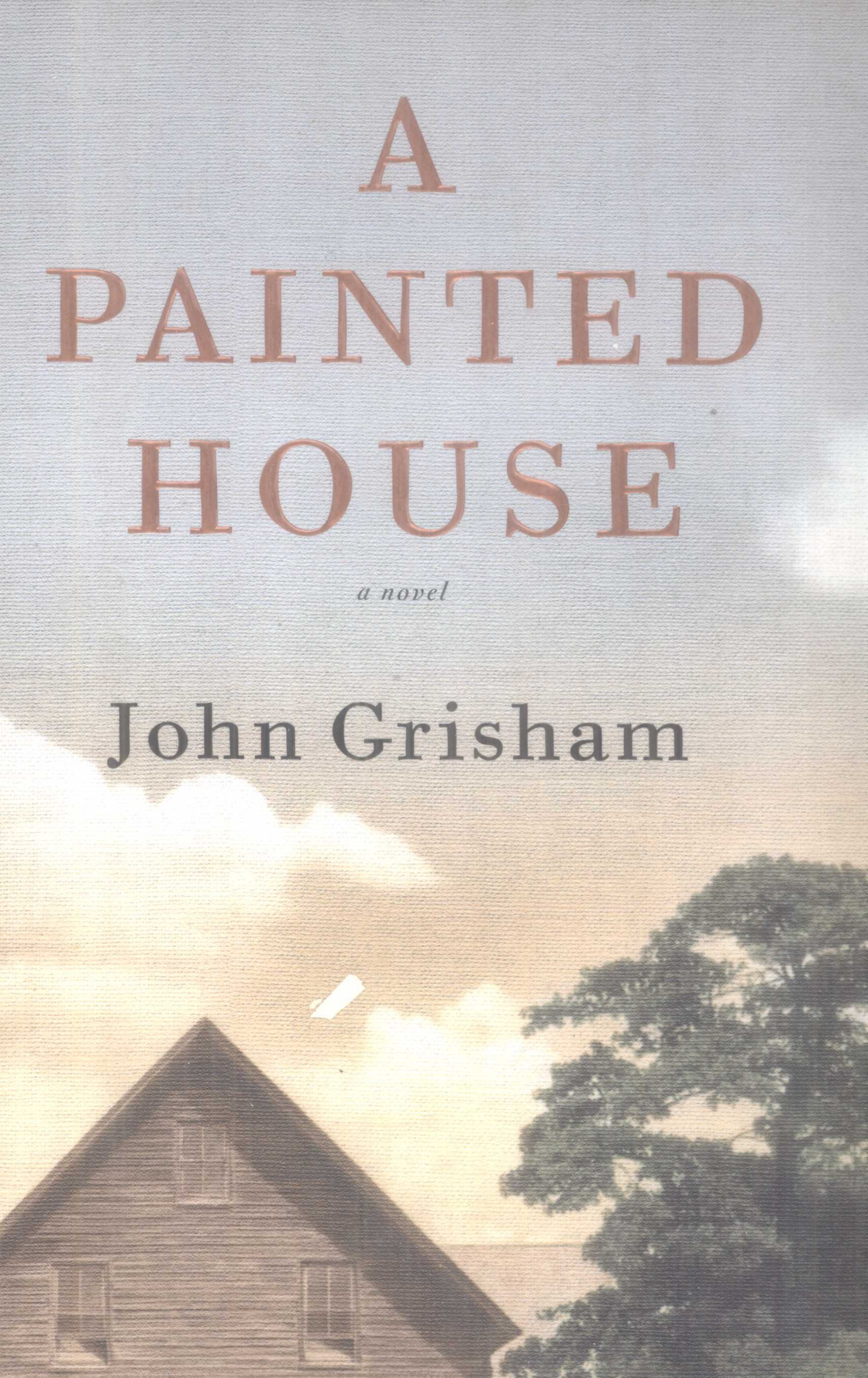
A PAINTED HOUSE

a novel

John Grisham



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For my parents, Weez and Big John,
with love and admiration

Chapter I

The hill people and the Mexicans arrived on the same day. It was a Wednesday, early in September 1952. The Cardinals were five games behind the Dodgers with three weeks to go, and the season looked hopeless. The cotton, however, was waist-high to my father, over my head, and he and my grandfather could be heard before supper whispering words that were seldom heard. It could be a "good crop."

They were farmers, hardworking men who embraced pessimism only when discussing the weather and the crops. There was too much sun, or too much rain, or the threat of floods in the lowlands, or the rising prices of seed and fertilizer, or the uncertainties of the markets. On the most perfect of days, my mother would quietly say to me, "Don't worry. The men will find something to worry about."

Pappy, my grandfather, was worried about the price for labor when we went searching for the hill people. They were paid for every hundred pounds of cotton they picked. The previous year, according to him, it was $1.50 per hundred. He'd already heard rumors that a farmer over in Lake City was offering $1.60.

This played heavily on his mind as we rode to town. He never talked when he drove, and this was because, according to my mother, not much of

a driver herself, he was afraid of motorized vehicles. His truck was a 1939 Ford, and with the exception of our old John Deere tractor, it was our sole means of transportation. This was no particular problem except when we drove to church and my mother and grandmother were forced to sit snugly together up front in their Sunday best while my father and I rode in the back, engulfed in dust. Modern sedans were scarce in rural Arkansas.

Pappy drove thirty-seven miles per hour. His theory was that every automobile had a speed at which it ran most efficiently, and through some vaguely defined method he had determined that his old truck should go thirty-seven. My mother said (to me) that it was ridiculous. She also said he and my father had once fought over whether the truck should go faster. But my father rarely drove it, and if I happened to be riding with him, he would level off at thirty-seven, out of respect for Pappy. My mother said she suspected he drove much faster when he was alone.

We turned onto Highway 135, and, as always, I watched Pappy carefully shift the gears—pressing slowly on the clutch, delicately prodding the stick shift on the steering column—until the truck reached its perfect speed. Then I leaned over to check the speedometer: thirty-seven. He smiled at me as if we both agreed that the truck belonged at that speed.

Highway 135 ran straight and flat through the farm country of the Arkansas Delta. On both sides as far as I could see, the fields were white with cotton. It was time for the harvest, a wonderful season for me because they turned out school for two months. For my grandfather, though, it was a time of endless worry.

. . .

On the right, at the Jordan place, we saw a group of Mexicans working in the field near the road. They were stooped at the waist, their cotton sacks draped behind them, their hands moving deftly through the stalks, tearing off the bolls. Pappy grunted. He didn't like the Jordans because

they were Methodists—and Cubs fans. Now that they already had workers in their fields, there was another reason to dislike them.

The distance from our farm to town was fewer than eight miles, but at thirty-seven miles an hour, the trip took twenty minutes. Always twenty minutes, even with little traffic. Pappy didn't believe in passing slower vehicles in front of him. Of course, he was usually the slow one. Near Black Oak, we caught up to a trailer filled to the top with snowy mounds of freshly picked cotton. A tarp covered the front half, and the Montgomery twins, who were my age, playfully bounced around in all that cotton until they saw us on the road below them. Then they stopped and waved. I waved back, but my grandfather did not. When he drove, he never waved or nodded at folks, and this was, my mother said, because he was afraid to take his hands from the wheel. She said people talked about him behind his back, saying he was rude and arrogant. Personally, I don't think he cared how the gossip ran.

We followed the Montgomery trailer until it turned at the cotton gin. It was pulled by their old Massey Harris tractor, and driven by Frank, the eldest Montgomery boy, who had dropped out of school in the fifth grade and was considered by everyone at church to be headed for serious trouble.

Highway 135 became Main Street for the short stretch it took to negotiate Black Oak. We passed the Black Oak Baptist Church, one of the few times we'd pass without stopping for some type of service. Every store, shop, business, church, even the school, faced Main Street, and on Saturdays the traffic inched along, bumper to bumper, as the country folks flocked to town for their weekly shopping. But it was Wednesday, and when we got into town, we parked in front of Pop and Pearl Watson's grocery store on Main.

I waited on the sidewalk until my grandfather nodded in the direction of the store. That was my cue to go inside and purchase a Tootsie Roll, on credit. It only cost a penny, but it was not a foregone conclusion that I would get one every trip to town. Occasionally, he wouldn't nod, but I

would enter the store anyway and loiter around the cash register long enough for Pearl to sneak me one, which always came with strict instructions not to tell my grandfather. She was afraid of him. Eli Chandler was a poor man, but he was intensely proud. He would starve to death before he took free food, which, on his list, included Tootsie Rolls. He would've beaten me with a stick if he knew I had accepted a piece of candy, so Pearl Watson had no trouble swearing me to secrecy.

But this time I got the nod. As always, Pearl was dusting the counter when I entered and gave her a stiff hug. Then I grabbed a Tootsie Roll from the jar next to the cash register. I signed the charge slip with great flair, and Pearl inspected my penmanship. "It's getting better, Luke," she said.

"Not bad for a seven-year-old," I said. Because of my mother, I had been practicing my name in cursive writing for two years. "Where's Pop?" I asked. They were the only adults I knew who insisted I call them by their "first" names, but only in the store when no one else was listening. If a customer walked in, then it was suddenly Mr. and Mrs. Watson. I told no one but my mother this, and she told me she was certain no other child held such privilege.

"In the back, putting up stock," Pearl said. "Where's your grandfather?"

It was Pearl's calling in life to monitor the movements of the town's population, so any question was usually answered with another.

"The Tea Shoppe, checking on the Mexicans. Can I go back there?" I was determined to outquestion her.

"Better not. Y'all using hill people, too?"

"If we can find them. Eli says they don't come down like they used to. He also thinks they're all half crazy. Where's Champ?" Champ was the store's ancient beagle, which never left Pop's side.

Pearl grinned whenever I called my grandfather by his first name. She was about to ask me a question when the small bell clanged as

the door opened and closed. A genuine Mexican walked in, alone and timid, as they all seemed to be at first. Pearl nodded politely at the new customer.

I shouted, *"Buenos días, señor!"*

The Mexican grinned and said sheepishly, *"Buenos días,"* before disappearing into the back of the store.

"They're good people," Pearl said under her breath, as if the Mexican spoke English and might be offended by something nice she said. I bit into my Tootsie Roll and chewed it slowly while rewrapping and pocketing the other half.

"Eli's worried about payin' them too much," I said. With a customer in the store, Pearl was suddenly busy again, dusting and straightening around the only cash register.

"Eli worries about everything," she said.

"He's a farmer."

"Are you going to be a farmer?"

"No ma'am. A baseball player."

"For the Cardinals?"

"Of course."

Pearl hummed for a bit while I waited for the Mexican. I had some more Spanish I was anxious to try.

The old wooden shelves were bursting with fresh groceries. I loved the store during picking season because Pop filled it from floor to ceiling. The crops were coming in, and money was changing hands.

Pappy opened the door just wide enough to stick his head in. "Let's go," he said; then, "Howdy, Pearl."

"Howdy, Eli," she said as she patted my head and sent me away.

"Where are the Mexicans?" I asked Pappy when we were outside.

"Should be in later this afternoon."

We got back in the truck and left town in the direction of Jonesboro, where my grandfather always found the hill people.

. . .

We parked on the shoulder of the highway, near the intersection of a gravel road. In Pappy's opinion, it was the best spot in the county to catch the hill people. I wasn't so sure. He'd been trying to hire some for a week with no results. We sat on the tailgate in the scorching sun in complete silence for half an hour before the first truck stopped. It was clean and had good tires. If we were lucky enough to find hill people, they would live with us for the next two months. We wanted folks who were neat, and the fact that this truck was much nicer than Pappy's was a good sign.

"Afternoon," Pappy said when the engine was turned off.

"Howdy," said the driver.

"Where y'all from?" asked Pappy.

"Up north of Hardy."

With no traffic around, my grandfather stood on the pavement, a pleasant expression on his face, taking in the truck and its contents. The driver and his wife sat in the cab with a small girl between them. Three large teenaged boys were napping in the back. Everyone appeared to be healthy and well dressed. I could tell Pappy wanted these people.

"Y'all lookin' for work?" he asked.

"Yep. Lookin' for Lloyd Crenshaw, somewhere west of Black Oak." My grandfather pointed this way and that, and they drove off. We watched them until they were out of sight.

He could've offered them more than Mr. Crenshaw was promising. Hill people were notorious for negotiating their labor. Last year, in the middle of the first picking on our place, the Fulbrights from Calico Rock disappeared one Sunday night and went to work for a farmer ten miles away.

But Pappy was not dishonest, nor did he want to start a bidding war.

We tossed a baseball along the edge of a cotton field, stopping whenever a truck approached.

My glove was a Rawlings that Santa had delivered the Christmas before. I slept with it nightly and oiled it weekly, and nothing was as dear to my soul.

My grandfather, who had taught me how to throw and catch and hit, didn't need a glove. His large, callused hands absorbed my throws without the slightest sting.

Though he was a quiet man who never bragged, Eli Chandler had been a legendary baseball player. At the age of seventeen, he had signed a contract with the Cardinals to play professional baseball. But the First War called him, and not long after he came home, his father died. Pappy had no choice but to become a farmer.

Pop Watson loved to tell me stories of how great Eli Chandler had been—how far he could hit a baseball, how hard he could throw one. "Probably the greatest ever from Arkansas," was Pop's assessment.

"Better than Dizzy Dean?" I would ask.

"Not even close," Pop would say, sighing.

When I relayed these stories to my mother, she always smiled and said, "Be careful. Pop tells tales."

Pappy, who was rubbing the baseball in his mammoth hands, cocked his head at the sound of a vehicle. Coming from the west was a truck with a trailer behind it. From a quarter of a mile away we could tell they were hill people. We walked to the shoulder of the road and waited as the driver downshifted, gears crunching and whining as he brought the truck to a stop.

I counted seven heads, five in the truck, two in the trailer.

"Howdy," the driver said slowly, sizing up my grandfather as we in turn quickly scrutinized them.

"Good afternoon," Pappy said, taking a step closer but still keeping his distance.

Tobacco juice lined the lower lip of the driver. This was an ominous sign. My mother thought most hill people were prone to bad hygiene and bad habits. Tobacco and alcohol were forbidden in our home. We were Baptists.

"Name's Spruill," he said.

"Eli Chandler. Nice to meet you. Y'all lookin' for work?"

"Yep."

"Where you from?"

"Eureka Springs."

The truck was almost as old as Pappy's, with slick tires and a cracked windshield and rusted fenders and what looked like faded blue paint under a layer of dust. A tier had been constructed above the bed, and it was crammed with cardboard boxes and burlap bags filled with supplies. Under it, on the floor of the bed, a mattress was wedged next to the cab. Two large boys stood on it, both staring blankly at me. Sitting on the tailgate, barefoot and shirtless, was a heavy young man with massive shoulders and a neck as thick as a stump. He spat tobacco juice between the truck and the trailer and seemed oblivious to Pappy and me. He swung his feet slowly, then spat again, never looking away from the asphalt beneath him.

"I'm lookin' for field hands," Pappy said.

"How much you payin'?" Mr. Spruill asked.

"One-sixty a hundred," Pappy said.

Mr. Spruill frowned and looked at the woman beside him. They mumbled something.

It was at this point in the ritual that quick decisions had to be made. We had to decide whether we wanted these people living with us. And they had to accept or reject our price.

"What kinda cotton?" Mr. Spruill asked.

"Stoneville," my grandfather said. "The bolls are ready. It'll be easy to pick." Mr. Spruill could look around him and see the bolls bursting. The

sun and soil and rains had cooperated so far. Pappy, of course, had been fretting over some dire rainfall prediction in the *Farmers' Almanac*.

"We got one-sixty last year," Mr. Spruill said.

I didn't care for money talk, so I ambled along the center line to inspect the trailer. The tires on the trailer were even balder than those on the truck. One was half flat from the load. It was a good thing that their journey was almost over.

Rising in one corner of the trailer, with her elbows resting on the plank siding, was a very pretty girl. She had dark hair pulled tightly behind her head and big brown eyes. She was younger than my mother, but certainly a lot older than I was, and I couldn't help but stare.

"What's your name?" she said.

"Luke," I said, kicking a rock. My cheeks were immediately warm. "What's yours?"

"Tally. How old are you?"

"Seven. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"How long you been ridin' in that trailer?"

"Day and a half."

She was barefoot, and her dress was dirty and very tight—tight all the way to her knees. This was the first time I remember really examining a girl. She watched me with a knowing smile. A kid sat on a crate next to her with his back to me, and he slowly turned around and looked at me as if I weren't there. He had green eyes and a long forehead covered with sticky black hair. His left arm appeared to be useless.

"This is Trot," she said. "He ain't right."

"Nice to meet you, Trot," I said, but his eyes looked away. He acted as if he hadn't heard me.

"How old is he?" I asked her.

"Twelve. He's a cripple."

Trot turned abruptly to face a corner, his bad arm flopping lifelessly. My friend Dewayne said that hill people married their cousins and that's why there were so many defects in their families.

Tally appeared to be perfect, though. She gazed thoughtfully across the cotton fields, and I admired her dirty dress once again.

I knew my grandfather and Mr. Spruill had come to terms because Mr. Spruill started his truck. I walked past the trailer, past the man on the tailgate who was briefly awake but still staring at the pavement, and stood beside Pappy. "Nine miles that way, take a left by a burned-out barn, then six more miles to the St. Francis River. We're the first farm past the river on your left."

"Bottomland?" Mr. Spruill asked, as if he were being sent into a swamp.

"Some of it is, but it's good land."

Mr. Spruill glanced at his wife again, then looked back at us. "Where do we set up?"

"You'll see a shady spot in the back, next to the silo. That's the best place."

We watched them drive away, the gears rattling, the tires wobbling, crates and boxes and pots bouncing along.

"You don't like them, do you?" I asked.

"They're good folks. They're just different."

"I guess we're lucky to have them, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are."

More field hands meant less cotton for me to pick. For the next month I would go to the fields at sunrise, drape a nine-foot cotton sack over my shoulder, and stare for a moment at an endless row of cotton, the stalks taller than I was, then plunge into them, lost as far as anyone could tell. And I would pick cotton, tearing the fluffy bolls from the stalks at a steady pace, stuffing them into the heavy sack, afraid to look down the row

and be reminded of how endless it was, afraid to slow down because someone would notice. My fingers would bleed, my neck would burn, my back would hurt.

Yes, I wanted lots of help in the fields. Lots of hill people, lots of Mexicans.