

# Junebug

by Marcus Walton

James had chosen to stay home. It had been five years since he had missed the parade (then for fever), and he thought about it all now.

About the sickness and drummers and horn players.

Every August, he got two or three extra-hot-hot-dogs from George's wooden stand and went, ate them, suffered, cried, sweated through them beside the Catholic church on Garden Street where the band made their last turn back towards Thagaste City School. It was a ritual that he preferred to be alone with, and his friends kind of made fun of him for it.

His dog Junebug hadn't eaten anything in two days. She had spent the last day sleeping in Mrs. Henecke's backyard. The old widow didn't mind and appreciated the compliments paid to her secluded garden by the patronage of all the neighborhood cats and dogs. Now, there in the garden, a baby cardinal flew overhead and was held down in the air by a hard draft.

Mrs. Henecke and Junebug slept now, away from most the noise on the other side of town and the deep Georgia heat, each in their respective places of shade. The boy thought about what he had to do as he watched Junebug's belly rise and fall with trembling, soft breaths. He knelt down, quietly bleeding unknown grass stains into the knees of his jeans, and reached out and stroked the course fur on her back. He remembered ricochet flashing off the stop sign and ending in his dog, remembered knocking the rifle out of Curtis' trembling hands. James' parents didn't know what to do. Dr. Messelich was sick and there wasn't another veterinarian within a hundred miles that'd work on a Sunday.

James pulled a book out of the canvas bag he had set beside the dog and laid it open to a dog-eared page, securing it flat with a nearby rock. For the last two days he had studied and studied it, burning the white pages into his eyes for hours at the library.

A friend had seen him there.

"What are you lookin at *that* stuff for?"

"I'm gonna use it soon."

"Use it? It's *professionals* that do things like that —with college. You're thirteen James. You ain't grown."

"Yeah, well I wish I was."

"Yeah. Me too. Hey, what you say me, you, and Ronnie go down to the rock quarry 'fore the parade Sunday? Tommy said he saw a *whole* human skeleton down there. What about that?"

"I can't. I got something more *professional* to tend to."

"Uh-huh. Whatever you say big man."

As the meaningless scene replayed, the words angered him now because he felt so very small. A new zeal pricked him all over and he continued on with a firm but sad determination. Placing one hand firmly on the dog's shoulder, he removed the soggy, loud-smelling rag from the bag and placed it over the dog's snout. She awoke and resisted for only a few seconds before falling back into the deeper sleep he had anticipated. He carefully felt around for and eventually revealed the shining scalpel he had pocketed from the science room earlier that week. The light from it glinted off his eye for a moment as he intensely surveyed the book and the belly of the dog, back and forth he looked, bringing the blade closer, so slowly towards Junebug.

Breathing in, he felt into the soft flesh and drew the knife towards him in a neat line. But he had pressed too deep. Blood began to seep out, streaming down Junebug's sides. James quickly inserted the makeshift coat-hanger clamps to see that he had cut open an organ the size of his fist. The garden lay perfectly still and in quiet awe surrounding him. As he fumbled, removing the rag from Junebug's face and placing it firmly over the pooling blood, he looked up toward the sky. The widow was at her window, the white curtains drawn back and her face alive with shock.

The Catholic church bells tolled the hour, and the long and hollow quiet in between was only interrupted by the baby cardinal's cries. Then there was no sound when Mrs. Henecke hobbled out her back door towards James. She cried with no sound as she held out the

dripping washcloth towards James, who sat frozen, his face blank and white, his blood-stained hands stretched out to her.

