-holding had led to a kiss on the way out the door. And then she'd said, "I'm not tired at all, pumpkin. Why don't you come over to my house for a drink?"

He supposed that was how things worked. It had been a long time since he'd been in that situation. He supposed he'd never really been in that situation. But he agreed. Her house was indeed a mansion on the hill, a stone castle with a panoramic view of the city. It had been in her family for generations.

After the scar was exposed, however briefly, Robert covered his eyes, pretending the mild lamplight was too bright. Then he switched it off again and lay beside her on the bed, wanting to touch her, not touching her yet, staring at the blackness above. He was about to turn seventy, and he hadn't been with a woman since Edwina passed. He and Edwina had never been as close as a husband and wife should be. He knew that if he was going to make any inroads with Esther Ruth, he was going to have to tell her what was on his mind and without her asking.

"You asked me earlier if I'd ever experienced anything *unusual*. Well..." he said, "I mentioned earlier that I had a brother."

TWO

On a pale Tuesday afternoon in early June of 1959, fifteen-year-old Robert Mackintosh had just jackknifed off a high rock into the green pond about a mile from his family's farmhouse. This was in rural Alabama, close enough to the Mississippi line that you could walk there. For much of the country, it had been a summer of reds and a summer of blues and a summer of blacks. The communist threat hung in the air like acrid rain. A young man born in Tupelo had shaken his hips and reduced every female Robert knew to shrieks and quivers. In Montgomery and in Birmingham, Negroes were gathering in churches and making plans under a backdrop of jubilant gospel music. It was as if they were living in the stitch between two fabrics of time.

But in this little bucolic edge of Alabama, it had been a summer mainly of rain and bugs and pulling the weeds that threatened the cotton. That's what Robert and his brother Wally, two years his junior, had been doing all the hot morning before going to cool off in the lake down the road and leaping off the rock into the water. Naked as Adonis and glowing in the sizzling sun, Robert dolphined up, arched his chest and shoulders, farmboy white to where his shirt sleeves stopped when rolled up. The pink and purple pompoms of the hydrangeas shook in the breeze to cheer him. Wally, also jaybird naked, cannonballed in behind him, emerged, and paddled toward him, spitting and coughing. Tiny fish, none worth catching, skittered away from the splash.

"I can smell something, Bubba. Like sulfur," Wally said. Robert smelled it too, like the devil was about to materialize before them. At the same time, there was a scent of blood in the water, like the fish had all been turned inside out.

A whistling approached from above, but Robert saw nothing but glare. He felt Wally's left hand, soft and cold, ease up under his arm and land on his chest, and he felt the younger brother's left shoulder pressed against his back. Wally's grip was tighter than Robert would have expected.

That's when the fireball fell out of the sky, churning and burning its path from above the tree line. Its crimson tail licked the wispy clouds. Whether it was a meteor or a satellite or the smoldering remains of a failed alien visitor, the images in the flames did not tell. Both boys screamed when they saw the streaming projectile splash down at the opposite end of the pond, maybe fifty yards away. The brown-green pond water heated up faster than when a kettle is poured into the bath. Robert started swimming, despite a growing dull pain in his chest and a weight on his back.

"Swim, Wally!" He couldn't stop to find out why Wally was still just holding on to him. Between strokes, he thought he heard Wally say he was stuck, but he didn't know what the boy could be stuck to since they were somehow still moving. When they finally climbed out over the reeds and crabgrass at the nearest edge, Robert glanced down and saw what Wally meant. A thin jelly-ish white seam had formed around his brother's hand. Wally's left hand, forearm, and shoulder were stuck to Robert in an embrace from behind, just as they were positioned when Wally swam up on him in the water. As much as they tugged at it, they could make no progress. Robert was stuck in his brother's grip, and there seemed to be nothing they could do about it.

They lay there in a pile on the edge of the pond for some time, bare to the sun and exhausted from struggling. It seemed that even the mosquitos sensed something wrong and were leaving the boys alone. It smelled like Wally might have peed. A couple of lizards scurried away into the scruffy nandina and young oak that lined the perimeter, dotted with bright orange day-lilies that had just come into bloom that week. Robert had to tell Wally to quit trying to pull away. Every time Wally tugged, it felt like he was going to yank the skin right off of Robert's chest. They needed to rest and think.



Wally's full name was Walter Scott Mackintosh, after the Scottish author—Mama was obsessed with all things Scottish—and as far as most people were concerned, Wally was unlikely to live up to any of his names. He was gangly and buck-toothed and had fiery red hair like Mama's that sprouted into shocking curls. Robert (whose middle name was Burns, also after the writer), was

a hard worker and reasonably smart, though not so brainy that he stood out. He'd always figured on taking over the farm from Pop, so he wasn't too concerned about having a brilliant mind for school subjects. Recently, he overheard Edwina Hunter tell another girl he was the handsomest boy in Pickens County; she compared him to Paul Newman, whose visage adorned the poster for that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* movie they showed at the Princess Theater in Columbus all last spring.

He wondered if anyone else saw the fireball, if his parents had seen it, or the few neighbors. It might have been seen as far away as Columbus or even Tuscaloosa. He pictured his father—Dewey Mackintosh, Pop—wiry and goat-bearded, tinkering with the antique musical instruments he collected and sometimes repaired for extra money, nipping at a bottle of moonshine he'd procured from Eddie Van Chukker—sometimes to the point that he would pass out in the barn and not be seen until morning. Chances were he was oblivious to this invasion from the sky. Their nervous, bookish mother, Lucretia, was probably reading. After she dropped out of college to marry Pop, she never did give up her impractical interest in literature. Mama took Benzedrine for her asthma, which kept her up at night, nights she'd often spend with her nose in a book. Surely, even if the fireball itself hadn't warranted a search party, someone would come looking for the boys if they weren't home for dinner. His mind quickly jumped into the deeper dread of what they would do when and if they *did* get home. This year, he was going to move up to first string on the football team. That was right out. Just yesterday, he'd cleared a respectable section of brush that had been encroaching on the turnrows and set out the wood to dry for the winter. The only thing Wally was particularly good at was playing the fiddle, and he couldn't do that with one arm. How would they do anything at all?



As if he could hear these questions in Robert's head, Wally began crying, a screaming panicked cry like the bellow of a wild animal with a paw caught in a trap. Robert didn't know what he could say or do to calm his brother, so he just let Wally go on and on. Honestly, he felt like screaming too, but he didn't see much point in the both of them blubbering. The sun had already dried

a thick layer of pond muck on their skinny legs. They lay there in that absurd clinch, the ricochet of both their hearts creating an audible buzz to match the mosquitos.

Robert said after a couple of minutes, “A’ight, we got to try and move. I’m gonna stand up. Move with me and not against me.” But it took another several, more than a few, minutes before Wally was ready to cooperate. As much as Robert pushed, Wally was just a dead weight trapping him on the ground. Standing required coordinating. “On the count of three,” Robert said, “get up on one knee. Come on now.” He counted off, but he found he was trying to lead with his left knee, and Wally was using his right, causing the both of them to tumble straight back down again.

“Bubba?”

“What’s that, Wally?”

“This is really bad.”

His younger brother’s propensity for stating the obvious was not making this predicament any easier to take.

“Pretty fucking bad, I’d say.”

This set Wally blubbering again, and Robert again waited it out, putting his own panic out of his mind by closing his eyes and staring into some internal blank space where he could still see that fireball screaming across the sky, coming right at them as if they had targets painted on their backs. Opening his eyes again, all Robert could focus on was Wally’s left hand, gripping his chest, and that milky seam that looked tender like new baby skin but felt as rigid as leather. The weight of it was like a yoke around his neck.

He noticed then that Wally’s noise had died down, and they started over. It took Robert pushing with both arms and Wally simultaneously pushing up with his one good arm, to get up on their knees. From there, Robert had to swing one leg out and provide the leverage for the both of them to stand completely. Robert was relieved at least that Wally’s legs could reach the ground on their own. He’d had an image in his head of having to drag Wally all the way home on his back. He was strong, but not *that* strong, and he was already worn down as a piece of gum on the bottom of a shoe.

After an extended side venture to collect the pile of clothes, which they didn’t even attempt to put on, they began to inch their way toward home. Walking was impossibly awkward at first. Within a few steps, they developed a crude technique and a

rhythm, a sort of lumbering waltz. They counted to three together, and Robert led off with a step. Then Wally followed in a side step shuffle. Their muddy feet were toughened from going barefoot often, but the newly discomfited way their weight now shifted when they moved seemed to make the gravel from the road dig in deeper and harder. They could keep it up for about ten or fifteen yards at a time before they had to stop, rest, start over. It made Robert think about football—ten yards, first down, time out. Robert imagined they looked like a hunchbacked octopus coming up the road.

Rows of pine and sycamore and dogwood loomed above on either side of them, the woods and pond all owned by old Jimbo Bobo. Beyond that was Eddie's peach orchard, and past that were the fields where the Mackintoshes grew corn and cotton mostly, but also beets, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes. Many times, Robert had worked beside Pop and other men in the field. Robert had been out there when one older man would start to sing "Hey... Oh..." and then another on the other side of the field would answer back in a deep baritone voice, "Hey...Hey...Oh..." It would go back and forth like that for a while, and it would gather speed, and then others would join in, layers of voices harmonizing. The singing filled Robert with the sensation that he and his fellow workers were all as much products of the earth as the cotton they were harvesting. The work songs filled the sky and connected the sky to the earth. On those hot days, the music was the glue that held the universe together.

There would be no singing in the fields this year. Several weeks of heavy rain during April and May meant there would be a spotty cotton crop for their family and many others in the area. And much of what they'd managed to save had suffered from high insect infestations during the hot, wet summer because they'd been too late in spraying for boll weevils. The cotton now was low and shrinking. The corn was not faring much better and withered like a defeated army on a bronze battlefield.

Beyond the shy purple of the cotton fields and wasting corn, there was the fenced yard and small barn where their mother kept chickens and sometimes a couple of hogs or cattle. They'd butchered their only cow to get through the winter before, and the few lean chickens had supplied them with scant eggs through the first part of summer. No animals were kept on their property now other than the dogs, who stayed in a pen just outside the house, and the

occasional feral cat.

They lived in a pinewood house their grandfather had built after the first war, which had gone to seed during the depression, but their father had been fixing it up gradually, and he had already replaced the rotten floorboards and the windows before marrying Mama. Then in '42 he had gone off to the Philippines where he served as an army mechanic, not then knowing that Mama was pregnant with Robert. Over the next couple of years, using army money he had saved up, Pop added insulation to the walls, plumbing, and electricity. During that time, Wally was born, and that same week Pop found an old fiddle that had belonged to his own grandfather—Robert's great grandfather.

When Pop found his grandfather's fiddle, back before the boys were born, it had been in rough condition. He thought he would fix it up and sell it, but he didn't know where to begin. At an auction, he bought a couple of other fiddles. He studied how they were put together and used the hopeless ones for spare parts. Over the years, he became so proud of his work, he couldn't bring himself to sell the items. Instead, he bought other instruments and learned how to repair those too. Eventually, a little side business arose, doing repairs for some people in the area, but it was never more than a hobby, and he continued collecting.

Pop had also enrolled the boys in music lessons, hoping to put some of these items to better use. Their teacher was a lady named Rhenetta Tate who had lived in Nashville for many years, played onstage at the Opry, and then had retired to the small town where she'd grown up, a few miles north of the Mackintosh farm. She'd arrived wearing a white cowboy suit full on with studs and spangles, a lean six feet tall, with long white hair that spilled out the back of her Stetson like an icy waterfall. She came by every Wednesday night, dressed exactly like that. Wally had a good ear, it turned out. Robert lacked the proficiency and the interest that Wally had, but he continued on for a year or so. When they didn't have as good a crop the following harvest, Robert stopped his lessons. Wally did odd jobs in his spare time for some of the neighbors so he could afford to continue on. Rhenetta kept coming every week, even when Wally couldn't pay, up until she died a couple of years ago.

It had now been thirty minutes of trudging gradually down the road, and they were only halfway home. A peach ice cream of

a sunset spread across the horizon, and the grinning countenance of a rust-red '49 Ford pickup truck approached, grumbling loud across the gravel. Their father had gone out looking for them, finally. His silver beard twinkled in the headlights when he came to check on them, as did the handle of the Colt Python strapped to his hip. He must have thought they'd been attacked.

"Where's your damn clothes? What the hell you boys gotten into now?"

"Pop..." Robert interjected. Pop must have noticed something was off kilter but hadn't quite processed it yet. The look on his face softened, and his voice lowered to almost a mumble. The warm scent of shine wafted by as he exhaled deeply, seeming to release all the air his lungs could hold in one heave.

"You hurt? What the blue hell happened to you?"

Robert felt ashamed at his nakedness and of the attending absurdity. He showed the pile of clothes and tried to explain, though his voice would not rise above a hoarse whisper, and the events in his mind were so jumbled, he could barely organize them into words.

"Swimming...Not hurt...Stuck...Can't get him off me."

Wally squalled again.

Being a man who respected action more than words, Pop didn't ask any more questions, just helped them into the truck bed and carried them the rest of the way. Robert felt every gully and trench in that weather-beaten path as a sharp pain through his lower back and chest. Wally cried out the entire trip. Both boys struggled and moaned the whole way home.

The dogs yipped at them when the truck growled up the dirt driveway. Pop rattled the fence to shut them up before opening the hatch on the truck bed and helping the boys down. The house's doors and windows were open to counter the heat from the wood-burning stove, where cornbread was cooking in a cast iron skillet. Butter beans bubbled from another pan. The boys stood naked, with patches of dirt, coal dust, and wood shavings from the truck bed spotting their bare flesh. When they stumbled into the house, for now unable to recreate the system of walking they had worked out on the dirt road, Mama became apoplectic.

"Stars, what is all that racket? Where have y'all been, and what in the world have y'all gotten into?"

Her auburn hair was up in curlers already, and she was wear-