



Marbles

a novel

OXFORD STROUD

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time."

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HARVEST AMERICAN

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MARBLES

Oxford Stroud

7712.4
5925

A Harvest/HBJ Book

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers

San Diego

New York

London



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Some material previously appeared in *NATIONAL FORUM: The Phi Kappa Phi Journal* under the title "Baptism."

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Stroud, Oxford S.

Marbles: a novel/by Oxford S. Stroud.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-15-157055-8

ISBN 0-15-657200-1 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3569.T733M37 1991

813'.54—dc20 91-21512

Designed by Trina Stahl

Printed in the United States of America

First Harvest/HBJ edition 1992

A B C D E

*For my mother,
Viola Goode Liddell;
and my wife,
Mary Anne Stroud*

Chapter One

I was ten and unbaptized when Aunt Rebecca discovered my fatal flaw, after which she put the verbal lash to Mother, and I was scheduled for sprinkling the following Sunday in Deen Presbyterian Church.

I loved Aunt Rebecca because I was afraid not to. Our family roots and her influence spread everywhere in the church. She had graduated from Calvin Bible Institute, where she struggled mightily with the divine enigmas, and afterward her judgments on the here and the hereafter were like steel shafts driven into the rock of God. No church elder dared cross unbidden the wake of her doctrine. No pastor, young or old, fared well without her favor. Once, directly before she went to the institute, a country gentleman, one John Decker, had forsaken her for

another, and thereafter she had closed the door of matrimony forevermore.

Every Sunday morning after song and prayer, Aunt Rebecca marched me and seven others into the anteroom behind the pulpit, closed the heavy white door upon us, and taught us Sunday school. She sat us alphabetized in a horseshoe facing the back door, over which hung a large picture of Jesus reaching from a small boat to lift Simon Peter from the waves. Aunt Rebecca sat in the mouth of the arc and called our full names, to which we responded with memorized Bible verses. Then she prayed. Seldom did she pray for God's mercy or love. She prayed for retribution and divine justice for those who had beheld God imperfectly. After the prayer, Aunt Rebecca opened her Bible and read in clipped phrases, pausing to warn, to caution, to forewarn, and to admonish. She lectured in exacting tones, and the vivid images of Hell and Satan she created in our minds sent me many times screaming out of my dreams into the hallway. If ever I see a piece of Heaven, I believe that it will be not because of my own godly virtues but because Aunt Rebecca frightened me upward from the horrors down under. She drove a hard bargain. "We are all sinners," she nailed into us Sunday after Sunday, "and the wages of sin is death." It didn't take me long to figure out where we were all headed. My sins were manifold, and the greatest

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of them, according to Aunt Rebecca, was shoot-
ing marbles for keeps. I was a crack shot. I had a quart fruit jar full of "keepers," every one a mortal sin.

Then, the Sunday before baptism, the Sunday before I was to be sprinkled, something happened that would become nearly the end of me. Aunt Rebecca seated us in our predestined pattern facing the terrified disciple and the angry waves. She called the roll: "Alice Jane Adams . . . , Carl Hooper Barnett . . . , Sylvia Anne Grayson . . . , Harvey Michael Johnson . . . , Janis Ellen Roberts . . ." and down to "Shelly Leopold Webster." It wasn't hard to learn a new Bible verse, but it was next to impossible to remember it in Aunt Rebecca's presence. For fun, Harvey Johnson and I once used "Jesus wept" on the same Sunday, and Aunt Rebecca mashed my toe against the floor with her Sunday slipper. "Brevity is not the soul of wit," she admonished. The next week Harvey started in on Genesis, and he had worked himself into the third verse.

Harvey spoke up: " 'God said Let there be light,' " and stopped.

" 'And there was light,' " Aunt Rebecca prompted. "Genesis one:three. Say it all again, correctly." Harvey did.

When she called, "Silas O'Riley Simeon," I was ready.

“Study to show thyself approved unto God . . . ,” I began, and said the entire verse correctly, adding: “Second Timothy two:fifteen.”

Shelly had an amazing brain and had memorized the whole thirty-eighth chapter of Job. Aunt Rebecca had to stop him when he got down to “Have the gates of death been opened unto thee?”

The lesson was about Noah and the flood and the destruction of the world. Then Aunt Rebecca made her astonishing announcement: we were all to “Find God this week and bring Him with you to Sunday school next Sunday.”

There was small ~~twittering~~ among the girls. Shelly smiled down into his Bible. Sylvia opened her beautiful eyes in amazement. Aunt Rebecca explained that there were but three ways that led into the company of God: Duty, Dedication, and Self-Denial—any of which could lead us into the holy center of His Presence. She stood up and held the Holy Scripture straight out in one hand and put the other on top, making a Bible sandwich. Through our imperfect means and by His own miraculous power, she said, God would show us the pathway to Him; then He would, for a moment, pull back the veil through which we see darkly, so that each of us might get a glimpse of Him and then, however briefly, take hold of His Divine Being.

“Find Him!” Aunt Rebecca instructed. She held

out her Bible in one hand like a cleaver and chopped the air. "Secure Him in your own way, and bring Him with you next Sunday. Remember," she said at last, "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free, for the Lord moves in strange and mysterious ways."

That was it.

I was stunned with the gravity of the charge. God gave saints their entire lives to find Him. Aunt Rebecca gave us a week.

As we passed through the door and into the body of the church, Aunt Rebecca said, "Silas, you are to pump the organ this morning for church services." The organ was an old colossus with a windbag in the middle and a pump handle in the side. Harvey's mother, who played when Aunt Rebecca was ill, had legs like a Roman and could keep the machine ablaze by the pedals alone. Not so Aunt Rebecca. Her calf muscles were small and tight like a grasshopper's. When I pumped, I was sealed off from the congregation and choir by a right-angled mahogany tomb but had a full view of my aunt. She perched herself on the organ stool like Queen Elizabeth, her feet poised to follow the rhythm of the pedals. Her dress tightened at the waist as she soared to the high notes. In profile her face was gray steel, sharp as a woodman's hatchet.

"Glad she ain't my aunt," Harvey said after

church. For Harvey, finding God was a joke. For Shelly, it was a problem, a mystery. For Sylvia, it would entail a performance. For me, it was an imperative: Aunt Rebecca was family. With her, God was the one fact in all creation; and my not finding Him, not laying even one little finger on the tiniest speck of Him, would amount not only to failure but to denial and damnation.

Harvey grinned. "Where you going to find God at?"

On Monday I was worried. By Wednesday I had lost my appetite. On Thursday I dreamed a scary dream: I was the only marble in my jar of keepers—a lone, sinful agate rattling about. But it was *my* jar and *my* marble. And so was born my private Jar of Marbles, an involuntary habit of collecting souls, a personal game I played right up to the beginning of my part in World War II.

On Friday I climbed up in Uncle George's hay barn and asked God to show Himself, to give me a sign—something from His divine Everywhere that I could lay before Aunt Rebecca on Sunday morning.

God started answering my prayer the next day, with the remote aid of Blue. Blue was our Negro cook's boy. In our running dialogue on the location of the human soul, Blue had decided that the "Big Ghost," God, could be anywhere He wanted to, but for convenience, Blue kept *his* "little ghost," his soul, in a snuff can on the mantel over the fireplace.

My prayer was not fulfilled before I had suffered. Friday night, before tucking the covers under my chin, Mother put her hand on my brow and wondered aloud about my health. Father said from downstairs if I didn't have any fever, to hush. It was deep in the night before I tumbled off to sleep. In a nightmare, Aunt Rebecca was transformed into a giant wasp. On waves of overwhelming music she arose on her stool from a smoking organ pit, charioting a flaming organ across a dark void and wielding lightning bolts that flashed from both hands. It never occurred to me in the dream that perhaps *she* had risen from the regions below. I knew only that if the organ was a devil, Aunt Rebecca was in the coachman's seat and the sounding bellows was nothing more than an infernal instrument completely at her command.

"You were having a bad dream," Mother said, steadying me from arm's length.

"What's the matter with him now?" Father said from downstairs.

"He had a nightmare about Rebecca and something about God."

"Silas," my father said.

"Sir."

"You want to come sleep downstairs?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Silas said Rebecca was flying a flaming organ and dealing out lightning."

"That's no dream," my father said.

Mother said, "Now you forget about Becky and go back to sleep."

The part of my prayer that was answered started happening Saturday afternoon, when I was alone in the house. I stood in the doorway of my room, looking at my stuffed animals on the mantelpiece. Uncle George had mounted them and given them to me. There was a crow and raccoon on one side and a hawk and an abused screech owl on the other. One of Mother's cats had found dispute with the owl and left the hapless bird partially defeathered and cross-eyed. In the middle, between two clumps of dried broom sage, was the red Prince Albert smoking tobacco can I kept matches and rabbit tobacco in. Every once in a while, Shelly and Blue and I slipped off and sinned; we smoked the rabbitweed rolled in brown sack paper out behind the barn or down at Tucker's Spring below the church.

Through the open sash of my window I could see Judge Webster's observatory, and rain clouds festering. The low rumblings in the distance brought to my mind the image of Aunt Rebecca charioting the flaming organ and dispensing thunderous authority. It was then that God started answering my prayer. My eye was drawn to the middle of the mantel, where my rabbit tobacco can was, and then to the oval spot where the prince stood. The red can began acting

upon me like a magnet, extracting my fears, pulling them straight out of me like iron filings across a sheet of paper.

God was moving, burning open the way.

Then I knew exactly what I must do. It wasn't anything I thought up. It was simply that, at that given moment, a curtain was drawn and the way was there: *I would pray God into the Prince Albert can.*

I rushed the can to the bathroom, shook the rabbit tobacco leaves into the commode, scooped slivers of Mother's best hand soap into the cavity, watered it down, capped it tight and sloshed it around until suds oozed from the lid, then dumped water and foam into the commode and flushed it down, rabbit tobacco and all, in one gulp. I rinsed the Prince Albert can clean, dried it with a clean cloth, and laid it purified at the head of my bed.

In the prayer business I had been a complete failure. Except for once. That was the time Blue and Shelly and I set out to find the chest of Civil War gold buried somewhere on a fork of Uncle George's land, where Snake Creek runs into the river. The raft we made was too big for the creek; so Blue and I, in the sanctuary of our hayloft, fell to our knees, praying fervently for rain, and it did rain. It had rained solid for a week when we hopped aboard, cut loose, and went swirling away. Downstream around the first bend, we piled into a beaver dam and

jammed fast. We hopped off and hitched a ride home on a cotton wagon. The waters rose treacherously and washed our raft afloat again, I'm sure, and swept the small craft downcreek into the river and away forever. It was the worst flood in Alabama history.

This prayer would have to be different.

This time I wouldn't be asking God to move a part of His creation in my favor, like the rain or like trying to pray a .22 rifle out of the Sears Roebuck catalogue and under our Christmas tree. I would be asking God to move the whole Everywhereness of Himself, His whole everlasting Godself in one piece.

With God all things are possible, Aunt Rebecca had said. And so it was. I was surprised at the simplicity of it all. I lugged up from downstairs our voluminous family Bible and Mother's candelabrum. I placed the Bible, open, on the edge of my bed and the brass candleholder on the side bureau, in the middle of the mirror and in line with the Bible. Flush against the top seam of the Bible and in line with the center candle in the candelabrum, I set the Prince Albert can. Then I went to open the window. The clouds were bundling up in windrows. I could smell it was going to rain. I loosed the tiebacks, and the side curtains fell together and turned the room blue. I used one of my rabbit tobacco matches to light the candles and then knelt down on the Bible side of my bed to pray. I knitted my fingers, closed my eyes, and put my knuckles under my chin.

Across the back pasture, Uncle George was revving up his airplane motor. He'd throttle the De Havilland up a couple of times and let her idle. Uncle George had been a hero in the First World War and secretly hoped there would be a second, so he could get in it. Numerous times, secure between Uncle George's knees, I had flown in the wonderful ship and, holding the magic stick, had guided the De Havilland with my own hands. I wondered if finding God for Aunt Rebecca could be as exciting and dangerous as war. Blue would have understood my kneeling down in prayer. We had prayed together for just about everything. But the thought of Uncle George or Shelly walking in on me all hunkered down like a scared monkey sent a little shower of shame over me. 有污损

Now was the time.

"God . . . ," I said into the empty room. Uncle George throttled the De Havilland wide open. I opened my eyes.

I had forgotten to open the lid on the can so God could get in. I pressed open the lid—then squawked when I saw myself in the mirror. The candelabrum on the bureau had cast itself in the mirror behind me and multiplied itself a million times, and in the middle of the two avenues of light my severed head hovered over the Bible.

I clamped my eyes shut.

"God."

I waited for the message to reach Him.

"God."

It was not working. I opened my eyes and thumbed back a clump of Bible pages and pointed down for some magic help from God's word.

It said:

"And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah."

This was not it. I moved my finger across to the opposite page. It said: "And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I."

This was it.

I closed my eyes again and prayed aloud.

"God, here I am too, and Aunt Rebecca's not going to wait on you or nobody."

I kept my eyes closed and held on to both sides of the huge Bible and swayed back and forth.

"Will you please . . ."

The way was opening up.

"Please . . ." I swayed.

It was like darkness making way for the sun.

"Please . . ."

My prayer was being answered.

"Will you get in the can?"

There was a holy silence. I waited. The clock downstairs struck the half hour, held its breath,

swallowed, then resumed its tocking. Then God said, matter-of-factly:

"Yes." His voice filled the room.

Uncle George throttled the airplane up again and let her die with a pop.

"When?" I asked God.

"Now, if you like," God said pleasantly.

"Will you say 'Now' when you get all the way inside?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," God answered. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," I breathed. A drop of sweat ruptured and ran down my forehead and off the end of my nose.

Then God said:

"Now."

That was it.

I opened my eyes and slapped the Prince Albert can shut. I hurried to the window, pulled back the curtains for more light, and got some slingshot rubbers—narrow bands I'd scissored from an old inner tube—and wrapped God tightly around and around. Then I blew out the candles and put God in my pocket.

Granny, what a feeling! I was amazed at my power of release. It felt like the time Shelly and I got into Mother's sherry. Leaving the Bible on my bed, I went downstairs and ate a breast of cold chicken, a drumstick, two biscuits, a bowl of greens, and a glob of peach cobbler, and drank a glass of iced tea.