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Easy Hearts: A Novel

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

EASY HEARTS: A NOVEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Andrew John Olsen

2015

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Andrew John Olsen, and entitled Easy Hearts: A Novel, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment. We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Debra Dean

Heidi Scott

John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 4, 2015

The thesis of Andrew John Olsen is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

EASY HEARTS: A NOVEL

by

Andrew John Olsen

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

EASY HEARTS is a novel set in contemporary Texas. Justin Borchard, just paroled after three and-a-half years in prison, returns to his hometown in East Texas where his wife, Melinda, has been tending bar at the Shortleaf Inn. After Melinda confesses to a brief affair with a local oil executive named Waylon Goodwin, an affair she has ended, and facing limited prospects in their hometown, Melinda and Justin make the hard choice to accept a proposition from Waylon: they will leave home for Hearts County, a desolate swatch of hardpan in the Permian Basin of West Texas, where Waylon has arranged steady work for Justin in the oil fields. When Melinda vanishes from their trailer home, Justin must re-cross Texas, avoiding the law and dangerous railway men, so he can confront his troubled past, his increasingly mysterious wife, and the secrets sown around them.

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PART I

Monday, December 31st, 2012

IT WOULD TAKE them an hour to drive from the state prison in Huntsville to the apartment in Tomball where, without him, she had survived for three and-a-half years. They left the main building beneath the prison clock tower that overlooked the square, as if Huntsville was a town like any other in Texas. It was the official clock to the state death chamber, but Justin kept that from Melinda, and from there they crossed the street to where she had parked their Jeep beside the curb.

“First things first,” she said.

She asked him for his hand and slid his wedding ring upon his finger with so much ease he feared he might lose it. She kissed him on the cheek and offered him the keys to their ninety-nine Laredo. He thanked her for his ring, but he declined the keys. He said he would prefer it if she drove.

“I don’t have the license for it anyway,” he said.

The Jeep was a constant concern, but when he rounded the front fender and opened the door he saw she must have washed and cleaned it for his big day. She had vacuumed her cigarette ashes from the dash and from between the seats. He opened the ashtray, found it scrubbed clean, and filled with quarters enough to cover the book of stamps he had just lost.

That morning Justin had played Hold ‘Em in the day room against an inmate-slash-war veteran named Alvin. Alvin had a lazy left eye and a scar in his bottom lip, but he was handsome—no doubt about it. Alvin explained to Justin how he had married a

dancer before his last deployment, how when his tour had ended and his service was up, things between them got messy. It turned out Alvin's wife had been taking customers into the champagne room since his last deployment.

"I put an end to that," he said. Alvin smiled at the fist he had raised and held near his face. He dealt a king on the river and won Justin's book of forever stamps, the book Melinda had bought him for Christmas. "My son's autistic," Alvin said. "It's a big mouth to feed, my man. I'm over there taking fire for that boy. Combat pay. And she's back here with the third cavalry between her legs." Alvin shook his head, collected the cards, and slipped the stamps into his pants' front pocket. "You ain't going home to the girl you knew, my man." Alvin rose to leave the table and smiled. "Believe that."

Justin paid Alvin no mind, though. That was prison talk, and Alvin was fixing to die in that place. He concerned himself more with Alvin's wife, with the costs of raising a sick child, with what had become of Alvin's family now that he was inside, with how much extra his wife had earned in that champagne room. How long would Alvin take to realize that his wife had been the soldier?

They left Huntsville behind them and merged south onto I-45 beneath a low ceiling of gray clouds that held a small window of sunlight at bay and had so since leaving the prison. Justin reclined in the passenger seat with his head against the rest and his window down despite gusts that bit his face with a cold that came with every winter in East Texas.

Melinda commented on the cold snap and asked him did he feel cold. Did he want the heat on or something? He shook his head without moving his eyes from the timber

stands of living pines and black tupelos stood within their understory of tall switchgrass that struck across the bottom of his window.

“I’m all right,” he said. He did feel cold, but the feeling reminded him of his childhood outdoors, of deer and boar hunting trips with his dad. He rolled his head toward hers, smiled without parting his lips, and returned to the natural world that roused him with what felt like a first impression.

“Maybe if you rolled your window up,” she said.

He shook his head. Huntsville was known across the state as the “Walls Unit” for its dark red bricks that kept everything from the yard but the sun and the rain. “I missed the wind,” he said.

She left the fan in the off position but turned the dial from blue to red. She mentioned how free the highways had been of traffic on the drive north and how empty they were again on the way back south.

“We should make it home in no time flat,” she said.

“Take your time.”

He enjoyed crude blues from the wind as their tires purchased another length of highway, and he felt nostalgic for the afternoon drives they had taken together in high school. He would skip football practice to pack a bowl or roll a joint with her and navigate the backcountry along Walnut Creek with the radio off and the windows down. The Jeep had been new to them then. Forrest, Melinda’s father, had helped her to pay for it, but they smoked inside of it anyway. Other days they would drive north and west for Indigo Lake. On the way to and from he would drain a six-pack while she burned through half-a-box of American Spirits. He might bum a smoke or two to keep his high, but most

days he would not. He liked to lean his head against the jamb and watch grackles flee the treetops until they vanished against the sky as it evened.

They might drive around the lake like that for an hour or so. After a while they would tire of it, though. She would pull the Jeep beneath a sparse canopy of short-leaf pines where they would recline the seats and enjoy the bodies they loaned to one another. There they could ignore the daylight that disappeared and think nothing of the hours that passed, or of the trouble they towed, like knots in a line of time.

Trouble caught up with them years later, though. It was a July night both moonless and sweltering when a Harris County deputy lit Justin up on Tomball Parkway for a dead taillight on the Jeep. The deputy had steered him toward Cypress Creek High School where they rolled to a stop inside a parking lot long emptied for the summer.

Justin had wrapped a six-week remodeling contract earlier that afternoon, and he had shared a few drinks with his crew at a nearby tavern once the cleanup was done. He had stopped at a convenience store for another six-pack of beer and was on his way home to watch TV and share a few beers with Melinda. Since his father's passing, months earlier, he had taken to drinking more than usual, but he had ventured into newer habits.

The Jeep's interior smelled rich with the scent of booze. He broke a sweat when the deputy approached his window and asked for his license and registration. He reached for the glove box but heard the Deputy breathe short and deep through her nose before he reached it. She asked him had he been drinking, and he nodded his reply. She asked him did he have any drugs or weapons in the vehicle, and he could only hang his head.

Before Justin's father died, he had left his cabinet of prized firearms to his only child: three hunting rifles, a twenty-gauge, and that Springfield forty-five concealed

beneath his seat. Melinda had a thing against handguns. They had argued about that forty-five, and he had meant to pawn it that afternoon, but he had gone drinking with the guys instead. The pistol was still in his possession, and it had followed him onto the grounds of a public school.

He hadn't seen the pistol since, but that wasn't the worst of it. The booze had given the deputy her probable cause, and Justin knew it.

"Step out of the car please, sir." She took three steps backward.

His clothes were damp and salt-stained from the day he had put behind him. He felt a chill trace down the back of his neck. The sensation startled him, and his foot came off of the brake.

The deputy yelled at him to stop. She grabbed Justin's T-shirt by the collar. He could have stopped there. He could have chalked the incident up to a nervous accident, but he didn't. For some reason, a reason his mind still chased, he mashed the accelerator into the floor pan beneath his steel-toed work boot and spun his tires onto the roadway again.

He stopped and pulled over a half-mile down the road, but by then it was too late to take back. Police cruisers and deputies swarmed. They ordered him from the vehicle under threat of raining bullets should he try anything worse than he already had.

He exited the Jeep and lay face down on the pavement, littered as it was with glass and rocks and plastic car parts. The deputies swarmed with pistols drawn. They cuffed him and hauled him toward the mosaic of police cars blaring their sirens and whirring their lights beneath a night sky polluted with city light.

Inside the Jeep, they found his eighth of hash and his half-empty bottle of Klonopin with the prescription label scratched off. The deputy he had almost killed spoke to him through the back window of the cruiser they had put him in. With rips in her uniform, sweat