
Opening Extract from...

The Homecoming of Samuel Lake

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Chapter 1

Columbia County, Arkansas, 1956

John Moses couldn't have chosen a worse day, or a worse way to die, if he'd planned it for a lifetime. Which was possible. He was contrary as a mule. It was the weekend of the Moses family reunion, and everything was perfect—or at least perfectly normal—until John went and ruined it.

The reunion was always held the first Sunday in June. It had been that way forever. It was tradition. And John Moses had a thing about tradition. Every year or so, his daughter, Willadee (who lived way off down in Louisiana), would ask him to change the reunion date to the second Sunday in June, or the first Sunday in July, but John had a stock answer.

"I'd rather burn in Hell."

Willadee would remind her father that he didn't believe in Hell, and John would remind *her* that it was *God* he didn't believe in, the vote was still out about Hell. Then he would throw in that the worst thing about it was, if there did happen to be a hell, Willadee's husband, Samuel Lake, would land there right beside him, since he was a

preacher, and everybody knew that preachers (especially Methodists, like Samuel) were the vilest bunch of bandits alive.

Willadee never argued with her daddy, but the thing was, annual conference started the first Sunday in June. That was when all the Methodist ministers in Louisiana found out from their district superintendents how satisfied or dissatisfied their congregations had been that past year, and whether they were going to get to stay in one place or have to move.

Usually, Samuel would have to move. He was the kind who ruffled a lot of feathers. Not on purpose, mind you. He just went along doing what he thought was right—which included driving out into the boonies on Sunday mornings, and loading up his old rattletrap car with poor people (sometimes ragged, barefoot poor people), and hauling them into town for services. It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd had separate services, one for the folks from the boonies and one for fine, upright citizens whose clothes and shoes were presentable enough to get them into Heaven, no questions asked. But Samuel Lake was of the bothersome conviction that God loved everybody the same. Add this to the fact that he preached with what some considered undue fervor, frequently thumping the pulpit for emphasis and saying things like "If you believe that, say 'AMEN'!" when he knew full well that Methodists were trying to give up that sort of thing, and you can see what his churches were up against.

John Moses didn't give a hoot about Samuel's obligations. He wasn't about to mess with Moses tradition just because Willadee had been fool enough to marry a preacher.

Of course, Samuel wasn't a preacher when Willadee married him. He was a big, strapping country boy, strong as an ox, and dangerously good-looking. Black-haired and blue-eyed—Welsh and Irish or some such mix. Several girls in Columbia County had taken to their beds for a week when Samuel married that plain, quiet Willadee Moses.

Samuel Lake was magic. He was wonderful and terrible, with an awful temper and fearsome tenderness, and when he loved, he loved with his whole heart. He had a clear tenor voice, and he could play

the guitar or the fiddle or the mandolin or just about any other instrument you could think of. Folks all over the county used to talk about Samuel and his music.

"Sam Lake can play anything he can pick up."

"He can make strings talk."

"He can make them speak in tongues."

Every year, the day after school let out for the summer, Samuel and Willadee would load up their kids and take off for south Arkansas. Willadee already had freckles everywhere the sun had ever touched, but she would always roll the window down and hang her arm out, and God would give her more. Her boisterous, sand-colored hair would fly in the breeze, tossing and tangling, and eventually she would laugh out loud, just because going home made her feel so free.

Willadee loved this ritual. This once-a-year road trip, when she was snugged into the car with her good, healthy family—all of them fairly vibrating with anticipation. This was her time for thinking about where they'd been and where they might be going and how well the kids were growing in to their names—the names she'd given them as blessings when they were born. The first boy, she'd called Noble. Her clear call to the universe to infuse him with courage and honor. The younger son was Bienville. A good city, or as Willadee thought of it, a peaceful place. The girl, she had named Swan. Not because a swan is beautiful but because it is powerful. A girl needs power that she doesn't have to borrow from anyone else, Willadee had thought. So far, her blessings seemed to be working. Noble was honest to a fault, Bienville was unfailingly amicable, and Swan radiated so much strength that she wore everybody else to a frazzle.

Columbia County was located down on the tail end of Arkansas, which looked just the same as north Louisiana. When God made that part of the country, He made it all in one big piece, and He must have had a good time doing it. There were rolling hills and tall trees and clear creeks with sandy bottoms and wildflowers and blue skies and great puffy clouds that hung down so low you'd almost believe you

could reach up and grab a handful. That was the upside. The downside was brambles and cockleburs and a variety of other things nobody paid much attention to, since the upside outweighed the downside by a mile.

Because of the annual conference, Samuel never got to stay for the reunion. Just long enough to unload Willadee and the kids, and talk awhile with Willadee's parents. At least, he talked with her mother, Calla. John would invariably gag and go outside the minute his son-in-law set foot in the house, but Calla thought Samuel hung the moon. Within an hour or so, Samuel would be kissing Willadee goodbye and patting her on the backside, right there in front of God and everybody. Then he'd hug the kids and tell them to mind their mama, and he'd head back to Louisiana. He always said goodbye to John as he left, but the old man never answered back. He couldn't forgive Samuel for moving Willadee so far away, and he couldn't forgive Willadee for going. Especially since she could have married Calvin Furlough, who now had a successful paint and body shop, and lived right down the road, and had the best coon dogs you ever laid eyes on. If Willadee had cooperated with her father by falling in love with Calvin, everything would have been different. She could have lived nearby, and been a comfort to John in his old age. And he (John) would not be stuck with a granddaughter named Swan Lake.

The Moses family lived all over Columbia County. *All over.* John and Calla had loved each other lustily, and had produced five children. Four sons and a daughter. All of these except Willadee and their youngest (Walter, who had died in a sawmill accident the year he turned twenty) still lived around Magnolia, all within forty miles of the old homeplace.

The "old homeplace" had been a sprawling hundred-acre farm, which provided milk and eggs and meat and vegetables and fruit and berries and nuts and honey. It took some coaxing. The land gave little up for free. The farm was dotted with outbuildings that John and his sons had erected over the years. Barns and sheds and smokehouses and outhouses, most of which were leaning wearily by 1956. When you don't use a building anymore, it knows it's lost its purpose.

The Moses house was a big two-story affair. Solidly built, but it leaned a little, too, these days, as if there weren't enough souls inside anymore to hold it up. John and Calla had stopped farming several years back. Calla still had a garden and a few chickens, but they let the fields grow up, and walled in the front porch of the house, and turned it into a grocery store/service station. Calla had John paint her a sign, but she couldn't decide whether she wanted the thing to say "Moses' Grocery and Service Station" or "Moses' Gas and Groceries." While she was making up her mind, John ran out of patience and nailed the sign above the front door. It said, simply, MOSES.

Calla would get out of bed every morning, go down to the store, and start a pot of coffee perking, and farmers would drop by on their way to the cattle auction or the feed store, and warm their behinds at the woodstove, and drink Calla's coffee.

Calla had a way with the customers. She was an ample, comfortable woman, with capable hands, and people liked dealing with her. She didn't really need John, not in the store. As a matter of fact, he got underfoot.

Now, John liked to drink. For thirty years, he'd laced his coffee with whiskey every morning before he headed out to the milk barn. That was to keep off the chill, in the winter. In the summertime, it was to brace him for the day. He no longer went to milk at dawn, but he still laced his coffee. He'd sit there in Calla's store and visit with the regulars, and by the time they were on their way to take care of the day's business, John was usually on his way to being ripped. None of this sat well with Calla. She was used to her husband staying busy, and she told him, finally, that he needed an *interest*.

"I've got an interest, woman," he told her. Calla was bent over, stoking the fire in the woodstove at the moment, so she presented a mighty tempting target. John aimed himself in her direction, and wobbled over behind her, and slipped his arms around her middle. Calla was caught so off guard that she burned her hand on the poker. She shrugged her husband off and sucked on her hand.

"I mean, one that'll keep you out of my hair," she snapped.

"You never wanted me out of your hair before."

He was wounded. She hadn't intended to wound him, but after all, wounds heal over. Most of them.

"I never had time to notice before if you was in my hair or not. Isn't there anything you like to do anymore, besides roll around in bed?" Not that she minded rolling around in bed with her husband. She liked it now, maybe even more than she had in all the years they'd been together. But you couldn't do that all day long just because a man had nothing else to occupy his time. Not when you had customers dropping by every few minutes.

John went to the counter where he'd been drinking his coffee. He poured himself another cup, and laced it good.

"There is," he announced stiffly. "There most damn certainly is something else I like to do. And I'm about to do it."

The thing he was talking about was getting drunk. Not just ripped. Blind drunk. Beyond thinking and reasoning drunk. He took his coffee and his bottle, and a couple more bottles he had stashed behind the counter, plus a package of doughnuts and two tins of Prince Albert. Then he went out to the barn, and he stayed for three days. When he'd been drunk enough long enough, and there was no further purpose to be served by staying drunk any longer, he came back to the house and took a hot bath and had a shave. That was the day he walled in the *back* porch of the house and started painting another sign.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Calla demanded, hands on hips, the way a woman stands when She Expects an Answer.

"I'm cultivating an interest," John Moses said. "From now on, you've got a business, and I've got a business, and we don't either one stick our noses in the *other* one's business. You open at dawn and close at dusk, I'll open at dusk and close at dawn. You won't have to roll around with me anymore, because we won't be keeping the same hours."

"I never said I didn't want to roll around with you."

"The hell you never," said John.

He took his sign, with the paint still wet, and he climbed up on his stepladder and nailed that sign above the back door. The paint was

smudged, but the message was readable enough. It said, NEVER CLOSES.

Never Closes sold beer and wine and hard liquor seven nights a week, all night long. Since Columbia County was dry, it was illegal to sell alcohol to the public, so John didn't call it selling. He was just serving drinks to his friends, that's all. Sort of like gifts he gave them. Then, when they were ready to call it a night, his "friends" would each give John a gift of some sort. Five dollars, or ten dollars, or whatever his little ragged notebook indicated the gift should be.

The county sheriff and several deputies got into the habit of dropping by after their shifts, and John really *didn't* sell to them, just poured them anything they wanted, on the house. Those fellows never saw so much free liquor, so it just stood to reason that there would be a lot of other things they didn't see. But they were used to not seeing, under certain circumstances, so it all felt pretty right.

Before long, John got his own share of regulars who would drop by to play dominoes or shoot pool. They'd talk religion and politics, and tell filthy stories, and spit tobacco juice in the coffee cans John had set around, and they'd smoke until the air was thick enough to cut into cubes.

John took bitter pride in his new venture. He'd have dropped the whole thing in a heartbeat, would have torn down his walls and burned his sign and told his regulars to go to hell, if Calla would have apologized, but she had her own pride. There was a wedge between them, and she couldn't see that she'd been the one to drive it.

After a while, Calla took to staying open seven days a week, too. Sometimes her last customers of the day would walk right out the front door and go around the house to the back door and drink up whatever money they had left over from buying groceries. Sometimes, it was the other way around. John's customers would stagger out the back door at dawn and come around to the front (there was a well-worn path). They'd sober up on Calla's coffee, then spend the rest of their money on food for their families.

You could go to the Moses place, any time of the day or night, and buy what you needed, provided your needs were simple. And you

never had to leave until you were ready, because neither Calla nor John had the heart to run anybody off, even when they ran out of money. Nate Ramsey had stayed once for almost a week when his wife, Shirley, took to throwing things at home.

And that's the way things went along, right up until the day John Moses died. Moses Never Closes was something folks counted on. It was a certain place in an uncertain world. Folks wanted it to stay the way it was, because once you change one part of a thing, all the other parts begin to shift, and pretty soon, you just don't know what's what anymore.

Chapter 2

This is the way it happened.

Samuel dropped Willadee and the kids off on Saturday, and Willadee spent the rest of the day helping her mother with the cooking and cleaning. The kids weren't going to be any help, so they were banished from the house and had to endure such punishments as romping in the hayloft, fishing for crawdads in the creek, and playing War Spies all over the hundred acres.

Noble was twelve years old, all arms and legs and freckles. He had his daddy's eyes, but you didn't really notice them because of his glasses, which were so thick and heavy they continually slid down his nose. He wanted, more than anything, to be *formidable,* so he walked with a swagger and talked in low, menacing tones. Problem was, his voice was changing and would take the high road when he least expected it. Just when he might say something sinister like "You make a move, and I'll cut your heart out," his voice would jump to falsetto and spoil the effect completely.

Swan was eleven. A gray-eyed, compact bit of a girl who could

pass for a boy, dressed in her younger brother, Bienville's, clothes, as she was now. Samuel would have had a fit if he'd known that Willadee allowed such things. The Bible clearly said that women were not to dress as men, and Samuel Lake always tried to follow the Bible to the letter. But then, Willadee had a habit of letting the kids do whatever they wanted to when Samuel wasn't around, as long as they didn't violate the Moses Family Rules—which meant no lying, no stealing, no tormenting animals or smaller children.

The most delicious thing in Swan's life was this one week every summer of wearing boy clothes and forgetting about modesty. She could scoot under barbed-wire fences and race across pastures without those confounded skirts getting in her way. She was little. She was quick. And she was just what Noble dreamed of being. Formidable. You couldn't get the best of her, no matter how you tried.

"That child is a terror," Grandma Calla would say to Willadee when she thought Swan wasn't listening. (Swan was always listening.)

"She's her father's daughter," Willadee would answer, usually with a small sigh, which indicated that there was nothing to be done about the situation, Swan was Swan. Both Willadee and Calla rather admired Swan, although they never would have said so. They just indicated it with a slight lift of their eyebrows, and the least hint of a smile, whenever her name came up. Which was often. Swan got into more trouble than any other child in the Moses tribe.

Bienville was nine years old, and he was another story altogether. He had a peaceable nature, a passion for books, and a total fascination with the universe in general. You just couldn't count on him for things like surveillance, or assassinations. You could be playing the best game of Spies, and have the Enemy cornered, and be just about to move in for the kill, and there Bienville would be, studying the pattern of rocks in the creek bed or examining the veins in a sassafras leaf. He couldn't be *depended on* to do his part in a war effort.

Noble and Swan had learned how to deal with Bienville, though. Since he never seemed to commit to either side, they made him a double agent. Bienville didn't care, even though being a double agent generally meant he was the first one to get killed.

Bienville had just gotten killed for the fourth time that Saturday afternoon when Things Started Happening. He was lying on his back in the pasture, dead as a stone, staring up at the sky.

He said, "Swan, did you ever wonder why you can see stars at night but not in the daytime? Stars don't evaporate when the sun comes up."

"You're supposed to be dead," Swan reminded him.

She had just shot him with an invisible submachine gun, and she was busy digging an invisible trench with an invisible shovel. Bienville didn't know it, but he was about to be rolled over into the trench, dead or not. Noble was still lurking somewhere out there in Enemy Territory, so Swan had to keep a watchful eye.

Bienville said, "I'm tired of being dead," and he sat up.

Swan pushed him back down with her foot. "You are a corpse," she told him. "You can't be tired, you can't sit up, and you can*not* talk."

She had forgotten to be watchful. Sudden footsteps behind her told her so. She whirled, brandishing the invisible shovel. Noble was running directly toward her, arms pumping. The area he was crossing had been designated as a Minefield, but Noble wasn't looking for mines. Swan let out a ferocious *roar* and brought her "shovel" down across Noble's head. That should have done him in, but he didn't fling himself on the ground and commence his death agonies, like he was supposed to. He grabbed Swan and clamped one hand over her mouth, and hissed at her to get quiet. Swan struggled indignantly but couldn't get free. Even if Noble wasn't formidable, he was strong.

"I just—killed you—with a shovel!" she hollered. Noble's hand muffled the sound into mushy, garbled noises. About every other word, Swan tried to bite his fingers. "No way—could you—have survived. That—was a fatal blow—and you know it!"

Bienville was looking on like a wise old sage, and he made out enough of what Swan was saying to have to agree with her.

"It was a fatal blow, all right," he confirmed.

Noble rolled his eyes and clamped his hand tighter across Swan's mouth. She was kicking up a storm and growling, deep in her throat.

"I said *shhh*!" Noble dragged his sister toward a line of brush and brambles that ran between the pasture and a patch of woods. Bienville flipped over on his belly and crawled across the Minefield after them. When they got close to the brush line, Noble realized he had a problem. He needed to let Swan go, which promised to be something like releasing a wildcat.

He said, very calmly, "Swan, I'm going to turn you loose."

"Irpulmbfrmlmb, ustnknbzzrd!" she answered, and she bit his hand so hard that he jerked it away from her mouth to inspect it for blood. That split second was all Swan needed. She drove an elbow into Noble's gut, and he doubled over, gasping for breath.

"Dammit, Swan," he groaned. She was all over him. Noble drew himself into a wad, enduring the onslaught. He knew a few Indian tricks, such as Becoming a Tree. A person could hit and kick a tree all day long without hurting it, because it was Unmovable. He'd learned this from Bienville, who had either read about it or made it up. Noble didn't care whether Bienville's stories were true, just so the methods worked.

Swan hated it when Noble Became a Tree. It was something she had never mastered (*she* was not about to stand still for anybody to hit *her*), and it wore her out fighting someone who wouldn't fight back. It made her feel like a loser, no matter how much damage she inflicted. Still, she had to save face, so she landed one last blow to Noble's wooden shoulder and licked her sore knuckles.

"I win," she announced.

"Fine." Noble let his muscles relax. "You win. Now, shut up and follow me."

John Moses was sitting under a tree, cleaning his shotgun and talking to God.

"And another thing," he was saying. "I don't believe the part about the Red Sea opening up and people walking through on dry land."

For a man who didn't believe in God, John talked to Him a lot.

Whether God ever listened was anybody's guess. John was generally drunk during these monologues, and the things he said were not very complimentary. He'd been mad at God for a long time, starting when Walter had fallen across that saw blade, over at the Ferguson mill.

John was pulling a string out of the end of his shotgun barrel. There was an oily strip of cotton cloth tied onto the end of the string, and the cloth came out gray-black. He sighted down the barrel, squinting and angry-looking.

"You expect us to believe the damnedest things." He was talking in a normal tone of voice, just as if God were sitting two feet away from him.

"For instance, all this stuff about You being love," he went on, and here his voice grew thick. "If You was love, You wouldn't have let my Walter get split wide open like a slaughtered hog—"

John began polishing the butt of his gun with a separate rag that he'd had tucked away in the bib of his overalls. Tears welled in his eyes, then spilled over and trailed down his weathered face. He didn't bother to wipe them away.

"If You are love," he roared, "then love ain't much to crow about."

The kids were all crouched behind a thick wall of razor wire (blackberry vines), peering at the Enemy through the tiniest of openings between the thorny canes. They had a good, clear view of the old man, but he couldn't see them.

Swan had a feeling that they shouldn't be here. It was one thing for her and her brothers to spy on each other, since they only said things they meant each other to hear. But this was Papa John. They had never seen him cry, or believed it was possible for him to cry. Usually during their visits, he just slept the days away and ran his bar at night. If they saw him at all, it was only as he walked through a room without speaking or sat at the supper table, picking at his food. Their mother said he hadn't always been this way, that he had really been something beautiful when she was growing up, but he had let life get the best of him. From the looks of him now, she was right about that last part.

Swan tugged on Noble's sleeve, intending to tell him she wanted to leave, but he drew one finger across his gullet, indicating that he would slit her throat for sure if she said a word.

Just then, Papa John gave up on talking to God and set in singing.

"Coming home," he quavered. He had to be tone-deaf. "Cominnng—hommmme—"

Swan shot a look at Bienville, and he shot one back. This was getting harder to swallow by the minute.

"Never more to roammmm—" Papa John caterwauled, but he couldn't remember any more of the words, so he switched over to a Hank Williams song, which he also couldn't remember.

He hummed the first few bars tunelessly, while he dug a shell out of his pocket and loaded his shotgun.

"I'm so lonesome, I could—" he sang, suddenly loud and clear. Then his voice broke and quavered. "I'm so lonesome, I could—"

Swan thought he sounded like a stuck record.

"I could—" he sang again, but he couldn't make himself say that last word. He shook his head and blew out a long, discouraged breath. Then he stuck the shotgun barrel in his mouth.

Swan screamed. Noble and Bienville sprang up in the air like flushed quail.

Papa John hadn't had time to get his finger situated on the trigger, so instead of blowing his brains out in full view of his grandchildren, he jerked to attention and banged the back of his head on the tree. The shotgun barrel slipped out of his mouth, bringing his upper plate with it. The false teeth went sailing and disappeared in the blackberry vines, directly in front of where the three kids were now standing, shaking like maple leaves. Papa John jumped to his feet, shocked and humiliated. His mouth was working, open and shut. Slack-looking without that upper plate.

The kids hung their heads and stared at the ground for the longest time. When they looked up again, Papa John was cutting through the woods, going back toward the house. Shade and sun rays fell across him, dappling and camouflaging, making him indistinguishable from his surroundings. He never really disappeared from view. He just

blended in with the trees and the underbrush, like he was part of the woods and they were part of him.

Papa John didn't show up for supper, just went into Never Closes and opened for business. Calla and Willadee and the kids could hear the hubbub through the wall that separated the kitchen from the bar. John had bought himself a used jukebox during the past year, and his customers were giving it a workout. Swan and Noble and Bienville kept sneaking anxious glances at each other while they ate.

Finally, Calla couldn't take it anymore. "All right," she said. "I want to know what's up, and I want to know now."

Bienville gulped. Noble pushed his glasses up his nose. Swan reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out Papa John's false teeth.

"Papa John lost these this afternoon, and we found them."

"That's all you're looking guilty about?" Calla asked sharply.

Which made Swan mad. Grown-ups had a way of interpreting every single, solitary expression that ever lit on a kid's face as guilt. "We're not *guilty,*" she said, a little louder than was necessary. "We're *worried*. Papa John came within an inch of killing himself this afternoon, and if it hadn't been for us, he would've made it."

Willadee sucked in a sharp breath.

Calla just shook her head. "He wouldn't have made it. He never does."

Willadee looked at her mother accusingly.

Calla poured some tomato gravy onto her biscuit. "Sorry, Willadee. I can't panic anymore. I've been through it too many times. You kids eat your okra."

Willadee didn't say anything, but you could tell she was thinking. As soon as supper was over, she offered to clean the kitchen and asked her mother to put the hellions to bed. Grandma Calla said, "Oh, sure, give me the dirty work," and both women laughed. The kids all turned up their noses while they allowed themselves to be herded upstairs. They knew better than to complain, but they had

their own ways of getting back at people who insulted them. Next time they played War Spies, they would probably take a couple of female prisoners and get information out of them the hard way.

Willadee washed all the dishes, left them to dry in the drain rack, and went out the back door into Never Closes. This was the only bar she'd ever been inside in her life, and the first time during business hours. At least once every summer, she'd insisted on cleaning and airing out the place for her daddy, marveling every time that his customers could stand the bitter, stale burned-tobacco odor that no amount of scrubbing could drive away. She was surprised tonight to find that the smell was entirely different when the place was full of life. The smoke was overpowering but fresh, and it was mingled with men's aftershave and the heady perfume worn by the few women customers. A lone couple danced in one corner, the woman toying with the man's hair while his hands traveled all up and down her back. There was a card game going on, and a couple of games of dominoes, and you couldn't even see the pool table for all the rear ends and elbows. The way people were laughing and joking with each other, they must've checked their troubles at the door. John Moses was standing behind the bar, uncapping a couple of beers. He passed them over to a middle-aged bleached blonde and smiled, lips closed, self-conscious about the missing upper plate. He pretended not to see Willadee until she came over and leaned against the bar.

Willadee passed his teeth across to him. Discreetly. John's eyes narrowed, but he took the teeth, turned away for a second, and put them inside his mouth. Then he turned back to face his daughter.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Just thought I'd see how the other half lives," Willadee said. "How're you doing, Daddy? I never get to see you much anymore when I come home."

John Moses coughed disdainfully. "You didn't live so far away, you'd see me plenty."

Willadee gave her daddy the gentlest look imaginable, and she said, "Daddy, are you all right?"

"What do you care?"

"I care."

"My eye."

"You're just set on being miserable. Come on. Give me a grin."

But it looked as if he didn't have a grin left in him.

She said, "It's not healthy to manufacture trouble and wallow around in it."

"Willadee," he grumbled, "you don't know trouble."

"Yes, I do, you old fart. I know you."

That sounded a lot more like the kind of thing a Moses would say than the kind of thing a preacher's wife would say. So, as it turned out, John did have a grin or two left in him, and he gave her one, as proof.

"You want a beer, Willadee?" He sounded hopeful.

"You know I don't drink."

"Yeah, but it would tickle the pure-dee hell outta me to see you do something that'd make Sam Lake have a stroke if he knew about it."

Willadee laughed, and reached across the bar, and goosed her daddy in the ribs, and said, "Well, give me that beer. Because I surely would like to see you get tickled."

It was after 2:00 A.M. by the time Willadee left Never Closes and sneaked back through the house. Her mother was just coming out of the bathroom, and the two bumped into each other in the hall.

"Willadee, have you got beer on your breath?"

"Yes, ma'am, I have."

"Well, forevermore," Calla said as she headed up the stairs. She was going to have to mark this day on the calendar.

Later on, when Willadee was in her old room, she lay in bed thinking about how the first beer had tasted like rotten tomatoes, but the second one had simply tasted wet and welcome, and how the noise and laughter in the bar had been as intoxicating as the beer. She and her daddy had left the customers to wait on themselves and had found an empty table and talked about everything on earth, the way

they used to, before Willadee got married. She had been the old man's shadow, back then. Now, he had become the shadow. Almost invisible these days. But not tonight. Tonight, he'd had a shine about him.

He didn't want to die anymore. He certainly did not seem to want to die anymore. He'd just been feeling unnecessary for so long, and she'd shown him how necessary he was, by sitting with him those hours. Joking with him, and listening with her heart, while he poured out his.

"You've always been my favorite," he had told her, just before she left Never Closes. "I love the others. All of them. I'm their daddy, and I love them. But you. You and Walter—" He shook his head. All his feelings stuck in his throat. Then he kissed her cheek, there at the back door of the bar. John Moses, ushering his beloved daughter back into the solid safety of the house he had built when he was a stalwart, younger man. John Moses, feeling necessary.

Willadee was groggy, but it was a pleasant sort of grogginess. Like she was floating. Nothing to tie her down and hold her to earth. She could just float higher and higher, and look down at life while it turned all fuzzy and indistinct around the edges. She promised herself that, one of these days, she was going to have another couple of beers. One of these days. She was a Moses, after all.

Her father's favorite child.