

"...A GEM—BOTH GRITTY AND HEARTWARMING AT ONCE.
A WONDERFUL, EMOTIONAL READ."

—LEE SMITH, AUTHOR OF *The Last Girls*

SLOW WAY HOME

a novel

MICHAEL

AUTHOR OF *A PLACE CALLED WIREGRASS*

MORRIS

Slow Way Home

By Michael Morris

Nana always said the Lord works in mysterious ways. Every time she would say that, I would think of Darrell Foskey. If it hadn't been for Darrell, I don't know where I might've ended up. Probably tossed around in a system of Foster homes just like the clothes did in the dryer the night we first met Darrell. He came into our lives thanks to a jammed quarter at the Laundromat. As the night manager, Darrell saved the quarter and won my mama's heart all at the same time.

I was eight that summer day in 1971 when he moved to the apartment with us. The window air conditioner made a rattling sound as it fought the heat that Darrell let through the door. He put down a water-stained box filled with records long enough to snatch the G.I. Joe figure from my hands. The smell of his soured tongue rolled over me the same way he rolled G.I. Joe's head between his fingers.

"Boy, what you doing playing with dolls?" Red lines outlined brown pupils and when he smiled I saw the chipped tooth that he claimed was a sign of toughness. "Hey, just kidding, big guy." When Darrell flung the action figure, I jumped to avoid being hit by G.I. Joe. Little did I know then how I'd keep on jumping to avoid Darrell.

Mama was as shocked as I was seven weeks later when Darrell quit his job at the Laundromat and announced he was taking us out for supper. "Daddy, that's what I love about you. You just go with the gut," Mama said. She nibbled his ear and talked in that baby way I hated. "That man said he'll be at JC's party tonight with a new stash. Let's go on down there, Daddy."

They didn't see me roll my eyes big as Dallas right in front of them. He sure wasn't her daddy, and I'd throw up before I was fixing to call him any such thing. Before I could ease out of the beanbag and make it to my room, I heard Mama giggle.

"Boy, go on in there and get ready," Darrell yelled. "You gonna get yourself a steak dinner tonight."

Darrell was still going on about Canada and all the good jobs he could get working the pipelines. The pretty waitress reappeared and put another drink before him. Although I couldn't bring myself to look her directly in the eye, I liked the way she smiled and winked at me. Darrell licked the juice remaining on the steak knife and washed it down with a loud smack.

More than usual I was nervous around Darrell tonight. Not so much because of his erratic behavior—I was getting used to the outbursts. But the restaurant was too much. Casting my eyes across the room, I watched a group of women Nana's age laugh while one of them opened brightly wrapped gifts. I couldn't help wondering how they would take Darrell if he got on one of his "spells," as Mama called them.

The more glasses of gold liquid Darrell consumed, the more he bragged about all the gold he could find in Canada. "There's an ol' boy who used to work with me already up there. They tell me he's making fifteen dollars an hour on that pipeline." Darrell licked the excess from the A-1 bottle top and slammed it on the table. I flinched and looked over at the ladies, who were so caught up admiring a gift of crocheted dinner mats that they didn't notice.

The pretty waitress appeared again and poured tea into my glass. "Boy, you best leave off the tea and go to studying your plate," Darrell said with a point of his knife. The waitress glanced at Darrell and then smiled back at me.

"Go on, Brandon, and eat your steak now," Mama said. She lit a cigarette and gazed across the restaurant. "Don't start no problems."

Picking at the slab of meat surrounded by pink juice, I rested my case. Mama knew I wanted chicken. But Darrell was determined and ordered steak for all of us. "I'm not very hungry."

"I'm not very hungry," Darrell whined and squinched up his ruddy face. "What's the matter, this place ain't good enough for you? Not good enough for the little king?"

I stiffened my back and dug my nails into the vinyl seat. Trying to gauge how to respond, I looked at Mama, but she was staring at her reflection in the tinted window and flicking the ends of her newly blonde hair. "Just eat the steak, Brandon."

“We ain’t leaving until you eat ever bit of that steak, you hear me.” Elbows planted on the plastic red-and-white tablecloth, Darrell enforced his message with another point of the knife.

“It’s got icky stuff coming out of it.” I followed the tip of the knife up to the brown eyes. It was that look. The same vengeful stare that Mama excused as the dark side in each of the two men she officially met at the Justice of the Peace plus the four she had let in without signed papers. The same dark side that made Darrell throw plates, punch holes in our apartment wall, and kick in my bedroom door.

Mama blew cigarette smoke at the plastic gold lamp dangling above the table. “Brandon, just don’t, okay.”

Darrell threw his napkin on the plate and steak juice stained the once white material. “Most kids’d be happy to eat at a nice restaurant, but no, not you. Not the king. You little no good piece of . . .”

“Oh, Daddy, don’t. Don’t get all riled up. Not tonight. He’s just being a kid.” Mama leaned into Darrell and whined, “Come on, shug. The man’s gonna be at JC’s and everything. And they’re having that band.”

All I could do was stare at the steak bone remaining on Darrell’s plate. I never flinched when he yelled, “I’m so pissed off right now I don’t wanna go nowhere.”

Mama’s eyes felt as hot as cigarette ash on my skin. I looked up to find her bright red lips pursed and blue eyes bugged as if to tell me in some sign language that she was at her breaking point. “I need a refill over here,” she finally yelled.

Soon Mama’s body leaned on Darrell, and her hand was inside his shirt. When she put into nibbling his ear, my neck became hot. What I wouldn’t give to be able to walk out and leave. To run away and hide until this part was over. Sometimes I almost hated her when she was with one of the boyfriends. Not so much out of jealousy, but because when she drank alone I could handle her. With another man to compete with, I always lost. Some battles were never meant for a boy, I overheard my teacher say the time I showed up at school with a cut above my eye.

So I learned long ago to remove myself when I had to. I convinced myself that I was the only boy in North Carolina or maybe even the whole entire United States who could shrink in his brain and become tiny like G.I. Joe. Searching for an object to stare

into and focus the way I had taught myself, my eyes fell upon the group of older women. The one with apple earrings gave me a pitiful sideways smile, and I jerked my head away.

After Darrell was pampered and slurped on proper, he agreed to go on down to JC's party and meet the man with their supply. But not before he vowed to never take me out to eat again. Fine with me, I thought and folded my arms as the waitress supplied the Styrofoam take-out box.

Just as Darrell moved to stand, it happened. The low-hanging lamp shaped like a mushroom struck the side of his forehead, and the carton tumbled to the floor. The slab of undercooked meat rolled onto the green carpet decorated with cracker crumbs and a piece of wilted lettuce. Darrell's face twisted even tighter. Blue veins around his eyes bulged, and he hissed in a way that made me think any minute he would turn into a snake. Holding the side of his head, he let out a loud moan that caused the ladies at the table next to us gasp and clutch their blouses. With the lamp dancing above us and the moan never ending, all I could do was picture Darrell in some sort of cartoon, like Roadrunner and Wily Coyote. In this case the pestering Wily Coyote just had the heavy weight slammed against his head. And before I could help myself, laughter broke free.

"Sophie, I'm telling you right now that boy's got attitude," Darrell said between clips of electric guitars on the radio. The entire ride from the restaurant I sat on guard in the backseat, arms folded, back stiffened.

I ought've knocked a knot on his head to show him how it felt. Then we'd see who'd be laughing." Darrell kept one hand on the steering wheel and used the other to reach around the backseat and swat wildly in the air. I pulled my legs in close and watched his oil-stained fingers stretch within inches of my knees.

"You're gonna have a damn wreck," Mama screamed. And then she returned to that baby voice. "Daddy, I just need less stress in my life."

"I tell you where you gonna find less stress. Either away from that snot-nosed brat or in a morgue. You got no more control over him than a whore dropping acid."

"Shut up! Just shut your damn mouth," she screamed.

For a second the sound of guitars on the radio overtook the car. I think Darrell was as stunned as I was at the outburst, but instead of cheering, like I was about to do, he slammed the side of her head against the car window until she begged forgiveness.

As soon as the door of our apartment opened, I headed straight for my bedroom. Predicting trouble had become a sixth sense. I knew even though Darrell said he forgave Mama and would pay for the pills that calmed her nerves, he had not forgiven me. Laughing at him had hurt his manly pride, he had said in the car. I guess like it hurt him when he got part of his tooth knocked out. Pushing a chair under the doorknob of my bedroom door, I pictured myself standing on a stool, holding a bat over my head, and knocking the rest of that tooth out of his square jaw.

Sitting in the chair to add weight for extra protection, I heard their words clipped and broken like some sort of secret code. “Sorry.” “Money.” “I need it.” Within minutes, Mama’s little-girl voice disappeared behind a slamming door. The car engine started, and the apartment grew still. Beyond the bedroom window crickets chirped and my heart regained some sort of stable rhythm. With peace came the return of hunger and the image of a fat peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Returning the chair to its proper place, I eased the door open and tried to remember the schedule for Saturday-night TV. But my plans for dinner alone were cut short when I saw the steel-toed work boots propped up on the coffee table. Our coffee table. The one I found hidden in the corner at the flea market.

Darrell laughed a deep stomach howl. “You look like you just crapped in your pants, boy.” He shoved the table with his foot, and I jumped as it slid pass me. My reaction only made him laugh harder, and I scolded myself but good.

When he rose, I stepped backwards, feeling the cool night air that was trapped inside the cinder-block wall. He kept those tiny brown eyes locked on me, even as he turned the radio dial and music blasted out. “Sophie’s done gone, sissy boy. And just ’fore she left she give me strict instructions.” Darrell lit a cigarette and blew a ring of smoke. “She told me to straighten you out for her. See, here’s the deal. You got yourself a respect problem when it comes to your elders.”

My heart began to pick up speed again, and I braced myself by sticking my fingernails inside the wedged out places in the wall. Just like a magician, he moved forward and pulled the white take-out box from behind his back. He held it up in midair and stomped the work boot. I dug my nails in deeper, feeling the flecks of gravel in the quick of my nail. The front door was only a few steps behind Darrell, and the chain lock dangled free. Sliding along the wall, I thought of punching him in the privates and leaping over the coffee table to safety. But the magician must have read my mind. At the air-conditioning unit, Darrell slammed the work boot against the wall. The long leg pinned me in like the hogs on my grandparents' farm.

“You ungrateful bastard. I paid for this steak and you're eating ever bit of it.”

My lip flinched, and I fought to control it with the edge of my tooth. “Can we . . . can we just cook it a little bit and then . . .”

“Now, right there's what I'm talking about. You didn't see your mama and me whining about our steak. Boy, why do you go and do things just to piss me off?”

I wanted to ask for forgiveness like Mama had done. I wanted to say the words that would make him remove his leg and let me go free. But when I opened my mouth, it was dry and the tongue heavy.

Darrell shook his head and took a long drag off the cigarette. He studied the filter and twirled it between his fingers like a minibaton. The red tip shined and the ash grew long, sagging towards the floor. And then with that look in his eye, he stepped forward. I wanted to yell, but my mouth would not let me. The image from an old western Mama and me watched a few nights back ran through my mind. All I could picture were the eyes of the cow from that movie. The eyes of the creature being branded into submission.

The day Darrell decided to officially move to Canada, I packed the small suitcase Nana and Poppy had given me for Christmas and waited in the living room. By this time I had been trained to follow Darrell's golden rule: not to speak unless spoken to. He said that's how I showed respect.

Mama fussed around trying to latch beat-up suitcases and finally settled for wrapping them in black electric tape. I was surprised that all of our earthy possessions

could fit into a total of three bags and couldn't help but think that some things were being forgotten.

Darrell acted downright happy and even playfully thumped me on the back of the ear as he walked back and forth carrying battered luggage. Mama was dressed up in new hot pants, and her hair was stacked high. She laughed when I told her she looked like a movie star.

Inside the car Darrell described the apartment he wanted to find. "Out on a lake somewhere. I'm talking about a big-ass apartment with high ceilings and marble floors."

The way he waved his hand was hypnotic, and all I could picture was some sort of apartment like the one Mr. French kept for Buffy and Jody on *A Family Affair*. "And a great big patio too. We can eat supper out there and everything," I said.

Silence lingered for a couple of miles.

Darrell finally hit the steering wheel with his fist. "You ain't told him?"

Mama looked straight ahead and adjusted her sunglasses.

I leaned towards Mama's seat. "Tell me what?"

"Boy, your mama's too chicken-shit to tell you, so the heavy falls on me. Always the heavy 'round here." Darrell sighed in such a way that if it had come from anybody else, I'd guess they were being sympathetic. "Now's not a good time for us to be watching after you. I might even be traveling with the pipeline and all. And you got school."

My hand slowly slid down the plastic seat cover, brushing Mama's shoulder, before I sank back into my proper place.

"Hell, we're even having to sell the car. I'm dropping it off to the man right now. Money is tight and you'd just be . . ."

"I can cut back on my eating. Peanut butter and jelly don't cost much. And I love that."

Mama patted her curls and coughed. "Brandon, don't start, okay. It's just for a little while. Just for a month or two, I promise. Besides, it'll be good for you to spend time with Nana and Poppy. You know, getting to know them better and everything."

Nobody said a word after that, not even Darrell. I never saw my mama's eyes that day. She sat looking straight ahead with loops of curls stacked on her head.

At the bus station, I slid to the end of a wooden bench advertising a furniture store and watched them from a distance. Mama kept pulling at the pants that matched the color of her hair while Darrell kept counting the wad of cash he had made from selling the car.

As black fumes floated around the bus, passengers lined up to board. Mama made one final attempt. “Now, Brandon, you know if Mama could, she would.” She handed me a Greyhound bus schedule. “Right up here is Poppy and Nana’s phone number. You’re better off with them right now. Trust me on this one. Me and Darrell gotta get settled first and then we’ll come back for you. I promise it’s just for a little while. Hey, look at it as our new destiny. I’m going up there to get things ready for you.”

I fought from blinking so I could tear right through her daisy-shaped sunglasses with my eyes. I won’t cry. I won’t cry. The words rang in my head to remind me I was tougher than anything she could dish out. My jaw clinched, and all of a sudden I found myself wanting to rip every fake blonde curl right off the top of her head.

“Brandon, don’t give me that look. Just don’t, okay. This is hard enough on me as it is.” Darrell yelled from the door of the bus, and with one final brush against my arm she drifted away. At the top of the bus step she kissed her index finger and pointed it right at me. Her feet looked as tiny as doll feet standing on the wide step. With a final climb nothing was left of her at all.

Before I called the number on the schedule, I watched the bus move slowly forward and then with a roar lurch towards the intersection. Unable to stop it, my eyes burned with emptiness, so I turned to study the red-and-white swirls on the nearest Coke machine. Staring into the bright colors, I felt myself becoming smaller and smaller until at last nobody could make out the pity that weighed on my shoulders.

People of various colors and classes moved about the station as if it was just an ordinary day. Only a few looked down with a smile that they might offer a new puppy in a pet-store window. The garbled call for Columbus, Georgia, blared from the loudspeaker. Families with sons dressed like G.I. Joe clumped around the bus. Mothers with crisp white handkerchiefs dabbed their eyes. All the while, I watched and massaged the callused place on the inside of my arm, a nervous habit I had acquired right after the run-in with Darrell and his cigarette. A free tattoo, he called it. A branding meant to make a man out of me.

After nine more buses had pulled away, my grandparents' white Ford appeared at the curb. Nana's forehead was wrinkled with worry. The way she held on to the string of her plastic bonnet and searched the crowd, I figured she was wondering if she would recognize me. When she turned in my direction, her brow softened and a smile formed as if she was simply picking me up after an afternoon spent at the library. As she made her way through the crowd of servicemen, the hem of her houseshift flapped around her knees.

Her touch was soft to my shoulder, and she pointed towards Poppy. He was sitting in the car with a cap pulled down close to his pointed nose like a getaway driver about to flee a robbery.

"You'll feel better when we get something in your stomach. Now on the way home I want you to study about what you'd like for supper. A hamburger maybe or how about I fry up a breast of chicken?"

Her words hazed my mind the same way the bus exhaust blanketed the air. As we walked towards the car, her arm drew me closer to the folds of her stomach. Poppy cocked his hand forward as if we were about to set off on a vacation. No words were spoken as they took me away to their farm outside of Raleigh. The hum of the engine and cries from a steel guitar on the radio filled the car. An urge tempted me to turn around and look back at the bus station one last time. But I kept my fingernails dug into the vinyl backseat and managed to win that one.

By the time we had reached their farm, mist from the air conditioner covered the car window. Nestled between a thicket of pines and a field blanketed with tobacco, the white farmhouse teased me like an oasis. Ancient ferns swung from chains on the front porch as easy as jewelry on a rich woman.

When I was in the big claw tub that evening, their words drifted from the kitchen and rose above the sound of hot grease popping in a skillet.

"The worst kind of trash wouldn't do something so sorry," Nana said.

"I'd skin her alive if she was standing here right now," Poppy added.

I leaned against the cold surface of the tub and tried to picture Poppy skinning Mama with the switchblade he used to clean catfish. But I gave up trying to picture it, deciding there was not enough flesh on Mama's bony frame to allow such punishment.

For the first few months at Nana and Poppy's farmhouse, whenever I went to the bathroom or got ready for bed, I would glance at the black phone propped on top of a Sears and Roebuck catalog on the hallway table. It was a carefree glance, like one someone might give a penny on a busy sidewalk. I didn't want to stare too long and make Nana and Poppy think I wanted to hear from her. But the concern was short-lived. By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, I realized there would be no good-night calls offered from the land that seemed as far away as the North Pole. By Christmas, I had even stopped praying that God would make Mama come back at all. It was then that I let the house's perfume of pine needles, mothballs, and cooking grease seep into my system. I pictured the scent running up my nose and through my blood, ironing out all the nervous places as perfectly as Nana pressed the collar of my church shirt.

"A fresh start" were the words the school guidance counselor used when talking about life on my grandparents' farm. Even then I knew the experience deserved more than a dime-store cliché. It was more than a new start. Life on the farm would be nothing less than a resurrection in which the past and the future are called up and transformed into perfection.