

SOUP FOR ONE

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities

Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

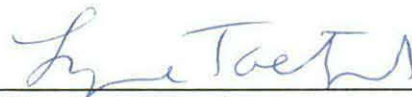
Master of Arts in English

by

Liz Mandrell

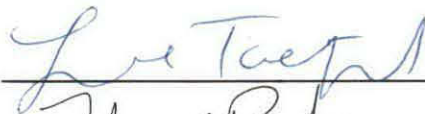
May 1996

Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English degree.



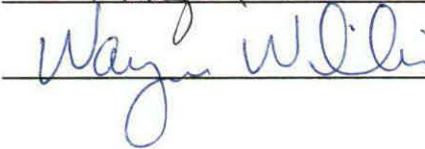
Director of Thesis

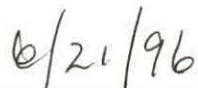
Master's Committee:



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Date

SOUP FOR ONE
Liz Mandrell, M. A.
Morehead State University, 1996
Director of Thesis: Lynn Taetzsch

Soup For One embodies the fictional product of one year's creative endeavor. The collection, written for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Arts in English degree, allowed me to explore an important theme, that of loneliness and alienation among people who maintain a superficial membership in a community, but never create the necessary connections to live a complete and fulfilled life. The issues of right and wrong, good and bad, black and white struggle together in my work as they struggle together off the page in my life. Much of the energy that propels my work into existence comes from my own struggles to rectify and justify the choices I have made and continue to make as I sift through the myriad of options that life holds.

If I were to think of the essence of my work, I would point to the paralyzing and destructive elements of disconnection, dissociation, separation wherein people often seek solace, but upon going there, withdraw even further into isolation where they are caught, bound by a strait jacket of their own psychopathic indifference and stay until some magnificent force rescues them from their own ruin. Each character in this collection is looking for a miracle, looking for salvation, looking for rescue. Some characters such as Mona in "Mona Dearest" and Teresa in "Sunday Morning Miracles" recognize the force lies within themselves to create a meaningful life. Other characters such as Jeremiah in "Jeremiah Lamentations" and the narrator of "Precious Memories,

How They Linger" have turned to violence and rage to deal with the jagged, cruel life that has been foisted upon them.

Accepted by:

Lynda Taepel, Chair
Wayne R. ...
Wayne Willie

Mona Dearest

Lying on the examination table, I can see only the jungle poster. A nurse or some secretary has tacked a poster on the ceiling. It has a dark, flowering jungle with animals peeking out of the green foliage, peeking out with cartoon faces, wide eyes drawn like they are waiting on some signal from the jungle to spring out of the poster and onto me. I am waiting too, on my back, looking up at the poster while the doctor arranges himself. I wait, looking at those animals. The nurse stands at my head, gripping my hand, and talks about every move the doctor makes. She is plump and blonde with big teeth and an add-a-bead necklace almost invisible in the folds of her white neck. She's the type of woman who has her name written on masking tape on every piece of Tupperware she owns. She talks like a natural born comforter, rosy and warm, someone who would talk your ear off on a long bus trip. He's going to swab the area now, he's going to absorb some of that with a damp cloth now, you'll feel a few pricks now, she says. I speak to her without thinking, only conscious of the need to say something, knowing I wouldn't speak to her in any other circumstance than this, than this unpredictable position I am in, knowing she is beneath me, but now above me, gripping my hand as if she were my Savior. I hate her, but I open my mouth out of pain. My boyfriend David loves me, he really does, and we are going to be married and move somewhere and his mother *will* like me, she will, and everything will be O.K. He doesn't love her more than me, he *does* love me, and I don't mind a bit if he loves his mother just a little more than he loves me as long as he loves me a

little. The nurse's voice is next to my ear. What you'll be feeling will be cold, yes, I know that is cold, yes, just hang on to me. I'm not trashy, I say into her hair as she bends down to hand the doctor something. I *do* want children. We do, you know, my boyfriend and me, I say, hoping she'll believe me. I know, I know, the nurse says. We *do* want children, he was going to come with me, but he had to work. Is it almost over? Is it almost...oh, God, *is it almost over?!* The nurse's voice is stern now and she spits in my ear. You'll have to be quieter, there are patients out there in the waiting room. You must be quiet, Miss Carmella, you *must* be quiet. Shhh, it's over, it is over, yes, it is over now. Just lie still and I'll be right back.

He was fourteen when his fever was so high his hair hurt and the touch of the sheet across his feet pained him. His mother was worried, not knowing what to do with his father gone again, and no money in her purse. She rubbed him with the isopropyl alcohol she found in the rusty bathroom medicine cabinet with the cracked mirror. She brought the stinging alcohol to his fevered naked body lying on the ancient mattress, the sheets dirty yellow from his illness. His sluggish eyes followed her hand down his body to his stomach, his legs and feet. The heat of his stomach almost burned her hand. She knew she needed help, she must take him to the hospital, take her blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy to the doctor. But evening kept coming and she couldn't break away from his beautiful tight body aching with the poison from within. Nurselike, she rubbed the alcohol as quickly as it evaporated. And when he moaned and reached to the side of the bed for water, she brought it quickly to his lips, like to a dying man. His short hair bristled with the fever and he stared blankly at her fingertips that held the glass of water while he drank. He fell back onto the hot bed and she continued nursing her son, her life, her David. She moved closer to his bed and kissed his stomach lightly, his fevered stomach almost hot blue beyond touching while with her lips she moved lonely and slowly down his body, curing him from wandering away from his mother, keeping him forever in this alcohol swarm of rage against birth.

The pain of my uterus pulling back from its loss doubles me over and I fall

onto the brown vinyl couch in the tiny waiting room across the hall from the procedure room. I fall asleep immediately. I have a dream that it is David who has killed someone with his own hands and I have been only a witness, an accomplice. In the dream, I know every detail of the murder, but it had happened years and years ago and now David has shown up again out of the blue to talk to me, to make sure I haven't told anyone about the murder. I feel an incredible burden because I have had to carry this secret around with me and I have tried so hard to forget it, but now David has reappeared and reminded me. I don't want to see him or think of him, axing away on the hard-wood floor spattered with blood, his mother's matted hair against her ashen cheeks and thin neck, her blood as floor polish in a puddle edging closer and closer to the white rug on the hard wood living room floor. I think of my grandmother throwing pennies in the milk churn to scare away the evil spirits that might do harm to the butter, and I suddenly wish I had a penny to take away the evil thoughts of this dream that plagues me while I wilt on this sticky brown couch, thinking of David's voice, pleading with me to keep- - . . .

"Please sit up," the nurse says at my side. "Not everyone is here for the same reason you are. Please sit up." She gives me a glass of cherry red Kool-Aid and leaves the room. She returns in a few minutes.

"You are ready to return to the main waiting room. Dr. Richards will see you in his office in a few minutes," she says.

He thinks of her now, coming to him like that in the middle of the summer, straight from the pool with her black hair still wet, across the hot asphalt parking lot of the country club. He sees her at the edge of the course in the rough grass, knowing she is there for him, even though he has no claim on her. He deposits the balls he has salvaged from the pond into his cart and walks to her, lifting her up into his arms, laughing, carrying her to the cart and they ride out to the fourteenth green. Late summer in Kentucky and the sun goes down on them, twilight riding the cart path through the fairways and toward the fourteenth green. His square fingered hands reek of chlorine, his tan, blonde-haired, blue-eyed hands, his wonderful hands touch her, lay her on the cropped bent grass, the mosquitoes biting her legs. He murmurs into her ear, you are the most beautiful thing here, really, in the moonlight, this has been my fantasy in the moonlight, on the fourteenth green, you in your wonderful blue swimsuit and I, in my khakis and white T-shirt, waiting for you to stop panting, until you've paled into the lull that I am waiting for, entering you and waking you up once again to me and my hands. She becomes a picture, a photographic memory, framed in the greening of the twilight for his mind to rest on again and again. He murmurs Mona in her ear and she speaks David once to him. Say my name again, he says, and she speaks David twice into his ear. He murmurs Mona, Mona, Mona, Momma and thanks God for her beautiful, beautiful name, burning like a double wicked candle, like a dark green stain on his lips.

I'm very tired. I want a cup of hot soup, maybe a grilled cheese sandwich. I want to go to bed and sleep a long, long time. I want my mother to hold my head as she used to when I would get sick in the middle of the night, holding my feverish forehead as I threw up. What if I have a brain tumor? What if this causes scars, hollows, dents in my body? Maybe I'll die soon, too. Dear God, I must do better than this, I promise. My cherry Kool-Aid is almost gone. I think about David pleading with me to keep- - . . .

"The doctor would like to see you for a few moments in his office. It's the last door at the end of the hall," the nurse says to me, smiling and pointing down the short hall to the end. I walk unsteadily, holding onto my cramping stomach. I enter his

office and he motions for me to sit down in the dark maroon leather chair opposite his desk.

"I am sorry I was so verbose in there," I say, using the word "verbose" to show I'm not some little chippie who does this every day on her lunch hour. I want him to know that I am well educated, just incredibly stupid. He looks softly at me in the rich light of his dim office, surrounded by his books and the deep, sonorous sounds of his fish tank. He seems like a very kind man, almost a Mr. Rogers, who has children and loves them and would warn them against reckless women like me, except now he is smiling at me as if I were his child.

"I know that this was painful. I tried to be as gentle as I could," he says softly, as he writes out a prescription for painkillers and antibiotics. I think he tells all the girls this. We both know I am irresponsible to have let this happen and shouldn't be trusted to even know where to have that prescription filled.

"Continue your education, Miss Carmella, and in the future, if this becomes a burden, seek counseling. There is no shame in that," he says, firmly. "This is not the end of your life. I am not a psychiatrist, but I know you will rise above this and go on." He pauses as if to emphasize his prophecy. "Continue your education, Miss Carmella."

"Yes sir," I say, feeling like I am in the principal's office. Just give me the prescription. I wonder how much the medicine will be. I only have \$100 from David and \$400 from my savings. I think just a moment about David's mother, looking

through her checkbook, asking David why he had written a check for \$100 to RedHed Auto. Car repairs, he had said to the floor and not to her, so she knew in an instant that I was in trouble and she smiled slowly, curling lips like Cruella DeVille, and gave David her new husband's credit card to buy himself a sweater. Pick a nice one, I can hear her voice. A blue cotton Coogi will look lovely on you, David.

She and her latest rich husband went somewhere for Thanksgiving, flying far away from home. Her neighbor, Mrs. Thornton, saw them from her kitchen window load the luggage into their Lexus on Thanksgiving morning. Mrs. Thornton can't understand why David and his mother are never together on holidays, but she doesn't question it. Mrs. Thornton loves to fill her house with kith and kin, and doesn't know there are mothers of any other kind. Thanksgiving night, Mrs. Thornton takes out the turkey carcass and notices a car pulling into the driveway across the street. David and a dark haired girl emerge, laughing, unloading luggage. Hmmmm, Mrs. Thornton says to herself. They look like they are married, the way they use that garage door opener and unload luggage and unload bags of groceries, like they were on their honeymoon in his mother's house. They look just like they are married, fussing over who will open the door for which one. Later on that night, Mrs. Thornton lies beside her husband of 43 years, listening to him snore. She wonders about David and the dark haired girl in the house across the street. She steps to the window, cracking the blind 1/4 inch and looks at the house. It is blazing with lights and the windows are thrown open for anyone to see inside. The dark haired girl is standing before David, in his mother's bedroom, wearing his mother's negligee and he is bowing to her, holding her about the knees, his head buried in her legs. He is like a disciple, worshipping her. Mrs. Thornton snaps the window back into place and thinks about the sacrilege she's witnessed. If David's mother knew what they were doing in her bedroom, why, she would just die, Mrs. Thornton thinks as she drifts off to sleep.

Dione waits in the waiting room. I smile weakly as I walk past her to the payment window. She smiles back at me as if to say, are you O.K.? This is her third time to Dr. Richard's, her little sister in Whitesburg, her room mate and now me, her

best friend. Dione is a lesbian.

"Did you see that dark-haired woman next to the plant?" Dione asks as we walk down the ice-slicked handicapped ramp to the parking lot. I can barely hear Dione as she says this. There seems to be a sheet of glass between us, as if she's visiting me in prison and I can barely hear her through that protective glass because the phone is out of order.

"I saw her. I didn't notice anything," I say, thinking about how spiritual I feel all of a sudden, how totally pure and good I feel, as if I have been pared down and the evil culled from me.

"You would not . . . woman and her daughter . . . office . . . nurse took . . . blood test . . ." Dione's voice comes to me in waves, ebbing as my body becomes a cork, rocking with the tide of her words.

"She's here . . . so young . . . and the blood test . . ." Dione says, rambling. I am light, blowing in the wind, ready to take to the skies if Dione doesn't get the key in the lock fast enough and open the door for me. I am as pure as water, I am a clear glass ship, I am Venus de Milo with wings. I grip myself with my own arms, struggling to stand with my own strength, trying to concentrate on Dione's words.

"They took her blood and she doesn't have the right blood type. In other words, her father is not her father, her mother doesn't know who the father is and this girl is sixteen years old, getting ready to go in there and she finds out her father isn't who she thought her father was! Can you believe that?" Dione says as she jiggles the

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handle and it crunches open, cracking the ice along the window. I fall to my knees in the snow and see the pine tree sway with me and topple over. Dione struggles to reach me, but I can only see the pine tree falling, falling on top of Dione and me and the car. The tree covers the parking lot with dark green needles, and I feel like I might never wake up.

Mona almost tells her sister, driving home to their family farm, knowing the whole family will be there. Knowing that she will carry this thing into her father's house, knowing the procedure can't take place until after the new year, knowing it must be eight weeks or the doctor won't terminate it. Knowing the pressure of the holidays, the warm pressure of belonging, knowing that they would be sympathetic to the idea, knowing that they would say it was all right, that this pregnancy was all right and that Mona would not change in their eyes. Mona opened her mouth twice on the long ride home to tell her sister about it, but knew it would be easier if she didn't. Her sister talked of work and nothing more, until over a hill there came a car straight toward them in the northbound lane going south, passing on this narrow two lane road, and her sister swerves to miss the other car and rides roughly on the shoulder almost hitting a tree, but manages to right the car and land safely on the other side. Mona cries like she has never cried before. She melts in the passenger seat. Her sister pulls over into the Antioch Christian Church parking lot, and turns toward Mona, telling her to hush. Do you want Mom to see you like this? What are you so upset about? It is over, it is over. What is wrong with you? It is over. Why are you crying? Mona falls quiet, keeping her resolve not to tell her sister. They go home to the tinkle of Christmas bells. The door opens into the warm house, the glitzy tinsel blows when the heater kicks on, blowing the curtains and the tinsel softly up, making a movement like angel's wings around the tree and around Mona's head and around the life she is holding. She bends lightly by the tree and watches the gifts distributed, knowing the gift she has been given, the gift of weight, the gift of burden that would have to be taken back again and again and again because this time it wouldn't fit and when it doesn't fit, just like Grandpa's overalls, it just doesn't fit.

Precious Memories, How They Linger . . .

I am in the fifth grade, riding the big yellow school bus to Baxterville Elementary, ten miles away. The bus smells like puke and wood shavings and rain and despair. I feel tiny in the sticky green seats. Some fat boy has sat on them for a long time, heating them with his sweaty behind. I have ridden this bus for five years and the transportation department has not made one improvement that I can see. The bus fills up pretty quickly and I look behind me to see that all the seats are full. The last stop is at the muddy swine pile of a trailer park at the end of our route. I realize I am the only person with a empty space next to me. One of the trailer park kids will want to sit with me. Krystal Crawley will want to sit with me. The trailer parkers were wretched, smelly animals who spit out the windows and flip off the bus driver. All their parents are bikers and their grandparents are bootleggers. My dad says that in an average week one person is killed in the dark, drunken nights of the trailer park. Our bus driver, Mrs. Sutherland, had seven wrecks that year. She said it was because of her bursitis, but we, not of the trailer park, knew it was fear of those of the trailer park that caused her to swerve from the yellow lines into the soggy ditches and culverts of our twisty country road ten miles away from Baxterville Elementary. Sometimes she sang hymns to teach us a little sumphin 'bout Gawd, she said. Sometimes she sang country songs like "Burnin' Ring of Fire" and "El Paso City." I had stared at the back of her head for almost five years now. The wheels on the bus go round and round, but they are making their slow and sure stop in front of the fighting mob of kids boarding

from the trailer park. They file on the bus like they are in a police line up, a miserable troop of bedraggled subhuman units, stale toothpaste dried on their toothless mouths, dried yellow crust matted in their eyes, scowls and inbred hatred teeming from their pig faces. The last one scuffs its way onto the bus, once a safe haven, now a stinking hulk of a machine bound for the penitentiary. Krystal Crawley lunges onto the bus and stands, searching for her favorite victim, me. Krystal persecutes me daily, yelling out the window as I get off the bus in the afternoon, "Lezzie! Lezzie! You eat pussy!" She sits with me, every day for two weeks, afflicting me with taunts about my sexuality, my ancestry and the like. And every day I sit and do nothing. I sit and do absolutely nothing . . .

That is a moment I would like to go back to. I would stand up to Krystal, stand up and push her down into the floor, wedging her greasy head between my knee and the seat. Others of the trailer park would try to come to her rescue, but the viscous river of obscenities issuing forth from my mouth like a malicious lava fire would stop them dead in fear and admiration of my vocabulary. Krystal Crawley, you suck, I would say. We are sick and tired of your crap, tired of your smell, your wretched lives and your welfare mothers and dead-beat dads. Krystal's red rimmed eyes bulge out of her pasty face like some goofy cartoon character. Your breath stinks, you stink and we don't like your kind on our bus anymore, I say, accentuating every word with a jab of my finger into her rotting chest. The bus is quiet with tension

and anticipation. Mrs. Sutherland starts to hum "Soldiers of Christ, Arise!" I hiss at Krystal. I think you should just get off the bus right now and let Papa take you to school on the back of that worthless motorcycle since he won't be doing anything else today but drinking Beam and violating your mother or is it your sister this week? After this those not of the trailer park start to cheer, pushing and jeering at the trailer park kids. Someone throws a punch and the trailer parkers are soon rushed, pushed and shoved out of the emergency exit in the back of the bus. Mrs. Sutherland is looking out the front of her window, saying nothing, but humming happily and revving up the engine of the big Bluebird Bus. Let's get out of this filthy hole, Mrs. S, I say to her as we rally in a cheer and spit out the windows at the destitute unfortunates on the ground outside of the bus. You belong on the side of a milk carton, someone yells. See you on *Unsolved Mysteries*, someone else snickers as we drive off into our bright future with Mrs. Sutherland at the helm.

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I'm in the ninth grade and our teacher, Sarah Stephens, who used to be a Nazi, is breathing out threats, like Saul killing Christians on the way to Jerusalem. She's become a cannon, releasing fire-doused commands to the fidgety English I class where I sit, third row, two seats back. This class is right after gym, right before lunch, a deadly combination. Brian Swango lurches about in his seat because he's a freak, but the SS doesn't know this and thinks he is just baiting her for pleasure. So she yells out

that he is squirming like a June bride on a feather bed and if he doesn't calm it, she will take him outside. Brian rolls his eyes but falls into a lull to cease the embarrassment of the moment. The SS starts passing out the novel list, a list from which we must pick a book to read. Preppy Betty Rucker, my sometimes best friend, asks the SS if she, Betty, could read *Catcher in the Rye* even though it is not on the list, and the SS says no. Preppy Betty gets miffed because she had met this wonderful girl at lacrosse camp this summer who had read the book and claimed it a must read. Preppy Betty asks again if she can read *Catcher in the Rye*. I said no, the SS lashes back, but persistent Preppy Betty keeps on railing until her eyes light on me and I know she is going to say it before it is even a quarterways out of her mouth. *She* has read it. Betty points at me triumphantly while looking at the SS. The SS would now humiliate me in front of the entire class like she had Brian Swango. I was a clear target, a lone duck flapping lamely along the horizon. But the SS just stares at me, the room around us gone quiet, and her eyes widen a bit at my greasy hair and thick glasses. Well, SS says, if *she* has read it, I'm sure *she* didn't understand it. I eye her, but do not deny it, although Betty in her pink and greenness seems to be licking her lips hoping I'll rally and say something stunning to the SS.

That is a moment I would like to go back to. I would stand up and say, SS, perhaps *you* don't understand *Catcher in the Rye*, maybe no one over 18 can understand Holden Caulfield, and just maybe someone as old as you shouldn't even be teaching public school. SS starts to sputter, her bun making a shift toward her neck in

an iron gray slide. General gasps would be heard all around. I would continue. Maybe *you* are the one Holden Caulfield is condemning, with your false standards and hypocrisy. This is a novel about truth, an interior monologue revealing the insensitivity of modern society. I rise up, and start to walk about the room, a pipe magically appears in my hand and suddenly I'm wearing a tweed jacket. You see, SS, we are more in tune to the proposition Salinger makes because we have not yet learned the deadened ritual of pretense, the disturbing fatigue brought on by ripe deceit. Are you frightened that we will suddenly realize what a sham the adult world is, something a little disturbing in your habit of gray acquiescence? I would be shouting off the mountain tops by this time, shouting and gesticulating wildly while the SS shudders in the corner. Then I would step down from the top of the desk that I thought was the mountain, and Betty would be on the floor, and everyone would be either stumped or howling with joy for the victory, lifting me on their shoulders, carrying me out of the room while the SS swats at imaginary gnats and slowly loses her lucidity.

* * *

I'm twenty three years old, teaching in a small town school in Hogan County. There are only 32 students in the senior class. Mrs. Swineburn has the 16 upper level seniors, I have the 16 lower level. Lower level as in criminally lower, as in wretchedly lower, as in lewd, evil and miserably lower. Lower as in we put our cigarettes out on

our arms, lower as in we have babies at 13, lower as in we huff glue, sniff gas, shoot through, dope early, burn late. Lower as in concrete blocks on Hwy 21 in the middle of the night, cover it with hay, and kill two nurses coming off the night shift from the Jewish hospital. Lower as in slash my tires, throw my keys into the incinerator, plant a joint in my purse and in my grade book. Many, many thanks.

So one day, Queenie stands up in the middle of class and says to me that she thinks she and I ought to have a little talk about how I view the future. I, sensing a showdown, continue stapling grammar work sheets, scared, cowardly, not knowing how to deal with a damn thing. Queenie says I hear you talk about us to the other classes, I hear you say that we know how to turn on the tears when we want to. Queenie's face is turning red and she looks like a huge blustering cow. This is so stupid, this whole scene is so totally stupid, I am twenty three years old, I should be passed this now, but I stand here, trying to ignore this pathetic little shit and I feel at her mercy. They do sense fear, and it is ripe in the room. Queenie stands there before me, the class waiting expectantly to see her humiliate me, watch me submit. I have to join in her dance and once I enter that, I can't withdraw delicately.

That is the moment I would like to go back to. I would open up the drawer to my desk and pick up the gun that I have prepared for this moment from the beginning of the world. I look straight at Queenie and raise the barrel, pointing it shaky with one hand, giving the impression that just because I aim at Queenie doesn't mean I couldn't

pick off any one of you reprobates. Dirty Harry comes to me by memory. This is a .44 Magnum, I say. It's the most powerful handgun in the world. It can blow your head clean off. The question you've got to ask yourself is, do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, Queenie? Queenie is not Queenie anymore. Queenie is shitting in her pants. I throw down the gun on the desk top, someone in the back of the room squeals. They are like frozen chunks of ice, stiff and staring at me as if they have never before this very moment even known there was someone at the front of the room. I pick up another gun from the desk drawer. This is a 9 mm Rossie, I say. I slip the magazine out of my suit pocket where it has been waiting all day, quietly breathing in and out as I breathe, waiting for me to kick it into the butt of its girl. I slam the clip into the gun just like on tv with the gun held high and they all realize the importance of such an event. I want to breath on Queenie so I walk from behind the desk until I am in her face. In fact, I want to walk around the room. I can unload this clip in your face, I say. I can bust a cap on any one of you pathetic little cocksuckers. I would just love to. And then I start listing their offenses, not stopping until I hear the sheriff's bull horn in the front parking lot.

* * * *

I am a thirty-two years old, a single white female, eating at Shoney's every night with my room mate, living the life of singlehood, singlehandedly. We live in a singles apartment and there's always a lot of volleyball hoopla in the summer and snowball goofiness in the parking lot at winter. I know he has caught me looking at

him, and during an impromptu snowball fight outside the apartment, I try to make him notice me with a snowball. My roommate attests to the fact that I bruise myself, straining to lob the snowball, but falling instead and landing on the edge of the concrete, hidden by snow. My elbow turns black and blue, a badge of honor in warfare of the heart. After the snowball fight, I have something to show him. I see him in the rec room and show him my bruise. He is impressed and we talk and I'm smitten. I know that he is a tortured artist, an architect trying to gain a partnership in the firm where he works. I start to create this tableau on which he lives and moves and has his being. And then spring comes and the whole hot wet earth thing is working on my loins, so I catch him leaving his apartment one night as I am stepping out for pizza and we just fall into one another and hands do what lips do, mighty pilgrim. We descend into this thing with one another and he is good for a night or a day or a day and a night, but he never seems good enough for a week or a month or a year, definitely not a lifetime. I know there is a woman who he has loved since birth, but they aren't on right now. Besides his name is Marcel and her name is some fuzzy little 80's name I can never remember, but it is not at all classic like Marcel. Then one night after we have spent the afternoon, the evening, and the start of a long night together doing the hot wet earth thing, the phone rings. He answers and his voice softens to a tone I've never heard before. He leans into the phone and his bony shoulders hunch up like vulture wings over the table. I am frowzy with in and out of

sleep and I reach across the bed to get my watch, 12:14 a.m. Then I see him, like in a dim mirror. He has my shirt in his hand. He beckons me up with a jerk of his thumb toward the door and then throws my shirt at me, as if to say. . .as if to say. . .as if to say. . .

That is a moment I would like to go back to. I would stand up, take my shirt from his hand and put it on. He would probably still be mumbling into the receiver, comforting her out of whatever pathetic state she has found herself in. I move to the chair and retrieve my jeans. In the left pocket I feel change, but in my right pocket I feel the heavy lunk of my father's Swiss Army knife, kept there like a talisman to ward off evil spirits. Marcel is an evil spirit. I must begin to ward. I am dressed and am walking toward him. He doesn't have a stitch of clothing on and is huddled, white and cold, against the desk. He doesn't see me working my hand against my right thigh, loosening the blades. One, two, three, four, and they are splayed like combine tines, ready for the reaping. He hears me behind him and turns to see my face before he feels the head of the corkscrew go into the urethra of his penis. Precision is the key here, but Marcel makes no sudden movements, so it is easy to eye the target and zero in, sliding into the opening like a squirrely catheter. Marcel looks like an animal waking up from winter's hibernation, sluggish, pained and hungry. I made a bruise for you, stud boy, and now you expect me just to clap my shirt on my back like the noble bitch I'm supposed to be, and saunter back to the old cathouse I call home. Well, before I go, I think I'll just pop the top on a cold one. Blood has seeped between my fingers

and Marcel has dropped the phone, now clutching my hand in something of a desperate hold. I give one final jerk upward, sending Marcel to the floor in unconsciousness. Clinking the knife blades back into their cleft, I sally forth.

* * *

I am four years old, one of my earliest memories. My mother and I are going to Ben Snyder's in downtown Lexington. We are in the elevator and the operator has on a faded blue jacket with buttons that have lost most of their goldness and shine. Her white gloves radiate whiter than her teeth that gleam against her gleaming black skin and fragrant soft hair. I watch as she shuts one, two, three different doors, shutting us up with her, my mother and me, to go to the third floor where the children's clothes are. I feel like I am in a banker's vault or on a carnival ride, wondering if she knows the combination to bring us into the light at the end of the spin. The elevator stops with a jolt and she begins sliding one, two, three doors away. We step out into the department store that smells like clothes and racks and mildew. The floor sags in places and there are water stains on the carpet from the leaking ceiling. The carpet was once a brilliant blue like the operator's jacket, but now looks pale, like blue eyes after crying. I'm only two and a half feet tall and that's all I see, the carpet like an ocean rolling out onto the floor with coat sleeves in the sky. Mom gives me a penny and tells me to get some Chiclets out of the round gum machine by the counter. I walk to the counter, my hand sweating with the penny, smelling like copper, pink

Kleenex, CoverGirl medium ecru powder, all from my mother's purse where my penny lived. The gumball machine has a picture of a lion in a circle on the top and I look up to see the green, white, orange and yellow Chiclets ready to descend. Then I feel something clawing at my hand. Another little girl is standing beside me, looking directly into my eyes, but never stopping her hand, still clawing at my clutched paw, holding my penny. I am so surprised my hand flies open and she takes my penny. It seems like we stand there forever in fresco next to the cashier's counter, but I am aware of grown up voices and soon two women are standing over me. One of them looks like my mother. She looks hazy standing over me moving her mouth. I can barely make out what she is saying. The other woman is the mother of the little girl. Did she take your penny, the person who looks like my mother says to me. Did you take her penny, her mother says, shaking her a bit. The girl stares straight at me with black eyes like coal chips and we say nothing. My mother's voice comes to me from five feet above, where is your penny, do you have your penny, did you lose your penny, does she have your penny? And her mother keeps saying what do you have in your hand, what are you doing, wandering off from mommy? And we stand on, looking at one another, saying nothing. She is dirty with Kool-Aid stains above her lip and mud on her shoes and pants. I remember a thin trickle of liquid beginning to descend from her thin nose, a sure sign, I think later that she just wasn't loved as much as I was. I relinquish the Chiclets, the penny and fall back against my mother's knee, hiding in her raincoat hem, wanting suddenly for her to hold me, to pick me up against

her sweet, young face and carry me back to the elevator.

That is a moment I would like to go back to without changing one jot or one tittle, just as it happened. My mother bending toward the gum ball machine with two pennies, clinking one for me first, letting the colored chips slide through the trough to my cupped hand. Then turning toward the little girl, considering her small unknowingness, and slipping in a penny for her. My mother worked the Chiclets into the girl's clenched fist where my penny was, then turned and picked me up, walking back to the elevator where the smiling operator stood watching us. My mother was a delicate mystery to me then, knowing loss and sanctuary in a big world. But I, being small, knew only softness and tender deliverance, hoping it would be there for the rest of my life.

Jeremiah Lamentations

Today is Tuesday and Jessica will be visiting me soon. Soon I'll hear my name called over the intercom from the guard post and she'll be here, crossing and recrossing her legs when she should be crossing herself with a hale and hearty Hail Mary, hallowed full of grace. But Jessica is a Protestant, a precious little Protestant gem sent to me by the local Church of Christ. Filling out the forms to process my enormous debt to society, I checked Church of Christ in the religious affiliation box. If I'm going to be a part of anybody's body, I wanted it to be Christ's or perhaps if Jessica's body is available for occupancy I might be interested in laying my sin between her legs for redemption. Soon, I have little old Jessica, Jezebel in a diaper, a present from the elders, dishing out the gals to save the souls of the convicts in proper fashion, to lure me to the Luther Luckett Correctional Facility for Men Non-Denominational Chapel, to sit close to her in the warm pew, tasting her on the air of the hymns that we mumble along in baritone and bass.

Jessica is here now. I know she is here even before I see her. I am clairvoyant, penetrating time, space and matter, able to peek through the Levis of a single town. I'm superman in the pen. The visitation room is swarming with dirty women and children, looking straight at their men across the battered, scarred brown tables. Jessica is beautiful, well dressed and young. She has eyes only for me. I watch her in the glass-paned room as the guard runs the wand over her shape to detect any hidden objects like guns that she might have stowed away in her panties to slip to

me later when I run my hand up her thigh and feel her warm and close, saying to hell with the gun, just let me touch you. My hand is a wand, rambling over her, shaping the cups of her body in the cusp of my hand. Her hair flames red like a blazing fire, burning against the blackness of some single night as she waits for the guard to check her driver's license. She is an heiress, a princess, a martyr for my love. Her white skin and even whiter whiteness around her lips remind me of a little girl who has just been surprised. I want to lift her on to me when she comes to the table and watch her move against me, scraping her white ankles on the legs of the metal folding chair where I sit. I want her to cover me with her hair, cover me and the floor and the room and the whole prison. She walks to me. I can smell her now as she sits across the table, oily like some offering of wine and oil and wheat, a young bullock, ready for sacrifice.

"Good morning, Mr. Crystal, " she says in a shy voice, looking at the exits and the guards stationed in front of the thick glass-paned window that leads to the compound. There are two bullet holes in the glass and I notice she stares at them for a second longer than she should, causing her to shiver and look at her hands. She clutches her Bible and remembers why she's here. She doesn't know how much she loves me. She thinks she's here to save my soul.

"Good morning, Jessica. How are you this morning?" I say to her, sounding like a talk show host. Jessica answers me in a voice I love to hear, a voice that sounds very much like my own.

"I'm fine, Mr. Crystal. Did you have anything in particular that you wanted to talk about today?" she says, still clutching her Bible, hoping to save herself from me and this mission and her desire to be something holy. She comes to me like this, wanting a sainthood, pushed by the elders who all want to touch her, but don't have the words, the words that I now put to good use and watch her face light up with the glow of a separate holiness that only I can grant her.

"Yes, Jessica. I think you know what I want to hear," I say, looking at her small face, as I've seen it in my mirror. Jessica looks uncomfortable for a moment, but I don't want her to feel distressed at my request, so I quickly ask for a simple supplication.

"Jessica, tell me again of saving grace and the five steps of salvation, in order. Could you repeat them for me now, please?" I say. I want to watch her, just to watch her. She accepts this request and turns her little Testament to the acts of the apostles to preach. Her voice waxes over me in heat.

She talks on that way for the hour, snapping her gum between her admonitions. She burns before me, lit by her own words of mercy, joy and sanctuary from the mercy seat of Christ, the fruits of the spirit that she sees through my sinner's eyes. I speak without talking from my pulpit behind the table. She is so caught up with me and my sin that she wants so desperately to cover that she doesn't see my hand between my legs, working against the grain of the wood, against the fabric of my pants, against her white face and staring pink eyes, like a rabbit I would like to skin

and eat.

"Do you see?" she says, " Do you see the light of the gospel?"

"I see your light, Jessica," I say, bending close across the table to her. "The light between your lovely, long legs." Jessica jerks the Testament to her as if I had defiled the both of them. She stares wildly at the guard, but laughs a little out of nervousness.

"Mr. Crystal, why do you say stuff like that?" she says, pissed and sad because she almost had a convert on the line, dragging me back to the baptistry.

"Please call me Jeremiah, Jeremiah Lamentations," I say.

"That's not your real name, and you're just saying that to speak vainly of the word of God, " she says. She rises and walks away from me, disgusted, resting her young leanness on each clip of her heel. I sit at the table and wonder if she is the will of the Lord, embedded in the roll and lush of her body of wonders.

She sat up, falling against my father quickly, except he wasn't my father or my brother or my cousin or anyone I'd ever seen before or have ever seen since. She wrestled with the sheets that flowed smoothly over her thighs that I had sat on since birth. The back of the man's head lowered behind her back and she opened her mouth to scream. I knew that she had seen me, finally seen me with her popping eyes, white in the darkness of the room. She had seen me, standing there with my flashlight, creating dark shadows on the lavender wall of the master bedroom, using the searchlight method I had mastered in the garden during moonless nights, searching for bugs . The light made an O that looked like an open mouth on the wall. I put the light into her eyes and then moved down into her mouth where the light fit nicely, shining against her drunken wetness. But now she had seen me and was screaming, so I could go back to bed finally and dream of her, clean like the morning, hanging the Clorox-rinsed wash on the line that stretched from the

parsonage where we lived and the church house next door. In my dream, she was daffodil freshness, swinging in the breeze of the morning, touching close to me with a flick of the clean, wet clothes. But instead of dreaming, I stood there in the ill lit air of the bedroom, watching her scream. The curtain moved against her as she rose and stood beside the bed for a few moments, then moved forward toward me, stepping across the night time floor, quick and naked. She took the flashlight from my hand, and swung. I could feel the hard cold edge of Mr. Flashlight in my teeth as I fell asleep, dreaming of her swinging in the breeze of the morning wash, pure and chaste.

It is Tuesday. My name is called. I sit in mid-sort, filing mail into the carts marked for each wing of each dormitory. There are four dormitories, all serving a purpose for different kinds of prisoners. I live in the Honor dorm because I can read and control myself when it comes to sex. I'm purely heterosexual and only fuck when there are tits attached to the item. I've got a fat boy who does nicely in that capacity. But I don't really have time to diddle with all this mail to sort and Jessica to worship.

"May I call you Jezebel?" I ask politely, using my best little boy manners after she sits down across from me. I can smell her again, fresh red meat left out to thaw. Jessica closes her eyes for a moment and I think she is considering it, to please me, to satisfy me.

"Mr. Crystal, my name is Jessica. You don't make this very easy. I am trying very hard to come and see you," she says.

"You're right. It is very hard to cum and see someone at the same time. I usually have to close my eyes," I say.

"What? What did you just say?" Jessica says.

"Nothing. I just want to call you Jezebel after my mother," I say.

"Your mother's name's not Jezebel," she says.

"Yes, it was, and my father's Beelzebulb, " I say.

"I met your mother here last week," she says, pointing toward the holding room.

"I doubt that. My mother's been dead seven years now," I say.

"She said she was your mother. Why would she have lied?" Jessica says now, confused by the many stories one hears in the languor of the holding room.

"A lot of women say they are my mother or sister or cousin, just to get to see me," I say, looking at her closely. "Who do you say you are? My lover, my concubine? King Solomon had 300 concubines and 700 wives, you know."

"I have to leave early today. I have a Bible study at 2:00," she lies, ignoring my Biblically sound remark. She flicks a tiny piece of lint from her yellow summer dress. It is my favorite dress. She knows that, of course and wore it just to please me and my shadow.

"I'm sorry, Jessica. Please stay for a few more minutes, " I say. "I've been in here so long I don't know how to treat a lady."

"Oh, ...ha, " Jessica laughs a little tense snort to hide her obvious pleasure at my solicitous nature. "Mr. Crystal, you might not believe this, but I don't care what your crime was, really, I don't." She begins to feel expansive, generous now because I've called her a lady.

"I just want you to know there is Someone who can cover all your sins . . .

and my sins, too, of course, I mean. . . hummph, I'm not perfect at all. Not by any stretch of the imagination. None of us are perfect, Mr. Crystal. Our preacher, Mr. Suard, he says that we are all just the biggest sinners," she says, but I don't hear her anymore because she is above me now licking the lids of my eyes and the sallow of my cheeks, the hollows of my neck, pulling on the teardrops of my ears with her wet tongue, covering me with her hair.

" . . . God's . . . eyes . . . same, . . . you . . . me . . . everybody," she floats above me and I recognize the truth in her words of oneness. I've pushed toward unity all my life, pressing against women, uniting before the earth, bowing to the weakness all flesh is heir to.

" . . . Jesus. . . died . . . you . . . me . . . everybody," she says, her hair brightening the room like a lantern.

"Mr. Crystal? . . . Mr. . . Crystal . . . Mister?" she says, but I can't answer her. I have died beneath her, smothered by her mouth, choked and strangled by her legs that wrap around me. The air changes and I know she is leaving before I am finished. I can see her walking away from me again. I watch her white legs move across the room. I am left alone until a guard comes to get me.

I can barely remember her, but her prom dress was shimmery, silvery blue green like dewy spiderwebs, spanning over her deliciously tanned body. Could we go now, could we leave, the teachers are all over the place, this place, this Hawaiian Sunset in the gym, gold and blue streamers looped net to net. We stood in the bright lights of the school lobby, standing under the tinsel waterfall with leis about our necks, waiting for pictures. I could feel the hair of her arm touch the hair of my arm

and the lights went off momentarily from some nameless electrical surge. She was my mother's best friend's daughter from West Virginia, shipped in to provide me with this date. My father had opposed it, preaching against the sinfulness of the whole situation, but the only sin I could see was her, being so damn beautiful with that soft, lilting voice, a 5.6 on the Erector scale. She had smiled at me and then we danced, pressing against our luck and each other. We swung away into the darkness of the gym, cluttered with paper maiche sunsets and balloons and tables and other dancers, sweating with the moment. She was soft against me then, crushing, tender and pliable against me. She spoke my name and I looked at her. I felt like a rock careening off a mountain, bounding down the sheer granite sides, suddenly caught by a thistle patch. She held my rocky, bounding eyes with her prickly voice, speaking my name, "Jeremiah, Jeremiah Crystal." I laughed, moving away from her, wanting something to drink, knowing Sloany Sloan had a cup of pure grain, putting spunk into our pissy drinks at his table in the back of the gym. Sloany sat there, grunting as we used him. She reached across the table catching the flame of the Tiki torch candle on her arm and tulle and ribboned corsage. Her corsage burst into flames. I reached for a glass of water to douse her arm where the lovely fragrant hairs had spiked me and my imagination. But, of all the crazy things, I chose the wrong cup, and doused her pretty arm in alcohol. I saw her face only for a moment, cast in memory, screaming out my name, now not soft and gentle against my ear, her mouth a glistening, anxious O. She fell into the table, consumed by the angry orange light of the growing fire. Sloany made a pained howl and lumbered impotently around the table in slow motion toward her. I remember standing there fascinated by her anger at dying, her helplessness, her reaching for me as I stepped aside and let her burn.

She must be back, coming to see me. My name is announced. I have a visitor.

It seems like forever before I see her, poised on the edge of her seat at the table. Her long skirt wraps around her legs and I imagine the sea foam that still clings to her lovely feet rising from the ocean every morning. I want to eat her hair like spun sugar off the stick of her body. I want to tell her this, tell her as a token of my appreciation, my esteem, my worship of her. But I know she will leave, so I sit at the table with slick hair and dark shirt, listening intently to her questions.

"How long have you been here, Mr. Crystal?" she says, looking at her hands,

knowing her eyes would deceive her like they always do, yielding up the abundance of love for me.

"Seven years. How 'bout you?" I say. She laughs tightly and ruminates through her mind for something to say.

"Hmmm, seven years ago. I was a junior in high school," she says.

"Really? Seven years ago I killed my wife," I say, thinking she needs to know this. She needs to know this about me if she is going to love me forever.

"I . . .uh, I'm sorry, Mr. Crystal, I . . .didn't. . ." she says, looking off to the left of my face. My left side has always been my best side.

"I guess you want to know why," I say, knowing she wants to hear me only to say that I love her and will forgive her for all her petty ways.

"I . . .no, I . . .you don't need to tell me," she says.

"They say when you go to seek vengeance, dig two graves," I say. "Well, that's true to some part. But I wasn't buried in either of them."

"Mr. Crystal, I think I should be going," she says, getting my drift, understanding me like no one else has or ever will.

"I'm still here and they are gone," I say, knowing that she will kiss me soon, leaning over the rough table and smoothing her basic pink lips on mine.

"Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord," she says, as she walks away.

"That's exactly right," I say. Finally, she has understood.

There was this bar I used to go to after classes when I was tired and just wanted to sit in a dark bar all afternoon while the sun was blazing outside. It was cool and amber and soft on the inside. There was a girl who danced there, a college student, like myself at the time. Her name was Tawny or Heather. She looked more like a boarding school girl with white socks and a short skirt, shaking her ass at me until I could almost smell the cocoa butter on her tanned thighs. I didn't know why she kept coming to my table because I hadn't asked her to and I hadn't paid her either, so after she had been there two times I asked her why she was dancing for me and she said that there was a man at the bar who says that he's your father, he keeps paying for me to dance for you. No, no, I said, that couldn't be true. My father's a preacher, he wouldn't be at a place like this. Don't be silly, she said, we have preacher's in here all the time. Not my dad, I said. No sirree, not my dad, I said. And so I drank on, until I couldn't see the bar, but Tawny helped me. I couldn't take my billfold out, but she helped me there, too. I couldn't bring the slippery shot glass to my lips which seemed to be moving in and out of range, but she helped me. She was talking, saying that she had to pick someone to dance with her, it was a crowd pleaser, part of her act, all I had to do is sit in a chair on stage, would I please the crowd with her and I said, why the hell not? She whispered in my ear and I could smell her lovely body. What is your name, she said. I could see her dimly, like looking through a dark glass. I could feel her hands on my shoulders. They were cold and I felt cold then and realized she was taking off my shirt. I was on stage above the crowd. They were cheering. Tawny smiled and straddled me. Jeremiah Crystal, I said to her, that's my name. Out of the thick smoke of the bar, out of the drunken mist surrounding me came her enormous silicone mountains, swinging like swollen tumors from the girl's tall frame. She laughed at me, the gyrating tanning bed goddess, and her left breast smacked me in the face as she leaned over to whisper in my ear. Jeremiah Crystal, she said and looked at me through the mist, above her boxing breasts. I almost fell out of the chair, but she caught me, looking at me again. Have you received the Holy Ghost? I asked her. I've had it all, honey, she said. No man has the power over the wind to contain it, I said. No kidding, she said. I felt a jet of cold air blow down from the air conditioning system, moving the air like an angel stirring the healing waters of the temple. I rose and dumped her onto the ground. I lifted the chair above me, bringing it down against her stomach, watching her body arch backward in a ugly vibration as if it were part of the dance. I could feel my father's arms around me, wrestling the chair away from me, pulling me to the dirty floor of the stage. The darkness turned in on me, and I lay in the smug tight arms of my father, his arms protecting me from her.

She is back, hoping for stars in her crown of glory, laying up her treasures in heaven where thieves like me don't break through and steal, where the rust of my

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tongue doesn't corrupt. She talks about some revival they are having, some visiting preacher from Georgia. I watch her mouth move and imagine it sliding down onto me, imagining the revival she could give me. Last week she had asked me to pray for her and I said that I would. Do you hear him talking to you, sometimes in a still, small voice, she said. I had listened for a few days, straining, cupping my ear. I heard nothing but a whistling noise, staining my mind with nasty jokes about red heads.

"I must be on a different frequency than you, " I lie, knowing she is on my frequency like she is on my mind, always tuned in, always turned on.

"We are all on the same frequency with God, " she says, so sure of herself, leaning so close to me her smell is overpowering.

"What is that perfume you have on? You smell like a flower, Jessica, " I say. She is taken back. She wants to be seduced subtly. She is still guarded, wanting to play hard to get, but I know how hard it has become for her, knowing it will become harder still.

"A good name is better than fine perfume, " she says.

"And the day of death is better than the day of birth, " I say, finishing.

"How did you know that?" she says, quickly.

"I just do, " I say.

"Is that what you think, " she says, "that the day of death is better than the day of birth?"

"I've seen both and I'd say that's about right," I say.

I was in New Orleans on a business trip and needed a drink and didn't have to wander too far to find it. The bar in the hotel lobby was rich with dark coolness, the sanctity that I needed. I stayed until I could stand life again and then started to leave. A strange woman came up to me as I wheeled off the stool. You're my man, she said, rubbing the back of her hand against the front of my chest like someone touching a mink coat, soft and coaxing. I think there is a mistake, I said, looking at this ancient woman. I walked out of the bar and into the hotel lobby. She followed me. The light from the lobby broke over her face. The light aged her as it hit the long creases beneath her eyes and her wrinkled face and neck. I just want to spend a few hours with you, just want to make you feel good, she said. I said o.k. I looked at her misplaced breasts, sagging into her stomach, her lipstick, looking rude to the rest of her face as if it were an embarrassment to the family of facial features. She wore too much make-up, I decided in the elevator to my room. She looked like Cleopatra or an early Priscilla Presley or a raccoon. I could taste the cigarette odor that clung to her as we stepped into my room. She asked me what I liked, what I wanted, and I said I'd like to take a shower. I asked her to join me. I even offered to scrub her back. I scrubbed harder and harder and harder until she begged me to stop, but I couldn't because she was way too dirty to fuck. She cried that she just wanted to go, just let me go, please . . . dear God, let me go! she pleaded. But I had just gotten a good lather up.

On her Bible she had stenciled vertically, J-O-Y and beside each letter she had written her priorities, Jesus, Others, You. She had grown stronger through our visits. I thought she was wonderful, beautiful, not as scared as before, more fiery, ready to give me more than words. Sometimes I would think of her words instead of her body, but not very often.

"Look, I'm on top of you, " I say, pointing to her Bible.

"Jesus is over us all, " she says.

"Well, so he is, I suppose," I say.

"What? What did you say? " she says, thinking I have made a confession of

some sort.

"I believe Jesus is the authority for all things, " I say, sensing her rising next to me.

"Do you? Oh, Mr. Crystal, you have nothing to lose and only heaven to gain!" she says now, looking directly at me.

"Would it gain me you?" I say.

"Mr. Crystal. . . I. . ." she says, falling back and looking disappointed after her close call with conversion.

"Would you wash my feet with your hair? " I ask, knowing she will accept, knowing she has wanted to do this for a long time.

"Mr. Crystal. . ." she says.

"Please call me Jeremiah, Jeremiah Lamentations," I say.

"Why do you make fun of me? Why do you twist my words and poke fun at me? We were having such a nice conversation," she says.

"Joshua judges Ruth," I say, singing, looking past her, hoping that she will reconsider washing my feet with her hair. "Jessica judges Jeremiah. You judge me, don't you, Jessica?"

"No, I don't," she says with a little jump towards me. "God judges us all, but I don't, Mr. Crystal. I don't judge you at all. All that is important is what is in here."

She touches a light finger to her chest and for a moment I think she might unbutton her blouse. But she doesn't. Instead she reaches across the table and taps

my chest, close to my heart and repeats that what is important is in here, her finger burns through my chest and then she speaks my name

"Jeremiah . . . important . . . inside . . . you . . . Jeremiah, " she says, close to my ear, her voice dripping onto me. The room has turned irregular, jagged around the edges and I look for Jessica to smooth herself down on me, to make things come out all right. It is important to know what is inside of her. I can see her mouth moving with my name and know what is to follow.

"Jeremiah . . . just . . . accept . . . personal . . . savior, " she says, using my name again like a sword against my heart. She has seen me finally, sitting across from her, listening to her words. She has finally noticed that I am sitting across from her. I grab her wrist, snapping it back against her arm. I hear her scream and see the closeness of her mouth as I pull her across the table and on top of me. She is so warm against me and moves like a wave of rhythm, in harmony with my own eternal swell. I watch her mouth open and close again in noise and I feel as though the room about us has gone to pieces. I feel the hands of the guard on me, tapping my shoulder, waiting his turn to cut in and take his dance with her.

My lovely, my only, my wife, my bride. I tried so long against everything, straightening the crooked hinges of my life to live for her. In the blue bottle color of our soft bedroom, the music played and I moved, softly riding above her, uttering unearthly words of praise and amazement. Her hand fell into the dishes left cluttered beside the bed, her fingertips trailing in the cold, potato soup bowl. She brought her hand to her lips, sucking the cold cream of the soup off each finger. Her voice like a crystal double helix rose above me, sounding strangely cold in the balmy summer of

our bedroom. I could smell the rich smell of herself that I had kissed and kissed and suddenly I wondered where I left off and when she began to be such a bitch. Such a bitch. She ran her own cleaning company, Out Damned Spot, but when she was not at work, she was at home, watching me. I tried to love her, but it was hard with her watching me all the time. That is a beautiful shirt on you, she said, as I got dressed one morning. Really, it's almost sublime, she says. I try to imagine what she would look like without a face. Only a spirit, falling down the stairs into our basement where a tub of lye awaits her like a milk bath, the best facial yet. I carry her liquified body in milk jugs to the sewer plant, to the excrement beds to deposit her remains. I love those milk jugs. Every day afterwards I visit her, growing there in the compost pile of humanity. The shit pours in from the whole city and it dries there in the beds, made with concrete and three feet of sand. The human body does not digest tomato seeds and so there were tomato plants everywhere, pulling green from the beds drying there in the sun, springing up from her, reminding me that love does resurrect itself in some way, in some mysterious way. Omnia Vincit Amor.

Quality Dreams

Today I am taking The Trip. I have been forcibly abducted every year of my natural born life and taken to Double Creek Cemetery in Triple County, Kentucky, for Memorial Day. I am 14 and have had to languish in that stupid cemetery year after year. The dead are it, you know. Actually just the ancient of age are it. The ancients have stories that give wisdom to those who are poor in spirit, or so my grandmother says. The olders have insight into daily righteousness, or so my mother says. My mother holds the philosophy that I should learn the lessons of these hoary heads. Here's a run-down on the hoary heads. Granny Daniels is my mother's mother's mother. Her real name is Ophelia Daniels and she still lives in Double Creek. She is an outspoken woman with three husbands, all laid to rest, a wicked testament to death by henpecking. She's still alive and kicking with Husband #4. Now there is a disgusting thought, Granny Daniels in a little black silk teddie sashaying across the hotel to the aged bridegroom who reclines seductively on the honeymoon bed after having deposited his teeth in a glass. Meme, my mother's mother, is a soft spoken poet who carries a big pen, big enough to set people straight when they read her articles in the paper. Her husband died from a heart attack at a farm machinery auction. He tried to tell someone that he was in pain, but they just thought he was caught up in the bidding. He kept waving his hand at the auctioneer, and before the ambulance arrived, he had bought two combines, a Homelite chain saw and a gooseneck cattle trailer. Meme told the auctioneers that he hadn't needed all that stuff

in the first place. She still lives in Double Creek with Johnny Cash, her cat, two houses down from Granny Daniels and writes the "Double Creek Community News" every week for the *Triple County Times*, but sometime she writes stories for me. She said she had a story for me today about Annie DeVore, another hoary head whose grave is in Double Creek Cemetery, but no one seems to know anything about her. Every time I ask about Annie DeVore, Granny Daniels just sniffs real loud and Meme looks uncomfortable. Mom usually tells me to mind my own business. Meme said she'd give me the story today. All I know about Annie is that she had a baby. There is a little white gravestone next to hers for a baby with no name, no birth date, no death date. It just says Baby DeVore. I used to make up stories about her all the time. My mother, Janice, also considers herself a hoary head even though she is only 48. She breaks the mold in more ways than one. She weighs 400 pounds and never stops talking. Clearly, if Richard Simmons could find a way to lose weight through conversation, my mother would be Elle MacPherson. She takes after my Granny Daniels in the gum flapping department. My father tuned her out sometime around 1964 and hasn't bothered to tune back in yet.

Annie, you are my sweetheart, my little girl, the sweetness of my life, many a tear will fall when I have to leave you, but I do have to leave you.

Oh, Alonzo, you will be back? You'll be back for me?

Of course, my darling, I would never leave you for all the world, not for all the world, my darling, Annie.

And you'll send me word when I should come to you, you'll send me word to come to Louisville, Alonzo?

Of course, my little pet, my little bird, my little snow cat, Annie.

I'm sorry, Alonzo. I'm just so worried, but I know that you'll send for me.

Today is Memorial Day and very soon we will be loading up even though it is raining like hell outside. We live in Frankfort which is a thirty minute drive to Double Creek. We will go even if the Rapture comes and the dead walk among us. Flat tires, floods or tornado warnings have never daunted my mother a whit. One year my uncle met us on the gravel road leading to the cemetery, drunk as Cooter Brown, claimed he was on a mission from God and shot a cow in the field beside us. He thought the cow was my mother, preaching to him about the sins of alcoholism. We had to pay for that cow because Uncle Peanut doesn't have the means to pay for murdered livestock. He's torched three trailers since I've known him and been in jail once for tobacco card fraud. He's little, about 5' tall and tiny for a man. He might weigh 96 pounds. He's little like all the Rhisley's, my mother always says, when the Uncle Peanut topic comes up. Let me just say that it comes up way too many times, especially when my mother gives her Neither-Charles-Barkley-nor-your-uncle-are-role-models speech. She'll go into this thing about wasting my substance on riotous living and how my uncle had such a fine career as a horse trainer until he was drunk one day and a horse kicked him in the head. Then she launches into a description of his head. When I was ten, Uncle Peanut's head was only about as big as a well-pumped volleyball, but now she lays on like it was something the size of a Charleston Gray watermelon. I've always imagined Uncle Peanut laying in the hospital with a big turban wrapped around his head like a

mummy with only the slits where his eyes are. He probably liked hanging out at the hospital for a few days with all those nurses pawing all over him. He's supposed to be sexy. He's 50 years old, but has an 18-year-old girlfriend. The hoary heads have a lot to say about that. Granny Daniels sniffs "perversion," Meme swears "statutory rape," and my mother screeches "It's just damn sick, that's all!"

Anyway, back to Memorial Day. One year there was a drug bust in process and we couldn't get back down the lane that leads to the cemetery and the church beyond. The police had blocked off the Double Creek Road at both entrances and there were helicopters hovering over head. My mother just about had an ancestral fit. What would Granny Daniels' mother think about this, dope heads in her back yard. I told Mom that Granny Daniels' mother had been dead for a thousand years and I'm sure she'd give her nasty, worm-riddled right arm to have neighbors of any kind, dopeheads or no. But she kept harping to my father, who sat dumb and driven behind the wheel of our accommodating '74 blue Plymouth Fury station wagon. My 7th grade English teacher made us memorize this poem that said be not like dumb driven cattle, be a victor or a hero. Every time I think of my dad, I think of that line. Even though he is one of the smartest people I know, he acts like he is in another world. My mother's mouth is always moving, but he doesn't hear a word because he's being rubbed down by the Pieratt's twins with baby oil and listening to Lawrence Welk's timpani bubbles as they fly around his head. When you remember that he sleeps with the talking Shamu, you can't really blame him for dreaming about a free willy.

My earliest memories of Memorial Day include waddling around in a diaper, pulling up flowers on newly made graves, having Mom pick me up and scold me. The years of my childhood that I don't remember have been frozen by my mother with her boxy camera, a constant companion of each trip. Any picture with a baby and a tombstone was a Kodak moment to my mother, so there are several hundred pictures with me looking like a Weeble that won't fall down with my diaperbutt as big as Uncle Peanut's head on a picnic blanket, me asleep beside somebody's war memorial footstone, me drooling on my teething ring, propped up against some crumbling, moss-covered headstone, a testament to the brevity of time, or mutability or something like that.

He's coming tonight because he promised, Annie reassured herself. She looked out the window as the rain and wind swayed the willow tree beyond the barn. When a man promises like that, he has to do it, she thought. She paced the floor and looked at her little grip she had packed for the night. She hadn't packed much. She would have to buy new clothes soon anyway. Her clothes were tight with her swelling body. I can take care of him and then he can take care of me and the little one to come, Annie thought. She thought about the long trip to Louisville and about meeting Alonzo's aunt. She had never been outside of Double Creek before. She stared out the window again, straining to see the lane in the dark night.

Since Memorial Day is in May and Double Creek Road is not paved, there is always the getting stuck question, but Dad usually manages to crawl around the winding roads, turn off onto Double Creek and plow his way through the mud and overgrowth, passing a few crumbling houses at the mouth of the road and then on to a lonely stretch where the trees reach out and touch the top of the Fury. Every year,

mom says that she sure wouldn't want to come down here without a man, it just wouldn't be safe down here without a man, and I look at my dad and realize we are pretty much on our own because he is clearly not with us. He is getting a blow job from the prettier Pieratt and Pieratt-The-Lesser is filming the whole thing. My mom harps on dad the whole way about his driving, about how if he gets us stuck again like he did in '88, she is *not* walking back to that crack house with the Rotweiler to use their phone. I've tried to decide which my mother likes better: eating, talking on the phone or running down my father. I've made a list of things I'm never going to do when I get married, and those three things are top o' the list. My marriage will be wonderful. I'm thinking my husband will look like Sting of The Police and he'll sing lullabies to me before we go to bed every night. He'll make lots of money and we'll live in a stupendous house. I'll have cookouts there, but I'll invite somebody else's family.

After we drive down this overgrown road, we reach this old oak tree that is gnarled and crippled by some fungus, but is tall as the sky and welcomes us to the cemetery. I always think that when my mom dies I'll bury her under that old oak tree, but I think my mom will probably outlive me. My mother has an iron will and when she resolves to do or not do something, things happen according to her plan. I don't think she will die unless she wants to. My father's standard comment is, there is a right way, a wrong way and Janice's way. For example, Granny Daniels wanted to name me Sarah, and my mother had agreed right up until the moment they laid me in her arms at King's Daughter's hospital in Frankfort. She said she took one look at me and knew

that I was not a Sarah, I was a Quality. And so Quality I am and Quality I'll always be.

Quality Rhisley.

Once you are past the oak tree, this incredible meadow spreads open like a green dream, swaying with daisies and purple thistles and long grasses in the rich bottom land. I always imagine some naked lady on a white horse will come riding out of the woods in slow mo, gracefully bounding across the meadow, blonde hair flying. The road divides the meadow like the spine of a book. The meadow seeps into the woods that surrounds it and is lost behind the Double Creek church. Before the actual grave show begins, we always picnic next to the little white clapboard church house that sits beside the cemetery on the right side of the meadow.

The needles clicked neatly against the flashing thimbles and the quick sounds of quilting mixed with the ladies' low voices. Ethel, Ophelia and Blanche swished their flying needles through the pieced top to make the quilt for the county fair. The air was hot and stale on Ethel's tiny porch.

I heard that he promised her a lot of things and then betrayed her. Promised to marry her and set up housekeeping in Louisville.

You mean, he never came to get her after he promised to?

Oh, he got her all right and now she's got . . .

Hush and finish your quilting. We're never gonna get this done. Ethel Willoughby, I've never seen such a gossipin' foolishness.

Well, Ophelia, aren't you being Miss High and Mighty? When did you get to be such friends with Annie DeVore?

I said hush, that is none of our concern, she has had a bad time of it and she'll have to live with it. She'll leave Double Creek soon.

Ophelia's right, Ethel. She doesn't have any money and she looks like she is ready to have that baby any day now. We should try to help her out as much as we can.

We are always the first ones there. Meme eats at a restaurant in town

before driving out to the cemetery. She claims eating on the ground would set up her rheumatism. She just doesn't want to eat with us and uses her health as an excuse to get out of the Hades Treat. Mom is always on a diet, so the menu reflects whatever is the rage. Lunch is usually some insane combination like raw unsweetened peanut butter and home-made peach preserves with a relish tray of bread-and-butter pickles and black olives. Mom thinks colon cancer is her answer to weight loss. She likes the prospect of a colostomy job, dumping her crap out of a bag every few hours, walking around with a sack of piss on her leg all the time. This sort of sickness runs in the family. Granny Daniels is obsessed with her intestinal functionings. Last year, she had some plumbers come out and put two extra toilets in her house, just in case she needed to go fast. Then she installed phones by each of the toilets in case the passage became unbearable and she had to call the paramedics. The plumbers sent her a bill and she paid it, but they accidentally sent her another bill. She wrote them a letter and said she had already paid the bill, but unfortunately they sent her yet another bill. She took the third bill, wiped her butt with it and stuffed it into an envelope with the message, "My plumbing is working fine. Thank you very much. Ophelia Daniels."

She's a real joy to have at Memorial Day. She usually wears three inch spiked heels in the mud, drags her walker around all day and asks people she doesn't know, "Now, who do you have here?" Anyway, while we are choking down something from mom's Bag o'Eats, Uncle Peanut and his 18-year-old flavor-of-the-month usually come careening into the church lot in his latest junkyard beauty. Last year it was a '77

United States Postal jeep. Since Uncle Peanut drives drunk on the wrong side of the road anyway, that jeep gives him just the excuse he needs. At this point, Dad has to drag himself up from his impending orgasm at the hand of Miss Pieratt, to see if Uncle Peanut is drunk or not. If Peanut is drunk, Dad has to collar him and take him back into town and get him sober for Mom's sake because she just can't stand it when he's smashed. If he isn't drunk, Mom pesters him about his lifestyle until we all wished we were drunk and out of ear shot of her railing.

Two months had passed and Annie had heard no word of Alonzo. She felt sick at the thought of his betrayal. Her little grip remained by the door, but every day came and left with no word, no sign, no letter. She was almost too big to make the trip now. Her feet were swollen in the summer heat.

That night Annie sat close to the window as she had done the last two weeks, watching the oak tree as it hung over the winding road that passed her house. She thought of her teaching job and how much she missed the students and their little smiling faces. She was lost in thought when a knock on the door made her jump. She looked out the window. Alonzo had finally come! He was here, she thought joyously. Annie rushed to the door and flung it open in delight, but stopped short when she realized the man at the door was not Alonzo.

I have one job every year. I carry the flowers from the back end of the Fury to the graves up on the hill. Meme sometimes helps me with this job. We walk up the hill together and she tells me stories about each gravestone. They are the same stories every year, but I still love them. When we come to Annie DeVore's grave, she stops and sighs. I always ask her what is wrong, but she never tells me. I have to lug about a million Miracle Whip jars and coffee cans with flowers in them up the hill for Mom. She packs irises, roses, big waxy peonies, anything she has clipped that morning from

her flower garden, arranged in Maxwell House cans or wrapped in aluminum foil. Mom follows with hedge clippers, pruning shears and a weed eater, bitching all the way about the \$10 that she sends every year to the church for the perpetual upkeep of this cemetery. Mom doesn't have much use for churches. Granny Daniels' first husband, Pleasant, was kicked out of the Salem Regular Baptist church in Double Creek because he played his fiddle at all those places up the river near Carrollton. When I was little, I didn't know what "those places" were, but I assumed they were likened to some den of iniquity since Meme spoke of them in such hushed and reverent tones. Pleasant apparently was quite a wild man. He is supposed to have walked through a tornado and lived to tell about it. Mom said that all his nieces and nephews ran up on the porch and said, "Uncle Pleasant, you'd better get on in the house with us . . . there's a cyclone a comin' " and apparently he spit out into the yard and said, "Let 'er cy!" and then walked down the lane toward the twister. Meme says that Uncle Peanut is a lot like Pleasant, both rebels, both outlaws. Uncle Peanut tries to drag me into that category, but I think he is barking up the wrong branch of the family tree. I remember when I was eight years old he had a fish fry. On that night, he had tried to be sober. Most of Double Creek was there and he was frying up about a thousand catfish he'd spent two weeks catching. He was the only one really qualified to hold these shindigs since he was the only one out of work and able to fish from sun up to sun down. I remember the dank pond smell of the headless catfish, rolling in bloody water in an old empty paint bucket. I remember the heat of the fryer splattering all

over the yard and Spotty, Uncle Peanut's dog, eating a hush puppy right out of my hand. Uncle Peanut slapped the dog with a greasy spatula and then continued scooping up the sizzling breaded fish from the fryer. He looked at me and grinned. He leaned over and whispered into my ear with breath like charcoal, "You's just like me, Quality. We quality, you and me, quality, and your mom, well, she's my sister, but she's still a bitch, you know that, don't you?" I just stared at him and didn't know what to say. The smoke from his cigarette circled his head like a vaporous snake, an evilness that clouded his eyes and curved his grin into a foul grimace. He gave me another hush puppy, but Spotty ate that one too. I just wasn't fast enough for a one eyed, 300 pound beagle.

On Saturday, John Hewitt, a boy employed as a farm hand, was walking near the Alexandria Pike not far from the Double Creek community, when he came across the headless trunk of a woman. Horrified at his discovery, he reported his find to the police. A search was instituted, but up to last accounts the murderer had not been located. The identity of the woman, who was about twenty-two years of age, has not been ascertained.

February 1, 1896, The Triple County Times

"Henner B, you remember him, Mother, " my mom will yell as they stand over poor old Henner B's grave. They have this conversation every year. Meme pretends she's deaf even though she has better hearing than my mom. She once heard me cuss at my cousin, Tina, from across the midway at the State Fair in Louisville. Even with all those hawkers yelling and screaming, she heard me tell Tina to go to hell. We figured she's probably like the Bionic Woman.

"Henner B married a Swigert from over in Lockport and they had twelve children. Well, they did have twelve children until the youngest one died of typhoid or was it tuberculosis? I can't remember. Mother, you remember this, don't you? One of them kids swallowed lye, thought it was a mug of beer and drank it straight down. Burned his esophagus up, isn't that right? Had to go to Cincinnati and have a tube attached to his stomach. Remember Granny Daniels talking about how he had to chew up his food and spit it into that tube, and swoosh, it'd go right down that tube to his stomach. He was really just like me and you," Mom would enthuse, dreaming about the day she reached 1000 pounds, undergoing surgery to wire her jaws together, being fed by a tube herself.

We climb to the top of the hill and sit under the sycamore trees waiting for a breeze. This is my favorite spot in the whole cemetery, not only because it is cool, but because that's where Annie DeVore is. I usually climb to the highest point where her grave is and hug the tall heaven-bound spire, pressing my sweaty forehead against the cool mossy inscription, whispering her name. Annie didn't belong to any of the Swigerts or Rhisleys or Smoots that peopled the hill of graves. I beg Meme to tell me about Annie, but she will only say that someday she'll tell me. I'm glad someday has arrived. I imagine Annie was fiercely loved by a married man and she died without his knowledge, carrying their secret to the grave. Or she loved a retard and he didn't know anything except the magic of her hands. Or she desperately killed herself and her baby when she found out that her lover was killed in some foreign war. Each year my hands

could reach just a little farther around the base of Annie's tombstone and every year my image of her became brighter. Last year I was finally able to clasp my hands together, wrapping like ivy around the cold rock, but Annie was still as silent and elusive as the wind blowing across the hill.

The mystery that for several days has been hovering over the Double Creek community after the discovery of the headless trunk of a young woman so foully murdered on Alexandria Pike has been partially cleared up. The body has been identified as that of Annie DeVore, the daughter of W.K. DeVore, a farmer living near Double Creek. The men who are responsible for the murder are Scott Jackson and Alonzo Waller, two students of the Cincinnati Dental College. The girl had been betrayed by Waller and was carrying his child at the time of her untimely death. Neither miscreant has made a full confession. The head of the unfortunate has not yet been found, and though Jackson and Waller have been subjected to the most rigid examination, each is trying to throw the murder on the other.

March 3, 1896, Triple County Times

. . . And the Livin' is Easy

1974

Two nights run together in my head, rethreading the past through the tender eye of my present, given to me that Christmas, like an omen, my sister's opal ring. I watched the Watergate hearings while my mom stood ironing, over and over, steam rising as she stood, veins bulging in her legs, a stain of blood no bigger than a thumbprint leaking on the back of her dress. Bobby Scalf got shot with a BB gun and Grandma won something in the mail, hailing it like a miracle, watching the mailman for fear of treachery. My sister, cornered by our neighbor's dog, Rastus, had a date with The Senior. He wore a green sweater with ducks on it and flair leg blue jeans. I stole her diary and read some entries twice. I drew a six foot picture of The Senior, his face dripping with fangs and drool on our concrete cistern, so long ago in crystal memory, line upon chalky line on the pebbled cistern porch. She could have killed me, but she didn't and that Christmas I got her opal ring, and she said I love you. I could have killed Judy Spencer kissing Ray Botts under the forsythia bush at the edge of our lot, resting in that strange new sensation, my only thought was of Gilligan's lips on mine. My brother fell in the pond soon after that and dad pushed mom into the simulated hardwood edge of the stereo. Mom blamed dad and he blamed her while I watched with Grandma on the lumpy edge of the couch. Mrs. Sutherland, our bus driver, wrecked seven times in Bus No. 33. Mom sent her flowers by me every time she wrecked and Mrs. S always cried. In June, I solemnly waved goodbye to Mrs. S, stepping off that last wet step to the ground, the bus smell lingering on my clothes like a memory, walking up the long gravel highway to my house.

1981

Duty fell in my lap like cotton hospital sheets, lying on my father's legs, shriveled sticks, shanky tobacco stalks left drying in the field, scattered for coverage, waiting for the spring and me. Memory piles on me and heaps the plenty in with the loss. He couldn't make it to the hospital bathroom, the tubes wrapped around the bed rails, his catheter, tender and yellowed with iodine, pulling at his chest with every turn. He ruined his white sheets and thin, blue pajamas. His eyes turned pain toward me, 14, sitting in the seat beside him, waiting for mom to return from the hospital cafeteria, waiting for her to take my place. I read a book and didn't look at him. He was embarrassed by the liquid forming in a green-yellow pool under his legs. He tried to reach for a towel to cover himself as he leaked across the bed, but couldn't reach it. I looked up to help him. Don't, he said to the floor, the wall, the ceiling, stopping me as I started to wipe him. She'll be here soon. You shouldn't have to. . .his voice stopped, choking. You shouldn't have to. . . Light creaked through the door and my mother, coffee in hand, came to us. She rescues the perishing and cares for the dying. I watched her over my book. They didn't speak, but he let her bathe him. I saw it all over the pages of my Harlequin, a romance of locks and tresses, enflamed stallions and Irish landscape. I tell this to my sister who seems to understand and to my brother who doesn't want to. But only I know that a story must be told to be forgotten.

1983

The ride is bumpy with my beer open, trying to keep my hands from sweating, my mouth closed tight against your question. You might ask it tonight, our fifth date, my calendar covered in hearts from April 22 to tonight, our fifth date. It's been the best three weeks of my life, the card said. My brother read it, acting like he would gag. My mom snatched it out of his hand. I cried in my room. I didn't know, didn't know, didn't know. What is it like, I asked my sister who remained mysterious, talking about being easy and being good and which was better. They act like they want you to say yes, but they want you to say no, just say maybe, but never give in. I think about that as I ride beside you, bouncing in your pickup that has no shocks, \$350 from your uncle who said it was a real winner and you bought it. We pull into Mr. Stubb's lane, the house two miles off the road. You say excuse me and chuck the crow bar and lug wrench into the truck bed for more room in the cab. You kill the lights and pull me across the vinyl seat, bulging with ratted tatters of stuffing and criss-crossed scores of duct tape. We wrestle and I feel the steam condense against my skin and on the windows. You turn to me and set forth a defense. You said that if I didn't touch you down there your balls would turn blue and explode. You said a painful biochemical reaction would take place. I think of Virgil Livers, defensive back for the Chicago Bears. A football hit a nerve in Virgil's knee and one of his testicles blew up. An ugly scene for the trainer. We twist and sweat some more. I think about Virgil, but mostly I think about being easy and being good and which is better.

1985

Weema-whip, weema-whip '50's sounds bounce back against the no back bleachers, against the glass case holding trophies past won. Pass one of those Coke's, please. The squeaky tennis shoes are exchanged for slick Florshiems sliding across the lacquered free-throw line. Line up for pictures, please. The gold and blue streamers stream across the gym from net to net, hoop to hoop. Balloons scurry across the gym floor. We kick them when we dance. Coach Conrad frisks us for whiskey. Happy Days is our prom theme. I have on a black dress. I can not breathe. My dress is too tight. The band plays dreamily while our grinning goat principal reads our names for Prom Court. My date thinks he's Fonzie, so I watch his hands. I watch my dress hem. I watch Pee Wee Sloan hand Tracey a joint. Join hands as you walk across the stage, please. His hand is dripping, positively, and I peel my lips back to grin at the juniors, who clap adoringly at us, of course. My ice pick heels dent the gym floor. Name your party, baby; my date's voice leaks onto my shoulder. I could drive my ice picks through his vampire heart. The flash bulbs pop wide to chill the moment we arrive at the head of the march. We move on. Pee Wee says your brother's drunk again. He's in the parking lot throwing up. I wade through this sticky fifteen minutes, pulling at my tight black dress. I move when the band plays a slow one and I can think of no place else to go, no place else I want to be.

Sunday Morning Miracles

Sunday morning, Teresa Jackson sits in church and wonders about her soul. She has just gotten off work at the Waffle House, two exits up from town, off the interstate. She's worked there for six months and knows just about everybody coming through the door - dusty farmers, businessmen, women who work second shift at the tire factory. They all talk about the news of the day over their coffee, cigarettes and waffles. Teresa got this job waitressing two days after she quit her job at Ye Olde Bookstore out at the Discount City Shopping Plaza, a little strip mall flapping out from Wal-Mart like the wings of a great brick bird. People would come in and ask for books all the time, and she just didn't know what to tell them. The book might be right under her nose, but she was more of the Harlequin novel type and didn't know Faulkner from Fabio.

"Is that the new preacher?" Teresa leans over to Shelly Watson who is trimming her fingernails into her lap.

"Yes, we had him over for dinner last night. We've had so many new preachers come through here lately. I wished they'd just fix on one and stick, " Shelly says. Shelly is a beautician and works at the Nu-Wave Beauty School as an instructor. Her husband, Jake, comes into the Waffle House all the time, tipping Teresa three times what he should. Teresa wonders if Shelly even listens to him at home because he talks Teresa's ear off at the Waffle House. He is always talking about the farm he and Shelly bought two years ago from Mr. Henderson's widow. There's either a drought

or there's way too much rain. The tobacco either is way too big to cure up good or not big enough to amount to anything. It's always something with Jake. It's always something with Shelly, too. Since she was promoted to Head Nail Tech, she has really got the airs about her.

"He looks awfully young, don't you think?" Teresa asks.

"That's the way they grow 'em at the preacher school," Shelly says and casts a dim look in Teresa's direction. Shelly thinks that Teresa looks like Lazarus walking among the dead with that black eye liner smeared into raccoons beneath her eyes. Lord, why do people wear make-up if they don't know how to apply it, she thinks. And you'd think she'd have the decency to change out of her Waffle House uniform. Batter all down the front of that brown polyester, she looks like she's been wandering in the wilderness herself.

"He's about 19. Can you believe that? What 19-year-old knows anything about anything?" says Shelly.

"I feel so old sometimes, when I see young kids like that getting up and doing something with their lives, " says Teresa. Working at the Waffle House meant working all night and going to bed in the morning when the rest of the world was bright and eager to live. That was o.k. by Teresa, but some nights she didn't think she could wipe another table or listen to "Fulsome Prison Blues" on the jukebox one more minute. She is 21, but sometimes she feels 61 and going down hill fast. This is one

of those mornings that Teresa feels like she has arrived at a crossroads in her life and she is ready to lay the burden down on somebody. She thinks a good dose of Sunday will cure her. Her soul isn't in too bad of shape, she decides. It just needs a little mending, a little patching around the edges. People, well, men mostly, have told her that she was good enough for heaven, but Teresa is just never sure.

The church building was once a little clapboard house on the edge of town. The little white building with its dying brown marigolds, thirsting in the dry soil outside by the two concrete blocks that serve as steps reminds Teresa of her grandmother's house. Teresa's parents were killed by a coal truck on Hwy. 23 when Teresa was four and she has lived with her grandmother ever since. She doesn't remember much about her parents. Her grandmother keeps their senior pictures on the TV in the living room. Teresa can't imagine having parents who look like those kids in the pictures. She knows her life would have been so different if they had lived, but she doesn't ponder too much on that. She has a lot to keep her busy at the Waffle House and if she does get blue, like this morning, she just comes to church. Their old preacher had a low dreamy voice that iced over any Merle Haggard kind of night. Teresa loved to sink unnoticed in the back pews and listen as the singers wailed along.

"Hey, " a voice comes close to her ear. Junior Franklin edges in the pew next to Teresa, causing her to scoot over and bump Shelly Watson. Shelly's fingernails jump out of her lap and litter the dark carpet like a constellation of little moons.

"You're a little late, " says Teresa. Junior flips her the bird. Shelly sees him do

this. She sniffs and gets up to leave. She moves three pews up and sits with Sister Cochran.

"Bitch. She acts like she's a hundred years old, " Junior says in a low voice. "A lot of time has passed since she and big Jake were getting it on in the Sav-A-Lot parking lot. She acts like that is just his-toe-ree. "

"Hush," Teresa says. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I saw your car. I thought maybe we could do something after this," Junior says, looking around as if he were searching for someone. He has not been to bed yet that night either. He smells faintly of old beer and cigarettes smoked in the open air. His jeans are clean, but his white t-shirt looks old and yellow under the armpits.

"I'm going straight to bed after this, " Teresa says.

"That sounds just fine to me." Junior grins at Teresa and she notices how old he looks, how the wrinkles around his eyes sag like spider webs across his face. Hard living has a way of catching up with you if you let it.

"I planned on going to bed alone, " Teresa says, looking straight ahead.

"Oh, come on, Tee. What would my wife think if I went home and told her I'd been at church this morning," he says, his breath coming across her face with a stale smell. His voice is gentle and teasing like always. Teresa and Junior grew up living five miles from one another, but on either side of the county line. Teresa rode the bus to Unrue County and Junior rode the Lee County bus to school. They didn't

really know each other very well until after high school, after Junior was married to pregnant Candace. Teresa used to baby-sit Candace's sister's kids and that's how she met Junior. Teresa had heard about Junior though. He was a Franklin and that was the brandname of the Devil in Lee County.

"Hush. They are getting ready to have the Lord's Supper, " Teresa says, drawing a hymnal out of the holder in the back of the pew. The nasal wailing of the congregation bounces off the cedar ceiling as the wooden fans chop the air and push the sound back down to Teresa's ears. The song is soon over. Old men named Shirley, Doc and Virgil shuffle up to the body of Christ and mumble the necessary thanks and amens. Teresa reads the front of her hymn book, *Sacred Selections for the Church*. She used to think it was *Scared Selections*, but her grandmother straightened that out. She remembers her grandmother singing old hymns while she canned tomatoes at the end of the summer. The memory of hot tomatoes and the fear of bursting canning jars always mingled in 4/4 time, as Grandma drug the old rugged cross around the kitchen with her wailing, mountain nasal. She used to take Teresa to church with her when she was little. Teresa loved Sunday school, smearing white glue on cotton balls for clouds and coloring in the blue skies of heaven. She always proudly toted some project out to her grandma, a popsicle cross, a picture of the ark with all the animals, a star on her sheet if she knew all the books of the Old Testament.

"Turn in your songbooks to No. 93, please. We'll sing "Hero of Calvary" before the prayer is offered," the song leader says.

As she turns the pages to No. 93, Teresa thinks about what Junior said about Shelly and Jake getting it on in the Sav-A-Lot parking lot. They must have been about 16, skipping school in Jake's mom's car out behind the loading dock at Sav-A-Lot. The butcher was expecting a delivery, and standing on the dock, saw Shelly's white behind pressed against the window like a boiled ham. The butcher yelled at them. Shelly turned around and cussed him out, until Jake got a handle on her mouth, hushed her up and drove off. They were married two months later. She was already pregnant. Teresa remembers how sorry she felt for Jake as he stood there next to Shelly during the wedding. Trapped, Teresa told her grandmother later. That's what he looked like, a big, scared rabbit in a little woman trap. Sometimes Junior looks that way or he lets on that way, just to get sympathy from Teresa. He's really as free as a bird. His wife sells Excel and is working on some kind of level where she is over a bunch of people. Junior thinks she's having an affair with one of his buddies, but he can never prove it. She is always at those Excel meetings. Junior thought that at one time she might be sleeping with people just to get them to sign up, but he's given up that idea. She's too frigid for even that.

"Good morning and welcome this morning, a fine Sunday morning this is. The Lord has blessed us with another good night's sleep and a fine sunny day to glorify his creation. Isn't that wonderful? Don't you think that's wonderful, Brother Curtis?" the preacher starts off in a rush. Brother Curtis nods furiously in the front row.

"I just want to thank the Watsons for a fine fried chicken dinner last night. I was invited over to Shelly and Jake's for some good country cookin' and I bet I've gained five pound since last night." He chuckles and taps his rounded stomach with his hymnal. Everyone laughs and feels pleased with themselves for being in on all this admiration and appreciation. Teresa feels Junior touch her leg.

"What are you doing?" Teresa whispers.

"Your legs are so brown," Junior says. "Do you go to a tanning bed?"

"No, I don't go to a tanning bed."

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure if I go to a tanning bed or not?"

"Yeah."

"Of course, I'm sure. Will you please hush?" Teresa feels a little uncomfortable. She and Junior are sitting in the back pew. Shelly and Sister Cochran are three rows up, but no one else is even close to them. His hand touches her knee again lightly, his hardened fingernail making little circles on her dry skin. He is faithful to her, even if he is cheating on his wife. Teresa likes the comfort they have between them. She wouldn't trade it for a hundred double dealing boyfriends, but she sometimes worries about the rightness of it all. After all, adultery is adultery whether you spell it sleeping around or not.

"This morning I plan on talking about The Effect of Modern Day Miracles. Now I know there are skeptics out there this morning, those who don't believe in

miracles, those who think they don't need miracles. Well, I'm here to tell you, brothers and sisters, I don't care who you are, where you're from or where you think you are going, you need a miracle! We all need miracles, don't we, Brother Shirley?" Brother Shirley nods in rapt agreement. The young preacher begins preaching to the lost who listen reverently and think of pot roast, ballgames and sleep. One of the church members swats a wasp lazily with a song book, rustling the curled pages of the hymnal. Teresa looks at the young preacher. He has on a shiny suit and tight shoes that bind his fat feet. Teresa thinks he wouldn't last a day bussing tables in those shoes. His pudgy fist beats the pulpit as he gets worked up. He starts talking like an old moss-back gospel preacher, as if his mouth is full of marbles. Teresa wonders if they teach them that at the Seminary. He talks about debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. Teresa compares herself to that list and feels like she is doing pretty good. I've been drunk, in lust and I've caroused, but nix on the orgies, debauchery and detestable idolatry. The floor creaks with every step he makes, pacing, trodding down the sins of the flesh. He is young and indignant already about the Evil One and a whole lot of foolishness going on in the world. Teresa wonders what this list of sins has to do with miracles.

"What's this have to do with miracles?" Junior says, leaning over again to her, his lips just brushing her ear lobe. His hand is still on her leg. She likes the warmth of it, covering the coolness of her legs in the crushed carpeted reverence of the

sanctuary, but doesn't think this is the time or the place for cuddling. Teresa looks at Junior. He is staring intently on something in the front of the building even though his hand is working its way up her leg. His face looks sharp as if he is listening hard at the young preacher.

"He's right, you know," Junior says, serious.

"Get your hand off my leg right now," says Teresa.

"How much you pay me?" says Junior and lifts his hand off her knee. Teresa knows Junior is crazy. Craziness is the most talked about thing in this town. Who is crazy, who's going crazy, who has craziness in their family. Junior's dad shot himself in the bathroom one morning when everybody was getting ready to go to school about ten years ago. Half the town heard the gun shot blast. Everyone thought that Junior's family should have moved out of that house. The shot blew a big hole out of the bathroom mirror, but they stayed on and his mother never fixed the wall. Junior's mom and little brother still live there. Junior had a good job working at the tire factory until he quit two days before he was going to be promoted to foreman. He says he couldn't knowingly contribute to the destruction of the environment or something. People thought he was a lunatic for that and pitied his poor wife for having taken up with such a bad seed. He came from a long line of bad seeds. That bunch of inbred Franklin's, her grandma used to call them. Junior didn't look inbred though. He looked pretty good this morning despite his smell and his disheveled hair. Teresa can't remember the first time they official met and started seeing each other. It

seemed like he was always at the Waffle House when she was getting off work and they just started up together. Of course, she knew he was married, but it always seemed like Junior and his wife were more like room mates than real mates.

"Let's go get us a beer, " Junior whispers. His hand grips her knee again and tugs a little on the hem of her brown Waffle House skirt.

"It's Sunday, fool. You can't buy a beer today," Teresa says, getting a little impatient with Junior. He was good in bed, but she was trying to concentrate on the sermon and there's nothing more distracting on a Sunday morning than lust. If she let herself, she could probably have a sex fantasy about him right here in the sanctuary. She could imagine the heat of Junior's hand like a phantom on her stomach, her breasts and her face. She could almost feel his hands anxiously unbuttoning her dirty polyester blouse, pushing away the fabric to her arms, capping her shoulders with his hands. In her fantasy, Junior looked like a god, chiseled in pinkish marble like Moses on the mountain top, low slung hips balanced by the slight bow in his legs, a starched white shirt covering his concrete washboard stomach, overlaid with gold. His warm, earthly smell almost overtakes her for a moment as he comes down on top of her. Teresa closes her eyes and tries to remember where she's at.

"This is a hell-speeding, God-cursing, judgment-making, sin-taking, wrath-raking world we are livin' in, brethren. We are livin' in the last days and the devil, that old serpent of old, is stalking about the earth seeking whom he may devour. Do you

hear me this morning, brothers and sisters? Do I have any warriors out there? Ready to take up the shield of faith and the breastplate of righteousness against the devil?"

the preacher's high pitched voice careens off the walls and knocks Teresa back into the now. The preacher suddenly looks at Teresa and seems to draw a bead on her shriveling soul, as if he knew she was having a sex fantasy about Junior Franklin, who has slumped over in the seat next to her and looks almost asleep. Teresa feels uncomfortable with the preacher's stare. His face is red with perspiration as he wipes his forehead with a K-Mart thin handkerchief. His eyes land on her and seem to stick. Now he is talking about stealing and tax returns. Teresa takes home about a pound of Sweet & Low every month from the Waffle House in her smock pocket, so maybe stealing is among her faults, but her grandmother still does her taxes every year and makes her owe up to every red cent. The preacher's eyes are still on her. She thinks about kicking Junior awake and hauling him on out of here with her. She feels watched by the preacher's little pig face staring at her innermost private thoughts. Teresa looks out the window. The world outside the clapboard church hums on with the life and heat of a Sunday morning, swarming dragon flies rise lightly from the creek. The grass clicks together in the rushing of the outside and moves by itself, the wind breaking over the tiny hills beyond the asphalt road. Now the young preacher is railing about fornication.

"Ladies, if you love a man, marry him. Gentlemen, if you love a woman, marry her. But if you want to lose your man, lose your woman, degrade yourself, contract a

disease, produce a bastard, ruin your reputation, just sleep around, brothers and sisters. It has been done! Even in the days of old, that old seducer Bathsheeba bathed on the rooftop in full view of King David. Now, you tell me sex doesn't sell, you tell me people aren't driven insane by it? King David killed a man to satisfy his conscience. What would you do this morning, brothers and sisters? If there are those among you, coveting your neighbor's wife, coveting your neighbor's husband, are you standing right in the eyes of the Lord? Are you standing ramrod straight, baby powder pure, clean, holy, white in the eyes of the Lord? Are you clean, Brother Curtis?"

Brother Curtis shakes his head, yes, he is as clean as the day he was born. Teresa really feels uncomfortable now. The young preacher seems to have singled her out. He is preaching directly to her and she notices Shelly Watson turns around in her seat to catch a glimpse of her face. Teresa feels like she's up front on the stage. All she wanted to do was to come in and wind down a bit after a particular bad night.

"The hand of the Devil is upon many of our young people today. They need the direction and example of the hoary heads. They need to see the example set by the gospel advocates, by the soldiers of Christ, by those who love the old tree of Calvary. We need a miracle, brothers and sisters. We need a miracle in the God We Trust U. S. of A., that's what we need, more than love, more than a Coke and a smile, more than MTV or QVC. Do I have any warriors this morning?"

Teresa doesn't feel like much of a warrior. In fact, she feels like a coward and a

sinner, sitting in church next to a married man that she'll probably fool around with later on. Junior jerks awake and looks at her for a full minute before he leans over to her.

"I thought I was falling into the pit of hell, " he says. "They say if you hit the bottom, you'll die soon."

"I've heard that, too. Do you believe it?" Teresa says.

"No, I've fallen lots of times and hit the bottom. Still livin'," Junior says.

"Never fallen into the bottom pit of hell, though," Teresa says.

"You got me there."

Teresa wonders about hell a lot. She knows it's wrong to fool around with Junior, but he never expects one thing from her. Sometimes in the long afternoons she spends with him, lying in her little double bed, twisted together like slick twine, she looks over his shoulder and thinks she sees her mother there, shaking her head, disappointed at her only daughter. Her grandfather had told her about the yawning chasms of flames, a pit where the devils and his angels were chained, thrown from the airy expanse of heaven. Teresa's grandmother would always shush him when he scared Teresa with talk of licking flames and forked-tongued serpents. Teresa's grandmother would talk of blessed peace and the gentle milk of kindness and the circle going unbroken and hundreds of harps, angels, big mansions and shiny gold things. Teresa thinks about that peace a lot, about safety, rest and music surrounding her somewhere in heaven. Beulah Land, her aunt always used to call it. Way off in Beulah

Land. Teresa knows a few Beulah's at the Waffle House and can't get the image of a bunch of fat, beehived old women swapping afghan patterns out of her mind when she hears Beulah Land.

"Come forward and fall to your knees if you're a sinner. Fall to your knees if you know that wide path leads to hellfire and the narrow path leads to eternal delight at the feet of our heavenly Father. Who needs a miracle this morning? Who needs one real bad?" the preacher says. The congregation begins to amen and praise the lord in a rumbling, mumbling fashion. The old women fan for salvation and the men are shaking their heads from side to side like ridding themselves of fleas or the sin that so besets them. The pianist has turned her plump behind to the congregation and starts chording the opening strains to "My Rock and My Shield."

"My Rock!" someone yells.

"My Shield!" someone else joins in.

"Yessir, He sure is!" A staccatoed voice punctuates the low moans.

"Mmmmmm," someone assents.

"Praise the Lord!" A woman's voice raises above the general din.

"Do I have any warriors?" says the young preacher, coldly, pointing to Teresa.

"Yessir!"

"Here sir!"

"Lord, here, sir!"

"The Lord has miracles a-plenty, he has the market cornered on miracles, he has air-to-land miracles that can go anywhere, pierce any heart, he has miracles for the grieving, miracles for the lost, miracles for the sinner, he'll lead you to the other side, he has miracles for you, young lady," the preacher says. Teresa doesn't realize that he is talking to her until Shelly Watson turns around and glares at her for a full minute. Sister Cochran turns around too and sniffs loudly. Sister Cochran has cataracts and can only see Teresa as a brown blob. There seems to be another blob slumped in the pew beside her too, but that might be Teresa's coat for all Sister Cochran knows. Teresa realizes directly that she will have to do something, respond in some way. He obviously is talking to her. The fluorescent bulbs suddenly grow brighter and their cold, artificial buzz becomes oppressive. Teresa feels a tension now that she has not felt before. His icy voice comes to her through the thick air of the congregation.

"Weary . . . heavy laden . . . lay it down . . . miracle . . ." he says in a cloud of icy perspiration and cold fire of the pulpit. He seems to grow larger and to beckon to her. He looks bright like an angel with shafts of light breaking from behind him in the baptistery, coming through his arms and legs. Junior touches her quickly on the leg, sensing in an animal way that something big is about to happen.

"What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know."

"What is he saying?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Haven't you been listening this whole time?"

"I can't tell if I have or not," Teresa says. She feels almost hypnotized by the young preacher's face. He has stepped down from the pulpit and is standing in the aisle beckoning to her, genuinely waving his hand for her to come on down, walk down that aisle, cast off those sins. Teresa thinks about stepping into the aisle and what that would mean. Teresa doesn't know. She imagines her feet in her white orthopedic shoes, spattered with eggs and waffle batter, sliding on the carpet that is burnt crimson from the thrown-off sins of those who've gone before her. A doorknob turns somewhere in her head and she tries to count the steps to the baptistery. She wonders if her slip will show or if that even matters on your way to salvation. She grips the back of the pew in front of her until her knuckles are white.

"Consider it, folks. Don't give the devil a foot hold, a strong hold. Do you have burdening sorrows? Do you want the peace that passes understanding? Set your sinful soul on fire. Let God dip his lovin' spoonful in your heart," the preacher says, pointing directly at Teresa, starting to walk toward her. Junior arches his back against the pew as if he is ready to bolt out the door if the preacher takes one step further. Teresa feels fated, almost led by some unseen hand, maybe her mother's, maybe the devil's. Teresa's grip on the pew stays firm and she rises in her place. The noise

around her seems far off, buzzing like a carnival. The tambourine's jangle and the guitar's pluck mix with the plinky piano sounds and the congregation sways in a blurry dream. Teresa steps over Junior's knees to the aisle. Junior stares at her, unbelieving. She passes him and he thinks for a moment he needs to reach out and grab her, hold her back from the aisle, but his hands are like lead in the seat beside him and he can only stare at this swaying woman before him, who up until three seconds earlier, he thought he knew.

Teresa moves into the aisle, led by the unseen hand and her conviction to throw off the life she leads. Junior knows he has to move fast to stop this transformation. She is looking straight ahead at the young preacher who is almost too bright to look at. She squints and starts to walk down the aisle. Junior considers for a moment how all this came to be. If I had stayed awake this whole time, I might have prevented something like this from happening, he thinks.

"That's what happens when you fall asleep in church," he says out loud to nobody in particular. He moves out into the aisle and comes slowly behind Teresa. There are other people out into the aisle now milling their way to the front, hands held up, swaying and moving to the music, moaning.

Teresa loses sight of the young preacher for a moment. Someone from another pew steps in front of her. Another member of the congregation sways in front of her also. Shelly Watson is even standing, clapping her hands to the pounding music. Teresa feels someone's hand on her arm.

"Look at me," Junior says harshly into her ear, pulling at her arm. Teresa pauses in her trip down the aisle to salvation. She wonders why Junior is in the aisle next to her, why he has risen from his spot in the pew to walk the narrow path to redemption.

"Look at me, damnit," Junior says, again. This time he pulls her body to him, turning her around, covering her arms with his own. He smells like a memory of happiness, of closeness, of some type of salvation himself. Teresa wonders what kind of cologne could carry that message, what type of scent could make a woman sin on the way to a miracle.

"Don't, Junior. . . I can't give the devil a foot hold," Teresa says in a far away voice.

"Hell, woman, I ain't the devil. What is wrong with you?" Junior says, trying to turn Teresa so she'll look at him. Teresa turns to Junior, but looks at the clock on the back wall instead. Next to the clock there is a little handwritten sign that says "Remember Lot's Wife."

"Look at me," Junior says again, this time cupping her chin in his hand and gently pulling her face to look at him. No one notices them standing there in the back of the church, Junior staring at Teresa, who runs her tongue along her teeth and thinks she tastes a bit saltier than usual. People surround the pulpit now and the congregation is loud with miracles. The pianist pounds her way to a high pitch and

the ceiling fans whirl to the fast pace of deliverance.

"Hey, let's get out of here, " Junior says, turning Teresa to the door. She looks at him finally. No bright lights shine from his eyes. He looks tired and worn, weary like a poet searching for airy words that never come, a blind prophet with miracles for no one, a father gathering flowers for a dead son.

"You've been up all night, haven't you, Junior Franklin?" Teresa says finally. He nods. They walk heavily away from the pew toward the back of the church and the two wide doors that lead outside. Teresa leans on Junior and allows him to cradle her to the car. When she was little, her grandmother had taken her to the fair and she had gotten lost. She wandered around for almost twenty minutes before some kindly old woman who lived up the road spotted her on the midway and carried her back to her grandmother. Her grandmother didn't scold her for wandering away. She just held her, close, and didn't let go for a long time. Teresa feels like Junior knows about this the way he is holding her so close and tight.

"I was just looking for a miracle, Junior," she says.

"I know, baby. Aren't we all?"