

# DEEP SOUTH magazine

[HOME](#)[BOOKS ▾](#)[INTERVIEWS ▾](#)[TRAVEL](#)[CULTURE ▾](#)[EVENTS](#)[LITERARY FRIDAY](#)[SOUTHERN V](#)[Home](#) | [Southern Voice](#) | [Runaway](#)[Southern Voice](#)

## Runaway

🕒 January 30, 2015   👤 Erin Z. Bass   💬 12 Comments   ❤️ 0

*by Jennifer N. Shannon*

When they pulled into the driveway of the all-brick home, Jay didn't flinch. He sat dazed by nothing but the structure before him—almost startled by how familiar things felt. The memories swarmed within him even though years had passed. He gripped the steering wheel. Hands quickly becoming drenched in perspiration, while his heart nearly beat out of his chest. He shut his eyes and tried to determine the best way to get out the car.

Karen didn't move either. She was caught up in her own emotions, afraid to find out why Jay was so secretive about his family; why he left home and hadn't returned until now. She turned her head in his direction, noticing how stiffly he sat, barely blinking, barely breathing. He was frozen. As scared as she. Perhaps even a little more afraid of what was on the other side of the door to the home in front of them.

She finally shifted forward, wanting to face whatever came next. She gently touched Jay's shoulder—just enough to wake him, just enough to let him know she was there.

"You all right?"

"Yeah." Jay said. "Might as well go in, right?"

Karen nodded, slowly pulling the lever to open the door. Jay sat still for a few more seconds before following suit and slowly forcing his body out into the warm South Carolina air. Even before the horn sounded from the click of the doors-lock button, the door from the house flew open.

"Lawd, there go my baby. Jay, if you don't get up here and give yo' momma a hug," the woman said,

gleaming with joy.

Jay was equally excited, rushing towards her, arms outstretched.

“Momma. It’s so good to see you,” Jay said, picking up the 5’7” woman, his large arms forming a dark brown belt around her flowered house-dress.

“Boy, you best not never wait this long to come home again.”

Jay put her down and then just stood there with a simple smile, almost as if he were a teenager being spoiled rotten by his mother.

“Baby, you look so good. You really been taking care of yourself.”

“I been trying. You look good too. How you been?”

“Baby, momma all right. I’m just happy to see you. Can’t believe it’s been nine, going-on-ten years since I seen yo’ face,” she said, softly touching his jaw, then grazing her fingers along Jay’s chin. She was amazed at how her son had grown. He was a man now. Had always been one, in a way, but now he wasn’t the teenager who ran away from his problems. Now he was a man who had come back to face them.

Caught up in the moment, both Jay and his mother had forgotten about Karen. She shyly remained near the car, waiting on the right time for her to extend a greasy hand to this woman she’s heard almost nothing about.

“Ahh, mom, this is my wife, Karen.”

“Wife? Baby! Why you didn’t call us? We woulda come,” his mother said, walking firmly toward Karen, recognizing her discomfort but paying it no mind, and embracing her with weakening arms. Karen hugged her back, relaxing within her hold.

“Baby, my name is Janie, but you can call me Ma.”

“Yes ma’am. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Same here. You a pretty thang, wit’ all that hair. Now y’all come on in this house. I done cooked and we been waiting,” Janie said, leading Karen by the hand toward the house, then grabbing Jay’s hand on the way.

As Jay was being tugged forward, he stopped, bringing both the women to a jolting halt.

“Baby, you all right?” Karen asked, looking back at her husband.

“Yeah. I’m cool, just need a minute.”

Karen watched Jay’s eyes begin to water. Janie released Karen’s hand and made her way back to her sor

“I know it’s hard but this is still your home. Besides, yo’ daddy took his medicine a little while ago, so he

"I know it's hard but this is our home. Besides, your daddy took the medicine a while time ago, so he won't be up for hours," Janie whispered as she leaned in towards Jay's face.

Jay's eyes were glossy. Even looking at his mother, seeing her soft features and graying hair encourage him, he still didn't move. His feet felt like they were stuck in the ground, underneath a few layers of dirt, with grass sprouting up around his ankles. He tried to lift his legs but couldn't shake free. Then, he found himself moving his heavy, stiff feet, but he was turning in the opposite direction, then he was running down the street.

"Jay," Karen called after him, but he didn't slow or turn back. She called his name again, her voice drifting around Jay's head, but it didn't seem to enter into his eardrums, or if it did, it didn't connect to his brain.

"Baby, he gone."

"Gone where? Is he okay?"

"He be all right. Just need to clear his head, I reckon."

"I don't understand," Karen said, dropping her arms by her side, feeling helpless.

"I guess he never told you why he left and stayed away."

Karen shook her head no, gazing in the direction Jay went. "How could he just leave like that?"

"Well, baby I wish I could tell you exactly what happened but I can't."

Karen opened her mouth to speak, but Jay's mother placed her pointer finger in front of Karen's mouth before any words could be released.

"The reason I can't give you the details is: They ain't mine to give. Jay only wanted to protect his family and something terrible happened in the process. It was unfortunate, but it wasn't his fault. My son has always been a good boy, just had to grow up faster than some, and was forced to become a man while his own daddy was in his life but acting the fool. Janie grabbed Karen's hand, and rubbed the top of her dark skin in a soothing motion before speaking again. "Jay just need a few minutes to think through how he gon' step back into a house he ain't seen in years and how he gon' look at a father he damn-near hates."

Karen nodded, resigned.

"Now, come on and let's go in this house. I'll fix you a plate."

By the time Jay reached the abandoned shed, he was winded and sweaty. He placed his arm against the corner of the building and rested his head on his forearm. With his eyes closed, he felt like he was positioned back in front of his house. The thought sent shivers up his spine. He shook the reflection out of his mind and stood up straight, to face this old place he sometimes called home during his adolescence.

With a little effort, Jay was able to push open the door and he saw right away that no one had touched the place in his absence. No one had fixed up any part of it, nor had anyone tore down any part of it. The edifice was steadily falling apart due to natural causes, the wear and tear of the elements eroding it bit by bit. Jay entered anyway, searching for a little bit of quiet for his mind.

Jay's movements were calculated as he entered the space, stepping slowly onto patches of dry brown grass and weeds, maneuvering around the old tractor that had been there when he first crossed the threshold in 1995. It was even more rusted now, with small flakes of color scattered around the sides. He continued, careful not to go in too deep too quick, but sneaking along as if he might disturb someone sleeping in the corner of the shed, far away from life.

He looked down and noticed a can lying on its side near a tarnished, dirty spoon and a piece of cloth. The items seemed familiar, and he knelt down to look. Yes, they were his. His can of pork-n-beans, recognizable for what it was only by a tiny piece of the label that fell off when he lifted the can off the ground. He glanced over at the soiled shirt, thinking back to the moment he had ripped it from his body, throwing it to the ground in anger. He peered at the piece of fabric, filthy with dirt and blood. He stared at the shirt, and without warning, started to cry. For the first time since that night he shed tears. Jay's mind raced back and forth from the past to present.

"All I wanted as for him to stop. Stop beating up on her. To stop making us watch, stop making us afraid," Jay mumbled through tears, as if he were that 17-year-old kid, defending his actions. "Why did I have to go back? Why? I hate myself for it." After the words tore from his mouth, he made his way out of the dusty shed. When he stepped out into the woods, his arms began flailing around his head, fighting off a swarm of gnats gathered outside the door.

He ran heavily, nearly falling, as he followed the path his footsteps had created, back home. When he opened the door, memories stormed his mind.

"Where is he? Where's my dad?"

Karen and Janie rushed into the living room from the kitchen, hearing what sounded like a teenager's voice echoing from the front of the house.

"What's wrong baby?" Karen asked, realizing that it was Jay, but his voice had transformed back to that of child's.

"I just need to know where he is."

"I'm in here, son." A faint voice made its way out of the guest bedroom.

Jay took a deep breath and marched in to see his father, a man he hadn't laid eyes on in nearly 10 years. He hesitated only for a moment in the doorway, then made his way closer to the bed. When he stared into

the old man's face, he could see that death had indeed fallen upon him. Each strand of hair on his head was gray, wrinkles were poured on his face, and his body appeared frail and small. He looked far older than his age.

"Son, you finally came back home."

"I came back cause I needed to. I needed to see you before you died," Jay said, his voice fading when it arrived at the last word.

"Janie, come light me a cigarette."

With the same obedience as always, Janie, who had been standing in the doorway observing, walked over to the dresser and grabbed the box of Camel Lights, plucking one from the pack. She eased past Jay, and placed the cigarette in his father's mouth. Scrapping a match on the corner of the nightstand, she put the flame to the end of the stick.

"This place is still the same." Jay said. "Even half-dead, you still got complete control over my mother. I never understood that. Never understood how a man could treat a woman so bad and that woman still break her back to make him happy."

"Baby, it's not like that."

"Janie, you don't have to explain nothing to him. 'Specially not about our relationship."

"Some things never change."

"How you know? You been here for all of two minutes and you think you know something," the old man said, coughing out his smoke.

"I can tell 'cause Momma still jump when you call. Still moves at the speed of light when your mouth opens."

"That's what she supposed to do. I'm laying here dying, ain't I? So why wouldn't she get me a cigarette if I ask? I'd do it for her."

"No, you wouldn't. You never loved my mother, nor did you love us."

"I did love you, just had a messed up way of showing it. But I'm sorry. I really am. I don't want to fight with you but I imagine that's the only way we gon' move on," he said, pushing himself up toward the headboard his arms shaking as he elevated his butt. Then he dropped slowly back down onto the mattress. "I haven't been the best father. But right now, I'm saying I'm sorry. I'm not just saying that 'cause of this situation, but truly am sorry for everything that happened. After that night, I had to—" He couldn't finish. Tears creaked from his eyes, sliding down his face, before his long fingers sprinted to his cheeks to prevent them from dripping onto his neck.

"After that night, you had to do what? Say it daddy, say it!" Jay screamed.

"Jay, please don't do this. Please," Janie moved toward her son, taking his arm.

"No Momma, let him finish. Why did you have to bury your youngest son, daddy? Why?"

"Because of you."

Karen stood just outside the door to the room, her arms folded across her chest, listening to the past unfold.

"Yeah, I'm the reason he was shot but I didn't kill him. Did I Momma?" Jay asked, looking intently into his mother's face, seeking confirmation for his words.

"No. It wasn't your fault, baby. It wasn't yours at all. John was gone long before he was shot. He was a sensitive boy. Always taking stuff to heart. He was in this house with us too long. Too long for his own good and we didn't even realize it. Parents know their children, but sometimes we don't do what's best for them. Sometimes we get so caught up in our own lives that we don't realize we're hurting them. So no, it wasn't your fault, it was ours."

Jay physically felt like he was back in that moment. He took a step back from his mother. "See that night, when I came back, I was so tired, I just wanted to get in bed." He looked at his father. "But what did I see but John pointing a gun at you? And me being stupid, I tried to save you. Save you!" Jay took another couple of steps backwards. "A motherfucker who beat my mom in front of us damn-near our entire lives. And when I tried to take the gun from him—" Jay stepped backward again, and found his back against the wall. He slid down slowly, his hands covering his face. "And the sad part is, I still don't know why I did it. Guess I didn't want him to go to jail for killing the man that I should have killed when I had the chance." Jay removed his hands from his face and looked strangely at his father, as if he was seeing him for the first time. "John didn't deserve to die that night, but you did. You deserved to die over and over again." Jay gave a short laugh. "I guess my prayer has finally been answered."

Nobody moved. The old man seemed to have forgotten that he was smoking. His arm hung limply off the side of the bed, the cigarette now burned down to the filter, the cigarette ashes long since fallen onto the floor. The silence was loud. The truth was breathing in all the oxygen in the room, suffocating everyone in it. Jay wiped his nose and then slowly raised his body until he was standing on two feet.

"I can't do this anymore. I been carrying the weight of this secret on my soul since I walked out that door ten years ago. And I just can't do it no more. I'm tired. I grew up too fast. Became a man in a house where 'the' man acted like a boy. I promised myself, I wouldn't turn out like you and that's the one thing, I'm going to hold on to. Not being like you, but being better than you."

"Son, you've always been better than me."

"I don't need you to tell me what I know. I come here to get my peace and I got it. Now I can go on and live

I don't need you to tell me what I know. I came here to get my peace and I got it. Now I can go on and live my life." Jay said. "Thanks daddy, 'cause without you, I wouldn't have known who not to become."

Jay turned and walked out the door, to find his wife standing in the hallway. "Come on Karen, time to go."

Janie ran after her son, lightly touching his arm. "Baby, please tell me you're not leaving all ready?"

"Momma, I'm leaving. But not for good. I'll be back, but I need some time. I need to get out of this house. I've finally said what I needed to say. So I can move on now."

"Just remember that we love you. I love you, Jay, and so does your daddy. No matter what, he still loves you."

Jay embraced Janie, closed his eyes and felt John's presence light the room. "I love you too, Momma."

Janie gently stroked Jay's head, before letting him go and wiping evidence of her own tears away from her face. Karen hugged Janie, unable to force any words to leave her mouth.

"Baby, you make sure he come back, now," Janie whispered directly, softly, into Karen's ear.

Grabbing Janie tighter, Karen simply nodded her head. She let go and trailed Jay to the car. From the guest room, as Janie waved at her son and his wife from the porch, Jay's father whispered, "I love you too, son."

Two weeks later, Jay returned and buried his father next to John.

*Jennifer N. Shannon was born and raised in the "prettiest town in Dixie" and currently resides in Atlanta. She is the author of three books, including a novel Silent Teardrops and two books of poetry, short stories, blogs and photographs titled for the LOVE ... Vol. 1 & 2. Runaway is an edited version of a short story in the LOVE ... Vol. 1.*

---

POST TAGS:

[fiction](#) [jennifer shannon](#)

SHARE THIS STORY



---

« [Previous article](#)

[Books & Film Not...](#)

[Macabre, Femininity...](#)

[Next article](#)



---

RELATED ARTICLES

Call For Submissions...

12 COMMENTS

Leave reply

regina / January 30, 2015



this story made me so emotional! i had to get up and walk away for a moment. i felt like i was in the room with this family...feeling everything they felt. wow!

Leave reply

mj / January 30, 2015



This was powerful! Very honest, but intense. I liked the way it unfolded, and took unexpected turns even i that very small space. Bravo!

Leave reply

PP / January 30, 2015



Conveying so much in so few words, true artistry; sucked me right into that room, I could smell it. Looking forward to reading more from you.

Leave reply

Lem / January 30, 2015



Wow! I was captivated by the writers ability to allow me to connect emotionally with the relationship of these characters. I would love to read more of Jennifer's writing. I will subscribe to your magazine so that can continue to follow her work! Impressive!

Leave reply

Ann / January 30, 2015



Well written with a dialect that placed you in the South and vividly in the hearts of John, Jay and Janie. I wanted more of the story!!! FORGIVENESS IS A POWERFUL TOOL!!

Leave reply

tom / January 31, 2015



You should be proud of this work JS...extremely powerful and engaging. Keep up the terrific work. Yes, you have a gift...but more importantly, you have a passion.

Leave reply

Brian D. / January 31, 2015



We all know how it feels to runaway or to want to run away instead of face the problems...your story





definitely connects me to my own story that I must face

[Leave reply](#)

jean claude / January 31, 2015



I feel as though I've been lost in this story for hours. I was completely drawn into the gravity moment. Looking forward to more from Ms. Shannon..

[Leave reply](#)

Pingback:Runaway... | Jennifer N. Shannon / February 1, 2015

[Leave reply](#)

Tina / February 2, 2015



Enjoyed reading your story. It was very vivid. Proud of you and your accomplishments.

[Leave reply](#)

Pingback:

Jennifer N. Shannon, write to live. write to love. write to laugh. write to express you. | Jennifer N. Shannon /

February 4, 2015

[Leave reply](#)

CC / February 16, 2015



Your story was very engaging and I was drawn in by the complex layers of the characters. It was wonderfully written and I yearned for me. I'm proud of you...keep shining!

LEAVE A COMMENT

Write your comment here...

Name

E-mail

Website

POST COMMENT



Deep South is an online magazine covering Southern culture and literature. We strive to celebrate the literature of the South by interviewing authors, reviewing their books, creating reading lists and visiting landmarks. We also present a roundup of literary news every Friday and publish original fiction, poetry and nonfiction in our Southern Voice section.

Copyright 2016 Deep South Media, LLC

---