

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE THE WORM FARM

That was the great, grand secret of writing, the secret certain students lusted after, the secret some people wrote him letters about, the secret he was sometimes paid money to lecture on, the great, grand secret of writing: Put your ass on the chair. Repeat: Put your ass on the chair.

—Harry Crews, *Where Does One Go When There's No Place Left to Go?*

If you're looking for a place to turn over a new leaf, a place where you could avoid distractions, stay sober, and get some writing done, New Orleans probably wouldn't be your first choice. A city where the bars have no mandatory closing laws, where drinking in public is legal and encouraged, and bartenders will pour your leftover hurricane into a plastic go-cup, where your waiter at even the most cultured of restaurants is liable to offer you a wine list at breakfast—a city like this would not be the place to go if you wanted to clean yourself up and jump onto the wagon. “New Orleans,” said his friend Rod Elrod, “was not the place Harry needed to be.”

But that, indeed, was Harry's plan. He wanted to get away from Gainesville, from classes, students, and faculty meetings, from Lillian's and the Orange & Brew and the Rathskeller. It was to be an escape from the familiar haunts of Gainesville, the ones that had become a force of stagnation. It was time to pack up and ship out, change the scenery, reshuffle the cards and see what came up.

Maggie, Harry's longtime, on-and-off-and-on-again girlfriend, had found some direction in her life, direction that had escaped Harry ever since he had completed *A Childhood*. On a tip from a friend of Harry's film agent, Maggie had, a few years back, set herself on the path to becoming an exercise physiologist. It wasn't quite psychology, her chosen field, but it was a subject she knew a little about, and once she cracked the books, she found she had an aptitude for the subject. She had spent years refining her own body through exercise; it wasn't much of a jump to do the same thing for patients. So she had chipped away at it, class by class, and in December 1985 she earned her master's, with a thesis titled "Physiological Profiles of Female Competitive Body Builders," based on hard-earned knowledge from her years pumping iron on the amateur bodybuilding circuit. Degree in hand, she was now ready to embark on a new career. She had secured a job as the assistant director of a wellness center at a brand-new hospital in New Orleans and made plans to leave Gainesville and start her new life as the calendar turned to 1986. Her sister bought her a golden retriever, which she named Heidi, and the two of them made the trip west on I-10 and moved into an apartment on Audubon Park, right near Tulane University.

A few months later, Harry was headed down the same stretch of I-10. For the first time in twenty-six years, a fall semester would start without him. His supervisors in the English Department at the University of Florida had happily approved a sabbatical for the 1986-87 school year. He had clearly earned it. With nearly two decades of service, he was now one of the senior members in the department. And a little separation might do a world of good, for both Harry and the denizens of the department.

So it was set. Harry would move into Maggie's apartment, put the bottle aside, and dedicate himself to a new novel, starting from scratch. He hadn't published a novel in nearly a decade. (*All We Need of Hell* was at the publisher and on track for release, but he had written much of that book in the early 1970s.) Now, cleansed of all the burdens of home, he was ready to start on an entirely new work of fiction.

The plan went bad quickly.

Harry arrived ready to tackle his New Orleans novel, and at first he seemed to be mentally and emotionally prepared to do just that. He tried to develop a strict writing routine, as he often did when he was in a productive period. He woke early, walked Heidi three miles around Audubon Park, had a light breakfast, and set up in front of the typewriter. For a short while, progress was on schedule.

But the lure of Bourbon Street proved too strong. While Maggie was working long hours at the hospital, Harry began spending long hours in the bars of New Orleans.

Gainesville had offered familiar barstools and friendly bartenders, but New Orleans was a major-league drinking city. Harry spent time in the French Quarter, ostensibly to do research for his book, but his research was always participant research, and he spiraled into a binge that he couldn't pull out of. He spent less and less time at the typewriter. The cycle that had happened time and again in Gainesville reemerged. Maggie began to feel she was losing control as Harry went deeper and deeper into his binge. He was powerless to stop drinking, and Maggie was unable to help. But now she had a fledgling career to protect, and she needed to do something before things spiraled completely out of control.

When she reached the point at which she felt there was no other option, Maggie sat Harry down and, quietly and dispassionately, told him he would have to leave. "There was not enough from our years together for her even to be pissed," Harry said.

After another night of excess, Harry somehow found his way back to the apartment and crashed on Maggie's bed, vodka bottle in hand.

"This shit has got to stop," he told her.

"I keep telling you that."

"I think I've redlined again. I don't think I can get back without some help. You've got to take me to a hospital."

Maggie knew the drill from a dozen times prior. "I don't know where to take you. Where do you want to go?"

"A hospital, any hospital," Harry demanded. "If I go down for the count before we get there, just tell them I have to detox from alcohol. It ain't a fucking big deal. Any hospital will do."

But this time, the choice of hospital proved extremely important. Harry woke up the following morning in pajamas he'd never seen before. He began to detect that the level of sanity among his fellow patients was very low. And then he noticed that all the doors on the hall were locked from the inside. The hospital Maggie had chosen was DePaul Tulane Behavioral Health Center, and Harry, unbeknownst to him, had signed a consent form that called for him to be locked down for seventy-two hours.

When he was lucid enough to understand where he was, he quickly realized he didn't want to be there. He asked for a phone call, then a lawyer, only to be told again and again that he had signed away his rights.

Eventually, he convinced a nurse to let him talk to the doctor. The doctor silently puffed on a cigarette while Harry pleaded his case. Harry told the doctor that he was a writer and a professor and a respectable member of society. “And,” he said, “I’m committed to give two lectures later this month.”

The doctor looked at Harry, bleary eyed, unshaven, and wearing institutional pajamas, and scoffed.

“Do you think you can lecture? You can’t lecture.”

“Give me a podium and I’ll show you,” Harry protested.

The doctor was unconvinced, and Harry was becoming more desperate. “I can go down to the French Quarter and find you five guys in five minutes drunker than I was last night,” he said.

“You’re not going anywhere,” the doctor retorted. “Try to relax and be comfortable.”

Another day of desperation and internment followed before Harry struck upon the bit of information that won him his release. DePaul was a private hospital, and this time, Harry’s lack of funds worked in his favor. He told another doctor that he didn’t have the insurance to pay for a stint in such a prestigious facility, and, once his story checked out, he was quickly transferred, via ambulance, to East Jefferson General Hospital, where the rules were far less stringent and the patients less frightening.

Still in his DePaul pajamas, Harry performed a reconnaissance mission in his new surroundings and learned that a simple request, to the right nurse, could grant him his immediate release. He spent another twenty-four hours playing pool, watching football, and wandering the corridors before he deemed it safe to request parole, and after a three-day hospitalization, he was once again free on the streets of New Orleans.

Once on the outside, Harry called Rod, his former student, who had moved back to Franklin Parish, a backwater in the northeast part of the state. Rod drove down to New Orleans to pick up Harry, the two of them went to Maggie’s apartment, packed up, and, with Heidi in tow, drove back up to tiny Winnsboro, Louisiana, population four thousand, which Harry would call home for the next year.

Elrod had grown up in Franklin Parish, and after leaving the University of Florida, he had earned his MA at the University of Montana. He and his wife, Debbie, had moved back home to Winnsboro to raise a family. Debbie had given birth to their first child six months prior. Now Rod was teaching English at University of Louisiana–Monroe and considering a

run for state representative. The couple lived on the farm where Elrod had been raised. His family was in the worm business, raising worms for fish bait, and now he and Debbie had taken up residence in a small house on the farm, about twelve miles from Winnsboro, about thirty from Monroe, the nearest city. And about a mile away from the house, across the farm, sat an empty worm barn. Rod understood how Harry worked best, and he knew instantly that with a little work, it could be an oasis.

“It was just a little barn, and it didn’t have a toilet,” said Elrod. “That was the main thing. So we built an outhouse. Dug a deep hole, built a little outhouse, put a little curtain on it, and he moved right in.”

To visitors, it appeared to be nothing more than a shack sitting in a giant field of mud. Harry and Elrod outfitted it with a woodstove, some bookshelves, a few chairs, and a plywood desk. The bookshelves quickly filled up. On one wall, Harry posted Muhammad Ali’s famous phrase of defiance, “No Viet Cong Ever Called Me Nigger,” and on the opposite wall, “Only the Dead Have No Fear.” And on the desk, he placed a placard with his Number One rule of writing: “Get Your Ass on the Chair.” There was no electricity, and Harry had to get his water out of a jerry can.

The Elrods had experience sobering Harry up from their days in Cross Creek. They cleaned him up once again, and Harry pledged not to touch another drop until he had a completed manuscript.

Harry had stumbled into the exact situation he needed to recapture his gift. All his life, his best writing had come in isolation—in a makeshift study attached to the back of a trailer, in his house on Lake Swan with no TV, radio, or mail, in his hidden rented room in Gainesville—and now here he was, in a barn on a swamp, often without a soul in sight, just him, his dog, his typewriter, and the worms.

Once sober, he quickly settled into a routine. Rod got him a fishing pole, and Harry would catch two or three fish in the pond behind the barn, bake them on his wood stove, and eat them with some lemon for his meals. He had his old truck with him, and he found a little gym in Winnsboro, really just a metal structure where the owner had thrown some weights and benches. But it had a locker room, and Harry was there six days a week for a workout, a hot shower, and a shave. And every day, at four a.m., he was at his Underwood, ass in chair, a fresh page in the roller.

The subject was boxing. He’d devoted a fair amount of time and energy to the sport over his lifetime but, until now, hadn’t devoted an entire novel to it. His introduction to the sweet science had come early on in life. When

Harry was ten, his older brother Hoyett had somehow come across a biography of Jack Dempsey, heavyweight champion and larger-than-life legend of the Roaring Twenties. Hoyett devoured the book, and then decided he was going to be a boxer. The family was on another tenant farm in Bacon County at the time, living hand-to-mouth, but Hoyett managed to save up enough money to buy himself some gloves and headgear, and he soon launched his ring career.

On Sundays, they would hitch the mule to the wagon, and Harry would drive Hoyett across the county looking for fights. Age and weight were unimportant. Anybody willing to scrap with Hoyett was acceptable. Harry served as his big brother's trainer, cut man, and second. The fights were often just glorified wrestling matches, but they served the purpose of allowing Hoyett to experience the sensation of taking a glove to the face and coming back for more. Eventually, Hoyett boxed professionally, compiling a 22–2 record before breaking his hand, and Harry spent many hours in the gym with him. Later, in the Marines, Harry took up the sport himself and fought as a light heavyweight, winning a base championship belt. Now boxing, and New Orleans, would make up the backbone of his next novel.

Needless to say, it wasn't to be a straight boxing story, where the bloodied underdog gets up off the canvas to gamely defeat the arrogant champion at the climax. In fact, there would be precious little actual boxing, as the general public understands the sport, in the book at all. There would be, however, a generous helping of perversity, debauchery, and one of Harry's most memorable freaks. Harry declared it a "novel with an absurdity at its center." The protagonist of the story was Eugene Biggs, a young fighter from Bacon County, Georgia, who finds himself in New Orleans after a quick trip from promising contender to washed-up pug before his twenty-third birthday. With his boxing career over prematurely, he learns accidentally that he has a special skill: the ability to knock himself cold with his own right hand, a trick he discovers spontaneously after his trainer and surrogate father abandons him in the dressing room following his final defeat. The trick was Harry's "absurdity at the center of the novel." Eugene performs it for cash, entertaining the New Orleans underworld of sexual deviants and bizarre misfits. Eugene's girlfriend is a Tulane graduate student who views Eugene as source material for her dissertation, and his best friend is another ex-boxer who now shows snuff films to tourists in the French Quarter. Eugene eventually rejects his profitable trick and

goes to work for the undisputed king of the pervert underworld, J. Alfred Blasingame, a powerful businessman by day and a human oyster by night:

But even before Eugene finished speaking, an enormously fat young man wearing an Adidas warm-up suit came into the room. He had chin after chin rolling down his chest toward a ballooning stomach that ended in a flap of fat even the warm-up suit could not hide. It hung across his thighs like an apron. His eyes were no more than slits in his swollen face. He had a leash in his right hand, the end of which was attached to a leather collar decorated with steel studs and fastened about the neck of an extremely thin man whose head was entirely bald, showing not a single wispy strand or a trace of stubble. He was dressed as a boxer and was as tall as Eugene but could not have weighed more than ninety-five pounds. Every bone in his body was insistent under his skin, skin that was diaphanous and desiccated. Eugene couldn't take his eyes off him. He was the most unhealthy-looking human being he had ever seen. As he watched, the man reached up and scratched his chest. A little shower of skin fell to the thick red carpet.

"Knockout," said Georgie, "may I have the honor of introducing you to Oyster Boy."

Eugene acknowledged him by simply repeating his name: "Oyster Boy." He did not offer his hand.

Harry's short stay at Maggie's apartment in New Orleans and his research provided much of the backdrop for the story, as did the time he spent in northeast Louisiana. "We'd take drives and tour the countryside around the area," Rod said. "Went down and showed him some of South Louisiana, some of the antebellum homes, things like that. Then it all turned up in the book."

Rod would later spend many years as a writer and editor at the *Franklin Sun*, the local newspaper in Winnsboro, but at the time he was still writing fiction and would regularly join Harry in the barn. The two would chat about the weather or how the fish were biting in the pond and then commence typing, Harry at the Underwood and Rod at a word processor across the room. The two had developed a rapport back in Gainesville, and they fell back into the same rhythms now.

"I've got a lot of the same stuff Harry has," Rod told a reporter who had come to record the story of Harry on the farm.

“Compulsion,” Harry said.

Rod laughed. “Compulsion, I think, is the word. When I’m with Harry everybody thinks I’m the sane one. But when Harry’s not around, everybody looks at me the way they look at him.”

But most of the time nobody was looking at Harry. He kept to himself to a large degree, stayed on what he called “his program,” spending days at a time by himself. Winnsboro was the anti-New Orleans, a town that Rod called the most conservative place in the world. He knew that one night of the wild Harry on the quiet streets of Winnsboro, the kind of performance that was a regularly scheduled event in Gainesville, would mean the immediate end of the Worm Barn experiment. Harry made a well-received appearance when Rod brought him to the university to read for his students, but for the most part, Harry remained on the farm.

“He wasn’t trying to attract any attention, and I wasn’t trying to give him any. He was here for a reason,” Rod said. “He’d concentrate for several hours, and spend the rest of the day in a daze. I don’t mean like in a trance or anything, but just letting things stew and getting ready to do it again. Might listen to NPR or something, you know? Talk about the news a little bit, but it was mainly just waiting to do it again the next day.”

About halfway through Harry’s stay in Winnsboro, in January 1987, *All We Need of Hell* was released to generally positive reviews. And, more surprisingly, people were buying it. The first printing of 7,500 copies sold out in twenty-three days, and the publisher cranked up the press for another batch. And, because it was his first novel in eleven years, reporters smelled a story. “*Crews is alive! And he’s back!*” When they learned that he had become some kind of literary Mr. Kurtz living on a bayou outpost with only a typewriter and a bottle of Jack Daniels, the smell got too strong to ignore. *People* sent a reporter down to Winnsboro for a profile, and other media outlets made inquiries, all wanting a piece of Harry. Rod acted as the dutiful secretary, scheduling appointments, and Harry would trek up to the main house to tell the tale of the outlaw novelist typing away in the swamp.

Harry told *People* and the rest of the reporters that he had exorcised his demons for the time being and was bone dry, but the exorcism was not fully successful. More than once during his stay, Rod made the trip to the barn to find Harry in the grips of one of his binges. Harry would be on the floor hours, or days, deep into the bottle. The bare-bones literary command center would have transformed into the miserable pigsty of an

alcoholic, the stench of urine in the air, waste of all kinds strewn around. While under the spell, Harry would stop eating or bathing; the longer the binge, the more time and effort would be required to clean him up. Rod would clean the barn and then drag Harry to his truck and drive him into Winnsboro, where a country doctor, a friend of the Elrods and a hard-core Christian, would help sober him up and send him back to the barn with a Bible and an admonition to follow the Lord.

Harry's final binge, near the end of his stay, nearly pushed Rod over the edge. Rod wasn't the carefree student he'd been back in Gainesville anymore; now he was a family man trying to build a career and a reputation in his hometown. Watching over Harry, a task that had been exciting and new in Florida, was now becoming more and more of an aggravation. "Of all the years I've known Rod, that was the angriest I'd ever seen him," recalled Debbie.

Harry took his Bible back to the barn after the last binge and, clear-headed once again, wrote the final chapters of *The Knockout Artist*. It was spring now, which meant the sweltering Louisiana heat was beginning to emerge, making life on the worm farm a little less pleasant. And in more ways than one, his sabbatical felt like it was reaching its conclusion. He composed a coda to *Knockout* in which his Bacon County antihero gets in his truck and heads east, all the while planning to do the same himself. On Easter Sunday 1987, Harry typed the final sentence of the novel and shortly thereafter packed up, bid the Elrods farewell, and pointed his pickup toward Gainesville.

The Knockout Artist would be dedicated to Harry's Louisiana hosts: "For Rod and Debbie Elrod, who made every effort to keep me sane—and very nearly succeeded—during the struggle to write this book," he wrote. Late in his year on the farm, Harry had asked Rod to take on the responsibility to carry out a task he'd been thinking about most of his adult life: the scattering of his ashes when he died. He asked Rod to take his ashes to Bacon County and pour them into Big Hurricane Creek, where he had played as a child.

It would be a year before *The Knockout Artist* showed up in bookstores. When it did, it was taken as a confirmation that *All We Need of Hell* was not some aberration; Harry Crews was indeed back on his feet. Reviewers uniformly noted that his skills as a storyteller and satirist had not diminished. "Harry Crews writes like an angel, but one, of course, who is trapped in hell," wrote Chauncey Mabe in the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. The

majority of the reviews had reservations, however, and they were all over the map. The book was either too much of a comic book, or not enough of one. The female characters were either too stereotypical, or too evil. And the vision was too dark, the story too outlandish, or the passages too cute. Charles Nicol, writing for the *New York Times*, discerned a change in Harry's work as he moved into late middle age: "Perhaps Mr. Crews has got too close to the sophisticates or, like his hero, has begun to find himself the subject of a dissertation or two. Has he quit knocking himself out, or is he just beginning?" And Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, also for the *Times*, wrote that when reading a Crews novel, "One doesn't pick up on its shortcomings; one allows oneself to be seduced. But one never forgets that one is being seduced. Or that Mr. Crews is a carnival barker of a slick and profitable freak show."

Perhaps the most important development in Harry's life to come from the publication of *The Knockout Artist* wasn't the critical reaction or the sales figures, or even the acknowledgment in literary circles that he was once again a productive and formidable writer of fiction. What would have even greater ramifications for Harry's life was the fact that *The Knockout Artist* somehow wound up in the hands of a pop-music superstar who counted herself among the exclusive club of celebrities so famous they didn't require a last name. And to Madonna, the book was a genuine, once-in-a-lifetime masterpiece.