

Focal and Idey

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Idey Ponder whistled softly to himself as he shuffled his lanky body along behind the hounds. "Oh, the dead are gone and the light is new..." he mouthed the words to the tune. The sun had singed his angular face to a deep tan and turned his freckles to dark flecks. His thick blond hair was stark as snow.

Miles of spongy earth, clumps of slash pine, sinks and ponds overgrown with grasses lay behind him in the swamp. The odor from pools of oil seepage tainted the damp air.

A tin-roofed shack in the distance poked its squat form from the earth. Focal Tarson, wearing a XXL plaid shirt and khakis, sat on the front porch in an oversize rocking chair going back and forth in a rhythm constant as a frog's croak.

Dropping his whittling, Focal looked up over his thick glasses as the dogs approached and Idey emerged from the recesses of the swamp. Near the foot of the steps, Idey shook himself like one of the pack and knocked the mud off his high-topped boots.

Focal whooped in surprise. "Holler first – then come, Idey! Been alone so long since Laurie left, I didn't even hear the hounds."

"They say you're plenty short on company," Idey said. "But your real friend's here now."

"Don't make no sense," Focal muttered. "She was lucky to marry at all with that ma of hers doing swamp spells and such. Everybody wants away from a family like that but an old woodcarving man like me."

Idey moved closer and scattered a pile of wood chips with his foot. He lifted his head like a rooster crowing, but what came out was an imitation of Focal's voice, thin and trembling. "This here long piece of cypress got to be a gator. That's what it tells me." Abruptly, he changed to his own rasping tones. "If you had special protection, Focal, why'd so many things go wrong?"

"No telling," Focal shaved a thin curl of wood onto the ground. As he bent forward, his khakis gaped open at the waist. "She threw the best beads I ever carved away. Found the broke string and a few by our bed."

"She done plenty before she left," Idey said with bitterness. "After she told me not to come over no more, you should have knowed something was wrong."

He brushed aimlessly at his pants leg. "If your best friend ain't welcome unless your woman's ailing and needs bleeding..."

"You didn't understood, Idey. She was only a youngster, a little tender, and it takes getting used to me. Never thought she'd hit one of them women's moods and go off after the bleeding."

"Damn right I didn't understand till you kept repeating how good it would be to have things friendly like they used to be. Well, I took care of it for you. You ready to go hunting?"

Focal glanced in the direction of the swamp and then up at the cloudy sky. "The weather don't look none too good," he said, running a leathery hand along the side of his balding head. "We got the waxing moon all right, but following the signs ain't all."

Idey spat into the center of a worn-out rubber tire near the porch, smiled and snorted. "What's the matter with you? You afraid of

haunts now? I always thought Old Man Tarson's boy would keep a lot of swamp women busy hatching his little terrapins. Why, you going to be old before your time worrying so much over one woman."

You talk like I'm in trouble, Idey. But I just feel sad thinking about Laurie. Haven't done much since she left. She was so little, came from her ma straight to me. Too bad she wanted her own way so much."

"If you're coming, come on," Idey snapped. "They seen possum over by Lawson's Slick." He kicked away the hounds sniffing his khaki cuffs and started down the rise.

On the porch, Focal pushed the whittling knife into its leather sheath and wiped his hands on the front of his grimy shift, once a fancy affair. He eased himself sluggishly out of the rocking chair like one of the elders and steadied himself for a minute on its worn arms. A slight wind from the direction of the swamp lifted his thin hair like fingers.

"Get up, Rez," Focal told a grizzled hound sprawled on the corner of the porch. He prodded the dog with his foot. "Come on, boy, we're going to get us a possum." He reached inside the door of the shack and gingerly picked up Old Man Tarson's rifle. Glinting on the silver stock, a deeply-etched parade of swamp animals moved toward the trigger.

Idey watched Focal with envy as he patted the stock, "Give you a good price on that piece and take it off your hands. He said it would be mine someday."

"Old Man hadn't willed it away before he died." Focal paused to think. "I can't see clear to letting it out of the family. But you'd sure be more comfortable than me with them things crawling over it."

"Sure would. Lot I'd do for that piece," Idey chuckled as he pulled an untanned possum skin from a burlap tote bag looped over

his belt. The dogs yelped with excitement when he let them sniff it and scattered toward the river bottom. Rez trailed behind them. "One damn dog left," Idey said. "She took most everything, alright." He turned and began walking downhill.

Focal caught up, bringing the rifle and two kerosene lanterns. "It's rain coming, for sure," he said. "Swamp's too wild for me. Comes right up to the porch and all but goes inside the house."

"Has gone inside," Idey said, "or don't you remember that either? Get them lanterns lighted."

His hands shaking, Focal lighted the lanterns as the younger man held them. The two made their way into the swamp, each step slathering more of the heavy, smelly mud onto their boots.

Focal, breathing with difficulty in the humid air, soon lessened his pace. Idey went on ahead.

"Wait up," Focal shouted. "I don't feel too good. Felt bad since Laurie" – he broke off suddenly at the victory yell of an unknown swamp animal. Focal felt the hair at the back of his neck bristle. The cry seemed to attract other noises from all over the swamp that bubbled and gurgled, subterranean sounds, the death scream of a care-less bird. The confusion spread through the green maze like a crown fire in the treetops.

"Them spirits is mighty unhappy today, Idey," he shouted. "They must've got some reason. Listen, there's half a jar of shine back there I been saving. We could go back and drink that. Let's come possum hunting tomorrow after the rain."

Idey stopped walking and turned to stare at Focal hurrying toward him. "Ain't that class!" he smirked with his eyes fixed on Focal's chest. "What you wearing your wedding shirt for?"

Focal glanced down embarrassedly at his stained shirt and back to Idey's face before him. He smiled like a three-year-old. "I put it on when I get lonesome for Laurie."

"What you wearing that wedding shirt for?" Idey stubbornly repeated. "Laurie being gone after the bleeding, it don't seem right." He headed further into the swamp.

As Idey disappeared around the side of a thick clump of sweet gum, Focal called out. "I'm wearing this shirt because my wife never came back. You're a good friend, Idey, but no old man ought to do for himself. Soon I'm going to marry Lucy Simons. But she better like my friends."

Reappearing among the trees, Idey grinned so hard the skin under his eyes puffed. "That's right. Before you married Laurie and come over to this side of the swamp, I always said that. Course you was the one married. You never was left alone until now."

"Let's go back," Focal whined. "I don't like this sky."

"You heard me ask you once before? We passed the place where we go through to Lawson's Slick anyway, and that's where you said the possum was. Why don't we build a fire and set by it like usual?"

"I ain't seen you so poorly in a long time," Idey said softly. "What you wearing that woman's wedding shirt for? Only good thing she ever made with her hands."

"It's my shirt and she don't come back. Why?" Tears squeezed out of his eyes and ran down his wrinkled face. "Your bleeding should have perked her up so she'd stay. She helped, Idey."

"You think help," Idey snarled. "Sold your dogs, cleared out your friends."

"She needed things," Focal pleaded for understanding. "Hounds was sold high. She and friends didn't get on. Can't hold that against her. Her kin come."

"Friends," Idey hesitated. "I was the only one. I stayed. And you tell me you ready to go do the same thing again." He uncurled his fingers from the handle of the lantern and it dropped to the ground. As he brought his boot down on it, the glass cracked and kerosene poured out. He kicked it off the path. "Bring that other light over here."

Focal stood still. "Answer me about this hunt."

"I told you that there was possums in Lawson's Slick, but what I didn't tell you was there's more signs over toward Nowhere Waller. Don't it make sense we take the most while we can?"

"Maybe you're right, but slacken up," Focal answered. "I can't go so fast. I told you I wasn't feeling good. What's wrong with you anyway?"

"Nothing. Always like a possum hunt," he spoke to the swamp ahead. "If we don't find possum, we'll sure find something."

The smell of rain spread its tendrils through the darkening marshland. The dank, melancholy atmosphere increased Focal's uneasiness. Wisps of steam escaped from cracks in the great mire.

"Look! It's Laurie! She's here!" Focal shouted. His arm jerked spasmodically toward a steam formation slithering along one side of the narrow path they followed. Hanging limply between two trees laden with mistletoe, the smokelike apparition radiated a golden glow. A breath of fetid air dispersed it as Idey came near with the lantern.

"Where? Where's Laurie?" He held the lantern high and examined the darkness with hunter's eyes. "Nothing's there. Laurie's been gone three months. Making slime by now."

A bolt of lightning cleft a cypress tree in the distance. Focal stood transfixed in the center of the path; his ears rang with the sound. Howls of surprise came from one of the dogs somewhere in the swamp. "Rez," Focal spoke aloud, rushing blindly toward the flaming tree. The fire gave an ochre sheen to the tree in the slowly falling rain.

Noiselessly, Idey reached Focal, who had stopped before the tree. "What happened to Rez?"

His energy spent, Focal burst into tears. "He skittered off the waller alone, I guess. Help me find him, Idey."

"Fine," Idey agreed. "That was the one hound Laurie liked..."

Focal stepped away from him, whimpering, "Don't, Idey. We already talked too much about her. Maybe something will come you keep calling like that."

"Focal, I'm telling you one more time. I took care of it for you. She's gone. I buried her behind your place. If you don't quit putting on, I'm going to leave you here alone. We got us a possum hunt, not a haunt storytell."

"I just don't know what's the matter, Idey. Thought you said we couldn't find her when we come back to the shack after drinking all that shine. Did you find her while I was dozing?" As he talked, a purple flower drifted down from the vines. He cradled the blossom in his hands and stared at it. "Laurie," he moaned, "Laurie, she done it. I seen no flower like this but once on the day we was married. She wore it in her hair."

Idey took the flower and pressed it between his palms. He dropped the crushed blossom in the mud and wiped his hands on his trousers. "She died after the bleeding and I buried her. What else you want?"

Looking blankly at Idey's face, Focal whispered, "I want to go back. I'm sick."

"Why don't you lead the way after Rez instead?" Idey suggested. "Old dog gets lost sometimes. Go ahead with this and I'll follow. Hunt's still on." He shoved the lantern into Focal's hands.

Focal nodded dazedly and stood completely still in the steady rain to listen for the dog. He heard a low, bubbling sound close to the path. Clearing his way through the vines, he emerged on top of a bar of land overlooking a slime pit. The plop-plop rhythm of the mud increased in intensity and pitch, at the same time keeping its two-syllable chant. As he tried to focus his eyes on the pit itself, the light from the lantern touched a long, curling piece of moss hanging from one of the trees around the pit. The hairlike, green substance shone a festered yellow. Focal jumped at first, but then, slyly smiling, set the lantern on the ground. He took Old Man's rifle, leaned forward and, trembling, squeezed off a shot. The moss fell from the tree as the shot, in its straight line, went harmlessly above the tree. It rested, gleaming, on the far side of the pit. The sound of the shot echoed again and again through the swamp like water dripping into a hollow tree trunk.

A frenzied rustling in the underbrush on the side of the slime pit opposite Focal roused him further. He watched fearfully as a dog with matted fur and bleeding bramble scratches burrowed out of the thick foliage. It advanced cautiously to the strand of moss at the edge of the bubbling mud. Focal recognized his hound, Rez.

The dog put one paw onto the slime, and then stepped lightly into the pit. He swiveled his dripping tongue toward the moss and began a cautious dissection of it.

At first, he nibbled. He put one paw on the moss to steady it, but it pushed deeper into the soft mud instead. Suddenly, Rez whined and barked sharply. His paws and tail started to sink to the pit along with what was left of the moss, caught between his teeth. He tried desperately to move his paws, to free himself, but only sank deeper. Frothing at the mouth, he still held the moss in his teeth.

Focal started around the side of the pit. He got closer and his boots sank into the mud all the way up to the top. He watched helplessly as the dog sank down into the chanting slime. Finally, only Rez's moss-tipped muzzle showed.

A high-pitched humming started in Focal's head. Or was it from the pit itself? "What's that?" he said aloud. At first, it sounded like Idey's tune, but it crescendoed into a wail. With a final contraction, the slime churned the dog under, leaving a bit of moss, light and luminous as a woman's hair on the surface.

Weakly, Focal sat down and began wiping his face with the tail of his shirt when he noticed a strangely sweet odor. It was not sweat, his mind told him, yet it came from the cloth. As the thought grew, he rose from the ground. "Laurie's here now cause I'm wearing this shirt," he whispered to the pit. "I got her hair, but she got Rez."

Ripping the dirty fabric from collar to waist, he stripped it from his body and tossed it into the pit. It took some time, but as it began to turn the color of the slime beneath, he stood with clenched hands, almost in prayer.

Dogs howled, each in a different key blending at the end into a dirge. Focal backed away from the slime pit and the remnants of the shirt. About twenty feet away, Idey held the tote bag above his head.

Hounds surrounded him, leaping and yowling. One old beast with a lolling tongue broke from the pack and ran toward Focal. He bayed once and sidled away. Focal's eyes closed into a squint. The dog looked like Rez.

"You need to get a hold of them dogs, Idey," Focal yelled. "They ain't even treed one possum yet."

"You don't know," Idey shouted back. "They so excited they ate two possum already." He swung the tote bag around his head in a tantalizing circle and threw it into a thicket. The dogs left deep claw marks in the earth as they skidded after it.

Focal moved closer to Idey. "No good dog ever eats possum while he's hunting. That hound come at me looked like Rez. He yours?"

"Never seen him before." Idey watched the brush as it quivered with the motion of the dogs, and then turned to Focal. "What happened to your wedding shirt?"

"Listen, Idey, let me tell you why I asked for Rez." Focal's voice cracked. "He got stuck in that slime after a piece of hair and he went under and died and..."

"I'm ashamed of you," Idey interrupted. "Nothing different about my dogs. Nothing different about dogs dying all sorts of ways. Where's your wedding shirt?"

"Just you wait, I'm not finished. He went under anyway, and the slime was humming that song you sing." Focal bobbed his head up and down excitedly. "I didn't know where it was coming from until I seen that moss laying on top shining."

"Uh-huh," Idey responded. "Where's that shirt you getting married in again. Change your mind? Going to tell me it made the haunt come?"

"That's it!" Focal proudly replied. "Caught myself rubbing my face with it smelling like the dead and I figured out how to end my troubles with Laurie quick. I'll marry Lucy, shirt or no."

"You lose it?" Idey asked.

"I throwed it on that slime. Know it was peculiar then, most like conjure."

"Know what? Conjure don't need to be on you." He ran his thin tongue across his bottom lip. "Someone could just think it."

"Spirits is gone, though," Focal argued. "You know that shirt brought Laurie on."

"I know you're some ungrateful friend talking to me about marrying that other woman. Hell, I killed Laurie for you with a little extra bleeding when you wasn't there. Now you shut me out again," Idey said bitterly. "Get home by yourself." He disappeared into the gloominess of a thicket with the remaining lantern.

As the light receded, Focal's body shook in the dampness and an unfamiliar pain started at the base of his neck and crowded into his skull.

"What'd you say about Laurie?" Focal called after Idey. "I'm so tired I hear wrong. Don't listen right after her name's spoke." A volley of barking startled him into movement and he rushed toward the noises, Old Man's rifle dangling from the crook of his arm.

As he made his way through the brush, the weapon caught in the lavish coils of a creeper. Focal fell down, hitting his belly on a hard object that flickered in the blackness, and rolled heavily into a hole beside the path. He lay stunned for a few minutes until pain and a strong smell of burning kerosene from Idey's discarded lantern revived him. His trousers blazed as he struggled to his feet. He slapped

uselessly at the flames as they engulfed him. Fire wreathed his head and he grasped wildly at the rain-slick dirt on the sides of the hole. "Idey!" he screamed. "Help me! Laurie!" Frantically, he threw himself against the sides of the pit.

Victory yelps from the dogs in the distance drew Focal's eyes upward to the path. Idey gazed down vacantly. Focal held out his flaming arms toward him.

"My how I love a possum hunt," Idey said, and bent down to where the rifle lay. He did not hear the soft footfalls behind him. □