

[Home](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

The Fire Ceremony

by Jeff Lacy

I was lost in the trees trying to find Uncle Doc's place. Driving around soaking wet from sweat with the windows rolled down because the air conditioner broke. I thought about the song lines that Australian aboriginals use to navigate from one point to another without the use of a map. I imagined myself walking on broken glass barefoot in a barren wilderness with an aborigine on my back; his elbows pressing on my shoulders, his arms choking me around the throat, his knees squeezing into my ribs, his feet jamming into the pockets of my britches; him wearing only a loincloth, white paint on his face and arms, orange paint covering the rest of his body, and him giggling and wheezing into my ear as I stumbled in the heat and humidity, making it hard to keep my grip on the old man, him readjusting and squeezing and gripping me harder, me the mule, him the navigator, no map, only the Aborigine's song lines and my trust that he delivers me to the place *he* knew I sought, though I didn't have a clue.

By an accident of fate or dumb luck, I finally found the place at the end of a clay dirt road along a creek that required crossing over a rustic plank bridge. The house was surrounded by white oaks and pines, insulated with azalea bushes and dogwood trees, and fragranced with honeysuckle. The house had tall abundant windows that absorbed light like an open mind, and a red tin roof for rain drops to play lullabies.

I got out of my pick-up truck and was greeted by an arthritic red hound with white hair around his mouth, wagging his tail listlessly. The dog made an obligatory bark and sniffed before he hiked a rear leg and made his mark on my truck's front left tire. The dog bowed his head to allow me to pat it. Then he escorted me down the hill past the well house, the vegetable garden, toward a barn and corral. Two mules and a horse stood in the corral eating hay. There was a pasture beyond, and a wall of pines surrounded it. Poss and Uncle Doc, my boss, were waiting for me in the farthest corner of the pasture. A tractor trail leading into the wood snaked out behind them.

Poss grinned and wiped his forehead with the back of his enormous hand. "We was wondering if you were gonna show."

"Sorry," I said. "I couldn't get my bearings with all these trees."

"Well, that's all right, son," Uncle Doc said. "We better hit it before it gets too dark to see." He handed me a pair of leather gloves and we set to collecting wood.

A thick layer of pine straw carpeted the floor of the woods. The scent of pine rosin covered us like a veil. Uncle Doc drove his tractor between the trees, and Poss and I walked behind the trailer, Poss loading three limbs for every one of mine. It did not take long for the heat and humidity to make our sweat soak through our hats, clothes, and gloves.

We could barely see the trailer by the time we had it heaped full. Poss and I held onto the trailer as Uncle Doc guided us out of the woods to the fire site at the edge of the pasture.

The old hound was waiting for us. Poss grabbed a Dr. Pepper out of the cooler and plopped down beside the dog. Boozer rolled over on his back for his belly rubbed. Uncle Doc went to work molding the wood carefully into a pyre, then he stuck a piece of cloth soaked in diesel

fuel in the middle of the pile and lit it.

It was a while before Poss's stomach pangs and Uncle Doc's bladder jarred them awake. Uncle Doc stood slowly and worked the stiffness out of his back and numbness out of his right leg before drifting behind a tree to relieve himself. Poss struggled to identify points of light in the sky that he'd heard talked about on a public television program. He told me that the smells, when you went in the jail, were like the rings of Saturn. I was confused but curious. To Poss's mind the smell inside the jail was more complex than just saying it smelled like disinfectant and stale grease, altogether. He said the smells came in compartments as if you were flying through the rings of Saturn like the Viking or Voyager probe, whichever one did it, if they did, it didn't make any difference for his purpose. Poss's observation from years of trudging to the jail and interviewing new clients as part of his job as our investigator, was that when he walked down the hall there'd be a compartment of say furniture polish, then three steps later brass polish, two steps later urine, five steps later fried fish, four steps later Lysol, seven steps later bleach, three steps later vomit, four steps later stale milk, six steps later a sour armpit, three steps later shit, etc., etc., on and on and on.

With a fourteen-year-old being tried as an adult for murder of his younger brother approaching on the other side of the weekend, Uncle Doc had invited me out to his country place for a fire ceremony, he called it, which would cleanse me and give me some magical momentum so I'd be ready to pick a jury, or some such bullshit that went through one ear and out the other. It was a case that I could win. You never had to worry about the loser cases. It was the ones you had a viable defense and you could or should win that terrified you and made you lose the most sleep. From our perspective it was an accident. My client and his family were devastated and in shambles. The parents were near divorce. A nine-year-old shot dead and now the State seeking to take away their other boy for life because it claimed he intentionally killed his brother. The evidence did not support the State's theory. I mistrusted the State, I mistrusted their witnesses, and I mistrusted the trial process. Despite the State having the burden of proof, I'd seen it play out too many times that it was us who had to prove we were innocent. You live in a courtroom long enough and you learn that nothing's about fairness. It's about power and perception. I was terrified for my client.

Like a revenant, Uncle Doc returned from behind the tree, zipping up his britches, and the dog sniffing and limping behind him. He went to the coolers and pulled three wire clothes hangers and a packet of hotdog wieners out. After untwisting and straightening the hangers, we threaded two to three wieners on the hangers, and squatted by the fire like primeval men grunting and watching our store-bought processed wieners char and blister black over the flames.

Poss let out a long belch. "Whoo-wee! Ain't nothing like a weenie roast," he said.

"Michael," Uncle Doc said, "have I ever told you about Lamar?"

"I don't recall" I said.

"Back in 1967, right after I turned 16 and a few days I had gotten my driver's license, I remember the Ladies Auxiliary Club at the United Methodist Church of Pine Log, Georgia, thought it a Christian thing to buy my cousin Lamar a new bicycle. On Homecoming Sunday, to kick-off Revival Week, the Ladies had a ceremony, a "Holy Bicycle Ceremony" they called it, in the church parking lot to bestow this gift on Lamar. The ladies of the Auxiliary were so full of the Spirit, so proud of themselves, so eager to have people see they were generous Christian women with love in their hearts.

"If we're made in God's image, then God may be a frail little man-boy who wears a baseball cap, a cockeyed grin on a head that tilts to one side, with unreliable hearing aids in both ears,

and thick glasses from which large eyes swim.

“After everybody filled themselves from the pot luck, they gathered round. It was so hot, this middle of September day, it felt more like Hell than Heaven, everybody sweating through their clothes. The Reverend began the ceremony with a long prayer. Then the choir led everyone in ‘What a Friend We Have In Jesus,’ Lamar’s favorite song.

“Mrs. Ola Mae Gossiple, the President of the Ladies Auxiliary Club, presented the bicycle to Lamar. Lamar’s momma was so appreciative toward the good Christian ladies of the Auxiliary that she cried. Lamar hugged Mrs. Gossiple long and hard, just like a little dog on your leg. You couldn’t pry him loose.

“Lamar was like dealing with a child. The Reverend distracted Lamar, offered him a toy in exchange for letting Mrs. Gossiple loose – the toy being the new sleek red bicycle that Lamar sniffed and fondled. The Ladies pecked-up Lamar’s smallest reactions like they were fiddling for worms or as if he was their child eating his first birthday cake all by himself.

“Then the Reverend encouraged Lamar to get on his new bicycle and ride it around. And he did, lickety split.

“Lamar rode around on that bicycle in the church parking lot and was so proud, and Lamar’s momma was so proud, and the Reverend was so proud, and the women of the Ladies Auxiliary were so proud. Lamar rode that bicycle round and round and round that parking lot.

“After a time, he needed to get off so the ceremony could be wrapped up. Nobody, not even Lamar’s momma, who he minded without question usually, could get Lamar off that red bicycle. Mrs. Gossiple, giggling, finally threatened to take the bicycle away if he did not mind his momma. That worked. Except, when Lamar tried to stop, he couldn’t. He didn’t know how to use the bicycle’s new fangled hand brakes. Nobody had stopped to think to show Lamar how to use them. Everybody started hollering to Lamar while squeezing their butt cheeks, ‘Use the hand brakes Lamar. Squeeze the lever on the handlebar. Lamar. Sque-e-e-e-eze. Squeeze the lever. The lever, the lever, the lever, lever, lever, lever. Sque-e-e-e-eze.’ Lamar’s hearing aids were whistling as he tried to adjust them. Lamar just kept spinning the foot pedals in reverse as fast as he could go as the choir sang, *What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and grief to bear! What a pri-vi-lege to carry, Ev-rything to God in prayer!* I saw it happening in slow motion. Everybody says that, but that’s how it happened to me. I saw him all helpless and everything, so I started running after him, but he was going too fast. Lamar’s momma told the choir to shut up, and then she pleaded with some of the men to run after Lamar and stop him.

“The good Christian ladies of the Ladies Auxiliary were in high anxiety and grief-stricken. The Reverend got down on his only good knee and prayed. I was yelling at him to jump off the bike or stop it with his feet. He was bearing down hard on the pedals to get the bike to stop. It was a helpless thing to watch. Him bearing down on the pedals was a cross between sitting on the pot constipated and Fred Flintstone slamming on his feet. He finally spread his legs from the pedals like wings, but he never would put them down on the ground. Him and them Coke bottle glasses and that dag gum hearing aid. I don’t think he knew where he was or where he was going, just getting faster. Then got on the road and that’s when he really picked up speed. There he was, legs sticking out, hanging on for dear life, face twisted up, his eyes bugging through them useless glasses and them hearing aids whistling.”

Uncle Doc took a long swig of beer and stood and took a deep breath before continuing.

“Well then the preacher looked skyward and held up his hands and his Holy Bible, and said, ‘Je-sus, Je-sus, Je-sus’

“And the deacons repeated, ‘Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord. Hear him, Lord.’

“And the women, wearing their white gloves and their best summer hats, and ironed cotton dresses, stomped and hollered, ‘Stop, Lamar. Oh. Oh. Oh. Stop, Lamar. Stop. Stop. Stop, Lamar . . .’

“I was sucking in air and shouting stop over and over and I’d start running then stop, run then stop, run then stop. It was heartbreaking. I started bawling.”

Uncle Doc pretended he was riding a bike. “As his momentum carried him faster down the hill he turned over his shoulder and yelled, ‘How nyoun snop nis Gnobnamn ning?’

“Somebody said, ‘Oh, shit.’

“Then, BLAM! Lamar and bicycle crashed into the rock and concrete railroad underpass.

“It was the first time I ever cussed in front of grownups. People that had known me since I was born, who had fed me, taken me into their homes, babysat me, whose kids I’d played with and gone to school with. I cussed at them for being ignorant and old and slow, and at God for leading them astray and being a mean son-of-a-bitch for making Lamar retarded and helpless and making him have to wear them Coke bottle glasses and that useless hearing aid, and that damn bicycle, that goddamn bicycle. I gave Him the finger and wondered if He was getting His jollies good over some helpless boy He had born this way. Then I ran down to the bottom of the hill.

“Lamar bounced off that underpass like a ball. Miraculously, he survived with only broken glasses. That’s because that bicycle weighed almost more than him. It was built like a dag gum Cadillac. It took a chunk out of the concrete underpass when it hit.

“I beat everybody down to him. I was holding him and talking to him when somebody gathered him up and the ambulance was called and came and took him to the hospital over in Calhoun.

“I took that bicycle and threw it up against that underpass and kept throwing it up against that underpass, cussing, picking it up, taking a step back and heaving it again at that overpass until my arms could not lift its frame, because that’s all that it was when I got through with it.

“Mrs. Gossiple collapsed and died a few days later. I feel guilty about that because I did give her a good cussing.

“I took the bicycle pieces and dropped them down the mine shaft below Fairmount.”

Uncle Doc refreshed his beer and drank near all of it. Then he began singing “Victory in Jesus.” Poss joined in with an overpowering bass when Uncle Doc got to the refrain. I followed the best I could. When we played that song out Poss announced it was time for dessert. Uncle Doc pulled out a box of Suzy-Qs, two pieces of chocolate cake with whipped cream in the middle. Poss’s favorite, he said.

“What’s the lesson of that story?” Uncle Doc said.

“I don’t know,” I said. I felt like I had been sliced opened and was carved out and left hollow and then fill with guilt. At dinner, a week before coming to Uncle Docs, with the kids corralled to table, we crossed ourselves and all joined hands, and my five-year-old volunteered to say Grace. “We miss Pepper. We love Pepper. God, take care of Pepper.” His three-year-old brother repeated the prayer. My wife and I stared at each other. I shook my head. It had been the same blessing every meal for the last three months since we gave Pepper (a black Labrador Retriever puppy) away to the County Animal Control Department, hoping and praying

that we were not sending him to his euthanized death. I said my own silent prayer for Pepper, too. What kind of role model was I being to my children? I felt I had no choice giving Pepper away. He was tearing up the carpet, barking at all hours, playing too hard with the children, taking up too much room in our small apartment. I couldn't go to the bathroom or to the kitchen to get juice for one of the kids in the middle of the night without risking waking Pepper and then having to spend the next hour calming him and then not being able to get back to sleep and then being sleep deprived and not rested for my new job where I needed all my energy. The neighbors would complain. We'd be evicted. We wouldn't get our security deposit back, and I'd have to pay for the damage to the apartment – I didn't have any disposable income to fix the crap the dog was messing up moment by moment. The dog was also growing like kudzu. Soon he wouldn't be able to fit in his travel crate/bed. He was becoming a big active dog that needed room to run and romp and roam. He was growing out of our small apartment where the three kids were sleeping in one room, one child "camping out" on the floor to sleep. Pepper needed people to allow him to be a dog. He needed a family who would love him, play with him, spend time with him. My wife was a saint, but she was reaching her limit, too, working from home and simultaneously taking care of the children. We were beyond claustrophobic. Something had to give. Pepper had to go.

I met my wife at the Animal Shelter. She carried Pepper in his crate with his stuffed toy dog that was his Momma dog and his bed cushion and his toys. Pepper had no idea that we were going to abandon him there with all those big dogs barking and all the loud noises coming from trucks that had traumatized him when he was abandoned on the side of the road as a five-week-old pup before we were given him by a neighbor who thought the kids needed him. My five-year-old insisted on coming with his mother to say goodbye to Pepper and to see for himself where Pepper was going. I cried. My wife cried. She told the worker that Pepper had had all his shots. She told the worker about Pepper's toys and his need for his Momma dog. The man toted the crate with Pepper inside. We turned around with our guilt and our disappointment in ourselves and drove off.

Poss wiped his mouth with his shirt tail. "Michael, I was a preacher until I baptized this young lady named Twinkie. There we was, standing in the baptistery pool, the church was packed, the congregation beholding us." Poss stood. "I placed one hand over her head and said, the usual. 'Sister, based upon your profession of faith I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' I held Twinkie's hand and put my other hand behind her back like this. I made sure my feet were under me good like this. Twinkie held her nose. I guided her down real slow, as careful as I could, worried that I was going to throw my back or get a hernia. And you see, I'm not a little man, but I wasn't strong enough to control her. She slipped out of my arms and plopped down and sank like lead. I tried to pull her up by her robe, but I couldn't budge her. She must of gotten stuck or jammed somehow. I started to panic when my fishing waders started filling with water. Fifteen, maybe thirty seconds or even a minute went by. It felt like a minute. She was still under and I was water logged trying to pull her up and get her unstuck. Lord, I prayed, don't let Sister Twinkie drown. Then she started kicking and twisting her body. I thought that was a good sign. She got one of her chunky legs caught over the top of the observation glass on the front of the baptistery. Then her arms were flailing and splashing the water. I squatted to get some leverage to get her vertical, but she'd slip every time I tried to get a grip on her. Water was sloshing and going into the choir loft. A couple of deacons ran up. One of them unhooked Twinkie's leg. The other deacon tried to get in the pool with us but couldn't fit. All of a sudden, miraculously, as if the hand of Jesus Himself reached down and plucked her out, Twinkie came out of the water snorting and gasping for air, screaming and snorting and hollering with her hands over her head, 'Sweet Jesus God!' Twinkie then let loose a stream of cuss words like she was speaking in tongues. The head deacon reached out to grab my hand and pull me out, but Twinkie grabbed me by the wader suspenders and jerked me back. My feet came out from under me and I fell backwards. She had long curled-in fingernails like claws, and pushed me under the water and held me there and coughed and cussed me, calling him every name no church should hear. She'd pull me up about every fifteen seconds, let me struggle to get a breath, and then push me under again, and again, and again, spitting and cussing. Three deacons and two other big

men were required to restrain her. My face and neck got all scratched-up from her claws. Then Flutie Billue, the music director, jumped up real quick in his raspberry loafers and led the congregation in what else? 'Love Lifted Me.'" Poss started singing.

I was sinking deep in sin,
Far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within,
Sinking to rise no more;
But the Master of the sea
Heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me,
Now safe am I,
Love lifted me!
Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help,
Love lifted me!
Love lifted me!
Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help,
Love lifted me!

"The congregation just about stoned me out of there," Poss said. "Some smart aleck thanked me for the nice exorcism. I didn't have the heart to get back in the pulpit after that."

Uncle Doc waved his hand toward Poss. "Behold the man."

I sat taking in the balm of the fire and the shrill rhythmic drone of the bugs, and remembered my own cousin who had been killed accidentally by a shotgun when he was eleven and I was ten. His eight-year-old brother never got over the trauma of being in the same room when the gun went off. Nor could he deal with the guilt of living. Life unraveled for him after that, being alive and playing with him one second, seeing him dead in a pool of blood the next. His nightmares haunted him until he died at thirty-two after a long illness. I could imagine the screams and terror moans of my helpless aunt and uncle who ran into the room after hearing the shot. Overcome with a shiver, I thought about how much I hated guns and how my greatest fear was of my own children's death in such a sudden inexplicable way and how or whether I'd be able to survive it. My dad – whom I only saw every other weekend and on particular afternoons during the week after my parents' recent divorce – had the unenviable task of breaking the news to me and my younger brother that Sunday afternoon in February,

just like he had seventeen months earlier when he told us about our bigger than life Granddaddy dying in a car wreck. Life was a dangerous and scary place for me after my cousin died. It was as if the devil cut out my childhood light with the dull rusty steak knife we used to cut weeds with, and pointing the blade down at me, threatening that I was next, soon, soon, very soon. It became hard to sleep, as it still was. That may have been when I started biting my fingernails.

After a time, Uncle Doc added more wood to the fire. Outside the fire circle, lightening bugs hovered and illumined. Poss caught one in his hands. He watched the bug glow for a moment, then opened his cupped palms and the lightening bug floated away. Then he began singing,

Old Uncle Doc is a sorry ole soul,

Washed his face in a toilet hole,

Brushed his teeth with a wagon wheel,

Died with a tooth ache in his heel.

Uncle Doc kicked Poss on the bottom of his shoe.

Dr. Pepper spilled down Poss's shirt. "Look what you done done."

"I love you plumb down to the bone, Poss," Uncle Doc said, "And even the bone."

"Well, now I know you're drunk."

Earlier in the day I had an initial visit with a client.

Heavy steel doors snapped unlocked and sounded like a hammer driving a railroad spike into my skull, and when they slammed shut, it reverberated through the jail's acoustical wasteland. The sound is terminal. It *is* the sound of mortality, closing yourself in hell, all former identity dissolved.

A chubby, unmotivated fellow with a crew cut, who stressed every seam of his autumnal uniform, escorted me. I saw him flatulently wallowing in yams, brown gravy and dark meats, over-done green beans, boiled okra, and pork. His flat-footed, knee-knocked trudge made me think he must've played the tuba in high school. If he had a soundtrack he'd have tuba and clarinet accompaniment, sweating and puffing down the hall, his thighs rubbing, while some soul kicked and cussed and hollered behind some other heavy steel door. He locked me into a six-foot-by-six-foot windowless interview room – a cold space of off-white painted cinderblock walls and linoleum floor, and two white plastic chairs: one for me and one for a large, loosely breasted woman wearing orange surgical scrubs, shackled at the ankle and wrist, wheezing and curling her bottom lip. I sat across from her and asked her name. She leaned, exposing a good bit of her large cleavage, and turned one ear toward me.

"Are you Polly? Polly Pomeroy?"

She smiled big and toothless. "Yes. Everything be beautiful." Her eyes widened and narrowed, widened and narrowed. She looked behind her shoulder and mumbled.

I watched her for a while as she talked behind her and nodded.

“Ma’am.”

She held up a hand as if I was interrupting.

A few seconds later, she swatted at something and then faced me and giggled.

“How are you doing?” I said.

“Fine. Fine. I got no man. Live by myself in my trailer with my beautiful dogs.” She looked behind her and mumbled, then looked at me, and pointed, and looked behind her again and mumbled. After a time, she spun square to me serenely.

“You talking to somebody?” I said.

“My peoples. They’s telling me how my beautiful dogs are doing at home.”

“Who are you people?”

“Why my Momma and Daddy. They’s telling me about my beautiful dogs.”

“They talk to you from the outside?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Can you give me your Mom and Dad’s name and address and telephone number so I can get in touch with them?”

“Oh, they’s with Jesus. Didn’t you know my momma and daddy dead?” She leaned, sniffed me, and narrowed her eyes. “M-m-m-m.”

I’m beyond my script, the initial questionnaire my office used to take down information from new clients. “Do you see your momma and daddy?”

“When I being good.”

“Well, do you see them now?”

She crossed her arms over her breasts, pressed her chin against her chest, and cut her eyes up at me, grinning. “No-o-o-o. I’m thinking naughty thoughts, now.” She sniffed. “Y-u-u-m-m. You is beautiful and just good enough to eat.”

I pushed my chair back. “Do you know where you are?”

“Oh, yeah!”

“Where are you?”

“You got a cigarette and a Coca-Cola for a beautiful sexy lady?”

“You can’t smoke in here.”

She opened her legs and rubbed her crotch. “Ask for me. Tell Mr. Hal I’ll give him some if he

will.”

“I’ll see . . .”

“Ask about getting me a bond, too. Tell Mr. Hal I’d like to be able to be released on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday afternoons so I can sit on Miss Mable’s porch. On Sundays I’ll go to Calvary Holiness. And if I don’t make it there I’ll stay here and go to the church service for the inmates.” She swiped at something behind her shoulder, then leaned forward and summoned me with her index finger. “I got something to tell you. You know, I’m a queen. . . Well, maybe not a queen. But, I’m a daughter of a queen.”

“I’m eighth Cherokee myself. I’m also from the public defender’s office, and have come to talk to you about what happened at the grocery store the other day.”

“Yeah, you be a good *looking* defender.” She rocked and whistled. “I be all by myself. Got no man. I got big beautiful titties, don’t I?” She smiled over her shoulder and talked and cackled. Then she grabbed my tie and fondled it. “Where’d you get that beautiful tie? Oh look at them pretty colors.”

A toilet flushed.

I plucked my tie from her scraped fingers. “Polly, do you know who I am?”

“Yeah, you is from the good looking defender’s office. And you come to see me about my beautiful dogs.” Her eyes narrowed and she leaned closer to me. “You can come around *any* time.”

I pushed my chair against the wall. “Tell me what happened at the grocery store, Polly.”

She palmed her sagging breasts. “I got big tits, don’t I? Ever seen beautiful titties this big? Want to touch ‘em?”

“Do you remember what happened at the grocery store, Polly?”

“Yeah. Mm-hmm.” She rocks and smiles at my tie. “Went to get me some Coca-Cola and cigarettes and some Vienna sausages and mustard to eat for me and my beautiful dogs.” She reached for my tie, but I flung it behind my neck. Then she massaged her breasts. “You a good looking man. That’s the truth.” She rubbed her crotch and moaned.

“Polly the police report says you were exposing your breasts at the grocery store.”

She rocked faster. Touched her dented nose with her bottom lip.

“The police claim that you pulled up your shirt and brassiere and showed everybody at the grocery store your breasts. That’s why you’re in jail.”

Polly mussed her hair and scratched her arms, and her eyes darted at the ceiling, the floor, my eyes, the floor, and my tie. Then she snorted, “*I did not*. I was shopping for chicken breasts and looking for sharp dressed men!” She popped to her feet, chains clanging, almost tipped her chair backwards, waved her index finger back and forth. “No, no. Uh-uh. Uh-uh.” Then round that small space she shuffled, shackles clanging, flip-flops flip-flopping, wheezing and chanting. “I was shopping for chicken breasts and looking for sharp dressed men. Sharp dressed men. Sharp dressed men. Sharp dressed men. Sharp dressed men, yeah-yeah-yeah. Sharp dressed men, yeah-yeah-yeah. Sharp dressed men, yeah-yeah-yeah . . .”

I reached behind me and pushed the buzzer next to the steel door.

Polly chanted and plodded. "Sharp dressed men, yeah-yeah-yeah."

I pushed the buzzer and pushed the buzzer.

Time passed and I heard somebody coming, but it was nobody for us. I buzzed and banged and kicked the door and hollered for help. This went on for ten, "I got to go pee," fifteen, "I got to go real bad" flip-flop, flip-flop, twenty, "Mmm-mmm, mmm-mmm, pee-pee, pee-pee," flip-flop, flip-flop, clink-clink around the room, bent over, hands gripped between her legs. "Sharp dressed men, pee-pee-pee, sharp dressed men, pee-pee-pee," at a whisper now. Round and round and round, flip-flop, flip-flop, flip-flop. And I kicked, demanding to be let out louder, holding down the buzzer, thirty, forty, forty-five minutes . . . becoming hoarse, anticipating Polly to make water anytime. An hour. An hour fifteen.

Keys jingled outside and talking over a walkie-talkie. A key jiggled in the lock, the door opened, and before me was bovine jailer, red-cheeked, sweating, and out of breath, blowing his tuba. "Y'all finished?"

I stared at him a few beats. You stupid bastard, I'm thought.

"Do you know if Polly's been given her meds?"

He shrugged. He blew.

Polly swooshed by me, shackles clinking, flip-flopping. She brushed my arm lightly with her hand, puckered her lips and kissed the inches between us. "Love ya babe."

Poss slouched behind his Dr. Pepper can. Uncle Doc spit into the fire and rubbed his mouth coarsely. "Polly has never tried to kiss me. She ever try to kiss you, Poss?"

Poss shook his head.

Uncle Doc said. "Poss and me have been dealing with poor old Polly for years. As long as she's taking her medicine, she's right pleasant. But then she gets to thinking she's cured and don't need her medicine and starts unraveling like a bad rug and ends up like she did at the grocery store. Hell, she witched my well up at the house yonder."

"She can talk fire out, too," Poss said.

"What?" I asked.

"I burned my hand one day. She was at the office, took hold of my hand, and talked the fire out," Poss said.

"How'd she do that?" I asked.

"I don't know. I ain't fed her, I ain't milked her, so I don't know," Poss said.

"She says some bible verse or something," Uncle Doc said before spitting into the fire. "A little birdie told me about your experience at the jail."

"Who's listening?"

"They're *always* listening."

Poss couldn't suppress some laughter. "You got to laugh to keep from crying," he said.

I chuckled at myself, picked up my beer-can off the dirt, and finish it off before standing and drifting behind an oak to relieve my own bladder. Standing there waiting to make water, I wondered what direction I was facing. East? North? Looking at the sky was no help. I could make not make out star from planet, constellation from galaxy.

When I returned from behind the tree, Uncle Doc pulled out a long wooden pipe and stuffed it with tobacco. He said, "This is what we call our sacred pipe. Don't worry. This ain't nothing illegal. It's just Captain Black."

"Yeah, but this is illegal," Poss said, as he retrieved a Mason jar of clear liquid from the now empty cooler. "Son, this is some of the finest moonshine whiskey this side of Talladega Prison."

Uncle Doc winked at me.

I peered around us into the void beyond the firelight. "Polly also was holding her head as she was walking out into the hall and kept saying in a totally different voice, 'Baby, I hear the bells. I hear the bells. Lawd, Lawd, I hear the death bells. Who dyin'? Somebody dyin.' What the hell does that mean?"

"She hears the death bells," Uncle Doc said.

"The what?"

"Death bells." Poss said.

I looked at Poss and then tried to find that evening star.

"Poor old Polly," Uncle Doc said. "Don't know if it's a gift or a curse. I got a call this morning from her niece. She said that Polly's auntie died. Wanted to know if I could do something about persuading the Sheriff to let her go to the funeral. Until they get her meds evened out she's ain't going anywhere. She'll do about sixty days of D.A. time and then the bastard will let her go. Dogs will be gone. Trailer will be gone. Social workers will have to find her another place to live. She'll eventually get off her meds. Then she'll be right back. D.A. doesn't give a shit that we go through this mess about every six months. Social Services call me, the family calls me, I tell them to call the D.A., and the D.A. tells them to call me. Why me? I haven't got a dime's worth of power. We're right back to where we are now."

Uncle Doc dug into the tobacco and then tamped it into the pipe with his thumb. "But, yep, Polly hears death bells likes she witches wells and puts out fire."

Poss retrieved a couple of styrofoam cups from the cooler. He said, "Son, if you're wondering where the still is hid, I've been coming out here for years and I don't even know where it's at."

"Maybe there ain't a still. You ever thought?" Uncle Doc said.

Poss laughed. "Yessir, maybe it don't exist at all." Poss rubbed his bald head. "Michael, this stuff will take the hair right off your head."

Poss poured some of the moonshine in the cups. I peeked into mine. Poss and Uncle Doc raised their cups. Poss said, "Well, don't let it sit in them there cups too long 'cause it's liable

to eat a hole plum through ‘em.” We all whipped back quick swigs. My gulp was too big. Poss had to wallop me on the back to help me catch my breath. The effect of the moonshine was like breathing in a heart attack.

Uncle Doc pulled out and lit a sprig of sage (where he got it I haven’t a clue). He held the smoking sprig to my face and told me to pull the smoke to my face and inhale it. He circled my head with the sprig while chanting something. Then he did the same for Poss whose face was pouring sweat.

We sat there for a time and watched the flames. Then Uncle Doc lit his pipe and puffed off it. Then he passed the pipe to Poss who drew a couple of puffs before passing it to me. I was going to pass the pipe back to Uncle Doc, but he poured himself another cup of moonshine and got up and started dancing around the fire and chanting. He took a drink of the moonshine, swished it around his mouth, spit it into the fire, and jumped back. A flame swooshed up and out and I smelled burnt hair. Then Uncle Doc spun around on one leg. Poss caught him by the arm and sat him down before he stumbled into the fire. Poss poured more moonshine for himself and Uncle Doc. Uncle Doc turned his cup up. He savored the stuff. “Oh, that’s mighty fine, mighty fine.”

I sipped another cup that Poss poured and watched Poss and Uncle Doc dance and sing arm in arm round the fire. I felt as if I were spinning and floating off the ground. I pulled the cooler next to me and drummed it. Our chanting erupted low as if from below ground and grew to great supplications with our heads raised to the stars like wolves. “He-e-e-e-y ya-a-ah, hey yah yah ah yah ha-a-a-e-y. He-e-e-e-y ya-a-ah, hey yah yah ah yah ha-a-a-e-y.”

Everything got louder and less in focus. Whiskey, fire, chanting, smoking, spitting, drumming, singing, sweating, howling.

Instead of holding the rusted steak knife over me, the Devil was laughing at us from the flames, or maybe he was laughing at the painted aboriginal man dancing in the shadows.

After a time we all got quiet and reflective again, watching the blaze, hearing the wood popping and hissing.

I followed the aimless smoke and realized I was still directionless.

Copyright 2010, Jeff Lacy. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

Jeff Lacy was born and raised in Georgia, and for many years he worked as a public defender in the Atlanta and coastal Georgia area. He received a MFA from the University of Nebraska, and his stories have appeared in *Timber Creek Review*, *Conte*, *The Wrong Tree Review*, *The Legendary*, *Review Americana – A Literary Journal*, *Green Silk Journal*, *Full of Crow*, *Writer’s Bloc (Rutgers)*, *Bring the Ink*, *Sex and Murder Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Offensive*, *Darkest Before the Dawn*, *Mary Magazine*, and *Storyglossia*.