

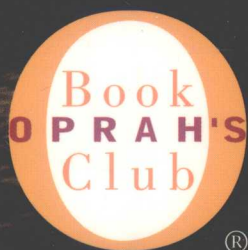
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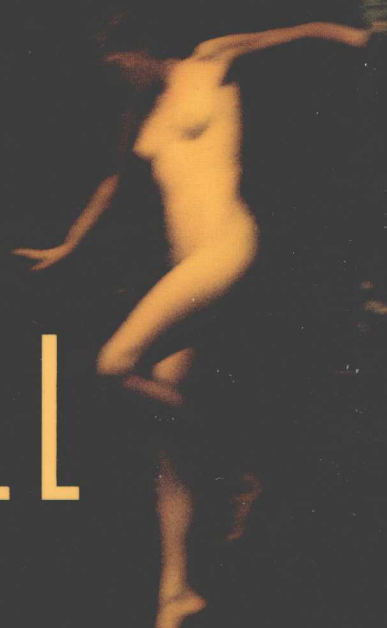
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BACKROADS

A NOVEL



TAWNI O'DELL



back roads

Tawni O'Dell

VIKING

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back roads



75 years

V I K I N G

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chapter I

All those times me and Skip tried to kill his little brother, Donny, were just for fun. I keep telling the deputies this, and they keep picking up their Styrofoam cups of coffee and walking away only to return a few seconds later and heave their fat butt cheeks onto the metal-topped table in front of me and flash me sad, weary stares that would be almost tender if they weren't filled with so much hatred. They tell me they don't care about Skip and Donny. They're not interested in stuff I did when I was a kid. I'm twenty years old now. I will be TRIED AS AN ADULT. The words come out of their mouths in Skoal-flavored capital letters and hover against the fluorescent glare of the room. I reach out to touch them but before I can, they melt away again and one of the deputies slaps down my hands stained the color of a dead rose. They won't let me wash them.

Tawni O'Dell

They want to know about the woman. I laugh. Which woman? My life is lousy with women. All ages, shapes, sizes, and levels of purity.

"The dead woman in the abandoned mining office behind the railroad tracks," one of them says, making a face like he might puke.

I close my eyes and picture it. The roof with gaping holes. The rotting floorboards scattered with broken window glass, rusted screws and bolts, and pieces of flattened iron that used to be part of something bigger a long time ago. When I finally took her there, she didn't ask me to sweep it out. She said she didn't want to change anything about it because she knew it was a special place for me. She said she loved the calm of decay and desertion that reigned there. She liked art and sometimes the way she talked sounded like a painting.

Rage starts building inside me, nicely and neatly, like a perfect pyramid of sticks being piled up for a fire. My hands start shaking, and I sit on them so the police won't see.

"Me and Skip used the mining office for our secret hideout," I answer, smiling, while the blaze roars to life inside me. Soon I will be nothing but a black skeleton of ash that the slightest touch will cause to crumble. But no one on the outside will know.

The deputies shake their heads and groan and snort at the mention of Skip. One of them kicks a folding chair across the room. Another one says, "The kid's in shock." The other one says, "We're not going to get anything RELEVANT or COHERENT out of him tonight." I reach for those words too and this time I get the side of my head smacked instead of my sticky hands.

"You better start talking," the sheriff says, pausing to spit a brown bullet of chew into an empty coffee can before adding, "son," to his suggestion.

He's the only one here I know. I remember him from my mom's

trial two years ago. He testified that she gave herself up willingly after shooting my dad. He smells like a wet couch.

I do start talking but all that comes out is the same stuff about me and Skip again, how we used to spend hours in the old mining office eating bologna sandwiches and hatching our plans against Donny. We called it secret even though Donny knew where we were. It was secret because he couldn't get to it. He was too little to make it up the hill and through the vicious undergrowth surrounding the place like nature's barbed wire.

We came up with some great ones. Once we bent down a birch sapling and anchored it to the ground with a tent stake and tied a rope loop to it, then lured Donny into the middle with a shiny foil-wrapped HoHo. The tree was supposed to break free and fling him to his death by his ankles, but we realized too late we hadn't figured out a way to make it do this, and Donny just finished the HoHo and left.

Another time we spilled a bunch of marbles on the back porch steps and yelled at him to come outside, we had a box of Little Debbie Oatmeal Creme Pies for him. He came tearing out of the house but instead of slipping and falling on the marbles, he skidded to a stop and sat down and played with them.

Another time we promised him a box of Little Debbie Star Crunches if he would let us tie up his feet and hands and lay him on the railroad tracks but they were freight tracks—the same ones that run by the old mine—and we all knew a train hadn't been down them since before we were born. Donny got bored waiting to die and started wriggling toward home on his belly.

Our most ingenious plan was probably the time we put a pack of Dolly Madison Zingers beneath the open garage door, and we hid out with the garage door opener and clicked it on when Donny sat down to eat. He didn't notice or didn't care about the heavy door grinding down toward his skull. We watched in amazement, unable

to believe we were finally going to succeed, but I lost my nerve and ran and yanked him to safety. I saved him. I can't seem to make the police understand what this says about my character.

"That's the closest I ever came to murder," I explain, "up until my dad . . ."

The sheriff interrupts me. He doesn't want me to go into that again. He knows all about my mom and dad. Everybody does. It was in the papers and all over TV.

He was the one who was there, he reminds me. Not me. I wasn't even home. He was the one who walked in and found my mom with a bucket of red sudsy water calmly scrubbing the stains off her kitchen wallpaper while her husband lay a foot away stuck to the tile in a pool of tarry blood staring right at her with hunting trophy eyes. He was the one who found my baby sister huddled in one of the doghouses with vomit all over her because she had cried so hard she made herself throw up; and Jody never even liked Dad. He was the one who watched Dad get zipped into a body bag. Not me. I never got to see him again. It was a closed casket funeral. I'm not sure why. Mom shot him in the back.

It's been almost two years now, the sheriff reminds me. No one cares anymore. It's not RELEVANT.

"Define relevant," I say.

The deputy who keeps hitting me grabs me by the front of my dad's camouflage hunting jacket and pulls me out of my chair. He has big sweat stains under his armpits. Eighty-five today. Hot for the first week of June.

"Tell us about the woman," he shouts at me.

I don't know why they won't say her name. I guess they're waiting for me to say it. For me to admit I knew her. Well, of course, I did. They know I did.

He drops me back into my chair, and TRIED AS AN ADULT appears in front of my eyes bright and buzzing like neon. I don't know

why I can't talk about her. Each time I open my mouth something about Skip comes out, and he's not even my friend anymore.

I always knew Skip would leave. His constant scheming never seemed a part of these quiet, wounded hills the way Donny's blind love of snack cakes did. Donny will be here forever. I see him every morning on my way to work at the Shop Rite waiting on the side of the road for the school bus like a stump.

"Skip's away at college now," I say.

I'm still staring at the words so I don't see the fist coming. I feel the warmth of blood gush down my chin before I feel the pain. Bright red droplets spatter onto the front of Dad's coat where her blood has already dried into a brown crust. They keep trying to make me take off the coat. People are always trying to make me.

I hear the sheriff say, "Jesus Christ, Bill, did you have to do that?"

I think the sheriff's up for reelection next year. I guess I'll be old enough to vote then if I want. VOTE AS AN ADULT. I think I would probably vote against him though. It's not that I dislike the guy, and I don't know anything about his stands on law enforcement issues so I can't say I disagree with him. My vote would be based solely on smell.

I touch my smashed nose and decide to tell them the TRUTH. Who's to blame. Who's at fault. Who should be locked up. I have nothing to be afraid of anymore. What will I be giving up by losing my freedom? What will the world be giving up by losing me?

I told her once I wasn't good at anything. She ran her thumb over my lips raw from kissing her and said survival was a talent.

chapter 2

When Skip left for college, he never even came around to say good-bye. I heard about it from Amber, who heard Donny talking about it on the bus.

He wrote me once during his whole first year at school. The next year I didn't think he was going to write at all, but he finally did and invited me to come visit him. We both knew I wouldn't go and that's why he asked. I read the letter a dozen times, then put it in my drawer with the Victoria's Secret catalogs I was always swiping from Amber's room.

I made the mistake the next day of telling Betty about the letter. Betty loved it when I talked about Skip. She especially loved hearing about the times we tried to kill Donny. I supposed I should have never told her that stuff in the first place, but she asked me to tell her

a pleasant childhood memory once and it was the only one that came to mind.

She wanted to know how Skip's letter made me feel and why I wouldn't consider going to visit him. I pulled my stare away from the window where blue-gray tree branches crawled against the white sky like the veins on Betty's thighs. I had tried not to notice, but she wore her skirts way too short for an old lady.

I didn't look at her but the fact that I had stopped staring out the window was a signal between us that I heard her question but the answer to it was so obvious I wasn't going to say it out loud.

"I think I know what you're going to say, but why don't you tell me anyway," she said, smiling. "Treat me like I'm stupid."

It was what she always said to try and get me to talk. One of her textbooks must have told her teenagers could never resist this invitation.

"I have to work," I said finally.

"This weekend?"

"Yes."

"Next weekend?"

"Yes."

"Every weekend?"

I didn't say anything, and she leaned back in her chair.

"Do you have any other reasons for not going?"

I shifted around on the far end of the couch and tried to find something new in the room to look at, but nothing ever changed. Desk. Window. Chair. Table with lamp. Couch. Table with box of Kleenex. Door. Betty. She didn't even have a framed diploma or a bookcase here. I asked her about this once—I thought all shrinks had bookcases—and she said this wasn't her real office; it was just the place where she saw government cases. I could tell she regretted the way she said it, and I let her.

"Who's going to watch Jody and Misty?" I said after a while.

"Who watches them when you're at work?"

"I'm talking about overnight."

"Amber is old enough to watch them overnight."

"Amber," I snorted, and I was done talking.

I went back to staring out the window, and Betty reached into her blouse and adjusted her bra strap when she thought I wasn't looking.

"I'm going to assume from that reaction that you and Amber aren't getting along any better," she said, and let me stew for a minute.

"Why do you think that is?" she asked.

A crow landed in the parking lot outside and started trying to peel a flattened earthworm off the blacktop. Early March had been warm and fooled everyone into thinking spring was here. The ground thawed. Worms woke up. Girls got out their summer clothes.

Every morning on my way to work, I drove past a yawning group of bare-legged ones in shorts and miniskirts waiting for the school bus with Donny the stump. In the past, I would've slowed down and watched from my rearview mirror until they disappeared around a bend in the road, but lately looking at girls shredded my nerves. It was a big part of becoming a man: discovering there was a difference between wanting sex and needing it.

"Amber says she's been trying," Betty persisted. "She's told me she's been helping out a lot more around the house."

"Are you kidding me?" I cried out.

"No, I'm not. Do you disagree with that?"

I laughed. A real laugh. A sincere Har Dee Har Har.

"Why would she tell me that if it isn't true?" Betty asked.

I pulled one of my feet onto my lap and started digging at a piece of gravel stuck in the tread of my Sears work boot. Amber made fun

of their red laces. I didn't care. They lasted forever. Not like the Pay-less crap she bought with my money.

"Because along with being lazy and stupid, she's also a liar," I answered.

"How do I know she's the liar and not you?"

I got the gravel out and seriously thought about flicking it across the room at Betty, but instead I put it in the pocket of Dad's camouflage hunting jacket.

"I guess you don't," I said, feeling my face burn.

I dropped my foot back on the carpet with a thud.

"I didn't mean to upset you."

"Sure you did. You want me to get mad so I'll say something meaningful."

I had made that mistake before. Recalling things like the way my mom's eyes had sparkled with tears at my three-year-old observation that "I am person-shaped," or how my mom used to save the dogs' expired rabies tags because she thought they were pretty. I could always tell when I had accidentally said something meaningful because Betty would look at me like I was suddenly naked and surprisingly well-hung.

She smiled and caught a piece of her nickel-colored hair with a finger and hooked it behind one ear. Her hair was expensive-looking, cut on an angle and shiny solid like a helmet. It didn't go with the rest of her. It reminded me of the county fair pony rides and the brand-new, freshly oiled saddles sitting on top of the broken-down, shaggy old ponies.

"Everything you say in these sessions is meaningful, Harley."

I slumped down as far as I could go and still be on the couch.

"Can I go?"

"Not yet. Let's try and resolve this problem. I think it would be good for you to get away for a day or two. If you don't trust Amber

to watch your sisters overnight what about someone else? A relative or neighbor?"

"I told you before my mom doesn't have any family, and Dad's family won't have anything to do with us anymore."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I guess because we're related to Mom."

"You're related to your father too."

"Not as closely."

She smiled at me again and I fingered the gravel in my coat pocket and imagined it embedded smack in the middle of her forehead with a tiny trickle of bright red blood dripping from it. She would have gone right on talking if I did it.

"What about your Uncle Mike? I thought you said he's been helping out lately."

"He's been bringing me cases of Black Label. I guess that's helpful. Although Rolling Rock would be more helpful, in my opinion."

She gave me her concerned look. Clear young eyes peering out anxiously from a wrinkled face like a kid trapped inside a mask. I hated it when old people kept something young about them, like Bud who bagged with me at the Shop Rite and chewed bubble gum all the time. It was easier to think of them as always being old instead of being young and dying very slowly.

"Alcohol is not a solution to your problems," Betty announced, frowning.

"I didn't say anything about alcohol. I'm talking about beer."

"If your social worker found alcohol on the premises, the girls would be put in foster homes immediately. You're underage."

"I don't care."

"You don't care if your sisters are put in foster homes?"

"No."

"Well, you have a funny way of showing it."

"I have to go."