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FreeCell and Other Stories

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FreeCell and Other Stories

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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August 2011

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FreeCell

Sorry, you lost this game. Better luck next time. Games played: 3557. Games won: 3008. Play again? Restart this game? Exit?

Restart this game. Why not? Everyone deserves another chance.

I listen as the massive antique in the foyer reminds me in Westminster chimes that another fifteen minutes has slipped beneath the front door and away while I play another few games of FreeCell on the computer. FreeCell. Is that an oxymoron? In four more hours (and fifteen minutes) it will be time to serve dinner. Dinner for two. Not five. And what can I fix? I click on the ace of clubs and send it up to the top right corner of the screen, tiny bells ringing as it goes on its way. The deuce follows. More bells. The game continues until all the cards, in proper sequence, move into position as required. The last card, a king, rises up, and as he comes to rest, all of his subjects leap forward as if falling from a cliff, plummeting down, down, crashing into tiny fragments at the bottom of the green screen, like that Corelle bowl crashed onto the linoleum floor in the kitchen of our first apartment when I dropped it intentionally to prove to you that it was shatterproof.

Congratulations! You won the game. Play Again? Exit?

Play again. Who invented this game, anyway? Another form of Solitaire, as if another one is needed. A waste of time.

Remembering the summer before my senior year in high school, spending days stretched out on a blue, flowered quilt in a field of waist-high, softly swaying grasses, I was isolated in the dense, lush growth, insulated by the poetry of Dickenson and Frost. The time wasn't wasted. Not to me. I lazily drifted off into those afternoons of possibility, marveling at the vast, blue sky,

and breathing in the life of my surroundings, drinking in the beauty of simply being, until evening's dimming light compelled me home.

Home. Now I live with that hideous clock watching me. I despise the sardonic brass pendulum behind its distorting, beveled-glass facade, swinging back and forth, back and forth, trying to hypnotize me into believing it controls the continuum of life. The bonging reverberates through this entire house, shaking it down to the very foundation. Inescapable. The sound didn't always bother me like this. In fact, I scarcely noticed. Now the house is so quiet I can't help but hear it. Dammit.

Sorry, you lost this game. Better luck next time. Games played: 3558. Games won: 3009. Play again? Restart this game? Exit?

Restart this game.

Your mother insisted about the clock, telling you, "It belonged to your great-grandfather. He brought it over from Germany before the war. It's a symbol of faithfulness and stability, you know. Dependable. Every home must have a grandfather clock."

I almost had to stomp on my own foot to keep from telling the woman *yes, every family must have a cuckoo, too, and you're ours*. But you never could appreciate my humor, and I didn't want your cutting glance of disapproval. You're so protective of your mother. You actually wanted the clock, thanking her, almost gushing, praising her thoughtfulness, embracing her with a warm, cuddly son of a hug and a soft kiss on her pulled-too-tight cheek. It made me want to gag.

When the Kid Glove movers arrived in their matching, black jumpsuits and placed the dark, wooden behemoth against the foyer wall, the entire entryway took on a gloomy pall that has yet to lighten. I even tried having the walls painted a soft beige and changing out the drapes, hanging simple, white sheers to let in as much sunlight as possible.

You, my dear, expected me to be the custodian of the clock, the timekeeper, as part of my household routine. You demonstrated the proper way to raise the heavy, brass weights by their chains and adjust the screw at the base of the pendulum to maintain precise operation. The weekly schedule was one I had no interest in keeping. Several times you came home and found the pendulum stilled and the weights lying corpselike at the bottom of their mahogany case. After that, the responsibility of maintenance silently passed on to you.

Congratulations! You won the game. Play Again? Exit?

Play again. Another game.

I left a message for the girls, but they haven't called. I know how tight their schedules are this first semester, and a few calm moments for a phone call must be nearly impossible to come by. They're busy. This is a great time for them. Hectic. Ha. I say that as if it's a new thing, as if life wasn't hectic from the day I was told there were three of them, not just the one I wasn't prepared for. Exhausting. Endless, it seemed. Where were you? Yes, I know, the breadwinner, out doing what needed to be done. I'm unfair. Really.

The phone rings.

You'll be home early; the scheduled meeting was cancelled. Someone sick. Now you're early. Now. I wish, for once, the call would be to say you're working late.

The monster bong, four quarter-hours followed by four strikes at precisely 4:00 p.m., shattering my reverie. I minimize the screen, rise and head to the kitchen to begin dinner. Chicken. A big chicken, seasoned and soaked in Chardonnay. I pour some wine over the bird, some into a glass. The next monumental decision of the day? What's the side dish?

My friend, Ginny, called last week to tell me about her latest promotion, a raise with a hefty bonus and a transfer to San Francisco. New position. New city. New life. I am happy for

her. Really. She'll probably celebrate with a trip to Saks, satisfy her Jimmy Choo cravings—a pair of boots, a thousand dollars. I know the ones she's been eyeing, too. Gorgeous. Frivolous. But she's single and has nothing else to spend her money on. I do wish I'd been able to go with her and Elaine last month. Santa Fe seemed like the perfect spot for a long weekend to renew old friendships, but the budget didn't allow for it. You were quick to tell me that. All those years, I guess I was too busy to notice things like budget constraints before. But really, I couldn't leave the girls back then. They were just too young.

Mashed potatoes. Instant mashed potatoes and a can of gravy. Starting from scratch is so much trouble. It doesn't matter, anyway.

I've been considering getting a job and invited your sister, Barb, over to talk about the possibility. Her response was, "It's a charming idea, sweetie, but what can you *do*?" I chew on that question now and want to call her, tell her she's a bitch, but the truth of her words itches like this maddening rash that's developed on my left shoulder recently. From the garden, something. A spider maybe, although there's no bite mark.

I take out placemats, plates, forks, napkins, and set the table "just so," like Mrs. Rouen taught me in Foods class in high school. A nicely set table was one of her many preparations for a perfect domestic life—the proper way to fold a napkin, the proper position for flatware, proper glasses for proper beverages. Yes, proper was instilled in me at a young age by Mrs. Rouen and her wise instruction. I wish she'd taught me the proper way to spit, because that's what I feel like doing. I want to spit.

Mrs. Rouen. Her smile always reminded me of a possum, kind of pale and thin-lipped, curled around to the sides. She was always smiling, looking at me with those too-close, beady eyes down that long, pointed nose, but the smile wasn't real. I knew. She probably had a

horrible home life. No doubt the old possum face is dead by now. I'm sure she had a proper burial, with the proper casket and the tissues folded "just so," in order to receive the proper quantity of her family's tears.

Back at the desk I maximize the screen, continuing play. Red. Black. Red. Black.

Dammit.

Sorry, you lost this game. Better luck next time. Games played: 3559. Games won: 3010. Play again? Restart this game? Exit?

Restart this game.

Dr. Kahn called in a prescription for me today. She said it would get me past this bout of sleeplessness. Late last night I couldn't stand the quarter-hour bonging any longer and got out of bed, pulled on my robe, and went to the kitchen. I fixed a cup of tea, wanting to step out to the garden and sit on one of the concrete benches in the darkness and stare up at the stars until my neck ached. But it was too cold out. No toads called back and forth across the pond with their high, whirring mating calls filling the empty night. They've all tunneled underground. I wondered what decides which toads end up together. Romance or circumstance? In spring there are dozens of them, all calling out ardently in their desire for attention. What if one found out she didn't even like her mate, much less love him? Would she leave?

After a while I went back to bed, staring at the changing numbers on the alarm clock and listening to the low puffs of your sleep beside me. Eventually, the first hints of daylight slipped around the edges of the window shades, and I got up and went back to the kitchen to make the morning coffee. Tonight, though, I'll sleep.

Congratulations! You won the game. Play Again? Exit?

Play again.

I wonder what the girls are eating this evening. Pizza? Burgers? Unlikely. Probably tofu-organic-herbal something or other. My career-minded, health-conscious daughters. Good for them. I'm proud of them. I didn't have a career. I didn't know what tofu was, much less most of the other meat/sweet/dairy substitutes that are so accepted now. Everything is accepted now. They weren't called burgers then, either. They were hamburgers, not soy, not turkey, but real hamburgers made with real beef and heart-unhealthy, weight-watchless mayonnaise slathered on so thick it gushed out the sides and plopped down onto the plate in front of you with a messy splat every time you bit down. Dammit.

Sorry, you lost this game. Better luck next time. Games played: 3560. Games won: 3011. Play again? Restart this game? Exit?

Restart this game.

You asked what I wanted for my anniversary. *My anniversary.* I guess I hadn't realized it was a solitary occasion until then. No, I was just being a bitch. I know you didn't mean anything by it. After a long silence I answered, "Oh, I don't really need anything, dear. I have it all."

The statement makes me shudder. What I want is impossible. I want a restart, a do-over. I want to go back to the night we ate those sloppy hamburgers at Mike's after the show. I want to get into the car and go straight home this time, crawl into my soft, single bed with the thick, white comforter and stencils of white daisies on the headboard. I want my purple-striped socks and my white eyelet nightgown, and I want to drift off to sleep thinking about flying for Delta or American and not what happened that night, or its consequences.

I don't mean that. Dammit.

Sorry, you lost this game. Better luck next time. Games played: 3560. Games won: 3011. Play again? Restart this game? Exit?

Restart this game.

What would you think if you knew how I spend my days? I wonder that you seldom ask. The bonging reminds me I need to check on dinner. I minimize the screen and go to the kitchen. The chicken simmers on top of the stove, and I move on to vodka. Bitter. I add ice and consider if there is room for me in the glass. I head out to the courtyard to survey the plants. What I find there shouldn't surprise me, but it does. A cold blast of air blows loose leaves along, sending them scurrying into corners and spinning in frantic circles.

The long-anticipated spring has held off for another day. The plants are tired, losing turgor, branches like arms hanging limp, too heavy to support their own weight. (They look defeated, surrendered to their desiccated fate). I put my glass down and bend to turn on the faucet, a feeble attempt at resurrection, likely too little, too late.

My thoughts wander to the neighbor next door. His bedroom window looks down onto the side courtyard and, though I never look up, I often imagine that he watches me as I move about. Our driveway conversations center on a common love of gardening. He is a widower. Younger. I begin watering. Pause. I stand just so, a pensive look on my face as though trying to work through a complicated landscaping plan. A slight smile. A reach. Hands of a ballerina as I delicately pinch dead leaves from the foliage. Gracefully I bend to pluck a weed that has sprouted, grown and died in a crack in the stone walkway.

Yesterday my neighbor stopped me as I was leaving for the grocery. "My violets are not doing well," he remarked. "I was wondering if you had a couple of minutes to take a look at them, tell me what I'm doing wrong."

Of course I did, suggesting he move them to a different window, one offering better light. I pointed out the need for constant warmth and nourishment to keep them happy. His radiant

smile warms me. Would he like to attend the annual garden show in a few weeks? Should I call to see?

The green man hanging on the wall, La Bocca della Verita, monitors my actions while I work; his glaring eyes and gaping mouth admonish me. Does he read my thoughts? He is not green at all, but yellow. As I water the firebushes and devil's backbone that flank him and grow below, I turn the hose toward his face, spraying him for spite, but I am careful not to let my hand too near the mouth of truth.

The ice is nearly gone from my drink. I pick up the glass, finishing off the diluted vodka, and walk to the cypress swing. I sit down, gathering my sweater around me, pushing off with my feet, setting myself into motion. The forward and back movement quickly shifts to more of a diagonal one, sending me swaying to the side at an angle. It sets my sense of order on edge. It shifts again; this time moving into a wobbly circle. Disorienting. Who ever heard of a swing doing such a thing? It's so wrong. You said you would figure out why and make it right. The chains were probably twisted. Something else to fix. I try kicking off again, determined. Sideways. Circles.

Giving up, I head back to the kitchen and confirm that the evening meal is fully prepared and waiting for your arrival. At my desk, I maximize the screen, check email, and then continue play. I look up the number and make the call to my neighbor; my stomach dips as the phone connects and begins ringing. Four rings. Five. Six. I place the receiver back into its cradle and turn my attention back to the computer. The crunch of wheels on the gravel lane lets me know you are home. Dammit.

Sorry, you lost this game. Better luck next time. Games played: 3560. Games won: 3011. Play again? Restart this game? Exit?

Restart this game.

I hear the front door open and your keys landing on the table next to the clock. I minimize the screen. When I look up, I realize you're not in color. You glance across the room in my direction, a dull shade of gray. As you walk toward my desk, the bong, bong, bonging registers in the background of my thoughts, and I sense the stark, black metal bars rising up in front of me, and although it isn't real, I know it isn't really there, the coldness of the smooth surface surprises me as my hands clutch two of the vertical bars, and even though I'm sure they aren't in front of me, I see them, and I feel them, and I'm holding on and shaking them, holding tight and shaking, shaking them here inside wanting to be out, wanting to be free, and you, you stand there, and you're in a black and white movie reel in an old picture show from the Forties or the Fifties or the Thirties, I don't know when, flickering, coarse and scratchy, the sound muffled and static, and your mouth is forming perfect, round O's and E's of pieces of something that my ears can't hear and my brain doesn't understand, and I'm screaming, screaming and shaking, my mouth wide and my lungs expelling every trace of the air in them, but I don't hear anything, I don't hear panic coming through in my voice, the screaming, and you don't react, and I wonder what is the matter with you, why you won't see me, hear me, hear my screams. I take deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out. Stop it. This is not real. This is not real. It's not.

You say hello to me, smiling.

I smile back, feeling Mrs. Rouen shuddering through me, crawling around under my skin, peering at you through possum eyes, through beady possum eyes. I shake my head slightly, sending her away and log on to the Food Channel website. "Hello, Dear." I force it out, hoping it doesn't sound too sarcastic. "How was your day?" It's not your fault. I tell myself this as I try to rewire my thoughts to see you in color again. It isn't working.

You walk up to my chair, bend and kiss the top of my head, lean over toward my computer screen. “My day was good. You checking the market? Doing my job for me today?”

I laugh, not a real one, but a false kind of nervous *ha ha as if* chuckle as I answer, hoping my voice doesn’t sound as if I’ve been running. “No, Dear, you know I wouldn’t understand all that. Just looking around for some new recipes.” I breathe slowly, conscious of my chest rising and falling with each intake, each release.

You move over to the sofa and sit down, turning on the TV, changing the channel. “Dinner smells good. Cooking up a little something from cyberspace?” You slip out of your loafers and prop your feet up on the coffee table.

I stare past the whisper blue violet plant in the center of the table, past its withering leaves, its papery dried blooms, and down to your feet, following the design of your gray socks. Mentally, I trace the outline of the checked pattern, corner to corner to corner, square after square after square. “No, Dear,” I say absently, putting too much emphasis on the “Dear.” “Nothing unusual. Just a chicken.” A flash of headlights in the front picture window catches my attention, telling me that my neighbor is home. “Let me know when you’re ready to eat.”

You stand and walk over to the bar, pour yourself a Scotch, and announce that you’ll be in the study, returning calls.

I return to the game. Red. Black. Red. Black. Dammit.

Sorry, you lost this game. Better luck next time. Games played: 3560. Games won: 3011. Play again? Restart this game? Exit?

Restart this game.

All of the Trimmings

Will's Midtown Market was closing early, and Jane barely made it inside before the sullen security guard locked the entrance door behind her. He didn't even offer a "Merry Christmas" to her as she passed in front of him. Half of the overhead lights were already out, and she threw her hood back and grasped the lapels of her coat, shaking raindrops to the floor. An announcement instructed all customers to make their final selections and proceed to the checkout area. The clerks at the front of the store looked as though they had already shared whatever good tidings were left to offer.

Jane had forgotten the damned potatoes. She grabbed a shopping cart and made her way through the maze of people assembling near the checkout aisles, her flat, brown shoes making squeaking sounds as she walked. The cart had a wobbly wheel that made it unsteady as she pushed it along, but she wasn't going back for another one.

What would Mother think? Christmas Eve and her only daughter is making a last-minute, mad scramble to the grocery store. Tsk. Tsk. What *would* Mother think? Bad planning, that's what. Adele Josephine Grimley would never approve of a last-minute run to any store on the day before any holiday, let alone the biggest eve of the year. She taught her daughter better than that. Just ask her. Planning was the most important part of life. *Fail to plan and you plan to fail.* How many times had she heard that one? It bounced in her brain, playing ping pong pain in the ass with all of the other trite sayings that had gone back and forth, from ear to ear, since she was old enough to nod her head in agreement. *Take care of your equipment and your equipment will take care of you. When the going gets tough, do unto others.* What else.

Well, she sure did unto others what Mother didn't want. That good college? The nice husband? Ha. The job was decent, though. As for any darling little grandchildren she could

mold into perfect little replicas of her perfect little self? Sorry, not this year. Just add it to the list of disappointments. Oh, and the happily ever after? Last Saturday's birthday date was the last candle, as far as Jane was concerned. No more blind dates set up by her co-workers, no more widowers. Watching reruns of *Friends* held more entertainment, even if she'd already seen all the episodes enough times to quote most of the lines.

After her temporary position as bookkeeper's assistant for Shady Hollow turned permanent, Jane moved into her own place, a tiny, quiet, one-bedroom apartment across town. Her mother sat stone-faced, with her thin nose crinkled and her deep-set eyes glaring, as Jane told her she'd be moving out. Nine years later she was still living in the same little place and still working as an assistant for the funeral home. Mother constantly emphasized that she needed a plan for her life. Jane went to work every day. In her opinion, that qualified.

She just turned thirty and, already, gray streaks were showing up in her long, mousy-brown hair. Jane had always heard that for every gray hair you had a good time. She knew for sure that was bullshit. She also heard that for every one gray hair you pull out, seven come to its funeral. This was more likely, so she didn't pull them out, just in case it *was* true. Taking chances was for other people.

Chewing a fingernail as she looked over the produce aisle, Jane stopped at what was left of the sweet potato display. Or were they yams? Jane didn't care. She picked up the least pitiful potato and turned it over and over in her hands, looking at its eyes and checking for flaws. Scraping away a small crust of mud with her stubby nail, she decided it would do and put it in a plastic bag. She didn't understand what the big deal was about the sweet potatoes anyway. Her mother didn't even like them. Neither did she. Too mushy and they tasted weird.

The remaining potatoes were sallow and oddly-shaped, but Jane selected four more and dropped them in with the first, her thoughts focused on tomorrow's Christmas Day expectations. Ten sweet potatoes. She shifted through the bin, finally surrendering to her lack of options and, picking the closest five, put them into another bag. Not nine or eleven sweet potatoes. That would throw the table off. Ten chairs. Ten place settings in perfect position. Ten diners. The right amount of ritual. A ritual Jane had had enough of years earlier.

Bitterness rolled around Jane's stomach like spilled marbles as she remembered the message on her machine from 7:00 the Saturday morning before. "Jane!" Her mother's shrill voice pierced the still room, and Jane groaned, rolling over and pulling a pillow onto her head. "Jane, this is your mother." As if she couldn't recognize the voice of the screech owl who had roused her from her slumber too early every morning for the first twenty-one years of her life. "Jane, you there? You must be in the shower."

No, it's Saturday, and I get to sleep late. That is if some old bat stops calling me and waking me up.

"Jane, I know how you are, so I'm calling to remind you not to forget to remember that you're in charge of the sweet potatoes for Christmas Day. Pick some nice ones this time. No cut marks. Not too big, they won't cook in time. Don't get the pale ones; get nice, orangey ones. Don't forget! And don't wait until the last minute to get them. They'll be all picked over. Call me and let me know that you got this message and that you got the sweet potatoes."

Jane got the message. Yes, this year was shaping up to be a little carbon copy of Christmas last year with Mother and Christmas the year before that. Everything would be perfect. Just once Jane wanted the turkey to explode, causing the oven door to fly open and chunks of meat and shards of bone to splatter all over the kitchen walls and ceiling. Or wouldn't

it be sweet if the big bird sat in the oven, forgotten until it became a big, black ball of Butterball charcoal? What if that traditional, so-succulent, perfect pork roast ended up undercooked just enough for someone to come down with a mild case of trichinosis? Or maybe Uncle Ferd, her mother's brother, could reach his one-too-many early enough to fall, face first, into his bowl of oyster and artichoke soup, splashing it all over the white linen tablecloth. Yes, that would be rich. A nice niece would offer to fix her darling uncle his traditional holiday cocktails, Bocce Balls, adding (oops!) a little too much happy holiday juice to them. She could be a nice niece, sometimes.

Each year there were the regulars, and then there were the chair fillers, but the number at the table never changed. Ungrateful, all of them. It was Jane's father's tradition to put on the big spread, one he enjoyed hosting year after year, and her mother slaved in the kitchen and scrambled to pull off without incident. Uncle Ferd was a regular. He usually brought a different woman to dinner each year. Such a smoothie with them, he was a regular red-nosed Rudolph Valentino, in Santa-print suspenders. That is, until they got to know him a little better, and discovered his affinity for all things alcohol. After that revelation, they soon evaporated. This year, her mother had told her, Ferd would be stag. Knowing that, Jane was feeling pretty good about her vision of face-first Ferd, lovely in oyster and artichoke. It was a distinct possibility. But look out ladies! Two women from Mother's college sorority were in town for a study program that ended a couple of days before, and they would be in attendance. Their presence would make for some interesting covert Ferd footsy between courses, a ripe opportunity for him to dabble beneath the damask.

The Happles from across the street, Hattie and her husband, Emile, would be there, along with the famous Hattie Happle pie. They were the only ones who ever brought a dish to share.

This was their twelfth year at the table, excluding, of course, the year Emile gave himself an early Christmas present in the form of the dish, Sharon, a speech therapist. Jane heard through the repast grapevine that the stuttering the Happle's son did was no match for Emile's, and Sharon was speechless when Hattie walked in on a little private session the two were engaged in. Emile didn't get anything for Christmas that year, including a place to spend it.

Queen Maureen and Dave "Dip" Duncan would be there, too. Jane's father's best friend and partner in the financial planning business and his wife continued the dinner tradition, even after John Grimley died. Jane's father had been working late one night, again. Dip found him sprawled out on the carpet, next to his executive chair, the Wall Street Journal clutched in his frozen fingers. Mother hadn't been so bad before then.

Jane was fifteen that year. She dubbed Maureen "Queen" after a third year of Christmas feast cleanup came and went with Maureen spending the entire time, post-gorge, on the throne, engaged in a PTBM, while she and her mother toiled over the aftermath of the meal. Jane's mother never challenged a guest's personal needs, so Queenie got away with it every single year. The Perfectly-Timed Bowel Movement was a work evasion technique Jane developed when she was eleven. She had no idea that it would be used against her, and so effectively, later in life. The other couple on the guest list this year was a woman her mother knew from the country club and her husband. They'd been friends with Jane's mother for some years now, but Jane had never met them. She'd only heard her mother talk about how the woman talked about other people all the time. Why Mother would put up with that, Jane didn't know.

Who would round out the table this year? Who would fill slot ten? It was probably a toss-up between Jane's cousin, Skeeter, and Uncle Boogie, her dad's brother. All Uncle Boog ever did was sit on the sofa after the meal with his belt undone, belching out Christmas carols

during ball game commercial breaks, so Jane was banking on Skeeter. At least Jane could relate to her. They were about the same age.

Jane flashed back to the year she turned thirteen. Mother told her to go out into the yard and collect pine cones and needles to scatter down the middle of the table for the centerpiece. It was the day before Christmas, and she was supposed to spray them with insecticide, wait a few minutes, then rinse them with the hose and let them dry in the sun. She accidentally forgot the spraying part, and the rinsing. As everyone ate, tiny red spiders exited the pine cones, crawling across the crisp, white linen tablecloth, first one, then another, then more. Mother still reminds her of the year she ruined Christmas.

Sometimes Jane felt sorry for the turkey after her mother finished with it, all buttered up on the outside and a big gaping hole in the middle. It always looked so pale and naked, lying there in the roasting pan, waiting to go into the oven. Mother had quit filling it full of crap the year Uncle Ferd got sick, the same year Jane moved out. The argument is resurrected every Christmas, with Uncle Ferd still saying it was food poisoning and Mother still insisting it was an overdose of Bocce Balls, something about Amaretto and pineapple becoming a losing combination when teamed up with vodka and orange juice for the seventh, or eighth, or ninth match. But she stopped stuffing the bird anyway.

Jane's mind returned to the present. She dropped the sweet potatoes into her shopping cart and headed toward the front of the store. Taking a detour through the candy aisle, she picked up a box of chocolate-covered cherries for the ride home. There was another thing Mother could harp on tomorrow, the fifteen pounds she'd put on since last Christmas. Jane wondered what the chances were that she would make it all the way from the front door of the house to the kitchen before the crap hit the Casablanca. Maybe she'd swing by the drug aisle,

too, and pick up a set of earplugs. Tuning out the screech owl had been fully mastered by the end of high school, but a little insurance never hurt.

She reached the front of the store. There were only two checkout lanes open and five or six customers in each line. Jane scrutinized the arms and baskets of those ahead of her, moving into the lane that would likely be the quickest. She fully expected it to stop still though, once she was in place and it was too late to change. Sure enough, the line stopped moving, but not until the person ahead of her tried to check out.

Price check on two. The woman turned to apologize for the delay. When a clerk brought the correct price for the item, she smiled and thanked him, and wished him a Merry Christmas. Then she turned and smiled at Jane, wishing the same to her.

Jane nodded and placed her selections on the belt, watching them slowly move toward the cashier. She made the mental observation that if more registers were open they could get everyone out of there a lot more quickly; it was bad planning on their part. At least, that's what her mother would say.

Once in the car, the candy was opened, and Jane munched on the sweet cherries and chocolate as she drove home. The phone was ringing when she opened her front door. She let the machine pick up; her hands were sticky.

"Jane? Jane, are you there? Jane, this is your mother. No? Well, where are you on Christmas Eve? All right then, I just wanted to remind you not to forget to bring the sweet potatoes. I'm going to need your help in the morning, so you ought to be here early, like around 7:30. Don't be late. We have a lot to do. And don't forget the potatoes." Click.

Jane rolled her eyes and contemplated a couple of suggestions for what her mother could do with the potatoes but put them on the floor, just inside the front door. She'd have to trip over them to get out. She put her keys on top of the bags. More insurance.

The evening damp cold had penetrated Jane's clothes, and she put a pot of water on the stove to make tea. When the water was hot, she steeped herself a big cup of Sleepytime and grabbed the stack of unopened mail off the kitchen counter. She headed to the bedroom, changing into her favorite gray flannel nightgown. The rest of Christmas Eve was spent sitting up in bed, leaning back against the headboard and sorting through the pile. Junk mail made up the bulk of it; a few bills and a late reminder of a dental appointment rounded it out. Last chance to save before Christmas, a brochure from Kohl's urged. Free Delivery through December 23rd, another ad touted. Spend Christmas with us; the postcard was printed in red on a white background. Jane put the bills on her nightstand and stacked the rest for her recycle bag. Finishing her tea, she placed the empty cup on top of the bills and tucked down under the covers. As she drifted off to sleep, she could hardly wait for tomorrow to be yesterday.

At six-thirty Christmas morning the phone rang. "Jane? This is your mother. Pick up. Jane?"

Jane groaned and turned over, pulling the covers up over her head.

"Jane! Pick up. This is important!"

Her mother's screech was impossible to ignore. Jane threw the covers back and reached over to the nightstand, grabbing the phone and knocking the empty cup into the wastebasket. "Merry Christmas, Mother. What's so important?" She yawned, not making any attempt to disguise it.

“Jane, I just wanted to remind you to be here early. We’ve got a lot to do to prepare for this meal, and you know I don’t want anything to go wrong. You did pick up the sweet potatoes, yes?”

“This is what you call important? Nobody died?”

“No, no one died. For heaven sakes, Jane, why would you even think such a thing? It’s Christmas. That place of yours has you thinking death all the time, doesn’t it? I just don’t want you to be late, and I’ll need those potatoes, so get rolling. It’s time to be busy.”

Jane groaned again. “Yes, Mother. I’ve got the damned potatoes. I’ll be there.” She slammed the phone into its cradle and rolled over in bed, pulling the covers up again and drifting back to sleep.

Tiny red spiders crawled into her dreams and chased after her. She struggled to get away from them, but her legs were dead weight, and she couldn’t run fast enough. The spiders overtook her, climbing up past her ankles, biting and stinging her legs until they felt like an inferno. Her feet and ankles swelled, causing her to fall to the ground, and suddenly the spiders were gone, and she wrestled to stay afloat in a giant bowl of soup. It was warm and smelled of artichokes. She looked around, treading soup, and spotted Uncle Ferd, sitting in his undershorts on the rim of the bowl, rolling bits of turkey meat into little balls. He tossed them at her, calling out, “Turkey thighs in the skies. Whoop! Whoop! Who’s in the soup?” Over and over he said it, laughing hysterically, and slapping his bare, flat feet up and down along the rim of her mother’s good china, his knees bouncing around like bony, baby beach balls on the shore. The black-framed glasses he wore teetered on the tip of his Rudolph nose, threatening to fall off into the soup. Turkey balls rained down all around her. Jane ducked under to avoid being battered by the balls, swimming over to the rim and scrambling as she tried to get out of the soup. Her

foot kept slipping on bits of oyster as she climbed, and suddenly she was running, enveloped in darkness. She couldn't see where she was going and dropped to the ground, curling herself into a ball and rolling forward, head over heels, into black.

She jolted awake, tossing the covers off and staring at the ceiling. Daylight flooded through the slats in the window blinds as she tried to recall the details of the dream and figure out what it all meant.

It was nine-fifteen. Jane was already late, by her mother's standards. As she showered and bolstered herself for the looming celebration, the annual feeling of overwhelming anxiety settled onto her neck with a heaviness like those big medicine balls she had to lob around in P.E. class when she was young. Out of the shower, she went to the closet, standing in the doorway, deciding what to wear to Party Grimley. She glanced down at the trash can where the cup had fallen. As she bent to pick it up, the junk mail post card on top of the recycle stack caught her eye. She picked it up too. *Spend Christmas with us.* Jane hadn't read the entire card, figuring it was just advertising bullshit. She sat down on the bed to read it. The warm red lettering was pretty and seemed oddly soothing, as she ran her fingers across the swirling script and pure white background:

*Spend Christmas with us
Our home will be brimming
With food for the spirit
And all of the trimmings*

The Midtown Mission was soliciting volunteers to help hand out Christmas dinners to the needy. Jane wasn't that kind of person. In fact, she was always very uncomfortable when organizations had people stand on street corners, shaking cans for cash. Her practical side thought it was a dangerous thing to do. Someone could be robbed or run over if they weren't

careful. That ten dollar donation she gave must have landed her name on the volunteer mailing list.

Riding over to her mother's, Jane noticed the roads were empty. She concluded that everyone else in the city must be having warm cocoa and opening gifts by the Christmas tree, the picture-perfect, Norman Rockwell fireside scene that seemed so unrealistic to her. Jane and her mother hadn't exchanged gifts since the year her father died. So that special magic of the morning depicted in December calendar pages was merely a remote memory. Mother focused instead on the big meal, hitting the ground running on Christmas morning, preparing the dinner and doing everything possible to maintain the traditional holiday festivities John Grimley enjoyed most. It was a ridiculous effort.

The medicine ball weight Jane felt earlier only intensified as she got closer to the house she grew up in. The rambling old place, with its big rooms and high ceilings, always made her feel small and lost. She gnawed another fingernail, thinking about how much more she liked the coziness of her tiny apartment, how safe and comfortable it was.

The Christmas decorations on the front lawn greeted her when she arrived at the house. They were the same ones she knew from childhood, and Jane was surprised that they hadn't disintegrated over all those years. Mother placed them in the same spots, the reindeer, the manger scene, Frosty, Santa: just like the dining room table, everything had its place. Nothing ever seemed to change, though the three-foot plastic snowman standing next to the walk was looking a little yellow these days. She resisted an impulse to kick it over.

Jane let herself into the house, calling out as she walked into the foyer. "Mother?" No answer. "Mother, I'm here." Still, no one answered. She walked to the kitchen with the bags of sweet potatoes. The white countertops were completely covered with varying stages of yet-

unfinished featured offerings of the upcoming meal. All of the trimmings. The only surface available was the top of the dryer in the laundry room. She put the sweet potatoes there, went back into the kitchen, and looked through the kitchen window onto the backyard. She didn't see her mother, but a scattering of pine cones on the patio brought back the memory. "Ah, crap. Here we go," she said aloud, as she flashed back again to the Year of the Spiders. It was only a matter of time. She went to the back door. Opening it, she yelled out, "Hey, Mother, I'm here." Silence. Jane walked out onto the patio and scanned the yard with her eyes. Her mother wasn't there.

Back in the house, Jane walked through the downstairs rooms, calling. The dining room table wore its tablecloth, the plates and soup bowls stood in stacks in one corner, but none of the dishes or silverware had been set into place. A pile of napkins waited to be ironed. The silver platters and bowls had not been unwrapped from their storage bags. In the living room the Christmas tree stood, half trimmed, while half-empty boxes of ornaments and decorations sat waiting to be tucked away. It was very unlike her mother to have left things in such a state of disarray so close to the dinner deadline.

Jane went to the stairs and called up. "Mother? You up there?" As she waited for an answer it occurred to her that perhaps her mother had gone to the store for something. Jane hadn't checked to see if her car was in the garage. Quickly she dismissed the thought. Not on Christmas Day. If Mother didn't have whatever it was, she would do without. But Mother always had whatever it was. Part of her pain in the ass planning philosophy.

Jane started up the stairs. Mother must have been in the shower. As Jane reached the end of the hall she didn't hear water running. "Mother?" She called out again, recognizing only a slight edge of panic in her voice.

“In here, Dear.” Her mother’s voice came from the open door. She sounded tired.

Jane rounded the door frame to find her mother sitting cross-legged on the floor at the foot of the bed. Pink sponge rollers adorned her head, a lovely contrast to the yellow, quilted robe she wore. Photographs were spread in a semi-circle on the gold carpet around her. She held a photo in each hand and raised them toward her daughter as Jane entered the room. “Look at these. I don’t think you’ve ever seen them. It’s your father and I when we went to Venice, the year before you were born.”

Jane recalled seeing the photographs years ago. But what in the world was her mother doing, still with curlers in her hair, sitting in her robe on the floor in a pile of sentimental goo on Christmas morning, when there was so much left undone—was it possible this woman was not really her mother? Jane glanced around the room—the unmade bed, clothes strewn across the chaise lounge, throw pillows piled into a corner. She spoke slowly. “Mother? Are you feeling well?”

Her mother stared at her a moment before answering. “Well, I’m a little tired. Why?”

“No reason.” Jane hesitated. “You do remember what today is, yes?” She moved over and sat down beside her mother. Hadn’t she gotten a call from her mother very early this morning? Had she dreamed it?

“Of course I do. It’s Christmas. Don’t be silly.” She continued shifting through the photos around her.

“Don’t we have some cooking to do?” Jane wasn’t sure what was going on, but it frightened her to see her mother not in full control of an occasion.

Her mother sighed deeply. “Oh, I am trying. But I just can’t seem to get it together this morning. Quite frankly, I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed. What time is it?”

Jane looked at her watch. “Ten-thirty. Is the bird in the oven?”

“Yes, of course it is. I did that while I was having my coffee earlier.”

She said it so nonchalantly that Jane could only stare.

Her mother began collecting the pictures into a stack and placed them in the box they had come from. “I suppose we need to get going. Can you get that spinach casserole ready while I get dressed?” She stood and placed the box into the bottom drawer of her dresser. “I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Jane stood up. “Okay, but we’re going to have to hustle if all this is going to be done before those people get here.” She headed for the door. “You sure you’re okay?” She turned to look at her mother once more.

“I’m fine. Now run along and let me get ready.”

Back in the kitchen Jane looked at the mess surrounding her. As she prepared the casserole for the oven she thought about all the work that needed to be done and for what? So a bunch of ungrateful mooches could stuff themselves, get drunk, and have a grand time. Once the casserole was in the oven, she moved on to the cornbread stuffing. Her mother’s recipe lay next to the empty dish. As she began collecting the ingredients, her mother arrived in the doorway. Every silvery hair had been put into place, and her Christmas dress, the same one she’d worn for as long as Jane could remember, made her seem frozen in time, though the lines in her face said otherwise. Jane realized with a start, her mother had gotten old.

“All right, Dear. I guess I’m ready to tackle this.” Her mother pulled an apron from the pantry and tied it on. “I’ll take over that dressing. You go out and get the pine cones.”

Jane hesitated, preparing for the worst.

Her mother seemed to be reading her mind. “I’ve already sprayed them. It’s okay to bring them in.”

As Jane moved toward the back door she blurted out, “Mother, why do we need to go through all this for these people?” She hadn’t meant to say it, but seeing how old and tired her mother looked made her angry. “For years you’ve been bending over backwards to put this thing together, and it’s all for a stupid tradition and a bunch of unappreciative jerks.”

Her mother sighed. “Oh, Jane, it’s for your father, not them. He always loved to host the big Christmas meal. It made him feel proud, like he was royalty. I do it for him.” She began frying off the pork sausage for the dressing.

“You know, he’s been gone a long time now, Mother. You don’t have to keep doing this if you don’t want to. Do you want to?”

Her mother didn’t answer, but Jane could tell she was thinking about it. She decided to let the subject drop. Jane stood at the back door and glanced over at the stack of mail on the counter. On top was the same card she had received from the Midtown Mission. She picked it up. “You got one of these too?” She held it up for her mother to see. “How did we get on their mailing list?”

Jane’s mother waved her slotted spoon in the air. “I get one every year. I suppose it’s because I send them a little check.” She shrugged. “Now go take care of those pine cones for me. And please set the table after you do the centerpiece. We are way behind schedule.” She put her hand on her hip and continued cooking, as if she hadn’t heard what her daughter said about ending the tradition.

Jane collected the pine cones and brought them in. She placed them down the center of the dining table, mixed in some other decorations from a box on one of the chairs, added candles,

and went about setting the table. When she was finished, she moved into the living room and began putting it in order. She put the remaining decorations back into boxes and closed them, returning them to the storage closet they lived in for most of the year. The whole time she worked, she chewed the inside of her mouth, thinking about Ferd and Dip, the Happles, and the other guests who would be arriving soon. Empty-handed, she was sure.

When Jane returned to the kitchen her mother had finished preparing the dressing and two other side dishes. Jane watched as, methodically, the woman worked her way around the counters, going through the choreography of cooking that Jane had watched and assisted with since childhood. The whole time her mother worked, she was muttering under her breath. Jane walked over to the stack of mail and picked up the invitation from the Midtown Mission. An idea began formulating in her mind. “Mother? What do you think about volunteering at the mission?”

“I think it’s a fine thing, Dear. Why?”

“No, I mean, today. What about doing it today?”

Jane’s mother stopped what she was doing long enough to look up. “Don’t be ridiculous. We have guests coming.” She returned to her work.

“So? Do you think they care whether we’re here or not? What if they showed up and we weren’t here? We could leave a note on the door, telling them to make themselves at home. Ferd has a key, doesn’t he?”

“Well, yes. But that would be so rude.”

“Rude is what they’ve been for all these years, Mother. Really, you don’t think they’d miss us, do you? Just turn the light on behind the bar. They can help themselves.”

“But what about my girlfriends from school? They’re expecting me.”

“We could put on the note that if any of them wants to come help out at the mission, they’re welcome. We’ll leave the address. Better yet, we’ll leave this invitation. You used to tell me about how your sorority did charity work all the time. It would be like the old days for you all.” Jane held up the card.

“I can’t, Jane. Your father would be mortified.”

“He’s gone, Mother. He’s *been* gone. How long are you going to keep acting as if he’s still here? When are you going to have your own life? These people don’t give a damn. They’re just here for the food and the booze. You know I’m right. Half of them didn’t even come to Dad’s funeral.” Jane saw she’d struck a nerve.

Jane’s mother stopped wiping the counter. She stared at the dish towel in her hand for several moments, saying nothing. Then she slowly began wiping again, in small circles, then larger ones. Finally, she stopped, picked up the towel, and tossed it into the sink. She looked at Jane and grinned. “You are right. I’d forgotten about that.” She walked over to Jane and put her arm around her. “Let’s do it. Why not. I’ll get my purse; you write the note.”

Jane dug a tablet from the junk drawer and composed the note. When she returned to the kitchen, her mother asked, “Who’s driving?”

“I’ll drive, Mother.” That is, if you don’t mind a lot of candy wrappers under your feet.”

“You really ought to keep your car up a little better. You never know when a nice young man might come along. You’ll want him to think you’re tidy.”

“Oh, Mother, don’t start, okay?”

They walked out to the front porch and, after Jane taped the note to the door, her mother locked it, then exclaimed, “Jane, the sweet potatoes. We forgot the sweet potatoes.”

“Mother. Fuck the sweet potatoes. Who cares.”

Jane's mother wagged a finger at Jane. "Now, Jane, you may be grown, but I still won't tolerate that kind of language. I taught you better than that. There are far too many other words in the English language for you to use that one."

Jane gritted her teeth as they headed down the walk toward her car.

As they passed the old lawn decorations, Jane suddenly turned and slammed her foot into Frosty's belly, knocking him over on his back and sending him halfway across the yard. She felt the impulse to kick Santa too, but she restrained herself, it being Christmas after all.

Me and Baby Sister

My Baby Sister Jolene come home about four months ago saying, “Sandra Ann,” that’s me, that she met a new man over at the Hilltop Grocery, and she was gonna marry him. She ain’t but seventeen, and she’s prone to telling stories, so I didn’t know how much of what she related was fact and what all she made up inside her head. She had me going for a minute or two, but then I decided I didn’t believe her. I hadn’t heard about there being nobody new in town, because if there was, I’d a known about it.

Now me being six years older and all, I try to watch out for Baby Sister when I can. I take care of her, since she’s young and don’t know much as I do about the ways of the world. She gets a little headstrong from time to time, and I have to straighten her out. Ever since Momma come down with the sugar diabetes a while back and died, I been doing what I can to help out when I’m not at my work. Daddy took Momma’s passing real hard. Things he used to be concerned about just don’t bother him so much no more. Especially us girls. Plain and simple, I took over Momma’s chores. He tells Baby Sister to mind me like she would her momma, but Baby Sister don’t listen.

So when she come home bragging about this new man she met at the Hilltop, I start asking her some questions. Come to find out she was telling the truth this time, for once. He’s kin to Old Man Thompson up Beetline Road. Old Man Thompson passed last April. He was eighty-one. His wife passed the year before. They didn’t have no kids, so the place went to a distant relative. Real distant. All the way from France, Europe. Well, it must have been a whole bunch of money he come into to move all that away and settle in here. Seems to me he’s gonna stick out like a Black Angus in among a herd of Holsteins.

His name's Jock, and he's my age. I think that's too old for Baby Sister, and I told her so. He's a full-grown man, and she's just a kid. But like usual, she don't listen to me.

Now, me and Baby Sister are about the same size and wear each other's clothes and all, most of them anyway, but she got this idea somewhere along the way that she was prettier than me, Hollywood material. She wants to be a movie star. Got her room all plastered with pictures from magazines. Even got some on the ceiling so she can look at them when she's laying in the bed. It's all she's talked about since she was little. Oh sure, she's got them full lips, and she's got a mole on her cheek. Truth told, she's developed a lot better than me, but I don't see where she's no prettier, and besides, she's way too short to be in the movies. All them actresses are tall and skinny. And she's too young to be on her own in a big place like Hollywood. She ain't even finished with high school. I read about how young girls like her went off to California to get famous and got lost out there and ended up doing them blue movies without a stitch of clothes on. And as far as acting, I've seen Baby Sister tell a whopper or two to Momma and Daddy, and she ain't no actress. I could tell she was lying a mile away.

I like to say I'm a natural blonde, and most nobody questions it. Baby Sister's hair's brown with some natural red shining in it, but it looks like she went at it with one of them segregated knives, all choppy-looking. She come out of the bathroom one day all proud and says to me, "Sandra Ann, look at my new hairdo. Don't I look like one of them fashion magazine pictures?" Then she took a spin on the balls of her feet and posed with her backend sticking off to the side and them big lips stuck way out in front. I swear to San Francisco she looked like one of them pigs of Mr. Jimmy's. But when I told her that's what I thought, she got all pouty and threw a fit like as if I wore her best Sunday sweater on a Saturday night. Some reason she don't want me wearing that one. And I respect that, least when she's around.

Well, that day she come in the kitchen saying she was gonna marry that man, I just shook my head. The way she paraded around like she was walking down the aisle, holding Momma's plastic hygeraniums from the bowl on the table for a bouquet made her look plum silly. She snatched the cover off the toaster and put it on top of that raggedy hair like as if it was a veil. Come up to me and grabbed my arm, pulling me along, pretending I was the groom walking beside her. She was singing *here comes the bride, big fat and wide*, and laughing so hard she got the snorts, and then I couldn't help but laugh at that, specially after me telling her she looked like one of Mr. Jimmy's pigs. I got so tickled I couldn't stop the giggling, so I ran her out the kitchen, told her she was gonna make me burn the pork chops, but she didn't pay me no mind. That girl was up in the clouds, floating around in the air like the puffball fuzz after you wish on it and blow real hard.

Turns out Jock's got himself a job at the power plant, right down the road from the nursery where I am. He's running some kind of big equipment that keeps everything measured and calculated like it's supposed to be. Whatever that means. Got a college degree. Guess he'd need one to do a big fancy-sounding job like his. I don't need no college to keep all them azaleas growing. I just need to know when to give them the water and when to feed them and when it's time to cover them up so they don't get frostbit. Sometimes things get to be pretty dull. But that's how life is.

Well, Baby Sister and Jock started going out. Official dating, not just hanging around at the Hilltop. He come by the house and introduced himself to Daddy like a real gentleman. Baby Sister stuck her tongue out at me after I met him. Nobody saw but me, and I returned the insult. She knew I hadn't believed what she was telling me. I had my suspicions about Jock though.

Even though he was with her, I could feel him looking at me, but when I'd glance over his way, he'd be looking off someplace else.

What really put the egg whites on the lemon pie was Daddy. Here I was thinking he'd have all kinds of reasons to say no. I figured he be yelling to high heaven that Jock was too old for Baby Sister. I know he'd a yelled if it had been me. All he said was, "He seems like a nice enough fellow, even if he does talk funny." And then he went out back and started tinkering with the tractor. I know if Momma'd been alive she'd had plenty to say. But seems like Daddy always was soft on Baby Sister, treated her special.

That Jock speaks French, but of course he would, coming from over there. I imagine it'd be a pretty good thing being able to say things about folks right there in front of them and them not having one notion as to what you was talking about.

Things was rolling along fine with Baby Sister and Jock for a while until it came to the Lord. Seems this France man wasn't much for church-going on Sunday morning, or any other time for that matter. Made me wonder if they was all heathens over there. He kept asking Baby Sister to go some place or other with him on a Sunday or a Wednesday night, and she'd tell him no. I knew Daddy wasn't going to put up with back sliding. His girls would go to church as long as they lived under his roof. I'd heard that since I was little. But Baby Sister called him on it. Said she wasn't gonna tell Jock she couldn't go anymore, and then she had the nerve to ask me to back her up. I told her flat out, "Baby Sister, if you want to be irrelevant you go right on ahead. But you ain't bringing the devil down on me. I been a good church-goer since I come into this world. Ain't no fancy-talking France man gonna get in the way of my salvation."

Daddy hit the roof when she stood up to him and said she wasn't going to church anymore. But his upset didn't last. All Baby Sister had to do was to get them tears running like

she used to do when I'd take her favorite doll away when we was kids. Daddy melted like a Hershey bar in the hot sun. Told her she'd have to come up with a compromise, that she ought to convince Jock to go to church just once a week with her at least. She promised she would, and then she give him the big cow eyes, but I knew she was lying. And Daddy let it go by. Didn't say another word about it. He'd a had my hide if I done it. But my Baby Sister's something real special.

She and Jock kept on dating, and I swear up and down the flagpole that man was sweeter on her than cane come harvest time. Almost made me sick. He was always showing up with a big grin on his mouth and showing off them cute dimples, bringing her a present when he come to pick her up. I thought he might bring me a little something every now and then. After all, me being the big sister, I oughta get a little appreciation too. But he never did.

Now, I been telling Baby Sister ever since she was old enough to know about things that she needed to save herself till her wedding day. She knows I'd be madder than a cat in a bathtub to find out she did otherwise. But I begin to wonder if maybe she was, you know, giving the milk out free. I don't mean to be mean, but there had to be some reason this Jock was hanging onto such a young thing as her. I even backed her up into a corner one night when he dropped her off after one of their dates. First she told me it was none of my bees business. That was one of her favorite sayings. But I kept after her, and she swore up and down that they was just kissing. Nothing more. I wasn't so sure about that. I hadn't never had no boyfriends, but I know what can happen and how one thing can lead to another and all.

So I decided to do a little snooping. Now don't get me wrong. I wasn't planning to go stepping onto her parade as they say or anything like that. I just thought I'd better make sure she wasn't gonna go and get herself knocked up. No telling what might happen then. I know

Daddy'd skin me if it was me that done it. I asked Mittie Sue Fortenberry, she's my ride to my work, if she'd drive me over to Old Man Thompson's place on Saturday. I told her I'd give her some extra money for gas since it was such a long ways. She was agreeable to it, and Saturday morning she picked me up, and we went on over.

We pulled up into the front yard in Mittie Sue's old Chevy Nova, and I seen where Jock's car was in the driveway, so I figured him to be at home. I got out the car and told Mittie Sue she could go on back, and I'd get Jock to bring me home later. She looked at me kinda funny, but I told her it was all right and thanked her for the ride. Then I told her I give her the gas money when I got paid, and I closed the car door. I went on up to Jock's front door and knocked on it. Mittie Sue backed out of the driveway and drove off.

After a minute Jock opened the door and asked me in. He looked surprised, standing there with his wavy dark hair slicked back wet and no shirt on, asking me what was wrong, wanting to know if Baby Sister was all right. I stepped inside, and he closed the door, and I told him Baby Sister was just fine, and I come over wanting to know what his aim was with her, that I was worried the two of them was headed for trouble. I put my nose up real close to him so he'd know I was serious. He smelled nice, like soap, like as if he'd just got his shower. I kept looking at his bare chest. Judging from the looks of him I suspected he probably had some weights around somewhere that he used pretty regular.

Jock smiled at me with them dimples showing, and he tells me in that soft French voice of his, "Sandra Ann, I can't believe that you would think I'd do anything to dishonor Jolene. I think the world of your sister." Then he grabs me by the shoulders real gentle and told me to trust him, that I didn't have nothing to worry about.

I felt my knees go all jelly-like, and he had to catch onto me tight to keep me from hitting the linoleum. After that things got a little fuzzy, and I don't remember quite exactly what happened, but all of sudden I found myself laid out on his green plaid couch, and he was sitting next to me on the edge of it, brushing my hair back from my face with his hands, looking deep into my eyes and asking me if I was all right. He might have just been concerned that I fainted, but I took the look in his eyes to mean he wanted me to kiss him. So I did. I reached up and pulled him down close to me and begin to kiss him on the lips, putting my tongue out like as if I was French like him and letting my body go all limp. My stomach was churning like buttermilk, and I got kinda woozie all over from the smell of his soap.

He pulled back from me quick asking, "What are you doing?" like as if he didn't know, but I could tell he liked it, so I just pulled him right back down without saying a word. He pulled away again and pressed his hands down on my shoulders. "Sandra Ann," he said, "I don't think this is something you and I should be doing."

I told him it was all right, that Baby Sister and I shared just about everything, which was mostly true, and that she wouldn't mind at all, which was mostly not true.

I don't think he believed me, though. He looked a little bit confused and asked me, "Are you sure she wouldn't mind? Is this something all you American women do?"

"Oh, sure," I said, and in case that wasn't quite enough I convinced him by taking one of his hands off my shoulder and putting it up underneath my shirt. Seems I forgot to put my bra on that day. I spread both of my hands on that bare chest of his and rubbed them across his muscles, feeling the hairs passing through my fingers, and I thought I felt his nipples hardening up. His hand was warm on my stomach, and I pulled him down close to kiss him again. At that he jerked away from me and stood up.

“Sandra Ann, this is not right. I can’t do this.” He walked out of the room, and I just laid there on the couch wondering what was wrong with him that he didn’t want me. I knew he must have been attracted to me, what with me being older and more sophisticated than Baby Sister. Then I figured maybe he was impudent was the reason he pulled away. Guess men don’t like to talk about that none. But then I just figured he was being all shy.

After a while, he come back in the living room. He had a shirt on. Had his shoes on, too. He was talking to me, but he wasn’t looking at me. “How’d you get here?” He sat down in a chair across the room and stared at the floor.

“I got dropped off,” I told him. “Guess you’re gonna have to give me a ride back to the house.” By then I was sitting up on the couch and pulling my shirt tail down around my waist. I was still picturing the muscles and the hairs on his chest.

“Well, let’s go.” He stood up and walked to the door, holding it open like a gentleman and waiting for me to get up off the couch.

Jock’s jaw was working the whole ride home, but he didn’t say a word. Just drove with his eyes straight ahead. I let the silence fill up inside the car and spill out the windows. Nothing much to say at that point. When we turned off the main road, I saw Mittie Sue’s car coming from the other way, and I knew she’d been over at the house talking to Baby Sister. I knew I shouldn’t have trusted that Mittie Sue. She’s got herself a reputation as a troublemaker by a lot of folks around here. When she passed us, I could see the guilt spread all over her face. She didn’t even wave.

We pulled up in the yard, and Baby Sister come running out the house like her cut-offs were on fire. I put up the car window real fast, because she was coming up to my side of the car. I locked my door too, so she couldn’t get at me. She started beating on the window glass like as

if she was gonna bust right through it. That girl was crying and screaming like a spoilt little baby with a broke rattle. Looked like she'd a scratched my eyes out if she got close enough.

Jock let out this big ole sigh and got out and went around to her, started petting her like as if she was a baby kitten. She beat on that chest I'd been rubbing on, and he just held her tighter and tighter until she calmed down some. After a while I felt like it was safe for me to get out the car, so I did.

That's when Baby Sister broke away from Jock and picked up Momma's favorite yard ornament, a cement skunk she'd bought with her jelly money and painted all by herself, and flung it at me, looked like with all the umph she had, which wasn't a whole bunch. Baby Sister never was no good at any kind of sports. She didn't have no muscle in her arm worth a lick. Well, that big old heavy skunk come flying in my direction, and I could tell it wasn't gonna hit me, so I wasn't too worried about it. But it did hit Jock's brand new red Chrysler right smack on the hood and made a big dent in it about two feet across. Looked like a crater from Mars on the front of his car. Then I didn't know who was madder, her at me or him at her. They both start yelling at each other, and I just slipped off quiet-like into the house. Daddy was kicked back in his big green recliner watching the ball game, and he wanted to know what all the ruckus was out front. I just told him it was one of them lover's quarrels and not to bother himself about it. He turned his attention back to the TV, and I went on into the bathroom and got me a long, cool shower. Felt like I could use one under the circumstances.

By the time I come out the bathroom Jock was gone. Baby Sister was sitting on the couch with her bare feet propped up on the coffee table and her arms crossed over her bosoms, pouting. I wondered if she and Jock patched things up, but I didn't think it was the proper time to ask about it. She had them big lips stuck way out, and I thought about Mr. Jimmy's pigs again,

but I wasn't gonna say a word to her. Let sleeping dogs take their naps. I just went on down the hall to the kitchen and started fixing supper. I set the table and made a nice big salad with some tomatoes and cucumbers I'd picked in the garden out back the day before. The neighbor'd brought over a jar of figs that morning. Nothing like homemade cathead biscuits to go with that, so I whipped up a batch, spooned them out, and got them into the oven to cook. Once or twice I caught myself smiling at nobody while I cut up the chicken and floured it. While I was frying it up, I got to thinking about how nice it might be for Baby Sister if she was able to follow that dream of hers and go off to Hollywood and become a movie star. Maybe she wasn't too short after all.

Ivory Jupiter

At ten in the morning, Liz called the number listed for the Crossroads Bar. It had been disconnected. She decided to take the ride from Baton Rouge to New Orleans to see if, just maybe, she could find out if her biological father was still alive. She wasn't sure what she wanted from a man she didn't know and only in the last several days had suspected might still exist. The contents of a storage box found in the attic of her mother's home after her death revealed the truth to her. Her mother had lied. Her father hadn't died in the war when she was a baby. Instead, for many years after the war, he played piano player in a New Orleans honky tonk. Surely her mother, facing her death, left that box for her for a reason. So she booked a room near the New Orleans airport for the night, then tossed an overnight bag into the car and headed for the Interstate.

New Orleans. Her Baton Rouge neighbors spoke ill of the place. Sin City. Booze. Gluttony. Casual Sex. Utterly the opposite of the traditional lifestyle in which Liz had grown up. She never had an alcoholic drink and, being a vegetarian, didn't understand how people could gorge themselves on anything that once had a face.

Liz arrived at the motel and checked in, deposited her bag on the bed, and pulled out the city map she'd previously marked with the route she needed to take to trace her father. The Crossroads Bar. That's where she planned to start. From there, who knew?

The drive from the motel to the bar was fairly short, and Liz had no trouble spotting the place as she approached. A large, faded billboard at the far side of the parking lot announced that she had arrived. Pulling up in front, she parked facing the building. The Crossroads Bar was an old, clapboard, two-story building in dire need of paint. The silvery gray of exposed, weathered wood out-competed the peeling, pale yellow that must have once blanketed the

exterior walls. There were torn screens on the second floor windows, a couple of broken panes, and several holes in the wood fascia near the roof edge. She read the fading signs in the first floor windows. *Fresh Po-boys, Lunch Weekdays. Live Music Every Night. Owned and operated by the same family for over thirty years. Open seven days a week, except Monday. For Sale. Fresh hogshead cheese.* Liz read over them twice before turning off the engine. She sat in the car for a few minutes, staring at the front of the place.

She walked up to the door and paused, arms to her sides, scratching her palms with her fingernails and taking a deep breath before opening it. Bright sunlight gave way to darkness so black, for a moment Liz thought the place was abandoned and someone forgot to lock the front door. The smell emanating from within made her stop short. Mold. Mold and something else. God knew what. She brought a hand up to her face, covering her nose and mouth, and held it there, trying to filter some of the stench away. It was like nothing she'd ever smelled. Sickening. The darkness closed around her like a blanket. She fought the temptation to turn around, and stood motionless in the doorway, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

Slowly the room took form. To her left, a long bar took up one entire wall. There were cardboard boxes stacked all along the top of it. A raised bandstand stood in the far corner, an upright piano the only instrument on it. A couple of stacked wooden crates took the place of a piano stool. The rest of the room held odds and ends of furniture and household items. She made out the shapes of chairs, sofas, dressers—all of them piled high with lamp bases, dishes, tools, and the like. There were even washing machines and a couple of refrigerators. It looked as if the Crossroads Bar had been converted to a flea market, then abandoned. There seemed to be no order to the collection of used objects, and Liz didn't see anyone around.

“Hello?” She called out, but there was no answer. She called again. Just as she decided to leave, a door opened on the back wall of the room, and an old man came through it slowly. The light from the room beyond the door allowed Liz to see that his unsteady movements and limp right arm indicated that he’d had a stroke. She called out, “Excuse me. Can you help me?” The man flinched or stumbled slightly but then seemed to ignore her. He closed the door and moved slowly along the back wall. “Sir?” she tried again. He reached the far corner of the room and disappeared behind a tall armoire. Liz made her way through the obstacle course, stepping gingerly over and around the collection of used furniture, following where he’d gone. When Liz reached the armoire and looked behind it, she found a small sitting area. A black ceramic lamp with a dented shade atop a wooden crate separated two upholstered wing chairs, one that no longer had fabric on the arms. The bare stuffing showed through. For the amount of light it offered, the lamp must have been outfitted with an appliance bulb. There was barely enough light to see the man occupying one of the chairs. His head tilted back against the chair, and his eyes were closed, as if he were sleeping. A bushy, white beard covered most of his face; white hair on his head matched the beard. He wore overalls with a white T-shirt.

“Excuse me,” Liz began again. “I hope I’m not disturbing you, but can you help me?” She waited, expecting his eyes to open, then, when they didn’t, wondering if the man could hear. “Sir?”

After a few moments, the man responded. Without opening his eyes or moving his head, he asked in a low, gravelly voice, “What do you want.”

“I’m looking for someone. Ivory Jupiter. He used to play piano here. Do you know him?”

“Never heard of him.”

“Is there someone else I can ask?”

“Nobody else.”

“How long has this bar been closed?”

“Years.” The man still didn’t move or open his eyes.

She waited a moment before turning to leave. “Thanks,” she said.

* * *

Liz sat at a small table in the restaurant adjacent to the motel, eating a fruit salad and thinking about the old man, the smelly junk shop, and her father. A dead end. A wasted trip. She’d found out nothing. But what did she expect, really? Her father had probably been dead for years, just not as many as she originally thought. And even if she did find him alive, if she did manage to track him down, what did she want from him? Nothing. Everything. Answers. She had a right to know why her mother lied to her. And a right to know who her real father was.

Liz’s stepfather had been dead for years. Often Liz found herself reflecting on some memory of them together. Losing him had been difficult. They’d made a great team. Whenever she needed him, he was right there. She speculated on the team she and her real father might have made.

So where to? She decided to go back to the Crossroads and ask the neighboring businesses if they could offer her any information. Another night in New Orleans in hope of answers. Additional room charges. She could afford it, but spending the money made her uncomfortable. She’d always been very cautious with money. Her mother instilled in her at a

young age that she should always be able to support herself. She smiled, thinking of her mother's lesson.

* * *

The next morning, Liz rose early, walking across the street from the motel to a coffee shop that offered beignets. Since she was this close, she figured she may as well indulge in a little of the New Orleans culture and have a breakfast of fried dough.

When she finished her breakfast, she got in her car and drove back to the Crossroads Bar. The convenience store diagonally across the street looked like a good place to start. She walked in and glanced around. Two cashiers manned the counter. One of them didn't look old enough to be working. The other appeared to be Middle-Eastern. Neither of them was able to offer her any information, saying they'd only been working there a few months. She thanked them and left. Behind the Crossroads stood an automotive repair shop. There Liz found the same response. She stood on the sidewalk and scanned the street. The cleaners had a sign that read *Out of Business* on the door. A couple of metal buildings, probably warehouses, made up the remainder of the block. Liz walked back to the Crossroads Bar. Another car had pulled into the parking lot and occupied the space next to hers. It was an old, faded, red Honda Civic. It looked as if no one had ever given it a bath, and when Liz peered into it as she passed, she noticed several crumpled fast food bags and other trash on the floorboard of the back seat.

When Liz stepped inside the bar, the smell was no better, but she resisted the impulse to cover her nose again. A bare window offered morning sunlight, enabling Liz to see the contents of the room more easily than the day before. She scanned the objects in the room and began to

weave her way through, heading back to where she'd been, fully expecting to find the old man sitting in a chair behind the armoire.

A couple stood in front of a group of head and footboards, stacked vertically. The man moved one and then another of the pieces of furniture, apparently trying to decide which to purchase. The woman's hair was done in a short, butch style, while the man wore a long, gray ponytail down his back. Liz did not see the old man from the day before. His chair behind the armoire was empty. Liz approached the couple, asking if they knew where the old man might be.

"Mr. Jimmy?" the man asked. "He's always here. Lives in the back."

Liz wondered if the couple could give her any information. "Would you happen to know how long this place has been a flea market? When the bar closed?"

The woman answered this time. "It's been this since what, Jake? Six? Seven years? She looked over at Liz and shrugged.

Jake added. "At least. Mr. Jimmy would know, and I'm sure he's back there. Just go knock. He'll come out. And he's open to bargaining on most things in here. We been buying stuff from him since we been living down here."

Liz went to the door and knocked, hesitantly. When no one answered, she knocked again, louder. She looked back toward the couple. They had moved on to another part of the room, now inspecting a large bookcase. "He's not answering," she called out across the room.

Jake looked up from the furniture. "Just go on back. He's probably fixing his coffee or something."

Liz grasped the knob and opened the door. Behind it was a short, dimly-lit hallway leading to another door. She reached the second door and knocked again. No one answered. She opened the door into what appeared to be a tiny, one-room apartment. A bare bulb,

suspended from an electrical wire in the center of the ceiling provided garish light. The single mattress on the floor on one side of the room held a tumble of sheets in the center. On the far wall, a tiny gas stove, a sink piled high with dishes, and a small countertop with an old portable radio and a pack of cigarettes on it, took up the entire space. A large color poster hung on the wall behind the stove. Emblazoned across the top were the words, “Ivory Jupiter—Out of this World” and in smaller letters below, “Nightly at the Crossroads Bar.” So the old man had lied to her. He at least knew who Ivory Jupiter was. Liz suspected he knew much more.

In the foreground of the poster was a lively-looking woman on a dance floor holding her flowered skirt high above her knees as her red, strappy high heels clacked against the tile floor. Her bent-back head and open-mouthed smile said she was having the time of her life. The woman resembled her mother.

Several cockroaches crawled across the counter and over the dirty dishes in the sink. There were no windows and no other doors in the room, and she didn’t see another door for a bathroom. She realized she was standing in nothing more than a large storage room that had been converted into a living space. Behind the door she’d opened was a threadbare green recliner. The old man she’d met the day before lay sleeping in it, his feet up, head back, mouth open. In the brighter light of this room, she was able to get a much better look at him. The man was her father. Of that, she was certain.

Liz stared down at him, mentally comparing the frail-looking, elderly man with the photographs she’d looked at two nights before. The man in front of her was rail thin; the conditions he was living in were shocking. He looked nothing like the massive man in the pictures, more like one of the stick drawings she had done so often when she was a child. His pasty skin reminded her of the cadavers she’d studied in nursing school. The back of his head

extended slightly beyond the top of the recliner, and his feet hung past the edge of the footrest, but he was gaunt, nothing but skin and bones. Much of the hair on the left side of his head was gone. The man seemed to be a hundred years old, and he looked to Liz as if he hadn't had a bath in days.

A cockroach scurried across the floor in front of Liz, and she started back, hitting a stack of boxes that was next to the door and knocking the top one down. It crashed to the floor, spilling the pots that were in it, and waking her father from his slumber.

“What the hell is...” the voice boomed, as the man started up in his chair, reaching for the lever on the side to bring down the footrest. He saw Liz and stopped. “What are you doing in here?”

Liz stepped around the door so that he could see her fully. “It’s Elizabeth. Your daughter. Do you know who I am?”

The man stared as if he didn't know. Maybe he was senile. Maybe he had Alzheimer's. She was certain he'd had a stroke. He moved his jaw for several seconds without opening his mouth, as if he were chewing on something. Finally he spoke. “I know who you are.” He looked her up and down. “I knew it yesterday, the minute I saw you. You look just like your mother.” He looked away from her, down at his feet.

“So, why didn't you say something?”

“What's to say?”

“Well, you could have started with something like, ‘Gee, Liz, sorry you didn't know I was alive.’”

“Why'd you come here? What do you want with me?” He looked up at her, and went back to his chewing, not making any further attempt to get up from his chair.

Liz looked around at the dirty mattress, the dirty dishes, and then at her father, noticing that his hands were gnarled like exposed roots on a mature oak tree. The skin between the index and middle fingers and the thumb of his left hand was yellowed like an old newspaper. She studied his face, realizing from the sallowness, sunken cheeks and protruding chin, that his teeth were gone.

“What do I want? Why do I have to want something? I’m your daughter.” What did she want?

Liz’s father pulled himself forward in the chair, bringing the footstool down into its tucked position. He came to his feet slowly, steadying himself with one hand against the wall beside the chair, and pulling up to full height. Liz was tall, but he was easily a foot taller.

“Well?” He stepped up to the counter and grabbed a cigarette from the pack and put it in his mouth, turned the knob on the stove, and bent over to light it. As he did, the flame from the burner caught a little bit of the short hair at his temple, singeing it. A roach crawled across the counter, and he slapped his hand down on top of it, crushing it. He wiped his palm against his pants leg, let out a stream of smoke, and tucked the cigarette into the yellow cradle between his fingers, supporting it with his thumb. “Now what?”

“What are you doing living in this hovel?” Liz blurted it out.

“I run it. What’s it to you?” He took a drag, leaving the cigarette between his lips.

“But, why?”

“Why? A little bit of scratch and a place to stay.” The cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth.

Liz had trouble believing anyone could live in such squalor. “Why didn’t I know you were alive? Why didn’t Mom tell me? Why’d she lie and say you died in the war?”

“Why? What do you care?”

“Because all my life I thought you were dead. That is, until two days ago. Now here you are alive, and right in front of me. I don’t understand how Mom could have lied to me about something so important.”

“Don’t blame Lucille. Your mother just did what was best.”

Abruptly, Liz felt angry. “How can you say it was best not to know my father, to have been told you were dead, almost from the time I was born?”

Her father stood in front of the sink, elbow bent, the cigarette suspended in his hand. He stared at her, saying nothing. He looked down at the lit cigarette in his hand as ashes fell to the floor. Moving his foot back and forth he smeared the gray soot into the bare concrete. In that action, he looked like a little boy to her.

“Why you want to come around here at this point and dig up all of that?”

“I deserve to know.”

“Deserve what? Know what? That I didn’t die? Okay, I’m alive. Is that what you want to know? I’m alive. Now. You happy?”

“No.”

“What, then?” He moved back to the chair and turned to sit down, using only his left hand for support. Once he was seated, he grasped his limp right hand with his left and moved it onto the armrest.

“I don’t know.”

“Then let it be. Go away and leave me alone.”

“Don’t you even want to know about me? Don’t you even want to know about her? She’s dead, you know. Eight years now.”

“I figured. When the letters stopped.”

“She wrote you all along?” Liz was incredulous.

He didn’t answer. She repeated the question.

His left fist came down hard on the arm of the chair. “Don’t you get it?” His voice shattered the room. “Don’t you get it?” He looked up at her, his eyes pleading. Then he turned his face to the dingy wall. “Why don’t you go home? Forget you came here.”

Liz said nothing, but she didn’t move.

A long silence passed before he finally said, his voice cracking, “Look, you wouldn’t understand.”

“You can’t possibly know that.”

He took in a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. “I made your mother tell you I was dead.”

“Why? What purpose would it serve not to know you were alive?”

“I was afraid of you. I couldn’t be around you.”

“That makes no sense. How could you be afraid of a child?”

“Look, I told you, you wouldn’t understand.”

She stared at him with unblinking eyes.

“You were early. Premature. I was afraid I’d hurt you. You were so small.” He got up from his chair and went to the sink. He turned on the faucet and ran the cigarette under the thin stream of water, extinguishing it. “So tiny. You were only two pounds when you were born. You had no fingernails, no toenails. No eyebrows or eyelashes. You should have died. The odds were completely against you. When you lived, I was afraid I’d kill you. I was afraid I’d drink too much and hurt you again, not meaning to.”

“What do you mean, hurt me again?”

“Look, Elizabeth. I was a piano player, one of the night people. We played music and drank all night. We slept all day. It’s what we did.” He lit another cigarette. “Oh, never mind. Why don’t you just go away?”

“I’m still listening.”

He took a deep drag on his Kool and exhaled with another sigh. He looked up at Liz and shook his head ever so slightly. “I was drinking, like always. Came home one morning and picked you up to play with you. I didn’t know how fragile you were.” His eyes watered. “I thought I was being so gentle, but I was drunk and clumsy. And when I spun around laughing, and you were suddenly loose from my arms...” He looked at Liz and wiped his left index finger under his nose. Then he shrugged. “Lucille left and took you away. When I sobered up, how could I blame her?” He stared at Liz blinking. “Get what I’m saying? I did you a favor.”

“You never tried to be a part of my life.”

“I knew where you were. Always. I know you’re a nurse. That you work in pediatrics. I know how much your mother loved you.”

“You knew where I was, but you never wanted to meet me, to know me?”

He sucked his lips into his toothless mouth. “I didn’t have anything to give you. Either of you. You or your mom. Not then. Not ever. Certainly not now. Don’t you see? I played music. That was me. All of me. I drank. Sometimes I got mean. I wish it had been different. I wish I was different, but...” He shivered. “I’m waiting to die. That’s the best thing I can do for everybody I have ever known.” He sat back in his chair and returned it to the full reclined position.

Liz said, “You know some things about me. But you don’t know me. You could, though. You have a chance to know me, right now, right here. Do you care about that at all, now that I’m here?”

Her father responded only by placing his left forearm over his eyes.

Liz waited a long second. But then she turned and left the room, pulling the door closed behind her. Why had her mother left those boxes for Liz to find? Why had they contained the clues that led her to this rancid building and this decaying man whose once charismatic spawn had led to her being? Then she realized that her mother wanted to make sure Liz knew who her father really was.

Sweet Life

How I come to be at this old cemetery is a mighty shame. It's a waste and a loss that didn't need to take place, in my opinion. But the Good Lord don't explain his reasoning, and my opinion ain't worth much a nothing when it comes to the choices he makes. I try not to question God's decision-making. Things are what he wants them to be, and the best a body can do is accept it. So that's what I try do, but accepting it don't allow me to forget it none, and I end up here more often than folks might think is healthy for a woman my age. I got to go over it from time to time in my own mind. I know it don't change it, but somehow, I feel better for the recollecting.

Springtime come in early that year, just like this one, the warm sun calling forth the wisteria blossoms high in the trees, and the dogwood flowers looking a lot like white butterflies flitting around in the woods. First light, and I was sitting on the porch in my rocking chair, having my coffee and listening to the birds waking up, when the deputy brought my boy to me, cold and dead as the winter just past. I saw the truck turn off the highway and watched it come slow, up the gravel drive. Sheriff's deputys laid him out in the living room to wait for a proper burial. Me, I was in a state of shock and disbelieving what all happened. They had to wrap me up in a blanket and stay with me till I got the whole notion of it settled into my head.

Sheriff found my boy laying in the bottom of a dry ditch on the side of Hilltop Road, just out of town, a hole in his belly the size of a cantaloupe and all the sweet life drained out and staining the clay underneath him a darker color. I thought it was a accident at first, some fool with a shotgun that ought not have one. But then the sheriff told me it was close range, that whoever pulled that trigger wanted somebody to die.

The boy's daddy come home later that day from being on the road. I met him at the door and told him what all happened. He didn't look in on the boy for a couple of hours. Kept

walking by that open doorway, and walking back by it again. The two of them had their problems, not seeing eye to eye on most things. But my boy was his own flesh, and right about the time I started to say something, he went on in and stood by the side of the body, just staring down. I'd fixed the boy up best I could. Put a clean shirt on him, combed his hair and all. That man didn't spend five minutes in there with him. I was listening outside the door, and all I heard was a couple of grunts. He turned around and walked out after that.

When supper was done that night, he come to me and wanted to lay with me. And here we'd just lost our only son. This man I been living with near all my grown days, and I thought I knew like I know The Lord's Prayer, couldn't think of nothing more than to satisfy his own selfish needs. I didn't understand a man thinking like that. I felt like he took that big, hard fist of his and punched a hole in me the same as had been punched in my boy. I felt like all my own life drained out of me onto the floor at my feet.

Well, I did it. I laid with that man because that's what I vowed to Heaven to do when I took his name, and I never denied him in all of them years, not even when he was full of meanness or running around on me, or drunker than a coot. But that night something broke in me, ugly and awful. That night, with my dead boy laid out not twenty feet away in the next room, I laid with his daddy like he was a stranger, and I hated myself for doing it. I felt gut sick the whole time, deep down inside of me where nobody knows the truth but me and the good Lord.

When it was over, I got up and went out back behind the house and spit on the ground right next to my calla lilies, and I swore to myself, and I swore up to God on my dead boy's memory I never would lay with that man again. He must have figured it, cause he never came to me again in that way. I reckon he knew he crossed a line there wasn't no stepping back over.

That was twenty years ago.

We didn't talk about the boy much after he was put in the ground. Nineteen years he was with us. I mention his name and that man would turn away from me or change to talk about something else. At first I just figured he was hurting, too, so I let it be. He never was one to talk about such as that. Then it didn't change none.

Him and me stayed together, but it wasn't no more a marriage. We slept in the same room, but there was a wall down the middle of that double bed just as sure as if somebody come in and stacked up cinderblocks. I still fixed his meals and washed his clothes. Even helped with the wood for the fire so long as I could do it, you know, physical, but I had a bitterness on my heart that didn't want to let up.

After a time the way we was become routine, regular as any we had in our younger years. When he got too old to work he was home all the time. We spoke some, never said much, though. I'd sit on the couch in the living room, crocheting or watching him watch the TV. The sound of it was up so loud I couldn't hear myself thinking. He'd holler over it at Bob Barker or the people trying to win the dishwasher or the motorboat or the trip, telling them they was too high or too low, like he'd know the difference. Nights, he'd watch the Wheel of Fortune just to see what Vanna White had on. He got us connected up to one of them satellite dishes so he could get more channels. Things being like they was between us I could understand him watching the TV a whole lot more, but I got so tired of hearing it, I'd often go on into my sewing room and find some busy work to occupy me when he was watching.

We couldn't afford to put a whole lot of food on the table most of the time, having to rely on the government for our canned goods and cheese and the like. But we sure had the satellite, and we had money for beer and cigarettes. Not for me, mind you. I ain't never had a drop of

liquor in me. Never touched a cigarette neither. But I bought 'em at the grocery store every week for that man.

Then come the year he took sick, started complaining that his belly hurt every time he tried to put food down into it. I went with him to the doctor in town. Doctor told him it was indigestion and give him some pills and sent him home. He didn't get to feeling better, so we went back, and the doctor sent him on up to the hospital and run him through enough tests to choke a donkey, but they didn't find nothing wrong. Told him he was healthy as anybody they ever seen. Said it was all in his mind.

That man kept insisting that his belly hurt every time he ate. So he quit eating. Not all at once, mind you, just gradual like, he ate a little bit less, meal to meal. After a time he got to looking mighty puny and was so weak and thin that his legs didn't want to hold up his body no more. Skinny as a fence post, he looked like a old, bald-headed scarecrow in his plaid shirt and dungarees. Got to where the clothes was just barely hanging onto him. He started using a stick to get around with, helping his legs to hold him up.

Then he quit leaving the house. Took to his bed and wouldn't get up except to go to the bathroom. Couldn't really do much, what with his strength all gone from not eating enough to keep a mouse alive. He had me close the curtains in the bedroom. Said the light hurt his eyes. Morning to night he lay up in that bed, smoking his cigarettes and drinking his beer and watching the TV he had me move in there. It was like a cave in that room, a stale, old cave. I couldn't hardly stand it; all that darkness and the smoke smell made me sick to my stomach.

By and by I moved into the living room and slept on the couch. It wasn't real comfortable, but at least I could breathe again and had me some light to greet me when I woke up in the morning.

I'd look over to the doorway into that dark hole and see the reflection onto his face from the TV or watch the red glow from the cigarette end moving up in the air and back down. I'd shut my eyes and wait. Wasn't long before he'd holler out to me from the bed that he was wanting something. He yelled, and if I didn't get up and go to him straight away he'd keep it up until I did. He mostly needed something that didn't amount to nothing near all the time, and just as quick as I'd get it and sit down to rest a spell or get back to working on my crochet, he'd holler, and I'd be up again.

I come to hate my own name. I hated to hear him call it out. I didn't like waiting on him hand to foot like I did either, but he didn't have nobody else. Truth told, with the boy gone, I didn't have nobody neither. We was both kinda stuck. I kept cooking, and that man wouldn't eat. I'd make a fresh pitcher of tea and all he'd want was another beer. I even made his favorite supper, fried chicken and mashed potatoes and brown gravy. But it didn't matter. He'd just look down at the tray when I put it next to him and shake his head and go back to looking at the TV screen.

Then one night I got madder than a wet hen, and I went back to the kitchen and slammed the tray down into the sink, supper and all. I broke one of my good plates and a jelly glass and had to clean up my own mess, but I felt a whole lot better. I did. Then I broke down, had me a good long cry sitting right at the kitchen table, playing a hand of Solitaire.

Two years, neither one of us left the house, except for me going to the grocery store or the two of us going to the doctor. The doctor kept sending him up to the hospital and running him through another bunch of testing. Nothing wrong with him that they could find, but he kept on complaining about the pain in his belly, and they give him some pills to make him feel better, or not feel nothing. The pills didn't help his appetite none.

I got to feeling sorry for him. His body got to where it wouldn't function like it ought to. He had trouble breathing, and they put him on some oxygen. There was a tank by the side of the bed and a tube in his nose, but he kept on smoking them Lucky Strikes. I wasn't sorry for him in that, though. I figured one day the two of us and the house would all just blow up, and that'd be the end of it. There wasn't no telling him to stop. He was as bull-headed as they come. Maybe he wanted us to blow up. I don't know.

Time came he couldn't relieve himself no more. I was the one emptied the bag they hooked him up to. He got so weak he couldn't shift himself over from the bed to use the pot they told me to put by his bedside. I was the one changed the bedsheets near every day. He wouldn't wear no diaper. I went on up to God's Store in town and bought a couple of extra sheets for fifty cents apiece. That helped me out some with the wash load. After him laying up in the bed all that time he got the sores on his backside and the heels of his feet. I had to tend to that, too. Believe me, I had me a handful.

He finally quit the drinking, though. Must have been that the pills they give him for the pain they couldn't find a reason for was doing their job. He didn't need the beer to do it no more. I started giving him cans of that liquid nutrition. He drank some but still got down under ninety pounds. Time was he weighed near two-hundred.

The day finally come I had to call the ambulance to get him and take him to town up to the hospital. He was talking out his head and seeing stuff wasn't there, and I couldn't handle him no more. They stuck a needle in him to calm him down and kept him in the hospital. Then they put a hole in his belly to pump food into him and keep him going. His belly wouldn't have no part of it, though, and the doctor took me out into the hallway and told me that man was gonna die. Said it might be a day or it might be a week, but he was gonna die and there weren't

nothing else to be done for him but to keep him comfortable with the pain killers they had going in him. I nodded my head and thanked him kindly. Then I went back in the room and sat down in the chair next to the bed and waited.

I waited six days for that man to pass on, never leaving him for more than the time it took me to go out to the house and get cleaned up and get back. I slept in that steel chair with the green naugahyde on it, sitting up, with my neck and my back aching near the whole time. He come in and out of consciousness off and on, but I don't believe he ever woke up enough to know nothing about where he was or what was going on around him. Every day he looked more and more like a skeleton—a skeleton with the skin left on it. Looked like one of them pictures from the war. It was a sad, sad thing, I tell you.

Come day six I was sitting there with my hands folded up into my lap, looking at the spots on 'em and wondering where the time got off to. My mind wandered back to when we was young and holding hands and how I'd get lost in them blue eyes of his every time I'd look up in his handsome face. It was in the springtime when we was wed. We walked out the church holding hands, and the air was sweet with the wisterias blooming in the woods. We sure come a long way from that day.

After a while I looked up from my memory, over to the bed at what was left of that man. He was laying there with a oxygen mask on his nose, and it looked to me like he was grinning—wearing a grin like a jackass, like as if he was winning a big money card game down at Charlie's Place. He didn't have his teeth in, and to other folks who didn't know him like me and ain't seen him since all the weight come off him, it might a looked more like he was trying to scream, but there wasn't no sound coming out. He was grinning sure as I was sitting there.

I didn't like it none. This wasn't no peaceful smile of a man going to Glory. It seemed to me it was mocking. I stood up straight next to the bed with my hands grabbed onto the rail, and I leaned over real close to his face, close enough to where I could feel the oxygen being pushed around the plastic they had covering up his nose. The heat rose up in back of my neck and begun to curl around my ears. What would make a man grin at such a time as that? Why was he laughing in the face of death and mocking the Good Lord for taking him? He ought to been ashamed of himself.

I thought I might slap him. I wanted to take that disrespectful look off his face, and I wanted him to have some regret before he went to Judgment. I wanted him to feel some remorse for the wrongdoing in his life he brought before the Lord, but I didn't get a chance to think any more on it.

All at once his eyelids flew open, and he come out of that place that was making him grin, and a look of fear crossed him like nothing I ever witnessed. I backed up quick cause he sat straight up in the bed like a shot, like I wasn't there, and he would of slammed right into me if I hadn't moved out the way. He was reaching out to the empty air in front of him with them bony hands and shaking all over like someone just got pulled out of a icy pond in the middle of the wintertime. He looked out to somewhere I couldn't see, and he hollered out, louder than I ever heard him, "My God, I'm going to Hell!"

Well, I tell you the whole three floors of the hospital must of heard him. I couldn't see what all he was looking at, but from the terror in them wide blue eyes of his, I believe he must of been visualizing the very devil himself.

He stayed that way, kinda froze up and staring way past the wall for a few seconds, like as if he was hanging in between this life and the next, trying to decide which direction he was

gonna head in. Then he dropped back down in the bed, and his eyes closed on him again. I believe that's when the consciousness left him for good. It wasn't thirty minutes later he was gone.

I wanted to cry. Believe me I did. A woman ought to cry when her man passes. But I just stood there looking at that body in the bed and wondering about that soul that went to Judgment, and I kept waiting for the tears to come to me, but they never did—not then, not at the service when the preacher give his talk, or when they put the lid over him, not even when they put that man down in the ground next to my boy. I guess I was all done with it.

I never did find out what was wrong with the man. It would of cost me fifteen-hundred dollars that I didn't have for an autopsy to be done on him, and the doctors insisted all along there wasn't nothing wrong a psychiatrist couldn't help.

I never did find out who killed my boy either. Sheriff said he come to conclude it was one of them random things, some drifter coming through and looking for work or trouble or both, finding the trouble, then moving on. I got my own idea about it, but ain't no use to dwell on something there ain't nothing to be done about. Won't bring the life back into him.

So now and again I come on up here to the graveyard. It's a pretty place, sweet with the flowers folks bring to their dead. I like to stand under the shade of the big red oak tree at that man and my boy's feet and let my eyes run along the cement copings and over the grave markers that bear out they spent some time here on this earth. It makes me feel better, watching the sun come down through the leaves, thinking how it's shining little glimmers of heaven onto the both of them. Off in the woods, beyond the fence line of the graveyard, I see a clump of blue phlox blooming in the shade. It reminds me how much I used to love looking into my husband's eyes.

Sometimes, in the spring of the year, like now, I bring a few of my calla lilies to put on top of my boy. Today, I put them on my man, too.

Southern Belle

Lily finished off the last few bites of food on her plate and set it down on the tray at the foot of her bed. She wiped her mouth with a linen napkin, placed it daintily on top of the empty plate and stood up, hobbling over to the cheval mirror in her bedroom. Here, she practiced her smile. Wide. Toothy. Charming. So very Southern. She leaned in close, moving her head from side to side, inspecting her teeth and gums to ensure there were no lodged pepper flakes or spinach flecks or wads of wet bread from the finger sandwiches. All clear. She applied fresh lipstick, checked for smears, and backed away from the mirror, giving herself the once-over. She was too heavy. But it took years to put the weight on; it wasn't going away overnight. That aside, she felt as if she looked presentable overall, with her wide-brimmed, pecan-colored straw hat and its silk camellia accent, her tea-length beige sundress, and the low-heeled, bronze sandal on her left foot. Two toes were all she could see of her right foot, the rest hidden by the ridiculous cast that ruined her entire ensemble. Damn that garden hose. She'd tripped and broken her ankle while watering the pothos that hung from the cypress arbor in the rose garden. Another two weeks remained before the cast came off and she'd be back to normal. Two weeks too late.

Lily took a deep breath and reached for the antique cane propped against the footboard of the bed. She wasn't using that other thing she'd been getting around with, the ghastly, four-footed aluminum horror in the corner. Certainly, the aluminum one provided better support, but on this special day Great-Great-Granddaddy Foster's antique cane seemed a better choice. She had removed it from its normal display station on the wall in her *Gone with the Wind* memorabilia room. The cane would make a good conversation piece.

Lily's great-great-grandfather had supported his weight with the unusual cane after losing a leg in the war. She was fascinated by a painting of him she'd found in the attic after her

mother passed away. He held the cane in his left hand as he posed; a Confederate flag provided the background. Lily hung the painting over the fireplace in the den, studying it closely over the years, memorizing every crease in the man's forehead, every wavy, gray hair in his beard.

Lily felt as if she knew her ancestor, often sitting and imagining how grand his life had been, before the war ruined everything. His holdings were gone, and all that remained of her ancestor's memory was that portrait and the cane. It had been in the attic too, stored in an old trunk. Never, though, would she have imagined herself having the occasion to use it. The shaft was intricately carved wood, black walnut, with cotton flowers running the length of it; a smooth ivory handle topped it off. The cane was a fine piece. Striking, really.

Lily dropped her head slightly, thinking again of the past. She knew she was born too late, that she belonged in that prior era. The grand parties, the yards and yards of fabric that made up all those beautiful dresses, a simple gesture of chivalry by a Southern gentleman—the tip of a hat, a door held open for a lady to pass through—all these traditions were slipping away or had been fully dismissed with the passage of time.

Thank goodness the brim of the hat hid her eyes when she tilted her head down. Those eyes belied the big smile on her face, and she had made a promise. She would be nice if it killed her. After all, it wasn't her day in the spotlight.

Lily heard the hurried footfalls on the hardwood floor. A quick knock, and the door burst open; her daughter Vivian's voice, sounding rushed and excited, filled the room.

“Mom, what are you doing? Everyone's waiting downstairs. Are you coming?” Vivian approached her mother and wrapped her arms around her shoulders, giving her a squeeze and knocking the hat back on Lily's head.

“Careful, Sweetie, you’ll wreck me.” Lily pulled away, using the cane to steady herself. She saw Vivian looking at the serving tray on the bed.

“Oh, Mom. Don’t tell me you ate up here. How could you?”

Lily leaned the cane next to the bed and put her hands on her hips and pursed her lips. “I told you I didn’t want to eat with those Yankees.”

“Those Yankees are my family now. How can you be so rude?”

“Never mind,” Lily said. “Let’s just be done with it, shall we?”

“You promised to be nice. Now, come downstairs. They’re all asking about you, and the photographer’s waiting. We need to do the family shots. Let’s go, *please*.” She dragged out the end of the word, grabbed her mother’s hands and pulled slightly.

“Wait, Sugar, you’ll set me off balance. Remember I need my cane with this darn foot.”

Lily reached for the cane.

“You’re going to use that old thing?” Vivian scrunched up her face. “Mother, really.”

“Now, hush. It’s an antique. I’m proud to use it this once, all the more so on this occasion.”

“Well, I think it’s ugly. But what do I know. Anyway, Raymond’s uncle collects old canes. So you two will have something to talk about. His name’s Seth.”

Vivian let go of her mother’s hands, and Lily planted the tip of the cane firmly onto the floor, steadying herself against the extra support. She sighed heavily. “All right, Dear, I suppose I’m ready. Lead me to your *enchanting* new in-laws.”

“Mother, be nice. Everything is so lovely. And they all like you so much. Nothing but compliments.” Vivian raised the front of her silk gown slightly and escorted her mother slowly toward the door.

“They like me, huh? Bunch of Yankees in my house, all of them.” Lily grimaced. “I still don’t know why you couldn’t find a nice Southern boy to settle down with, someone with good Southern upbringing and manners. Someone refined. Someone who knows how a lady should be treated and acts accordingly.”

“Stop it. You’re trying my patience. And I tried the Southern gentleman route already, or have you forgotten what a jackass your first son-in-law turned out to be.”

“Dear, don’t curse. It’s unbecoming.”

“Mom. Please, let’s not do this. It’s a little late, remember?”

“A nice, charming, handsome, Southern... Of course, I remember. I’m not senile yet, though I barely made it through those vows. Almost got the vapors.” She fanned her face dramatically. You must admit dear, they are a bunch of Yankees. Didn’t you tell me they’re all from, where was it? Ohio? Now if that isn’t Yankee country, I don’t know what is.”

“Yes, Ohio. But Mom, the Civil War is over. Long over.”

“Alas, I was born too late. I’ve told you before.” She placed the back of her hand across her forehead.

“Yes,” Vivian said, “a hundred-and-fifty years. C’mon, you don’t mean that, do you? Don’t be so theatrical; you’re not on stage. Besides, you like Raymond. I can tell.”

“Yes, Dear, he’s my favorite Yankee. A true gem.”

“Mom.”

“All right, all right. Listen, you run on ahead. Tell them I’ll be along. And tell the photographer to take the other pictures that don’t call for me to be in them. I’ll meet you in the garden in a few minutes. Now scoot. I have to visit the ladies room.”

“Okay, but come straight out. We need you there.” Vivian kissed her mother on the cheek before drifting gracefully out the door, the tulle veil floating behind, giving her a ghost-like fade.

Lily started towards the door. Her gloves. She’d forgotten them on the dressing table. It simply would not do to be bare-handed for the afternoon’s socializing. All that Yankee hand-shaking. All that touching. She retrieved the white, wrist-length gloves, slipped them on and steadied herself again with the cane. She took one slow step at a time, making her way towards the stairs: cane, cast, good foot, cane, cast, good foot.

For Lily, this was one of those occasions in a woman’s life that required repeated grand entrances, and she mentally reviewed her next moves as she held the handrail and carefully descended the stairs. No, not yet. She wasn’t ready to make that entrance. When she reached the first floor, instead of heading for the garden, she turned and made her way to what was once the library, but what she now considered her time machine to the past. Nearly every inch of wall space held a photo, poster, or plaque from *Gone with the Wind*. Scarlett O’Hara gazed at her from all four walls, as did Rhett Butler, and Ashley and Melanie Wilkes. Scenes from the film hung frozen in time. Atlanta burned in the distance. Statues of Mammy and Prissy stood stoic beneath glass domes, and a period bookcase held volumes relating to the movie and the grandeur of the Old South. A two-foot-square replica of Tara occupied a pedestal in the center of the room, and a glass-topped display table in one corner held ladies’ silk purses, tortoise-shell combs and a silver dressing mirror, items she considered representative of the era, acquired over several years.

In this room Lily became a denizen of the past, a true Southern belle enmeshed in a bygone age. She sat down in the one chair in the room: an antique, upholstered spool chair

she'd bought at an auction house in Atlanta. Her late husband, Calvin, had expressed his distaste for its style at the time, but she overruled him, insisting that the chair would add a finishing touch to the character of the room. As she thought of him, she was thankful that he wasn't around to see all the Yankees invading his home, though he never was as deeply entrenched in the romance of Old South as she was.

After a few minutes Lily sighed, remembering her expected role as Mother of the Bride, and rising from the chair, she steeled herself for mingling with her daughter's guests. Southern. She would positively ooze it. Show those Yankees why the South should have won the war. *Gen-teel*. A word she was sure none of them would understand.

Lily made her way to the French doors leading to the patio, resting the cane against her leg as she opened the doors wide and paused for effect. Big smile. The harpist played the last few notes of *Amazing Grace*, and Lily imagined all eyes turned in her direction. As she made her entrance she worked the cane as if it were a parasol prop from a 1930's Hollywood set. Reaching forward, handle in hand, she brought the tip to rest about a foot in front of her cast. She moved the cast forward to meet it, and then brought her other foot alongside. The cane took a step. She stepped, closed, and paused. The cane took a step. She stepped and closed. An orchestra could have been playing a soft, slow waltz out in the courtyard as she advanced gracefully. Every little nuance of her mannerisms was carefully executed in her performance. The wide front brim of her straw hat dipped slightly in perfect time with the three-beat rhythm of her sashay, and her head moved from side to side as if she were a queen looking down on her subjects.

Lily spotted Vivian and Raymond with the photographer and started toward them reluctantly. Raymond's parents stood alongside the couple. Lily had met them the night before

at the rehearsal dinner. They hadn't *clicked*, a term she used often when describing her impression of new people. Raymond's father had failed to stand when Lily approached the table as she returned from the ladies room. That was all it took.

As Lily scanned the crowd, she noted that not one of the men in attendance was wearing a blue seersucker suit, the mainstay of afternoon Southern weddings. It figured. Uncouth people.

A guest approached, blocking Lily's path to the group being photographed. Lily assessed the woman as she drew near, noting that she looked like a scrawny bird in a pale gray suit, perhaps a mockingbird, with her sharp beak and the way she raised her elbows slightly as she walked.

"Mrs. Holdrich, I'm Raymond's Aunt Olivia from Dayton." The woman held out her hand. "I just wanted to say how nice it is to meet you. Your home is lovely. And Vivian is adorable. Such perfect weather, too, for such a joyous celebration. Don't you agree?"

Lily shook Olivia's hand limply and forced a smile. The woman even sounded like a bird, chirping her empty compliments. "Yes, perfectly lovely," Lily drawled. She excused herself, moving toward the newlyweds. Three more times she was interrupted by others expressing their congratulations and praises. One man wanted to engage her in conversation about her broken ankle. He resembled General Grant, with his paunch and his graying beard. In each instance, Lily nodded and dismissed her daughter's guests, moving away from them as quickly as possible.

When Lily reached the newlyweds, Vivian said, "Finally, Mom. What took you so long?"

Lily smiled. "I'm here now, dear. May we continue? Raymond? Everyone?"

Vivian shook her head, circling her arm around her mother's waist. "Let's get all this posing done, so we can enjoy the party."

"I'll enjoy it when it's over." Lily smirked.

“Stop it right now,” Vivian scolded, as she leaned in close to her mother’s ear. “People can hear you.”

“I don’t care if they hear me,” Lily said, raising her voice slightly. The look Vivian gave her said her daughter was losing her patience. “It’s *my* home.”

“But it’s *my* wedding. If I’d known you were going to act this way, I would have booked a hall. Maybe even in Ohio.” Vivian moved away from her, putting her arm through Raymond’s, nodding and smiling at her new mother-in-law.

Lily shrugged her shoulders and waited for the next instructions from the photographer. He took shot after shot with his cameras, directing Lily to sit, stand, and smile with the couple and Raymond’s parents. After what seemed a lifetime of posing, the photographer informed them that he’d gotten all of the shots he’d need until the time came to cut the cake. Vivian and Raymond disappeared into the crowd of guests who’d been watching, and Lily, tired from standing on her bad foot for so long, looked around for a place to rest awhile. She spotted one of the white, cast-iron benches under the oak tree in the rear corner of the yard, away from most of the activity. She followed the stone path and sat down in the welcoming shade, leaning the cane against the seat next to her. A cool breeze wafted over her, and she was contemplating removing her hat briefly to receive the full effect, when she noticed a middle-aged man watching her. He moved toward her. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck come up. There was something disconcerting in his manner as he approached.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Holdrich. That’s an interesting cane you have there. Do you mind if I have a closer look?” He pointed toward the cane. “I’m a collector.”

Remembering her daughter’s words, Lily answered, “Yes, Vivian mentioned something about you. Raymond’s uncle, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m Seth Sayer.”

“It’s an odd thing to make a collection out of, don’t you think? Canes?” She gestured for him to sit down.

“Thank you.” He sat down a little too close for comfort.

“My father was a collector, and he got me interested. When he died, I inherited his canes. Over a hundred of them, from all over the world. They tell so many fascinating stories. May I have a closer look?” He held his hand out, palm up.

“This one belonged to my great-great-grandfather. He was a general in the War Between the States.” She handed him the cane. “It gives me immense pleasure to be able to show it off today, even if a broken ankle is the cause.”

The man pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and, holding the cane horizontal in front of him with both hands, he studied it closely through his bifocals. He started at the brass tip, turning the shaft as he inspected the elaborate woodcarving detail, remarking how talented the artisan was. When he reached the place where the shaft met the handle he stopped abruptly, looking more closely. “Well, this is interesting indeed.”

“What’s that?” Lily said, in a bored tone. She contemplated yawning, just for spite.

He looked up at her, then back down to the cane. “This handle, do you know what it’s made of?”

“Certainly,” Lily sneered. “It’s ivory. Against the law nowadays, but back then it was perfectly legal.” Any fool would have been able to tell it was ivory, she thought, unimpressed. Some collector.

“Mrs. Holdrich, I don’t mean to correct you but, what you have here is a relic cane. This handle is made from part of a human bone.” He continued to examine the cane’s handle.

“What? Don’t be ridiculous. It’s ivory. Just old, discolored ivory.” She snatched the cane from his hand, planting the tip on the ground and pulling herself up with it. “Why would you say such an awful thing?” She turned to walk toward the house. Of all the nerve. As if someone would use a human bone for a cane handle.

He continued speaking, and she stopped, turning back to face him. “Sir, you insult me.”

“Please forgive me,” he said. “I didn’t mean to offend, but I know about these walking canes. I learned about them in my research. A small number of them surfaced sometime after the end of the Civil War. It seems there was a group of Confederate soldiers who collected Northerners’ severed limbs from the battlefields and buried them in various marked areas. They returned later, after the war was over, and unearthed the bones, bleached them with a lye solution, and made numerous novelty items with them, kind of a ghoulish last laugh, if you will. Some of the ends of the femurs were used in cane handles; yours is one of those. Quite a valuable item, if the idea of that sort of thing doesn’t bother you. You’re actually holding part of the leg bone of a Union soldier. It’s like touching history.”

Lily stared at the man, incredulous. What he was suggesting was positively absurd.

He went on. “But what I’ve always wondered about is, under those conditions, how those Confederate soldiers could have been sure they only had Union soldier’s limbs. I mean, let’s face it, the battlefield must have had the mutilated bodies of both sides strewn everywhere. If the uniform was blown off of the arm or leg in combat how would they know? How could they tell the difference?”

Lily realized her mouth was open as she stared at the man. She snapped it shut and looked down at the cane in her hand. The idea was ludicrous. Impossible. The nerve of that man. To suggest that a Southerner, a refined gentleman, was capable of doing something so

macabre made her blood churn. She felt heat rising in her neck and took a deep breath, bringing herself up to full height. She glared at Raymond's Uncle Seth. "How dare you." She raised the cane and brought it down, striking Seth on the top of his head with a loud *thwack*.

"Wait," the man yelled. Guests turned to look at them as Lily raised the cane up to strike him again. "Hold on." He grabbed the cane to stop her. Their eyes met for a moment, the man's face wild and questioning.

Lily relaxed her grip, and he let the cane go. She planted the tip of it firmly on the stone walk. "I'll thank you to leave my home." Lily whirled around and hobbled toward the house, ignoring the gawking guests as she passed them. Once inside, she pulled herself up the stairs and returned to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. She sat down at her dressing table, resting the cane against it. The handle held her eyes, and she stared at it, thinking about what Raymond's uncle had said. "Impossible." Lily removed her gloves and threw them on the floor.

A few minutes later Lily heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Vivian knocked and entered before Lily had a chance to say anything. "Mother, what the hell are you doing? You hit Raymond's Uncle Seth with that hideous cane."

Lily waved her hand in the air, a gesture of dismissal. "He deserved that and more, insulting our relatives the way he did."

"Our relatives? My new relatives are the ones who've been insulted. I can't believe you did that."

"Oh, don't make such a fuss."

"Mother, you have gone too far."

"Why, Dear, whatever do you mean?"

“I want you to go down those stairs right now and apologize to that man and to my other guests. You have positively ruined my wedding day.”

“I will not do anything of the kind. And I haven’t ruined a thing. I’m trying to preserve your heritage.”

“I don’t want my heritage.” She raised her hands in the air and shook them. “Jesus, Mother, slavery was reprehensible. And your behavior is disgusting. Now, go apologize. I can’t have this left as it is.”

“May God strike me dead, before I will do such a thing.” Lily crossed her arms in defiance. “A damn Yankee who insults my ancestors deserves whatever I can dish out in retaliation.”

“I’m warning you, Mother. If you don’t get down there and fix this, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I will not have you ruining my new life with these people because of your stupid misplaced sense of superiority. I won’t have it. They’re my family now.”

“And I’m your mother. I gave birth to you and raised you better than for you to side with a Yankee over me.”

“You are impossible. If you won’t do it, I’m going downstairs and apologize *for* you.”

“You will not.”

“And then I’m going to thank my guests for coming. And, after they’ve left, my new husband and I will leave also. Do you understand that? You have gone too far this time.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Wait till you see what a fool you’ve been to marry an outsider.”

“Jesus. What do I have to do to get through to you? I give up.” Vivian left the room, slamming the door behind her. Lily sat, staring at her reflection in the mirror. She removed her

hat and flung it onto the bed. Then she stood and hobbled over to the bed and stretched out across it, listening to the faint sound of the harp playing below her window.

When Lily woke up, she no longer heard music playing. She got up and looked out the window, down into the garden below. There was no one around. She hobbled over to her bedroom door and opened it, listening. All was quiet. She retrieved the cane from against her dresser and headed down the stairs. Everyone had gone.

Lily hobbled to her *Gone with the Wind* room. She hung the cane back in its position on the wall. It looked odd to her, out of place, and she took it down and put it behind the door. Sitting down in the spool chair, she looked around the room. The faces of Hollywood's Old South surrounded her. Scarlett glared haughtily, her eyes burning into Lily like the intense flames that engulfed Atlanta. Rhett's expression was fixed in a laugh. He looked like a wicked man who'd successfully executed some elaborate practical joke. Melanie and Ashley stared sadly, their faces drawn and tired.

Lily looked at one of the posters of Scarlett, noticing that a piece of the paint on the cardboard, about the size of a quarter, had flecked off at the hem of Scarlett's green velvet skirt. She went over to the poster and reached one hand up, passing it gently across the front. She made a mental note to have it repaired, before she returned to the chair and sat down again. The grandfather clock in the hall announced the time. Seven o'clock. Vivian and Raymond would be on a plane by now, heading to Jamaica. When they returned, Lily would call and invite her daughter to lunch. A nice restaurant, maybe one with a courtyard, where they could sit and enjoy the spring breeze while they chatted. Of course, her daughter would come. And as they ate, Vivian would tell her all about the trip, and everything would be just fine. Just fine.

The Little Rumboogie

I went to live with Mama Lucy right after Momma died. Daddy said he couldn't take care of me. Said I didn't have no business being in a house with nobody around. He was on the road all the time. I told him I was old enough to look after myself just fine, but the night after the funeral he gave me two pasteboard boxes, one for my clothes and one for everything else I wanted to keep, and he told me he was taking me to the bus station. I didn't have much to put in the clothes box, a couple of pairs of shorts and two shirts, my nightgowns and my underwear, of course. I outgrew almost everything while Momma was sick. So I put my bride doll, my Bible, and my reading flashlight on top of the clothes to fill up the box and filled the other box up with the books my momma gave me from when she was a girl. I still had two weeks of school left, but Daddy said I didn't have to finish out. I'd already missed a lot anyway, taking care of Momma.

"Hinkie," Daddy told me, "my sister Lucy is gonna take care of you now. You're gonna have to stay with her. I ain't one to raise you."

I'd never met my Daddy's sister before then. Momma always changed the subject whenever Daddy said anything about her. She told me that Daddy's sister was different from us. Daddy's the one that told me to call her Mama Lucy. All the time he was putting my boxes in the trunk of the car and putting me in the front seat, I tried to make him change his mind. He wouldn't listen. When we got to the bus station, he took my boxes out of the trunk and told me to write to him, and he'd write back if he could. He put me and my boxes on a Greyhound bus to New Orleans. I'd never been out of Shreveport before.

The bus driver pointed to the seat right behind him and said for me to sit there so he could keep an eye on me. The seat he put me in was big and soft, but it was cold on that bus. I took my thongs off and tucked my feet up under me to keep them warm. Momma would have

fussed at me for putting my feet on the furniture, but the bus driver didn't say anything. I waved to Daddy from the window as we drove off. The bus rocked side to side as it went down the road, and I felt like I was riding inside a big gray marshmallow. I sat there with my head down, crying in the dark until I didn't have any more tears.

I woke up when the bus driver shook my shoulder, saying it was time to get off. Momma would have said that by going to sleep I took the short cut to get there. The man steered me across the aisle to the steps where, down at the last one, I could see a woman standing on the ground, looking up into the bus at me. The lights in the parking lot shone down yellow on her, and the night breeze swept her flowered skirt to the side, making a shadow on the ground. She held the front of her shirt with one hand, close in at her stomach. The other hand pressed down on the top of her head, keeping a red hat with feathers sticking out of it from blowing away. A big red purse hung on her shoulder. Her hair blew sideways across her face. She looked like a movie star.

I stopped on the lowest step of the bus, holding on to the handrails on either side, staring down at her shoes.

"You must be Henrietta." She smiled up into the bus at me.

I stared at her feet. She had on red high heels. Momma never would have worn anything like that. I didn't answer her.

"Well, come on, child." Mama Lucy motioned the direction with her head, toward a big, black car pulled up at the curb. The door to the back seat was open, like it was waiting for me. "Let's go. I'm getting all blown around like a hurricane out here."

The bus driver nudged my back, and I stepped down, slowly letting go of the handrails. Mama Lucy reached out and took my hand, and the driver got my two boxes from the luggage

hole in the outside of the bus. I pulled my hand away from Mama Lucy and moved way out to the side of her as we walked. The wind felt warm and nice after being on that cold bus. I couldn't take my eyes off of those red shoes. They made a clip-clipping sound on the pavement every step she took. When we got to the car, a tall, skinny man with a beard stepped out from the driver's side and opened the trunk. The bus driver put my boxes in and closed it, and I slid into the back seat. Mama Lucy slid in beside me and closed the door. The man with the beard got in behind the steering wheel and closed his door. Two big boxes full of papers took up the rest of the front seat. He twisted around in the seat to look at Mama Lucy. "I told you I couldn't put all this sheet music in the trunk, you know, instead of you having to sit in the back."

"And I told you not to bother. It's all right. Gives me a chance to get to know my new boarder."

Mama Lucy smelled like flowers and fried chicken. She slapped her hand a couple of times on the top of the seat back in front of her. Even her long fingernails were red. "Jimmy, this here's the little girl I'm gonna be taking care of. Henrietta, this is Mr. Jimmy Lee, the finest piano man this side of the Mississippi River. He was nice enough to give me a ride here to get you."

Mr. Jimmy nodded, started the car and a cigarette, and drove away from the bus depot.

I told the both of them, "I can take care of myself. And I don't go by that name. Everybody calls me Hinkie. My momma was the only one called me Henrietta." Momma would have fussed at me for being disrespectful, but I didn't want anybody else calling me by that name. I pushed myself all the way back in the seat, the breeze from the open window blowing into my face. The top was open on the ash tray on the arm rest, and there were cigarette butts sticking up out of it. I shoved them in and snapped the lid shut, then opened it. I snapped it shut again.

Mama Lucy turned sideways in her seat to face me. “Well, yes child, we’re all real sorry about your momma there, and we’ll call you whatever you want us to, so long as your daddy keeps sending the checks. Right, Jimmy?” She looked at him and winked and smiled. I wasn’t sure if the wink and the smile were for me or him.

Jimmy chuckled, blowing smoke out the window. “You got that right on the aces, babe. Hey, kid, how old are you, anyway?”

Mama Lucy jumped in. “Charlie told me she’s twelve. What’s she look to you, Jimmy?”

I moved my head a little and saw his eyes in the rearview mirror. The way he looked at me made me feel dirty. I looked away and opened the ash tray again.

“Looks to be near a grown woman to me.” He took another drag.

“Oh, don’t be silly. She’s got a ways to go yet. So, what is it, child? How old are you?”

“I’m gonna be thirteen next month.”

“Thirteen. My, my.” She looked straight at me. “And I hope you appreciate the big favor I’m doing your daddy by taking you in. Not a lot of women would do that.” She turned in her seat, facing the front.

Mr. Jimmy turned the radio up and started singing. I kept looking out the corner of my eye at Mama Lucy, up at her red hat and down at her red shoes. She had her feet propped up on the hump in the middle of the floorboard of the car. Her toenails were all painted red like her fingernails. I wondered how mine would look like that.

I figured out that I didn’t like either one of them and thought if I sat quietly enough maybe they’d forget about me, and I could disappear into the seat. Tucking my feet underneath me, I wondered as we rode along what Momma would think of them. I wondered how long it would be before I’d see Daddy again. Maybe he’d come visit me at Mama Lucy’s. It still didn’t

make sense to me that I had to leave home. Daddy needed me, I thought. Maybe I'd run away. I turned my head to the window and looked out at the street lights and buildings we passed.

When we pulled up to Mama Lucy's house, the porch light was on. It lit up the whole front and more. It must have been after midnight. As I got out of the car, I saw a big swing filling up one end of the porch and two wood chairs next to it. The door was on the other side. Colored window glass was all around the sides and the top of the door. Mama Lucy didn't have a front yard, just steps leading up to the porch. She didn't have a driveway to park in either. There was an alley between her house and the next, just big enough to walk down. At home there was all kinds of room between the houses, and they were mostly flat on the ground, not raised up like hers. The porch came up to my waist. I figured that if I stood up there on the edge and jumped off, I'd be on the sidewalk. If I stood between the houses with my arms stretched out, I could almost touch the outside of her house and the one next to it at the same time.

Mr. Jimmy took my boxes out of the trunk and put them on the porch. He put his arms around Mama Lucy, kissed her on the mouth, and told her goodbye, saying, "I gotta go to work." He looked over at me as he got back into his car and said, "See ya, kid," and drove away. I was still standing on the sidewalk, looking at the big fins on the back of his car when Mama Lucy called me in.

"Well, come on child. Let's get you settled." She dug the keys out of her red purse and opened the door, turning on a light inside and motioning me to follow her. "Come along. Your room's down this way behind the kitchen."

I followed Mama Lucy, passing by the front room, bedroom and bathroom before reaching the kitchen, then on to the room behind it that she told me was gonna be my new room. She reached up and pulled on a chain, and a light bulb in the middle of the ceiling came on. It

didn't have a shade on it. There was no window in the room, and the walls weren't finished. A rollaway bed with a bare mattress took up most of the space on one side. There was a chest of drawers on the other side, and there was just enough space between the two for me to walk in. A sheet and a blanket were folded up on the bed. I didn't see a pillow. My new room looked like the shed in our backyard.

Mama Lucy stood with one hand on her hip and the other resting on the door frame. "Here it is, child, your new home. Now, I know it's no Howard Johnson's, but you'll be comfortable. And just outside the back door here, on the porch, is the washing machine. You won't have to go far for that chore. And speaking of that, let's you and me sit down in the kitchen here and talk about expectations. You know what those are, don't you?" She turned and moved into the kitchen, pulling out one of the metal chairs at the table and plopping down into it.

"No, ma'am." I sat down in the chair opposite Mama Lucy and stared at the pink roses on the plastic tablecloth. Mama Lucy was saying something about dusting the furniture, but I was thinking about Momma. She had taught me all about flowers. We grew roses before she got sick. Miss Alice next door gave her some cuttings, and she made new bushes out of them. Momma showed me how to cut the roses back at the first five leaf on the stem to make more grow and how to dust the bushes with powder when the bugs got on them and started eating. We wore thick gloves to keep the thorns from sticking into our fingers.

Mama Lucy slapped her hands down flat on the table, and I jumped. "Pay attention, child." She looked straight at me. "I'm not talking to myself. You hear what I'm telling you?"

I looked at her for a second, noticing that her teeth were crooked, and the skin on her cheeks wasn't very smooth; it had the kind of scars like you get from pimples. I put my head down and stared at my hands in my lap.

“Well you better listen up. There are rules in this house, and you need to pay attention to what is expected of you. I’m not doing this for me. It’s for your own good if you want to grow up to be a fine young woman. You and I are going to get along like grits and gravy, so long as you carry your part of the load around here. Now, first off, any mail that comes into this house is my mail. It’s my place to open it. So you just leave it be. If the door to my bedroom is closed, I don’t want to be disturbed. I don’t care what time of the day or night it is. And sometimes Mr. Jimmy stays over. You’ll have no business going in there, especially then. He’s bringing over some groceries tomorrow, so there’ll be plenty of food in the house for you to eat. Can you cook?”

I looked up. She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms.

“No, ma’am.” Momma taught me how to cook, and I did a lot of the cooking when she was sick, but I wasn’t about to tell Mama Lucy about that.

She went on. “We’ll have to work on that. Now, about those expectations: I expect you to keep this place cleaned up, and I expect you to do all the washing and ironing. You know how to sew?”

“No, ma’am,” I lied. Momma taught me how to sew too, and do most other things she said girls needed in order to get along in the world, but I didn’t think I wanted Mama Lucy to know all of that either.

“Well child, you’re gonna learn. A girl’s got to know these things. For now, there’s just the cleaning and the wash. Those are gonna be your regular chores in exchange for this nice place to stay. You’re gonna have a good home here. I’ll see to it.” She stood up and headed for the front door, talking back to me over her shoulder. “Oh, and you might as well know this going in, I’m not gonna be here a lot of the time. Especially at night on the weekends, but I

won't be too far away. Just over to the Little Rumboogie on the corner. That's where Mr. Jimmy plays his music. I sing along." The door slammed, and she was gone.

I got up and opened the door to the ice box: a block of butter in a saucer, dried up green beans in a blue plastic bowl, a bottle of milk, and half a watermelon with the middle gone out of it. I loved watermelon. Momma showed me how she ate watermelon when she was a girl, how to carve the sweet middle out of a slice, real careful, and put it to the side, saving the best for last, eating the part closest to the rind first, using a butter knife to cut it all into bite-sized pieces. It's how I ate my watermelon, too. Mama Lucy didn't even bother to cut a slice, and I could tell she scooped the watermelon out with a spoon. There were little half-circles around the edges of the big hole in the middle. The bottom was full of seeds. I thought about maybe eating some, but I changed my mind, figuring she'd probably notice it missing and punish me.

I closed the ice box door and walked down the hall and out the front door, wondering when Mama Lucy was coming back. I picked up the box with my clothes in it and brought it to my room in the back. I made my bed and tucked my doll in, and put my flashlight and Bible on the floor under the rollaway. I went back out to the porch to get the other box, but it was too heavy to pick up, so I took out as many of the books as I could carry and took them to my room. I had to make two more trips to the porch, but I got them all to the back. I put them in the bottom drawer of the chest—*Heidi*, *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Bible Stories for Children*...—I ran my hand across the cover of each one, remembering Momma sitting in bed, reading to me from them until I fell asleep. I knew Mama Lucy wasn't going to be reading to me. After I put my clothes in the top drawer and changed into my summer nightgown, I wrapped up my day clothes for a pillow and pulled the chain to turn the light off and climbed under the blanket, holding onto my bride doll like it was a baby.

It was just light when I woke up. Mama Lucy hadn't come home. I got out of bed and put my same day clothes on, walked out to the front porch and sat down on the swing. The milkman in his white uniform made a delivery across the street and waved to me before getting back into his truck and driving off. The swing squeaked when I pushed off with my foot, like it wasn't used to being bothered so early in the morning. A young Negro boy rode by on a bicycle. I noticed the bike was rusted all over and the fenders were missing. He had cards held with clothespins stuck in the spokes. It made the bike sound like a motorcycle. Blue morning glories wrapped around the iron posts on the porch and somewhere, somebody already had breakfast cooking. I smelled bacon. I thought about running away again, but I didn't know where I was or where I could go to.

Mama Lucy came home around nine. I was in the kitchen, eating dry corn flakes, picking up a flake and scooping it into the sugar bowl, catching a little of the sugar on the edge, and popping it into my mouth. Eating it normal, with milk, would have been better, but the milk in the ice box was bad. Mama Lucy sat down across from me and asked why I hadn't made a pot of coffee.

"I don't know how," I lied again, eating my corn flakes. I pretended to read the cereal box so I wouldn't have to look at her messed up red hair and bloodshot eyes. I wondered what happened to the red hat with the feathers all over it. She looked like a tornado had spun itself all around her, and she smelled a lot like my granddaddy's cigars.

"Child, you got some to learn. Didn't your momma teach you anything?" Mama Lucy leaned forward, placing her elbows on the plastic roses and pointing a finger at me while she was talking. "Let me tell you, you-got-to-take-care-of-yourself-and-you-got-to-take-care-of-others-too." With each word she poked that finger in my direction, her head rolling around on her

shoulders like it was trying to find a comfortable spot to settle on. “Now, I’m gonna go lay down and rest a while, and when I get up, I’m gonna show you how to make coffee.” She stood, grabbing onto the edge of the table and swaying a little, then turned and walked down the hall to her bedroom. Her shoulder bumped the wall a couple of times before she got to her door and closed it behind her.

I finished my cereal, put the box back in the cabinet, and went out on the porch and sat on one of the steps. There were four-o’clocks growing on both sides, just like at my house, and I reached into them, picking the black seeds and putting them in the pocket of my shorts. Maybe I’d plant them when I got back home. The Negro boy I’d seen earlier passed by on his noisy bicycle again and turned around. He put his legs out in front of him, digging his bare heels into the sidewalk to slow the bike down.

“What you doing sitting on Miss Lucy’s stoop?” He looked like he was about ten years old, with dark freckles splattered on his brown face.

“What’s a stoop?”

“You don’t know what a stoop is?” He looked at me like I was crazy. “That’s what you sitting on there. What you think?”

I looked down at the step and back up at him, giving him the same look he gave me.

“I’m sitting on a step.”

He folded his arms in front of him. “Stoop.”

“Step.” I folded my arms.

“Stoop.”

We both grinned. He had a tooth missing in front.

“You Miss Lucy’s kin?” The boy was off his bicycle now, laying it on its side and hitching his baggy pants up at the waistline. He sat, cross-legged on the sidewalk, directly in front of me. He didn’t have a shirt on. I could see his ribs showing underneath his skin.

“Yeah, I guess. Something like that. I’m staying here for now, anyway. My name’s Hinkie. Who are you?”

“They call me Booger Ray.” He rubbed his bare arm under his nose from his index finger to his elbow and wiped his arm on the side of his pants.

I laughed. “Well, I know why. Hey, is there someplace I can get a Coke around here?”

“Sure is.” Booger Ray pointed down to the corner. “There a machine outside the Rumboogie if you got a nickel.”

Daddy had given me a five dollar bill before he put me on the bus, but I had a nickel I’d saved in my coin purse.

“Walk me down?” I stood up. I kept looking at his smooth brown skin. We didn’t have any Negroes living around us in Shreveport.

Booger Ray stood up and picked up his bike by the handlebars. “I’ll ride my motorcycle.”

“I’ll get my money.” I turned and went up into the house, tiptoeing down the hall so as not to wake up Mama Lucy. I heard snores coming from behind her door. Booger Ray was riding his bike in circles in the street when I got back outside.

The Little Rumboogie sat on the next corner. There was a taller building on the side of it and another one behind. The Little Rumboogie looked like it was tired. It had a screen door on the front and another on the side in the alley. There were two windows on that side, one toward the front and one about midway back. All the screens had dents in them. Garbage cans littered the alley. There must have been ten or more of them. The purple paint on the building was

faded out in spots and peeled away from the wood boards. The yellow trim around the windows was coming off, too. The roof looked like it was straddling an old swayback horse, like it was too heavy for the walls under it, and it slanted down in the back so that if you walked from the front part of it to the back, you'd have to stoop down or squat as you went along to keep from hitting your head on the ceiling.

I walked up to the door and put my head against the screen and cupped my hands around my eyes to see inside. Tables and chairs filled some of the edges and behind that, in the low part, it looked like crates stacked up. There was an open area in front of the tables and a place fenced off to the side, where the piano and some other stuff was. The smell of cigarettes came through the screen up into my nose. I couldn't see anybody inside.

"You ever been in here, Booger Ray?" I asked, looking over at him, figuring he'd say no.

He hopped off of his bike and leaned it against the side of the building. "Sure, I been in here plenty of times." He grinned and snapped the fingers on both hands like he'd just learned how to do it.

Mama Lucy had said something about it not being a place for a young child. "You're lying. They won't let you in."

He shifted from one foot to the other like he had to go to the bathroom. "Am not." He kept snapping. "Late night, when the music gets going loud, and it's kinda dark in there, and everybody's drinking drinks and dancing around, I sneak in that side door and hide under one of the tables or behind a crate and just watch what goes on."

"You little spy." I thought I might want to do this too. I walked over to the Coke machine and put my nickel in. I reached in and got a bottle of Coke and opened it. The cap

dropped into the metal box below the opener. The cold, bubbly drink felt good going down my throat. “Want some?” I held the bottle out to Booger Ray.

“What? You want to get me in trouble, girl? We can’t drink out the same bottle.” He licked his lips.

“Why not? I won’t tell if you don’t.”

“Your mamma’d shoot me for that.”

“My mamma’s dead. And I don’t care if you drink after me. Here, I dare you.”

He shook his head and climbed onto his bike. “You ain’t gonna get me in trouble. Besides, I gotta get home now.”

Booger Ray took off down the street, and I walked back to Mama Lucy’s, finished the Coke and tossed the bottle underneath the steps before I went inside.

Mr. Jimmy didn’t bring any food, so I found a can of tuna fish and some stale crackers in the cabinet and ate that for my dinner. Mama Lucy woke up about two o’clock in the afternoon. I was sitting at the kitchen table when she came in. She went to the drawer and got a spoon, walked to the ice box and opened the door, and pulled the half a watermelon out from the shelf. I watched her take bite after bite. She curled the spoon in a circle at the edge of the hole and scooped out the red meat, making slurping sounds as she sucked the watermelon from the bowl of the spoon. She spit the seeds back into the hole. I wasn’t sure she even knew I was there, until she turned around and started talking. And even then, I wasn’t sure she was talking to me, because she was looking over at the coffee pot on the stove and not at me.

“Child,” she shook the spoon at me and then looked straight at me, like one of my teachers might have done when I got caught talking out of turn. “First I’m gonna teach you how

to make coffee.” She licked the back of the spoon and wagged it at me again. “And then I’m gonna teach you a whole lot more.”

* * *

It was after dark when Booger Ray came riding up the street on his bicycle. Mama Lucy had already gone down to the Little Rumboogie. The night air felt sticky and hot, and I sat on the swing, trying to cool off. Booger Ray stopped in front of the porch.

“Hey, you wanna play a game or something?” He laid his bike over and sat on the sidewalk.

“Like what?” I pushed off on the swing and pumped my legs to get it going faster.

“You ever play *Dead Body in the Street*?” He grinned.

“I never heard of it.” Back at home Momma and I played *Rummy*. There weren’t any kids living nearby, so mostly I played by myself.

“It’s a game my cousin made up. You wanna play?”

“I don’t know how.”

Booger Ray stood up. “It’s easy. You just lay in the street in the dark, like this.” He laid down in the middle of the street on his back. “And you wait till a car comes. You lay there till it gets close. Then you hurry up and get out the way before it hits you.”

“Sounds like Chicken. We played that at school.”

“No, this is better.” He stood up and came back to the sidewalk. “So, you wanna play?”

“Yeah, sure.” I got off the swing and went to the middle of the street and laid down, looking up at the stars. Booger Ray came and laid down next to me. The street felt hot under

my back. We waited for a car to come. After a few minutes, I stood up and looked at him.

“This is stupid. No cars are coming.”

Booger Ray stood up. “It was funner at my cousin’s. He lives on a busy street.”

“Let’s do something else,” I said, as I went back to the porch and sat on one of the steps.

“You got a bike? We could ride around.”

“No. I had to leave mine back home when I came here.”

“Well, you think of something.” Booger Ray stood with his legs stiff apart, picking up one foot and then the other, shifting his weight back and forth, snapping his fingers.

“I know. Let’s go spy down at the corner. I want to see what goes on in that place.” I stood up. “Leave your bike here.”

Booger Ray grinned again. “You gonna have to be real quiet. I’ll show you how I do it. You just watch how I do.”

We started off toward the Little Rumboogie. I didn’t know what to expect, but I wanted to see what Mama Lucy was doing when she went there. When we got to the building next door, Booger Ray put his hand out for me to stop. He put a finger to his lips to let me know not to say anything. I felt my skin prickle up when he gave me a sign to press myself flat up against the wall of the building like he was doing, like we were trying to hide. We stood there, hardly breathing. I could hear the music coming out the windows of the Little Rumboogie. It was a fast song, and it seemed to me like the whole place was jumping up and down, keeping time with the playing. I could feel it vibrating under my feet.

Booger Ray waved for me to follow him. We snuck up to the alley and slipped in, first Booger Ray, then me. He stooped down and moved past a window. I did the same. The music stopped. There were a couple of low tree branches we had to duck under. We passed around

some of the garbage cans, and when we got to the next window, Booger Ray stooped to get under it and stayed there. I moved in next to him. We both waited for the music to start again. When it did, Booger Ray picked up his head and eased up until he was high enough to see in the window. He reached and grabbed my arm, pulling me up next to him.

The Little Rumboogie looked a lot different than it had the first time I looked in. There were people sitting at the tables and more of them standing around. The band crowded into the fenced off place I'd seen before. One of the men looked a lot younger than the rest of them. Smoke smell pulled into my nose every time I took a breath. There were fans spinning on the ceiling.

I watched as Mama Lucy walked onto the dance floor all by herself in those red high heel shoes, pointed finger shaking to the beat of Mr. Jimmy's piano playing. Mr. Jimmy played faster, and she kinda jigged out to the middle of the dance floor, stopped, and stomped her left foot into the floor. She twisted the bottom of that red high-heel shoe back and forth in time to the music, like she was putting out a cigarette. Those hips shifted around, side to side, and that skirt she had on started shaking like it had come alive. She hiked it up in the front with both hands, raising it from her shin all the way up past to where her knees were showing. She leaned back, held that skirt a little higher, and did a shimmy shake, a smile spreading on her face like nothing I'd ever seen. Then she started singing. The song came floating out the windows of the Rumboogie, and it seemed like all the bushes shivered with the sound of her voice. I could tell she was having a good time all by herself, that she didn't need nobody else. And she danced. A couple of men came up and danced with her, taking turns, and she got up close and rubbed her front all over them. Then she turned her back to them and wiggled those hips to the piano playing and just

kept on singing. When the song was over, she walked off the dance floor and through the crowd, picking up dollar bills from everybody that was clapping and waving the money at her.

Booger Ray dropped down from the window and pulled me with him. He motioned for me to go back the way we came. I wanted to stay and watch some more, but he pushed on my arm like it was urgent. We went back out the alley to the sidewalk, and Booger Ray got in front of me. “Scram,” he yelled, and he took off back toward the house. We ran all the way. I kept looking back, expecting to see somebody chasing us, but there wasn’t anybody there. When we got to Mama Lucy’s, we stopped. Booger Ray bent over with his hands on his knees, breathing hard.

“What did we run from?” I sat on the porch steps looking at him.

“Nothing.” Booger Ray laughed out loud. “We wasn’t running from nothing. I just wanted to scare you. It worked, huh?”

“Stupid.”

“You’re not mad, are you?”

“Yes. And you’re gonna pay. I’ll get you back.” I stood up. “I’m going inside. It’s getting late.”

“You’re not really mad at me?”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s what you think. I liked watching them. I liked it.”

“It was just old Miss Lucy wiggling around. What’s to like about that? But anyway, I gotta go home.”

I watched him ride off down the street before going back into the house. Mama Lucy’s bedroom door wasn’t all the way closed. I figured that gave me permission to go in there. I turned on the light. The bed wasn’t made. There were clothes laying on top of the dresser and

more thrown across the chair. The ashtray on the table beside her bed was full of cigarette butts. A couple of them had fallen out. The chiffarobe door stood open, and I could see Mama Lucy's dresses hanging up. It looked like a garden with all the color in it. There were so many dresses that they were smashed in together. The top of Mama Lucy's jewelry box on the dresser was open too. It looked like a treasure chest. Bracelets and earrings glittered, and I couldn't resist touching them with my fingers, careful not to move any. I passed my hands over the silky dresses in the chiffarobe. I wanted to try them on, but I knew I'd get in trouble if Mama Lucy found out. Instead, I pulled the skirts of some of the prettier ones out and held them against me, imagining I was on the dance floor of the Little Rumboogie, twisting my foot into the floor like Mama Lucy did. I backed up to the dresser mirror and watched myself, practicing wiggling my hips.

I don't know how long I stayed in there, but after a while, I figured I better clear out, just in case Mama Lucy came home. The last thing I wanted to do was get caught in her bedroom, when she made such a big deal of me staying out of it.

* * *

I had been living at Mama Lucy's for a couple of weeks when she came out of her bedroom one afternoon with an armload of clothes. I thought she was bringing them to the back for me to wash. "Child," she said, as she put the pile on the kitchen table, "these things don't fit me anymore. See if you can wear any of them, since you're too big for the clothes you brought." She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down.

I picked up the dress that was on top and held it up to me. It was sleeveless and straight, bright blue with red flowers on it. The front came down in a V. I slipped it over my head and zipped up the side. Mama Lucy was a little taller than me. And bigger around. The dress was too big, but I felt pretty, even with my shorts and shirt underneath.

“Well, child, looks to me like you’ll be filling that one out before too long. I’ll lend you one of my belts, and that ought to get you by for now.” Mama Lucy took a sip of her coffee. “You know, I got a pair of shoes that pinch my toes too much, and I can’t wear them. You might could try them too.” She went back to her bedroom and returned with a purple cloth belt and purple high heels. “I’m going take a bath.” She dropped the shoes on the floor, put the belt on the table, finished her coffee and headed to the bathroom.

Purple shoes. I didn’t even know there was such a thing. The shoes were too big for me, but I didn’t care. They were the most beautiful things I’d ever seen. I folded up two pieces of newspaper and pushed them down into the toes of the shoes. It was the first time I’d ever walked in high heels, and it took me three or four trips up and down the hall to get the hang of it. The shoes made me feel grown up, and I thought I’d borrow Mama Lucy’s razor and shave my legs next time I took my bath. Momma told me I couldn’t shave my legs till I was fifteen. I figured I must have looked at least fifteen in Mama Lucy’s dress and purple high heels.

Back in the kitchen I passed my hands over the pile of clothes on the table, picking up one dress and then another, holding them up to me. I wanted to see what I looked like, but the only mirror in the house was the one in Mama Lucy’s room. I’d have to wait until she was gone that night to find out. I practiced twisting the bottom of my purple high heel into the floor and wiggling my hips like Mama Lucy did at the Little Rumboogie.

I heard somebody knocking on the front door, so I went up to answer it. The man standing there looked surprised to see me. He looked familiar. "I'm looking for Miss Lucy," he said, taking off his hat and dipping his head down a little. "She home?" He looked around me like she might be standing there.

"Yes, she's here, but she's taking a bath right now. You want to wait, or you want to come back later?" He was tall and thin and had the bluest eyes I'd ever seen in my life. When he looked at me I felt my neck and face get warm.

"You must be the little girl she's keeping, huh?" He looked me up and down like he was trying to figure out where I came from.

"I'm not little," I said, feeling hurt that he called me that. "My name's Hinkie, and I'm sixteen," I lied. Of course he would know I wasn't anywhere near sixteen. I just felt like it, all dressed up in Mama Lucy's clothes and those purple high heel shoes.

He smiled, a big wide grin. Then he whistled low and soft. "You sure are a pretty one, Miss Hinkie. I'm Wiley Joe, from the band. I play the guitar. Jimmy sent me down to give Miss Lucy a message. Now I'm thinking it sure was worth the trip. Mind if I come in and wait? You and me could get to know each other a little better."

My stomach felt all quivery from the way he looked at me. I started to tell him to come in, but my voice wouldn't work. So I motioned to the couch. He slid past me and walked to the couch and sat down. I sat in the chair closest to the front door, staring down at the purple shoes. Neither one of us said anything, but I'd glance over at him, and he'd be looking at me and grinning. He had wavy brown hair that shined with the cream oil he used to smooth it back.

When Mama Lucy came out of the bathroom, I called for her to come up front after she got dressed. She walked into the front room in her pink flowered robe. "What you doing here?"

She stood in the doorway and looked at Wiley Joe, one hand on her hip and the other propped against the door frame. Her robe fell open in the front, showing more of her chest than she might have known.

Wiley Joe stood up, holding his hat in both hands in front of him. “Jimmy wanted me to tell you that we’re starting a little late tonight. He’s got something he’s gotta take care of beforehand. Ought to take him about half an hour.”

I saw him looking at Mama Lucy’s chest. It made me look down at my own chest. I wasn’t flat like I used to be, but I wasn’t anywhere near as big as Mama Lucy. Still, in her dress I did feel like I was grown.

Mama Lucy nodded. “All right. I’ll be along.” She turned and went back down the hall.

Wiley Joe walked to the front door and nodded at me before he left. “Miss Hinkie,” he said, “I hope I’ll be seeing you again soon.”

The way he looked at me made me dizzy. I went back to the kitchen where Mama Lucy was fixing another cup of coffee. She looked at me for a minute with her head cocked to one side like she was thinking about something real hard. Then she took her cup and went back to her room and closed the door.

* * *

Mr. Jimmy’s piano music rolled out of the windows of the Little Rumboogie and spread onto the street every Friday and Saturday night, all summer long, making the old building seem like it was jumping up and down, trying to dance to the beat of the songs. He and his band played late into the night, and me and Booger Ray spent a lot of time there, spying on the grownups while

they were drinking and dancing and carrying on. Sometimes we snuck inside and hid behind the crates in the back, but that was risky. Most times we just hid out in the alley and peeked in the windows until Mr. Jimmy or the others men with him got ready to take a break. Then we'd clear out, hiding behind the building when we knew they were about to come out to cool off and smoke. We liked to listen to them talk about the women inside, which ones were easy to do, what it was like. I liked to watch Wiley Joe play the guitar. The music sounded sweet. I'd imagine him and me dancing slow on the dance floor in the dark.

I learned a lot over that summer. Some of it Mama Lucy taught me, but most of it came from watching what went on inside the Little Rumboogie and reading Mama Lucy's magazines. She'd given me her old *True Romance* and *True Confessions* that she was done with.

I got tired of acting like I didn't know anything about anything. I started making a pot of coffee in the morning for when Mama Lucy came home. After a while, she said I was a natural when it came to cooking. She'd show me something in the kitchen, and I'd pick up on it after one time. It was my job to fix supper, but just like she had said, Mama Lucy wasn't around much at night to eat it. Most times she'd end up eating whatever it was the next day.

In the evenings I'd sit on the porch, swinging while she got ready to go out. She always looked nice when she left and walked off down to the corner in her fancy dress and high heel shoes. That's when I felt lonely, when I'd be sitting there all by myself in the dark after she was gone. So I'd pull a magazine out from under my bed and read until I got tired and fell asleep. I got a couple of letters from Daddy, and I wrote to him, but after being with Mama Lucy awhile, I didn't much miss him. So when his letters quit coming, I quit writing. Sometimes, somebody would run a message to Mama Lucy from the pay phone at the Rumboogie, but none of the calls were ever from him. I figured he just forgot about me.

One night Booger Ray and I were planning to do some spying, but he didn't show up. It got late, and I got tired of waiting and slipped off the porch and went down to the corner on my own. I stayed outside in the alley, looking through the window closest to the back, thinking when Booger Ray showed up at Mama Lucy's and I wasn't there, he'd know to come on along. Normally, the alley made a good place to hide without being seen, but the full moon was out. I had on one of Mama Lucy's hand-me-downs, a yellow slipdress with spaghetti straps. It was too big, like all of them, but everything of mine was too small by then. I had worn the purple high heels too, and I felt grown up like the women in Mama Lucy's magazines.

After a while, the band took a break. Wiley Joe came out the side door and stood in the alley. He lit a cigarette and knocked his head back to blow the smoke up into the air. Right then, something ran over the tops of my shoes and scared me so bad I jumped back from the window and tumped over the tin garbage can I was standing next to. The lid came off, rattling against the can next to it.

"What's that?" He heard the noise and moved toward me. I started to duck behind a stack of crates, but he saw Mama Lucy's yellow dress and reached out, grabbing my arm, and he pulled me into the open. "Come here, you little.... Hey. Well, look who it is. "Hinkie, right?"

"Yessir." I felt my voice shaking. My knees gave a little.

"Little girl, what are you doing here, peeking in the window? You trying to get an education?"

"I'm not a little girl. I told you, I'm sixteen." I stretched myself up so that I looked taller.

He threw his cigarette on the ground and grabbed my other arm and took me by the shoulders and squeezed. The straps of Mama Lucy's slipdress dropped down over his hands, and

the whole thing fell low to where my chest was showing. He looked down at me and grinned.

“Naw, you ain’t such a little girl after all, are you?”

I could smell the whiskey on him. Whiskey and cigarettes and after shave. I wanted him to kiss me like the men kissed the women I’d been reading about, so I picked my head up toward his face like I was ready.

He pulled me close and licked my cheek all the way up and kissed my eye. “Sixteen, huh? Mmmm,” he whispered, “you are a pretty one.” His breath was hot on my face, as he moved his mouth over mine.

I closed my eyes. That was the second time he said I was pretty. Nobody but Momma had ever told me that before him. My stomach felt funny. Lower, down my legs too. He pressed his lips into mine and forced my mouth open with his tongue, sliding his arms around me and pulling me up close against his chest. His hands were rubbing all over my back, my waist. Mama Lucy’s slipdress slid easily as he pulled up on it in the back. He grabbed my behind and picked me up against him, his mouth moving to my neck and ears. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. He bit into the skin on my shoulder, hurting me. I tried to pull away from him, but he was too strong. “Don’t,” I managed to say, but I barely heard the word come out.

Wiley Joe loosened his hold on me a little and pulled his head away. “Baby, don’t say don’t. You got my motor running now.” He ran his hands up my back, over my shoulders, and down my chest. All over me. He grabbed me around the waist and pulled me up against him again and whispered, “Oh, sweet Jesus, you are beautiful.” Before I could take another breath, he was kissing me again, pushing hard against my mouth with his.

I pulled back long enough to say, “Don’t. I’m just thirteen.”

Wiley Joe stopped short, relaxing his hold on my waist. He looked into my face, and his mouth spread into a wide grin. He shook his head and pulled me up close again. “No, baby, ain’t no thirteen-year-old gonna do what you’re doing to me right now. You know it ain’t nice to be telling stories. Besides, I got a little lesson I can teach a sweet young thing like you. Show you how to treat a man, especially when he’s been lonesome for so long.” He picked me up off the ground, and carried me to the back of the alley, holding me tight in his grip. I squirmed and pushed against him, but I couldn’t get away. The rough boards on the wall of the Little Rumboogie cut into my back when he held me against it with his weight and pulled my legs around him; his shirt was wet and sticky against my bare skin. I kept thinking Booger Ray might show up. I kept hoping he wouldn’t.

* * *

I was on the porch swing, letting the breeze dry the polish on my toenails when Ray came riding up on his bicycle. He jumped off the bike and laid it on the ground and sat down, cross-legged, on the sidewalk. I asked him, “Where’ve you been?” It had been a couple of weeks since he’d come around. He looked younger than before.

“I got sick with the chicken pox, but I’m better now.” He pointed to a sore on his forehead. “My momma said you can’t catch it now.”

“Come see what I found,” I told him, getting up from the swing. “It’s around the side in the alley.”

Ray stood up and we went to the alley and walked about three feet toward the back of the house. I showed him where a banana spider had spun a web that spread all the way across,

between the two houses. It went almost up to the roof it was so big. He stared at it for a minute, snapping his fingers before looking down at the ground. There were cigarette butts all around us. He picked one up and threw it into the web. It landed and stuck. The spider came running up to it, stayed for a minute, then went back to where it was before.

I picked up a butt and threw it into the web like Ray did. The spider ran over again. This time it just stayed there. I threw another at the web, hard.

“Stupid spider,” Ray said. “Let’s do something else.”

“No,” I said. “I told Mama Lucy I’d hem up one of her dresses.”

“Aw, come on, Hinkie. Let’s go over to the levee and look at the ships on the river.”

“I told you I can’t,” I said. “I don’t want to.”

“You don’t wanna go play? Do something?” He looked up at me with big sad eyes, like I’d hurt his feelings. I hated the way he looked at me.

“No, I don’t. You go play with somebody your own age.”

Ray climbed on his bike and pedaled off down the street, the playing cards buzzing in the spokes as he rode. He turned his head once and looked back at me. Then he faced forward and pedaled faster. I watched him, all the way down to the corner until he turned off onto a side street, and I couldn’t see him anymore.

VITA

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