

Harry Crews

an excerpt of

*Leaving Home for Home**

The house in which Mama was dying was layered with the smell of food: the quick touch of coconut cream pie, the fleshy fruit of ambrosia, the heavy, rich, overcooked odor of standing rib roast, and the thick sweet taste of honey-cured hams. Every surface that could hold anything was covered with fruit and cheese and meat and pies without end, all of it brought by townspeople and blood kin who were arriving now more quickly than I could count.

A discreet murmur barely above a whisper washed over the living room, the front porch, the den, the back porch, the backyard under the pecan tree that Mama had planted when this house was built. I, who had quit smoking, was burning one unfiltered Camel behind the other and obsessively thinking about going in search of a bottle of Jack Daniels, I, a recovering alcoholic, who had not had a drop of alcohol in nearly ten years. I felt made of thin rubber and overfilled with air, pumped so full that at any moment I might explode and splatter myself over every wall in the house.

My brother's voice, soft as a whisper, solicitous, loving, thoughtful, and vicious, came from behind me over my shoulder.

"Why don't you git on outside if you gone smoke like that?"

I didn't kill him or explode or even look over my shoulder at him. Rather, I started easing my way through the crowded room toward the front door when it occurred to me that I ought to at least tell him that the woman dying in the back room had never told me I couldn't smoke in this house, and it still belonged to her and not to him the last time I checked.

*From "Assault of Memory," Harry Crews's unpublished autobiography, a portion of which is in the Harry Crews Collection, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia.

But I didn't because the front door opened at that precise moment and through it came a tiny, fragile old woman, moving slowly, her eyes bright as a bird's behind the flashing lenses of her glasses. Her high sharp cheekbones flushed with the lovely color a young girl might show from the heat of the day.

A fullness in my chest, the heat of tears in my eyes, tears whether of joy or sadness, I did not know. My Aunt Eva, ninety-three years old, mother to eight children, wife of Mama's youngest brother, Uncle Alton, long dead now, and matriarch to the extended family. I went straight to her. Her eyes never left my face, but I saw no flash of recognition either, and I remembered suddenly how little those bright eyes really saw.

When I was close enough that I could lean forward and touch her cheek with my lips, her old velvet-smooth voice said: "Harry?"

I felt the start of tears now, I moved to embrace her, her bones insistent under her nearly fleshless body.

"Yes, Aunt Eva," I said. "Harry."

And with the sound of my name came the surge of memory, quick and awful, of me and Mama on another June day, this very time of year and every bit as painful. 1945. I was carrying the clothes I would be taking with me: a pair of drawers, one shirt, a pair of overalls, and a pair of socks, all of it stuffed into a pillowcase that had the neck tied off with string. The whole thing could not have weighed more than five pounds, but it seemed to get heavier with every step I took.

It was early but Mama's thin print dress was already sticking to her back between her shoulder blades because we were nearing the end of a six-block walk. That was as close as the city bus went to the Greyhound station on Bay Street, which ran parallel to the St. Johns River, at that time probably the dirtiest river in the country. I, along with every boy I knew, swam in it anyway during the summer months. The fact that we often came out of the water with human shit in our hair did not bother us at all.

Or at least we were quick to say it didn't. We made a point of laughing about it. Diving into a sewer filled with waste from ships and the flushings of hundreds of thousands of toilets, all of it cast slightly blue with a thin film of oil—diving into such a mixture of filth was the mark of a man. It meant that you had balls and that you were tough, so tough that nothing could ever bother you. Not only were you a man and tough as leather, but you were brave too and always ready to put it all on the line anytime, anywhere, for any reason. Or even better than that, for no reason at all.