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KING'S OAK

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SIDDON'S

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Anne Rivers Siddons



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A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1990 by HarperCollinsPublishers.

Cover illustration by George Angezini

Acknowledgments follow page 593

First HarperPaperbacks printing: September 1991

Printed in the United States of America

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TOM DABNEY CAME AROUND THE SIDE OF THE HOUSE

He made no noise as he came, seeming to materialize out of the lambent light, and came up to us smiling broadly. In the strong sunlight I saw that there were creases between his dark, straight eyebrows and a webbing of fine lines at the corners of his narrow, deep-set blue eyes. Except for their color, they were his mother's eyes. But the expression in them was far different. These eyes danced with merriment that was near madness. He was slightly out of breath; the thought that he had just been dancing flickered through my mind. There was a dark shadow of a beard on his strong, pointed chin, and on his dark hair he wore a wreath of some sort of small, pointed, shiny leaves.

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. I realized I was holding my breath, and let it out slowly.

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To HEYWARD
My huckleberry friend

I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.

—*from the Bhagavad Gita, as quoted by*

**J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER,
*upon first seeing a nuclear explosion***

**Moon River, wider than a mile,
I'm crossing you in style someday . . .
Dream maker, you heart breaker,
Wherever you're going, I'm going your way . . .
Two drifters, off to see the world,
There's such a lot of world to see . . .
We're after the same rainbow's end,
Waiting 'round the bend,
My huckleberry friend,
Moon River . . . and me.**

**—JOHNNY MERCER
HENRY MANCINI**

Chapter one

Early in the last decade of the century, the earth began to die in earnest, though few of us noticed, and as in all times of unperceived cataclysm, the very air shuddered with myths, legends, and wondrous occurrences. Goat Creek lit up for the first time, for instance, on the very day that I came to Pemberton. Tom Dabney told me that, only much later. I might have thought that he spoke allegorically, since by then I knew that he saw signs and omens everywhere. Tom saw portent in the fact that he woke up in the morning.

But then, only days later, Scratch Purvis told me the same thing.

"Lit right up like there was light bulbs way down in it, blue ones," he said in his ruined wheeze. "I could see it shinin' all the way down to where it runs into the Big Silver. I knowed then that something considerable was comin', and sho nuff, that very afternoon, there you was."

So I believed it then, this story of the shining, smoking creek. Scratch, who did have a kind of blinded and searching Sight, nevertheless did not speak of that which he was not certain. If he, too, said that Goat Creek had

lit up, then light up, by God, it did. The hows and whys of it were entirely irrelevant.

Goat Creek: an unlovely and earthbound name for that beautiful and haunted finger of dark Georgia water. Still as a breath-scummed black mirror in the late summer; dreaming in the steel-blue autumn like a somnolent reptile; ice-rimmed and shut down and secret under the bled-out skies of winter; drifted with the stilled snowfall of dogwood and honeysuckle in the long, magical spring, Goat Creek loops and laces its way some twenty-odd miles from its source, a hidden spring somewhere in the trackless river swamp that covers much of Baines County in southwest Georgia, to the place where it gives up its life to the Big Silver River.

In some places along its course, Goat Creek runs shallow and sunstruck through deep grasses and reeds, through open fields and clearings in the vast woods around the Big Silver. Its life there is clear and open, the province of busy waterfowl and industrious raccoons and bees and turtles and snakes and, I have been told, an occasional small, undistinguished alligator. I have never seen a gator, though I have seen the deadly roiling of the black water as one took a baby wild pig, and heard the terrible snortings, and the thin screams of the piglet, and I saw the black water redden with the piglet's blood. So I know that the gators are there.

Deer by the hundreds come to drink at the muddy verges of these shallows. It is possible to see the mish-mash left by their delicate cloven hooves almost any morning. Wild pigs chuff there, too, feral and stupid. And in season, the trees around the open fields bloom with the ugly flora of wooden and metal stands, refuge of camouflaged hunters with rifles and compound bows and an astonishing array of devices to lure, by smell and sound, the slender white-tailed deer of the Big Silver.

But mostly Goat Creek runs in secret, in an eternal

semitwilight of black-green trees and hanging moss and undergrowth so dense that it is like blood or darkness, a separate element. Its life here is a secret life in all ways, as secret as the place where it begins. I have never seen the spring that is its birthplace, but I have come to know much of its secret darkness and many of its sunny interstices, and I have slept and eaten and loved in one of those, and I have never forgotten, since the first day I saw it, that Goat Creek is a finger that points to Pemberton.

I came to Pemberton chasing banality like a hound a rabbit and found instead a lush, slow beauty so insistent and particular that it frightened me. After my initial visit to Tish, to scout the lay of the land and attend the interviews Charlie had arranged for me, I think I would have backed out of the whole thing because of the unease that beauty caused me, except that by that time Tish had found a place for Hilary and me to live, and had even paid the deposit on it.

"You have to come now," she said in her rich neigh. "I've told everybody you would, and you'll make me out a liar, and in Pemberton that's worse than letting your roots show. The ones in your hair, I mean. It's perfectly okay if the others do. In fact, they'd better, or nobody will ask you to their party."

"I don't have any of either kind," I said.

"Nonsense," she said. "There's not a thing wrong with your roots. After all, you're a Calhoun. That name around here is like Cabot in Boston."

"You know perfectly well I'm not a Calhoun. Christopher is a Calhoun. I'm an Andropoulis. You got any Cabotopoulises around here?"

"Don't be stupid, Andy," she said evenly, in her best Student Government voice. "It's the right thing to do, for you and Hilary both. You've got to get that child

settled down before school starts. And you've got to settle, too."

It wasn't so much the argument as the weight of her presence, her sheer, easy authority, that decided me. Tish was neither a fool nor a bully, and she had been a loving friend for over twenty years. Her enveloping presence had always had an enervating, soporific effect on me, and I was tired with fifteen years' worth of corrosive fatigue. It was not only the last terrible five years with Chris, but all those that went before, beginning in the small white frame house in southeast Atlanta that my mother had so insistently called a bungalow (which in fact it was, but her tone was that of the Newporters who so astoundingly called their vast summer homes "cottages," and I hated it). The years before my father finally died and left us in a frozen and furious peace.

Tish Griffin, who was my roommate the entire four years we spent at Emory University in Atlanta, and a psychology major, always held that I lived, moved, and had my being, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it, in flight from my father. He was a taurine man, a squat, roaring black Greek who kept a small grocery store in the blue-collar section of Atlanta where we lived, and from long before my birth to the day he died, he drank liquor and embarrassed my mother and me. Or at least my mother said that he did, and by the time that I was six or seven and had started elementary school, she had said it enough times so that I believed her. Certainly by then his stumbling, bellowing homecomings from the Kirkwood Café on the corner, late most nights except Sundays, and his erratic outbursts at the store and mumbling, lurching progress home to lunch every day were sufficient to mortify a pious conventional woman, which my mother was, and a timid, conventional child, which I was. And I do remember the stiff back and hot cheeks of youthful anguish that his behavior, and the chants and

snickers of my schoolmates, caused me.

But I remember loving him, too; remember distinctly the powerful, knee-weakening wash of pure contentment, of utter safety, that I felt at the smell of his soft, sun-dried undershirts and his spicy-sweet aftershave, and the helpless fits of giggles that his loud, clumsy, Greek-laced foolishness caused to bubble up from my chest when he picked me up and held me over his head. He was a strong man, deep-chested and long-muscled despite his short stature, and I felt a sly, proprietary pride in all that maleness and strength that was near sexual. *My father*: this modern Daedalus, this minotaur among us, was *mine*, property of otherwise insignificant *me*. I might be so incorporeal as to be invisible in my small society most of the time, but in the great, black-furred arms of Pano Andropoulis I was as luminously visible as Venus in a winter sky.

So if, by the time I was old enough to recognize his behavior as aberrant, outrageous, beyond the pale, and to be, with my mother, seared and shamed by it, my pain went deeper than hers, it was because under there was that hopeless, helpless love, while under her pain there was not, I think, anything but a cold anger and more pain. I cannot remember ever having a sense that my mother loved my father.

"It's a classic escape mechanism," Tish said to me one April night during our sophomore year, when we sat on our twin beds in the mimosa wash from the open windows, rehashing our double date. I had, for a few months, been going out exclusively with her boyfriend's roommate, like him a junior at Emory Medical School. Tish had been going with Charlie Coulter so long that their wedding, planned for the day after he got his M.D., was as fixed and unremarkable in her firmament and mine as our familiar stars. But I had only met Chris Calhoun when Charlie's old roommate, Shoe, flunked out and

Chris moved into the scabrous little apartment off Ponce de Leon Avenue. I had, that spring evening, after three or four unaccustomed beers at Moe's and Joe's, announced to Tish that I'd marry Chris Calhoun in three seconds flat if he asked me, and if he didn't, I'd live in sin with him anywhere he chose, even the vast basement apartment of his parents' great gray stone house on Habersham Road.

It was a mark of my degree of abandonment to Christopher Sibley Calhoun and the beer, that statement, especially the part about sin; it was, after all, only the beginning of the freewheeling seventies in the Deep South, and we were, at Emory, still a safe remove from burning bras and the sexual revolution. And Habersham Road was worlds, galaxies, a universe away from Hardin Street in Kirkwood, even if only four miles in actuality. I had visited Chris's home once, at a large party his parents had given earlier in the spring, but so far as I knew, my mother had never been west of Peachtree Road, or north of the Medical Arts Building downtown, and she went there on a bus. It was, for both of us, a distance measured in more than miles.

"Escape mechanism," Tish said around a mouthful of Milk Duds. "Get away from Daddy as fast and far as you can. Make him eat your dust. And what's farther away than Chris Calhoun and Habersham Road?"

I was silent for a moment, wondering, as I often did with Tish, whether or not she might be right. Aside from her veneer of sophomore psychology, which was ephemeral at best, Tish had, when it came to me, the prescience that comes with real affection. She both knew and loved me, something few other people in my experience had done. We had been closer than most sisters for two years. There was a marked sameness to us when it came to clothes, hair, makeup, ambitions, and bents of the heart. We were both bright, liberal-leaning, clever,

and worldly in the smart-mouthed manner of the time but ludicrously innocent beneath the banter, self-deprecating in the quasi-modest way of well-brought-up Southern girls, and ironically and ignorantly scornful of anything less than total commitment to our bruised sixties ideals of peace, love, and service to society. But there was a great and basic difference in us. Under my seventies shell was a vast, empty abyss where no perceivable self dwelled. Under Tish's shell lived more of Tish, solid down to her core. Tish had a large, rooted, privileged family in Macon, Georgia, and spoke out of generations of cheerful love and a given self-worth. The authority of sureness rang in even her most absurd statements.

"I think you're full of crap," I said finally, tasting my words. Tish would have said "shit" as naturally as she said her name. "Why do I have to be running away from my father? Why can't I just be running to Chris? Any woman who wasn't brain dead would be."

"Bullshit," she said. "I wouldn't. You wouldn't, either, if you didn't want to escape from Daddy so bad. Chris Calhoun is a jerk, Andy. You can do better than that. You know I've always thought you could."

And she had. When Charlie had brought him around to the Tri Delt house the year before, Tish had taken one look at his open child's face and sweet, three-cornered smile and gone uncharacteristically silent. By the time the evening was nearly over and we were driving back to the house in Chris's green Mustang convertible, she was positively arctic in her silence, and Charlie was glaring at her. Chris, to whom such disapprobation must have been as rare as a pimple on his faultless tanned skin, was outdoing himself with wit and charm, and I was laughing with pleasure and infatuation. Chris has always been a funny and endearing man, and he was never more so than that night. It would have

taken a real misanthrope to fail to respond, and warm, generous Tish was the opposite of that. But she was not moved, then or ever.

"He's not worth you," she said that first night. "He's too pretty. He's too rich. He's like a corrupted elf or something; he's too sure of himself. It's more than just being a doctor; they all have that kind of arrogance. It's something that goes under that. I think he's just your basic prick, and I wish Charlie had never met him. He's just as stupid over him as you are."

But she had said very little else about him one way or another through the following year, while we were double-dating every night Chris and Charlie could get free and I was falling in love with Chris and he was falling into whatever it was he had with me. That silence was undoubtedly another mark of her love for me. Tish saw Chris plain, but she also saw that my heart even early on had irrevocably gone over to him. Quite simply, I thought he was a miracle made flesh.

I honestly never knew what Chris saw in me, and still do not; even then, at what might be called my very best, I was small and dark as the Greek I am, not at all well-dressed, and round as an apple to boot, and he had long known what my family was. I had never taken him home, much less spoken of them to him, but he knew. Charlie told him, no doubt. It seemed almost beyond belief to me that he, a prince of the city in the most literal sense, moving in a world of private clubs and prep schools and family fortunes and huge old houses and long-legged, willow-waisted, drawling girls, should choose to spend all the time he had, after his medical studies, with me. But only almost beyond belief. Somehow I never really questioned it. Perhaps I did not dare to. And my dear, loyal Tish held her tongue, at what cost I shall never know.

So that night a year later, when she accused me of

using Chris to escape from my father, I did hesitate for a fraction of a moment before I snapped back at her. And then I said, "Anyway, how do you know it's not my mother I'm trying to escape?" and knew in that instant that it was true. And that it always had been.

Oh, my mother. My mother, Agnes Farr Andropoulis, spinner of dreams and killer of possibilities. Reality never sufficed for her, and her fantasies never nourished her. To others, they were lethal, or nearly so. My mother was a flower of old Mobile society, according to her earliest bedtime stories, caught young in a brutalizing marriage to a virile Greek god gone, early and inexplicably, to seed and to pot. Her life was a tragedy out of Aeschylus, out of Grimm.

He was never a Greek god, of course, my father; even when she met and married him, he was what he always had been and would be: second-generation son of a southern Greek grocery store owner, pigheaded and largehearted and full of a wild, fierce exuberance that was as natural and good as the scent of wild thyme on the hillsides outside Athens, but overdrawn, excessive, threatening in the stiflingly conventional, marginally poor neighborhood of Atlanta in the 1950s where his father, Dion, had his store. But my mother needed a god to mate with; nothing else would have sufficed for a princess in disguise as a lonely young schoolteacher in a strange city. And my father, by his very heritage, coveted a princess. By the time I was on the way, she realized that her god was in actuality the commonest of clay and impervious to molding and he realized that his princess was a blighted and pious pretender to the throne. Neither ever forgave the other, or ceased in their punishing. My father sailed his outrage through the streets of our neighborhood on a flood of bourbon. My mother moved far away from him inside her phantasmagoric mind and took me with her. From my earliest memory it was as

if they had a kind of mad joint custody of me; I lived half the time in his careening tenure, loving him, and half in her kingdom of cobwebs, adoring her. Both damaged me, I have come to see, but she perhaps most of all. He frightened me sometimes. But my mother made me afraid.

To this day she will not see it. For a short period of time, on the advice of an earnest young therapist who could have no more imagined my mother than he could have conceived of a griffin or a pterodactyl, I confronted her with it, seeking catharsis and insight.

"You overprotected me to the point that I thought I wasn't capable of simply living in the world," I said, trembling with the enormity of speaking so to her, but determined to seek some sort of salvation. "You made me feel like there was nothing I could do by myself, without you. Remember? You'd never let me go barefoot. You never let me play with most of the children on the street. I couldn't stay after school and play softball or volleyball. I couldn't date neighborhood boys. I couldn't ride in cars or eat spicy food; I couldn't walk to the movies or stay out after ten o'clock. It was always: 'Don't do that; you'll get hurt.' 'You can't do that by yourself; let me do it for you.' 'Wait till I help you with that.' You made me stay a child, Mama. Listen: I'm still calling you Mama. Not even Mother, Mama. I know you never intended to harm me; nobody could have loved me more than you have. But all that... smothering, that hovering... Mama, it makes me do things I shouldn't do, or not do things I should, just to feel *safe*. Or to be... oh, I don't know: *respectable*. Safe and respectable are the last things on earth I ought to be thinking about."

I was crying by then, silently, at the harsh sound of the traitorous words and the effort of speaking them to her.

"Oh, toot," she said gaily. It was what she said when-