



The Vanilla Entrance

Truth is like the spokes and hub of a wagon wheel.

To support the center, right and wrong come from many directions.

Warning

This book will disturb and anger some readers. Others will be entertained. Some will be inspired, which is not the intent of the author, who has no military or federal government background what-so-ever. The author does not advocate revenge or violence as an acceptable method to resolve issues, be they personal or national. It will be for readers to decide for themselves which parts of this novel represent the truth, and which parts come from no other place than the over-active imagination of the author. It may be said, however, all parts of this work have been based upon reality.

Chapter One

History's What You Make It

Ninety-one years old, Daddy Al has very fine salt and pepper hair worn in a long pony tail when he awakes in a foul mood; if chipper, hanging loose to his shoulders – a red and blue bandana tied around his head with a large duck feather fixed in back. Slim, standing erect at over six feet tall, he walks the main street of Ringgold without a supporting cane, though he requires glasses to read the smallest print in his copy of *The Ringgold Record*.

Daddy Al has all his teeth. He can hear people talking about him at a great distance, but recently his memory has become less reliable; more so with each passing month. At every breakfast he consumes large globs of melted extra sharp cheddar cheese, half a dozen or more slices of crisp thick bacon, sour dough biscuits with real butter, at least one tall glass of cold buttermilk and cups of black coffee with chicory. Lunches and suppers for Daddy Al are equally abundant, though large meals haven't slowed his steady weight loss. Thinner than in years past his face has become more angular; his high cheek bones more pronounced, but so far his age-wrinkled dark complexion remains the same. Smoking the same brand of large black cigars he has enjoyed for the past eighty years, Daddy Al ignores the inevitable conclusion of his throat and lung cancer. He spends his days telling fanciful stories to anyone willing to listen.

Outliving his wife, Gammy Mae, all his children, most of his grandchildren and all his contemporaries, Daddy Al lives alone as the honored guest of a wealthy Mexican couple who give him rent free access to one room in one of two grand homes facing each other that once belonged to him. His hosts allow him kitchen privileges if he has the help of an aged and wrinkled, peanut butter brown woman named Wanza. Once a week he may use the washing machine and dryer if she stands nearby to supervise.

Daddy Al accepts without thanks or humbleness the food, alcohol and shelter given to him without expectations. He remains the same dapper dresser as in his years past, accepting new - never used - clothing from many people who care about and for him. Penniless, Daddy Al has few remaining possessions of his own, receiving no financial support from any source what-so-ever, not even his few remaining scattered, forgotten relatives.

With Wanza as the single exception, Daddy Al still calls all black people “Darkies”, or sometimes, “Chain Legs”, but they have found a way to forgive him in advance. When chewing tobacco he no longer spits on them, but continues to aim at cats and dogs, though with little success. He calls his Mexican benefactors “Amigos”. They know he believes it an offense, so they return his perceived insult with a blessing in Spanish. He growls like a lion far past its prime, accusing them of cursing his ancestors.

“I’ve never had need for any doctor ever. Don’t trust them,” he boasts in his usual proud fashion whenever the subject of health comes up. His voice rumbles deep and graveled without authority; no longer threatening. Recent days have found him contorted in long painful coughing spells. He has lost the ability to draw a deep, lung filling breath.

When forced to see a doctor he complains, but submits for reasons of his own. “I’ve been inoculated by nature,” he insists, ignoring the physician’s straight forward prediction of Daddy Al’s soon-arriving end of life. “I never had an ailment except a case or two of the constipation now and then. I fix that right up with a good bowl of turnip greens washed down with some lemonade. That’ll get your Herbert to Hoovering! I’m telling you sure.”

“He won’t live more than another month or two at the most,” Doctor Ekileberger informs me, and through me, Daddy Al’s remaining family. “If he’d come to the hospital we could make his last days comfortable,” the doctor offers. “Otherwise he’ll wake up one morning without the ability to breath. The cancer will close off his throat. He’ll suffocate.” But that prediction came ten months ago. Daddy Al now enjoys pointing out he’s still standing vertical; still moving horizontal.

Daddy Al doesn't trust the government any more than doctors. He claims all ills of society should pile at the feet of the "elected bubble-heads" in Washington. He long ago became convinced the entire country heads straight for damnation with Congress leading the way. A constant, unsuccessful search for converts to his belief has left him with the sure and certain knowledge all young people suffer from a brain disorder. Without hesitation, he tells them so.

Bragging he has avoided paying taxes for an entire lifetime, he insists there never has been nor will the country ever know any elected person worth their own snot or the dynamite needed to send them to the fire and brimstone of damnation where they belong.

Daddy Al's diatribe about government mismanagement always begins with the same words. "You know what they all learn first thing when they get into office, don't you? They learn the politician's credo. Most of them have it printed on a big wall plaque in front of their desk so they won't ever forget: 'Lie. Lie all the time. Don't ever not lie. Lie even when people know you're lying. Someone will write down what you're lying about and soon enough it will become truth.' That's a fact. You can believe me. I've seen it for myself. Not one of those son-a-bitches even knows how to tell the truth. Their tongue would fat-up as big as their arm, turn black and explode if they tried to utter a single truthful sentence."

Opinionated, argumentative, narrow-minded, insulting and without a hint of remorse for anything he did in his life, Daddy Al's status in the community remains absolute. His now-fading ability to recall long ago events in great detail combined with his unequalled talent for spinning tales in a captivating, believable fashion, and his love

for telling fabulous, outrageous lies without blinking, have made him a small celebrity in Ringgold.

At five in the afternoon of every day Daddy Al begins drinking straight bourbon whiskey without water or ice. At the same time most Saturdays, with a full quart of Jim Beam in hand, he begins a casual half hour walk to Sootie's Roasting Hog B-B-Q. At a poker table in the back room he joins men who accept him as a living history lesson. Forgiving him for his past transgressions they listen when Daddy Al begins talking about the past or when he wants to tell great lies just hell of it.

"I shot a bucking horse at the rodeo one year," Daddy Al begins. In the back room of Sootie's he sits in a dark oak arm chair whittling notches in the seat with his large yellow pocket knife. "Bastard killed a rider. Wayne Willard. The boy couldn't have been more than thirteen years old; maybe twelve. They let anyone ride. Didn't matter how old. They called the horse Hammerhead.

"The bastard horse came out of the chute, jumped up on its hind legs and fell over backwards on Wayne breaking the kid's neck like a dry twig. All the way up on the top row of bleachers I heard it snap. Killed Wayne dead right then and there. You could tell right off there'd be no need at all for a doctor. Hammerhead had killed him dead sure enough."

Surveying his audience, Daddy Al wants assurance he has everyone's attention. Everyone knows this because he tells them so. "I ain't wasting what little time I have left talking to a bunch of no-listening-fools.", he says. Swallowing saliva to ease the burn in his throat, he cringes as the discomfort persists, takes the pain in stride, then continues his story with a deep raspy sounding voice.

“I had my forty-five with me – always did – called it ‘My Convincer’. I stepped over the fence, walked up to the horse, put a big one right through its brain pan, I did. Soon as they got Wayne out from under the beast, I hauled it off with my truck. Left it back of the chute until all the rodeo riding finished. You never know, I might get lucky. Might have to shoot another animal. Cheap dog food, you know.”

I’m sitting, straight across the poker table from Daddy Al. Even from this distance he smells like smoldering tobacco. His teeth have stained brown from decades of smoking and chewing the plant. His fingers have a permanent yellow tint. His breath reminds me of a cold fireplace.

“You had a bunch of dogs back then, didn’t you?” Fat Pat Prichard asks. Fat Pat always sits to Daddy Al’s right. Everyone has their own special place at the table. Unhappy and unconcerned married, with three young kids, Fat Pat sometimes bush hogs ditches for the state of Louisiana. He weighs close to three-fifty. A broad flat nose appears to be more on the left side on his sun-tan looking face than on the right. Ocean blue eyes seem out of place in unusually large dark circles. He rarely spends time in the sun and he’s much younger than he looks.

Fat Pat wears oil and dirt stained faded and patched overalls; long sleeve wrinkled print shirts buttoned from top to bottom; the cuffs secured at his wrists with four or five rubber bands. Mud-covered combat boots without laces hide his huge sock-less feet. Always covering his bald head there’s a filthy camo rain hat with hand grenade pins dangling like fish hooks in the loops. Even if they don’t ask, his wife tells everyone she doesn’t give a damn what he does, where he does it, or who he does it with. As soon as she saves enough money she’s going to leave him, the kids and Ringgold in her dust. Fat

Pat knows Daddy Al had a bunch of dogs back then. Everyone around the table knows the story, in many different versions.

“That’s a fact,” Daddy Al answers crisply. “I had over fifty of the finest hunting dogs any of you nose-pickers have ever seen. I kept them in a pen just outside Ringgold. Had a darkie named Boot who took good care of them. I fed the dogs any kind of animal I could get my hands on. Even road kill. I bought lots of mules over in Arcadia, too. Boot would kill ‘em, skin ‘em, cut ‘em up, boil ‘em and feed ‘em to the dogs. Bet you didn’t know it, but ole Boot killed the Wilson Twins too. He made book ends out of their ribs and skin. My grandson still has them, don’t you, boy?”

“I believe I remember a poem about ole Boot.” Daddy Al continues, scratching the three day old gray stubble on his chin as he looks up to the rusty tin roof.

“It went something like this:

“Shooting Boot will be my great pleasure.
Better than that it could be a treasure.
A worthless skinner he’s dumber than dirt.
If he fell in fire my feelings wouldn’t hurt.
Lazier than a dead man Boot can be.
If he moved any slower I’d think him a tree.”

“I don’t know. Now that I think about it, maybe I made up that poem about someone else. Lately my memory hasn’t been what it ever was. Anyway, Boot, he made a good ole darkie. Took care of my dogs just fine, he did.”

Daddy Al loves to make up poems. I’ve never known another person who could do it with such ease; without any forethought. I’m almost certain he made this one up about someone else.

“The way I hear it, you killed the Wilson Twins,” Ferris Dubois laughs. “I hear tell your daughter-in-law killed a man also. You whacked a few others in your time,

and you even had something to do with the Wilson Twins killing Boot's wife, didn't you? Your family was a murdering bunch, weren't you?"

The youngest and shortest of the men around the poker table, Ferris, who always sits on Daddy Al's left, remains unemployed. He can't keep his mind focused on anything for very long so no one in town will hire him, not that there's much opportunity for employment in Ringgold. He's no longer allowed to drive. For a while he drove to Shreveport when he worked for a cement company, but he always got lost. On the way home one night he ran a borrowed truck into Lake Bistineau, so the State revoked Ferris' driver's license for the third and final time.

It's early. Having consumed less than half a beer Ferris hasn't been altered by the alcohol. He can still put together intelligent sentences. He isn't married, never will, and lives with friends until they kick him out, then he goes someplace else.

Ferris lived alone in an abandoned warehouse for almost a year, but allowed a small fire to get out of control. It nearly burned the place down. People say he must smoke dope and use other drugs, but it isn't true. They don't understand him the way we do.

"I hear tell you ran a hundred mules into the middle of town once – made a big mess because you left them there. They ran into some stores," Jitter Bug John O'Hara calls out with a laugh. He sits to Fat Pat's right – to my left. It's a straight shot in his wheel chair – up the ramp and to his place at the table.

Jitter Bug lost both legs above the knee in the Viet Nam conflict. He lives with his widowed mother, refuses to wear anything olive drab in color and rides around town in a battery powered wheel chair with an American flag on back, telling everyone he will

happily go back to take care of a few more gooks if they'll give him the chance. We know it's just a boast because as he tells us, "The blind, the cripple and the crazy will go before I do."

"Why'd you always climb the water tower and paint a nasty message to the people in town?" I ask with equal jest. People say my wife Sharon Threes and I have a lot of money allowing us to avoid work, but that isn't true either. We don't have a lot of money, we have gobs of it - another story, for another day. I've tried many times over the years to channel some income to Daddy Al but he always refuses my help.

"I don't need or want your damn help!" Daddy Al growls when I offer a few dollars in assistance or say I'll treat him to a lunch. "You'd best keep it all for yourself. You might need to support a family of your own some day."

Last year Sharon Threes and I paid more in taxes than the entire town of Ringgold made in salary. We will never have the opportunity to support a family of our own. We live in a large cabin on the edge of Lake Bistineau. Sometimes I jot down notes when Daddy Al, my grandfather, tells stories or particularly grand lies.

"Yeah! How come you filled in the swimming pool one night? You don't know how to swim, or something?" Crusty Sledge calls out. Crusty's place is to my right.

With some family money Crusty bought a small general store called Lawbert's. After alerting Ringgold's volunteer fire department, he burned it down. He built a Piggly Wiggly then stocked it with enough canned goods and whiskey to supply NYC for a year. He's Daddy Al's main source for Beam.

Crusty's the tallest. Except for Daddy Al he's the skinniest of our group. He isn't married because any woman who isn't blind wouldn't be seen in public with him. When in high school he had the worst case of acne in recorded history. Now his face resembles the pitted surface of a dull red golf ball.

Crusty didn't open the Piggly Wiggly for business because he couldn't find anyone he liked or trusted enough to run the place, so now he lives in the back. He says there's enough canned goods to last two or three hundred years. Crusty's an alcoholic, or as he claims, a practicing alcoholic.

"I'm a practicing alcoholic. I'm going to keep practicing day and night until I get it right," he tells us almost every Saturday when we gather. It's a stale joke. Sometimes Ferris ruins the punch line before Crusty has the chance to tell it again.

On Saturdays, the one day of the week Sootie's opens for business, lots of people come in for the bar-be-que. Some come in just for the smell. A few stay for a while and listen to the stories, but Fat Pat, Ferris, Jitter Bug, Crusty and I, we're the core group. We're always there playing cards, laughing and joking with each other.

When Daddy Al shows up, he joins the game. We listen to his tall tales and laugh at his flagrant lies. We've heard all his stories before, but it's something to do. People say we're like comfortable old furniture. We're the regulars who give the place a homey feel. Anyone wanting to watch and listen may feel free to do so for as long as they like, if they don't take themselves or the stories too seriously, but we don't allow anyone else to join the poker game.

"Now, first off, I ran fifty mules through town, not a hundred. I herded them through Ringgold because that's the best way to get to the dog pen," Daddy Al answers

with a great smile on his face, showing his brown teeth. His voice booms slower, more deliberate than in years past, though still louder than necessary. He plays to the back row.

“I stopped the herd when it came to the one stop light we had in the town. It went red. I had to stop the herd. You don’t think I’d break any traffic law, do you? Wasn’t my fault the light never turned green again – and hasn’t to this day. Hell’s bells! Those mules figured they’d just go exploring while they waited for the light to turn green. Wasn’t a thing I could do. You figure anyone will ever fix that light?”

Laughter tapers off to chuckles, then to comfortable smiles. We’ve heard the explanation before. It’s still funny. It isn’t so much the stories that make us laugh; we’ve heard them all before, in many different variations. It’s the setting that makes us feel good about ourselves and the others around the table. It’s the five of us and Daddy Al. We belong here. It’s our place we found after a long search. It makes us better.

“Now about my climbing the water tower, that’s been blown way out of whack. I did that on Christmas; no other time. I didn’t paint a nasty message. That’s what a bunch of little girls like you would do. I painted the most profane sentiments I could think of at the time, but maybe it had something to do with sugarcane whiskey called Plumb Dumb.”

“I suppose you filled in the swimming pool because you got drunk then too,” Crusty calls. He’s our resident expert on all facets of alcohol abuse.

“I’ve never been drunk in my life,” Daddy Al responds, taking another pull off the quart of Beam. “I can drink any of you worm-eaters under the table and still go to your home to give your wives or girly friends a whirl. You can bet if I did they’d keep

me around for a couple more love lessons. Likely they'd change the locks so you can't get back in."

"Then why'd you fill in the swimming pool, old man?" someone laughs.

"I got your old man right here!" Daddy Al returns, grabbing his crotch, coughing and reaching for a fresh cigar to chew. No one smokes in Sootie's. It's an iron-clad rule everyone obeys. Chew and spit all you want, but don't fire up.

"I filled in the pool because they said me and my family couldn't use it. I figured if I couldn't swim in it, then no one could swim in it."

"That why you'd put a chain on the door of the church with people inside? Because they wouldn't let you in?" Everyone laughs at the question. It's all in fun even if it is true. Everyone knows how far they can go. Besides, if we keep asking we're sure to get a different answer.

"The church excommunicated me!" Daddy Al shouts. "What the hell would you do? They said I couldn't come in, so I said they couldn't come out, and I never had anything to do with killing the Wilson Twins, not that they didn't deserve being killed. I think ole Boot did us all a big favor by getting rid of them. It wouldn't surprise me to learn he fed them to the dogs. That year I took best in show at the hunting meet. It could have been the diet of Wilson Twins that made my dogs do so good."

"How about your daughter-in-law? She killed a man didn't she?"

"Now I wish you pecker-heads would put a stop to that rumor," Daddy Al responds with serious tones. "Excuse me, son, for saying so," he continues, pointing one of his extra long arthritic fingers at me, "but your mama could act the most pure and natural bitchy, suck-the-life-out-of-you, bad tempered, scheming, kill-you-with-looks

female I ever did come across, but I don't much think she ever killed anyone. Of course, it's sure enough possible. I wouldn't put it more than an inch or two past her. And I ain't saying one way or another if I had anything to do with the death of Boot's wife. That's something you'll have to figure out for yourself. But I will say this much. If you make a deal with a woman like your mother," Daddy Al again points to me. "You damn well better do whatever's necessary to see it through to the end."

"What the hell ever got you started on folks here in Ringgold?" Jitter Bug asks when the laughter dies. "I hear tell both you and your wife would do anything you could think of to get at the folks here. What got you started on that?"

"Yeah," Ferris adds. "What about that? How'd that ever get started? I don't think I've heard that story."

"That's right," Crusty agrees. "I never heard tell what got you started being such a bastard to everyone in town. Let's have it."

"That's because Gammy Mae and I control all the land around here," Daddy Al states in a matter of fact fashion.

"What's that you say?" Jitter Bug questions.

"You asked why I got started doing all that crazy stuff with the folks in Ringgold. I gave you refried beans the answer. It got started because Gammy Mae and I control all the land around here. Since she's been gone, I control the land by myself."

"Like hell you do," Jitter Bug states with great confidence. "My mother owns the land and the house we live in. My father farmed some property out on the lake road. You don't own their land."

“I didn’t say I owned the land, you abscess, I said I control the land, the water and all the resources. Ask your mother if she can sell her house or the land it’s on. Ask her if she can sell any of the land your father worked. She’ll tell you the answer’s no, because I control the land. No one can do anything on the land without my permission.”

“What about, Crusty?” Fat Pat asks. “He bought Lawbert’s store and burned it down. He didn’t have to get your permission.”

“Ask him,” Daddy Al smirks.

“What about it, man?” Fat Pat directs to Crusty. “Did you have to go to the Old Fart for permission before you bought Lawbert’s?”

“Well, yes,” Crusty says, tentative in his response. “Before he could sell his store, Lawbert told me I should go talk to Daddy Al. I thought he just wanted me to ask for advice, or something like that. The Old Geezer just said, ‘Sure go on and buy the store, if you want.’ I told Lawbert what he said. Lawbert said it was good enough, so we made the deal.”

Daddy Al smiles, beginning to clean his fingernails with his pocket knife. He sits in his chair waiting for the news to sink in. We look at each other, attempting without speaking to lay out a plan devious enough to catch him in his latest lie. It’s automatic. When Daddy Al gets started with one of his lies, we shift into the “Let’s Catch Him” mode. We need to ask more.

“Who gave you the land?”

“I’ve been wondering,” Daddy Al begins in a slow, deliberate fashion, with a broad smile still on his face. “Do any of you cow-pies understand English? I said, I control the land, I never said I own the land.”

“OK, OK,” Jitter Bug says. “Then who said you can control the land?”

“Abraham Lincoln.”

“What?” we ask at the same time. This has to be one of Daddy Al’s greatest lies in the making.

“You never heard the story because I never told the story,” Daddy Al states. “I never told the story because no one ever asked me. Most around here know what’s what. They don’t much care about the why of it.”

I reach for a notebook and pen, turn to a fresh page, readying myself to record history. He’s acting way too serious for this to be just another lie or great exaggeration. Maybe there’s something here, but I doubt it.

“Well, let’s have it old man. Give up the story. We’re all waiting,” Jitter Bug taunts.

“I don’t know, snow flakes. It’s a right long story. Could take the rest of the afternoon; late into the night if I got started. Maybe it’s best if we put it off for another time.”

“What the hell other time,” someone shouts. “Let’s have it right now.” Everyone agrees there’s no better time than the present. We’ve got him! He can’t think fast enough to worm out of this one.

“Tell you what, butt-scratchers, how about we start the story next early Saturday. You’re not going to believe me anyway, so I’ll bring some books and pictures with me to prove what I’m talking about. Best you prepare for a long afternoon. Some of the night, too. That’s about what I figure it’ll take. What makes the truth comes from many directions.”

“You have that much history in you?” Fat Pat questions with a serious tone.

“That and more. That and more.”

“Then you can bet I’ll show up next Saturday early. I wouldn’t miss this for a month of royal flushes.”

With a great smile on his face, Daddy Al continues to make notches in the chair seat. “History’s what you make it, butter cups,” he says, more to himself than to the others who have turned their attention back to the poker game.

“History is where we’ve been.
And history is our kin.

History tells who we are.
To everyone near and far.

History tells of the past.
And history’s here to last.

But history ain’t all fit.
When
History’s what you make it.”

Chapter Two

Pavlov’s Human in Bar-B-Que Heaven

Years ago, the current home of Sootie’s Roasting Hog B-B-Q became the second real non-tent building constructed in Ringgold, back when no more than a muddy place in the road to nowhere, the village had Slabtown for a name. Both Daddy Al and his wife, Gammy Mae, had a lot to do with the town changing its name.

The structure housed a combination of trades; gambling, whoring, saloon and even a first to fifth grade school. Playing in a week long poker game, Sootie dealt himself a perfect straight flush from the bottom of the deck, winning the establishment

and the whores who worked there. The owner, Sootie's uncle, who held an impressive aces over kings full house, correctly accused his nephew of cheating, adding he wouldn't give up his building or business to any "no good card cheating bastard". Sootie killed him in a knife fight. The building, saloon, gambling tables and whores became Sootie's property. He had no interest in the school, but allowed it to continue. No one ever said anything about the knife fight, at least not around Sootie or loud enough for him to hear.

Sootie didn't venture much passed the fifth grade because at the time the school in Slabtown didn't teach beyond the fifth grade, and anyway, the only teacher got himself hung for being a pervert. If there had been another teacher it wouldn't have mattered much because when boys reached ten or eleven years old they joined their fathers in the fields. Girls didn't attend school at all, but no one cared much about that.

Sootie's father, an immigrant from Germany who spoke no English, worked a fifty acre sharecropper dirt farm outside Slabtown. He employed all twelve of his kids as slave labor. Typhoid took the life of Sootie's father, mother and nine of the youngest kids. Wanting to dig only one hole, Sootie waited a couple of weeks from the time the first died until the last, so he could bury them in the same grave. Sootie then began drifting and gambling for a living, using his two remaining sisters, Rebecca and Annie Pearl as prostitutes.

Rebecca was killed on her fourteenth birthday by a small-time Texas crook and part-time undertaker named Real Big Jookie, who correctly accused her of stealing his wallet; at the time loaded with five thousand dollars stolen from a bank in Shreveport. Real Big Jookie recovered his wallet, but not the cash. It found a way into Sootie's

hands. Claiming family revenge, Sootie killed Real Big Jookie in a knife fight. He kept the money for himself.

The older sister, Annie Pearl, found a way to get away from all the trouble Sootie attracted. A few years after working the stripper and prostitute circuit in New Orleans, she took office as a Louisiana State Senator. She married a man named Jacob Elgin Virginian Wayne Victory Bogley, moved with him to Ringgold, and late in her life had a son and daughter. For good reason, Annie Pearl died from severe heartbreak.

Annie Pearl and Sootie never developed a caring brother and sister relationship, so when they both ended up back in Ringgold, or Slabtown, as it was called then, they pretty much ignored each other. As it turned out, before Sootie returned to Ringgold, he made a real fine card cheat, floating from one poker table to another in northwest Louisiana, parts of Texas and Arkansas.

Sootie never married, though he did keep steady company with several young whores, one of whom gave him a child. To no one's surprise, when Sootie became older and slower, he died in a knife fight – with his cousin, Jookie Two, Real Big Jookie's son. It wasn't a very interesting fight. After about a half hour of Sootie and Jookie Two poking at each other, all the spectators left in search of better entertainment. Jookie Two managed a fatal jab while Sootie propped up against a tree catching his breath. Sootie's son and only known child, Sootie Two, inherited the business. When he became old enough to operate the saloon, gambling tables and whorehouse, Sootie Two killed Jookie Two in a knife fight. Later he toned down his inherited business interests to no more than a bar-b-que place.

When new, the small square building served first as a barn for mules; sometimes a combination school and saloon. Even then it looked old. Now that it's mature and weathered, it looks ancient. Built from rough cut hardwood lumber it has tasted infrequent whitewashings but never paint. One large window in front, installed when it became a school/saloon, displays a half dozen spider web cracks produced by stone hurling irritated customers, but all that happened during the long ago Slabtown days.

Pieces of a broken flagstone now lead customers from the main street of Ringgold between tall moss-covered oaks, into cool shade and the front door of Sootie's. Situated between Billy's "You Better Fill It Up Here, Cause Their Ain't No More For Forty Miles" gas station, and the out of business Western Auto, Sootie's endures as an acceptable eye-sore in its own tiny forest of oaks, weeds, cactus and empty soda cases. A couple of fat raccoons known to all as Alice and Orlo will always be nearby, begging for hand outs.

There's a double swing hanging from an ages-old oak. A few flaking-green-paint metal lawn chairs scatter around over the grassless yard where you may linger for as long as you like tweaking up your appetite by smelling the special tang of bar-b-que smoldering in cookers. It'll make your mouth water. On the off-chance it doesn't, you should have someone check your pulse. If you delay too long finding a handkerchief, you'll embarrass yourself by wiping your lips with your shirt sleeve.

A rusting tin roof keeps out most of the rain. A pot-bellied wood burning stove sometimes produces enough heat to warm the "main room"; separated from the "back room" by a counter jutting out about a quarter of the way across the building's

inside width at the mid-point. There's no wall or curtain between main and back rooms. It's more of an "understood" division. Sootie Two, Daddy Al and the poker players can go into the back room. Everyone else stays in the front.

When first constructed, the builders discovered a massive stone in the exact spot where the middle of the building would be. Far too large for anyone to move, they worked around the stone, further separating the main room from the back room with an eighteen inch high step-up extending over the stone, into the back where Sootie Two now works.

Four battery powered emergency lights hang from a wooden support beam over the division between main and back rooms. When the electricity goes off in a thunder storm or because a squirrel chews through a line somewhere, two emergency lights pointed at the poker table switch on, causing us to be lit as if on a stage in a play. The other two lights face the main room but don't come on because Sootie Two didn't want the lights in the first place. He doesn't keep batteries in them.

Three notable pictures and one large framed black and white poster now hang on the smooth whiskey color knotty pine walls in Sootie's, though almost three hundred photos decorated the interior at one time. There'll be a broom handy in the corner for anyone who becomes offended by what they see on the smooth gray hardwood plank floor. Six irregular tables with one folding chair each scatter far enough apart for those wanting to sit while eating, though most stand at the wide shelf running along two walls. On Saturdays Sootie Two opens for business around noon. He closes when the mood strikes, but always sometime before sunset, so he has no need for lights, but we have one

hanging over the poker table in a basket ball size green glass world globe, allowing us to play poker for as long as we like into the night.

In the back room there's a 4x4 foot deeply-indented-on-top solid walnut three hundred pound chopping block, a six burner almost-antique black propane stove, two double stainless steel sinks, three dirty-white Amana refrigerators and lots of counter space with cabinets above for supplies. In the corner, near the back door, there's an Army surplus cot with mattress and covers for Sootie Two. Most important of all, there's a heavy duty, one-of-a-kind, green-felt-covering-the-top-with-slots-for-chips, solid red cypress, one hundred year old poker table with six sides. Always at the same sides of the table, there are five stone-heavy personalized dark oak chairs with notches whittled into the seat and arms. Rolling up a ramp in the center of the step-up, Jitter Bug brings his own seating arrangements.

Instead of making their bets with cash, the players at the poker table use large hand-oiled, shiny black metal washers. Each has a value. The largest represents one hundred dollars, the next smaller fifty dollars, the smallest twenty-five dollars. Hand carved by their owners and representing five hundred dollars each, four six inch high figures stand in front of every player. Each individual carved figure has a name, its own personality, place of birth, history of marriages and children, favorite local girl friends and awards earned in combat. None of Jitter Bug's figures have legs. None of Crusty's have a face. Fat Pat's are all round like a pool ball, but have holes in several places. Ferris' are simple one by one inch pine, painted red and topped with bottle caps. Mine, I carved from a branch of the Bloodwood tree - chess pieces; the King, Bishop, Knight and Rook. Strangers have offered me a hundred bucks each for the set. They're that good.

I'm real handy with a sharp knife. You should see some of the decoys I caved. I got \$7,000 for one I did last year.

When extremely confident with their hand, a player will bet with the figures. Losing any of the carvings brings on great distress and careless betting in an effort to win them back. Because we trust no one else to keep an accurate accounting of who owes how much to whomever, we furnish Sootie Two with a large ledger book. He won't wear the green accountant's visor we bought for him.

We play five hand, high stakes, cut-throat draw poker. Nothing else. The deal rotates counter-clockwise around the table at the end of each hand. The dealer doesn't play because the players don't trust him, whoever he may be. Jitter Bug owes me \$28,190. He owes Fat Pat \$172,480. Crusty owes Daddy Al \$16,770 and Ferris \$150. I owe Crusty \$130 and \$66,840 to Fat Pat, but he owes almost \$300,000 to both Crusty and Ferris. Daddy Al's almost a million in debt. He pays closer attention to his stories than to his poker hands. It's all right there in Sootie Two's ledger book. At any time, any of us can ask for an accounting.

No one who has been to Sootie's more than once asks to see a menu. Sootie Two makes it easy for customers to decide. He serves the best bar-b-que money can buy. No one comes for anything else. When people step through the front door they shout out their order because Sootie Two doesn't employ a waitress. It's more of a help-yourself place.

"Make it two plates!" a customer will call out if he's with his wife or someone else. "One plate!" a person will call when alone. Then they'll add, "On yours!" if they want the order on Sootie Two's plates. "On mine!" they'll shout if they brought their

own. It's about half and half – the people who bring their plates and those who use Sootie Two's.

When he hears an order called, Sootie Two steps out the back door under a tin roof where he opens the huge black mouth of one of his smoldering grills. If the smell you notice when you first walk in doesn't grab you - cause you to involuntarily pause for a moment, inhaling so deeply through your nose you worry about your ears caving in - it will when he opens the grill.

Sootie Two fills each plate to overflowing with ribs, sliced pork, sausage, and a good helping of beans. On the way to you salivating in the main room he adds coleslaw. On top of it all he drops a large fresh bun. If you can finish the entire plate, it's free. Some football linemen from LSU came in to try one time, but they left paying the bill like everyone else.

Sootie Two's secret for better-than-great bar-b-que comes from a green sauce and the seeds of the Bloodwood tree. The seeds give the smolder a slight cinnamon flavor. In the entire world, the one remaining Bloodwood tree survives with watchful care on property belonging to Sharon Threes and me, so we eat for free.

Usually you'll find enough plastic knives or spoons handy, and maybe some lemon wet towels for napkins, but most people bring their own utensils and paper products. Sootie Two doesn't care if you bring your own beer, whiskey or soda. If you want some of his, it's either in a tub of ice sitting in the corner, or somewhere on the counter.

When you finish stuffing yourself – and you will stuff yourself, because it's that good, there's a King Edward cigar box on one of the tables where you pay the bill.

Everyone knows the price. Just ask if you aren't sure. Make your own change. No need to leave a tip.

People come into Sootie's for the bar-b-que. After their meal some stay for a while to watch the poker game and listen to the stories. They say it's the closest thing Ringgold has to dinner theater. It's not much of a place, but people in Ringgold like it. Every now and then someone gets lost looking for Shreveport and finds their way to Sootie's. After the first time, they never forget the way back. When the Governor of Louisiana passes through the area he always stops by with his own plate and utensils. Once, a presidential candidate came in. But all of that doesn't mean much to the people in Ringgold. They have their own celebrity. He shows up almost every Saturday afternoon.



Chapter Three

Dinner Theater in Ringgold

"I've been giving this a lot of thought over the past week," Daddy Al begins. His voice reminds me of an old growling lion attempting to clear his throat. It's easy to imagine his pain.

It's straight up noon at Sootie's. We've all settled around the poker table waiting for the story. I have a fresh pad of paper and several new pens ready. Fifty or more people have come in with their own folding chairs not wanting to risk arriving too late to claim one of the six in Sootie's; maybe twenty five or so men, two dozen women.

A few high school seniors have been instructed by their teachers to take notes. Later they'll share the new story with their classmates. Daddy Al speaks to the group around our poker table, but with excessive voice volume, plays to the cheap seats while pretending to ignore the audience altogether. Everyone's ready and waiting. The chit chat has finished. If we had a curtain, we've raise it. It's show time at dinner theater in Ringgold ...

