Melinda's Ugly Turtle

Two things. I've always admired *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the simplicity yet depth of neighbor against neighbor. I wanted to create my own version. One year I took a writing retreat with my dog, staying at a remote hunting cabin at the edge of swampland that went on and on. And I waded in to the swamplands and into the story. A small town, a trailer park, a swamp between them. Coarseness. Hardness. Uncertainty. And struggles all around to find a foothold of who they are.

Excerpts

The car rounded the curve of the swamp and was on to the main stretch into town.

Bunny flicked the rest of the cigarette out the window, the end of it bright red with lipstick. The song went on without her. *"Ain't no doubt… I'm talkin' about... Kentucky woman.."*

"... and you, I been telling you, you really gotta go see Mindy. She'll fix you up."

They were reaching the outskirts of town, brown hulls of derelict buildings stood blank-eyed in golden, tangled weeds at their throats. An old board fence, leaning, corralled junked cars and trucks. They squatted slowly like ancient dying beasts, down on one haunch, then the other, their decrepit spines bowing and weakening. They gazed with lost eyes through the gaps in the boards as they sank into their graves, gleamless.

"But I ain't having her waste her time if you ain't gonna put any effort in it. You act like you ain't even sure what makeup is. And wouldn't hurt you none to start dressin' proper, either, especially since you're finally startin' to get some shape on you. Ain't no way anyone'll know what you got goin' on the way you dress in them big drab clothes. About time you get out there, show a little somethin'. Get some life to you. You use my name and she'll get you right in."

Bunny stole another look at herself in the mirror, fluffed up her hair, then shot a glance at Melinda.

"And she could do something about that hair hanging straight and with those eyes of yours, you need some decent color. Do you a world of good."

Melinda liked her brown eyes. They didn't reflect. She rode in silence, breathing the stale heat and feeling cold.

##############

…Nick lay back and looked at the sky. Melinda did too. It was pale weak blue, the clouds like gravel dust, shifting. All of it, sky and clouds, looked fragile and thin.

"Ray ain't no better," Shawna said. "Worse! Thinks he's so good cause his dad runs the camper store and then he downtalks me one second and the next thinks he can take off my shirt. I ain't takin' off my shirt for no one who downtalks…"

Nick began to sing, just a low hum that started down in the grass like the movement of the earth, full and rich, gently turning. Then it lifted, meandering light and free, dipping and arcing. There was a thrilling spirit in it, a nakedness out in the sun, out in the world of air that had no walls, going where it wanted, drifting, floating, free. Shawna fell quiet.

Melinda watched the clouds work above her. They had no temperature, clouds. They made no sound. They just went on and on forming and ripping apart, forming and ripping apart, over and over again.

##############

…Shawna was quiet. Her shirt bravely waved its pinkness against the swamp's desolate wash of brown and gray.

"Nick, he ain't what he was," she said. "None of us are, probably, but he ain't like what he used to be. Maybe you should know that."

Melinda felt the dampness of fear leach into her soul, the thing she'd already suspected and tamped back into its grave arising anyway, coming out into the open, coming from the deepness of the swamp oaks, enveloping out like black saturating mist. She stared into the swamp and all its hidden darknesses. Shawna continued.

"In his face, even. Ain't the same as it was. Somethin' about it. Just older lookin' maybe. I don't know what it is…" She glanced at Melinda. "Well, anyway, main thing you should know is he's got a girl."

One thing about Shawna was she could fling out a change in direction with aplomb, and although Melinda was well used to it, this time it caught her unprepared. She drew up her defense of coldness.

"Some girl in town. Angie Petoskey. Goes by Angel. Ain't bad as far as town girls go, but she ain't got nothin' to offer him. Won't last. She ain't got a lot up here." She tapped her head. "Or here." She pointed to her chest. "And she ain't no god damn angel, I can tell you that."

Melinda was tired of talking. And she was tired of losing people. Her father. Rachel. Apparently, Nick. And now, her turtle.

The water swirled sloppily, pearled with decay and gray…

##############

…"Look at that! A god damn fire in my yard! Those god damn…"

Impaled on a post in Major's yard was a straw scarecrow, stuffed into jeans and a flannel shirt. It wore a straw hat and had a big smile crudely drawn on its burlap face. It was being eaten by flames.

Major stomped out.

"This is war!" he bellowed. "You hear me you god damn punks? I know you're out there!" The night was dizzying, the lights and shadows frantic, flying. Major staggered into the darkness, the earth moving and disappearing under his feet. The grinning gnomes popped out of the darkness, faces illuminated by the fire, then were gone again. All around, the faces, the lawn ornaments, came and went, faster and faster in a panic of shadows and light.

White-orange flame ran its fingers up the scarecrow's face, dug them in, and peeled it off, the smile the last to go, slowly bending down at the ends before crimping in on itself in black ash. Fire engulfed the hat and crisped it black. A ridge of fire danced like fingers on a piano along the scarecrow's horizontal stick arms. The scarecrow crackled like percussion. Pieces of him floated into the black air, soft twirling stars, still smoldering.

Major teetered closer, his red creased face striated with the orange flickering light. His eyes were large, and in them, the burn of the scarecrow.

One arm of it now fell to its side in a whoosh of flame. Sparks scattered off.

Major took another step, stiffly, unsteadily. There was a burst of heat in his chest. Flames exploded out and shot through his veins, greedily up and down his limbs. He reached for his chest, a white hole of fire, but his arm locked up, dead as wood.

There was light everywhere. Light and heat and sparks. In his eyes, white lights burst. Everywhere, white lights. Fire, in his chest. His arms were gone. Major crashed down to his knees, the darkness and the sparks swirling, the fire in his chest boiling. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see. The sparks went out. There was the smell of smoke. There was intense heat. And then there was nothing.

The scarecrow toppled and the flames licked up the last of it, swelling in glee then dying back into their angry coals, their eyes glaring. In the doorway of his house stood a silhouette, pinned black against the yellow backlight. In the street, people took shape from the shadows. There were voices. There was running. Somewhere, there was more running. Someone said call an ambulance…

##############

…Time drifted by silently, slowly, for minutes, maybe an hour. The sun turned the shadows, but all around them, the swamp remained the same with its vast blank eyes.

"That night…" Troy said suddenly, softly. His voice scarcely rose above the swamp quiet. He still looked away, over the dully gleaming brown water. "That night…. I was supposed to be in the car with him. I saw him going down the street and I ran out there, yelling for him. I ran after, trying to get him to stop. He didn't see me. I was yelling for him but he didn't …"

His nervous hands pulled on the mat of reeds and rot. A soggy twig broke free.

"I was supposed to be in the car. Supposed to be there. I should be…"

He left it dangling. Melinda looked over. Troy's hard green eyes glistened brightly. He threw the twig into the swamp. It landed with barely a sound and sank out of sight, burrowing down almost eagerly.

Melinda wanted to say something, but Troy was right. She thought the same thing. He always tagged along with Stoner, and she was still a little surprised that he hadn't been in the car with him. Even today, when she saw him from behind working through the swamp, she had wondered into the back of his shirt: *'How is it you're not dead?'*

"Maybe," she said, "maybe it's because you weren't supposed to be." She didn't believe it herself when she said it, but as the words came out, she warmed to it. "Maybe there's a reason it worked that way. Maybe there's something to come from it. Maybe…"

She ran out of words.

Troy still did not look her way.

"I don't know," he said. His fingers clawed into the loamy earth. "It's all maybes. Ain't no such thing as maybes. There is only what is."…

##############

…Bunny fanned herself with the parking ticket, smiling with a deliciously candied mouth. The city clerk blinked behind his glasses. His adam's apple moved up and down in his throat.

"Ain't even my ticket," she purred. She shrugged, then she leaned in, set her breasts down on the countertop, and, while looking casually around the room, squeezed her arms together so her bosom spilled out a little more.

"Was my sister driving my car. Let her borrow it. She lives in Jasper and she don't know the rules around here, where to park and where not. You can't expect that from an out-of-towner anyway, especially since the signs ain't too good and it's a little hard to know. Hate to take advantage of people who don't know every little rule and who come here to visit and do business with our town. I just hate to take advantage of people. Don't you?"

She smiled at the ceiling and shifted her chest. The man blinked. A woman with thick arms pushed the man to the side. She crossed her arms. A fading blue tattoo that might've been a flower adorned a sprawling bicep.

"You ain't got no sister," she said. Her voice ground coarsely like the low gear of a truck. "You can just pay your fine now. And you can get those dirty filthy things off my counter."

Bunny looked down at her chest and feigned a look of surprise as though she'd no idea her breasts had climbed up there without her permission. She slowly retracted them off the counter and stood up straight.

"Well, ain't actually a *sister*, technically speaking, but she's just like family and I ..."

"Forty dollars." The woman glared hard. She put out a thick hand, palm up…

##############

…They were having tomato soup. The kitchen table, small and square as a card table and bearing the scuffs and wear of having been used for that purpose many times over the years, now held two white bowls, two plastic cups of water and square crackers set out still in their packaging. On one side, Lottie sank within the loose wrinkled skin of her housegown. On the other, Major sat straight-backed as though the wooden spines of the chair continued on up through him and cross-braced at his shoulders.

"Stoner boy dead, serves him right," he declared. "Reckless hoodlum. Was a matter of time. Ain't surprised. Kids ain't got no sense these days. Ain't like it used to be."

Lottie slowly broke crackers over her bowl, her thin hands shaky: dry frail white bones, dry frail white crackers, a dry frail snap of dust. Major, still talking, clutched his crackers in his claw of hand, the fingers and crackers brittle and crisp as autumn.

"Whole god damn world, going to hell. Ain't no respect these days. Ain't like it was. Whole god damn world, ain't like it was no more."

The red patches unfurled along his neck and jaw. He stopped and turned to the window, scowling and listening, then returned to his lunch.

"That girl, she came over. That one that hides in the grass. Thinks I'm old, can't do things for myself. Thought she needs to help me. Well I don't need no god damn help." Lottie clinked her spoon as she ate.

"Thinks I'm old. Thinks I don't know what it is to be young. I was young once. I was just as young as them. Don't think they're the only ones know about being young. But she came over, that girl. She came over the other day..."

He paused.

"Well maybe they ain't all hoodlums. Maybe not completely. Maybe the whole world will still go to hell, ain't no helpin' that, but maybe there's some of 'em can learn what's what. Maybe some. Maybe there's hope. You think there's hope? Maybe there's hope…"

Lottie's spoon clinked. He stared into his broth.

"Nah, there ain't no hope," he suddenly declared.

Lottie broke more dry crackers. Major crushed his in his rigid hand, opened his stiff fist over his bowl and let them fall like ash…

##########

…Bunny ravaged her kitchen with lipstick and hysterics. Her makeup spilled out over the table and, one after another, she grasped a lipstick in her fist, wielding it like a knife, downward stabbing, flailing herself into the cabinets, into the furniture, into the walls, swiping blindly, ferociously. The lipsticks smeared bright colored swaths across the walls, across the windows, across it all. She swung angrily at a glass pitcher. It skidded off the counter and burst into shards on the floor. She crunched through it, unaware, lost in her madness, attacking the space around her. She was awash in glitter: faux diamonds sparkling on her clothes, sparkling smudges raked all over the walls, shattered glass under her feet.

"Ain't no one talks to me like that!"

Furiously, she slapped at the window, tried to slap away the pictures in it, the houses, the cars, the world that existed on the other side, slapped back and forth, back and forth until she had smeared it shut behind burgundy and red. "Act like you love me, do you? Tell me those god

damn lies?" She attacked with the lipstick. Her eyes swam in fury. Her face was wet. "Now all of a sudden I'm some swamp whore? All of a sudden you're all better'n me when I know every one of you boys..." A glistening purple bruise welled up under one eye, rising like a black moon, rising higher and higher. The light in her eye sank behind it.

"They all ain't no better'n me. They all ain't no better!"

She broke into a desperate rage again, swinging in all directions, missing. She slammed a fist into the refrigerator and dragged it down, collapsing to her knees, the lipstick leaving a deep wet wound like an open trail of blood. She slumped with her back against the refrigerator door, sliding down to the floor, gasping. She feebly hit the lipstick on the ground, dotted the floor with it, then released it. It rolled out among the spent cases of the others.

She sobbed, soundlessly. Her beauty dribbled off her in streams.

Melinda was there. She slid down beside Bunny and put an arm around her. Her mother leaned into her, a hard, empty bottle, the emotions still dripping.

"I ain't done nothin'," Bunny said softly. "I ain't done nothin'."…