

M A R C H E S S

THE

GILLESPIE COUNTY FAIR

A N O V E L



THE

GILLESPIE COUNTY FAIR

A N O V E L

M A R C H E S S



GREENLEAF
BOOK GROUP PRESS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press
Austin, Texas
www.gbgroup.com

Copyright ©2019 Marc Hess

All rights reserved.

Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright law. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the copyright holder.

Distributed by Greenleaf Book Group

For ordering information or special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact
Greenleaf Book Group at PO Box 91869, Austin, TX 78709, 512.891.6100.

Design and composition by Greenleaf Book

Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group

Cover images: ©Maverick C. Used under license from Shutterstock.com, ©Gordana Sermek. Used under license from Shutterstock.com, ©Chuck Wagner. Used under license from Shutterstock.com, ©Hank Shiffman. Used under license from Shutterstock.com, ©Forolunate LLC. Used under license from Shutterstock.com, ©Delcroix Romain. Used under license from Shutterstock.com, Back cover image: ©Jacqueline Cooper. Used under license from istockphoto.com.

Author photo courtesy of White Oak Studio, Fredericksburg, Texas

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 978-1-62634-604-8

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62634-605-5

Part of the Tree Neutral® program, which offsets the number of trees consumed in the production and printing of this book by taking proactive steps, such as planting trees in direct proportion to the number of trees used: www.treeneutral.com



Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

19 20 21 22 23 24 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

*To Marc and Janet Bennett, who dragged
me down here against my will.*

For that I am eternally grateful.

Contents

Acknowledgments xi

An Enduring Heritage 1

A Night in Old Fredericksburg 45

The Last Road Trip of Max Ritzi 81

The Sin That Transcends Generations 141

Evening Prayers 167

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writers of fiction spend an inordinate amount of time alone in their cave—inside their own heads—toiling to coax a complete world out of a blank sheet of paper. That is what it takes to get a good story. But writers need to pick up a few angels along the way in order to make that story into a book that can be shared with others. Steve Adams, my friend in letters and Writing Coach, taught me that. Without his persistent encouragement and critical perspective you would not be reading this.

My first developmental editor, Jo-Ann English, found a story in the mess of words that I showed to her and gave me a methodology for moving forward.

Throughout this writer's journey and throughout my life, Doug Stevenson has been my most enduring friend and the harshest critic of my work.

Jodi Egerton kept the wheels on when I thought I should be saving the entire world in the pages of this one book. "Stop that," she insisted. I did.

David Aretha, with Austin's Yellow Bird editors, and Donna Snow Robinson did the painstaking, nit-picky (or is it pernickety?) copy editing of this manuscript as it went through fourteen revisions.

Marc Hess

It was my editor at Greenleaf, Amy Dorta McIlwaine, who helped baste the diction and flavor these words to make them taste really good.

More than anywhere else my depth as a writer grew through my long-time involvement with The Writers League of Texas—an invaluable resource for writers at all stages of their journey.

But most of all it was Lorrie, who lured me out onto the precipice with that wry smile of hers, brought her lips up to my wincing ear, and whispered, “Say Geronimo!”

An Enduring Heritage

There was no need to switch on the bathroom light. He knew where everything was, and besides, it wasn't his bladder that had him traipsing around in the dark. It was a different kind of rousing in his gut—a primal sense that something terrible was stirring.

He toed his way across the bedroom, where his wife lay snuggled in the sheets as if she were chilly. The nightstand clock told him that he could slip in beside her and catch another hour of sleep, but a blush of color flickering in the night sky lured him out onto the breezeless terrace instead. A bolt of adrenaline shot through his body before his mind registered what he was seeing.

In the town below, a fire billowed skyward like the blossom of some exotic flower: so rich and majestic that an entire neighborhood danced in its orange glow while its flames tongued a false dawn out of a black sky. Where, exactly, and how big? It was hard to guess from his hillside perch. Could be any one of

those old stone workshops down along the creek. Whichever one it was, this would be an absolute disaster for one of the old families of Fredericksburg.

He threw on the bedroom lights, jolting his wife from her sleep as he crashed about, grabbing for his clothes.

“Fire. Down Lincoln Street. Near the creek. Where are my new boots?” He shot out of the room and then back in again. “It’s a doozie, too. Someone’s gonna be out a lot of building.”

Cora Lynn sat up and pulled the retainer from her mouth. “Well, call the fire department.”

“They’re already there.” He pushed his shirttail into his jeans while scanning the closet. There were probably six pairs of boots in there, but not the ones he wanted.

“So, what are *you* going to do? You’re not a fireman.”

He answered her with a shrug that fell somewhere between *Don’t you get it?* and *I don’t know*.

But she wasn’t going to let it go. “You just let the fire department handle this, sugar.”

On his way out the door, he called back to her. “You know it’s going to be someone we know.” Then, from further away: “Where the hell are my new ostrich-skin boots?”

“Honey!” she called after him, then fell back against her pillow. “Turn off the light.”

He stuck his head back in the door. “Found ’em.”

• • •

Heat singed the leaves on the old oak trees that lined Lincoln Street, where a rookie cop was rolling out yellow tape to block off the area. He walked right past the officer, mesmerized by the grandeur of it all, one hand holding the brim of his Resistol against the heat.

The Gillespie County Fair

“Sorry, sir,” the cop called out. “This is an active fire zone. You can’t—”

“That’s okay, son.” He hurried by without making eye contact. “I’m Carel Geische.”

The scorch of the blaze pressed against his body and warmed his cheeks. The fire trucks and all the grisly action were playing out on the far side of the one-lane bridge. Dissolving into the blazing crucible was the old Ortner Gingerbread Trim factory, where three generations of Ortners had cut and pieced frieze boards into a Bavarian-style latticework that used to be popular in the old cottages of Fredericksburg. This morning that material provided the ideal tinder for a Class A fire that would devour every timber, collapse every doorjamb, and melt away the wavy crown glass windows of the old mill. After this fire, even those fourteen-inch limestone block walls would be charred—but still standing.

What a perfect location, Carel thought. It was just far enough off Main Street to avoid the zoning restrictions of the Historic District and there was the quick access to the San Antonio highway—the perfect location for professional office suites built in the signature Geische, neo-Hill Country style: burnt limestone walls with rustic beams but none of that old gingerbread trim.

The greedy flames reflected in the plate glass windows of Ritzi Agricultural Equipment, the first shop across the bridge, where Carel’s gaze found the plug-shaped Heinie Ortner standing with the willowy Jock Ritzi, two grown men who ran the enterprises their fathers had started on opposite sides of the creek. Carel approached them with the demeanor of a summons server—somber and erect. When he was within reach, Carel threw his arms around Heinie and took his old friend in a bear hug.

“Looks bad, Heinie. Real bad.”

It was Jock who looked like he was on the brink of tears. “Look at that.” He gestured with his chin as if none of them had seen the fire yet. “Looks to me like you’re gonna lose it all. Everything.”

Heinie was the calmer of the two—just standing there, his head bobbing up and down, responding to every sympathetic comment with some random biblical reference. “Everything has a purpose. We can’t know His plan.”

The three of them stood in a row, each one watching the fire from under the brim of his cowboy hat, dolefully going through a litany of what was lost.

“All those template-tables my pa and my *opa* made before I was even born,” Heinie mumbled. “Gone. Can’t be made again.”

They shook their heads in unison.

“That old Kluge embossing press y’all hauled over from Germany,” Jock remembered. “Probably the last one of its kind.”

“Oh, we got that out a couple weeks ago,” Heinie told them. “It’s out in our barn now.”

“What’d you go and do that for?” Jock asked.

“Oh, we’re gonna fix it up. Sell it. It’s worth some money, you know.”

When the tallest of the flames could no longer reach over the top of the limestone walls, the first streaks of the true dawn lapped the horizon, absorbing the colors of the fire and promising another hot day across the Texas Hill Country.

Jock turned to their friend. “You’ve got this insured, right?”

“Sure thing. Yeah. I figure I’m gonna take away some seventy-three, eight hundred.”

Carel slowly turned his eyes to the shorter of his two buddies, keen to catch the expression on Heinie’s face when he answered the next question. “Seventy-three thousand, eight

The Gillespie County Fair

hundred dollars. That's a pretty precise number. How do you know that?"

Heinie thrust his hands down into the pockets of his Carhartt overalls, his head still bobbing under that black hat of his. "Well, we checked on that already. A bit ago."

"Un-huh," Carel acknowledged.

Jock nodded too. Then they all returned their stares to the slow-burning remnants of the millworks and stood in uneasy silence. In those coals Carel saw yet another small piece of his hometown that was gone forever.

Struggling with a reverence for the moment and an impatience welling up inside him, Carel broke into the awkward hush. "Hey, Jock. Can we use your office for a moment?"

"Sure."

The three men each put a hand to their hat as they ducked under a garage door to enter the Ritzis' workshop. Jock led them across the concrete floor in darkness and then flicked a light on to reveal a cramped office swollen with dented file cabinets and odd machine parts.

Carel sat down in the chair at the desk, which was divided into two messy parts by a fat-back computer monitor. Behind him, Jock went to a small window to switch on the air conditioner. Heinie had to wait until Jock came around and lifted a stack of file folders off the seat of another chair before he could sit too.

Carel removed his Resistol and placed it on the desk before him. "You got any coffee?"

"Sure," Jock responded, "I'll get y'all some," and he left the two of them alone in his office, letting the door shut behind him.

Carel put his elbows on the desk and leaned into Heinie's face. "If you listen to anything I say, old buddy . . ." He left a

pause long enough for Heinie to realize that this was serious. "You got to listen to me now." He stared at Heinie until he was certain that he had his friend's full attention. "Don't you file that insurance claim."

Heinie furrowed his brow, anger welling up in his eyes. "That's no business of yours, Mr. Geische. I just lost everything I own. That money is going to get me paid off. Up and goin' again."

"They're going to figure out you torched your own place, and you won't get nothing but a stretch of time down in the Huntsville state pen."

"What are you talkin' about?" Heinie jumped to his feet, his fists clenched, ready to fight. "I didn't do nothin' like you're sayin'."

Carel held his palms up and softened his eyes. "I don't know anything, Heinie. And I wouldn't say anything if I did." He gestured, and Heinie sat back down. "And those guys down at the volunteer fire department aren't going to go looking for anything either."

"Ya don't think so?"

"*Macht nichts*. They're only going to talk about this one until the next one comes along. Then they'll just forget about it." Carel's eyes narrowed. "But before those insurance guys lay out one dime, they're going to find out how that fire got started."

Heinie's entire face dropped into his jowls. His breathing went shallow, almost panting, but his eyes never left Carel's.

"They're going to bring a special team up here from San Antonio. They'll shine around one of those blue lights on all the burnt marks." Carel swung his arm through the air to mimic how they might work it. "They'll have a fancy chemistry set that'll tell them everything: where it started, how fast it spread, how hot it got." He paused. "And what started it."

The Gillespie County Fair

“Oh, *Scheiße!*” Heinie sank down in his chair, removed his hat, wiped his brow, and put the hat back on. “I didn’t think they’d bring one of those things down here.”

“I really don’t know how all that works, but they probably can’t do an investigation unless you file a claim.”

“And I was really . . . really . . .”

“I know you were.” They sat in heavy silence without making eye contact until Carel spoke up. “I might be able to help you out, buddy.”

Heinie raised his eyes hopefully.

“What if I buy the property from you?”

“You mean . . . Won’t that look kind of funky?”

“I would have to buy it from you before the fire.”

Heinie’s face screwed up in confusion.

“We’ll have to backdate some documents. When was the last time you spoke to your insurance company?”

“Last week of July.”

“Okay. I’ll have to get it dated before that. It’ll be a letter of intent to buy. With some cash money up front for earnest. Something to get you going for now.” Carel could see that Heinie wasn’t fully following how this plan might work, but the man was desperate for a way out. “Of course we’ll have to settle on a value after the fire for a final sell price of, say . . .” Carel shrugged. “Twenty grand.”

“Twenty grand!” shouted Heinie, coming out of his seat again. “I was going to get more than seventy-three from insurance.”

Carel shook his head. “You were going to jail, buddy.”

Heinie threw up his hands as though he could fight his way out of this trap. “*Gott verdammt!*” he shouted. After exhausting himself with air punches, he fell back into the chair and squirmed around for a bit.

When Heinie stopped his contortions at last, Carel stood and put his hat on, rounded the desk, and held out his hand—the time-honored way that old Fredericksburg families sealed their agreements.

Heinie gave him a bitter look but took his hand.

Carel held the handshake firmly. “I’ll get the paperwork done. You’ll just have to sign it all.”

“I will, Carel. And I guess . . . I guess I should thank you. But damn it all.”

“I know. This isn’t what I wanted to happen, either. But I’m glad that I was here to help you out.”

Jock kicked the door open with his boot, struggling as he clutched three Styrofoam cups steaming with coffee. “First pot. I had to get the water heated up and all.”

Carel took one cup off Jock’s hands. “Hard day, buddy.” Carel gave Heinie a reassuring pat on the shoulder and walked out the door, calling back over his shoulder, “Thanks for the coffee, Jock.”

• • •

Including its clock tower, the bank on the corner of Main and Llano was the tallest in a block of two-story buildings that stretched from the little shops wrapped around the Marktplatz all the way down to the old Nimitz Hotel, now a museum. One street: That was pretty much all there was to Fredericksburg, a small dot on a Texas road map that reminded visitors of a quaint hometown where they imagined that they would have liked to spend their childhood.

Outside the bank, a teller was setting out a board that advertised the Rate of the Day like a burger joint would announce the daily special. Carel grabbed the door before it closed behind her.

The Gillespie County Fair

“Oh, Mr. Geische,” the teller called after him. “You can’t go in yet. The bank isn’t open until—”

“That’s okay, sweetheart. I’m here to see Mr. Schrubb.”

Charles Schrubb, an old school chum, had inherited the bank president’s position from his father back when it was called the Gillespie County Savings and Loan. Now he was the branch manager working for new owners in Houston. Carel crossed through his lobby, greeting several of the bank employees by their first names before swinging into Schrubb’s office as if it were a public restroom.

Carel dropped himself into one of the deep leather chairs without so much as a glance at the deer head mounted on the wall above it. He cleared a spot on Schrubb’s desk where he could set his Resistol. “I need about fifty grand. Short term.”

“You are truly amazing, Carel.” By his broad grin, Schrubb seemed amused by the request, but his tone was brusque. “Can you even grasp how overextended you are at this point in time? End of this month, the Loan Committee meets here, and one of our agenda items is ‘Carel Geische, Foreclosure.’ We have a whole agenda item devoted just to you, Carel.” He paused, squinting across the desk. “We have already sent you a thirty-day demand letter. Didn’t you get that?”

“Yeah, I got that.” Carel shrugged it off. “And that’s what I’m here to talk about. How to get you paid off. The sooner I can get this fifty, the sooner I can get back into the good graces of your illustrious financial institution.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Schrubb turned his attention to something that had popped up on his computer monitor.

“I’m making good on a letter of intent to buy the Ortner Gingerbread Trim shop.”

Schrubb shot up like a jack-in-the-box. “The one that’s still on fire! You are unbelievable, Carel.” He leaned forward and

pushed a button on his desk phone. “Beverly. Are you there? I have Carel Geische in my office. You have to hear this. And I need a witness. Bring a tape recorder.”

Beverly had become the senior loan officer when Schrubb became branch manager—she moved up when he went down. She stepped into the room now with a tin smile and a dry “Good morning, Carel.”

“Bev.” He nodded. They had dated once. Just once.

Neither offered a handshake, but Carel scooted to the other chair, offering her the seat next to him. Beverly, however—a little overdressed for mid-August in South Texas—preferred to stand, probably to keep the wrinkles out of her crisp business suit.

“This is about the Ortner family, who just lost everything they ever worked for.” Carel put on his best puppy-dog face. “A while ago I signed an LOI with Heinie. To buy the land under his shop. Now, after what happened this morning, I just can’t go back on it.”

Beverly was studying him with an acrimonious look that reminded Carel of the end of that one date. Carel turned to Schrubb. “We graduated high school with him. You dated his sister.”

“His cousin.” Schrubb was quick to set the record straight. “And that was just for one football season. We just went out so she could see his games.”

Carel waved away Schrubb’s comment. “The Ortners have been family here since forever. When this was your daddy’s bank, it took care of the families who founded this town.”

“That’s why it’s not my daddy’s bank anymore.” Schrubb filled his cheeks with air and let it out slowly as he leaned back in his creaky leather chair. “This is not the bank it used to be. Our loans are underwritten in Houston now.”

The Gillespie County Fair

Carel leaned in. "It's not about the money, Chuckie."

Schrubb winced at Carel's use of his grade-school nickname.

"This is about who we are and whose side you're on," Carel continued. "Are we really going to sell out the founding fathers of Fredericksburg for some quick tourist dollars?"

"It's not like that at all, Carel." Schrubb gestured to a neat stack of file folders on his desk. "We're the local bank. Most of our loan dollars go right back into this community."

"That's what your Houston-printed brochures say, but look at 'em." Carel reached across the desk, almost touching the file folders on his desk. "Any local family names on that big stack of approved loans? Or is it all just tax write-offs and hobby wineries for the rich yuppies who come down here and don't really cotton to the gritty side of quaint. While we,"—he pounded his chest—"the families that built this town, are going extinct."

Carel caught Beverly trying to disguise her smirk by turning her attention to the customers meandering into the lobby now that the bank was open for business.

Schrubb leaned across his desk, looking Carel in the eye. "Not that we're going to put up any money, Carel, but just out of curiosity, what were you going to do with Ortner's place?"

"Historical restoration!" Carel's arms flew into the air. "I am doing what I can to hang on to our way of life."

Schrubb was shaking his head. "Noble causes don't make good investments, Carel. It's a—"

Before Schrubb could finish, Carel's phone rang. He stood and drew it from his holster, quick as a six-gun, then flicked it open while pointing a finger at Schrubb. "That's Houston talking, *alter Freund*." Then, into his phone: "What?"

Beverly looked at her watch, then stepped right up into Carel's face. "Take your call outside. We conduct bank business here."

Carel covered his phone with his hand. “Excuse me, Bev, but it was *you* who busted into *my* meeting.”

“You’re not *in* a meeting,” she hissed up at him. “You’re talking on your phone.”

Ignoring her, Carel returned to his call, louder than before. “They’re a bunch of old Krauts, for God’s sake. You don’t get paid to speak to the Historical Society. You get paid to pound nails. Remember that!”

Schrubb spoke up from behind his desk. “I have to get to work here.” He flapped his hands in shooing gestures directed at Carel, who re-holstered his cell phone and picked his hat up off the desk.

“I gotta run, buddy. I got some ass to kick.” He pointed down at Schrubb. “But you need to do me right. Don’t talk to Houston. You make the decisions right here in Gillespie County, just like your daddy did. Fifty grand.” As he stormed out of the office, his voice rose loud enough for the whole lobby to hear. “I have to go do battle with the *Gott verdammt* Historical Society.”

Carel’s confidence fell to the floor when he saw her standing at a teller’s window, one of the first bank customers that morning, turning just in time to catch the drama rolling out of the branch manager’s office. His daughter.

He took a breath to stave off the swell of nausea that accompanied these surprise encounters with her, these random ambushes that happened again and again over so many years: picking out vegetables at the Farmers Market, riding her bicycle down Austin Street, in the congregation at a cousin’s wedding. He should be used to it by now—watching her grow up, but having no hand in raising her . . .

Carel took a moment to quell the tightening knot in his

The Gillespie County Fair

stomach before approaching her with a casual greeting. “So, *wie gehts*, Willow?”

“Hi, Dad.” She spoke in a quiet tone, maybe even embarrassed.

Just *Hi, Dad*—that was the next pang to hit Carel. *Hi, Dad*, as if everything was all right with them. As if these weren’t the first words she’d spoken to him since she graduated high school two years ago.

Carel argued, to all who would listen, that he had made an effort to fit into her life: He’d given her his old work truck. He’d remembered her birthday most of the time. And he’d hoped that the success of his business, his enhanced stature in town, would somehow bring her running back to him, at least when she grew up and needed a job. But Willow didn’t seem impressed with any of this. Now here she was, at the bank and looking all grown up, and he didn’t really know her at all. That pauperized him.

He didn’t fancy that piece of jewelry she had stuck in her nose, but he tried not to let on to that, either. Other than that, she looked like every other unmarried girl in town, with a billowy blouse, denim shorts (way *too* short), and her mom’s jet-black hair intentionally falling in her face, like she wanted everyone to know she’d just gotten out of bed. There were no tattoos—that he could see.

“So, what are you up to?”

“Gettin’ change,” she answered. “Me and Mom, we got this yard sale comin’ up. What you been doin’?”

“Just . . . fixing some history.”

She shrugged approvingly. “Cool,” she said, but the blank look in her eyes told Carel that she didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Did you walk down here? Need a ride?”

“Nah. I got the truck.” She hesitated and put out a coy smile. “I mean . . . yeah. The truck you gave me.”

“That old starter solenoid still holding up? It used to give me problems.”

“Yeah. It’s all running real good.”

“That part is bound to go out on you one day. When it does, let me know. I’ll fix it for you. I could write it off as a business expense.” He paused, but Willow gave no response. “You know, I drove that truck a long time. It’s a good one.”

“Been good to us, too. But yeah, okay. Thanks. We’ll take ya up on that.”

“Anything I can do to help you with your yard sale? I have a lot of expensive stuff I could throw in. You could keep the money.”

“What we got is *too much* stuff. That’s why we’re havin’ a friggin’ yard sale.”

Carel bristled at the profanity. *Her mother’s mouth*, he thought. *I could have fixed that.*

“Okay, then.” He nodded in acceptance. “You call me if you need anything, *liebling*.”

Willow pushed a deferential smile toward him and returned her attention to the teller. Carel slipped out the bank door, having reached the full extent of his parenting.

• • •

To get that old truck started, Willow had to lean on the key four or five times. It had been going on like that for a while, and her mom fussed at her about not tromping on the gas while she was cranking it. “Wouldn’t help,” her mom would say. “Got nothin’ to do with the gas. It’s a bad starter.” Eventually the

The Gillespie County Fair

solenoid would catch and the old Ford Super Duty would roar to life. It was a pain in the ass, but Willow wasn't going to ask Mr. Carel Geische to fix it for her. As far as she was concerned, she'd settled with him a long time ago.

In Fredericksburg it was hard for a child to tell, exactly, when it was that her father had left. He'd keep coming around on weekends for a while. He'd show up at occasional family gatherings. And then she'd be seeing him around town for the rest of her life, like just now at the bank. But Willow knew exactly when she had been done with him.

It was in the summer before her fourteenth birthday, late one night, alone in her bedroom up on the second floor of an empty house. She'd been sitting on the floor cross-legged, wearing only panties and a large T-shirt, a razor blade in her hand. And she'd felt no trepidation or sense of wickedness the first time she'd pushed that rapier into her thigh.

Bending over her legs, the same way she folded herself to paint her toenails, Willow had pressed the keen tip against the softest part of her leg. At first it just pushed the skin down, making a dimple but not breaking through the surface.

What's with this? were the words that scrolled through her mind.

Bravely she'd increased the pressure, fighting off an instinct to pull her hand away, until the tip of the razor broke through the surface and the pliable flesh rose up on either side of the blade to take the thin blue steel into her body. She had paused with the tip sticking in her just the tiniest bit, waiting for the pain. It didn't hurt, really, and there was not much blood at all.

"That's weird," she'd whispered to herself.

Carefully, she had drawn the scalpel through the surface of her skin, as smooth as the pull of a zipper, all the way up to the elastic band of her underwear. Flesh had fallen open on either

side of the cut, looking something like a slice made in a marsh-mallow. It wasn't messy at all.

Now what?

Her second laceration, slow and deliberate like the first, went just a tad deeper and ran around the circumference of her thigh, intersecting the first cut at a right angle. This cut, too, was trailed by a tiny furrow of white flesh that slowly filled with a line of her own blood. Willow had given this cut a name.

"Llano Street," she'd declared aloud.

Naming that cut meant that her first stroke was Main Street. With two streets named, Willow had gotten her mind around the pattern she would carve into herself. The next cut, a slice that wasn't quite straight, was Travis Street. Another quick slash made Washington Street. At this point, blood was seeping out of the earlier lines.

"Shit. Shit. Shit!" a more rational voice had cried through her clenched teeth. Willow had used the tail of her T-shirt to dab at the little crimson drips. Not a lot of blood, but she'd known those stains would be hard to get out, and she didn't want anyone to know.

On the inside of her left thigh had appeared a blood-scrawled street map of the route her father had driven to drop her off at home earlier that night. She had leaned in to make one last cut, a small and haphazard x to mark the spot where she was right then, on Washington Street: her safe house, her place in the world.

She didn't want to see him anymore, and she had told him so. He'd insisted that they go out for brats and currywurst on his visitation day—the one day that the Gillespie County divorce court made fathers visit the children they had walked out on. She hated it. It was like he was supposed to be her

The Gillespie County Fair

babysitter, taking her out every other Wednesday so her mom could go out drinking with her friends.

“I’m old enough to be home alone, you know.” Willow dropped the hint as they sat across from each other at Friedhelm’s Bavarian deli, out where Main Street forked off to the west.

Her dad did the worst thing a parent could do: He didn’t get mad. He didn’t lecture her. He just let her words sail right over his head. “Come on now. You love brats and currywurst. Right, *liebbling*?”

Willow hated that old German nickname. He had branded her with it when she was a toddler. *Can’t you see I am not your liebbling anymore?* But she couldn’t bring herself to be mean to him out loud.

Her father had one of his everything-is-all-right kind of smiles hung across his face as he leaned across the plate of German fast food he had ordered for them to share. “I was a teenager too, you know,” he said. “I understand how you feel.”

No, you don’t! she didn’t say. Willow sat paralyzed, biting into her lip, hoping that a waitress would come over, or that her father would just give it up, or that the whole deli would explode in one great ball of flames. But none of those things happened.

“I don’t want to do this anymore.” The words just kind of tumbled out of her mouth. She had wanted to say that to him for a long, long time. She had waited her entire life to get revenge on him for leaving her and her mom, for leaving them poor and her mom pissed off all the time. So often she had imagined how great it would feel when she finally got to tell him off—but now, with it out, it didn’t feel so good. Talking just made her feel worse.

Without raising her head, Willow peered up and saw his face flushed with indifference. He went on talking, but Willow

was already gone. The only time she gave him a response was when he said, at long last, “Do you want to take the rest of this currywurst home with you?”

Willow shook her head. *No.*

“Sure you’ll be okay home alone?”

She nodded eagerly. *Please get me out of here.*

Later, alone in her bedroom, Willow had breathed in the sense of relief that accompanied the numbing sensation, that drifted through her body while the blood on her thigh coagulated along its designated streets. The few places where tiny red rivulets crept down her leg had given her a palatable tickle, like a breeze blowing hair around her sweaty neck, before leaving tiny drops on the rug. Lying back on the floor, Willow had felt better then, much better—ebbing on an aberration of light warm air and letting her thoughts flow to other places, other times, days long ago when she was, indeed, her daddy’s little *liebling*.

• • •

The stone house at the very end of Washington Street, where the countryside broke upon the town, was the only place Willow had ever lived. Her mom, too, had spent her entire life within these venerable walls that Willow’s *opa* had built long before either of them were born. From the side facing other houses along the street, this gnarled slice of the Texas Hill Country looked like all the other old German farmsteads in Gillespie County: solid and practical, with a knot of outbuildings hidden from the street by five short rows of freestone peach trees. On the backside of the house, a treeless pasture fell away from a long wooden porch and rolled easily under the occasional hooves of black-headed Dorpers, all the way to the rocky bottom of Palo Alto Creek,

The Gillespie County Fair

where the barefoot days of so many summers had slipped carelessly through the tender fingers of Willow's childhood.

Fredericksburg itself endured as a rock-rimmed town of country-wide streets joining each other at precise right angles and held in place by tidy buildings made from limestone blocks. Many of the round and pleasant people who greeted each other in their singsong, German-English dialect were related in one way or another. It was hard for a kid to get in trouble in a community so intact. Willow couldn't ride her bike down Main Street without running into one of her cousins, her pastor, a teacher, or a friend of her mother. All these people would smile and look right through her, each of them seeming to know more about who she was than she did.

The worst day of Willow's life came somewhere near the end of her first year in high school, and it was her own fault. She found out how really stupid it was to start cutting on her arms. Of course her mom was going to find out sooner or later, and maybe that's what Willow really wanted. Her mom did find out, and after a tantrum to beat all, she dragged Willow off to have a talk with their pastor, where she pulled up Willow's shirt sleeve right in front of Father Huschmann. Laid bare in front of the poor bewildered pastor, she might as well have just shown him her nipples.

The cut marks above her elbow bore the indisputable evidence of her sins. Willow was sure she was going to descend into hell right there on that spot. Father Huschmann would pull a lever, and she would fall through some trap door. Or flamethrowers would light up and fry her, right in front of the crucifix that the nervous man twisted in his fingers while her frantic mother raged. But the more her mother ranted and the more Willow cried, the more obvious it became that Father Huschmann didn't have a clue what to do. He just told them to pray on it.

“Seek the guidance of our Lord,” he said. If anything, he sort of laid the blame on Willow’s mom when he said that “a broken family is the Devil’s open door.”

Willow was well aware that her mom had enough problems and didn’t need this one. Soon after the inquisition with Father Huschmann, the short attention span of Willow’s mother was hijacked by yet another crisis: Their water heater went out, right at the time that the property taxes came due. And Willow had gotten off scot-free with something that should have been the absolute end of her.

The other worst day in Willow’s life came a year later, in the spring of her sophomore year, when she had to go to her dad’s wedding. It was a big show-off church affair with a catered reception at Turner Halle. His new wife—Willow’s new stepmom—smacked of dressed-up trailer trash, with makeup thicker than the icing on the wedding cake. Two new stepbrothers, Justin and Jordan, were thrown into the deal as well. They would be living in her dad’s big new house up on the hill. Willow went through the rest of her high school years watching her dad get richer and her mom get more overwhelmed by the common burdens of single motherhood.

As Willow heard it, her dad made his money first by selling off pieces of his family’s land and building fancy houses on them, and then by fixing up stores in town to make them appear old-fashioned. The tourists were attracted to that old-timey look. Carel Geische got to be a big man in town who liked to throw his weight around and brag about his pioneer family name—which was also Willow’s name. But Willow didn’t see him as the Saint of Historical Renovation that he made himself out to be. The simple story was that he got rich buying and selling something that really wasn’t his: the very history of Gillespie County.