

Tupelo
by Alec Clayton

Excerpt from opening chapter

Everybody had finally fallen asleep when the phone in the hallway rang. Driver pulled himself out of bed to answer it. He grabbed his cane and hobbled on his one good leg to the phone, his slipped foot and cane going swish-bam, swish-bam on the linoleum floor. “Hello. Uh huh. Yeah, this is Kyle Lumpkin. Oh my god, no. Gosh, is it . . . OK, I’ll be there right away.”

“What’s going on?” Punkin asked. She was also awake now and had dashed out into the hall in her robe and slippers.

Driver said, “The store’s on fire. I gotta get down there.” “What store?”

“My store. Our store, goddammit.” “Oh me!”

He hobbled across the floor to grab yesterday’s clothes and his shoe from where he had left it before crawling into bed, put on his coat and hat, attached the prosthetic right leg, which he had been saying for months he needed to replace with one that worked something like a real leg. He rushed to the door. The commotion did not wake the girls. They were finally, as they say, out like a light.

Punkin asked, “You want me to come with you?” “Nah. You stay here with the girls.”

Thank the good lord, she thought, grateful that he didn’t expect her to get dressed and come with him. She had gotten light-headed when she stood up, tossed about by a belly as big as a medicine ball. This pregnancy had been tough, nothing like the first five, just one of many reasons she was convinced it was going to be a boy at last. She had already experienced a couple of false labors, and for the past two weeks she had been telling everyone she knew that the baby was going to come early. “A mother just knows these things.”

Doc Littlejohn conceded that she might be right. A mother does know these things. But he had his own criteria for thinking it was going to be another girl—a combination of the sound of its heartbeat and where the baby’s head rested, low and to the right (as if any part of that baby could be said to be resting; it had been doing summersaults in her belly for the past few months).

“Mark my word,” he said. “I’ve been delivering babies longer than you’ve been alive.”

Driver lost his footing on the icy front porch but kept from falling by grabbing the porch rail. He felt something pull in his back. It felt like someone grabbed the muscles near the lower spine and twisted and tugged as if wringing out a wet towel. His cane went skittering across the slick boards. He tried to ignore the pain and crawled to where his cane stopped, and he pulled himself to a full standing position and walked as quickly and as carefully as he could down the three steps and along the walkway to the garage, slipping his gloves on as he went.

He could smell smoke from eight blocks away as the crow flies.

The air felt as if it could crackle just from his body moving through it. My god, he thought, is this fire going to end everything? All the work, all the doing without to save up enough money to

get the business started? Is this what it's going to be like forever, everything just falling to shit just when it's finally beginning to look like it's going to be OK?

As he drove north past Clark and Magazine, he saw the orange glow in the sky off to the east. Could that be flames from the store? Of course. What else could it be? He turned right on Main Street. There were few cars on the street, because it was late, terribly late. What time was it, anyway? It was well past midnight, but Driver didn't know. He looked to his wrist but realized he had not slipped his watch on. The roads were slick, and the snowflakes were still as broad as drifting leaves. He had to lean forward with his nose almost touching the windshield in order to see. He could see the flames as he got closer, and billowing orange smoke. It must be a big one. Even at this distance he knew in his heart that nothing of the store could be saved. He could visualize melted globs of plastic, balls of nails fused together, shovels without any handles, the old cash register a molten and unrecognizable lump of metal, coins fused together and dollar bills nothing but ash.

He could not get any closer than a block away. Fire trucks had the street blocked and the ground all around was a tangle of hoses, sidewalks and pavement slick and quickly freezing. Icicles hanging from the hose connections. Lumpkin Hardware was a black shell of a building with orange and yellow flames still leaping out of windows and eating through the roof. There was nothing he could do but stand and watch from a distance, shivering in the cold night. There was also little the firemen could do but try and keep the flames from spreading to adjacent buildings.

Mr. Long, who had rushed down to see if it was his laundry building as soon as he heard the sirens, put his arm around Driver's shoulder and said, "This is a mess, my friend. I hope you've got good insurance."

"Nope. Not a bit." "That's a mess for sure."

"I saved for years. Borrowed money. We were just beginning to show a little profit."

"Shit. It's a mess all right. But you'll survive. You'll rise up again, and it won't be long."