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*Boston Globe*

JUDSON MITCHAM



THE  
SWEET  
EVERLASTING  
A NOVEL

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For my mother



“All flesh is grass,  
and all the goodliness thereof  
is as the flower of the field . . .”

Isaiah 40:6



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It was an idea as real as a sharp stick, and even better for drawing blood. But if you looked at it good, like I finally did, it didn't have nothing to back it up.

Out of a six-year-and-two-month sentence to the state prison at Milledgeville, I served it all—August 1954 to October 1960. I was crazy a while, and then I wasn't, and then I was. That's how it went. One second I'd be a free man—with Susan beside me and the boy on my lap—and the next I'd be awake on my back and looking up into the dirty light coming through my cell window.

The day they let me out, I walked on down the road and sat under a tree, and I remember how when the wind picked up, leaves started to fall. I'm seventy-four years old now, and that was a long time ago, like it was another life. But some of what happened before that morning, every now and then it seems like yesterday.



Mr. Stillwell had eight families working his land, five white and three black. His land was broke up into two parts—one of them right there at his house, where we had our farm and where a black family by the name of Cutts had one, and then there was another big piece about four miles down the road, the other side of Yellow Shoals and halfway to Ricksville. We didn't hardly ever see the families who worked that land, except maybe at church and at school. Some of them went to school over in Ricksville and some at Yellow Shoals, where I went.

Mr. Stillwell was the richest man in the county. He had all that land, but then he owned the bank and most of the stores in town too. To look at him, you wouldn't have thought he was a rich man. He always dressed real plain. He'd wear brown work clothes or overalls. He'd got his money farming—at least that's how his family had got their money; it was passed down to Mr. Stillwell—and he wanted folks to look

at him like he was a farmer. But if you did look close at him, you might see a crease in his work clothes, and you wouldn't find no blood or dirt or grease on his overalls, or where they'd been mended from being snagged on a barbwire fence. He had the cleanest work clothes this side of the Sears and Roebuck catalog. Looked like a uniform.

He was a short man, wiry and thin, and he walked with a strut. I used to make Mama and Daddy laugh by imitating how he walked. He'd stick out his rear end and jut his head forward and pull his arms back all at the same time, so he looked real stiff, and then he'd sort of strut.

His hair was pure white, but then one day when he come down to our house to tell Daddy to do something, he took off his hat and his hair was black as tarpaper. Daddy stood out in the front room talking to him, but me and Mama eased on into the back of the house, went back in the bedroom and fell out. Mama stuffed a pillow in her mouth so she wouldn't honk. After a while we settled down, but then when Mr. Stillwell left and Daddy walked in and we seen the expression on his face, we fell out again, and Daddy with us.

Mr. Stillwell had three girls—one that was four years older than me, one that was my age, named Alice, and one that was a baby. I didn't hardly ever see them. They stayed right around the house, and I didn't go up there much. Alice was in my grade at school, and I seen her there. She was always real nice to me. She knew my daddy worked for hers, but then so did half the county, so that didn't mean much. Her

folks always sent somebody to pick her up after school, and sometimes they'd pass me while I was walking home, and Alice would always smile and wave at me. She was a friendly girl, and I liked her a lot. She never let on that she thought she was better than anybody else.

Which is to say she wasn't nothing like her daddy. Uncle Mack use to sit and listen to him down at Hodges Store, where they called Mr. Stillwell "The Judge," like a lot of other folks did, even though he hadn't ever been a judge and wasn't even a lawyer. The word was that the governor had wanted to make him a district judge one time, but Mr. Stillwell had turned him down.

The Judge liked to talk about his family history. He'd tell it over and over, and we'd hear the stories when Uncle Mack come out to our house. It wasn't like Uncle Mack had any business being on close speaking terms with Mr. Stillwell. It was just that Mr. Stillwell liked to talk in front of a crowd, and he could usually find him one down at Hodges Store.

They said Mr. Stillwell's granddaddy had rode with Nathan Bedford Forrest in the War Between the States, rode with him most of the war, they said, at Shiloh and at Chickamauga. There was a tintype of his granddaddy standing beside the general, and I know that's a true fact since Alice brung it to school one day to show it off. It was a bent old tintype, smudged and hard to make out—two men in uniform standing by one another, and one of them was supposed to be her great-granddaddy and the other one the general.

Folks said there was a room inside Mr. Stillwell's house where they had his granddaddy's war things all laid out, like in a museum, everything in glass cases.

The Confederate statue on the courthouse square over in Ricksville had his granddaddy's name chiseled in at the bottom as the one who give the money for it. Mr. Stillwell would point out how the statue was turned due south, even though that made the soldier face sideways to the street. He said that was done by order of his granddaddy, who wanted the statue to show its backside to the North for the rest of eternity.

There was a time when I used to wonder about that room in Mr. Stillwell's house, the one with all the war things in it, wondered what it looked like. I'd been over there with my daddy, but I'd never been inside the house, and as far as I could tell, neither had my daddy. He'd stand out in the back yard while Mr. Stillwell spoke to him from off the porch about business matters—seed and fertilizer and such. It was clear that Mr. Stillwell wouldn't let no sharecroppers set foot in his house. He didn't even want you on his porch.

Once when there was a hog-killing and all the families that worked for him come over to help out with it like always, one of the little white girls from down the road, about seven years old, she went up and sat in a rocking chair on the back porch. Mr. Stillwell shot a look at the girl's mama, who run up there and told the girl to get herself down from there; said didn't nobody ask her up on the porch.

After the hog-killing was over, we'd always have us a big supper out in the back yard—some of the

best stew you ever ate in your life. There'd be these long two-by-eights laid across sawhorses to make tables, and we'd serve ourselves and then sit down around the tables to eat. The three black families took their plates and sat under the chinaberry tree about thirty yards off from the tables. Didn't nobody tell them to do that; didn't nobody have to.

But then didn't all the white families eat at the same place either. Mr. Stillwell and his wife and their girls all took their plates and went up on the porch and sat by themselves.

My daddy had a granddaddy in the war too, but he never talked about it much. Said he got put in a prison camp up in Chicago and that he walked back to Georgia after the war.

He served as a regular private, a foot soldier, but one day they pulled him into a field hospital to help them out, and they made him hold men down while they sawed off their legs or arms.

My daddy said sometimes, out of the blue, his granddaddy just cried and shook; said his mama told him a story that he never heard his granddaddy tell, about how they went charging up a hill, and the man in front of him got shot in the head and the man's ear flew off and landed in my great-granddaddy's mouth. Said he spit it out and stood there with it in his hand, looking at it, and he didn't know what to do with it—whether to lay it down on the dead man or not—and then he put it in his pocket and went on up the hill.

Daddy said there was a parade one time, long after the war, and they tried to get his granddaddy to march in it, but he crawled in the bed and he wouldn't get out.



My daddy had them little strokes before he died. One night he come in from the field and wasn't himself, come to the table with his shirt off—the same man that always liked to wash up good before supper and might even put on a clean shirt if he had one. That evening when he sat down, he just started to eat right off, never said the blessing. That's what scared Mama so bad.

Daddy didn't remember none of it the next day, even laughed about what a fool he must have looked like, sitting there bare-chested at the table. But you could tell it got off with him. He grabbed Mama and wrestled her into a hug, said she knew he was a crazy man when she married him, now didn't she? They held onto each other for a little bit, standing like that, like a couple between dances waiting for another slow tune to start up. But then when Daddy walked on ahead of me out towards the field I seen how his right foot was lazy, and I yelled out and asked him what

was wrong with his leg, but he didn't answer.

My daddy was a quiet man all his life. He used to say if a man talked a lot you just listen to him long enough and most likely you'll find out he don't know which end of the mule to feed sugar to. What words my daddy did use, he was big on using right. He didn't use no blue language, not unless it was called for, but then he knew how to turn it loose.

And I remember one time I said I hated rutabagas, and he said well maybe I didn't like them much, but I didn't hate them. He said you don't go around hating vegetables like you had a grudge against them and was going to get even.

Daddy couldn't read or write, and he was ashamed of it. He never tried to use a word he didn't know, and the ones he did know, he thought about them a lot, trying to make sure he was right. Sometimes he asked me to look up a word for him in the big dictionary they had at school, but he made me promise not to tell nobody about it. Usually it was a word he'd heard somebody use, maybe in town or over at the store, and that it looked like everybody knew but him. I'd write down what the dictionary said, every bit of it, and when I brung it home, Mama would read it out loud, and sometimes it cleared things up, and sometimes it didn't. I wish I could remember some of the words now, but I can't.

The early morning was my daddy's favorite part of the day. That's when he liked to sit on the front steps with a cup of black coffee, and I remember him drinking that coffee and pointing things out to me, like one time when he nodded toward the fence where a crow

had lighted. "Ellis, look yonder," I remember him saying, "the sun on them wings."

Then one morning he woke up and couldn't move. Had his eyes open, and he was breathing but couldn't move, and there was this awful scared look in his eyes, and that night we lost him.

The day we buried him it hadn't rained in a long time and the red clay was packed hard. I went over to where they'd opened the grave, and I looked down into the hole, and I looked over at the pile of dirt beside it, and that dirt got to me. They planned to put my daddy down in the hole, and then throw dirt on top of him—all that red dirt I could see piled up—pack it down on top of him, and that's where he'd be from then on. They'd dressed him up, and they'd laid him out in a fancy box, but they planned to put him in a hole like he was a dog, so he wouldn't stink.

Mama come and took me by the hand and led me away. They'd said the prayers and was fixing to lower him down, and we wasn't supposed to watch that, but they started before we got out of the graveyard, and I turned back and I seen him go under, and then I looked up at the other folks standing there, and I looked past the tombstones and out across the road, looked over into the pasture at some cows, and it hit me then how even them fool cows was still alive but my daddy was dead. The cows would be eating and sleeping and waking up to the light and the sweet air, and all the while my daddy would be dead.

I got to thinking the other day how long I've out-lived him already, wondering if I started to give out like that, who'd take care of me, since I ain't got

nobody that really loves me, like me and Mama did him.

I had somebody once, though. First time I seen her, I was working for a traveling fair, setting up the Tilt-A-Whirl. We'd stopped down near Jesup and raised everything up on a dirt patch some folks thought was too close to a church, and I reckon it was, but that church stayed dark all week long. I don't know who we was supposed to be bothering, except maybe the dead in that graveyard by the church, and I had a feeling they was on our side.

When I looked at Susan that first time, I didn't have a clue, though it's a fact that she could have been a picture in a book. I mean, she stood out right away from everybody around her—blackest hair I'd ever seen on a white woman, and dark eyes.

She was standing over by Chubby McElhannon's shooting gallery. I got the ride going and then I looked over, and there she was. I stopped the ride, let the folks out, locked the others in, started it up, and she was still there, still none of my concern, but I seen her, and I noticed she never did talk to nobody. I set them up again, and when I turned back this time, she was gone.

Just past the spot where she'd been standing, I seen Chubby leaning over the front of his booth, waving and yelling at everybody that walked by to come over. There was lots of folks for him to shout at, this being about the time the Japanese surrendered and everybody still celebrating. I seen Chubby shouting and yapping, talking fast as he could, calling people names he made up for them, usually not real nice.

Might call a soldier in uniform "Hero" or "General," or a girl with a candy apple "Sticky Lips." And when all I seen was Chubby being his fat self, I reckoned the girl had give up on whoever she was probably waiting for, but it didn't make no difference to me.

Sunday morning, like always, we broke down everything and got it all loaded on the trucks. And like always, there was townfolks standing off to the side watching us. Some of them had walked over from that little church, mostly children in their good clothes. And then you had folks who come out there to walk and crawl across the fairgrounds after we left, looking for dropped money in the sawdust and dirt. Never seen a town where they didn't show up. Crawford, the man who run the freak show, he called them the buzzards. We never did let them get going till we started to pull out. They just got in the way and made the work dangerous—folks everywhere down on their knees or wandering around, looking at the ground and not at where they're going, and us working fast and moving some pieces so heavy they don't give nobody a second chance.

That's where I seen Susan again, out there with the buzzards. She had her hair tied back, and something about that—I can't rightly say what—made her look like some kind of movie star. What I mean is, she was that good-looking.

I never was a man to just go up and talk to a woman, and that was even more true if she was good-looking. Made me feel like I had a big sign hung around my neck, and she could take one look at me