

Missing Isaac

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Valerie Fraser Luesse, *Missing Isaac*
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For Dave and my parents

Part I

One

OCTOBER 10, 1962

A sleepy purple twilight wrapped around the farmhouse, its tall windows glowing with warmth from somewhere inside. It was suppertime, and the cool October air smelled of cotton lint and field dust. Inside was an eleven-year-old boy playing checkers with his grandfather. As was his custom lately, he wore a flannel shirt many sizes too big for him.

“Pete, honey, you’ve got a closetful of clothes—why do you insist on wearing that old hand-me-down of your daddy’s?” his mother asked.

“I don’t know,” he said with a shrug. “Cause he gave it to me, I guess.”

There was more to it than that, of course. The truth was that Pete’s father was both his hero and his best friend. There was no one he admired more than Jack McLean, no one he so longed to emulate. Not only that, but he thoroughly enjoyed his father’s company—and Pete could tell the feeling was mutual.

So there he sat at his mother’s kitchen table, wearing his

daddy's shirt and holding a tentative finger on one of two red checkers still remaining on the board. "Okay, Daddy Ballard," he said to his grandfather as he lifted his finger and leaned back in his chair. "Your move." Their checkers game had become a weeknight ritual.

"You sure, son?" his grandfather said with a grin.

"Yes, sir."

Pete's mother peeled a colander of potatoes at the sink as a radio played in the windowsill.

Mrs. Kennedy attended a charity luncheon in Washington this afternoon. The First Lady wore an autumnal suit of red wool crepe . . .

Daddy Ballard made the only remaining move left to him. Pete's face lit up when he saw his opportunity—the long-awaited winning jump.

"I won! I finally won!" he cried as his grandfather laughed. "Wanna play again?"

His mother shook her head. "Now, Pete, you know your daddy'll be home before too much long—"

She was interrupted by the blaring of a truck horn. It blew and blew all the way from the county blacktop, and you could hear the tires slinging gravel as they sped up the driveway and into the backyard. Pete looked at his mother, whose face had frozen in fear and dread.

All three of them had heard it—the split-second transformation of ordinary sounds into a cry of alarm. Truck horns, tires churning gravel, men yelling to be heard over machinery—these were everyday background noises on the farm. But when something went wrong, when someone got

hurt, those very same sounds took on an urgent tenor. You could hear it. You could feel it in your bones.

“Y’all in there? Come quick!” It was Isaac, one of Daddy Ballard’s field hands, who helped Pete’s father work the cotton.

The adults bolted for Isaac’s truck, with Pete leaping over the tailgate and crouching in back before they had time to tell him not to. Cold wind blasted his face as they raced down the narrow strip of pavement to a dirt road that divided two sprawling cotton fields. He had to hold on tight as Isaac drove straight through the cotton, bouncing over furrows and tearing through tall, brittle stalks to get to a giant ball of light glowing in the distance.

So many trucks were beaming headlights onto the accident that it looked like a football stadium on Friday night. Chains rattled and clouds of red dust swirled everywhere as the field hands and Pete’s uncles—summoned from their own family farm—made a frantic attempt at a rescue.

“Shut that engine off!”

“Get the slack out! I said get the slack out!”

“Back up, back up, back up!”

“Can you see him? I said can you *see* him!”

Daddy Ballard held Pete’s mother back.

“Jack!” She screamed his name over and over and over.

At the center of it all was a massive red machine, his father’s cotton picker, turned upside down in a sinkhole like a cork in a bottle. One of its back wheels was still spinning against the night sky, like it was trying to run over the moon. Pete could hear—or maybe he just imagined—clods of red clay splashing into the watery sinkhole far below the snowy clouds of cotton. And he knew, without anybody telling him, that his father was lost.

Spotting him standing beside the truck, wide-eyed and horrified, Isaac came to pick him up. But with nowhere to take him, Isaac just walked around and around the truck, Pete's legs dangling like a rag doll.

"You gonna be alright. You gonna be alright. We gonna make it alright." Isaac was shaking.

Pete heard a loud, booming crash as the trucks pulled the picker over onto its side to clear the hole.

"There he is! Lower me down! Hurry!" That was Uncle Danny, his father's oldest brother. Isaac had stopped in a spot that kept Pete's back to the accident. "Pull! Ever'body pull harder!"

There was a momentary silence before Pete heard the sound of water dripping off of something heavy. It reminded him of the sound his father's Sunday shirts made when his mother hand-washed them, plunging the saturated cloth up and down in the sink.

Soon the field hands began to moan. "Sweet Jesus. Mister Jack . . ."

Only then did Pete realize it—Isaac was soaking wet.