

EBB AND FLOW
AN ODE TO LEWIS "BUDDY" NORDAN

I give the knob of the kitchen spigot a twist, and I've a feeling this'll be the night when the water never stops. It'll flow over the sink and fill the room, and it'll carry me out of the house. It'll carry out my bottles of Old Crow and Wild Irish Rose. It'll carry out my carpentry tools. It'll carry out my old record player, Bessie Smith singing *muddy water 'round my feet*, and the water, turning muddy, will carry me into the Delta, Bessie singing *muddy water in my shoes*. My wrist-cuttin' knife, the one Eb's mama done hid from me, will float by, but I'll have no need of it because the water'll do the trick.

She shuts the water off. And if the truth be knew, I feel some relief. The water would've taken Eb, and he's only seven, too young to be carried off into the Delta, though his time'll come. But if the water ain't going to take me tonight, I have a need to at least hear Bessie sing of it.

I go toward my room, and I hear Eb's mama go toward hers, and I know she'll be singing her own Delta blues tonight. God knows I wish Bessie Smith didn't have this effect on her, but there ain't a blessed thing I can do about it.

I turn on my record player and go toward my chair. I see my closet door is open, just a sliver, and I know that ain't my doing because I fear the kinds of things that can come out of a closet if you don't keep it closed.

I open the door wide, just to check out the situation. Down from the shelf comes a box. It hits me below the eye, cuts me, knocks me to the floor. I crawl to my chest-of-drawers and get out a bottle of Old Crow and take a few good slugs to ease the pain. *my mama says I'm reckless*, Bessie is singing, *my daddy says I'm wild*, and nobody knows better than me what it means to be

reckless and wild. Pretty soon Bessie and me have near finished the Old Crow, and I push my fingers all around my face and I can't feel none of it.

I crawl back to the box, for I can't remember having such a box, and I have a curiosity what might be in it. I find a dried-up white carnation with a straight pin through it, like maybe I wore at my wedding. I find a handful of empty hotel mini-bar whiskey bottles. I find a newspaper clipping of little Florian Chamber's mama singing with Willie the Bartender at the Cock-N-Bull Tavern, though Willy's picture is cut out. And in an old wallet I find two baby pictures of Eb. When I squint my eyes good, I see one of them pictures is actually of Florian. No one but me can tell the difference between them at that age, of course.

The pictures take me back to a time, back before the time there was an Eb and his best friend Florian Chambers. One day up on my ladder while roofing the Cock-N-Bull, I seen a crow fly out of nowhere straight for my face. I ducked, the ladder lurched, and I flew over backwards. Busted my carpentry arm. Roy Chambers, just let go from his trucking job for drinking, was looking in the mirror behind the Cock-N-Bull bar and seen the whole thing. Me lying on the ground, he said since it didn't look like I'd be fixing houses awhile mightn't I like to have a partner. He told me later I said yes, though I don't rightly recall, not being nearly conscious at the time.

Roy lasted near as long as it took my arm to get well. Roy wasn't used to not being on the road, and DeeDee, his wife, wasn't used to him not being on the road and instead coming to the Cock-N-Bull. She didn't stop leaning over the bar displaying her charms and saying to the men, "You want more, loverboy?" as she handed over their drinks. She didn't stop chasing down her shots of Early Times with swigs from them men's long-necked bottles. She didn't stop singing *my mama says I'm reckless* while letting her eye fix on one man then another, including me. And

one evening she showed up in the Cock-N-Bull wearing a scarf wrapped around her long neck and dark glasses over her eyes, even though the Cock-N-Bull was so dark she had to feel for the right bottle with her fingertips like she was reading some special alcohol Braille. The next morning I went to Roy's to pick him up for a job like usual. DeeDee answered the door, her bathrobe open, and red and purple spots on her throat and lower. She said the no-account fool had gone out during the night and not come home and she hoped he was dead, though I knew she didn't mean it.

The next morning I again went to Roy's, and he wasn't there, but DeeDee said wouldn't I like to have a piece of breakfast pie and coffee, and she had her bathrobe open and the reds had changed to purple and the purples to yellow and I said I don't mind if I do. The next morning Roy still wasn't there, and DeeDee said she was celebrating and wouldn't I like to come in and celebrate too. All the colors on her throat and lower were real faint now, and in my head Bessie sang *my daddy says I'm wild*, and I said I don't mind if I do. We drank Early Times which was fitting seeing it was morning. Though we were still drinking Early Times when it came afternoon. I felt like I'd fallen off the ladder again, and someone was asking me something. Would I like to go to bed, is what I thought they said, and I said I don't mind if I do.

I woke in a bed not my own, and somehow I'd lost my pants, and DeeDee, lying next to me, had lost her bathrobe and gown. She asked me did I have a good time and I said I believe I did. She dressed and left for the Cock-N-Bull, and I found my carpentry pants hanging from the ceiling fan in the living room, flapping around. There were a few more mornings then first couple weeks after Roy had quit DeeDee that me and she celebrated, but one morning I found her celebrating with Willie the Bartender and I didn't go round after that.

Eight months later, a little premature, maybe, DeeDee Chambers had a baby boy, a few

weeks after my wife's Eb was born. After DeeDee heard Eb's name was Eb, DeeDee said she'd name her baby Florian and call him Flo. Them boys look near enough alike to be twins, and they don't look nothing like Willie the Bartender.

Squinting good at the photographs, though, I see for the first time they might bear a likeness to Roy Chambers.