

# OPPOSABLE THUMBS

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## Opposable Thumbs

Kansas Lacey was twelve years old the summer Leo Tolbert carelessly took up a sharp hatchet, chopped off his five-year-old brother Cooter's thumb, and threw it up on the sloping tin roof of the jailhouse. Over the sweltering days that followed, Kansas, Leo, and his twin sister Roxy watched the tiny appendage go from orange to blue-green to black against hot silver, swirling small currents and sprinklings of decaying scents down to the scrubby back yard of the Blackshear County Jail. It was on a Thursday. It was 1962.

Leo was the jailer's boy, pudgy, pork-fed, and red-headed with freckles all over; Roxy was more angular, rust-haired and speckle-flecked as well, but pretty to Leo's plain. They lived in the house attached to the front of the jail, a dungeonesque Victorian structure with steep brick stairs and dark, barred windows that glared down at the back yards and alleys where they played. Victor Tolbert, the jailer, spent his days visiting a cold-edged humor on the inmates he kept, sometimes turning hard taunts at his wife, Joleen. When this happened and when stabbing words or the muffled pounding of a fist to a wall drifted from the open windows of the front rooms, the Tolbert children scurried like mice to Kansas's yard to create games and stay out of their daddy's way.

Next to the jailhouse was the office of the *Sumner Local*, serving the small town with church notes, wedding pieces, and farm news. Next to it was Kansas's grandparents' and great-grandmother's house, where Kansas had lived for the seven years since her mother's death.

The Lacey home stood crisp and white, jalousied windows across its face, looking out over the main street of town. Across the side alley, the courthouse loomed like the Acropolis, its huge domed clock chiming out the increments of childhood in surreal crescendos of hours and half-hours building to sultry noons and coarse midnights.

The day of the thumb-chopping, Kansas spent the morning helping Great-Grandemona and LittleBit, the cook, make dinner for her grandfather and the prisoners. When Kansas had been orphaned at five, she had desperately insisted on calling her grandfather "Daddy."

"It's Grandfather," his wife, Miss Pearl, would correct her.

"Daddy," Kansas would stubbornly volley.

"Grandfather," came the return, until the bastardized moniker finally stuck, becoming ingrained in the fabric of the familial landscape.

Daddy would walk over from his office at the courthouse every day with the twelve o'clock chimes to have dinner with Kansas, Grandemona, and Miss Pearl. The dining room table would be set with silver and starched linen in his honor, and dotted with dishes of barefoot LittleBit's ham-juiced, fatback cooking, and syrupy sweet tea. After dinner, the ritual would move to the living room, where Daddy would knock back a shot of Early Times, then savor a second shot, slowly, inhaling a Camel as he watched the midday news on the

TV. After a fifteen-minute nap, he would walk back over to the sheriff's office, leaving his wife to her soaps and peach brandy.

Kansas stirred the amber liquid in the yellow ceramic pitcher, the wooden spoon clicking at ice cubes. "Our prisoners sure do eat good, don't they? Mr. Hooker over at the hardware store says they ought to get bread and water is all." She dipped her little finger into the liquid and sucked a sugary drop from the improvised teat.

Grandemona's deft white hands carved at a tomato, unwinding its skin into one languid serpentine strand. "Anybody can wind up in a jail," she said. "Imagine if it was one of your people. Cane Hooker is just a mean old man."

"I can never get skins off in one piece," Kansas said, watching the red-orange tomato strip coil snake-like on the white metal tabletop as her Grandemona slid the tiny paring knife between skin and meaty pulp. The old woman twirled the fruit between thumb and palm as she peeled, mucus-pouched seeds sliding across her thumbnail. "You will with practice."

Kansas walked over to the sink and looked out over the back yard to where coal-black Pruella sat on the porch of Pinky's shotgun house, fanning herself with a cardboard funeral parlor fan. Both LittleBit and her sister Pruella now lived in the Quarter across the railroad tracks, but they had grown up in the Laceys' backyard. Their mother Pinky had been nursemaid to Miss Pearl, to Kansas's mother Ruby, and to Kansas herself for a time. Now she lay dying of cancer, so her daughters took turns staying with her. Kansas would sneak and visit her, too, even though her grandmother did not want her entering colored folks' houses. Not anymore.

Visiting Pinky had been just fine when she was five, her mother freshly packed beneath fertile South Georgia soil. In fact, Pinky's granddaughter, Bernice, was her primary childhood playmate, giggling with her at tea parties held on rainy days underneath Pinky's house, where they exchanged doll-babies of opposite hues. But Miss Pearl no longer welcomed Bernice once Kansas turned ten.

Kansas's kinship with Pinky grew out of penetrating black nights in the aftermath of her mother's death, when Kansas crept from the big house to Pinky's bed, nestling against the old woman's flannel gown in a curled, soothing sleep.

"You ingrown, child. Ingrown like a toenail, into me," Pinky would laugh, "because I tended your mama, all through her growing up, put my soul into her when she just a baby. Then her soul go into you. Miss Pearl always be a cold woman; now she cold and lifeless, too, since her baby be dead. You come to Pinky when you want the truth. Pinky can't lie."

And Kansas did seek Pinky's truth over the years, the implicit understanding between them that their shared truth was not to be undressed before the family, mired as her folks were in ritual and propriety.

"Why do you reckon Mama killed herself?" Kansas asked in her eighth summer. She and Pinky sat at the metal table in Pinky's tiny kitchen, no wall separating it from the rest of the miniature house. Butter beans thumped into aluminum pots as they splayed the green sheaths, zipping thumbnails through thin, moist membranes.

"She took a fit is all," was the matter-of-fact reply. "She were always one or the other. High up in the trees or low down on the floor. She put that rope round her neck when she down on the floor. Just couldn't stand what all come behind her dealings with your daddy."

"Tell that part of the story," Kansas had urged, biting on a raw butter bean, sending a waxy singe to the back of her tongue.

"Yes, Lord. Your mama-Ruby thought Eddie Frye was about the handsomest thing on the world. He give you that dark hair of yours. He were a traveling salesman she met over to the Bye and Bye Club in Albany. From Topeka, Kansas, your daddy was."

“And that’s how I got my name,” the girl recited.

“Only cause your mama sneaked it up on her Daddy, is how.”

“Sneaked it?” This was a new part of the story, and Kansas’s ears tingled with curiosity.

“Yes, Lord. Your sneakin’-around mama went and sneaked you a name.” Pinky fumbled through the butterbeans to find those still sheathed and hiding on the bottom of the pot, lying low beneath fallen kin.

“Sneaked how?”

“Well, when your mama told that Eddie Frye she were with child, he cut and run. He weren’t a damn bit of good, just like I knew. He left some hurt folks in Blackshear County, hurt to the bone. Your Daddy had all the deputy sheriffs and state police from here to Dothan chasing him down. They got him this side of the Chattahoochee. They must have worked him over real good, too, cause that handsome face of his was sure enough swole up when they brought him back. Took him to the courthouse with a cocked shotgun to his head. Had him say ‘I do’ and then run him straight back out of town again.” She took the pot of beans to the rust-stained sink and began rinsing them.

“But what about the name?” Kansas reminded her.

“Oh. Miss Ruby’ daddy say the courthouse wedding made you legitimate—not a bastard child—but the sorry name of Eddie Frye weren’t good enough for his grandchild. That’s why you took the Lacey name. Then, when you was birthed and your mama say, ‘I think I’m going to call her Kansas,’ Daddy went on and on about what a pretty name it was. I don’t reckon he knew where that man was from and don’t still to this day.”

And Kansas wrapped herself within the folds of this one sharp secret, watching her features in mirrors over the years for the developing imprint of her no-good daddy—the olive skin, brown eyes, and ink-black hair that lived in her mother’s last thoughts, as she swung gently from a pine limb near Scratchy Branch.

Kansas vaulted herself to the countertop where she sat by the eight-eyed, double-ovened gas stove watching LittleBit stir corn meal and water in a thick mixing bowl. “Did you know,” she said, “that you’d have an awful time stirring and Grandemona peeling if y’all didn’t have opposable thumbs? I read it in *National Geographic*.”

“You a reading somebody,” LittleBit said.

“It’s true,” Kansas went on. “When the monkeys and all sprouted a thumb, it got to where they could peel food like bananas and open nuts and all kinds of other things. And just look at us humans. When the apes turned to cave men and our brains got big, we could do all sorts of stuff, like art, because of our thumbs.”

“You saying we come from apes?” LittleBit asked sharply. “‘Cause that’s evil talk.” She poured the corn meal mixture into a flat iron skillet over a gas flame. Then she placed a large kitchen match between her teeth to suck up the stinging fumes of the white onion her knife pierced.

Kansas wiggled and curled the fingers of both hands into each other, then apart, then close to the eyes of LittleBit, who swatted them away. “Look how beautiful they are,” Kansas insisted. She cupped them together in a gesture of prayer. “The Methodist preacher says God’s hand hath wrought the Creation. Well I say the human hand hath wrought even more. Like the cathedral at Aachen. I saw it in *National Geographic*, too. Those Germans are some building folks.”

“You go on, now,” LittleBit turned the corn meal pie in the skillet. “Done wrought a mess,” she muttered.

“Kansas, stop talking in riddles and don’t contradict Brother Altman,” Grandemona ordered.

“Yes’m.” Kansas again looked out the window. Pruella had gone back inside the shack. The courthouse clock struck eleven-thirty.

“Yonder comes Sampson,” Grandemona said as LittleBit placed triangles of hoecake into the tins the trusty would carry over to the jail on large, stacking trays. Today there were nine tins of snap beans, fried chicken and mashed potatoes. The squeal and smack of the screen door and a rhythmic jangling of steel keys up the hall to the kitchen announced a short, stocky man, the color of an aging copper penny. He lifted the trays as they exchanged brief pleasantries.

“I’m going with him,” Kansas announced, following the man in the white pants, a black stripe running up the outside of either leg. Then she thought to add, “Don’t tell Miss Pearl.”

As Kansas passed through puberty, Miss Pearl was less inclined to allow her to roam the jailhouse as she had in childhood. And it was common knowledge that her grandmother judged the Tolberts to be pure trash, so sometimes she did not even want Kansas playing in the jailhouse yard. “But they are the only children nearby,” she would sigh. “Well, at least they are white.”

“You be back by noon,” Grandemona called after her.

Kansas knew not to talk to Sampson, though she had done enough of it over the months to learn that he was in jail for stealing a car, that his wife was a friend of LittleBit’s, and that he spent most of his time washing Daddy’s sheriff car or doing yard work around the jail or the courthouse. He spoke with a soft, muffled voice, and didn’t seem like a thief when he warned the prisoners not to cuss or talk nasty around Kansas.

She followed him past Grandemona’s flower garden and the big-leafed bouquet of a fig tree that Kansas often hid beneath, peering out at her world, at Pinky’s house, enveloped in the harsh smell of sun-dappled black dirt and juices of roly-poly bugs and rotten figs. In the fecund cave formed by the fig tree, Kansas would marvel at the notion of Grandemona turning the hard, velvety-skinned fruit into shimmering preserves that wetly sugared LittleBit’s buttermilk biscuits.

Today Leo was at the tree stump behind the jail with a hatchet, passing the time hacking sticks into smaller sticks, destroying things the way only boys could. Cooter sat in the dirt, picking at scabbed-over mosquito bites, tempting impetigo. Roxy was nowhere in sight, probably inside reading a Cheryl Ames, R.N., novel, feeding her interest in all things medical. She had read *Not as a Stranger* four times already this summer.

Once, she and Roxy had hidden beneath the fig tree in a night game of hide-and-seek with Leo. The two girls crouched motionless, muddy-toed and sliding sweat, for a short forever; thighs, shoulders, forearms touching and electric, shallow breaths filling the dampness with summer. Roxy’s deep-red hair caught slips of moonglow oozing between the leaves, her eyes wide with childish fear, and Kansas suddenly wanted to kiss her. She leaned in, imperceptibly, drawn to the lips that panted swift currents in and out, under the shield of midnight green. When she was close enough to see, even in the earthen darkness, Roxy’s front teeth gently working her lower lip the way she always did when she was nervous, Leo screamed. He snatched back a limb to expose them, making Kansas feel naked and ashamed of the mystifying urges taking her to places she dared not share with anyone, not even Pinky.

Kansas followed Sampson into the jail, the six-inch skeleton key making hollow clicks and rattles in the metal locks. They walked down a corridor of cells, the concrete floor stained with years of tobacco juice, amber imprints of time served, prisoners’ voices echoing across the divide to one another. Each cell door had a rectangular port in the bars large enough to pass through the meal tins, and Sampson always let Kansas deliver them.

“Mmmmm. I smell me some fried bird,” one called Joseph said.

Another one, called Gabe, said, "Tell Miss LittleBit she sure do some fine cooking. I'm going to send my wife by to get her recipe for hoecake."

And they all thanked her and didn't seem like criminals at all.

White prisoners were put on the far end of the corridor, but there were no white prisoners today. There was, however, a woman prisoner on the second-floor corridor whom Kansas did not want to see. Her name was Angel and she had been in the county jail for five months already, charged with attempted murder for dousing her husband with gasoline and setting him afire. Both of them had been badly burned, and one side of Angel's face and both hands and forearms were grotesquely scarred.

Kansas had only taken Angel's meal to her once, whistling her way up the narrow steps to a cell stacked with packs of Alpine cigarettes and movie magazines, where its occupant sat and puffed the days away to the dazzling lives of the stars. Angel had not praised the food or thanked anyone; she only looked at Kansas with her one good eye, the other draped in scarred flesh scythed like slick satin across the mahogany face.

"A whistlin' woman and a crowin' hen be sure to come to no good end," Angel had recited, her eye finding secrets in the skinny white girl bearing food.

Kansas had been ashamed and afraid to return. So when Sampson headed up the steps with Angel's tray, Kansas went out to where Leo was still producing piles of sticks with his hatchet.

"You are one big, sure-enough time waster," Kansas said, as the hatchet came down with another loud thwack.

"I'm going to build a fort for my army men," he said, indicating two cellophane bags of soldiers, Confederate and Union, battle flags and artillery lined up across the ash-gray dirt. "Go on, Cooter," he said to his little brother, who laid his hand on the chopping stump and drew it away in a taunt.

"Cooter, quit!" Leo demanded.

But Cooter repeated the motion as the hatchet came down, before Leo's brain registered it, and the thwack reverberated with the pained shriek of the child and Kansas' scream of revulsion.

The child lay writhing on the ground, squalling an ear-piercing wail, clutching his bloodied fist. Leo could only move slowly toward the chopping stump, repeating a mantra of "Don't tell Daddy, don't tell Daddy, don't tell Daddy." Suddenly, with a rush of nerve, he picked up the amputated digit and hurled it blindly as far and as hard as he could. Then he bolted, never looking back.

A crash of iron announced Sampson, jingling and clanking from the jailhouse. He pulled off his tee shirt and scooped the boy up just as Mrs. Tolbert and Roxy rounded the side of the building. Kansas could only stagger, heaving through the chain-link gate, horrified by a gore the like of which she had never before witnessed. The leaves of the fig tree slapped at her face and arm as she passed, bound for her own back door, above which an industrial kitchen fan blasted a typhoon of noontime smells into the August heat.

Miss Pearl sat tall at the dining room table, attentive only to Daddy, her husband since she was fifteen. She was a remote, delicate woman who barely haunted the house where Kansas grew up. She sipped peach brandy in the early afternoons and spent days at a time in bed, yet always appeared for meals. "She hasn't been the same since your mama died" was all Kansas ever heard by way of explanation, so her faint presence was accepted, and everyone, including her family, referred to her as "Miss Pearl."

"The nigras over in Albany are getting all tore up," Daddy was saying. "It's likely there'll be some trouble downtown this weekend. State police'll be there. Our office is to be on call."

“Why anybody would want to go where they aren’t wanted I’ll never understand,” Miss Pearl said to her husband. “I wouldn’t go within a mile of where I wasn’t wanted.”

“It’s a damn mess, is all,” Daddy said.

“You can’t believe how Cooter hollered when Leo chopped his thumb off,” Kansas said. “There was blood all over—”

“Not at the dinner table,” Grandemona interjected.

“Yes’m.”

“It’s the goddamn federal government taking over how we do things,” Daddy said.

“Thank goodness the nigras in Sumner don’t carry on that way,” Miss Pearl said.

Kansas thought about Pinky, how she used to keep her money folded in her sock and a can of snuff deep in her bra. Her skin was like black leather, her arms must have been sinewy and sure as they held the Lacey babies she had tended alongside her own.

“What would be wrong with Pinky or LittleBit going to the Walgreen’s for a CoCola, Daddy?” Kansas asked.

“Kansas!” Miss Pearl hissed.

But Daddy was laughing. “It’s a lot more complicated than that, and it’s something you don’t have to worry about. But if it’s thumbs you want to know about, just ask Royce over at my office to show you the one he’s got. Keeps it in a jar of alcohol down in his desk drawer. I’m surprised you’ve never seen it.”

“That is enough,” Grandemona snapped, “about body parts and race relations. I want a civilized conversation at my dinner table.”

The exhaust fan in the kitchen hummed deeply to the swish-swishing as LittleBit scrubbed pots. The grownups chatted an effortlessly empty chat, but all the while Kansas felt awed by the happenstance appearance of two severed thumbs in the midst of her thirteenth summer.

Royce Fitzhugh grinned as he held the small jar up to his desk lamp, Leo, Roxy and Kansas mesmerized by the gherkin-sized object floating in the chemical wash. The sheriff’s office in and of itself was a mysteriously fascinating place. Kansas spent storm-gusty summer afternoons poring over the Wanted files and photographs of dangerous criminals, talking to state troopers riding the southwest Georgia highways, creating patterns of numbers on the ciphering machine, or typing notes to Leo and Roxy on the big black Royal typewriter on Daddy’s desk.

Every great once in a while, she would talk Daddy into opening up the evidence closet to show her guns, knives, and tire irons, instruments of assaults and occasional murders being tried in the upstairs courtroom. Once he had let her sample a sip of shinny that had been tested clean by state experts; it ran a trail of fire down her throat, sending her coughing and gagging out to the water fountain in the cavernous hallway. “Whites Only” the sign above the fountain had said, and she was grateful at that moment to be white.

“I got it from Victor Tolbert, your very own daddy,” he said to Leo. “Vic said he found it in a fox trap, like some poor fellow had a tragic accident, kind of like Cooter, I hear.”

Leo looked down sheepishly.

“Can I hold the jar?” Kansas asked.

“Sure thing, girl,” Royce grinned.

It was translucent almost, veins and muscle like dwarfed spaghetti tubes inside the larger tube of the thumb, lightly spotted in places like some strange bruised fruit. The thumbnail had settled on the bottom of the jar, but the place it had once grown upon was definable, and Kansas felt a shudder rip through her as she realized there had been an actual person attached to this tiny bit of flesh and bone.

Royce laughed. "You got to have a stomach for it, I reckon. But a sweet little girl like you ain't never got to worry over seeing such as this."

"I'm going to be a doctor," Roxy said, "so I'll see dead people all the time."

Royce laughed harder. "Ain't no such of a thing."

"She will, too," Kansas insisted. "She's going to Emory and be a baby doctor."

The deputy chuckled them out the door. "Ain't no girl going to be no doctor. Especially not no jailer's girl. Get on, now."

Two curved wooden staircases led up to the courtroom, where they regularly played Perry Mason, acting out bizarre murder trials concocted from the thick summer air. The trio sat on the bottom step.

"Where's Cooter's thumb?" Roxy asked. "I want to cut it open and see what's inside." The younger boy was still at the hospital in Albany, his parents yet to come home; Sampson was in charge of the jailhouse.

"Don't know," Leo said, glancing a warning at Kansas.

"I looked all around the chopping stump. It would've been there, so don't be stupid. Kansas?"

Kansas spread out her hands and shrugged. "Maybe a squirrel ate it," she offered.

"Daddy's going to be mad as hell," Roxy said. "I'm just trying to help you." She gazed into her brother's brown eyes, her gold-flecked ones looking deeper until he buckled.

"I was scared of what Daddy would do, so I threw it away. I don't know where."

"You thought you could cover the whole thing up?" Roxy's eyes grew larger. "Are you a retard?"

"He panicked, is all," Kansas said. "Let's go hunt the thumb."

The grounds of the courthouse were greenly manicured, sidewalks bordered with monkey grass. At the northwest and southeast diagonal corners of the lawn were steps leading down to recessed toilet areas for coloreds. Leo spat into the stairwell as they walked past it. "Nigger shit," he mumbled.

It was only after a half-hour search of the back yard of the jailhouse that Kansas caught the glint of the sunset on the high tin roof of the jail. The thumb lay where it had been pitched. They could make out the meaty end bearing blackened blood, and reasoned that it must be wedged on a bent nail or a stob in the tin that prevented it from following gravity to the ground. They took an oath to keep its location a secret, to gather to view its decomposition each day, and to never tease Cooter about his missing thumb or make him feel freakish in any way.

LittleBit sat in the dark on the porch of Pinky's shack, barefoot, smoking her Salem, a small lamp from a bedside table within drawing moths to the screen. Pruella had gone back across the tracks to see to her children; LittleBit, who had no children, only a husband long dead, now spent the nights with her dying mother. She wiped at her sweaty neck with her palm, and Kansas thought her face, light cocoa glazed with acorn-hued freckles, was unusually strong and beautiful.

"I'll sit with her if you want to walk over to the Blue Goose," Kansas said. She knew LittleBit liked to visit the club just across the tracks, come back all giggly with beer and flirtation.

"You'd better get on, before Miss Pearl see you out here."

"It's okay. I told them Roxy and Leo and me were going on a playout. We go all over town on a playout, and I don't have to go in until Daddy turns on the siren."

The town that was their playground was a two-block-square expanse of narrow alleys and stone buildings: the Feed and Seed, the Five and Dime, Mason's Drug Store, Hooker's Hardware, and others that lined the streets, their granite faces inscrutable. The bank's front

was shiny black marble, cool and rich; Dougie Moore's Furniture Store had swing sets and yard chairs along the sidewalk, their own private park. On summer evenings the three of them would do night dances across sidewalk fields of darting palmetto bugs and moribund cigarettes, finding adventures in store window displays, climbing the fire escape to the courtroom's open windows, filling it with new dramas.

"I won't be but a little while," LittleBit said as the wood steps groaned under her callused feet. Her thin yellow dress, held together at the waist with a safety pin, framed the sturdy form beneath it as she stepped through the hazy glow of a street lamp into the dimness on its other side.

"I'll have me a shot now," Pinky said as Kansas entered.

"You hurting?"

"It's Satan's own fire," Pinky said.

Kansas opened the cigar box that held several syringes and vials, plus the mysterious white powder brought from Albany by a friend of Sampson's. Kansas smiled, thinking how jealous Roxy had been to know Kansas had a patient in her back yard. She held the spoon over a kitchen match until the liquid was ready. She tourniquetted Pinky's arm, then pricked the vial, drawing back the plunger, carefully, to the mark LittleBit and Pruella had shown her. The vein easily took the pop and gentle slide of the needle's point. Pinky's eyes rolled back, black lids falling almost the whole way, pulling her into an abbreviated sleep while a solemn cadence of crickets and humming bugs droned dirges in the dark.

Kansas sat on the edge of Pinky's bed, the old woman just awake after a short drowse. Pinky was alert now, pain muffled enough for company, so Kansas launched into her tales of severed thumbs, the habits of the apes, and the trouble in Albany. When she turned to Pinky for a comment she drew back instinctively. The old woman's black eyes, expressive of a sudden shock, surrounded as they were by the dark circles of illness, gave her face the ghoulish look of a deep brown skull. Pinky reached out to touch her forearm. "It's all right," she said. "It's only Pinky." She gave a deep sigh that caught in her neck and became a wrenching cough. She spat in a Maxwell House coffee tin she kept on the bedside table. "You done said a heap just now. And a heap more to come, I bet. You be wanting the truth, just ask. I won't be dying with a lie on my lips."

"Do you think it's wrong not to tell where Cooter's thumb is? So his mama can maybe bury it?" Kansas asked.

"No, baby. Cooter's thumb ain't got no spirit in it. It's just a old shell, just like the ones them biddies leaves in your Grandemona's chicken coop. Just like Pinky going to be real soon. 'Course, some of Cooter's spirit might be done leaked out of that hole in his hand before they got it all sewed up. But he'll be all right."

"Leo's mostly scared of what his daddy's going to do," Kansas said.

"Well, them children ought to be scared of they daddy. You stay slap away from him. He a evil somebody. He's done busted many a nigger's head, plus his woman's. And that girl child of his better be sly cause he humps the woman prisoners, white and colored."

Kansas's face grew hot at the reference to sexual intercourse, a term Roxy had once shared with her along with the stark details.

Pinky chuckled. "You old enough. Ain't no sense in keeping them thoughts away from Pinky. You be doin' it your ownself before too long."

"It's nasty!" Kansas spat out. Roxy had told her about the milky stuff that would fire out of the man's penis and into the woman.

"Well, it's how we all come to be," Pinky said. "It's how you come to be."

"How come LittleBit didn't do it with her husband?"

Pinky laughed with all the energy she could muster. "You don't get no baby every time. Folks do it 'cause they like it. You'll see one day."

They talked on for a while, Pinky allowing that the trouble in Albany was bound to come and right as rain, allowing that she liked doing it with her husband, even though he left her when LittleBit was born, allowing that she was not afraid to die. Kansas put out the light when Pinky finally slept again, just as LittleBit's bare soles slapped against the steps.

Friday afternoon found Kansas, Leo, and Roxy sitting around the chopping stump gazing up at the thumb, still perched imperiously on the tin stob. It had not changed much, but it was quite high up; subtle colorations could not be noted yet. Cooter had come home during the morning but was to mend indoors for a few days lest he infect his stitches.

"I don't think Daddy and Miss Pearl do it," Kansas said, shuddering at the image.

"Sure they do," Roxy said. "All men do, anyway. Who else could he do it with?"

"I want to do it," Leo said. "And I will."

The courthouse clock chimed out four-thirty, sending droves of sparrows out from under the dome in a frenzied flapping.

"Y'all want to play out tonight?" Kansas asked.

"Sure." Leo drew circles in the dirt with one of his chopped sticks, the Civil War fort still only a vague intention. Kansas reached over and touched the swollen bruise on his left cheekbone with her fingertips.

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"I can't play out at night anymore. Daddy thinks I'm off with boys," Roxy said.

"But that's crazy!" Kansas kicked at some of the sticks. "You're with us. We're your witnesses."

"Daddy says we're all liars," Roxy said.

"To hell with Daddy!" Leo strode across the yard and began banging at the chain-link fence with a baseball bat, sending rattling shocks all the way down its length.

Roxy gazed down at her hands, tucking her left thumb under as though imagining what Cooter's life might feel like from here on out. "It'll be strange," she said. "The three of us going to Blackshear County High School next month, being the youngest class. Seventh graders."

"You think any coloreds will ever try to come? Folks keep saying so."

"Not as long as my daddy has a gun, they won't." Leo had tired of bludgeoning the fence and joined back in the talk. "And I'll personally kill any nigger that thinks he's going to sit in a class with me." The rawness of his anger shoved itself into the words.

"Daddy feels the same way, I think," Kansas sighed. "I don't know, though."

Leo threw the bat hard into the fence. "I'm going to go look at Royce's thumb again," he called over his shoulder as he walked away.

"Do you think we'll stay friends?" Roxy asked, and her gold-flecked eyes were incredibly sad. "It's such a big school. All those older boys."

"Since when were you scared of anybody?" Kansas asked.

"Since forever." She stood. "I'll tell Leo to meet you at the fig tree at dark."

Kansas watched her step through the chain-link gate and walk up the side yard of the jailhouse, the afternoon sun playing the rich red of her hair beneath its glow into muted flames. She stopped abruptly at the corner of the front porch, took a deep breath and forged ahead, her delicate hands coiled into tense, knotted fists at her sides.

“I want to show you something.” Leo caught her hands, pulling her from where she sat beneath the fig leaves.

“What?”

“Just be quiet,” he snapped. “And do what I say.”

They crept through the dark that was just past dusk, toward the jailhouse yard.

“Where—” Kansas breathed.

“Shhh!” He motioned her to follow as he entered the back stairwell of the jail through the door that remained open during the summer’s hottest heat. A few steps up to the first barred door, and the male prisoners’ conversations hummed and lilted through the iron slats. Leo flattened his back against the opposite wall of the stairwell, easing up the brick steps. He put a finger to his lips and she followed his lead. The stairs zigged, then zagged toward the second floor. Just as they zagged she could hear it, a heavy, rhythmic, grunting exhalation as if one were being punched repeatedly in the stomach, and a slapping, sucking sound. She hesitated, but Leo clutched her wrist, eyes warning her not to cry out. The grunting came louder and quicker now. They stepped up the last increments of the bricks.

Angel’s cell was angularly framed by the doorway, steel bars slashing the picture into six-inch segments. Yet the picture they saw was clear: Angel naked on her back on the unyielding bunk. Victor Tolbert on top of her, knees cocked, pounding into her with all his strength and speed, groaning raspy growls into her neck. And all the while, Angel’s arm, draped over the side of the bunk, a burning cigarette clamped between two fingers, never lifted to her lips. And her one good eye, the other being scarred into blindness, riveted into a blank nothingness from an expressionless face.

When Leo and Kansas emerged from the jail, she punched him three times in the back with her fist and ran for Pinky’s house, where the lights were unusually bright and a small knot of ladies from Pinky’s church whispered to Pruella.

“Pinky gone, child,” Pruella said gently. “Gone home to Jesus. LittleBit inside tending her.”

Kansas gazed at a girl on the porch she knew to be the Bernice of her childhood, blood kin to Pinky. Kansas nodded and turned toward Miss Pearl’s big white house, itself a crypt for the lifeless.

On Saturday afternoon she watched the paddy wagons roll in from Albany, loaded down with black folks who sat down in the middle of the city because they wanted a CoCola. The county jail in Albany was packed, so the surrounding counties took on the overflow. Miss Pearl was worried that LittleBit wouldn’t be able to find a cook to replace her as she mourned her mama, but LittleBit surprised them all by announcing she would spend the next few days, twenty-four hours per if need be, in the kitchen cooking for the Albany folks. Pinky would want her to, she said.

It was during that marathon cooking session in the Lacey kitchen, late in the evening when the family slept under humming air conditioners, that LittleBit told Kansas a story. It was about how her husband, Ned, went fishing up Scratchy Branch one warm autumn night some fourteen years earlier. It was only about a mile up the branch that he stumbled upon a white couple having sex on the bank, the glare of the moon against their skin turning them the color of catfish bellies. The man spied him before he could slip off, went to running him down, and, by the time the rumor ran its course, the tale had LittleBit’s husband deliberately sneaking up to watch, “just to see a naked white lady get her eyes fucked out,” LittleBit said.

Ned went into thin air, but they found him a week later, strung up from a longleaf. Nobody was ever charged, and nobody ever took credit for it, but it was said to be Klan. Ned had been beaten, hanged, and castrated. Strangest of all, every one of his fingers and

toes was missing, and some said they were passed out amongst the Klansmen as souvenirs. Meantime, the white man on the creek bank didn't have the decency to marry the white woman and save her reputation, even when she turned up pregnant not long after.

Kansas listened as Pinky's truth came full circle. Faint traces of her mother's anguish made futile stabs at her memory, but Kansas did not want to see the ripples ringing her conception in the gravelly sand alongside Scratchy Branch. She thought of the shell of Pinky's body, lying out back in her tiny shotgun last night while LittleBit bathed her for the colored folks' undertaker. She wondered if the worn flannel gown was still in Pinky's bureau. There was no one to be ingrown with, and she dreaded what was to come.

She observed Cooter's thumb a few more times, perfunctorily, never looking Leo in the eye, unable to reveal the truth to Roxy. Then one day it was gone, perhaps carried off by a scavenging rat or an errant blue jay, so there was no longer the pretense of a reason to visit the jail yard. Instead, Kansas crouched beneath the fig tree for quarter-hours at a time, studying Pinky's empty house and Miss Pearl's equally empty one.

In the late afternoons leading to September, Leo, Kansas, and Roxy roamed Sumner's streets and alleys, kicking rocks and bottle caps into the silence growing between them, serenaded only by the chimes of the courthouse clock. One desolate Sunday, Kansas and Roxy put pennies on the railroad tracks, and, while a thundering string of freight cars mashed the money into thin copper puddles, Leo tossed slurs and track gravel toward the rows of shacks beyond the Blue Goose.

The bank's black marble facade threw reflections of the three of them behind the Feed and Seed, Leo poking poultry corpses with a sharp stick, the girls shuddering at the odor of stale chicken droppings, feathered carcasses, and the decaying eggshells of newly-hatched biddies. And while Roxy hung back, shoulders hunched with a splintering spirit, Kansas stomped the mounds of shells with her bare feet. The drying embryonic spittle stuck bits of eggshells to the summer-toughened skin of her soles, and razor-thin shavings zipped stinging slices into the tender, untouched secrets between her toes.



Opposable thumbs synonyms, Opposable thumbs pronunciation, Opposable thumbs translation, English dictionary definition of Opposable thumbs. n. 1. a. The short thick digit of the human hand, next to the index finger and opposable to each of the other four digits. b. A corresponding digit in other... Opposable Thumbs. We tackle a new creative challenge every two weeks and talk about our accomplishments, failures and lessons learned. RSS.Â We (Taylor Hokanson and Rob Ray) assign ourselves (and a guest) a new creative challenge every two weeks. We then talk about our discoveries, problems, solutions, failures and successes and. try to steer clear of catastrophic shop accidents. Opposable Thumbs on social media. Your Hosts. Rob Ray. opposable thumb â€” noun (C) a thumb that human beings, monkeys etc have that can be used for holding things â€” Longman dictionary of contemporary English. Thumb â€” For other uses, see Thumb (disambiguation). Thumb The Thumb. Latin pollex, digitus primus, digitus I Artery â€” Wikipedia. opposable â€” opposability, n. /euh poh zeuh beuhl/, adj. 1. capable of being placed opposite to something else: the opposable thumb of primates. 2. capable of being resisted, fought, or opposed. [1660 70; OPPOSE + ABLE] \* \* \* â€” Opposable thumb definition at Dictionary.com, a free online dictionary with pronunciation, synonyms and translation. Look it up now!Â A thumb that can be placed opposite the fingers of the same hand. Opposable thumbs allow the digits to grasp and handle objects and are characteristic of primates. Quiz. Sprint to the finish with this olympics quiz!