

# HELLFIRE

THE JERRY LEE LEWIS STORY

NICK TOSCHES

'THE GREATEST ROCK 'N' ROLL  
BIOGRAPHY EVER WRITTEN' *ROLLING STONE*



PENGUIN BOOKS

## Hellfire

'Superb' *New Yorker*

'Nick Tosches's extravagant and evocative biography is a superbly told story that makes sense of the wildest, most messed-up survivor in the history of rock'n'roll. They don't make them like that any more.

And, perhaps for that very reason, they don't write them like that any more. A killer of a book' Sean O'Hagan, *Observer Music Monthly*

'Terrific' *Washington Post*

'Brilliant . . . the best account we have of how the first rock and rollers were torn between salvation and the Devil's music' *New Statesman*

'Tosches's book is a work of art' *Boston Globe*

'To call *Hellfire* the best book written about a rock'n'roller is to miss the point . . . *Hellfire* is a rock'n'roll event' *Boston Phoenix*

'The finest rock-star bio ever' *Village Voice*

'A definitive rock biography' *Time*

'I read everything by Nick Tosches . . . words and wisdom that I shall carry with me into the fucking dirt' Johnny Depp

'Nick Tosches stands out as the kind of writer other writers only dream of becoming – amazing at fiction, unparalleled in journalism and biography, and possessed of a stature and genius his lessers can but crouch beneath, gazing up in wonder, awe, and more than a little terror at what this man, in a single, unfinished life, has been able to accomplish on the page' Jerry Stahl

'He wrote some of the best and most evocative books on music' *Paris Review*

'As versatile, soulful, tough and funny as any writer at work in America today' *New York Daily News*

'A writer of rare humanity' *GQ*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Tosches was a critically acclaimed American journalist, novelist and poet. Celebrated for defining the emerging genre of rock journalism in the 1970s, he is renowned for chronicling the lives of the great icons of his time.

His biographies include *Country: The Biggest Music in America*, *Unsung Heroes of Rock'n'Roll: The Birth of Rock in the Wild Years Before Elvis*, *Power on Earth*, *Arbor House*, *Dino: Living High in the Dirty Business of Dreams*, *The Devil and Sonny Liston*, *Where Dead Voices Gather* and *King of the Jews*.

He is also the author of the novels *Cut Numbers*, *Trinities*, *In the Hand of Dante* and *Me and the Devil*, and the poetry collection *Chaldea and I Dig Girls*. He died on 20 October 2019.

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## FOREWORD

I want to be very clear about this. Nick Tosches's *Hellfire* is the finest book ever written about a rock 'n' roll performer—nothing else comes close. But that is hardly all it is. Sooner or later, *Hellfire* will be recognized as an American classic.

In outline, the Jerry Lee Lewis story is well-known. Born in Ferriday, Louisiana, in 1935, Lewis was a hellion whose soul was pitched between the threats of the Holy Ghost and the charms of the devil—the latter taking the form of boogie-woogie piano. He stole, he preached, he went to Bible school, he was expelled from Bible school, he made music, and in 1957 Sun Records of Memphis released his “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On,” a record that has not left the radio, nor the mind of anyone who has ever heard it, in over a quarter of a century. Lewis became an international star. Almost immediately the news of his marriage to his thirteen-year-old cousin, Myra Gale Brown—it was his third marriage, and his second bigamy—destroyed his career.

Thrown back into the honky-tonks, Lewis continued to perform and became addicted to pills and alcohol. In 1968 he made a deal with the mostly southern, mostly God-fearing part of white America: he would, on record if not on stage, abjure music of sin—rock 'n' roll—for music of guilt—country. He became a star for a second time. Before long he was a big enough star to do as he pleased, and he again recorded rock 'n' roll. But the years of dissipation and profligacy, and that old conflict between heaven

and hell, caught up, and once more his life collapsed around him. Time and again he was arrested, sued, divorced, hospitalized; his property was seized by the Internal Revenue Service, and he buried the second of two sons. When he entered a Memphis hospital in the summer of 1981, newspapers across the country reported that he was not expected to live; some even printed his obituary. When he did leave the hospital, he announced that from that day on he would devote his God-given talent to the praise of God. It was a promise he had first made as a teenager, and no one expected him to keep it.

Out of these materials, which are both commonplace and the natural stuff of legend, Nick Tosches has made a book that can be read along with Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Parson Weems's *Life of Washington*, William Herndon's *Life of Lincoln*, and Van Wyck Brook's *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*. It is, as well, a book that sent me back to Michael Wigglesworth's 1662 Puritan poem "The Day of Doom" ("They have their wish whose Souls perish with Torments in Hell-fire / Who rather choose their Souls to lose, than leave a loose desire"), and to Faulkner—to "Barn Burning," *Absalom, Absalom!*, and especially "Compson: 1699–1945," the postscript to *The Sound and the Fury* ("Who loved not the idea of the incest which he would not commit, but some Presbyterian concept of eternal punishment")—in search of the sources of Tosches's voice.

*Hellfire* has no truck with irony, that alibi of desiccated modernism. It is instead a strict and elegant rendering of perhaps the oldest and most enduring version of the American story: having blessed America above all other communities, God will judge its members more harshly. It is a notion that has produced much of the best and much of the worst in American life; it has led as surely to the Puritan witch trials and to the so-called Christian right of our day as to the compassion and terror of Lincoln's second inaugural address. On this ground, Wigglesworth and Faulkner meet; they meet Jerry Lee Lewis, who at first refused to sing

“Great Balls of Fire” because he recognized the song as an obscene blasphemy. At the same time, Tosches’s book joins a special and peculiarly unexamined tradition of American biography. Like the books by Franklin, Weems, Herndon, and Brooks, and like our best nineteenth-century novels, it is a poetic, imaginative statement that means less to illuminate the American’s predicament than to judge it. *Hellfire* is not so much a “true story”—though no book could be more scrupulous about dates, places, record labels, crimes; about getting the story straight—as an implacable tract.

In contrast to the doorstep genre that has taken over American biography, in which the life of the most trivial figure is excavated down to its most meaningless detail, Tosches’s book is small and short. Like the biographies mentioned above, it is both an argument about values—where they come from, where they lead—and an example of the first American literary genre, the sermon. What makes the book so strange and so compelling is that the sermon comes not from some fixed, eternal set of religious values, like the sermons Lewis’s first cousin, the TV evangelist Jimmy Lee Swaggart, often delivered on the subject of Jerry Lee, but from a transmutation of such values: from inside Lewis himself. It is a sermon in which the cadences of Lewis’s life and the cadences of sin and salvation have created their own, new rhythm. *Hellfire* is the Jerry Lee Lewis story not as he might want it to be told—no matter how formally honest he might be, revealing every last moral and legal crime—but as a judgment he might dream, and from which he cannot awake.

Thus Tosches’s language passes back through Faulkner, and back through preachers like Wigglesworth, to their source—the Bible. Tosches weaves the most prosaic, seemingly anomalous details—chart positions of Lewis’s records, copyright data, particulars of marriage licenses, dates of barnstorming rock ‘n’ roll tours—into that language, until *Hellfire* reads like nothing so much

as twentieth-century Apocrypha. Tosches starts carefully, building the Lewis genealogy without ornamental portents or omens, describing without melodrama the arrival of Pentecostalism and the outbreak of speaking in tongues in young Jerry Lee's hometown of Ferriday, then dropping flashing, seemingly classical lines here and there— "[He] slowly fell to that place where fame repeats its own name"—until the reader is ready for a passage like this one, ready to accept it at face value, with all the irony a reader might have brought to it burned off:

The booze and the pills stirred the hell within him and made him to utter hideous peals. At times he withdrew into his own shadow, brooding upon all manner of things—abominable, unutterable, and worse. At times he stalked and ranted in foul omnipotence, commanding those about him as Belial his minions. He was the Killer and he was immortal—damned to be, for as long as there were good and evil to be torn between in agony. He would sit backstage in a thousand dank nightclubs, and he would know this, and he would swallow more pills and wash them down with three fingers more of whiskey, and he would know it even more. He would walk like a man to the stage, with his Churchill in one hand and his water glass of whiskey in the other, and he would pound the piano and sing his sinful songs, and he would beckon those before him, mortals, made not as he to destruction from the womb; he would beckon them to come, to stand with him awhile at the brink of hell. Then he would be gone into the ancient night, to more pills and more whiskey, to where the black dogs never ceased barking and dawn never broke; he would go there.

This is hardly the only sort of prose in *Hellfire*—just as typical is, "The hit records continued to come for Jerry Lee throughout 1970,

and his concert price rose to \$10,000 a night”—but this prose is the essence of the book’s weight. The use of the semicolon; the devastating close with that endlessly reverberating “he would go there”; the placement of the biblical “and he would know this,” brought down to an earth we can feel beneath our feet with the sardonic, no-hope smile of “and he would know it even more”—this, from a man whose previous book, *Country*, was just a little too hip, is bedrock American writing.

The strength, commitment, and sensitivity to rhythm in the writing provides the necessary credence for the context Tosches builds: a struggle between old-time Fundamentalist religion and modern-day celebrity, between the wish or the will never to “leave a loose desire” and the consciousness that such a wish demands the destruction of both the body and the soul. The context in turn makes sense of Jerry Lee’s story and links it to a story all Americans share—if only in pieces.

*Hellfire* is driven by the need to understand what forces shaped music as powerful as “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On,” and to understand what shape those forces caused the man who made that music to take once he had made it. And it is driven by the need to make that understanding real to other people. In Tosches’s book we are offered sins galore, but there is not a titillating moment in its pages. While one can be happy one is not Jerry Lee Lewis—and the ending of *Hellfire* is as bleak and terrifying as one will ever read in a biography of a person not yet dead—one can never feel superior to him. Even so, empathy is not the test of biography; implication is. Anyone who has ever said yes to “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” will likely find a place in *Hellfire*.

— Greil Marcus

There is laid in the very nature of carnal men, a foundation for the torments of hell. There are those corrupt principles, in reigning power in them, and in full possession of them, that are seeds of hell fire.

—Jonathan Edwards,  
*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*

I'm draggin' the audience to hell with me.

—Jerry Lee Lewis

It was three o'clock in the morning, and the master bedroom of Graceland was still. Elvis Presley lay in his blue cotton pajamas, dreaming. A small bubble of saliva burst softly at the corner of his lips, and, breathing heavily, he turned. It was the same old dream.

He walked through Tupelo in the late afternoon on a summer's day toward the home of the virgin Evangeline. He was smiling as he turned a corner and entered a street where lush hackberry trees swallowed the sun. There was the house of her father, where she waited, wrapped in that magic, unholy thing from her mama's bottom drawer.

He felt a chill. He was naked. Pleasance became dread, and he flushed with panic. He would retreat across town, where his mother was not dead, and there fetch his clothes. If he hurried, there was time. He took a shortcut through a backyard that he recognized, but he was soon lost, running scared in a strange,

unfriendly place until he came to a meadow like none he had ever seen, and afternoon became night and the meadow became endless and he screamed.

The telephone at his bedside was ringing. It was one of the boys downstairs, calling to tell the boss that there was trouble.

Robert Loyd, a Graceland security guard, had watched nervously as the 1976 Lincoln Continental sped up the gravel driveway and struck the gate.

"I want to see Elvis," the driver had shouted, with a voice as harsh as the clangor of chrome and wrought iron that preceded it. "You just tell him the Killer's here."

The guard recognized him and told him that Elvis did not want to be disturbed. This displeased the Killer. He pulled out a .38 derringer, and his eyes, which were already partly closed, tightened with a further wrath.

"Git on that damn house phone and call him! Who the hell does that sonofabitch think he is? Doesn't wanna be disturbed! He ain't no damn better'n anybody else."

Elvis motherfucking Presley—his heart hastened—setting up there in that goddamn mansion pretending he's God, and all he is is some fat old dope addict who dyes his hair like a goddamn woman. As the words of Job admonished: "They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave." To the grave, to the grave, to the grave. He almost laughed, but instead spat in disgust, then commenced howling anew. He did not relent, and the guard went to the phone.

"Elvis says to call the cops," the boy at the house told him. The Killer howled and waved his pistol toward the manor.

The guard did as he was told, and a patrol car arrived in less than a minute. Officer B. J. Kirkpatrick peered into the Lincoln and saw that the Killer had the derringer pressed against the door panel with his left knee. He pulled the door open, and the gun fell. He picked it up and found that it was loaded.

## HELLFIRE

"I'll have your fuckin' job, boy," the Killer hissed.

Kirkpatrick drew him from the car, spread him, frisked him, and locked his wrists. More patrol cars came, and the Killer was taken away.

Riding slowly, against his will, the prisoner glared into the slow river of dark night, wondering what had gone wrong. The thought must have come to him, and just as quickly fled, that there were no Breathalyzers in Old Testament days. This must mean something. He must have thought about singing a song, the old one about meeting in the morning; but he didn't. Then at last he grinned and shook his head, for he knew that the cold, brilliant handcuffs would not long contain him.



**A GATHERING  
OF SHADES**



The God of the Protestants delivered them under full sail to the shore of the debtors' colony, fierce Welshmen seeking new life in a new land. From Savannah they traveled westward into the wilderness, across the Canoochee and the Ohoopee, the Oconee and the Flint and the furious Chattahooche, to the Choctaw-cleared thickets of the Alabama Territory. Some stayed there, and some moved west again, farther this time, clear to the Mississippi in a covered wagon, then to the other side, to Louisiana.

"Hell," Jerry Lee Lewis would tell you in the middle of the night, which he seemed to have the power to evoke, to drape about himself, at any hour; "Hell," he would tell you, looking asquint at the veins in his wrist, receding into the memory of his father's tales and the tales of his father's brothers; "Hell," he would tell you, "they got a big history, the Lewises. Wild drinkers. Wild gamblers." Then the final wild son would look

away from his veins and regard the whiskey in the one hand, the cigar in the other. "Fuck-ups, I guess," he would say, then laugh or cast an evil murmur, depending on which night he was in the middle of, which cloak he wore.

In Louisiana, on the eastern bank of the Ouachita River, where the city of Monroe now stands, not too far from where the final wild son was born, Jean Filhiol ordered there to be built a fort, in the autumn of 1790, that the settlers of Ouachita Post might be safe from the Chitimachas.

The settlement comprised some two hundred men and women, only seventy-five of whom bore arms. Commandant Filhiol, who had founded the Post in 1785, described his fellow pioneers as "the scum of all sorts of nations." He complained of their indolence and reported that "They excell in all the vices" and that "The women are as vicious as the men." He wrote with embarrassment that "The savages, though savages, who have occasion to see them, hold them in contempt."

The fort was completed in February, 1791, and named in honor of Don Estevan de Miró, the provincial governor who had ordered the establishment of Ouachita Post. By 1800, when the French flag replaced the Spanish in Louisiana, Fort Miro had begun to grow into a town.

It was here, to Fort Miro, that Thomas C. Lewis came about the time that America purchased Louisiana from Napoleon, in 1803. Trafficking in land and law, he became one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Ouachita Parish. In 1812, when Louisiana entered the Union, Thomas C. Lewis was the parish judge. He and his wife, Lucinda, and their four sons and two daughters lived in a mansion on a bluff overlooking the river. They owned slaves great in number and various in hue, and drank from crystal.

On the first day of May, 1819, the steamboat *James Monroe* came up the Ouachita to Fort Miro. It was the first such boat

to visit Fort Miro, and the citizens renamed their town in its honor. Judge Lewis disliked President Monroe, whose name his town had indirectly come to bear, so he decided to secede. He and a neighbor, Patrick Harmonson, obtained through the Fourth Legislature at its first session an act that created from their adjoining properties the town of Lewiston. Though the actuality of Lewiston was ignored and finally forgotten, the town has never been abrogated. To this day, some five hundred acres of Monroe, running north from DeSiard Street along the river, still legally comprise the town-within-a-town that Judge Lewis named in honor of his blood.

In the autumn of 1819, not long after the making of Lewiston, Judge Thomas C. Lewis passed away. His wife followed him in the spring, and the Lewis estate, valued at \$8,973, was divided equally among the children.

John Savory Lewis, the great-grandfather of the final wild son, wed a girl named Jane, and, like his father before him, ruled one of the greatest plantations in Monroe. But it was not meant to last. Louisiana seceded in 1861 and fought the War of Independence. The drunkard Grant took Vicksburg, just seventy miles east of Monroe, in the summer of 1863, and John Lewis knew that what his father had wrought from dirt and courage had been wrought to fall, and that his true patrimony was neither the niggers nor the fancy crystal nor the fawning compliance of the townsmen, but only, and supremely, the dirt and courage, which all the ordnance of the North could never wrest from him. In 1865, it fell, as John Lewis had known it would.

"He'd take his fist, hit a horse, knock that horse to his knees. A hell of a man, Old Man Lewis. Then they turned all the slaves loose." This is what the final wild son said of the great-grandfather whom he never knew. He said it as if he were reading an epitaph, and he said it with pride.

Born to the manor in 1856, John Lewis's son Leroy saw the manor fall before his childhood was done. During the years of Reconstruction, many of Judge Lewis's descendants moved to Ruston, a newly founded town some twenty miles west of Monroe. There the Lewises established a wealthy aristocracy of doctors, lawyers, and congressmen, an aristocracy that exists in Ruston to the present day. But Leroy M. Lewis stayed in Monroe. He worked as a clerk in a drugstore, then, for seven years, as a physician's assistant. After that he became a school-teacher, and it was while teaching that he met and fell in love with his fifteen-year-old first cousin, Arilla Hampton. They were married in 1886.

Leroy continued to teach for four years after his marriage, but he grew restless of the city and began to make frequent trips to the wild countryside of Richland Parish, which lay east of Monroe, beyond the Lafourche swamp. His stays in the country grew longer, and finally he bought a farm there. But he had been raised as a city boy, and he did not know how to work a farm. He short-planted his cotton and almost starved.

Leroy and his family moved from one small farm to another until settling finally, in 1909, at a place called Snake Ridge. Located about ten miles southwest of Mangham, near Big Creek, the community of Snake Ridge had been settled by poor farmers in the 1820s. It got its name during the flood of 1828, when William Tom Hewitt, one of the founding settlers, saw the ridge protruding above the muddy Mississippi backwater and observed that it was as crooked as a snake. Although Snake Ridge, like its neighbor Nigger Ridge, has never been acknowledged on any map, the old-timers who live there still call the place by the name that William Tom Hewitt gave it back before their daddies were born.

By the time that Leroy Lewis moved to Snake Ridge, Arilla had borne him four sons and seven daughters. On account of

all the moving from farm to farm, the children hadn't got much book learning, but they all came to be better farmers than their father, and they all had a gift for making music. Leroy played the fiddle, and his sons played it, too; and the girls loved to play guitar and sing. There was music every night.

Leroy was a good man, but he was a bad drinker, and whatever he didn't ruin by bad farming, he ruined with whiskey. Music was his pleasure when drunk and his penance when sober, and somehow it kept everything from falling apart. He would take that bottle sometimes and ride that New Orleans & Northwestern from Mangham to Rayville, that Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific from Rayville to Monroe. He would drink till his mind and his body gave out, and then he would drink some more, till his purse gave out; then he would drink some more, till finally everything that there was to give gave out. Then he would return to Snake Ridge. Singing about Jesus or women without underwear, Leroy M. Lewis would return. And when he did, none was happier to see him than his favorite boy, Elmo.

Elmo Kidd Lewis, Leroy's seventh child and second son, was born on January 8, 1902, in Mangham. Handsome, with fine black hair, a tough jaw, and a grin that reminded his daddy of Old Man Lewis, Elmo was the tallest man in Snake Ridge before he even had call to put a razor to his face. Of all Leroy's boys, Elmo worked hardest and made the best music. He was kind as only a strong man can truly be, but he drank like a weak man. Leroy warned him about this, as he himself had been warned so many times by the Baptist preacher in Mangham. Elmo would just grin. Then his daddy would start grinning back at him. Then that bottle would come out, and Leroy would tell his son about what had come before him: about how Old Man Lewis could knock a horse to his knees

with one blow; about the big house on Ouachita Cliff, right where that new Mulhearn Funeral Home was now; about the hundred and fifty slaves and the morning of their freedom, when those slaves walked three miles down the road, turned around, and were back before dinner; and about the dirt and the courage.

Cancer ate Leroy Lewis's stomach, and he died in 1937. By then his favorite son had two little boys of his own. They sat on their daddy's lap, and he touched his face to theirs and told them about what had come before them. Not the part about the dirt and the courage, but the part that was like a fairy tale.

One of the little boys was to perish. The other, upon whom the Lewis patrimony fell, was to rise further than old Judge Lewis himself, further than any of the men in his daddy's tales, before falling even further. He was the final wild son, and he knew it, just as he knew what those men in the tales felt when it thundered but didn't rain.

# DIRT



Elmo Kidd Lewis took for his wife a sixteen-year-old girl from the nearby community of Crowville. Her name was Mary Ethel Herron, and she was born on March 17, 1912, during the great flood of that year. Her mother, Theresa Lee, was the daughter of wealthy people, the Foremans, who never forgave their child for marrying John William Herron, a humble farmer with little purse and less ambition. There was a history of insanity in the Foreman family, and Theresa Lee, like her unforgiving father, eventually went mad. It ran strong in the blood, this curse of the Foremans, and could not be cast out by the seed of other blood. Theresa Lee's children, and their children too, would know it. Some would hear it, an evil cawing thing, at certain darkling hours. Others would feel it descend upon them with talons and not fly away.

Mamie Herron was the prettiest, smartest girl that Elmo Lewis had ever run across. Like Elmo, she loved to sing. She

was a deeply religious girl, but not so religious as to scare off Elmo. They were married in early 1929. By then many of their brothers, sisters, and friends had left Richland Parish, where life just seemed to get worse each year. Folks there heard about the prosperity that President Coolidge was bringing to America, but they for damned sure knew that none of it was showing up at Snake Ridge. The flood of 1927, when men rowed boats over what had been the cotton fields of Richland Parish, when Mississippi catfish swam through the streets of Mangham, had been the worst flood that anyone there could remember. William Faulkner, who lived on the other side of the river, wrote a book about that flood, a book called *The Wild Palms*, and a lot of people up North thought that he made the whole thing up. Richland Parish was still getting over that flood two years later.

Elmo's sisters Carrie, Eva, and Irene had wed three brothers by the name of Gilley. Carrie and George Gilley stayed at Snake Ridge, but Eva and Harvey, Irene and Arthur Philmore Gilley moved south, to Concordia Parish, to the town of Ferriday. Mamie's elder sister Stella had also moved there, where she was married to Joseph Lee Calhoun, the most powerful man in the parish. With kin and a rich in-law already there, Ferriday seemed to Elmo and his pregnant young bride as good a place as any; so, in the spring of 1929, they packed what little they had and went south, hunting better things.

Ferriday is about fifty miles from Mangham, and back then those miles could be traveled either by rail, on the New Orleans & Northwestern line, or by automobile, on Highway 15. Until 1903 the site of Ferriday had been only a cotton field, part of the Helena Plantation owned by the Realty Investment Company. The location was chosen by the Texas & Pacific and Memphis-Helena & Louisiana railways as a terminal, and in the fall of 1903 the Investment Company laid out the town

and named it in honor of the late Judge J. C. Ferriday, whose family had owned the Helena Plantation from 1827 until its sale to the Investment Company at the turn of this century. Ferriday was incorporated as a village in 1906. Governor Blanchard appointed as Ferriday's first mayor one Thomas H. Johnston, who, it has been rumored, duly spent the first week of his office in the town saloon, where he held forth with glee upon the finer points of his proposed Poontang Tax.

For some years Ferriday was little more than a railroad terminal. But by the time that Elmo and Mamie Lewis arrived, it had grown into a community of some 2,500 souls, most of whom were black. (Concordia Parish had always been predominantly black. In the first years after the Emancipation, there had been almost 10,000 blacks and barely 700 whites in the parish. By 1929 white folks had made a comeback of sorts, but the parish was still more than two-thirds black.) Although its streets were not paved, Ferriday had a bank, a brick schoolhouse, gas and electricity, four churches, and the many-splendored King Hotel, where strangers with smooth hands and starched collars spat and talked with local businessmen of Anaconda Copper, New York Jews, four-row cultivators, and accursed wives. Mayor P. H. Corbett liked to say that no honest man could fail to find work in Ferriday. In addition to the cotton farms, there was a hoop company, a cooperage, a lumberyard, and other industry. Three train lines ran through town: the New Orleans & Northwestern, the Texas & Pacific, and the Memphis-Helena & Louisiana. The woods around Ferriday were still rife with wild game: quail and snipe, ducks and doves, deer and coon, even a few bear. It was just like Zion, Mamie told Elmo, except for the niggers and the armadillos.

They settled west of town, out near Turtle Lake, on a farm owned by Joseph Lee Calhoun. Sometimes it seemed difficult to go anywhere in Concordia Parish without treading on Cal-

houn soil. Like old Judge Lewis, whose fallen, acreless offspring he came to know, Lee Calhoun was a man for dirt. He was an unremarkable-looking man, a countryman of medium build, with a potbelly, weathered skin, and graying hair; yet he struck as awesome all who knew him. His people had been settlers in Arkansas, then had followed the Ouachita River south into Louisiana, past Monroe, forgotten Lewiston, south to where the Ouachita flowed into the Black. There, in Concordia Parish, in the town of Eva, between the freshwater of the Black and the swampwater of the Cocodrie, he was born, on February 20, 1887. There, in Concordia Parish, young Lee Calhoun bought him some dirt. He sold it and bought more dirt. He continued to do this, always being sure to sell his dirt at a greater price than he had paid for it. With the new, free money, he bought more dirt. By the time he moved to Ferriday, not long before his thirtieth birthday, he owned dirt not only in Concordia Parish, but in Catahoula as well. He put rent-houses on some of his dirt, so that tenant farmers would pay him for the use of that dirt; he raised cattle on some; and on some he erected oil wells. His power came to be as immense as his wealth. He himself never ran for political office, just as he never farmed the cotton on his own dirt; but foolhardy were those who did run for office in his neck of Concordia without first seeking his benison, for mayors and congressmen and such performed for Lee Calhoun a function not unlike that of his tenant farmers. They might be allowed to work his dirt, for the benefit of all, but they must never forget whose dirt it was. He rarely traveled beyond Louisiana, but men came to do business with him from as many far-off countries as there were parishes in his home state; and he never cheated anybody who was too dumb to eventually realize that they were being cheated. Whether he was leasing mineral rights to the Texas oil billionaire H. L. Hunt or selling a broken-down mule to an even