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If You Want Me to Stay

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“Love grows bitter with treason,” the English poet Algernon Charles Swinburne once wrote. Few contemporary stories illustrate that emotional transformation more poignantly than this novel. The author, a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, wrote it in a first-person stream-of-consciousness style about a fourteen-year-old boy who is forced to protect two younger brothers from their sporadically violent, mentally ill father, Joel.

The story opens one morning when Joel Jr.‘s father starts to go “off” in their rundown home in North Carolina’s backcountry—“off” being a code word for a psychotic rampage. Immediately the frightened protagonist rushes his brothers, Tank and Carter, to safety in the family truck parked outside their home. Music, especially by legendary blues and jazz singers, winds as relentlessly through the story as Joel Jr.‘s recounting of his family’s history. References to those songs so frequently appear that the reader easily imagines a household filled with music that serves as substitute for emotional stability.

As Joel waits with his brothers in the truck, his internal soliloquy reveals other traumatic family events: a weak mother who abandoned the family out of disgust and a desire for good times; and a pretty but shiftless older sister, Angie, who similarly fled in search of a better life. Gamely, the young narrator attempts to amuse and distract his younger brothers with songs and stories. By afternoon, however, the older boy, Carter, leaves the truck and dashes into the house, only to be seized and tied to a porch column by his raging father. So disingenuously does Joel relate the subsequent events, so classically in the voice of an experienced abuse victim, that it takes the reader a few moments to grasp their significance.

Joel then begins a chaotic drive in the truck with his little brother, Tank, in search of help. When he receives only a token assistance, the disgusted youth heads for a more distant town in hopes of locating his mother and sister. A subsequent encounter with Angie proves as hollow as the search for their long-lost mother. “Don’t pay any attention to her mouth. Just take care of your brothers and hold your shoulders up,” Joel Jr.‘s mother once told him before she left. Her words have become the narrator’s mantra, which, paradoxically, enables the reader to forgive the story’s shocking ending.

Parker is a professor in the M.F.A. writing program at University of North Carolina at Greensboro; his previous novel *Hello, Down There* was listed as a *New York Times* Notable Book, and *The Geographical Cure* won the Sir Walter Raleigh Award. Here, he has written Joel Jr.’s voice in a way that may be initially difficult for readers to understand, but *If You Want Me to Stay* is a persuasive invitation for anyone interested in memorable new fiction. (August 18, 2009)

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