

son
of the
morning
JOYCE CAROL
OATES

son of

the morning

A NOVEL

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BOOK ONE

the incarnation

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Whisper unto my soul, *I am thy salvation*.

You have promised that there shall be time no longer. Yet there is nothing but time in the desolation of my soul. A vast Sahara of time surrounds me, and though the frightful minutes pleat when I manage to slip into unconsciousness, the release is so brief, so teasing, that to wake once more to my life is a horror. Am I a brother to anyone in this agony, I ask myself; is it Your design that I awaken to such a brotherhood . . . ? But I don't want mankind, nor do I want the happiness of the individual without mankind: I want only You.

There shall be time no longer, yet we are deep in time, and of it; and it courses through us like the secret bright unfathomable blood through our bodies, bearing us along despite our childlike ignorance of its power.

Is this a revelation, I ask myself. Or an aspect of my punishment.

Save me, O God, by Thy name, and judge me by Thy strength and not by my weakness. If I have come to life again it is in obedience to the simple laws governing the sun, the moon, and

the earth; it is not of my doing. My strength is like that of the mist-green reeds that do nothing but bend, with alacrity and cunning, as the violent winds pass over. Or do I think of the delicate young buds of peaches, or the hair-nests of the smallest of the sparrows. I think of the improbable precision of the eye: the perfection of the iris, the pupil, the mirroring brain. I think of my mother's broken body and of my father's swarthy beauty and of my own soul, which drains away in time, minute after minute, even as I compose my desperate prayer to You.

■ ■ ■

It happened that Ashton Vickery one weatherless day thirty-seven years ago climbed the remains of an old windmill on his uncle's property, a .22 rifle under one arm, a shotgun under the other. He was twenty-three years old at the time: long-boned, supple, his pale blue gaze coolly Nordic, set for distances.

"Come along, come along, little bastards, come along, I got all morning, *I'm* not in no hurry."

Atop the partly rotted tower he stood for a while, shading his eyes. Where were they? In which direction? He unlocked the safety catch on the rifle, he unlocked the safety catch on the shotgun. Both guns were his; he had owned them for years. Very finely were they oiled. It was a pleasure for him to caress them, to draw his cheek lightly along the stock of the rifle, to raise the heavy barrels of the shotgun and take aim.

Through the scope he sighted the butchered chickens in the irrigation ditch. His finger hesitated, he felt a queer jolt of pleasure, wishing suddenly to pull the trigger: to tug it back toward him. The well-developed muscles in his shoulders and arms tensed. His mouth drew into its customary grimace — the corners downturned, the upper lip shortened, haughty and imperious. Ashton was a good-looking young man and very much aware of it. He had the Vickerys' prominent cheekbones, their thick unruly eyebrows and hard, square chin; by the age of sixteen he had been taller than his father. His eyes resembled his mother's

and were as thickly lashed. Softly he crooned to himself, drawing his gaze along the uneven horizon, in no hurry. "Come along, come along and show yourselves. Come *along* now."

He laid the shotgun carefully at his feet and cradled the rifle in his arms. It was light, lithe, a marvel to hold; a beautiful instrument. Quickly it leaped to his shoulder; quickly it arranged itself to fire. His left arm extended, his right arm crooked: just so! He leaned his face against it, closing one eye. Like this. Yes. Pivoting at the waist, Ashton Vickery could, by moving the barrel as slowly as possible, contain all of the landscape; all of the visible world. He sighted it along the barrel and all was well.

"Where are you hiding? It won't do no good. I can wait. I ain't half so hungry as you — I can wait."

To the north, Mt. Ayr dissolved upward in a haze of cloud; the powerful scope could bring it no closer. Closer in, farmland belonging to Prestons and Bells and Vickerys lay perfectly still, greening wheat and oats and barley, and a field of straight young corn, and a sparse woods of beech and oak. The air was fresh, a little chill. Ashton would have liked it cooler: would have liked to see his breath turn to steam. He hated being overwarm. It pleased him that the sky was overcast and that clouds moved above in sluggish layers, clotted, the color and consistency of skim milk. No sun. Only a peculiar glowering light that was like moonlight, like mist. A blank neutrality in which only a few insects sang, and very few birds. Like sleep, it was; like the dreamless sleep of the depths of the night. Perhaps he was sleeping? — dreaming? The foliage magnified in the rifle's scope and the glimmering surface of the river some distance away and the pallid, dissolving Chautauqua Mountains and the oppressive sky itself (which looked, for a moment, like a soiled concrete floor!) were mesmerizing. Ashton found himself smiling a foolish mindless smile, drawn through the scope and into the vast silence, thinking that this had happened before: many times: and would happen many times again.

But this is false: Ashton Vickery did not really think.

He was not accustomed to thinking, for what was the need?

The rifle was an extension of his arms and shoulders and eyes and soul, as everything he touched was an extension of himself. He did not think, he tasted. He tasted and chewed and swallowed. He was quite content with himself. (Since it had been decided that he would enter into a partnership with his Uncle Ewell, buying a one-third interest in his uncle's general store in Marsena, since it was settled once and for all that he not only could not emulate his father — who had an M.D. degree from the state university — but *would not*, there was peace in the Vickery household. But then, Ashton had always been at peace with himself.) It did not surprise him that women found him attractive, for he found himself attractive when he paused to contemplate himself. Tall, rangy, arrogant, cavalier, he moved about Marsena and the surrounding countryside with an unflinching confidence in his own worth. Had he not, after all, the power to kill? — as he chose? — to kill with grace, with cunning, with mercy or without? The secret of his manhood (which he could not have articulated) lay in his ability to destroy, his willingness to kill, the zeal with which he snatched up his guns. He had first fired a rifle at the age of five, and at the age of six he had killed for the first time. The creature had been a full-grown hare. Ashton was never to forget the amazing kick of the rifle, the cracking sound, the *certainly* — he was never to forget the astonishing life — the livingness — of the rifle as the trigger was pulled and the bullet shot to its mark. The death leap of the hare had been extraordinary; it had torn from the child a gasp of startled recognition. The *livingness* of the rifle and the bullet and the death spasm and his own bright quickening blood: never would he forget.

Patient and tender with the morning, so fond of himself he stroked his own stubbly jaw, and considered: "Ashton can wait. Ashton has plenty of time." Half-mindedly he reached in his shirt pocket for a package of chewing tobacco and bit off a thumb-sized amount and began to chew it placidly, the tip of his nose moving with the pleasurable rhythm. He hoped the morning sun would not burn off the haze; his only prayer was that the still,

blank neutrality of the present moment might be extended until he had accomplished what he'd set out to do.

"Come along, you little motherfuckers," he said softly.

It would have been well for them had they been able to run free about the countryside with their jaws stretched wide, like deepwater fish, gobbling up all the life they encountered. They were hungry. It was hunger, that enormous heartbeat. The throb, the palpitation, the lust was for food dampened and spiced by blood. In one barnyard they had cornered a dozen or more chickens and rushed upon them yipping with amazed delight, tearing at their throats — they ripped off the silly squawking heads even where there was no need, no time to linger and eat. A terrified Bantam rooster, all burnished-orange and red feathers, flew drunkenly to the top of a tool shed where none of them could leap; his screams penetrated the morning haze for miles. What a noise! What a commotion! Feathers, blood, flapping wings, scrawny scaly reptilian feet whose claws were as nothing against *theirs*. By the time the human inhabitants were shouting, by the time the first of the gunshots sounded, they were far away and safe, their snouts blood-darkened.

Then again they were hungry, panting with hunger. Where did the hours go? — they trotted in one direction and then wheeled about, panicked by a certain odor; their leader was a ragged German shepherd whose tail had been chopped off close to his rump many years ago, and it was his wisdom to run half blind, his nose close to the ground.

The pack was most commonly sighted along the Alder River, though it was once seen by Carlson Bell as far away as Rockland, north of the city, that is — eight, nine, ten, possibly eleven wild dogs trotting across the paved highway, their fur wild and filthy and matted with burrs, their ears torn, scrawny tails carried low. Carlson braked his pickup truck and skidded to a noisy stop on the gravelly shoulder of the road and reached for his rifle — which was always in the truck with him, for safety's sake — and began shooting before he'd had time, even, to shut off the igni-

tion. He leaped from the truck and ran after them and it was incredible, he claimed afterward, how *fast* they got away; and how sinister it was that they didn't bark or yelp or even appear to take special notice of him: just ran like crazy along a dried-up ditch of cattails and marsh grasses and thistle until by instinct or cunning they came to exactly the right place to jump free of the ditch, behind a screen of dwarf hazels, and then they were in that big swampy woods that goes on for acres on both sides of the old Marsena Road, all mosquitoes and snakes and rot and darkness: and naturally no sane man would follow.

Carlson Bell had fired a few shots after them, not in anger so much as in exclamation. "You see! Here I am!"

But though small posses were formed from time to time, mainly of boys, and though Old Man Arkin prowled out back of his barns all hours of the early morning muttering to himself, his shotgun ready to fire (for the pack had killed not only half his hen coop but had, for the sheer pleasure of it, torn out the throats of all but the strongest of his sheep, and killed his aged half-blind collie — whose piteous yelps Arkin believed he would hear the rest of his life — and in a frenzy of high spirits even dug and threshed in his daughter-in-law's kitchen garden a few yards from the back door), still the wild dogs ran free and struck where they would.

Carlson Bell claimed there were nearly a dozen of them, Ewell Vickery claimed there were even more — and one of them he recognized. It was a mongrel retriever that had once belonged to Harley Revere but must have run off when the family moved to town, a mean vicious stupid creature that had always acted a little wolfish so it was no wonder the Reveres left it behind — but now it had gone wild, now it was a killer. What if everyone drove their dogs off and let them go wild as coyotes! — no one would be safe. Thaddeus Vickery had never sighted the pack but had treated the nine-year-old Belding boy for bites on both forearms and on his right leg (a savage wound — looked like a shark bite, Thaddeus said) after the child had been surprised by the dogs on the Alder River bank — he and his brothers were fishing and when the

dogs appeared they ran toward home and, unprovoked, the dogs chased them, setting up a terrific howling and yipping and barking — a horror, a nightmare — but thank God the boys weren't killed — thank God no one had been killed so far. It was a pity, Dr. Vickery said, but absolutely necessary that the boy receive rabies shots; he knew how they hurt but the risk was too great: the dogs might very well be maddened.

The German shepherd, the mongrel retriever, a cocklebur-covered speciesless hound, a rat-sized stunted creature that was probably a coyote. . . . Surprised at their kill, they were sporty and looked like laughter; their stained mouths appeared to be stretched wide in grins, in human grins. They pranced about, howling at the moon like legendary beasts. They scrambled up the sides of ravines and caught pheasants in their jaws, and rabbits, and even flying squirrels; and of course river rats and muskrats, and groundhogs that had wandered too far from their holes. They hunted in the foothills of the mountains where there were no real roads, only overgrown trails; shrewdly they kept their distance from mankind; then suddenly and unreasonably they appeared at four in the morning in someone's barnyard or in the vacant lot behind the white frame Church of the Nazarene where there'd been a fund-raising picnic the day before and where food had been dropped in the grass — or they appeared one Sunday at dusk, out of nowhere, to frighten children playing at a smoldering refuse dump near a trailer village along the river. They were urchins, they were Apaches, they were savage, and savage-sad, their bellies permanently stiffened with mud, their ears laid back against hard mean skulls. Were they dogs, Thaddeus Vickery wondered, or merely stomachs. Hadn't they become nothing but a certain length of guts about which the animal skeleton and flesh moved, frantic with desire . . . ? Howling, whining, whimpering, snarling, deep-bodied growling, panting, yelping, baying, cries very nearly like a flicker's, an uncanny *ostinato* of grieved rhythm, a melody of blunt pain: eyes, brains, and teeth forever in the service of guts.

When they were first sighted a year before, there had been

only three or four of them, and the farmer who came upon them huddled against the side of his barn the morning after a snow-storm — thirty below zero it was, that morning — had not the heart or the wisdom to kill them, but drove them away instead, shouting at them and waving a pitchfork. At that time they hadn't killed very much — there were no tales of their raids — they were garbage scroungers mainly, weakened by hunger, their ribs showing, worm-ridden, brain-damaged, tongues lolling in their steamy mouths. The farmer had taken pity on them and driven them away and it wasn't until the next spring when the pack had grown in size and in meanness that he realized his mistake.

Hunting for deer in the autumn with his friends, Ashton Vickery, the doctor's only son, came upon one of their number lying in a pool of dried blood, and a few yards away were the remains of a doe — probably gut-shot by a local hunter and left to stagger away through the woods to die, and so the dogs had come upon it and killed it and devoured most of it, and somehow this particular dog — part shepherd, part hound — had angered the others and they had turned on him and torn out his throat and much of his belly. Seeing that ants were at work on the carcass, Ashton did not linger; but he felt at that time a curious sense of rage, almost a sense of — could it be injustice — of something gone wrong, and very ugly it was, and should be righted. "I'd like to get them dogs," Ashton said to his friends. "Let's go'n get them dogs — what d'you say to that?"

But his friends didn't take him up on it; anyway, they said, how would you know where to hunt them? They're most likely far gone from here.

Then one morning in his uncle's general store in Marsena — a red brick building eighty years old that housed the only barber-shop for twenty-five miles and the Marsena post office — Ashton's uncle Ewell Vickery complained bitterly to him about some dogs that had broken into his wife's hen-house the night before and killed seventeen hens, Rhode Island reds that were especially good for laying eggs, and the worst of it was the terrible mess the

dogs had made — tossing the chickens around, flinging blood everywhere, scattering feathers to the tops of the trees. No, the *worst* of it was, Ashton's uncle said passionately, that it had taken place so fast. And without much noise except for the hens' squawking.

"Why, that's a real shame," Ashton said, blinking. It was a surprise to him for some reason that the dogs had dared come so close to *him*.

Ewell complained about the fact that the dogs had been running wild now for months and the county hadn't done anything about it, wasn't there a sheriff's posse or a committee or something a while ago, why was everyone so lazy, why didn't anyone show responsibility . . . ? One of the McCord boys claimed to have winged a strange dog with his .22 but the dog was never found; must have run away on three legs. Apart from that, nobody had done anything.

Maybe the dogs were too shrewd to be cornered, Ewell said. Maybe they weren't dogs, but devils, and nobody human could kill them.

Ashton laughed loudly. "What the hell — ?"

"There's got to be some explanation for why nobody's killed them yet or even chased them away," Ewell said.

Ashton shook his head in exasperation. "Shit," he said, "you leave it to me. Take me my guns and set up a blind and wipe 'em all out. Leave it to *me*. . . . Hey," he said, leaning across the counter and extending his hand to his uncle, "you want to place a bet on it? You want to bet on it? One hundred bucks, old man, how's that? One hundred bucks says I can't do it — ? C'mon and shake my hand and it's a bet!"

His uncle waved him away. He seemed rather embarrassed.

"Not one *hundred* bucks," he said, frowning.

"Seventy-five, then! C'mon, you got the cash! C'mon!"

Ewell Vickery stared at the floor and his lips moved as if in a silent prayer and his nephew couldn't help but laugh, it was such a legend around Marsena that Ewell was a miser — getting to be

a silly stingy old maid, in fact, with (so it was rumored: Ashton himself helped the rumor along) a fishing tackle box stuffed with bills beneath his and his wife's sagging bed, and a savings account up in Yewville of who knows how much? — thousands, maybe tens of thousands! — yet he stood there, skinny in the chest and arms and legs and paunchy in the stomach, in washed-out overalls and a flannel shirt, the blue Vickery eyes gone all milky and squinting in his face, a man no more than five years older than Ashton's father Thaddeus — which would make him about fifty-two — yet looking shriveled and faded-out and maybe ten years older. It was the miserliness, Ashton thought; he wished he could cure his uncle of it.

"C'mon, old man," Ashton fairly sang, "give me a hand on it! Seventy-five bucks. It ain't like I was asking for a bigger share of your profits, right? Now *that* I don't look to expect."

"It might maybe be dangerous for you —"

"Not *me*. Not me and a bunch of scrawny pups."

"It might maybe —"

"*Might maybe*," Ashton said in his uncle's mournful voice, irritated by the old man's language — for it often annoyed the young man that his family — well, not his family but his relatives — the Vickery and Sayer people spread out through most of the county — were so old-fashioned. Even the word *they* used ("old-timey") upset and amused him. "Look: you going to shake on the bet or back down? Talkin' about them miserable little *buggers* like they're the Devil himself or something nobody can touch —"

"Watch your mouth, boy: what if there was a customer in here?"

"There ain't any customer in here, not that I can see," Ashton said with an impatient smile, "and what's wrong with calling them *buggers* if that's what they are? They killed your goddam chickens, didn't they? I don't see no point to talking about them as if they were something so special that nobody could touch — I can't halfway tolerate that kind of a mentality." Ashton felt obscurely threatened and even insulted and it seemed to him that

his uncle was partly to blame. But he managed to retain his smile. "If I kill them bastards I ain't gonna haul my ass around the countryside without some remuneration. Fifty bucks?"

"Fifty bucks what?"

"As a bet. Between you and me. You are saying I can't get them and I'm saying I *can*. C'mon, Uncle Ewell, you gonna shake my hand?"

"You don't have any fifty bucks that I know of," Ewell said stullenly.

All things must be fulfilled . . . consequently they shook hands, and that evening Ashton whistled cheerfully as he cleaned and oiled his guns, and when his sister Elsa asked him was he going hunting next day, and his mother's big frame filled the doorway of the shed and *she* asked him was he going to take a holiday from the store again and anger his uncle again, Ashton said only that he was taking a day off with his uncle's permission and it was none of their business what he did. "I wouldn't halfway mind, though, if one of you sweethearts packed me a nice lunch," he said.

They both snorted with laughter, but in a few minutes Elsa returned, honey-haired sweet-faced fifteen-year-old Elsa, with the breasts and hips of a full-grown woman ("I pray God she won't grow to be *my* size," Mrs. Vickery said often), leaning in the doorway to tease him. "How far are you going? Who's going with you? Them silly old friends of yours? Just a bunch of overgrown boys, Mamma says; playing around in the woods. You going after a bear maybe? A grizzly? You going after some big game? — maybe out in our woods?"

"Honey," Ashton said, "I'll bring you back the makings for a fur outfit: coat and hat and muff. Dress you up just fine for the winter."

She laughed scornfully but nevertheless made him a delicious lunch of roast beef sandwiches on rye bread, and almond and orange-peel brownies, and a thermos of coffee pale with cream. "This should fuel you up for as far as you're going," she said,

setting it on the kitchen table that night for him to take in the morning.

"I thank you, sister," Ashton said with mock formality.

"I surely do thank you," he said, eating the last of the brownies atop the rotted tower.

He drank half the coffee, cold, as he liked it, and saved the rest for later, and bit off another plug of tobacco, and moved a few inches so that he was in the shade, and yawned contentedly, studying the countryside. Did he see its beauty, did he take note of the birds' morning cries? — a trio of kingfishers by the river, rattling at one another; a jay singing the gentler of its songs, liquidly and breathless; a cowbird whistling in a pasture somewhere near. He smelled the wet grass, he filled his lungs with the scent of wet clover. For a half hour he was neither awake nor asleep, in a kind of alert doze, his eyelids lowered partway, the movement of his jaws slowing but never quite coming to a halt. In his mind's eye he saw the dogs. He saw them drawing nearer. Still, very still he was, not daring to move even in his dream; but he could not control the sudden leap of his blood. Ah, he saw them now, he *saw* them: deranged with hunger and therefore incautious, flea- and mite- and mosquito-bitten, worm-gnawed, eyes rolling a sick crazy yellow, tongues aslant, teeth gleaming inside black-gummed mouths. . . .

He waited.

He waited and it seemed to him that the fresh breeze that lifted from the river would urge the dogs to him; he sniffed the breeze and half fancied he could discern their scent upon it. He had no doubt they would turn up and that he would slaughter them one by one. It would come to pass sooner or later; if not today, then surely tomorrow; if not tomorrow, another day; wasn't Ashton Vickery a peculiar young man (so people said admiringly), brash and all-in-a-hurry sometimes, possessed of the slow cold methodical cunning of a hunting owl at other times?

He had oiled his guns and laid them atop the pine bureau in his room and he'd slept a fine, full, deep eight-hours sleep, which