

ABSTRACT

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This MFA thesis is a novel-in-stories. The stories deal with the changing landscape of the “New South,” especially in terms of the maturation of Atlanta, Georgia, as a national city. Certain characters recur throughout the stories, especially the central character, Franklin Mitchem. Franklin comes from the small town of Marthasville, Georgia, to live in Atlanta in late 1999. He is an anxious young man, and his social anxiety is exacerbated by an event that takes place during his freshman year of high school back in Marthasville. To cope with his anxiety, and as a way of healing from what happened to him in Marthasville, Franklin creates narratives about the people he encounters in Atlanta. Some of these stories are Franklin’s imaginations; others are his “real” life.

THE CITY TOO BUSY TO HATE

By

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The City Too Busy to Hate

They say that in three months from now Y2K may end the world. And it seems that for some reason everyone wants to move to Atlanta before it's all over with. They can't throw up enough condos to fit them all in. This city hasn't grown so fast since it rebounded after be burned down during the Civil War. Why would anyone drop a life and move to Atlanta? How would I know? Two months ago I moved here, and why, I'm not sure.

I left Marthasville, Georgia, because Mama told me to. She put out a Sunday's last cigarette and said, "Follow your dreams, Franklin," only she said it in the same tired way she always talks about the future, as if whatever turns the road to my dreams takes will only be good in light of what they aren't. Besides, I never dreamed of living in Atlanta. I just applied to school here because very few of the people I went to high school wanted to move here.

Now I've been here for two months, and is my life any different? Am I any less alone? Because the more I sit here and think about it, that's the reason I came here: to feel less alone. That's the only dream I have, to feel less alone, and until then I can't sleep and I can't leave. I stay up waiting for something to happen, for someone to call and listen to me.

Is this me following my dream? How am I supposed to dream when I can't even get to sleep? I stay up all night staring down from my window on the ninth floor, watching and waiting.

On the first day I walked the streets of Atlanta I left the building through the garage in the direction of the school I was enrolled in, even though I don't have a car. On the elevator I pressed the button for the wrong floor, so instead of ending up in the lobby where I could exit onto the sidewalk of Peachtree Street, I found myself in the parking garage. So I walked out the ramp that rose to Third Street, and as I approached the top of the ramp I was almost hit by a red Toyota Corolla that whipped around the corner. The little man driving was young but balding, and his face had the shape of a chicken egg. A scar ran down one side of his face from his forehead to his jaw like a crack in the egg. He laid on his horn and threw a hand up as he swerved by me, as if it were all my fault and he had nothing to do with it at all.

I lived to see Third Street, which I followed up to Peachtree Street, and I turned south toward school. It didn't take long to pass the Fox Theatre, which I had heard enough about to know I couldn't afford to go inside of anytime soon, then I came to the corner of Ponce de Leon, where a woman was wearing an area rug and cussing at a telephone pole. I was afraid she might take me for an accomplice telephone poll, so I crossed over Peachtree and kept heading south. One more block and I reached North Avenue where the Southeastern Energy Corporation had their headquarters. For years I had walked SEC bills to the mailbox for Mama, and I supposed that's where they had went, and that she had paid for part of the concrete and green marble trim work that reached thirty stories high.

There was a crowd of pigeons loitering in front of the building. Pigeons are overly proud of themselves, and they fit well in Atlanta. It's hard to tell the pigeons from the CPAs. They all wear suits gray as dry stone, and tanned leather shoes. They

take jerky steps and bounce their shoulders like they're cocksure, but they keep their heads straight and high, as if everything below them is too dirty to look at. To be so close to the dirt, they sure carry on as if they're far from it. Just behind the pigeons was an old man in gray wool suit walking the same way. It was too hot for wool, but there he was, sweating in wool as he paced back and forth across the plaza with his head held high, like he was trying to think of a way to get gas into Georgia. Or a way to get money out of Georgia.

The downtown bridge was just ahead of me when I came upon a security guard who didn't seem to be watching over anything but himself. It was too hot for his uniform too, a three-button charcoal suit with a starched white shirt and black necktie, and he had a scowl on his face like he meant to give his boss hell about having to wear it. But I'm sure his boss wouldn't care to hear it, and he would have to find someone else to blame, because when I nodded at him in the way you nod to a stranger in your path his face was scrunched up so tight that he couldn't nod back. I got the message and looked off in the direction of downtown, pretending I had already forgotten he was there, but he wouldn't let it go, and he barked in my direction, "Close your goddamn mouth, Billy."

Who was he talking to? Me, for sure. There was no one else there. The sidewalks in Atlanta are empty, for the most part. I don't know why he called me Billy, and my mouth wasn't open, but he was talking to me. I didn't know how to react, and if I could have thought of something to say I would have been too scared to say it. Not because he was big. He wasn't so big, but when someone is that eager to

find trouble, there is no telling what lengths he might go to in order to get it, and I sealed my lips tight and looked straight downtown as I walked past him.

After I had put two blocks between him and me, my fear turned to anger, and my elbows started shaking. There was a boy in my high school named Ryan Taylor who used to make my elbows shake like that, and four years passed without me standing up to him. Whatever Atlanta is, it ain't Marthasville all over again, nor do I want it to be. But there's Ryan Sailor again. Ryan would never wear a three-button suit, and if he knew his skin had turned brown he'd want to hang himself from a sweetgum, but that was him.

He was Ryan Saylor all right. Maybe it seems strange to see people shape shifting, but I hear things could get very strange come Y2K. The way the reporters on WSB-TV carry on, on the morning of January first the coffee maker might brew orange juice. Chicken eggs might hatch marigold sprouts. The chess players in Woodruff Park might all get hired at Lockheed-Martin. And there's no telling what will happen to my Caller ID box.

I never saw a Caller ID box before I moved to Atlanta. If we could have had them in Marthasville I know Mama would have bought one. She wanted to know everything, and when the phone rings you're supposed to be able to look at the box and it will tell you who is calling. But no one called me but Mama. She called and I didn't answer, and now she doesn't call. Now no one calls me but telemarketers, and they've got the box tricked. No name shows up. All the box ever says is *how would I know?*

How would I know? Mama never brought me into the city, and Atlanta may have been Carthage for all I knew of it, or some other city from my World History book. All I heard of Old Atlanta is that it was destroyed by fire in the Civil War. And all I heard of modern-day Atlanta was from WSB-TV and the banner headline of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and when I was growing up they were full of stories about Wayne Williams. In 1982 Wayne Williams was found guilty of murdering twenty-three children, and to me, Wayne Williams was Atlanta. When I walked home alone from school, other kids would stick their heads out of the school bus windows and shout, “Wayne Williams gonna get you!” and at home, if the sun went down and I resisted coming inside, Mama would call out to Wayne Williams to scare me into coming home. By the time the identity of the killer was public, he had been arrested, but for me and the other kids in Marthasville, that didn’t make any difference. It didn’t matter if Wayne Williams was in prison. Wayne Williams had become something different than a murderer. He had become like the ghost of a man who wasn’t dead yet. And to me, he was the spirit of *The City Too Busy to Hate*.

Now that I live here I see clearly the backside of the Chamber of Commerce’s line, “*The City Too Busy to Hate*.” This city is busy, but it makes time for hate. It’s a dressed-up hate, but it’s hate. I got it all August, and it kept coming in September. That evening the temperature dropped to something merciful and went walking north toward Buckhead. As I crossed Fourteenth Street on West Peachtree something caught my eye. Behind the Atlantic Tower was a wall of fountains I turned the corner and I saw a wall of square stone blocks forming a fountain pool that stretched like a ribbon for two-hundred feet, all the way past the edge of the building. It was like a

wonderful secret. At a glance there was enough lonesome beauty in that place that I thought if I ever became a ghost it was a place worth haunting. I wondered why it would be hidden away behind the tower, and so difficult to see from the sidewalk. I was so eager to walk along it I didn't notice I had walked right into calling distance of a no-good shouter sitting against the back of the building.

He shouted everything knew and a chunk of what he didn't. Another man sat quietly beside him, but there were no other pedestrians walking the plaza, so he made me his target. "Peacock's scared to fly. That's why they make a show of walking."

He was shouting in my direction but I pretended I was too fascinated by the wall of fountains to notice him, as if I was there and not there.

But he kept at me. He shouted, "Strut on by, peacock! Better not stop strutting!" And then, "Hey! Hey! You hear me!"

I could call him out or I could keep walking, same as with the security guard. If I said nothing, that shame would come back, follow me down the street and send me back to my apartment, and I didn't want it. So I turned and said something I hoped would confuse him: "Can I help you?"

Mama gave me two commands before I left: don't flush anything down a toilet that doesn't go down a toilet and don't ever try to help anyone. She said helping someone is the surest way to make sure you end up down where they are. But there I was, asking if I could the shouter.

He said, "Peacock, you can't help me unless you got time to get your ass whipped."

Maybe he was only making me scared so he wouldn't have to be, but I was beginning to understand why everyone in this crowded city seemed content to be alone—it had to be better than meeting people like this. The man beside him was thicker and healthier, and had cleaner clothes, but there were yellow stains on his eyes. He seemed like he could go for watching someone take a beating, and that attitude, as much as anything, told me I better swallow my shame one more time and turn back toward Buckhead. My walking away encouraged the shouter, and as I moved past the fountain I heard him call out to me, “The pretty peacock had a thought! Then he thought better!”

How would I know? I look down from this window and tell you about what I see, and when you talk about this city it's impossible to lie. Anything you can dream up has happened. And if it hasn't happened yet it will soon. Wayne Williams will come back. There will be another destruction [the burning of Atlanta needs to be earlier in the story]. I will meet you, and I will feel less alone.

There was only one person waiting at the bus stop when I arrived, a skinny man with two fat laundry baskets, both of them exploding with dirty garments. The man's hair was the thickest part of his body. It was long and curly, and was pulled straight back in a pony tail that hung almost down to his waist. I pretended he wasn't there at first, and he was so thin it was almost true, but he kept glancing at me, and finally he cracked a small smile. Soon enough he spoke to me in a very smooth Southern drawl. “You know when the man decides to stop here?”

“No, sir.”

“Sir? I ain’t as old as that, am I?”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Young Blood, I know I done been in one side and out the other, but *damn!*”

The man seemed to get a kick out of what he said, and he smiled broadly. He had long, flat teeth.

“I didn’t mean to say you were old. I just don’t know anything about the bus. I’m trying to get to a neighborhood called Little Five Points.”

“You and everybody else that takes it don’t know. Damn man driving it neither. All I was doing was yanking your chain, Young Blood.”

“I’m sorry.”

The skinny man set the laundry basket he was holding beside his other basket on the sidewalk. “I’m from Detroit. Where you from?”

The man had an easiness about him that made him seem harmless, if not kind, so I thought maybe it was safe to talk with him. “I’m from a little town east of here. You don’t sound like you’re from Detroit. You sound like you’re from the South.”

“When was the last time you was in Detroit, Young Blood?”

“I’ve never been to Detroit.”

“Then how you know what Detroit sounds like? Don’t say television. Old as you seem to think I am you ought to believe I’ve lived long enough to tell you the truth: harder you look to tell people apart the harder it’s going to come to you. Hear that, Young Blood? Don’t say yessir.”

I cut a smile as if I understood him, though I'm not sure I did, then he said, "Call me Ren," and stuck out his hand.

I shook his hand. "My name is Franklin."

"*Franklin!* You got a long money name, ain't you? What you going to do when you get on this bus, *Franklin?* Buy this motherfucker?"

"I'm going to see Little Five Points, I suppose."

"You suppose? Hell, I suppose you will, sooner or later. Myself, I'm off at Moreland if this man know how to stop here, and how to stop there, too. Laundry day, and you know I hate it. I don't do it less I'm down to nothing but a half-a pair of draws. And I mean a half-a pair. You know what I'm saying, Young Blood?"

Ren liked to talk. By the time the bus arrived a half-dozen folks were waiting with us, and Ren had spoken to them all. When the brakes hissed and the door opened, he was finishing a story about cooking a spaghetti breakfast for George Clinton and Bootsy Collins. The door opened, and he looked at me and said, "Think of all the things a man could do if he had four hands."

He meant that he could use help getting his laundry baskets on the bus, so I carried one of them onto the bus for him, which made him say, "You damn sure think I'm next to death, don't you Young Blood?" When he took a seat near the front of the bus I put his basket down on the floor and kept moving back, just so I didn't end up doing his laundry for him.

The bus was full but quiet. Even Ren stopped talking when he took his seat. I think I looked like an intruder, to everyone there.

At least I looked different than anyone else on the bus, until the driver decides to stop again, when on comes a little girl who seems to hop a little every time she takes a step. She was white too, but much paler than me. She wore seagrass shoes and a purple dress that didn't appear to have a seam.. She was a kid, maybe only ten years old, but she had a straight line of bangs that made me wonder when I would meet you.

The little girl started staring at me as she made her way down the aisle, and when she reached my seat she stopped and leaned against the aluminum pole right beside my seat. In her hands were a journalist's pad, spiral bound at the top, and a blue stick pen. She carried herself with a sense of entitlement, like she could approach anyone she pleased and shame on that person if he didn't welcome it.

I pretended she wasn't there. I made out as if there were more other things going on in the bus I needed to look at: an underfed child with a t-shirt that read "Book It!"; a stout little woman with a nose-ring big as a ladybug; an older lady with a handbag in her lap (both the lady and the handbag had perfect posture); a kid with dreadlocks and two sets of headphones, both of them on.

But the little girl didn't buy it. She spoke to me as if she knew that I was aware she was standing over me. "Do you know where I'm going?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"No. You heard what I said." There was no anger in the girl's voice, but she did seem unreasonable, like she wouldn't accept a perfectly good answer she didn't want.

I asked, “How could I know where you’re going?” The little girl leaned further into the pole, wrapping one pale little shoulder around for support, and she jotted something in her notebook before looking down at me again.

Then she asked, “Do you know where you’re going?”

I said, “Of course I know where I’m going.”

“Prove it.”

Prove it? What did this weird little girl want from me? The woman with the scarab in her nose leaned close to hear. I thought to myself, am I okay now? And, is the truth boring enough to turn her away? “I am going to Little Five Points.”

Again, the girl jotted something in her notebook. Her pen moved quickly, but judging from the amount of writing she seemed to be doing, she wrote more than just, “Little Five Points.”

When she finished writing she asked, “You think this bus will take you there, don’t you?”

Her pen was poised to write down my response.

With her questions and her pen, the girl seemed to hold a kind of power over me. I thought maybe if I asked a question I could take some of the power back. “Why wouldn’t it take me to Little Five Points?”

The little girl paused, but not for long. “You could also ask why it would.”

“But I didn’t, did I?”

The little girl seemed to think to herself for a moment, then she said, “Yes, essentially, you did. Did someone tell you this bus would take you to Little Five Points?”

I pointed to Ren, who by then was chatting up the bus driver.

“*He* told you that?” And she started grinning. It was the first time she had an expression on her face and it made her seem all the more menacing.

I asked, “Why do you think that’s funny?” but she didn’t answer. She just kept smiling, and writing like mad in her notebook.

“Do you know him?” I asked.

The little girl stopped writing but she didn’t stop grinning. “Do you?”

She was starting to scare me worse than the security guard had scared me.

“What are you writing?”

“I’m writing what I think. I write down everything I think.”

“Does that include what you think about me?”

“Do you know what the word *everything* means?”

“Please leave me alone.”

“Why? Are you afraid?” The girl stopped smiling. “I want to know you.”

If anyone has ever wanted to know me they never told me so, and if I ever leave this apartment again I doubt another person will ever say so for as long as I am out there. Anyone who would say something like that is too earnest to be trusted.

“Please leave me alone. I want to be alone.”

Again, she wrote in her notebook, only taking a moment to chide me. “You should never let other people make you feel uncomfortable. And if it happens, you shouldn’t let them know. It rarely helps anything.”

What she said to me sounded a lot like what I had been thinking, as if the little girl was inside my head. “What did you just write in your notebook?”

“You should never let other people make you feel uncomfortable. And if you do, you shouldn’t let them know. It rarely helps anything’.”

“What?”

“What I’m writing. ‘You should never let other people make you feel uncomfortable. And if you do, you shouldn’t let them know. It rarely helps anything’.” She seemed to wrap up her writing, as she looked down at me for a moment, but immediately put her pen back to the pad. “And, ‘you can tell a lot about a man by the language he uses toward children’.”

“What?”

“You can tell a lot about a man by the language he uses toward children.”

I shouted, “You’re not a child!”

That got the attention of everyone on the bus. Suddenly, they weren’t pretending I wasn’t there anymore.

The brakes shrieked as the bus came to a knee-bending stop. To keep from falling, the girl had to stop writing and weave her skinny arms around the pole. The notebook hung from three fingers while she used the other hand to keep herself steady against the pole. I could see the top of the page had been writing on, and in the margin was a rectangle with the words “People Afraid of People” inside.

The little girl was stealing my thoughts and then judging me by them. She coaxed me until I said what I really felt, and then she wrote down my feelings in her wicked little notebook. She was a devious little girl, if indeed she was a little girl, and not something that could take the shape of a little girl—the possibilities are almost endless in a city like this.

I snatched the notebook and ran for the front of the bus. But the passengers who had been pretending I wasn't there began cursing and slapping at me. The little girl screamed, "He pushed me!" which was a lie, and then, "He took my notebook!"

I ran toward the door of the bus, shoving my way through the busybodies who were trying to stop me. I almost made it out when someone tripped me. I fell down the steps, against the door, which the driver had shut. It was Ren who tripped me. He helped the bus driver as they ripped the notebook away from me and threw me from the bus.

That's Atlanta for you. Nothing's free in this city, not even a good word. If a rosy old woman says, God bless you, she means her god, not yours, and if you want that blessing you'd better fall in line. And there are sharp old gentlemen who will hold the door for you gallantly just so they can leer at you as you walk through it. There are children in this city who would rob you just the same as they would go to a matinee. If this city is too busy to hate it's only because it's so busy trying to get over on you. Nothing can be trusted.

When will I sleep? When will I feel less alone? When will I get myself out of this apartment, this window ledge?

The night when I look back on the day and feel like I have lived it. Just thinking of all the reasons I can't sleep keeps me up at night. I haven't left this apartment in two days. When I went out to find the security guard. Went I went out to make Atlanta something different than a bigger Marthasville.

Two days ago I walked up the ramp again, just to stay of Peachtree, careful to watch the corner at the top where the egg-headed man had almost killed me. There,

idling at the curb, was a boxy, cobalt-blue Chevrolet. It was the kind of truck that is driven into the city during the day for work, not the kind that parks here overnight. A man with hair streaked like marble and one meaty arm perched on the window frame sat in the driver seat.

The man said to me, “Get in.”

I told him I would not get in his truck. He ran his thick fingers through his marble hair, and asked me politely, “Please, son, get in the truck.”

I walked around to the passenger side, where I had to push away empty tobacco pouches and Mountain Dew cans to clear a space on the seat. When I was settled in the seat he asked, “You okay?”

Am I okay now? “Am I okay now? Why do you want to know?”

There was a chaw of tobacco puffing beneath the man’s cheek, and it pulsed as he considered my question. “Your Mama wants to know. She sent me to find out.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

The man worked the chaw and took a pained look out at the street. “Franklin, I’m Walt. I’m your uncle.”

The truth is that I knew the man was my Uncle Walt. I did not ask because I needed to know who he was, but because I wanted to hear how he would answer the question. I was not surprised he answered honestly. He is often honest about small details. It’s a technique he uses to build trust.

“What are you going to tell her?” I asked.

“What should I tell her, Franklin? You want me to tell her the truth?”

I felt hot, and I rolled my window down and hung my arm over the door the same way Uncle Walt was doing.

“I don’t think she should be upset,” I answered. “You know how she gets.”

There was an empty Mountain Dew bottle tucked between Uncle Walt’s legs that he lifted up and spat tobacco juice into it before he replied. “I know how you get, too. And she’s upset enough that she talked me into driving to this nuthouse they call a city.”

Uncle Walt was making me feel guilty, and that seemed manipulative.

I said, “This is where I belong.”

Uncle Walt cocked an eyebrow and looked over at me. “You believe that?”

I looked down at an empty tobacco pouch in the floorboard. There was a Native American wearing a headdress on the package, and something like a green sun shining from behind his head. “What do I need to do so that she’ll leave you alone?”

“Answer the damn telephone for starters.”

“I’m out of practice.”

“Out of practice what? Of picking up the phone and saying ‘hello?’ Don’t play with me Franklin. I didn’t drive up into this madhouse to play games with you, son.” Uncle Walt turned the ignition and revved the gas.

“Where are you going?”

“*We’re* going home,” he said, and he dropped the transmission into gear.

“Stop! Uncle Walt, wait. Stop for a second.”

“You stop,” he said.

“I will. I will. Just give me a second.”

“You going to act like you been put out to pasture?”

I said, “No. I’m going to answer the phone, Uncle Walt.”

“Ain’t no answering you can do right now. You going to go inside and call her, that’s what you going to do.”

“Yes sir. I’ll call her at work.”

“And then you’re going to walk back down here and tell me about it?”

“Yes sir.”

Uncle Walt killed the engine and gave me wicked eye. “Don’t make me sit out here all damn day, Franklin.”

That was two days ago. I came up to the apartment, and I’ve been sitting by this window since then.

I can’t get down. I mean, I can get down, but I can’t move. I can’t go out, and I can’t sleep. I can’t think of any way I can feel less alone. No matter how much I sit here and think. I think about all the stories that are behind the stories, and it’s like a circus tilt-a-whirl I can’t get off. Spin around and you’ll see a whole different story of *The City Too Busy to Hate* than the one you’re told. I know you will. Just because there isn’t a full-color headline in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* doesn’t mean there’s not a new destruction coming, this time by flood. And I don’t need WSB-TV to tell me that Wayne Williams will return, just like I don’t need Caller ID to tell me who it is on the line time my telephone does not ring. And if you’ll listen when I answer I’ll say: there’s something I want to tell you.

The Suffering of Others

When I was younger I was haunted by a loneliness I thought would consume me. Each night, when I lay down in bed, I could not sleep because I was terrorized by the feeling that I had not lived the day that had just past, and when I finally did sleep, it was difficult to pull myself out of bed each morning because I was oppressed by the notion that the day ahead of me would again be filled with nothing. When I finally made it out of bed, the loneliness followed around me like an aura, and for years I couldn't penetrate it, so I was separated from everyone I was close to.

Perhaps these feelings were just the melodrama of growing up. I have always seen the world as a collection of dramatic stories colliding with one another, each person their own narrative, and each narrative reconfigured by everyone that person met. No one sees the world as it really is, I think, because there is no way that it *really* is, there are just stories that are generally agreed upon. These days I find this to be a useful perspective because when a programmer doesn't want to buy a documentary I have produced I console myself by believing another programmer will be completely taken with that same film. It helps me deal with the initial disappointment, and it always proves true that I eventually find a venue for the film (though this last one about the Cherokee alphabet was very stressful for me). But when I was growing up, especially during high school and the decade immediately after high school, failing to configure my stories in a helpful way brought me a great deal of loneliness, and a

great amount of suffering. I do not blame my mother for this, but only because I understand how much she herself has suffered, and I do believe that if I am ever to completely escape from the melodrama of my imagination, I need my mother to explain my father's life to me, in very plain terms, and before it's too late.

I don't know much about my father. I only know that my father was a very handsome man. When I was a teenager it was rare for a day to pass that someone did not point out how much I had grown to resemble him. Men who had known my father would say this, especially if some months had passed when they hadn't seen me. "Every time I see you," they would shake their heads and say, "you look more and more like your daddy."

I never knew how to respond. It didn't make me feel one way or another. But almost as often as I would hear this from men I knew well, I would hear it from women I barely knew, and they would say it in a way that made me feel quite uncomfortable, as if they expected a certain kind of response I wasn't prepared to give.

Once when we were on our way home, Mama stopped at a convenience store near our house for milk. She gave me two dollars and a dime and said, "Go on in if you don't want dry cereal for breakfast tomorrow."

When I got to the counter with the milk the woman working the register looked at me like she knew something I didn't. At first I thought maybe I had forgotten to give her money, but when she said, "You some kin to Jimmy Mitchem?" I knew that wasn't it.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "He's my father."

She was a black woman, heavy set, and she wore more gold rings than she had fingers to put them on. When she heard my answer she smiled mischievously, and her eyes, which were circled with lavender eyeliner, nearly closed shut. I didn't know what to say.

I could barely see her eyes, but they seemed to be searching my face for something, though I couldn't imagine what that might be. She was silent, searching me this way for a moment, and then she said, "You didn't have to tell me that. I would've bet my car note you was his son if I could've found somebody fool enough to go against me. Where's he at these days?"

I told her I wasn't exactly sure, which was true, and then I thanked her, though I wasn't sure if thanking her was what I was appropriate. It wasn't strange for women to act this way, but most of them knew better than to ask me where my father was. If Donna England, whose husband owned the hardware store in town, met me alone in an aisle of the Bell's Grocery, she would put her hand on the back of my neck and speak to me. Donna was thin as a hand rail, and she tanned too much, but she was still pretty, and she'd say, "Franklin, I have a set of twin nephews that don't look so much alike as you and your daddy. I've never seen blue eyes paired with hair so dark and curly on two men in my life. And I'm older than you think I am." Still, Donna knew better than to ask me where my father might be.

Perhaps a more clever young man could have made use of all this unearned familiarity, but growing up I was never any good with girls. That aura of loneliness was around me, and it clouded my mind with so many thoughts that conversation was very difficult for me. I could never find the right questions to start a conversation, and

if a girl ever started a conversation with me I couldn't come up with responses sharp enough to keep it going.

It wasn't as though I was oblivious. Like any boy in high school, crushes would sprout inside of me, but when the opportunity came for me to speak up, instead of blossoming with words my mouth would close up like a nightshade at dawn. The feelings I had always stayed shut up inside of me.

The girl I secretly desired when I began high school was Amanda Hawkins. Amanda had hair as dark as mine and eyes the same rich shade of blue, but she had lighter skin and high cheekbones that plunged down to a pinched mouth, the corners of which squeezed tight when she concentrated. She wore her hair permed like girls did back then, and she kept it short enough so that I could see the bottom half of her neck when she leaned over her desk to take notes. She went to Marthasville Christian Academy through the eighth grade, so our freshman year at Adams County High was the first time I saw her. That year I saw her almost everyday, and I thought she was too beautiful to look at.

I wasn't interested just because she was beautiful. Amanda was quiet, and she seemed to pay attention in class, since the corners of her mouth were always tightening and loosening as she considered things seriously, and I came to believe that inside her mind there must be some thoughts that had been turned over like fertile soil, and that maybe her ideas were too valuable to just say out loud all the time the way some pretty girls in our school just seemed to say whatever was on their minds. In retrospect, I think I believed this gave us some sort of kinship, and in the narrative of my mind I contrived the belief that she felt the same way about me, though she

gave me no concrete reason on which to build that belief. Amanda and I had World History class together freshman year. It was a course that everybody had to take, and it was designed to give a basic history of the Western World over the span of the school year, but it was not until Columbus discovered the New World that I was sure she knew I existed.

It was just before the Thanksgiving break, with the *Santa Maria* anchored off San Salvador, that somehow, in my painful way, I opened up to Amanda. That morning I had a dentist appointment so I arrived to school late. There were two dentists in town, and one of them was Amanda's father, but Mama and I went to the other one. When I came to the World History classroom the door was closed and Amanda was standing beside it in the hallway reading a note. Maybe she had used some pretext to be excused so she could read the note undisturbed in the hallway. I don't know. But I immediately felt it was the sort of chance I might not have again all year, to meet her there with no one else around, and sometimes in life an opportunity presents itself so unexpectedly that you don't have time to talk yourself out of going for it. If I had time to think it through I certainly wouldn't have spoken to her. But I didn't think. I just blurted something foolish that had been in my mind for the last two months.

"Amanda, do you know that when you read you look just like Vivian Leigh?"

At fourteen years old I could've brainstormed all year and not come up with a heavier compliment than that, and I really believed it to be true, but Amanda didn't seem to appreciate it. She just folded the note into a triangle, slid it into her pocket

and said, “That must be another girl who doesn’t give a flip who you think she looks like.” Then she plucked the door open and returned to class.

If my dentist had sewn my lips together I wouldn’t have been any less likely to say something back to her, and as I stood there alone in the hallway the taste of fluoride lingering in my mouth seemed to become a gas that clouded around me. My stomach began twisting, and suddenly it became difficult for me to breath. I thought I was going to get sick right there in the hallway, so I went to the bathroom and rinsed my mouth out over and over. Twenty minutes passed before I was calm enough to follow Amanda into the classroom.

The town I grew up in is a suburb of Atlanta now but it wasn’t when I lived there. It was too small and too far out. The Christian School only ran through eight grade, so there was only one high school in the whole county at that time. Adams County High was in Marthasville, the town where I lived. Before Atlanta sucked Marthasville in, most of the families were at least acquainted with one another, which sat better with some folks than others. Some people said it was the ideal small town to raise a family in, and others said it was like living in a fishbowl, and the only people in Marthasville who knew how to keep a secret were buried in the town’s Confederate cemetery.

My mother and I lived in the northwestern corner of Marthasville in a two-bedroom Craftsman that crowded the street but had a large backyard. Our nearest neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Fenton, had a gorgeously refurbished Georgian home that

dwarfed ours and sat a respectable distance from the street. Mama rented our house from the Fentons, and Mama said they were “oak wood” kind of people.

Mama was the secretary for the payroll manager at the lumber mill and she always seemed to be stressed about something, usually money. She had two ways of relieving stress: she smoked and she gardened. Tomorrow I’ll pick Mama up at Emory Hospital and take her home for hospice care. She has lung cancer, and the oncologist says there is nothing to do at this point but to try and ease her suffering. Mama wants to die in her own home, the house she raised me in, and where she used to garden every evening. When I was growing up her flowerbeds overflowed with blooms ten months out of every year, and she kept the lawn squarely trimmed and free of dandelions and clover. As far as I knew, Mama’s reputation around town was that of a master gardener.

Our home faced south, and my room was at the back corner of the house on the Fentons’ side. Just outside of my window grew a peach tree and a fig tree. They flourished there in the backyard, each of them putting out so much fruit every spring that you would have thought they were trying to feed the hungry. But growing up I didn’t think of the trees as so kind. Allergies bothered me when the trees bloomed, so I didn’t appreciate them at all, I never opened my windows in the spring. But Mama loved for the trees, and she always gathered the fallen fruit before it spoiled on the ground.

Behind the fruit trees there was a stretch of centipede grass, and past the lawn my kept a vegetable garden. In the summer there were tomatoes, yellow squash and zucchini, bell peppers, okra and sometimes eggplant. In fall, Mama grew spinach,

arugula, broccoli and hard squash. Every season she had plenty to share with our neighbors, and Mrs. Fenton said over and over again that Mama could cut a graft from a rotten fencepost and grow a whole new fence. When I was very young Mama kept a strawberry patch the size of a picnic blanket in a corner of the vegetable garden, and she could make the most delicious ice cream with those strawberries. But she let the patch go after a few years. Mama claimed that strawberries drew snakes, and there wasn't much in the world that Mama hated more than a snake.

Mama worried about a lot of things, not just money. She drove so cautiously that every time we went shopping in Athens the drivers behind us would honk their horns. I was only allowed to watch television on weekends because she claimed TV people made you forget how to judge real people. She wouldn't allow me around my Uncle Walt much because she said she didn't trust him any more than she'd trust a cat, and she didn't want me to hear the language he used, even though I heard much worse at school. Mama always worried about me doing well in school.

She would say, "You want to spend the rest of your life in a house like this? In a town like this?" But she asked these questions in a way that made it clear that she didn't want me to answer. Mama made it clear that if I stayed in Marthasville she would consider it a failure. To avoid failure, according to Mama, I had to spend all of my energy earning good grades. There was no time for sports or clubs or girls. Especially girls.

She made a rule that I wouldn't be allowed to date or to talk to any girls on the telephone until I turned eighteen. I argued the rule didn't make any sense because I would graduate two weeks before my eighteenth birthday, but she only said, "Good.

Go to college in Atlanta and meet someone there. The last thing you want is a Marthasville girl.” It thought it was an odd thing to say because Mama was a Marthasville girl, but Mama never allowed me to make points like that when she had her mind made up about something.

Amanda Hawkins was in a small clique with two other girls, and they seemed to be the only people in school she ran with. I would watch them patrol the hallways shoulder-to-shoulder, and I thought it was kind of scary that they could talk to each other while looking straight ahead. It was like they knew people were watching them but were strangely unconcerned with it. So as best I could, I tried to do the same thing. I watched her, but when I felt her begin to look my way I would quickly look down at the carpet in the hallway, which was slick and dark from years of foot traffic. When Amanda did catch me looking her way I tried to make it seem like it was only an accident that I was looking her way, and that what I was really doing was thinking about something distant and important, and I would make a serious and uninviting face, and she in turn would just give one cold glance and then look away at something more important, like one of wooden intercom speakers or a bank of lockers painted our school colors, cream and crimson. That happened every time our eyes met, and all through high school I felt I was less important than the furniture.

Our school was too small to have many clubs but we were big enough to have several bullies. The most vicious bully in school was Alfonso Atwater. Alfonso was from a scattered family of convicts, and on the days he came to school he wore a

stopwatch around his neck like an amulet, “Just so,” as he seemed so fond of saying, “All y’all little punk motherfuckers’ll know what time it is when I step through the door.”

Nearly as bad as Alfonso Atwater was a giant golden-haired redneck named Ryan Taylor, who was in his second go-round at the ninth grade. During my first week of high school I met Ryan in the gymnasium bathroom and he immediately punched me in my chest and knocked me down to the tile floor. The floor was filthy and sticky, so I’m not sure why it smelled so strongly of cleaning solution, but even now I can remember my nostrils stinging with the scent of disinfectant as I lay on that floor looking up at Ryan.

I remember asking him why he had hit me. He just looked down at me very casually, wiped his hands on his stonewashed jeans, and said, “It ain’t no towels in the machine.”

His answer didn’t make any sense, but I realized that if I asked Ryan any more questions the answers would only make less and less sense, so I remained there on the floor with my mouth shut until he left the bathroom.

Ryan was in World History class with Amanda and me, and he once said of Mr. Norton, our teacher, “That old dick-nosed windbag tells the truth about as often as he turns down a jelly donut.” A couple of us waiting for class to begin had to nod in agreement.

But I didn’t agree. Sure, Mr. Norton probably stretched his stories, and maybe some of them were completely made up, but he gave his stories such strange details, and he made them so delightful to listen to, that I felt there must be some kind of truth

in them, even if it wasn't the first kind of truth you usually think of. And more than that, he really seemed to care about his stories. He described history as if he had been there for all of it, and it had impacted him in some meaningful way. I remember him telling us how Scipio defeated Hannibal's army by forcing the Carthaginians to fight on a mountain pass in North Africa, equalizing their larger numbers and turning the trained war elephants into a liability rather than an asset. Mr. Norton raised his shoulders and tucked his elbows in at his sides as he talked about the narrowness of the pass, and I remember he clapped his hands together to a slow beat as he went on about the Romans taking down Hannibal's troops one by one. I can't remember how he made that relevant to my life, but he must have pulled it off somehow because it's always stuck with me like a memory of someone important to me.

Mr. Norton was from the Lowlands of South Carolina, and he spoke with a funny accent, so that when he said "house" it rhymed with "loose" and when he said "about" it sounded like "a-boot." Mr. Norton ran his fingers through his wispy white hair when he told stories or when he got angry, causing it to stand straight up, and by the end of each school day his hair nearly reached the top of the classroom doorway. He was a very large man, and he had a huge belly that hung over his belt buckle, and he wore loud neckties with white shirts but never a blazer. Because of his size and his passion, he could be intimidating when he was angry.

Mr. Norton was angry as a rattlesnake the day the class was supposed to discuss the book he'd assigned, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. When he asked, "What bothered Anne most about her sister?" or "What did Anne's father do for a

living?” nobody had an answer. We all just stared down at the sepia silhouettes of the Frank family on the covers of our books.

When we did look up it was because Mr. Norton was screaming and waving his arms. “Do I look like an old fool? Is that it? A fat old fool? Let me tell you, there *are* some fools in this room, but I promise you I’m not one of them. If you all spent as much time reading as you did passing notes back-and-forth, maybe you wouldn’t be so ignorant a-boot the world around you. Six million Jews died in the Holocaust. Six million. Seized from their homes, stuffed naked in cages, then slaughtered by a whole nation of immoral bastards who didn’t have the nerve to look in a mirror when they went looking for somebody to blame. Children younger than you and twice as smart crying out for their parents, who were either dead or something worse. And you know why it happened? Ignorance.”

By then Mr. Norton’s face had turned the same shade of crimson that some of our lockers were painted, and spittle was flying from his mouth. His arms whipped through the air and mussed up his hair. He was livid. I had never seen him so ruthlessly angry, and I felt like a traitor for not reading past the first five pages of the book.

“Ignorance breeds evil. And you didn’t have an assignment. You had an opportunity to be a smarter person, a less-ignorant person, a better person. Peace doesn’t come from ignorance. Not true peace. True peace comes when you maintain a vigilant awareness for the suffering of others. Every last one of you blew it. You didn’t get any kind of awareness. You don’t care! You’re not students! You’re a pack of fools!”

Mr. Norton put his arms akimbo, and I swear he glared right down at me specifically. I was ashamed, and I hid my face by looking down at my book. The photograph on the cover was of very poor quality, and the girl looked more like a ghost emerging from a shadow than a human being. Suddenly, I was haunted by the feeling that she was emerging from the shadow to tell me something I ought to be afraid of, and for me not to have listened might not only be shameful, but also dangerous. She was staring up at me and Mr. Norton was staring down at me, and I was afraid.

And then a spot appeared on the book cover. Then there was another drop, and I realized I was crying. I don't know if I cried out of guilt or fear or for some other reason entirely, but I couldn't stop. Tears were streaming down my cheeks. All I could do was get out of the room as quickly as possible because if Ryan Taylor saw me crying I might as well start walking in any direction away from Adams County High and not stop till summer break.

It was the first of week of April when we came to the Holocaust, and Mama's fruit trees were blooming in full spring splendor. Their limbs were firm, but heavy with leaves that seemed to multiply by the week. The uppermost branches of the fig tree were streaked with lime-green buds that would darken to purple as they matured, and the peach tree was bearing its first taut fruits.

Every evening in the spring Mama would come home from the lumber mill and work overtime in the yard because there was so much growth to tame. Some

nights she would come inside, light a cigarette, and say that if she had a dime for every weed she had just pulled she'd buy a cement mixer and pave the whole damn yard.

I was also busy, reading *Diary of a Young Girl*. After his fit, Mr. Norton said he wanted to see if we were foolish enough to turn down a second shot at becoming a little less ignorant. He gave us two nights to read the book, and then there would be a test. On the first evening I was cutting through the book like something valuable was hidden in its pages, but when I came to the part where Anne finally begins to complain that the little room her family is sequestered in never gets enough sunrays, I was distracted by something moving fast in the yard. Through the bay window above our kitchen table I saw Mama sprinting towards the house. Something was wrong.

I ran out of the house, and when I made it to the front door I spotted Mama out near the mailbox, where there was a flowerbed of day lilies bordered with variegated leriopse. Mama was at the edge of the bed swinging a mattock over her shoulder so furiously that her feet lifted from the ground with every chop.

Between swings she yelled, "Snake! Snake!"

I ran as fast as I could, but by the time I reached the flowerbed Mama had already chopped the little snake into three segments. The segments curled reflexively on the pinestraw surface of the flowerbed. The snake was moving but dead. Mama had swung so hard that most of her light brown hair had fallen from her ponytail and she was panting deeply. Mama was always petite—I don't think she was five feet tall in bare feet—but she killed that snake in no more time than it took to bust a fig. But then, it was a very small snake.

If you had sewn those three segments back together again I don't think that snake would've been much longer than your hand, and it must've been young because its markings were nascent. Even if the markings had been evident I'm not sure if I would've known what kind of snake it was. I didn't know how to tell snakes apart, so I asked Mama, "what kind of snake is it?"

Mama tossed the mattock on the grass and said, "What do you mean?"

I didn't exactly grow up in the country, but I grew up far enough away from the city to have heard that there were good snakes and there were bad snakes, so I asked her which kind it was.

Even though she hadn't tracked down her breath, Mama lit a cigarette before she answered. She said, "No such thing. Only good snake's a dead snake."

I thought it was strange that Mama could remember the names of so many different varieties of flowers and shrubs, but wouldn't bother to tell one kind of snake from another. But I didn't want to push it any further because Mama could be harsh when she was questioned. I tried to lighten the moment by saying, "Then I guess it's a good one now."

Mama peered over the leriopie at the segments of the little snake and exhaled smoke that seemed to take the color of purple, maybe because it was getting near twilight. The segments had stopped moving. Mama bit the cigarette with her teeth as she corralled her loose hair and tightened her ponytail.

When she had captured all of her hair, she snatched the cigarette from her teeth and said, "Quit acting smart, Franklin, and go read your book."

The morning of the Anne Frank test I ate an egg and cheese biscuit for breakfast in the school cafeteria. My homeroom was in the Science Building, but when I started that way from the cafeteria I saw Alfonso Atwater on the path from the Science Building to the cafeteria. He was moving very slowly down the ramp, so slowly it seemed like he was just looking to meet someone. I decided to loop around the Administration Building to dodge him. This route took me by the drop-off circle, a part of campus I rarely saw in the mornings because I took the bus when I didn't walk to school.

As I made my way along the circle a black coupe approached the curb. It was so clean it beamed, and my reflection looked back at me from the door panel as it came to a stop. The reflection distracted me so much that I didn't notice who was in the car until the passenger door opened and Amanda Hawkins stepped out. I lost my breath. She wore a white peasant blouse and a long canary-colored skirt, and when she stepped up onto the curb she hoisted a dark green backpack onto her shoulders. She began walking beside me, step for step. Immediately it became hard for me to breathe. It was as if the air around me went bad, like it had the noxious smell of the dentist office. My stomach twisted. Months had passed since Amanda had been so curt with me in the hallway, and she hadn't so much as nodded at me since that day. As I walked alongside her I felt more acutely the awkwardness of being there and not there, like we were pretending we were each walking alone even though our bodies were arguing otherwise. I just didn't know what to do, so I did what I usually did when I past her in the hallway—I did my best to pretend I didn't notice her.

For about two-dozen long steps she walked beside me, close enough that our elbows nearly touched, and I had almost begun to calm down when it came time to veer off toward the Science Building. I knew I couldn't speak to her, and as much as I wanted to walk alongside her to wherever she might be going, I knew that would only seem creepy. No, we would each continue to pretend we were there and not there. At least, that's what I was thought until Amanda spoke.

She said, "You were crying when you left class the other day."

I couldn't believe it. She had seen me crying. It was a disaster. It was the worst thing that could have happened. All I could think to do was lie. I said I certainly had not been crying.

"Yes you were," she said, "And I hope it means you read the book this time."

"No I wasn't." I insisted I wasn't crying, but the noxious taste started plunging down my throat and my stomach felt so weak that I could barely speak. I only managed to mumble my lie so feebly that I was afraid I might start crying again.

Then Amanda said, "Last night I cried too. The first time when I came to the shopping list, and then pretty much everything after that. I stayed up until three in the morning reading. Reading and crying. I'm sure I look like a nightmare today. Do you remember the part where Anne made the shopping list?"

I said, "I think so."

"Could you believe the things she was just *dreaming* of buying? Wasn't it the saddest thing you've ever seen, Franklin Mitchem?"

Somehow I was both disturbed and comforted that Amanda had called me by my full name. “Franklin Mitchem,” right out of that pretty, pinched mouth. I told her I remembered the list but I didn’t remember exactly what was on it.

“Don’t be silly. You have to remember—“ then, Amanda interrupted herself, and made a little turn, which slid her backpack down into the crook of her elbow. A strap pulled at her blouse and revealed her bare shoulder, but she pushed the blouse back up on her shoulder as naturally as she often flipped her hair from her face during class. Then she pulled the book from her backpack and flipped straight to one of the dog-eared pages. There was the shopping list. Amanda pressed her shoulder to mine and told me to read it again:

3 cotton undershirts @ 0.50 = 1.50
3 cotton underpants @ 0.50 = 1.50
3 wool undershirts @ 0.75 = 2.25
3 wool underpants @ 0.75 = 2.25
2 petticoats @ 0.50 = 1.00
2 bras (smallest size) @ 0.50 = 1.00
5 pajamas @ 1.00 = 5.00
1 summer robe @ 2.50 = 2.50

Amanda went so quiet it was like we were at a funeral. I read the list, and though I truly cared what the little girl wanted, it was hard to think of anything other than Amanda’s blouse touching my shirt, and her bare elbow touching my mine.

Finally, Amanda said, “I’d buy it all twice for her. Wouldn’t you?”

I nodded and Amanda leaned her head closer to mine. When her hair touched my shoulder I noticed it smelled like strawberries, which made me afraid she would smell my breath, which certainly smelled like the egg and cheese biscuit I had just eaten.

“You’re shy,” she said.

I nodded again, and she said, “I am too. Sometimes it’s easier to talk on the phone.”

The phone line at Amanda’s house had Call Waiting, a feature that the phone at my house didn’t have. That was 1992. It seems quaint now, but at the time I had never heard of Call Waiting, and Amanda had to explain it to me. If she was using the phone at her house and another line called in, the phones in the house would not ring. Only she would hear the beep in the receiver, and she could click the line over without her parents knowing.

Another thing that seems quaint to remember now is that the Marthasville Farmers & Trust Bank had what they called an EST service. There was a number you could call at the bank where a computerized voice would give you the Eastern Standard Time at the sound of a tone. Amanda and I synchronized our watches that day at school, and Amanda said she would call the bank number at midnight. I was to call her house eight seconds later, and she would click over to my call.

My room had two windows. There was the window that looked through the fruit trees to the backyard, and another window that looked toward the Fenton’s place. By midnight the only light that washed into my room was from the security light between our house and the Fenton’s. I kept the blinds closed on the security-light side but I let the moonlight from the backyard in through that other window. It was never too bright in the springtime because the trees were flush with leaves that

blocked much of the moonlight. So it remained dark in my room when I lay in bed unable to sleep, even after my eyes adjusted to the darkness. There was a green light that shone from the phone when I was on the line with Amanda.

Amanda had a curious way of bopping around topics when she was in a conversation, and while she was in the middle of telling me that she wasn't as close with the two girls she walked the halls with at school as everyone supposed she was, she interrupted herself and asked, "You don't believe Mr. Norton's stories, do you?"

I only confessed that I liked hearing them, and asked, "You don't?"

"They make me feel a certain way," she said, "When I pay attention to them."

I asked her, "How did he make you feel that day he told us we were supposed to always think about how other people might be suffering?"

She said, "Strange. Like I was being manipulated by a good person. It makes you feel two ways at once. Is your mother as strict as it seems?"

I said, "No." It was a lie, but I was embarrassed by the truth.

"She has some funny ideas about who you can and can't talk on the phone with for not being all that strict."

I said, "Talking on the phone with girls is a waste of time. I have to stay focused on school if I'm going to go get out of Marthasville." I realized, as I said this, that it was not necessarily how I felt. It was my voice but Mama's words.

"Who put you in such a hurry to leave Marthasville?"

Though I found talking on the phone to be much easier than talking in person, that wasn't an easy question either way. I thought for a minute and said, "Because people run their mouths here." That was another thing I had heard Mama say.

Amanda didn't seem to relate. "People run their mouths everywhere. There are places that are much worse to grow up than Marthasville."

"How would you know?" I asked. "You don't know what it feels like to not have friends at school. To feel alone even when the halls are crowded, like all the people who are there are also not there. You wouldn't walk to tall."

Amanda said, "Stop being silly. You're just saying that because people don't like it that you and your mother are stuck up. People would like you if you would let them."

"That's what people in Marthasville do," I said, "Talk about you behind your back." It upset me hear Amanda talk that way about Mama. Even though it is something I had thought myself, I didn't want to hear Amanda say it.

"People only say your mother is a crow who thinks she has white feathers. And you walk around school like you're too good-looking to talk with anyone. That's what girls at school say. They might say it even if they had seen you crying."

I said defiantly, "Who calls my mother a crow?" but truthfully, in that moment, I didn't care who said my mother was a crow. I just needed to put the conversation back on Amanda for a moment because she had given me more to think about than I could handle. If I understood her correctly—and maybe I didn't—but she seemed to say, in a roundabout way, that she thought I was good-looking. Though it was something I heard often from older women, when Amanda said it, if only by implication, it was like I was hearing it for the first time in my life. It was like I had just learned something about myself. It was a revelation, and suddenly I felt like I

needed to get out of bed. I stood up and leaned against the wall, beside the window to the backyard.

Amanda didn't answer right away. It was as if she was giving me time to wrap my head around everything she had said to me, or maybe she needed time, too. I shifted my body so that I could see out the window to the backyard, and eventually Amanda answered. "People say it. But you wouldn't let that bother you, would you?"

The moon was low, but nearly full. The limbs of the peach tree were lit from behind, so they appeared even blacker than the night sky. The leaves were the shapes of half-moons, and though they bunched along the limbs like a flock of migrating birds, there was no breeze to give them life. They were still, and the longer I looked through the window, and through the branches, the more I could see of the backyard. I couldn't make myself get back in bed.

I said, "I told you that I thought you looked like Vivian Leigh."

"I know," she said.

"But you didn't care," I said.

"I thought about it, but I didn't know what to say. I know she's famous, but I'm not sure why. I don't know famous people sometimes. What does that mean to you?"

The lawn looked blue in the moonlight, not blue like the sky or sea, but blue like the moon in the pictures of Neil Armstrong near the end of our World History textbook. Past the lawn, dirt clods covered the garden. They had been turned up by Mama's first till, and they made it seem like a bed of moon rocks stretched to the

fence. Amanda Hawkins had decided I was good-looking. It was strange, and I might as well have been on the moon myself.

“Maybe it doesn’t mean anything,” I said. “I just think Vivian Leigh was one of the most beautiful women in the world. But it doesn’t matter, I don’t think. Anytime someone tells you that you look like someone, it’s meant as a kind of compliment.”

Amanda thought for a moment, and then she said, “You can see it how you have to see it. People don’t always want you to give them compliments.” Then she changed the subject again. “Yes. I like Mr. Norton’s stories. Even if he talks about suffering too much. It’s not too much trouble to feel two things at once sometimes.”

Amanda and I stayed on the line for hours that night, as we did many nights the final six weeks of our first year of high school, and a bond formed between us so effortlessly it was as if it had been there all along just waiting to be summoned.

During those calls I felt we were each completely there, even though we were removed by distance. We shared so many secrets about ourselves that I felt we were really seeing each other, and it was the first time I had ever felt that closeness.

Amanda confessed she was painfully shy, but she knew how to talk through it when she needed to cover it up. I learned that Amanda’s mother did not really get along so well with the mothers of the two girls I always saw Amanda walking with.

Eventually, Amanda told me a secret no one else at school knew, that her father wasn’t really her father. She had never met her biological father, and she said she was fine with that because her “Daddy” was a father enough. Her mother promised her

that, and her Daddy made her believe it. He was a good man, and he made her know she was loved.

I was also pleased to discover that we shared a favorite meal in Marthasville: chicken salad sandwiches on toasted rye bread from Harper's Drug Store. We promised that somehow we would meet each other at Harper's one day during summer break, and that none of our parents would know about us meeting.

Almost every night for the rest of the school year Amanda and I talked, but for the most part, those conversations were a world unto themselves. The day after that first phone call Mr. Norton began class by saying, "Please don't tell me you all don't know what happened to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki." The class let him know that we had heard of those cities and what had happened to them, but we could not answer the same when he asked, "Then I suppose you also know about the fire-bombing of Tokyo?"

My attention was on Amanda, but she wouldn't look in my direction. I didn't understand why and I don't know what I would have done if she had looked back, but that didn't stop me from wanting her to do it. But no matter how much I wanted it, she only pinched her lips, seeming to focus on the lesson about Tokyo and the end of World War II. When class ended I timed it so that she and I walked out the door at the same time, and I asked her if she felt sleepy. She shot a look at me like I had said something nasty. Then she turned her head, and she began to peel away from me in the hallway. My stomach began to knot. But just when I thought she was going to leave without speaking, Amanda glanced back and asked, "Eight seconds after midnight?"

Sharing so much with Amanda made me feel a kind of joy I had never felt before, but looking back on it now, what I believe was really happening as our secrets unfolded in the darkness of our own bedrooms, was that we were learning that neither of us were as alone as we had feared. It was a bond that even in my naivety I felt, or I knew, would last a lifetime, and though I was afraid to say so at the time, I could think of nothing more specific to call it than love.

Over the last twenty-five years it's become only a little clearer what kind of love it is. Amanda called me tonight, because she and her husband had another screamer. She said it started when she asked if he couldn't move his bass boat out of the front yard, but after he answered, "If I'd thought I could sell it out the back yard don't you think I would've tried that first?" It spun out of control and soon he was calling every member of Amanda's church a hypocrite and was threatening to separate the checking account again and. He makes that threat at least once a month. I told her when he bought the thing last May that I never knew anyone who had a bass boat that wasn't trying to sell it after one summer, but I doubt she ever brought that up to him. To tell the truth, I hope she didn't bring it up, because I don't want to be in the middle of it, and because I'm pretty sure that what they were really arguing about was something even harder to get rid of than a bass boat.

By the time Amanda and I hung up she had had a good cry, and she had asked if Mama was doing any better. I told her Mama wasn't doing any worse, which was not true, but if I had told Amanda that the oncologist had sent Mama home for hospice care she would've been upset with herself for unloading her burdens on me

on the night I knew for certain Mama wasn't going to make it, and then she would have just started crying all over again. It wouldn't have helped anything.

Though they've both spent their whole lives in Marthasville, Mama, as far as I know, has never even coughed in Amanda's direction. Amanda and I reconnected twelve years ago, when I finally finished college and her first son was born, but I haven't ever talked Mama about my friendship with Amanda. I don't think there's not much time left now. Mama has the force of will to hang out for a while, but I don't know that she wants to. The angry love that seemed to drive her, and that seemed to compel her to push me away from Marthasville and into another life, has gone. Now, when I bathe her and feed her and change her pillows, she is totally complaisant, not fussy like the head nurse told me some terminally ill patients can be. It is as if she finally trusts me to know what is best for us.

For so many years she would not grant me that trust. I lost more sleep than usual because of my late-night conversations with Amanda, and Mama grew suspicious. This went on from April until the end of the school year, and one evening, three days before the last day of school, Mama slammed my Geometry textbook on the table right next to my face. I snapped awake, and out of reflex I stood up. Before I could get my bearings, Mama grabbed my shirt collar and said, "Sit down now and look up at me."

That's when I realized I had fallen asleep, and Mama was furious about it.

I sat down. I had been doing graphing exercises at the kitchen table in preparation for my final exam in Geometry class, and I had fallen asleep on the blue

gridded graphing paper. Mama stared me down as I sat, and I smoothed the graph paper which had creases where my face had been.

I remember she Mama wearing one of my old tee shirts. It was ash gray and had stains the color of rust. Mama smelled of ammonium nitrate fertilizer. She had just come in from her garden where she was getting ready for summer planting.

“Tell me where you go at night.”

Her order shocked me even more than her slamming my Geometry book had shocked me. “Tell you where I go?”

“Don’t mock me,” she snapped. “Tell me where you go.”

I didn’t know exactly what she meant. I mean, I understood the question, but it had never occurred to me to go anywhere while Mama was sleeping. Where would I go? Was it possible for me to get out of the house without waking her? And could I get back in? I had never considered it.

Mama kept at me. “One of us has to pay the Fentons. One of us has to earn a damn check, and that means one of us has to sleep at night. I can’t watch you every second of every damn day. You know what it means when a teenage boy can’t stay awake when the sun’s up, just like I do. Come off your lie.”

I pleaded with her. “I don’t go anywhere, Mama. Where would I go? Sometimes I just can’t sleep. I’ve always had trouble sleeping. You know that.”

Mama didn’t believe me. She glared down at me, and she let the silence fester until I felt so uncomfortable I couldn’t stand it, and I looked down at the few slopes I had graphed. That’s when she said, “Your father couldn’t lie to me neither. He

thought he could, but he would always look away from me when he lied, same as you.”

There was nothing I could say. I had looked down. And though it wasn't the lie she had in mind, I had lied. She was scowling so hard at me that I thought she was going to hit me. What else could I do but look down?

But a long silence passed, and Mama didn't hit me. She just said, “Change clothes. We've got to water the whole damn garden in. Radio said it was going to rain at five o'clock, so I came home and fertilized. Now it ain't raining, and all the soil is going to burn up if it doesn't get watered in.

As midnight approached I felt afraid to call Amanda, but I couldn't keep myself from dialing. Our phone conversations had become the most important part of my day, the time of day I felt less alone than any other. In our strange friendship I had become comfortable enough to share almost any secret with Amanda, and almost any desire. Except, of course, my desire for her.

That night, in a soft voice, I told her about my mother's suspicions.

“If you hear your mother outside your door,” Amanda said, “Just hang up the phone. Don't say anything to me. I'll know what's going on.”

Mama was lucky Amanda wasn't her daughter because they would've been at each other's backs constantly. I don't know where Amanda got her cunningness, but she could draw up a scheme faster than Mama could jerk a spring onion out of wet topsoil, and not feel a quiver of guilt about it.

It even seemed like a trick when Amanda said to me, “I wish you would explain to me why your mother hates you, just so you could hear it from yourself.”

I told Amanda that was ridiculous. “Mama doesn’t hate me. Mama doesn’t hate anyone. Probably never has.”

“You think *I’m* ridiculous?” She asked.

“Except my father,” I added. “Maybe part of her hates my father.”

“*That’s* ridiculous, Franklin,” Amanda began to say, “If she hated your father she wouldn’t have—“ but I interrupted her because it didn’t sit well with me that she was telling me about my own family.

I said, “She never speaks to him. He’s not really worth knowing.” If I needed to talk about Mama, I just wanted Amanda to listen. I didn’t want her to have an opinion.

But when Amanda got going she had plenty of opinions. She said, “You don’t know your father. You just know what your mother tells you. That’s not knowing him.”

I said, “I knew him. He lived here until 1983. He moved to Marthasville with his mother and stepfather when he was in high school, and stayed here until I was five years old. So he was here in Marthasville for nine years, and I knew him for four.”

“And what do you remember?” Amanda asked. “What do you remember for yourself? Not, ‘What did she tell you that you think you remember?’ What could you really remember from that long ago?”

Amanda’s patronizing tone made me wish I had a quick answer, but I didn’t. Truthfully, I rarely thought of my father, and I had very few memories of him. The only concrete idea I had was that I was beginning to look very much like him. But that’s all I had, an impression, not a memory. I didn’t even have a photograph of him.

The closest I could come to seeing him was to look in a mirror. Whatever it was that made people remember him, and whatever it was that made people think of him ten years after he had left town, wasn't something they discussed with me.

There was only one clear memory I had, and in what felt like an act of self-defense, I began describing that memory to Amanda.

“He delivered orange juice. He drove a commercial truck and he delivered orange juice and other fruit juices. He would drive into a warehouse near Atlanta every morning. He would pick up his truck then he would deliver the juice to grocery stores around the east side of the city. I rode in it once.”

“You rode in the delivery truck?”

“Yeah, and I got to go in the back of the truck, too. It was cold, but we weren't back there for very long at a time, and I liked it. It felt fresh. It was a long hot day, in the middle of the summer, and at the end of the day we took home three plastic crates. It was three of the plastic crates that he had delivered cartons of the juice in. I had the crates for years after he was gone. I built forts with them in the yard behind the house, and I pretended I was a guerilla soldier fighting in Nicaragua. That was when the Nicaraguan War was in the news ever night.”

Amanda didn't say anything at first, like she was letting a silence pass in case I remembered anything else, and when she finally spoke, she spoke with a very soft tone. She asked, “Does your Mama know you helped deliver orange juice that day?”

I said, “She did. She said it was probably the only day that any damn juice really got delivered.”

Amanda laughed, and so did I. Her laugh, at the right time, could make me feel so comfortable. After opening up that memory to her, I felt welcome to ask her something personal.

“Amanda,” I said, “What was that note you were reading?”

“Which note?”

“The day in November, the I spoke to you in the hall. You were reading a note when I tried to start a conversation with you. You never told me who it was from.”

I was so accustomed to talking with Amanda on the phone that I felt I could sense when she was smiling, and though it took her a moment, when she realized which note I was talking about I could feel her smiling through the phone line.

She answered, “I didn’t tell you then, and I’m not going to tell you now either.”

I told her *that* was ridiculous. “I tell you secrets nobody else in Marthasville knows. I just told you things about my father I wasn’t even sure I knew until I started talking.”

“You don’t tell me everything,” she said. “I know you don’t. And you might believe I tell you everything, but that’s not the way it is.”

“But I want to know this,” I said. “If I have to remember that day, I want to remember it for what it really was, not how it made me feel.”

This must have meant something to Amanda because she gave in. But first, she made me swear that I’d rather give up Harper’s sandwiches for life than repeat it. I thought it was silly, but sometimes it feels good to be silly with someone you love.

“Ryan Taylor,” she said.

“Ryan Taylor,” I repeated back to her, loudly. I didn’t mean to raise my voice. It was just that his name was the last name I expected to hear.

The line was quiet. I lowered my voice. “The note was about Ryan Taylor?”

Sternly, Amanda said, “No. It wasn’t about Ryan Taylor, it was from Ryan Taylor, and you need to calm down.”

“Why would you read a note from Ryan Taylor? And why keep that a secret? You should’ve trashed it in front of his face. That’s what he deserves.”

“You can’t repeat it, Franklin. You swore. And it would hurt his feelings.”

I said, “Ryan Taylor doesn’t have feelings, Amanda.”

She said, “That’s a nasty thing to say. Feelings might be all Ryan Taylor has, and you act like you’re totally oblivious—“

But I wouldn’t let her finish. “Amanda, you act like Ryan Taylor doesn’t take cuts at people every chance he gets. You’re not a guy. He’ll hit anybody he thinks will take it, and he’s dumb as a tire jack. I want to know how long this note was because it may have been the most writing he’s ever done, and he probably pulled a muscle trying to finish it.”

Amanda raised her voice to match mine. “Franklin, stop it. He’s trying to get out of high school just like you are. And you ought to know well enough how people can be.”

I could tell she was angry, but I was angry, too, and I started to tell her she was making herself look foolish by taking up for such a jerk, when, at that moment, the door to my room opened and the light switched on.

Light flooded in, and I could see that I could see Mama had a hairpin in her hand and a scowl on her face. I froze. She had picked my lock, and I was so distracted by Amanda defending Ryan Taylor that I hadn't heard her at the door. And Amanda didn't know Mama was in the room, so she kept defending Ryan, saying something that began, "Ryan said his father once..." I realized Mama was hearing Amanda's voice, and I hung up the phone.

The next day in World History class Mr. Norton played a documentary film for us. It was about an underground Rock n' Roll scene in East Germany around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and I thought it was a weird film. It was in German, and the only thing I remember clearly about it was a cheesy montage at the end with a guitar-heavy soundtrack and hot pink text that explained on the screen, which the subtitles translated as: "Men can build a wall...but they can't stop boys and girls from tearing it down!!!"

I could barely watch. Ask me right now to name the year the Berlin Wall fell and I'd have to look it up. There were two reasons I couldn't concentrate. The first is that Mama had done something very odd when she caught me on the phone, and I was feeling guilty as a thief. The second reason I couldn't pay attention to the film was that Amanda was absent from school, and that made me afraid that Mama had called Amanda's parents.

Mama yanked the phone connection out of my wall, and then she made me sit down at the kitchen table while she screamed in my face. She said I had lied to her

like she had never been lied to before, and that I was ungrateful for everything she had done for me. Then she commanded me to tell her the name of the girl I had been talking with.

When I refused to give her the name she slapped me twice. Then she opened a fresh pack of cigarettes and said she could stand at that table all night if she had to, so I might as well get it over with and give her the name.

I didn't want to tell Mama about Amanda because I wanted that part of my life to belong to nobody but Amanda and me. I thought that if Mama knew about our closeness then we could never be alone together. Mama would hate Amanda for no good reason, and I was scared Mama's hate couldn't ever be unwound.

But Mama said that if I wouldn't give her the name she would call the phone company, and I believed her. It was something she would do. The secret couldn't be kept. So instead of suffering the embarrassment of Mama finding out on her own, I banged my fist on the kitchen table and I looked Mama in the eye. With as much defiance as I could muster, I said, "Amanda Hawkins."

I braced myself for an interrogation, but it didn't come. Instead, it seemed—and I feel sure about this—it seemed that Mama was afraid. It didn't make sense to me at the time, but now that I look back on it, I'm sure Mama was afraid. Not even cancer made Mama go flush like that, and though I didn't know what to make of it at that time, instead of having to explain who Amanda was, I only had to listen to Mama say one thing.

She composed herself, and then searched hard for an awareness of something specific in my eyes, some extra lie. When she didn't find it, she said, "Nothing good

will ever come of a girl with a mother like that.” Then Mama lit another cigarette and sent me to bed. That was the first time I had a feeling, even a faint feeling, that it was all more complicated than I could have imagined.

Amanda was absent the next day, too, which was the last day of our freshman year. I didn’t know what Amanda’s parents were telling her, or what my mother might have said to them. I was afraid that things must have been very bad in the Hawkins’ home for Amanda to miss the last two days of the school year.

Things were certainly bad at my home. The only phone left in our house was locked in Mama’s room. I was forbidden to use that phone, or any other phone, until September. Mama had grounded me for the summer. I would have chores to do everyday, and I was going to have to clear it with her before I went anywhere.

But as soon as summer began it was clear to me that I couldn’t take that. I had to see Amanda.

On the first day of summer vacation, a Friday, Mama left a list of chores as long as my arm for me when she went to work. I didn’t do any of them. I was too upset. I decided that no matter what my punishment might be I would walk to Amanda’s house while Mama was at work. I was completely sick of not knowing what was happening.

In a way, I’ve been sick of not-knowing my whole life, but for those three days it was more acute than it had ever been before, or than it has ever been since. It’s only here lately that it has all felt so painful again. The oncologist talked with me about how the next few weeks—or days, maybe—will go. She says that soon after we leave the hospital the pain will take over Mama’s thoughts, and she will be even less

alert than she has been lately. The oncologist showed me how to orally administer Mama's liquid morphine because I will have to give it to Mama when the hospice nurse isn't there. She also said that if there are things Mama and I need to say to each other before she passes we should say them very soon because in a few days it will be important to focus solely on managing Mama's pain. She is suffering now.

That night, the night before the last day of school, Mama called Mrs. Hawkins and told her that Amanda and I were staying up late and talking on the phone. The next morning, Amanda's parents told her the secret that they knew, and that Mama knew, that Amanda and I have the same father, Jimmy Mitchem. Years past before Amanda finally told me, and those were difficult years. But for me, finding out that Amanda was my half-sister didn't just answer a question for me, it also presented me with other questions. Why would my Mama keep it from me? Why couldn't she ever be honest with me? Why wouldn't she let Amanda be my sister? But all this time I have played Mama's desperate game. I've pretended that I don't know I have a sister, even though pretending has made me feel like Mama had some kind of hatred for an important part of me.

I think I know the answer to the question: Is it for my sake or Mama's that I want to talk to her about Amanda? but I don't know if that answer can keep me from doing it. I've even told myself that maybe deep down Mama wants me to bring it up, even though she is suffering. But I don't know that for sure. Since that night, I've never once mentioned Amanda's name to Mama, and I've never spoken of Amanda's parents. But it hurts me to keep silent about it, maybe even as much as it would hurt Mama to explain herself to me.

That's why those few days feel so important all over again. This is my last chance to ask Mama why she would never let me be a brother to my sister. That's why I have been thinking of Amanda, and my father, and of Mr. Norton's lesson. I need to decide if my need to know outweighs Mama's need to pretend.

I don't know what I will do. I don't know now, just like I didn't know so much back then. I only knew I that had to see Amanda.

If you left walking from our house through a wooded area behind the Fenton's place there was a shortcut into town through the back end of the Marthasville Cemetery. I took this path, which first let through the old Confederate cemetery, then through the modern plots, and then into downtown from the west where the expensive Antebellum homes loomed behind boxwoods and magnolias. I past the Baptist and Methodist churches and then through the heart of town where the post office faced the courthouse before I entered Poplar Ridge, our town's first, and at that time only subdivision.

Amanda's family lived there in a split-level brick home that our house could have fit into three times. The brick was dark but the trim work was painted a very light blue, a shade no darker than the color of the sky on a hot summer morning. The lawn was healthy and trimmed neat, though I didn't think the landscaping was anything special compared to Mama's. It was too much like all the other lawns in the subdivision.

The black coupe wasn't in the driveway, but the house had a garage, and I was afraid the car was hidden inside. As I walked I counted the cracks in the concrete driveway to try and calm myself, but it didn't help. I didn't have any idea what I would say to Amanda when she came to the door.

I probably looked like I was climbing the gallows as I climbed the three wooden steps that led to the porch, and soon I faced the light-blue door. My stomach was beginning to knot again, so I thought it would be best to get it over with right away. I knocked on the door, and the door stared back at me, making me so nervous that I had to turn around and face the street. No one came. I didn't hear any noise at all within the house. It occurred to me that my knock was so faint and half-hearted that if Amanda was home it probably wasn't loud enough for her to have heard it.

I turned around. There was a doorbell. Around the button was a ring of orange light that blinked when I pressed the button. But I didn't hear a chime when I pressed the button, so I pressed it several more times to try and make it work. I pushed it and the light blinked over and over, but I never heard a chime. It was strange, I thought, to have such a sharp looking doorbell that didn't even chime. But maybe, I thought, houses like this had doorbells just for show. I thought it was strange enough to be true.

I decided to leave, and I felt relieved that I had been saved from embarrassment and also that I had just missed an opportunity I might never have again. But just as I began to walk away I heard movement, and as I turned back to the house the door swung inward.

Mrs. Hawkins seemed very young, almost too young to have a daughter Amanda's age, though they had the same pale skin and uppity cheekbones. I could only see half of her body because she kept one shoulder hidden behind the doorframe. She held the door half-open behind her. Mrs. Hawkins was just as tall as Amanda, though her hair was relaxed and her eyes were hazel instead of blue. Her mouth was pinched, too, with tight corners that I imagined could deepen into the same smile Amanda had. Only Mrs. Hawkins wasn't smiling.

She gave me a very uninviting look, the look you give someone when they finally show up after you have been waiting on them for a very long time. I told her who I was, but she didn't nod or make a sound. She just looked at me with a cold, disaffected expression, as if to say, *don't you think I know who you are?*

I asked if Amanda was home.

Mrs. Hawkins asked, "Why?"

I didn't understand. "Why is she home?"

"No," said Mrs. Hawkins, "What do you want with her?"

I knew for sure then that Mama had called her, even though I didn't know all of what they had talked about. It only seemed to me in that moment that Mama wasn't content with her own hatred for Amanda. She had made Amanda's mother feel the same way about me.

Mrs. Hawkins was glaring at me with such presumption that it made me feel like I was being judged not only by her, but by everyone in Marthasville. Somehow she made it seem like the whole crowd was listening to the answers I gave, like I was

the Fool of Marthasville. I said, “Mrs. Hawkins, I don’t want to bother anybody. I just want to talk with Amanda.”

She said, “Why Amanda? The summer’s full of girls you could *talk* with, Franklin Mitchem.” She pronounced the word talk like she meant something by it other than *talk*. “Just because you say you don’t *want* to bother us doesn’t mean you’re not doing bothering us.”

Mrs. Hawkins seemed to be deeply angry with me, and I was helpless to do anything about it. I was being made into the fool because I was failing to understand the real story, and it was my mother’s fault. My voice cracked when I answered her. “We’re friends.”

Mrs. Hawkins said, “Amanda is not your friend, Franklin. Tell me what it is you want from her.”

Like so many other women my father had known, Mrs. Hawkins wanted an answer I couldn’t give. Only she wanted it for a different reason. It was as if she thought she knew exactly what I would say, what I would think, and that she wanted to use that knowledge to prove a point she wanted to make, and to make me feel ashamed of myself. So I wanted to give an answer she didn’t expect at all, something so honest and real that it would be impossible for her to sneer at.

I had to tell the truth—as much of it as I could tell. I began by saying, “I want Amanda to know that she can trust me,” but as soon as I had begun I had to stop and compose myself. I was on the verge of tears. I wanted to say that I wanted Amanda to feel like she could tell me anything, and that I would protect her like she was my own secret self, and that I wanted her to do the same for me. But if I opened my mouth

again I knew I wouldn't have been able to say those things because I wouldn't have been able to keep myself from crying. It was awful. Mrs. Hawkins was humiliating me, and I couldn't take it. I decided, in that moment, that I wasn't going to confess anything else, and that no Hawkins would ever again see me cry.

Maybe Mrs. Hawkins understood that. She stepped out onto the porch and pulled the door shut behind her. She was wearing a peach blouse and white slacks, and there was a golden bangle on her forearm as thick as a garden hose. It startled me when she put her hand up and touched my face.

She said, "Franklin, if Amanda really is your friend, why don't you go home and ask your mother why she seems to hate Amanda? Ask her that for me. Don't let her lie to you, and don't be stupid about it."

Mrs. Hawkins took her hand away and I thanked her. I'm not sure why I thanked her, but I did. It just seemed like it was all I could do. I turned away, and as I was taking the steps down off the porch I heard Mrs. Hawkins close the door behind her.

I walked quickly until I thought I was no longer in sight of the Hawkins' home, and then I began to run. I ran through town, and I kept running until I was almost home.

I stopped running when I came to the old part of the cemetery just across the railroad track, the part that everyone in town called the Confederate cemetery. Most of the graves did not belong to Confederate soldiers, but they were old enough. Briars and weeds grew wilder in this part of the cemetery, where fewer visitors came. I was alone. I sat down on the edge of an asphalt footpath that was cracked and raised from

the ground in odd places. I faced a plot of fourteen dirty headstones that were staggered in two rows of seven. The plot had no stone border around it, and crabgrass stretched over the graves just the same as it stretched from the footpath to the railroad track.

From time to time I sat in the Marthasville Cemetery because it was a peaceful place to think, or a peaceful place to not think at all, but I never came to this older part of the cemetery because above this plot of graves a Confederate battle flag flew. Only a certain kind of person from my hometown had any feelings for that flag, and Mama had told me when I was very young that I wasn't going to grow up to be that kind of person.

The pole was about twenty feet high, and the red field of the flag had faded to a shade more orange than red. The far edge of the flag was frayed, and I remember that there was a very weak wind that afternoon. The sun was still high when I sat down, but the heat was waning and I no longer felt as though I might cry. I just needed to sit and let my mind go away from me.

I tried to read the headstones. They were mossy and weathered, and a black mold crept upward from the dirt to the top of the stones. The marble had discolored, and the engravings were obscured by a century of wear and weathering. But as I looked longer and harder I could see that the engravings were legible, even if they only bore a little information. Nothing more than the name and rank of the deceased was carved into each one.

Only one headstone was different. It didn't even have that much information. It read, simply, "NEGRO SOLDIER, CSA."

I was confused by it. What could that man have been thinking? Why would he join an army that fought to keep his rights from him? He must have been lied to. Did he understand what the South was fighting for? Was he promised freedom? Or was it possible he was afraid of a new order?

That didn't seem likely. I couldn't come up with an answer that satisfied me. It seemed twisted. The man fought for, and died for, a government that couldn't even be bothered to carve his name into a headstone the way it had done for the other thirteen soldiers. Perhaps there was a mistake. Perhaps he was some kind of fool.

I don't know how long I stayed in the cemetery that afternoon. I lingered to avoid Mama, and the sky changed color and the sun plunged behind me as I sat there. I knew there would be hell to pay. Mama would hit me, and I felt guilty about it already. But I took my time that afternoon. I didn't know then the secret that Amanda's parents had revealed to her, and I didn't realize what the stones could tell me about the decision I would one day have to make. In that moment I was only trying to escape my life, my not-knowing. I tried to forget about my problem, and to imagine only the soldier's life—to imagine his choice, if indeed he had a choice. But no matter how hard I searched, no matter how hard I tried to get away from myself, I came up dry. At that age I couldn't decipher his secrets with my imagination in a useful way. I could not imagine what he must have been thinking, or what his suffering must have been like.

Seis Fridas

If Allison Geller knew I had bought a foreclosure in East Atlanta and was moving into it this week she'd either shake her head and say something smug or she'd crochet a housewarming present. It depends on how much she's changed in the six years since she left for Texas. You can lose a part of your day thinking about how much an ex-girlfriend has changed, especially when you haven't heard from her since it ended. And when you come up with a vision you think might be right, what do you do with it? Buying your first house can cloud your head with all kinds of thoughts like these. At least that's what it's done to me. I thought about Allison today after I packed several pairs of shoes into a bag she once gave me. I found it this week when I was cleaning out the closets of the duplex I've been living in for the last three years, and I didn't throw it away because when you're about to make a big move you suddenly get the notion that you need every box or bag you've ever had your hands on.

She gave me the bag the morning after I turned thirty. We were spending a long weekend in a hotel in the Gaslamp District in San Diego, where we supposed to be celebrating my birthday. We had been together six months that March, but it seemed like longer than that. I don't know if it's possible to fall in love too quickly, but that morning I was feeling like that's what we had done.

We had a terrible argument the night before. I mean it really stung. It felt like an ambush in the middle of the evening. We had dinner at a shi-shi Thai place, and

Allison was saying how she wanted to be married by the time she was thirty, which would be a little more than two years away, and then, believe it or not, we started talking about the names we might give our kids. That's how ahead of ourselves we were. I had said "Lena and Quinton," and she said "Coleman and Carter."

At least I think those were her names. I'm sure it was two names that sounded to me like they ought to be last names because I told her that first names like that were in fashion, and I guess I said it in a way that suggested something about her sensibility, because she snapped back at me, "And *who* has a last name for a first name, Franklin Mitchem?"

Next thing you know, she was claiming that I was only a vegetarian because I was pretentious, and that I was stricter about what I ate when I was around people I felt were less sophisticated than me than I was when I was eating with my friends. Then I said there was no way the church her father had just started was going to make it because all the deacons were his buddies from Alcoholics Anonymous, and they couldn't be counted on any more than he could. Before long we were making hurtful claims about each other's mothers. We were supposed to go dancing at an outdoor nightclub after dinner, but we went back to the hotel room instead.

Allison had dark blonde hair that made it halfway down her back, and it was as thin as thread. She was thin all over. Thin waist, thighs, lips and fingers. When Allison got angry those thin fingers would quiver, and when we got back to the hotel room that night her hands were shaking like they had an electric current running through them. I remember her clinching and undoing her fists as we argued, and I remember her saying, "You don't even know why you don't eat what you don't eat,

Franklin. Turkeys might fear pain, but they certainly don't fear death. They don't have any concept of it."

I told her, "You don't have any concept of life," which didn't mean anything specific, and then I said that I couldn't picture a future with her for lots of reasons, the easiest one to bring up being that she had no intention of getting out of Atlanta. At that time I thought I would one day move to a city that actually had people on its sidewalks, a city like San Francisco or New York. I never did, but it was an important idea to me, and we couldn't agree about it. Relationships are like that sometimes. One minute you're romanticizing about a vision of a life you assume your girlfriend shares, and the next minute you can't think of one thing you have in common. At least you hope there's nothing.

Then it takes something ridiculous to close the gap between you.

Allison left early that morning. I pretended to sleep as she slipped out. When she returned a few hours later she was carrying six bags, and though I was set on ignoring her when she got back, I couldn't help but ask her about the bags. They were just like the one we had both admired the morning before when we saw it swinging from the arm of a grandmother at the San Diego airport. On the side of each bag was a self-portrait of Frida Kahlo, one Kahlo painted in 1940. She's wearing a necklace of braided thorns, a crown of flowers, and silver earrings shaped like open hands. Brown and gold stripes framed each portrait, and, as if the artist wasn't recognizable enough by of her seagull-shaped unibrow, her name appeared on a banner at the bottom. The six bags all had the same image, but each one was a different color.

There was something wonderful and silly about those bags, and we both started laughing when she told me about discovering them at a stall down near the Naval dock. It changed the mood. I cleared away the pallet on the floor where I had slept, and Allison lined the bags up in two horizontal rows. We looked down at the spread and mimicked the voices of stock-character art critics.

“A Western masterpiece,” I said. “Travesty it’s been overlooked.”

“Utter travesty, Dah-ling,” she said, waving her arm in mock frustration. “*Seis Fridas*. An artiste can create her selves as she pleases.”

The playfulness made the rest of the San Diego trip bearable, and Allison seemed to enjoy identifying the people she would give bags to. She gave the green bag to me and kept the purple one for herself. Moving into this house has me wondering about so many things, especially the past. I hope there is some usefulness in it, and I wonder what’s in those bags now.

Frida Roja

Allison’s best friend during the time we were together was a pale-skinned girl named Gillian Wurtz. They tended bar together at a lounge called Reve on Ponce de Leon Avenue near City Hall East. Allison and Gillian grew up together in Lilburn, a suburb northeast of Atlanta. Allison liked to party, but not as much as Gillian, and I let Allison know I didn’t like it that she spent so much time with a girl like that.

Gillian showed a lot of skin when she worked and she had the line, “Do you cry out in your sleep?” from a Joy Division song tattooed on her midriff. More than

anyone else that got one, the Frida bag matched Gillian's style. It went right into her eclectic wardrobe, and she used it like an oversized purse for carrying her kitschy accessories. You might see Gillian with a kaleidoscope, or a book of stickers, or a water gun. One night, not long after we went to San Diego, I said to Allison, "Your friend is like a little girl with all the toys and booze and indiepop crap."

Allison said, "You're certainly fascinated with her, Franklin. It must be the way she leans over the beer cooler that irritates you so much."

I told Allison that I didn't care if Gillian fell in the beer cooler, and that I only came to the bar because that's where she was after I got off work.

One afternoon I got off early, and Reve was nearly empty. Allison was stocking mixers in the back, and Gillian was out front, where she was drinking from a plastic thermos decorated with images from the show *Magnum, P.I.*

I asked her, "What does a grown woman drink out of a *Magnum P.I.* thermos?"

Gillian downed a healthy swallow and stuck out her chest. She said, "Do you know where Tom Selleck was during the Watts Riots?"

I didn't answer because I thought that was just Gillian's immature way of making it known that she knew something I didn't, and some useless bit of information at that. Whether I was frustrated or fascinated I don't know, but Gillian had a way of getting under my skin, and Allison defended her even as she sensed I was getting tangled up in Gillian somehow. I think she was used to that with Gillian.

Anyway, in her Frida bag Gillian carried all these little items that seemed to me nothing more than devices to lure attention. There were even times when Gillian

carried her yippy little Yorkshire terrier in her bag. It would sit on top of the other items and look out with its oily little eyes and yip at everyone Gillian passed. The Yorkie's name was Stolichnaya. Stoli, for short.

I asked Allison, "What kind of lush names her dog after a brand of vodka?"

Allison was in one of her moods, and she said, "The kind that doesn't judge everyone she meets."

Frida Celeste

I'm pretty sure Allison's little brother Andrew was gay, but he wasn't out when I knew him. At that time he was just a twenty-one year-old kid too shy to clear his throat in the company of anyone he didn't know very well. He was studying architecture on a Presidential Fellowship at Georgia Tech.

I met him at a dinner party the night before Christmas Eve at the home of Allison's mother and stepfather. There were about ten family members at the dinner from Allison's mother's side, and they were overwhelming. They talked about politics and their football teams in a way that made it seem like they assumed I agreed with everything they said. Andrew was the safest person to talk with.

I asked Andrew, "So how do you like Tech?"

He said, "It's good."

I said, "And Atlanta? Do you like the city?"

He said, "It's good."

"What about the holiday? Were you ready for a break?"

“Yeah, it’s good.”

“Andrew, you’re pretty easy going, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Andrew had that same dark blonde hair as his sister, and was every bit as thin, even though he was at least a foot taller than Allison. He was a tall, gentle young guy.

At that time, I produced marketing videos for companies and government agencies, and the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce was one of my clients. I had done a video for them that was supposed to lure the nanotechnology industry to the city. It didn’t work, but it was fun to shoot, and I interviewed a professor at Tech about the commercial potential of a compound called buckminsterfullerene. After dinner I mentioned it to Andrew and his eyes lit up. Although he was an architecture student, it turned out he had all kind of geeky, cool interests. Nanotechnology was just one of them.

He’d been an amateur astronomer for years, and was starting to get into long-exposure photography. He took me up to his room and showed me the vintage camera he had just bought. He demonstrated how he modified its shutter control, and he became really chatty about all his other cameras and his telescopes. It was obvious he was passionate about his interests, and maybe even proud of them. I imagine he still has those cameras, and that he carries them out to the park in his light-blue Frida to shoot the stars on clear nights.

Before we went to bed that night in Allison’s mother’s house, Allison thanked me for spending so much time with Andrew. She said, “Franklin, I worry about him

all the time. He got picked on when he was in high school and he never did anything about it.”

I said, “He did something about it, in his way. He’s a cool kid, once he gets talking. And brilliant. He’ll do anything he wants to do. He’ll probably be in Chicago one day, designing those unbelievable skyscrapers.”

She said, “I just hope he’s happy inside his own skin, wherever that is.”

Frida Plateada

That was a stressful Christmas for Allison. Her mother was tipsy by the time we sat down for dinner, and dead drunk by the end of the night. It embarrassed Allison, and the worst part of it was that she had asked her mother to watch her drinking beforehand because she knew how she could get when company was over.

But all through the dinner prep, Deborah—that was her name, Deborah Lassiter—worked on a sweaty glass of Chablis that seemed to always be full. As Allison chopped peppers for the salad she cut her eyes at me several times, and finally she said, “Mom, are you going to save any wine for Aunt Carolyn?”

“Your Aunt Carolyn is in there watching God-knows-who play God-knows-who in the stupid Peanut Bowl or whatever, so she can fend for herself.” Then she went on and on to Allison and me about how difficult it is to eat “good” during the holidays. She said the next-door neighbors had come by earlier with chocolate peanut clusters and she had to chase them off with a dust mop.

At dinner Deborah talked to no one in particular about her diet and then made a show of putting dressing on her salad. The dressing was in a little spray pump like the kind teenage boys carry around to freshen their breath before a make-out session, and supposedly one pump of the oil-based dressing it sprayed contained exactly one calorie. Deborah got everyone's attention before she dressed her salad and slowly counted out loud, "One calorie...two calories...three calories," as she pressed the little pump.

Then she took a dramatic pause, as if she was considering some big moral question, before pumping again. She went through that a couple times, showing us all that, in the end, she was getting a total of six calories from her salad dressing. Even so, by the end of dinner she was slurring, "Ihrate too much," but the truth was that she ate very little and drank a lot.

Now that everyone takes their own bags to the grocery store, I suppose Allison's mother uses her silver Frida for shopping, probably buying several bottles of white wine every time she goes. Unless she quit drinking, like her ex-husband, and got into church.

That night Allison and I lay awake in her old bedroom, and she told me she was tired of bartending and staying out late. She also said she was afraid of becoming like her mother. I was surprised to hear it, but she really seemed scared. She put her head on my shoulder and said, "She's an embarrassment."

I felt awful for her, and I said, "Don't be embarrassed. She wasn't that bad. I'm sure she's not the only middle-aged housewife in Lilburn, Georgia, who drinks a

little too much and obsesses over bad food. These type of women always manage to take care of whatever it is they need to take care of at the end of the day.”

Allison didn't appreciate my saying that. She said, “My mother isn't a type,” which didn't make sense to me, but when I asked her to explain herself she started crying. I asked her what was wrong, and I pulled her body against mine, but really, I didn't know what to do. She wouldn't talk to me, and I didn't understand it. I didn't know if she was crying because of what I said, or because of how her mother had acted, but she cried until she fell asleep, holding my shoulder the whole time.

Frida Amarilla

My mother and Allison never took to each other, but Allison adored my Uncle Walt. Uncle Walt was a character. The day I left my hometown of Marthasville for college in Atlanta, Uncle Walt said to me, “You watch the sidewalk when you take a step up there, Franklin. Some of them girls ain't as pretty as they look.”

Uncle Walt didn't feel that way about Allison. “You make an old man feel young.” That's what he said to her the first time they met. Not long after that we went to San Diego, and she gave him the Frida the next time we went back out to Marthasville. When Allison gave him the bag he looked like somebody had just given him a baby, but when he realized that Amanda was serious, and she really wanted him to have it, he thanked her over and over, and then he held it up to the light like it was a prism.

Sometimes Uncle Walt got work as a general contractor, but mostly he just framed houses. If he still has his yellow Frida he's probably using it to tote light materials around his jobs, like paper sacks of ten-penny nails, or bubble levels. Uncle Walt had the iron grip of a man who swung a hammer all day, and when I went out to Marthasville alone later that summer, he locked that grip on my shoulders. I had told him I thought Amanda and I weren't going to make it much longer.

He dug his meaty thumbs into my neck and said, "What in the hell have you done this time, Franklin?"

"Uncle Walt, sometimes it just comes apart. I haven't done anything."

"The hell you ain't. You done something. I've known you longer than *you've* known *you*, and I guarantee you done something. You could fuck up a wet dream, Franklin Mitchem. Always could. I don't know what, but you done something. Talk to me now."

Uncle Walt wasn't an educated man, but he had a sense for things. Even more than my Mama, he could tell when I wasn't being up front about something, and the older I got, the better he became at getting me to come out with it.

"I was on the phone with her friend."

Uncle Walt said, "You idiot. You cinderblock-headed, fat-tongue idiot. I've got a blue tic mutt that knows when to lift his goddam leg and when to hold his ground. You ain't no better than your daddy."

"Hold on, Uncle Walt. I didn't cheat on Allison. I wouldn't cheat."

"Does her friend answer the phones at a pizza delivery place? Then you ain't got no business on the phone with her. Look at you. I know you lying."

“I’m not lying. They work at the same bar, and sometimes I get in these conversations with the girl that seem like arguments, but then they turn into something else, and I realize we’re, like, playing with each other.”

Uncle Walt squeezed me hard and said, “It ain’t *like* playing.”

“Well we didn’t play on the phone. I cut it short. And I was hanging up the phone when Allison woke up. I wouldn’t cheat on her. I just think we’re breaking apart because she wants to get married and buy a house in Atlanta, and I want to go to a bigger city.”

“And you want to go without her?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think she wants to live in a place like New York or San Francisco. And, Uncle Walt, could you please let go of my neck? You’re hurting me.”

Uncle Walt looked like he was ashamed of me, and he took his time releasing my neck. When he did let go, he shook his head and said, “Man’s got to live his own life, Franklin, but I’ll tell you one thing. You ever look at a magazine with pictures of a bunch of cities? They ain’t easy to tell apart. It’s a mite easier to tell one woman from another.”

Frida Verde

“What do you think you’re going to get in a bigger city that you can’t get in Atlanta?” That’s what Allison asked me when that night I when I got back from Marthasville. By then we had moved into a rental with a rocky yard in the Kirkwood neighborhood. It was too soon for us to have moved in together, but it was a two-

bedroom place, and even though we shared a bed, we referred to the second bedroom, which was just a storage room with no bed, as “my” bedroom.

Anyway, she wanted to know what I was looking for in New York or San Francisco. That’s the way she put it at first, when we were being civil. Before long she was angry, and she said my desire to go to a bigger city was like my being vegetarian. It was a pretention I couldn’t justify. I was pretending to be someone different.

Maybe I couldn’t justify it, exactly, but I tried to explain to her what I felt as accurately as I could. “If I live my whole life in Georgia, I just won’t ever feel *settled*, like I have never tried any place different. A different place is a different life. I’ve never tried a different life.”

“Then let’s go to Nashville, or Houston, or Savannah. Why won’t you consider a city like one of those, where we can actually afford a decent place, and where we can get around the city without it being some big ordeal? You’re being too narrow-minded about it, Franklin. It makes me wonder what you really want to change.”

I said, “Those places aren’t different enough,” but I didn’t know, honestly. Wanting to be in a different place, or wanting to live a different life—I’m not sure I could tell those two desires apart. But that’s something you have to consider when you move. It’s more complicated than finding a bag to carry your shoes from the old place to the new place. There are so many possibilities you have to consider.

Take my job. For years I worked as a freelancer, always hustling for the next job, always searching for new clients. But I just took a fulltime position at National

Pulp, an international paper products conglomerate that has a forty story building downtown and a production studio in the basement. I'll make their videos in-house from now on, with a staff of eight, so I finally decided to buy this place in East Atlanta. I've been throwing away rent at the duplex. I still want move to a different city one day, but it's scary when you don't know where your clients will come from, or who's going to give you a job.

So I will be here for a couple more years, at least. I don't know what to say about it, honestly, but I'm sure Allison would have something to say, because that night I told her, "There's a spirit in those great cities that Atlanta just can't offer. I want to go and get that spirit, and get it in a way you can't get just by visiting. It's important to me."

Allison's fingers were shaking, and after she thought about what I said, her head started shaking, too. She said, "That's bullshit, Franklin. There's a spirit in this city that you're afraid of. You're afraid of everything. That's what I think. I don't think you want to move to another city to get anything. I think you just want to get rid of the life you have here."

Then Allison went back into my bedroom and got her yarn and needles. When she came back through the living room she didn't speak to me. She just went out to the porch and started crocheting.

Frida Púrpura

Allison took up crocheting that summer. She made a new group of friends, a group of girls that didn't include Gillian or anyone else from the bar, and they got together once a week for what they called a Stitch n' Bitch. Those groups were popular around Atlanta for a few years. It was girls only, and they would get together and crochet. I don't know what else they did, but I assumed they talked and maybe had snacks and drinks. I never found out. But Allison would go crochet with these new girls and then she would come home and crochet more. I thought it was a little strange because she used heavy yarn, and she would sit on our porch right in the middle of the unbearable Atlanta summer and crochet blankets that were so warm and heavy that I don't think they would have been any use in Atlanta even in January.

But that's what she started doing right in the middle of our conversation. She went out on the porch, sat in the gliding chair, and started crocheting one of those heavy winter blankets. It pissed me off that she would stop talking with me in the middle of our conversation, so I followed her out there to finish it.

I leaned on the guardrail near her chair and said, "I talked to Uncle Walt today."

Allison wasn't quick to reply, but she finally said, "How's he?"

"We talked about you, and how I want to move out of the South."

Allison wouldn't look up. She just kept working the needles into the blanket, and pulling them back out a steady pace.

"I'm going to move to New York. I told him that. And now I'm telling you. I'm not going to talk about it anymore. I'm really going to do it."

Allison didn't miss a stroke. She just kept working the yarn over itself. She never looked up. But I thought it really hurt her to hear me say I was leaving. Every time I brought up moving up north or out west she got upset. She always said she didn't want to be that far from her parents, and from Andrew. She also said that she liked her life in Atlanta. It had a small-town feel, but plenty to do. But I thought she just didn't want to be without me, and that was her way of talking me into staying.

Allison's hands were steady as she worked those long crochet needles, and her body didn't move in the glider. She just sat still and looked down at her work, even when she finally spoke, "What did Walt say?"

I had been dreading this conversation because I was afraid of how much it was going to hurt Allison. She wanted to be married, but I couldn't even imagine making a decision that big back then. I was having enough trouble trying to figure out how to get out of Atlanta. It just wasn't fair to keep dragging her along.

I pulled myself up on the guardrail and sat. "He said I should go for it. He said, 'A man's got to live his own life.' You know how he talks."

Allison didn't ask anything more about Uncle Walt. She asked, "Do you have a job up there?"

"No. I haven't even started looking. I've just finally made up my mind to do it. I'm thirty. If I don't go now, I'll never go. You can have the house, if you want it. I guess you'll have to find a roommate."

"I don't need this house, Franklin."

"Don't talk like that, Allison. Let's not get emotional with each other."

“I’m not talking like anything, Franklin. I just don’t need the house. I’m starting a new job, and I’m going to move.”

Allison hadn’t mentioned looking for a new job to me, but she had been talking about quitting bartending ever since Christmas. “Where did you get a job?”

She said, “Arlington.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s in Texas.”

For a moment I was confused. “It’s not a new bar in Atlanta called Arlington? You’re telling me you took a job in Arlington, Texas?”

“Yes. I got hired as an event coordinator at the Hilton. It’s a conference hotel. It’s big. I start on the first of September.”

I didn’t expect her to tell me that. It was hard to believe. But she wasn’t making it up. She had the details worked out. “When were you going to tell me? That’s in less than three weeks.”

Allison finally stopped working those needles and looked up at me. “Now, I guess.”

I felt betrayed. I felt like I had been set up. But I knew Allison wouldn’t let me get away with saying that. It just made me so angry.

Allison picked up on that, and she didn’t let me sit there and boil. Instead, she said, “I don’t want to hold you back, Franklin. New York is waiting for you.”

Somehow that got me through the next few weeks. Allison didn’t say much else about it. She just packed her yarn and needles in her purple Frida and went back

to my bedroom. I could make it anywhere I wanted—I liked hearing her say that about me, and I wished it were true.

It's hard enough to make it one place. There is too much to consider. This Frida isn't the only bag of shoes I have. There are two more bags of shoes. And then there's all the furniture, and I have so many more bags, and boxes, too.

Our New Gal

I got your goddamn messages, Henderson, but Sunday ain't the day I go hopping for Moustache and his headbobbers, not when one grandbaby's got a recital in the service and Mary Ellen's got the whole lot of them up for dinner at the Piedmont Club. Matter of fact, there ain't no day I go hopping for that crowd, and you can tell them that next time they come poor-mouthing sideways with their palms pushed out like a goddamn league of Salvation Army Santas. The most important bill in the history of this company since deregulation and they think they got to clear their throats. Or maybe they just want to hear themselves give an order, now that they know somebody'll listen. The word he sent? Time to play ball? Hell, I was playing ball when he was wearing short britches, shitting yellow and pouring peanuts in his Coca-Cola. I didn't make this company into the most profitable natural gas provider in the Southeast so I could wait for orders from Moustache, I promise you that. One term at the rostrum and his damn neck sure stretched high. Course we knew that was coming soon as the economy turned down and the state started swinging. I tell you what Henderson, he might've shaved that lip and bought a closet full of shiny sack suits, but he's still Moustache to me—high-hipped, poke-lipped, swivel neck, and a head of hair like a gamecock set to spar. Politics is show business for ugly folks, and I'll be damned if he don't look the part. Got the tall hair for it. Tall hair and short memory. Seems two years is plenty long enough to forget a career full of filibusters and barbecues with nobody to foot the bill—and who helped swing it all back around. My company's had business under that damn gold dome for better than fifty years,

and he's going to tell me to play ball? Says he's got to take a hit from everybody from the Commission to WSB TV. That loafer-wearing fairy with the microphone and his Boy Hero, that's who he means. You tell Moustache he ain't got to worry about nobody but his district and the folks who paid for his fare to the rostrum. Hope springs eternal at the Georgia General Assembly, they say, even for a cad like him. This ain't the first time I've cast a line in the deep end of the pond. He ain't got no idea. I'm an old line-runner, but I ain't dead yet. I aim to dig one more ditch, and I got help on the way.

* * *

Ten thousand thank-yous for your very detailed message, Henderson, but I can goddamn count. Don't bring up the Boy Hero and the Commission again, and don't tell me one more time we should've helped blow the caps off their terms. We emptied out the cupboard for those assholes and they could've done whatever the hell they wanted to with it. Now they got that boy on the Commission and we got to deal with this poke-lipped, amnesiac in the House. First in the GOP to pick up the gavel since Reconstruction, and he'll damn sure remind you of it. Did you see him on the set last night? Knotted up in a shiny necktie that looked like a marlin still soaking wet, strip of white where that moustache used to lay, high neck swiveling like a cobra. Don't he think he's the king of the pit? I tell you what, Henderson, I'm about to set a mongoose in that pit, and that high neck's bound to crane over just a jot. She'll be down there tomorrow, and I told her where to find you. I guarantee you

won't miss her, and when they let out I want you to take her over to Corrado's and give her the long and short. Y'all are having dinner with Ray and the Chairman on Wednesday, and I want her cooking with gas by then. Putting it in Ray's sub-committee's fine—I know better than to run down a mountain—but I don't want to be climbing no stairs on Sine Die, and I damn sure don't want Ray to think she works for him. He'll get that in his head sure as a bear shits in the woods and you know it. Wait and see our new gal, Henderson. A filly fit for post if there's ever been one. Legs lean as river reeds and a body like a coke bottle from back when they had a damn bit of style. Eyes like greens at Augusta National, and sharp as a tenpenny nail. Come dumb tomorrow and see. You sign the checks, but you let her hand them off, you hear? Ray don't get nothing but what he got before the primary and what we shook on in Athens. I mean it. And don't you be an idiot either, Henderson. You got tackle and bait when you go fishing, but there's a line, too. If you touch that gal your ass'll be back on the fourth floor three desks over from the account temps with a goddamn badge clipped on your coat sharpening no. 2 pencils like left-handed dunce. Don't take that personal. I don't mean it like that. I just know damn well that if a man sits on a bench in a barbershop for long enough, sooner or later he gets the urge for a haircut.

* * *

I knew you'd perk up, Henderson. Lightning, ain't she? I tell you what, I've had an eye on every session since Ernest Vandiver was governor of Georgia, and

those marble floors ain't clicked under no heels like that in all that time. Believe she's Catholic. Drinks Jameson like orange juice. Went to school in Boston, where her folks are from, but was raised down here. Been up there for ten years though, and that's a good thing. Not too many sacks on the luggage cart for all these boys to trip over themselves trying to tote.

And good on Ray. He's got to do his little pony-and-puppydog promenade. We knew that up front. Long as he don't go whimpering then you don't go barking. He'll get it through the committee and the House if y'all hold his hand tight enough.

Don't worry about the other side right now. Unlike three-quarters of those clowns, the Lieutenant's got a memory. We're good in his Senate.

And Denny said we won't hear much out of the Commission either, except for the Boy Hero, of course. We knew we'd get his routine. Denny's reasonable. Always has been, no matter how much he gets in my craw sometimes.

We got a heap going for us, not least of all the damn length of it. Can't nobody under the gold dome, or nobody across the street on the Commission, give us all the beg-off they gave us during de-regulation about how a headline might hurt them next campaign. What the hell is the press corps going to ask them? *Could you please explain why the Commission will not get to decide whether a private company will be allowed to level a rate hike for a \$90 million capital outlay expense stretching from the coast to the center of the state prior to the overhead being accrued over a period of time equal to that of the combined cost to yak, yak, yak*—and now John Q. Public's either passed out and snoring like a snared trolling motor or watching reruns of *The \$10,000 Pyramid* on cable.

Imagine that, Henderson, the cable company's a friend of ours this time, no matter how much you might want to tell that asshole Larry Temple to go look for a lamplight at back of a train tunnel sometimes. They want a trail blazed around the Public Service Commission as bad as we want to blaze it. And what we got don't look like nothing but a little housekeeping measure in the legislature. Nobody's worried about us right now. Nobody.

I know y'all heard the governor ain't going to get involved, and that's nothing but a good thing. He was golden during de-regulation, and I ain't forgot it, but he ain't been dimes on the first floor these last two years. Groundhog Bramblett, that's what y'all call him? Comes out his office once a year, sees his shadow and skedaddles back in? Don't see him again till Sine Die. What's his shadow? The press corps? They a league of shadows, sure enough. Y'all got time to shoot the shit early in the session if y'all ain't got nothing else. I know how it is to wait on a nibble. I used to go down there every session with my hat in my hand. Y'all lean on the banisters and think up names for folks.

I tell you what, while you're leaning on rails and dreaming up nicknames, you need to get our new gal in there to meet Moustache—that's the one nickname y'all two need to worry about. Remember what he did to that lefty from Athens during tort reform? He ain't afraid to pick a dog in any fight, I'll say that for him. Get a man like that in your johnboat and there'll be a heap of water in your wake. Just make sure she don't forget who he is, and make for damn sure he don't forget who he was.

* * *

Good idea on setting up a retreat at the Brasel Inn, Henderson. Getting Moustache away from downtown with just you and her'll give you some time to make a point. You ain't as dumb as you look, and I'm sure them Augusta Nationals didn't hurt none when y'all gave him the invitation. Remind him how he got what he got when y'all are up there. You know what to do. I told the Board it'd be easier for an advocate to sneak daylight past a rooster than to get one over on Nathaniel B. Henderson, and they ain't sharp enough to know no better. Put a handle of Glenfiddich on my line next time you're in the suite. February, and they're burning days off the calendar like the budget's just going to roll over. Let that girl know it's time to put on the hardhat. She ain't too pretty for that.

And you ain't too old for it. No, you still got something on top of that cantaloupe of yours. Look at me—bald as that damn gold dome, and nearly as old. Mary Ellen drug me to a *function* Sunday evening—one of those brush-up-against-your-leg-and-beg-a-thons the gals put on where the little pickpockets won't let loose of your hand after they shake it. Two glasses of some crap that tasted like Kool-Aid with bitters and I was beat as one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest. Couldn't drive home. Had to hail a cab, and Mary Ellen was pshh-ing and pshaww-ing all the way up Peachtree. Gratitude, Henderson, is a virtue lost on all wives, children and politicians—every last damn one of them. It's in their wiring.

* * *

Glad to hear it's out of Committee, Henderson, I really am, but do me a favor and don't leave a goddamn message on my machine like you just won the Battle of Second Manassas. Is it on the Rules calendar? Do you got a headcount? Is Moustache in the johnboat? Say? It's still February. You and the gal got a heap of wet asphalt to pour if we're going to cut this road. This ain't a skins game with your pinstripe posse from the second floor. This year we take the whole pot home or we got to learn to play a new goddamn game. I'm too damn old to learn a new goddamn game, Henderson, and you've been spreading The Gospel According to the Southeastern Energy Corporation too damn long find a new faith. What we got is a window of opportunity smack dab between de-regulation and the goddamn passel of startups getting their feet set that won't never crack again. We got to move like a jackrabbit jumps when the beagles bay or all the pissing and moaning and paying and playing we've done for a damn decade ain't going to mean shooting stars to the blind. Goddamn, Henderson, you ever try to put toothpaste back in the tube? You can't do it, Henderson. You can't do it. This here's serious as anything we've ever done. I know you don't need me barking at the gate when y'all got your hands full with Ray and the Committee Chairman and the Rules Committee and Moustache and the House, plus both sides of the aisle. I know it's like herding cats. But Thursday when they head home for the weekend I want y'all to get up here and give me the long and short of it. Every last damn bore-you-tears drop of it. Y'all got time for that. It's been too damn cold lately for me to feel this hot.

* * *

Back before we put you on pay I used to come down there some bit of every session, and the boys on the third floor used to say Larry Temple was slick as onion. Said he could sell a bucket of ice to an Eskimo. I tell you what, Henderson, the gal reminds me of him a little bit—thirty years later and heap better for the scenery, mind you. And I tell you what, for a youngster with a tongue on her, she sure has got a bead on something that a heap of lobbyists with more wear on the tires ain't got. She shuts up. I swear, damn near every somebody you talk to these days ain't figured out what that'll do for you. It's like folks just sit there waiting for their turn to yap. They ain't listening. They waiting. She's different, Henderson. Makes it seem that way, at least. Yesterday when y'all came to the office she felt like she was mine the whole time. There's something to that, and it damn near makes an old man feel—well, not young, but something other than old. Did you hear what she said when I was in the middle of telling her about all those duck hunting trips me and Denny used to take to Mississippi—how to keep the Commission on their side of the street? No, you didn't, because she didn't say anything till I was through with that damn story. Knowing when to keep her mouth shut'll serve her better than knowing when to run it, more often than not. Gracefulness, that's what she's got. You don't hardly find that no more. What'd she tell us when they served the coffee? It'll get on a supplemental Rules calendar on day thirty? That's dimes. Always better to be on a supplemental calendar than the morning calendar, the way I see it. It don't let nobody set their feet. When feet get set they start casting shadows, you now what I mean? I guess come

dinnertime on day thirty we'll know for sure what we got, but I'd bet you folding money we get on that supplemental calendar.

The count sounds good. It's about what I figured. We don't need no help from the Dems anyway, long as they don't come out beating drums and buckets. I reckon it's too much to ask to keep the press corps out if this too, ain't it? I know better, but they ain't found their lede yet. Keep your nose clean and your shirt tucked, Henderson. It's near March. We'll be hitting that little white ball before long.

* * *

Well beat the drum and blow the goddamn bugle, Henderson, you might be fit for killing after all. Little easier when you got a mongoose at the flank ain't it? When the supplemental calendar got called up that damn cobra found a hole to hide in and didn't slither back to the rostrum till adjournment, did he? What's he trying to say? His hands are clean? Didn't preside and didn't vote? Don't matter. Who gives a lick? We're through the House! You got slow-dancing close with that count. Damn near dead-on, yea to nay. Long as I can lace my own shoes I won't doubt you, Henderson. We're headed over to the Senate. Come on up to Daily's this evening and let's crack one of those single-malts. Bring our new gal with you. Tell her that ain't an invitation, it's an order.

It's a good day. Not a perfect day, but a damn good day. The Representative from the Fourteenth got a heap of gravel in his goddamn boots over a vote that wasn't going to tip things either way. Shimmied down to the well like a mallard, wings

jutting out and beak in the air. What did he say? *We've all been on the junkets, all had jobs over the summer, but I can't let that rest on the people who've lived in my district all their lives.* What the hell is that supposed to mean anyway? *The people who've lived in my district all their lives. I can't let that rest on the people who've lived in my district all their lives, therefore I re-cuse myself.* You heard him. *Therefore I re-cuse myself,* staring down from the well at some pineknot on the wall. He's good for a dose of drama, that boy. Claims he ain't going to tell nobody how to vote, then he gets down the road with that mess about *the people who've lived their entire lives in my district.* I tell you what, we used to say this about that whole race crowd: when you ain't got nothing in your tool belt but a hammer, everything you see starts to look like a goddamn nail. Ain't it about damn time that jig ran for mayor? Tell him we'll max out his chest just to get his ass out of the House. Hell, tell him we'll build a library down in Ward One if he can get us that easement the City Council keeps dragging its feet on. Scratch that. Don't bring it up. Hoe one row at a time.

What do they say—drink today's wine today? Dinner at Daily's. See y'all there.

* * *

Forget what I said about her not being there, Henderson. That was the malt talking. If she said there was something she couldn't get out of then there was something she couldn't get out of. Drinking with you wasn't as bad as it sounds. It's

been awhile. I know I get red sometimes, but I've paid for it. Gin blossom on my nose and hypertension, and I turn sappy like that sometimes. You'll understand when you get my age. I got a load on my shoulders with the Board nervous and the Boy Hero waiting for any slip. He'd stick his head out a window at midnight looking for goddamn shadows.

I'll be on the other side of it when this bill gets through.

Mary Ellen's been leaning on me. Her friends at the University get to her, not that I blame her for it. I don't hold a dollar up against a dollar like folks say I do. Maybe I'll be able to do something on the other side of this. I was a flinthead to talk numbers last night, but the good stuff'll do that to you, and I've been working on this for a long time. Longer than you know. Next year's pay out'll be it for me, Henderson. That wasn't just talk. You can fool yourself and say I don't need it, but that school damn sure does, more than ever since things turned down. Mary Ellen's set on it: "The Vernon L. and Mary E. Anderson Billups School of Public Health." Can you picture that on North Campus? You could if you heard Mary Ellen give the long and short of it. She's got me seeing the masonry carved up already, U in Billups like a V, lawn lights aimed up like the marquee at the Fox.

You wouldn't have thought that to see me in a South Georgia tobacco field sixty years ago. Nobody would. Wouldn't of thought it to see me running propane lines forty-five years ago neither, even over at that same school in the evenings. Only one had the notion then was Mary Ellen. And that wasn't no cakewalk for someone with her blood. Folks in this building don't believe it, but her daddy wouldn't spit in my direction for the first six years.

Imagine that, Winston Anderson Jr.'s daughter married at City Hall to a municipal line runner. That took something a lot of women ain't got, and it didn't turn around quick. Brenda'd be ashamed if it got out, but the truth is she slept in a dresser drawer on the floor of our first apartment till she was six months old. Mary Ellen made her a little pallet in there, and she'd put that drawer on the floor beside the bed so she could hear every breath that baby drew. Know it killed her to see her first baby sleep that way, back curved a whip so she'd fit. But we didn't have nothing save one room plus the kitchen. Now she could have her name carved up on that building. That ain't the first thing you'd a thought when you woke up this morning. Those schools do something too. Kids go off to places you couldn't pronounce without a pint in you when they're working their way out.

But it damn sure ain't going to go up with nothing but a chunk of change from the state, not with things down like they are. Looks like Moustache and the Lieutenant Governor are going to play chicken with the budget again this year, after swearing back in December they wouldn't get caught up in that mess again. We knew better. Always goes that way.

You two enjoy Augusta. The Masters ain't in me this year. Too much bearing down. May be we'll hit that white ball on the other side of this thing, Henderson. Maybe. I'm getting too damn old to pretend like I'm anything other than too damn old.

She phoned me this morning about the drink. I told her the whiskey went warm regardless, but it was good to hear her apology anyway. I don't care where she's been the last ten years, that gal's a peach. You got the world in a gravy boat—that's what I told her. She said she had breakfast with the Committee Chairman over on the Senate side, and he told her there wasn't no need in me coming down. As long as you two are in the meeting for the vote they'd go ahead and move it through. But I suppose I ain't telling you nothing. We'll have to deal with a little less bullshit on this side, with the Lieutenant holding the gavel. His word means something. And now we're by that poke-lipped cobra in the House. Back in the day there would've been a hammer to drop that snake into place, but times have changed.

Can they burn four legislative days in the next two weeks? Have you seen an adjournment resolution? Can you make heads or tails? Seems like it'd be best if they finished before the March revenue numbers came in. They ain't going to be nothing nobody wants to look at. There'll be even less to fight over than there was last month. Mary Ellen wants to book our Florida trip with the grandkids' spring break. I told her they ain't going to come up with a schedule both chambers can stick to. We ain't that lucky. What do you think? Call me after y'all are out of committee. Throw a handful of grass clippings in the air down there and tell me which way the wind's blowing.

* * *

Just got your message. I told the temp at the desk to find me when you called, but she's an idiot.

I heard it's out of committee. Good. But that ain't all I heard. It ain't all you heard either, is it? Don't spit, scratch or take a piss before you get back with me. I mean it. I want to know everything, and I want to know it two days ago. Don't play dumb either. Matter of fact, you get her and bring her here with you. That ain't an invitation, and I goddamn mean it this time. Go get her and bring her here if you have to grab a fistful of that hay-colored hair and drag her up Capitol Avenue. I'll be in the building. News like this ain't nothing to dick around with, true or tale.

* * *

Five years after me and Mary Ellen went down to City Hall we bought a house in Morningside. At the time I was running a team of linesmen so damn hard you'd a thought I was back in Korea with a company of kids scared out their boot soles. Brenda was three and Jaime wasn't a year. That's when Winston Anderson finally looked me in the eye.

One June morning he come out to the shop in a Buick shining like a new penny, with white walls and a chrome headboard for a front fender. He steps out the Buick and walks up the drive like a guinea hen, heels hitting the dirt first, and I remember he was wearing red braces and one of them cream fedoras with a fat band that could hold a whole stogie snug. No more than a city minute and he has his hands on my shoulders and the scent from his morning cigar was bearing foul on my face like beagle breath. He went red-eyed and started talking some mess about a drop-mouth boy ain't got no business smudging up a shop window with his dirty palms,

and without a nickel to rub between them. On top of that, there's plenty other shop windows to smudge up than the one he built. Said it real high up.

And that's when I gave him the long and short. I told him he was right. I didn't come from nothing. I told him my daddy beat me like a dirty doormat every damn day of the week and twice on Sunday. Told him I hoed tobacco in the summer till I walked with a hunch and I chopped tobacco in the fall till my arm wouldn't go straight. I told him I had whole lot of nothing when I went into the service, but I went from PFC pissant to Sergeant in no more than one tour. I told him I got more kin than I can count and ain't hardly none of them fit to claim. But one thing I had going for me—one thing I had going for me that nobody else could match—was that I had the kindest, most selfless woman in the world for a mama. I told him that if I ever got a break in this goddamn world, if I was to ever come up off a tobacco share, if I ever made a mark, if I ever found a woman like that, there was two things I wasn't never going to be.

Poor. That was the first thing I wasn't never going to be. No matter if I had to work every damn day in the sun till the sun couldn't stand it and run for cover. No child of mine wasn't never going to chop tobacco, not as long as my skin could burn and my arms could bleed. Never.

The other thing I wasn't never going to be, no matter how rough the water got, no matter who took notice of what I'd made for myself, was a bad husband. I wasn't never going to be a shade of my daddy. Now, Mary Ellen was that woman. She had me in, dirty hands and all, and I told him that he could think whatever in hell he wanted to think about this tobacco chopper from South Georgia, but if he kept

treating his daughter like he was treating her then he wasn't nothing but a concrete fool, and that goddamn Buick couldn't put him a mile away from his own foolishness if he run it to the red with a tank of high-test.

Well he kept them red eyes of his on me a hot minute, and he didn't turn loose of my shoulders till that stoge got lit. He takes a long draw, then he says real come-back like, that in business there's one skill a man needs before anything else. It ain't summing. It ain't plotting. It ain't speculating. He said what you need to be able to do is you need to be able to look a man in the eye, to look right through his eyes, truth be told, straight down into his guts, and you need to be able to know, at the end of the day, if that man can be trusted.

He said right then he knew he could trust me.

And he could. You know I'm not perfect. You won't even hear me joke that. But I've always been true. No matter how much I might look and how much I might talk, I've always stayed true. True to Mary Ellen. True to Brenda, true to Jaime, and true to The Southeastern Energy Corporation. That's all I can do.

I want to know what you think of her story, but first I want to tell you what I think. When I looked in them Augusta-National eyes, I was convinced. There is a line, and she ain't crossed it. Not with him. I believe her. The advocacy groups are always going to rouse. They ain't got no other choice. WSB got to find something to put on between the commercials. Her at the Brasel Inn, her at Daily's, her in the suite with him, those sharp knees aimed at his—folks are going to talk, and folks don't never talk no more than when they ain't got shit they can say. She says nothing happened with him, and I believe her.

We got two legislative days left and a off-day in between. Day thirty-nine, a hustle day, and Sine Day. I want her to take a long walk. Get scarce. And all I want you to do for the next three days is go down there and lean on one of them banisters. Make up names for folks. Tell lies to Larry Temple. I don't care. Our bill is going to slide through. The Lieutenant's in the bag. Just look around and be looked at so folks know we ain't hiding.

Call me if something comes up. The last thing I want the last two days of the session is another goddamn surprise.

* * *

Who calls and tells me what's coming out? The inbred asshole I'm paying a quarter of a fortune to keep a line on one goddamn bill—the biggest bill in the history of this company outside of de-regulation? The asshole put on pay when he hadn't had nothing but a fucking coffee-fetching penny-gripping piss-on post with the County Association before? Or maybe the dumb dame that's getting six-figures without a foothold, and a career being served to her like a goddamn honey ham? Has she had the goddamn decency to darken my doorway? Hell no. She ain't even stooped down to pick up the goddamn phone. You know who calls me, you goddamn idiot? That filthy weasel-faced light-in-the-loafers shadow from WSB, that's who goddamn calls me, and that brain-dead heifer temping out there puts him straight through. She ain't put nobody straight through since Alexander Graham Bell dialed Watson to come get is head out of his ass, but she puts that crooked little asshole on through because she

thought it must be important if had to do with TV. Hell, I reckon it is pretty goddamn important when the most recognizable weasel-faced fink in the press corps says he's got *indisputable video evidence*, not to mention a taped interview with the spit-angry wife of the Speaker of the House Representatives of the State of Georgia babbling that her husband is shacking up with a lobbyist on my goddamn payroll. Goddamn it, Henderson. What the hell am I supposed to say to that? What the hell have I padded your ass for? You can't keep her in line? You can't hold her goddamn hand? You can't keep Moustache in his goddamn sack suit? Goddamn it! I don't care if Moustache sticks his dick in a goddamn hay bale, but of all the goddamn skirts sashaying under that goddamn yellow dome why in the hell has got pick ours? And she don't know no better than to hit the floor? Who in the empty hell is looking out for her? Goddamn it!

You knew it the whole time, didn't you? Goddamn it! *The Public Service Commission will not get to decide whether The Southeastern Energy Corporation will be allowed to level a rate hike for a \$90 million capital outlay expense prior to the overhead being accrued over a period of time commiserate with the cost because the legislature changed the scope of the Public Service Commission's power* might not work to go to commercial break with, but I suppose *Affair between House Speaker and Utility Lobbyist Leads to Passage of Company's Bill* might do the goddamn trick! Goddamn it! And you're the one supposed to be down there holding hands. This ain't crossing the line, this is tripping on the goddamn line and falling into a pile of flaming shit. I'm trying to end with something special, and I trusted you to see it through. Instead, you piss on my head and tell me it's raining, you bowtie twisting

son-of-a-bitch. What in the hell have you been doing down there? You and Temple just making up names for me? Old Chief Dumb Dick? The Executive ATM? What else? Go drink a quart of castor oil you ungrateful asshole, and find a way to fix this mess you made.

* * *

I've got a list of folks who won't call me back: Ray, Moustache, the girl, you. Oh, and don't let me forget my friend, the Lieutenant Governor of the great state of Georgia. But I suppose I could take one of the calls from the press corps if I really wanted to chat with an idiot.

They want to rattle on with what sells—sex—while the economy's in the ditch, the goddamn budget is lopsided, and every two-bit official from every nook and corner of the state takes home a pot of pork. All that don't matter. Those parasites have their goddamn lede.

And where is my old friend, the Lieutenant Governor? The imbecile I got elected to the second most powerful post in the state? In the antechamber cutting out shares for endorsements down the line, I suppose. He's got a future to think about. Governor one day, maybe. And while he's selling spec on the future of the state the press corps is chasing that poke-lipped cobra from the rostrum to his hole. It's a golden opportunity for our good Lieutenant Governor to take the high road and tell the viewers at home he never had any intention of changing the way the PSC does business. For what? So a utility company can function like the free enterprise it is?

Goddamn pit of vipers, that place. And across the street Denny and his new buddy the Boy Hero are jumping up and down in place to get their piece of the good favor.

Course they are.

Why, Henderson? What were you thinking turning a blind eye to something serious as that? The Brasel Inn, where every lobbyist and their first cousin cozies up? Daily's, where the pigeonstools can't stop yapping long enough to keep their steins from sweating? The suite—like shitting where you eat? Did you think? Do you even care? Do you care about the future of this company? The legacy I've built?

You see, there ain't a next time for me. No next session. Doesn't figure to be a line of natural gas from the coast to the heart of the state. No line. No legacy. What damn bit of good did deregulation do? And what of the school building with Mary Ellen's name on it. There ain't but one day left in the session, the fortieth day, when all the hens come home. The Lieutenant can do what he wants to, can't he? He can pay the man he owes his title to or he can play to John Q. Public. Either way, it looks like he's set on doing it without us getting a word in. He ain't worried about his last campaign, he's worried about his next one. Don't you leave me stranded too, Henderson. We need to get in that antechamber. Do you know someone? Anyone? Anyone with clean hands we can pull in to pitch for us? Tomorrow's Sine Die. We need a man to go down there and fix this mess.

Oh No, No, No, No, No

The March of the Picnic Tables

ELMORE: Did you see them? Did you see them? Did you see them?

DAVE: Thunder and lightning, man, I heard you the first time.

ELMORE: So you saw them?

DAVE: You know, in his book *The Nine Traits of Genuinely Genuine People*, Dr. Richard Dovie explains there are two types of people in this world: those who push doors open and let them crash back into place, and those who open and close doors with a certain measure of gracefulness.

ELMORE: I'm sorry. I am. But this is important. Don't you think?

DAVE: How should I know?

ELMORE: So you didn't see them?

DAVE: I didn't say that. Don't put words in my mouth. All I mean to say is that it's important we identify what's really important and what's not. Especially now.

ELMORE: Now? Exactly! Picnic tables, herds of them, are marching out of town, one side at a time, moving like very fat men, one side at a time. Left side, right side, left side—right out of town. It's unbelievable! Unprecedented!

DAVE: Is it?

ELMORE: To my knowledge.

DAVE: And I suppose you can tell me precisely the amount this till is going come up short at week's end, since you understand the course of history so well?

ELMORE: How would I know that? I don't even know how this is happening. I never could've imagined it. Look how they've avoided traffic, marching at off-hours, vaulting the curbsides, straddling the sidewalks, going vertical to make way for the ladies of The Garden Club. How? And why?

DAVE: You underestimate them. That's the sort of thing that can really light a fire under someone.

ELMORE: Someone? They're made of yellow pine. They aren't modal. And what happened to the telephone poles? How did they get all the telephone poles moved to one side of Main Street? It made for a clean escape. Telephone poles tend to remain in place, being yoked together as they are.

DAVE: Makes no difference. A telephone pole—a pack of telephone poles, can always be moved. There's paperwork involved, but I wouldn't call it prohibitive.

ELMORE: Lord have mercy! What can't be done with paperwork these days? Barbecue will never be the same. Remember barbecues? The charming way skinny uncles used to stand around with fat aunts? The way ripe vinegar cooked with sweet tomatoes to make the perfect sauce? What a smell! I long for the days of barbecue.

DAVE: Oh now, don't go sappy on me. They'll find a home.

-But not this home! Not this city! Can't something be done?

DAVE: That's quite enough. Step aside now. I have paying customers to see to.

ELMORE: Paying customers? What are you talking about? I'm the only one here.

DAVE: You think you're the only one here? You're not a very philosophical creature are you? Emotional, yes, but not philosophical. Step aside now, step aside.

The Municipal Swimming Pool Commits Suicide

ELMORE: Who hung these sleigh bells on the door handle?

DAVE: Who do you think hung those sleigh bells on the door handle?

ELMORE: Well, they don't put one at ease, just so you know.

DAVE: Then they're working. What do you want?

ELMORE: What do you know about the municipal swimming pool?

DAVE: Is that your way of letting me know you want to tell me about the swimming pool?

ELMORE: Not at all. What do you know?

DAVE: What could I know? I've been here keeping the store. I'm here every time you come in, am I not? Dawn to dawn, here under the fluorescents, minding the till, stocking the shelves, pleading with the ledger. I work hard.

ELMORE: I know, I know. Hanging sleigh bells with bungee cord. The municipal swimming pool has committed suicide, just in case you haven't heard. It's done for. Flat as a parking lot. Dry as a chalkboard.

DAVE: Well, it had some good days, but they were a long time ago.

ELMORE: I wouldn't go that far. Sure, the lattice about the perimeter needed a do-over and the diving board had lost its shove—but suicide? You must admit this is extreme. Extreme by any standard.

DAVE: If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'm going to slice this honeydew.

ELMORE: Be careful with that thing. Looks like it could slice a finger in less than a whisper. Health is a fleeting state these days.

DAVE: Now look who's philosophical. Have a slice and let it go.

ELMORE: No, thank you.

DAVE: No thank you? Have a slice. Stop pouting. Things change. Honeydew is an underrated melon. Grow up.

ELMORE: I prefer not.

DAVE: You don't like honeydew, do you? Whoever heard of such a thing? What kind of person doesn't like honeydew?

ELMORE: The same sort of person who wants to know how the municipal swimming pool committed suicide, I suppose. Just how, that's all.

DAVE: You know those spouts just above the level-line? The ones that pour water steadily throughout the day?

ELMORE: Of course. One in the deep end and one in the shallow end. When I was young I would hold the thick brown edge of the pool and let the heavy water stream over my hot face on its way down. It was a peaceful thing to do for spell, to take a break while the other kids screamed at the chicken fights or raced sharks & minnows.

I have fond memories of those spouts, now that you bring them up.

DAVE: Well, yesterday afternoon at closing time they started spouting wet concrete. Poured all evening. Displaced the water. Filled the pool by midnight and it was dry by lunchtime.

ELMORE: So you do know! What else? How did the wet concrete get into the pipes? Who knew it was running all night? What will the concrete slab do?

DAVE: Thunder and lightning, man, it's a concrete slab. It's not going to do anything. What are you talking about? And what do you want me to do?

ELMORE: Answer my questions! Be upfront! And post placards. I think placards ought to be posted. Placards ought to be posted as soon as possible.

DAVE: Placards? We can work on placards, I think.

The Controversial Question of Public Laughter Settled Peacefully

ELMORE: You must have made a fortune with this place by now.

DAVE: By now I have poured two fortunes into it. All my work, dawn to dawn, and nothing but a red ledger to show for it. Who knew it would turn out like this?

ELMORE: Yes, but you must have had a comfortable life so far, as lives go. Lots of wares going in and out. Wares and dry goods for the parents, knick-knacks and tchotchkies for the children. Something for everyone with a pound or a penny.

There's a certain richness of life in that. Most folks can't say they have it.

DAVE: Most folks wouldn't stand for roasting under these fluorescents. Does this swivel chair look comfortable to you? Comfortable enough to grow old in?

ELMORE: We've had some times under these fluorescent lights. Never a wasted moment. Always something to talk about.

DAVE: It doesn't take much, as far as you're concerned.

ELMORE: Remember the controversy over public laughter?

DAVE: Oh roll me to the river! Why bring that up?

ELMORE: It was heartbreaking. Demeaning and heartbreaking. Why wouldn't I bring it up? What do they say about history?

DAVE: They say it's fungible. Let it go. Stop oversimplifying.

ELMORE: Oversimplifying? What if someone told an honest-to-goodness knee-slapper, one you'd never heard before? Maybe the one about the family of beavers and the blind electrical engineer, or the one about Rhett Butler and the team of cardiologists, and just when you turn red as a cardinal, just when you're about to burst at the seams, you're told you cannot, come hell or high water, laugh out loud.

DAVE: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. Nobody ever told anyone they couldn't laugh out loud. Take that drivel to the dram shop. If we can't be honest with one another after all these years we have major problems indeed.

ELMORE: Hold on now—laughing in a barrel. That's what it came to. No laughing out loud for a certain segment of the population. "Laughter must be discharged into an empty barrel in an orderly fashion," read the ordinance. It was a violation of the very nature of laughter. At least for that segment of the population, of which I am most often included. Sometimes you've got to look past all the absurdity and call a spade a spade. You have to agree with that.

DAVE: It's the way you're putting it, as if laughing into a barrel isn't the same thing as laughing out loud, when clearly it is. While you're laughing out loud simply aim it down into a barrel, that's all. It was a peaceful resolution, considering the time.

You're being confusing on purpose. It's deceitful, and I don't need it. Truth is, things are always changing. We're always changing. But when progress infringes on basic human decency, well, I think it's time to pump the brakes. Have I not always been

decent to you? Has my door not always been open to you? And yet look at what's happening. Look around. Remember when shoppers bustled in and out of this place? Remember when the shelves were stocked so high I had to keep a shepherd's crook handy to pull the wares down from the top?

ELMORE: It is a little sparse in here, now that you mention it. But what does that have to—

DAVE: A little sparse? I don't know much longer I can take it. And your attitude! What have I ever done to you?

ELMORE: Come on now. Don't go overboard. I didn't mean it that way. I was just being nostalgic, that's all. I'm going to take a walk. You should, too. Get out from behind that till sometime. It will do you some good.

DAVE: Thank you very much but I will decide what will and what won't be good for me. I've done just fine so far. Close the door with a little gracefulness on your way out, if that's not too much to ask. Good day, now. Good day.

The Topographical Map-In-Progress Bites The Conscientious Cartographer

ELMORE: You're closing up shop.

DAVE: I take back all those things I said about you not being so bright.

ELMORE: Why?

DAVE: And now I take that back, too.

ELMORE: Is it already time for retirement?

DAVE: Retirement? Who retires these days? When the coroner comes for me he'll have to find out where I do business. He can ask you where I do business, if he doesn't already know.

ELMORE: : Why would he ask me? I won't know what to tell him. Not unless you hurry up and die. You're on your way out. Look at all these boxes. It didn't seem like you had this many wares and dry goods in the place. Wouldn't it make more sense to put all the wares and dry goods on clearance rather than lugging the boxes to a new shop?

DAVE: For someone who's never owned a business you certainly have plenty of notions about how to run one.

ELMORE: I have more business sense than to go into business.

DAVE: That's the smartest thing you've ever said. This place has run me into quicksand.

ELMORE: Is there anything I can do?

DAVE: You can box up those pinwheels.

ELMORE: Anything else? I don't want to mishandle your knick-knacks. You'd probably want compensation in the event of an accident.

DAVE: I should have known. Then entertain me. Talk to me about the conscientious cartographer, since current events seem to interest you so.

ELMORE: The who?

DAVE: The conscientious cartographer. Evidently, she was constructing a topographical map of the city when she was viciously and quite suddenly bitten.

ELMORE: Bitten by what?

DAVE: By the topographical map-in-progress.

ELMORE: That's unsettling, but how much could it matter, really? It doesn't seem that paper jaws, even 120lb matted paper jaws, could do much injury.

DAVE: Well there's injury and then there's injury. It must be difficult to go on cartographing after that kind of insult.

ELMORE: Perhaps. But sooner or later we all have to learn to push ahead through insults. They say the way forward is with a broken heart.

DAVE: They? Who is *they*? What kind of people do you spend time with when you're not here? This conscientious cartographer was doing her job, admirably, by all accounts, and the very thing she was bringing into existence tries to bite off her arm. It's a crime of the highest order, if you ask me. Makes me wonder whether or not she had an X-acto knife nearby. She had a right to take desperate measures, if you ask me.

ELMORE: What kind of cartographer did you say she was?

DAVE: Conscientious. I read she has an international reputation for conscientiousness.

ELMORE: Well, I'd like to hear more about it, but I don't see any reason to jump to desperate measures. Here, let me give you a hand.

DAVE: *Now* you want to help.

ELMORE: Yes. I've wanted to take down these sleigh bells for quite some time.

The Campus Turns Morose, Makes Awkward Small Talk

ELMORE: It's too quiet here. It sounds like something heartbreaking could happen at any moment.

DAVE: Something told me you'd find my new place, sooner or later.

ELMORE: The sleigh bells didn't make the trip? This place is very—I don't know, wide? Clean?

DAVE: Customers spend more money in clean environments, according to market research. These days I analyze market research. It's a new approach to the job, analysis. But there's no less minding, stocking and pleading, mind you. It never gets any easier, you know?

ELMORE: I don't know. I'm retired, and I'm enjoying every minute of it.

DAVE: Retired? You? From what?

ELMORE: Awfully presumptive of you. I've worked my whole life.

DAVE: Doing what? And for whom?

ELMORE: Again with the assumptions. Anyway, I miss it, but there's not much time for looking back, is there?

DAVE: I take a peek every blue moon. Nothing worth dwelling on, really, but sometimes I can't help myself.

ELMORE: At our age it's difficult not to look back.

DAVE: I saw on the television set that the campus is acting very peculiar these days.

ELMORE: It always has, to my understanding.

DAVE: Not when I was there. According to the set, the campus has turned rather morose. Said nearly every one of the buildings has assumed a rather Bohemian look,

leaning against the elms wearily, as if they aren't in it for the long term. But the strangest thing, I think, is that the campus has begun making awkward small talk.

ELMORE: Well, that would be a new kind of peculiar. At whom is this awkward small talk supposedly directed?

DAVE: Didn't say, but I get the sense it was rather aimless, like the grumblings of rummies and poets. Nothing to be minded, I gather. It's more the presence of the awkward small talk than the actual content of it.

ELMORE: Is there anything that can be done about it?

DAVE: I think so. A good razing ought to do the trick. Maybe even just the threat of it. But then nobody asked me.

ELMORE: Yes. Yes, I suppose that might do it. But somehow I doubt anything much will be done. It doesn't seem these sorts of things are taken seriously at all by the powers that be.

DAVE: The powers that be! Don't get me started! I stew about it, but what good does it do?

ELMORE: I wouldn't know. After all this time, I wouldn't know. All I've learned is half of what I don't know. Except for where the picnic tables made off. I saw a few outside. It looks like they came here, outside of the city, all those years ago. Now I know. And now you're here. Where it's clean and wide and too quiet.

DAVE: Well, they had to go somewhere. Should we listen to some music? I've got a sound system here. Pipes music all throughout the store, even into the bathrooms.

Market research shows shoppers are comforted by piped-in music.

ELMORE: I imagine there are barbecues here from time to time. I bet that sweet smell of vinegar and tomatoes rolls around the place and pulls you in. Have you noticed it?

DAVE: I'm going to put on a record. Do you like Steppenwolf?

ELMORE: Steppenwolf?

DAVE: Steppenwolf, the band. Never heard of them? Well, never mind. You'll enjoy Steppenwolf. Everyone likes Steppenwolf.

The New-ish Apartment Towers Have Grown Mighty Haughty

ELMORE: Hello.

DAVE: Hello? Are you not feeling well?

ELMORE: I've been better. I've been worse, but I've also been better. I am thinking of leaving the city. I am thinking of leaving the city for good, as you have.

DAVE: I wouldn't blame you one jot. But why now? After all these years?

ELMORE: Well, there are the tolls. The tolls and the ordinances, which seem to be particularly petty of late. But the worst are the apartment towers. They've grown mighty haughty, much too haughty for my taste.

DAVE: The new-ish apartment towers? Or all the apartment towers?

ELMORE: The new-ish apartment towers mostly, but it does seem to be spreading.

DAVE: It didn't take long, did it?

ELMORE: Not at all. They grow up fast.

DAVE: And high. Fast and high. It's a recipe for haughty-ness, sure as the world.

ELMORE: Sure as the world. We should have seen it coming.

DAVE: Well, I'm always in here, remember? Whether here or there, I'm always here, dawn to dawn. And it's always dawn under the fluorescents. I've spent a million dawns under them, or only one dawn—it's all the same.

ELMORE: You know, these fluorescents seem blue-ish to me. Cobalt, if you will. The fluorescents in your shop downtown were perhaps a little more green-ish. Seafoam, you might say.

DAVE: Sappy, again. No thank you. Fluorescents are fluorescent. Dawn to dawn and dawn again. Variances, I find, are as unrecognizable as our erstwhile city.

ELMORE: Maybe. There are unrecognizable parts, of course, yet there are other parts that are unmistakable. A bit slanted, perhaps, yet oddly familiar.

DAVE: Maybe you're right. It's possible that's what gets me so. There *is* something I recognize, something familiar. But there is also something foreign. I am surprised, at my age, how I sometimes yearn for the way things used to be. Things didn't seem so good at the time.

ELMORE: I agree, only I am not surprised. I'm beyond surprise at this point, I'm sorry to report. That's not to say I am beyond disappointment. I am not beyond disappointment. In fact, I'm disappointed rather often, only not surprised.

DAVE: We've both gone sappy.

ELMORE: Perhaps.

DAVE: Philosophical.

ELMORE: Maybe.

DAVE: Two old, helpless, philosophical friends.

ELMORE: Is that the way you see it?

DAVE: I think it's one way to see it.

ELMORE: It is one way to see it.

DAVE: Might as well.

ELMORE: ...

DAVE: ...

ELMORE: Might as well.

DAVE: ...

ELMORE: ...

DAVE: Those new-ish apartment towers, haughty as they are, what do they do?

ELMORE: They stand.

DAVE: They just stand there?

ELMORE: Like fresh-cut cliffs.

DAVE: Well, thunder and lightning.

ELMORE: It could be worse.

DAVE: Yes, but we can try to avoid them, I suppose. We can avoid them as much as possible.

ELMORE: And when we can't avoid them, I guess we'll have to come to terms.

DAVE: Thunder and lightning. I suppose we'll have to come to terms, somehow.

ELMORE: Yes, somehow. You, on your terms. Me, my terms.

DAVE: Yes. Somehow.

The Festival of the Dying Trees

--- 1 ---

Geautreux, a motherless transplant to Central Georgia from the Mississippi Delta, stands curbside on Forsythe Street and vends *The Macon Star-Democrat* in denim shorts, gold-plated fronts, and hi-tops blooming with fat, fluorescent-orange laces. His lungs sound younger than his voice:

“Springtime. Days stretch out. Nights scrunch in. Too pretty out to stay in. Too much pollen to stay out. And soon’s you feel the pollen you smell the buds. Here they come, there they go. Don’t stay long. Three days. That’s it. Two days and then the dying. Life like a weekend. Not for me, but for y’all. Life’s a weekend.

“Friday morning, Opening Day, Pedal Parade. Line-ups on page eight, facing the message from the Lady in charge. Karen Breckenridge. Smiles even when the floats won’t budge. Acts like it’s all petals and parades, like everyday is Friday. Here they come. Bands march right downtown, step high by the dying trees. Trucks dressed up, trailers decked out. Stomp dancing. Paper dragons. Jugglers. Devil sticks. New blooms on the trees.

“Then Friday night. Bourbon Cokes. Beer. Firecrackers. Fire eaters. Rock show. Funk show. Step show. Bon show. What? Bon show. Bon show for the bigwigs, from the same place as the dying trees. What else you want to know? It’s in the preview issue. Pay your money and read. The Festival of the Dying Trees.”

Detective Hotchkiss rubs sugar from a raspberry croissant from his bristly moustache and greets his partner, “Coffee?”

Detective Greene’s father was one of the first six black police officers in Atlanta, and he went straight to the force after high school, but he’s never eaten like it. “Detective Hotchkiss, you and I’ve been partnered for seventeen years, and a one-armed man could the number of cups of coffee you’ve seen me drink on his fingers.”

“I am aware of your questionable eating habits, Detective Greene, but I’ve never offered you certifiable shade-grown Yergecheffe brew before. Look at that color. Smooth as the Chattahoochee. Whiff that break. Aroma of a ripe beet. This coffee is fit for Marco Polo, Detective Greene, and it doesn’t matter if it’s served jump-out-the-bath hot or icicle cold. A greater complexity unveils the more time you spend with it. Like a Winslow Homer, in that way. American art and Ethiopian coffee—both wild and underappreciated, in my view. Turn up your nose if it suits you, old friend, but consider this: you’ll never have the chance to taste this particular coffee on this particular morning again. Nobody lives forever. It’s a day unlike any other, Detective Greene.”

Detective Greene shrugs, says, “Just like all the others, Detective Hotchkiss.” Greene drops a folder thin as a silk scarf on Detective Hotchkiss’s crowded desk. “Chief Dewey wants us up on this by the time he arrives.”

“That’ll be easier than I wish it was. That’s all we’ve got?”

“For now. Maybe the Chief’ll have more.”

--- 3 ---

As he does every Friday morning, Pete Ehrlich, Executive VP of Marketing for The National Pulp Corporation, peers into a 10x mirror set in bronze and plucks his nostril hairs with precision Rubis tweezers. He pulls back the loose red skin of his lips with his free hand, and pulls until he's satisfied.

Men my age, he thinks to himself, who fail to pluck even the wildest runners, aren't worth rotwood, and I fail to see how even the dimmest women can give them a lick of attention.

--- 4 ---

It's only the first day of The Festival of the Dying Trees, and already Sheree, the oval-shaped clerk at the Commodore Inn, has had enough of the guests. Another one approaches and casts a look at the countertop. She lights a filterless cigarette, blows out a puff of gray smoke, and says, "Name?"

"Makeesha Steele."

"Are you Makeesha Steele?"

"That's what it says here," says Lil, and she turns over a Tennessee driver's license to prove it.

"One room?"

“Double beds. My daughter is with me.” Sheree did not look up far enough to notice the young, striking young woman behind the older woman. When she does, she sees a distant face, as if the girl’s heart is elsewhere.

“And will you be with us for the whole weekend?”

“Doesn’t it say so on my booking?”

“Smoking or non?”

“Well, how does the booking read? Shall I come around there and punch it in myself?”

Sheree squints her eyes and pretends to study something on the computer screen. Wonderful things to put the guests in their places, these computers, because no one can hear what they’re saying. She could pretend to study the computer screen for hours. Sometimes she even moves the mouse a bit, makes a shape with the cursor, just to add a touch of drama to the stand off.

Lil loses the waiting game, “Smoking. And what else? What time is breakfast?”

“Lady, this isn’t that kind of place, and I don’t need this job that bad. Now how do you want to pay?”

Sheree runs Makeesha Steele’s credit card and then returns it to Lil, who snatches it like a starving prisoner snatches a plate of hot food, and leaves the lobby in such a hurry she doesn’t realize a small black canister has fallen from her bag to the grimy tile floor.

Sheree gives the mouse a twirl, thinks to herself: Be careful when you invite the whole world to town because the whole world might just show up.

In her fourteen years in charge of The Festival of the Dying Trees, Ms. Karen Breckenridge has dealt with more pleasant dignitaries than the Japanese Ambassador to Washington, but he is who he is, and this year he has finally accepted her invitation. So too have the Mexican Consular General, a Belgian attaché, the Mayor of Dakar, and parties from South Korea, Cote d'Ivoire, Costa Rica, Macedonia, Antigua, Sweden, Trinidad & Tobago, as well as Diane Hull of the Ottawa Convention & Tourism Bureau, who can be depended on every year.

Truth be told, she would pass on a dinner date with most of them, , but what a sight they are at the Bon Odori, what a curiosity in the Founders Gala. And she herself, set amongst all those dignitaries, wearing the customary pink blazer of her position (which is cut for a man), grinning like a duchess, raising her eyebrows at stories she'd be pressed to recount a moment later, nodding to concur with notions she would disagree with if she could cut meaning from such thick accents. She is not a pretty woman, but she is a woman who can pull off a pretty festival in a hailstorm without so much as showing an ankle—all firm handshakes and chamber-of-commerce boosterism. Locals brag that the Governor would love to have her Rolodex.

But they laugh into their sleeves when they see her drive by in the blossom-pale Cadillac that comes as a perk of the post. They say it does not suit the square-shouldered demeanor of “*Mr.* Breckenridge.” They say she parks where she pleases.

It does the trick of distinguishing her around town. They also say she doesn't need the job but it contents her to believe the job needs her. A celebration of cultures pleases her not for the chance to embrace other societies, but for the opportunity to be embraced as the jewel of her own.

--- 6 ---

“Hotchkiss, Greene, those chairs want y'all to sit in them. Well, hold on now—pull the door to first, Greene, what I got to say ain't for the blotter. That's right, have a seat now. You haven't got all day. You've read the report?”

Greene answers, “Young woman, twenty-two years old, vanished sometime between Sunday night and Monday morning. Last seen leaving the Buckhead café where she waits tables at approximately twenty-three hundred. Never showed for a ten o'clock shift Monday morning. Studio apartment off Cascade Road showed no signs of force, but someone left in a hurry.”

Hotchkiss adds, “Caribbean immigrant, it seems, though we've three different reports of from where exactly. Bahamas, Virgin Islands, one co-worker said Jamaica, Little odd, don't you think?”

“There's not a lot we know for sure, but all of it's odd, gentlemen. Lots of mystery surrounding this girl, Fern.”

“Fern,” Hotchkiss echoes. “Did you know Sigmund Freud was afraid of ferns?”

“Not surprising,” says Chief Dewey. “That much blow’ll do a number on you, I don’t care how clever you are. Co-workers said she was a stand-offish girl. Kept to herself. Hoed her own row, so to speak. Something else you may have not read between the lines.”

Chief Dewey hands the detectives a photograph.

“Wow,” says Greene

“Breathtaking,” says Hotchkiss.

“I bet you a Buffalo Nickel you ain’t the first two with that reaction.”

“A goddess,” says Greene.

“A muse,” says Hotchkiss.

“A problem,” says Chief Dewey. “She’s either got one or she’s behind one.”

He hands the detectives a second photograph.

“Interesting.”

“Now that’s odd, ain’t it?” asks Chief Dewey.

“Similar,” says Hotchkiss.

“But different,” says Greene.

“If you ask me, it looks like the same woman—rode hard and put up wet every day for about twenty years,” says Chief Dewey.

“Her mother?” asks Greene.

“Or some other relative. They were spotted early yesterday evening at an exit off Interstate 75, an hour south of the city, carrying on like a ghost and the crypt keeper. The older woman asked about finding Thai food in Macon.”

“Thai food!” squeals Hotchkiss. “Fantastic!”

“Is that it?” asks Greene, his shoulders slumping.

“The mother—or, the older woman—she bought a pack of those black cigarettes.”

“Cloves?” asks Greene.

“Cloves? No, that doesn’t sound right. But you figure it out. Y’all are the detectives.”

“There is a special place in my heart for Thai food,” says Hotchkiss, one hand hovering between his heart and his belly. “If I have one taste of Tom Ka Kai and I go on a tear. I can’t stop eating it for weeks. It’s always a quandary if I should even start down that road.”

Chief Dewey hands Detective Greene a slip of paper.

“A list of the Thai restaurants in Macon, Georgia?”

“All two of ‘em.”

“Maybe I should have hot and sour soup instead. Or just go with some sort of salad. Or the larb gai. Never a bad idea to get the larb gai. Oh, goodness at the choices! Either of you have any suggestions?”

“I suggest you two catch the first thing smoking to Macon.”

--- 7 ---

Ricky Benford, the easily excitable Macon City Manager, in a tizzy, phones Mrs. Breckenridge. “Hoodlums have graffiti-ed a stretch of South Forsyth! From the Central Bank to Cochran Realty, and four shops in between! They’ve muraled a

convertible passenger train carrying assassins! Assassins of every stripe! With seven shades of Krylon! Massad operatives, Sandanistan Guerillas, Masai Warriors, ninjas and Knights Templar! Who would think to do such a thing! What magnificent derelicts! And what to do about it? The Festival of the Dying Trees Begins today!”

“Let’s start by toning down the screaming in my ear a notch. Then call Sheriff Calhoun. Tell him he’ll trade extra visitation time to the most harmless county inmates in exchange for a good scrubbing down of the brickwork. Now get a hold on yourself, Benford.”

Another phone call come in from Eduardo Perez, facilities manager at The Little Palace, Macon’s premier performance space, and site of tonight’s Bon Odori dance performance by the troop from Tokyo. “Ms. Karen, we found a short in the soundsystem fusebox last night. The string section mics are dead as doormats. We can’t send phantom power through the XLRs!”

“You’re not speaking my language, Eddie, but call Councilman Peters at home. Tell him I told you to. He’s got a brother in Milledgeville who owns an electronics shop. Take a city car if he can’t get them here.”

Ginger Wallace, manager at Heart of Georgia Inn, sends Ms. Breckenridge a tetchy message, including the phrase “bitchy little magpie,” complaining that Bon star Umuno Hei is insufferable with his complaints about the accommodations. “I’m on the verge of booting him out by what little butt he’s got, Ms. Breckenridge,” goes the penultimate line of the note.

Remembering the star’s inexplicable, near girlish delight with toffee, Ms. Breckenridge dials her assistant, Amy, and directs the young redhead to deliver a

heaping dish of individually wrapped toffee drops from the office stash of Sweeney's Sweets. "He'll be so high on sugar he'll forget that dreadful aqua wallpaper."

"Eerie you'd think of that this morning, Ms. Breckenridge," says Amy. "I've just opened the official letter from Sweeney's confirming they'll end their sponsorship after this year's festival. They claim business is in the hog trough. Entertaining Pete Ehrlich of National Pulp just became the most important order of business for the weekend, awful as it sounds."

"Amy, I'm still in charge here, so I'll decide what sounds awful and what doesn't, thank you very much. Get that toffee dish over straight away, and stop staring at me with your mouth slung low and your hair slung lower. Girl, I swear by night, if you moved any slower you'd be going backwards."

--- 8 ---

Detective Hotchkiss, a stout man who usually exudes an equally hefty jolliness, is vexed with indecision, and thumps the menu. "How's the tom ka kai?" he says to the slight young waitress.

The young lady nods.

"Fresh galanga?"

The young lady smiles.

"I'd eat a pair of saddle oxfords if you stewed 'em with fresh galanga."

The young lady looks to Detective Greene.

"The minced chicken salad, please."

The young lady looks to Detective Hotchkiss. “Main dish?”

“Would you suggest the pad see ew or the yellow curry with beef?”

“Lobster special.”

“Lobster? Detective Hotchkiss makes his most polite grimace. “I don’t typically think ‘lobster’ when I think ‘Thai food,’ you know? And I don’t typically think ‘eighteen dollars’ when I think ‘lunch’. Why don’t we just do the pad see ew. And your tom ka kai, of course.”

The waitress looks at Detective Greene and asks, “Lobster special?”

“The salad will do.”

The young girl wraps her arms around their menus and retreats to the kitchen.

“Jeanette and I saw Vertigo on Tuesday night,” Detective Hotchkiss says, sipping his ice water with lime. “The Plaza Theatre is doing a Hitchcock series through May. It’s sublime. What a sense of pace he had! What a slow hand! What creeping tension all the way through the film, Detective Greene. Does this water taste a little funny to you?”

Detective Greene says “No. I hadn’t thought to taste the water.” He retrieves the photographs from the slim folder, one of each of the women. He holds them side-by-side. His middle-aged wrinkles deepen as he squints to compare the pictures in the low-light of the restaurant. Both women have strong faces with jaws like wishbones. The younger woman is fairer, with finer hair, but she has the melancholy expression of a woman who has already lived a life of long burdens.

The older woman has something else, a strange countenance, a squint around her small eyes that has permanently creased into sharp crows’ feet, and a dryness

about her features. She seems like a traveler, wearing a billowy jacket with enough pockets to carry whatever she may need along the way. With her squinted eyes and sunken face, it seems that whatever she has been looking for, she has been looking for it for a long, long time.

When the girl returns with the entrees Detective Greene shows her the photographs. Immediately the detectives see a look of recognition in the girl's face, but she hesitates, then shrugs.

“You have seen these women,” says Detective Hotchkiss.

The young girl scratches her arm.

Detective Hotchkiss looks to Detective Greene.

“What do you want?”

“Lobster special,” says the girl.

Detective Hotchkiss grimaces. “Okay. I'll take a lobster special.”

The girl looks to Detective Greene.

Detective Greene shakes his head. “Make it two, if that's the going rate.”

When the girl returns with two sad lobsters she informs the detectives that the two women did indeed dine at Thaiphoon last night. The young women said nothing, and the older woman said little more, but she did make it clear they enjoyed the meal so much they might stop in again on their way out of town Sunday night.

“Then they're not going past Macon,” says Detective Greene, tucking a stiff napkin into his collar.

“Festival then,” says the girl.

“Festival?”

“Festival of Dying Trees.”

--- 9 ---

Karen Breckenridge has said that Cody Peale is nothing but breath and britches and that he could handle a weed whacker and not much else, but this weekend the Director of The Festival of the Dying Trees has a job she thinks the thirty-year old adolescent can handle. “Honey,” she says, “Why don’t you take Otis McGuffey and this envelope stuffed with twenties and lose a weekend at the Pearl in Mississippi?”

Cody peeks up at her from, his eyes almost invisible underneath his ball cap. She goes on, “They’ve got bourbon hurricanes and one-armed bandits to yank on till you and Otis can’t stand or say for sure you’re sitting. Keep what you don’t spend, but don’t slide, step or crawl on the white dirt of Central Georgia before Monday morning.”

“Thank you, Miss Karen, but I aim to see the fire-eaters this year. Last year it rained buckets and a fellow biting down on smoldering sticks ain’t nothing to look at. Can’t Otis get on with somebody else?”

“Not if you want to keep your maintenance job with the City he can’t.”

By the standards of Central Georgia, Karen Breckenridge is a wealthy woman, but her relations, an ancient family of evaporated planting money, have gone the way of the plantation—they’ve vanished from sight. Vanished, all of them, except Otis, a distant cousin who is nothing if not conspicuous, especially in his familiar wobbly pose, both elbows bent and kissing a bottle. Somehow he followed Karen around like

a long shadow—a shadow that never got the message of any bottle, no matter how many bottles he saw the bottom of. Last year he tried to hotwalk a deputy's mount into the parade route, and that's excitement she could do without this year.

Truth be told, Otis is only a distant cousin, but as they say in Macon of lonely women like Karen, "Close is as close comes," and, "Her money's got family."

Cody Peale spits a geranium bush, pulls his rough hands from the pockets of his jeans, says he'll take the job and keep it.

--- 10 ---

Pete Ehrlich says to his Assistant VP, Jon Phelps: "That broad told me a hundred thousand people show up for this shindig and I'll be damned if they ain't all on this highway." And then, through the intercom, "Driver, how far to downtown?"

The driver says less than ten miles.

"Well one and nine are about as close as you and me, so that don't tell me much. Jon, this woman's name again?"

"Karen Breckenridge."

"Don't forget it. I've been here before, you know. I couldn't have been any bigger than a two-by-four. My folks had a thing for these small-town street deals. That's all it was then. But somebody's kept it like kudzu. What's-her-name, I suppose."

"Karen Breckenridge."

“You’re listening. The locals have all these lies about why the trees die, you know. I don’t remember any of the stories, but I remember hearing that they pick which story to tell based on what kind of person they believe they’re telling it to.”

“I’ve only heard one.”

“Which one?”

“There was a boy prince whose parents were killed by a warlock in the form of an eagle. The warlock was hired by the man who became the prince’s regent. All along the regent plotted to usurp the prince’s throne, and the young prince knew it, but was powerless to stop him. The prince fled the castle, taking with him his father’s ring, because he knew the people would only follow the wearer of the ring. The royal guard was loyal to the regent, and they gave chase, finally surrounding the prince at the base of large tree with tremendous white blossoms. As the dogs snarled and the guards threatened, the tree was moved by the pleas of the prince. The tree split open, and when the prince stepped inside the tree healed instantly. Terrified of the powerful magic they had seen, the royal guard retreated to the castle without the prince or the ring. Without the ring the people did not respect the regent, and he had to be overthrown by a revolution. Locked forever inside the tree, the prince ached for his people, who suffered greatly during the civil war, and his sadness and shame at abandoning them manifested through the tree. It shrunk and gnarled, and its pale blossoms, which had previously held their shape for the better part of a season, withered and fell away no sooner than they flowered. And they’ve done so ever since.”

Pete Ehrlich scowls at his gold Cartier wristwatch. “That story’s too long to be any good. And we haven’t moved one or nine miles in the time it took to tell it.”

--- 11 ---

Lil switches on two floorlamps, drapes diffusion over the shades, and drapes a phlox-colored cotton sheet over the bathroom mirror. The fabric is so thin that Lil’s silhouette is visible in the mirror as she tacks the material into place.

Lil removes the comforter from the bed nearest the bathroom sink, wads it, dumps it into a near corner, says, “Nasty. They never wash these.”

Lil takes the girl by her shoulders and says, “Shower.” The girl undresses.

From her bag Lil removes twenty-one votive candles in three scents, a soft leather pouch with several small vials of liquid, a sprig of lavender and a sprig of juniper, a wooden mixing bowl, and another sheet of fabric. This sheet is muslin, sheer and soft. Lil lights the candles and turns off one of the floorlamps. Fragrances of mustard, salt and anise drift from the melting wax and begin to comingle in the room as the girl showers herself.

Lil empties two of the vials into the mixing bowl, stirs the ingredients, adds clippings from the juniper, and pours in a third vial in. This one has golden liquid. She whisks the mixture, introducing air until it thickens to a paste, then lets it cool and congeal as the girl finishes her shower.

When her body is patted dry and her hair is unfurled, Lil has her lie down naked on the muslin. Never did Lil imagine the girl would grow so long and clear,

some parts clearer than others, all of them so young, like a wicked little water nymph cursed with beauty and eager to share it.

Her belly is no bigger than a Bible, thinks Lil, as she begins to rub the mixture upon it. The mixture stings Lil's hands as she spreads it evenly over the girl's taut skin.

The girl's eyes are closed, but Lil can tell she is not asleep. Lil begins to hum an old island tune the girl might remember from many years ago. Maybe the girl remembers it from the last time Lil bathed her, when she could carry the girl draped over her shoulder. It's a simple tune, lively but peaceful, and it coaxes whispers from the girl's lips that Lil cannot decipher.

Lil leans in closer. The girl whispers again. "If I were a stocking I would turn myself inside out."

--- 12 ---

Cody Peale's pocket is warm from the wad of twenties and he's whistling "You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog," when he finds Otis McGuffey leaning against the blue brick of Raekstraw's Food for the Soul. Otis's hand grips a bottle wrapped in a McDonald's bag.

"Otis," says Cody, a firm hand on the padded shoulder of his friend's wash-and-wear suit, "Let's lose a little time this weekend at the craps table? Me and you. What do you say? Take a chance on chance?"

“Hands off, by god. I don’t dance with men when I’m drunk, and I don’t dance with nobody when I’m sober.”

“I didn’t ask you to dance, Otis, and I know you ain’t sober. Now raise up off this brick and let’s get to the tables before my pocket burns right off.”

“It ain’t all that hot out here,” Otis slurs, and hits the bottle. “Cody, you worse’n a pregnant prima donna sometimes.”

“Otis, I didn’t say nothing about being hot. I’m saying I’ve got a wad of money to blow this weekend. Me and you. Let’s get out of town before Sheriff Calhoun comes through and drags you to the tank.”

“Ain’t going nowhere, and spit on you for trying to see to it otherwise. If you’re looking for somebody to give you a fight you’ll find Otis McGuffey’s a generous man, by god. You can print that in *Star-Democrat*, if it suits you. All Macon be served to know it.”

“We ain’t talking about Macon, Otis. I’m a get us a suite in the finest casino hotel looking down its nose at Pearl, Mississippi.”

“Pearl Mississippi! That heifer dropped a milk crate on my kneecap and stole my collection of Allman Brothers tapes. I’ve got a couple words for her, by god.”

Otis turns the bottle up with attitude, almost catches the last drop with his lower lip. “Couple good words I been sitting on for a while.”

“Otis, we’re going river-gambling in Mississippi this weekend. They got plenty of pretty girls there that don’t give two clanks about your Allman Brothers tapes. Come on now, let me buy you some drinks.”

“Drinks? By god, old lady, why didn’t you say so to start with?” Otis seizes Cody’s arm, works his way off the apple box. “If you’re sure you ought to be drinking, pregnant and already in the heat phase.”

--- 13 ---

Detective Hotchkiss guides the steering wheel with the bottom of his wrist and squints at the glare from the hoods of all the idling cars, says, “On this of all weekends—for a big little town like this to have half the world over. Who could’ve known?”

“Two veteran detectives?” deadpans Detective Greene, “If not their Chief, who happens to have been raised down here.”

“You may have a point, but he’s been in Atlanta longer than Piedmont Park, and I don’t for one stay abreast on the tourism trends of Macon. What’s your excuse?”

“If the whole world got together and made a date to fry catfish I’d end up on the other end of town at the barbecue pit.”

“Let me pull on the shoulder so I can reach for my handkerchief. The world is having a catfish fry without you. It must be the anti-Greene conspiracy everyone knows is bubbling.”

“I’m not fishing for sympathy, and close the gap to that de Ville. All I mean is I’m not in step, so don’t ask me.”

“Well I need you in step, so while you’re sitting over there driving with your eyes, think about how to get with it, not about how you got without it.” Detective Hotchkiss’s eyes flick as he searches the blocks of Riverside Drive for another hotel. “Tell me, do we think they’re here for the festival, or for other business and this is just coincidence?”

“We’re not in a position to believe in coincidence. But all we have to go on is what the Thai girl said. For all we know, they may be clear to Tampa by now, and we’re wasting a Friday in this gridlock.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“If I had a better idea I’d say it.”

“Well you’ve been tucked in your seat over there quiet as Stone Mountain since we cleared Atlanta. I can’t tell if you’re looking inward or just looking toward the weekend, but you’re looking. I’m sorry if the sun isn’t shining on your side of the highway today, but I don’t care for sitting in traffic with a lump of granite.”

“A blind man could see what I’m looking for. No need to jaw about it. And why don’t we check in with Chief Dewey before we settle on Macon? Maybe call him from a hotel phone.”

“Because I need coffee first. And don’t turn to stone too soon. You’ve got time to pair up. Jeanette didn’t agree to settle for me until I was thirty-seven years young.”

“That was fifteen years ago, Detective Hotchkiss, and I’m a year older than you.”

“Then you’re not rushing into things. You could do it fast or you could do it right. Now cinch your seatbelt. I can see a java sign down the stretch if I can see my own knuckles.”

--- 14 ---

Perched on a felt-covered chair bolted to a trailer, among a art student-constructed grove of miniature paper cherry trees, surrounded with this year’s squad of adorable Blossom Girls, Karen Breckenridge floats down Forsyth Avenue in the Petal Parade, and beams a smile at spectators. She alternates between her hands a queenly wave in the direction of neighbors she wouldn’t even nod to in the supermarket.

She follows the South Macon High drum corps; the pre-debutante Petal Bearers; the Sister City Flag Teams; the floats of the Sister Cities; BSA Troops 85, 119, 631 and 850; the Belgian Cultural Exchange; the bouqueted Ms. Cherry Blossom, Miss Teen Cherry Blossom and Junior Miss Cherry Blossom; the brocaded Junior League of Central Georgia; the Greater Macon Fellowship of Christian Athletes; The Sons of Italy; the Macon-Bibb Consolidated Fire Dept.; VFW Local 626; the Sons of Jubilee Choir; the Central Georgia State Chapter Alpha Phi Alpha Step Team, National Champion of HBC Step Shows, Ltd.; etc.; etc.; she waves to a throng eight-thousand thick, many of them munching on Sweeney’s Sweets.

--- 15 ---

Pete Ehrlich slides a standard room key to Jon Phelps and explains, “For some reason they only had one suite on reserve for us, but I hear your room has a mini-fridge.”

The Marketing VP of the Fortune 500 timber company doesn’t acknowledge the bellhop following him with his leather bags to the Presidential suite until he flips the lanky young man a fifty-cent coin and says, “Looks like this bed has been taken for a spin. Send one of your ladies up with crisp sheets.”

Ehrlich switches on the television, spins the volume dial down, mixes himself a gin and tonic with no ice, and undresses. He starts a warm shower and drains the gin and tonic in four gulps. Between each gulp he pauses, admires himself, in the bathroom mirror, pale and flaccid. He is cut well for a man near sixty, though his face is permanently chapped in a swatch that cuts over his gin-blossomed nose from cheek to cheek. His hair is the color of bad teeth, and is long in the front but is swooped to the left in a permanent wave.

He empties the ice from his empty highball glass in the sink, and leaves the door opens as he begins to shower. He uses shampoo as body wash because he thinks it is good for his pores, and as he cleans himself he belts out both Danny and Sandy’s parts of “You’re the One That I Want” from the *Grease* soundtrack.

He sings, “I better shape up, because you need a man—I need a man who can keep me satisfied,” shakes to dry a little, and hops out of the bathroom.

“*Dios mios!*” shrieks the maid, when he appears beside the half-made bed, still pale but not longer flaccid.

Ehrlich slaps his hands on his naked hips, says, “Don’t play innocent sister. I was trying to take a shower when you busted in. Now pull that sheet back one more time and finish what you’ve started.”

The maid throws out her arms, scurries around the bed, but Ehrlich blocks her. He puts his hands on her chest, says, “Now sister, let’s act like grown-ups, *comprende?*”

Boxed in, the woman lunges, rolls over the bed, dives off the other side.

“*Comprende!*” shouts Ehrlich, but he can’t pin her down. “You’re a jumpy little mackerel. Now let’s work out some of that anxiety, señora.”

The maid tumbles away from the bed, rolls across the floor, and jumps to her feet. She scrambles toward the door and slides out before the VP can catch her.

As Ehrlich reaches the door it slams shut, vibrates in his face like it’s mocking him. He screams back into its face, “*Ombliigo!*”

He takes a deep breath, takes a long look towards the foggy mirror, and mixes another gin and tonic. Again, he shouts in the direction of the door, “Bring me more ice!”

--- 16 ---

In the cramped parking of lot of a 24-hour coffee shop called Lack ‘n Happy, Detective Greene leans his head against the glass of the passenger window of Detective Hotchkiss’s Oldsmobile sedan, and he looks outward. He sees a man he guesses to be maybe fifteen years older than himself, maybe more, perhaps nearing

seventy even. The man has a cane that is pronged at the bottom, and he negotiates a step up to the small patio at the entrance of the shop. The step is painted school-bus yellow on its vertical edge.

It takes the man a dreadfully long time, but Detective Greene sees that he eventually makes it up the step by first getting the pronged-bottom of the cane up top, and then rocking his weight moving in unison upward and onward. The old man is alone.

Negotiating the door proves more difficult for the old man. It must be pulled, not pushed, and the man has a hard time stepping back far enough away from the door to give himself enough room to get inside it, while also keeping control of the handle. The cane, in this case, seems to be a hindrance. There is nothing convenient to do with the cane while he pulls and steps around. It's just in the way.

Finally the door pops open. It is Detective Hotchkiss. He has a small disposable coffee cup in his hand, and he smiles to the old man. He holds the door open so the man can enter, and as the man is making his way inside the Lack n' Happy, Detective Hotchkiss says to him something Detective Greene cannot read.

When Detective Hotchkiss sits in the Oldsmobile he says to Detective Greene, "Guatemalan blend. It's unbelievable, Detective Greene. One of these days you're going to have a cup of coffee with me and your whole life is going to change."

At Petal Parade's end, in the disembarkment parking lot, Amy tugs at her boss's flowing white linen blouse, "Ms. Breckenridge, the reporter from the *Star-Democrat* is asking for her Friday quote."

Karen Breckenridge scolds her, "Amy, if you'd ever look at the boardroom calendar you'd know she'll get her quote in the lobby of the Little Palace before the Bon show tonight and not half-beat sooner. And you're supposed to there to make sure the anterooms are up to snuff for Hei and the troop. Now don't just stand there like a grit picker; get to the Little Palace!"

Karen Breckenridge turns away from the redhead, shakes the hand of Councilman Peters emphatically, almost as if she had ever voted for the man, and she says to his powder-cheeked daughter in ringlet curls, "Look at this little flower. If I came upon you in a field I wouldn't trust myself not to pluck you."

From behind, Karen feels someone patting on her shoulder. She turns to Emily Houzer, A&E Editor for the *Star-Democrat*, gives a smile and says, "Emily, dear, if the paper had tenacious women like you selling ads they wouldn't be in the red every spring."

"Does that mean you have time for me now, Ms. Breckenridge?"

"Emily, the day I don't have time for you is the day I don't have time to do my job."

Detective Hotchkiss crunches a warm shortbread cookie nods his head as if he is hearing a bee-bop album in his brain, and chats with the freckled brunette at the desk of the Heart of Georgia Inn. “A man could live on shortbread cookies and looks from you, as long as he didn’t die of contentment.”

Across the lobby Detective Greene holds his head still as a fisherman with no luck. He squeezes a phone receiver with his shoulder, and listens to Chief Dewey.

“You bet your buttered bread I got something new for you, Greene, and it’s sitting with me like heartburn.”

“Yes, Chief?”

“Couple weeks ago the waitress came to work scraped up pretty bad. Front-of-house manager badgers her on what happened, and after two shifts of heat, the girl comes clean that a patron put the press on her.”

“How far did he get?”

“If the manager knows what he’s talking about—and you’re guesss’s good as mine—then not all the way. But soon as he got to that part of the story he started taking long looks at the pint glasses, so I wouldn’t take it to the B&T. Anyway, he tries to get her to file a report with us but the girl pitches a fit, says it’s nothing, and won’t hear no more of it.”

“And there’s a reason for that.”

“There’s a reason you don’t plant tomatoes before Good Friday and a reason for everything else that does and doesn’t happen. Computer boys up town run Fern through the database this morning, and it turns out the girl came for school and never finished. Once she dropped out, her visa expired, so she ain’t on the books.”

“Undocumented.”

“Borderline illegal, in a shady area, and you’d figure she’s rather it not get clearer to nobody else before it gets clearer for her.

“So where’s she from?”

“Not sure. You know how they get with their computers. She’s either from a country called Trinidad or some country called Tobago. I couldn’t get a straight answer either way. Computer boys get confused by a simple question. But the point is, this is something that’s been dragging on. Somebody’s been after her, and you know how these things go.”

“Yeah, the girl’s scared to do anything because she thinks she’s going to be sent home.”

“Scared as a Siamese cat in a room full of rocking chairs. She doesn’t want to get sent home, it seems, for whatever reason. Now Greene, I hope a handful of questions ain’t all you got for me.”

“Best we can tell, Chief, they’re in Macon for the weekend. Word is that they’ll be here till Sunday night, and maybe they’ll be back in Atlanta then. We can try and track them down here, or we could get back to the city and go at it Monday with fresh eyes.”

“You know the answer to that. You can have fresh eyes on a Friday evening same as you can Monday morning. And speaking of Friday, ain’t this the weekend of The Festival of the Dying Trees?”

“Afraid so.”

“Then you’ve got your hands full. That place explodes like a red ant eating rice during The Festival of the Dying Trees. I grew up in Macon. That was back when a nickel was worth a nickel. Work out a hotel room somehow, and check in with me later. Call me at home if you have to.”

“Will do, sir.”

“And Greene, remind me to tell you the story I always heard growing up about why the blooms fall as soon as they bud. That’s what they do, you know. The trees blossom all at once and then immediately lose their blossoms in unison. Limbs’ll be naked in three days.”

“Yes, sir.”

Detective Greene cradles the receiver and is immediately greeted by Detective Hotchkiss, who cozies up to the phone booth and has shortbread crumbs dangling from his moustache as he talks. “The look on your face says we’re not welcome back in Atlanta until we find this girl.”

“Tell me I’m not that easy to read, and then tell me they’ve got two rooms for us.”

“I wish I could,” says Hotchkiss, “They’re fresh out of empty space, but there is a sweet young lady at the desk, and she had some delicious shortbread cookies.”

“*Had?*”

“Had. And she gave me this address.” Detective Hotchkiss passes Detective Greene a bag chit with an illegible address scribbled on it. “She says this place is just outside of town, but they might have vacancy. She said if the tourists are successfully avoiding any place, this is it.”

Emily Houzer's parents raised her to be what Karen Breckenridge's parents would've called a *Papist*, so it's no mistake the deceptively pretty young journalist wears rimmed glasses styled after Flannery O'Connor's spectacles, which she bumps up higher on the bridge of her nose each time she asks a question: "When was the last time the blossoming actually occurred over the span of a weekend?"

Karen Breckenridge listens without looking at the reporter, casting cheeky grins at colleagues and winks at well-wishers in the lot, but when she answers her interviewer she looks squarely into her spectacles. "Emily, I'd wager you know as well as I do that it's been fourteen years since our arborists pinned the blossom cycle from a Monday to a Sunday. Together with this perfect weather and a slate of guests that includes His Excellency the Japanese Ambassador, this already seems to be an exceptional year."

"What sets this year's festival apart?"

"This year we have distinguished guests from six continents, so you could say the eyes of the world are upon us. And what those eyes see is a fusion of the local and the global that only the best little city in America could muster. Besides, I haven't had a festival yet that wasn't better than the last, and this one is no exception."

"After last year's weather dampened turnout, you must be excited for better weather this year?"

“Rain or shine, Macon has a good time. But it’s pretty as a postcard when the moonbeams glow through those blossoms, and I imagine the music of romance will move through the downtown dance party tonight.”

“Well we’ve heard grumbling that one romance may be coming to an end. Word is that Sweeney’s Sweets, who’ve generously sponsored the festival for thirteen years, is bowing out after this weekend.”

Karen Breckenridge tugs at her own sleeves and crosses her arms. “Once upon a time, news went in the newspaper and grumbling got you sent to bed with no supper, but I suppose everybody and her kid sister wants to win a Pulitzer these days.”

“If Sweeney’s Sweets won’t sponsor the festival next year, who will?”

“If I don’t freshen myself up before seven o’clock so I can look half-way presentable when I host the Bon show at the Little Palace tonight, then who will? I’ll wish you a good evening now.”

“Thank you, Ms. Breckenridge.”

--- 20 ---

Lil hums up dreams until the girl is so deep in sleep that she breathes like a baby. Lil can save her voice for tomorrow night, when the cream will have worked its way in.

Lil flicks on the lamp by the television, and catches a fuzzy glimpse of herself through the fabric over the mirror as she enters the bathroom. She scrubs the cream from her hands with hot water and a pumice soap.

Lil eats a few dried apple rings and she removes a black cocktail dress from her bag. She unfurls the dress, which she'd rolled instead of folding with the hope that she might not have to iron it. She thinks it would be safer to use an iron spade heated over an open flame than some of these instruments they offer at American hotels.

Lil hangs the dress in the closet, returns to her bag, inspects the bag's small pocket. She notices the zipper is partly unzipped. She reaches in the bag. Her hand pokes around, slowly at first, then quicker. She scours the bag with her palm, but she cannot find what she is looking for. She snatches the zipper all the way down, turns the bag up and empties everything on the floor. It's not there. The canister is not there.

Maybe I forgot to put it in the bag, but then, no. I am certain I put it in the bag. She looks in the bag again, even though she just emptied it, and the faster she searches the sooner she is positive someone has taken it.

--- 21 ---

The truth that Emily Houzer didn't get is that Karen Breckenridge does not have the luxury of rushing off to freshen up for the Bon show. Instead, it is with equal parts anticipation and dread that she must make a meeting with Pete Ehrlich at the Chattsworth House.

Pete Ehrlich is not the sort of man who reads an entire menu, no matter how simple its content. He goes with the first entrée he comes to that sounds acceptable, in this case the Salisbury steak, and gets on with the meeting: “You pack them in like pilgrims, Ms. Breckenridge. Lots of eyeballs in need of something to look at. Eyeballs from I-75 right down to Forsyth Street; no need to sell me on that. Jon here had a midlife crisis while we were waiting to get off the exit.”

“The Festival of the Dying Trees sells itself, Mr. Ehrlich. Any cornerstone sponsor gets a dynamo for every dollar, and that’s the gospel truth.”

“Which is why I was so surprised to hear that Sweeney’s Sweets has a wavering faith of late. I think they’re absolutely mad to walk away from you.”

“It’s more likely that Sweeney’s can’t go dime-to-dollar with international low-bidders, Mr. Ehrlich, but if I were you I wouldn’t presume Sweeney’s is out of the picture. A rumor is as good as a lie, as a businessman of your pedigree is sure to know.”

“Then some of my oldest and best friends were lying like dead dogs at the Piedmont Club last evening. Atlanta’s not a big city yet, and word gets around. But with or without Sweeney’s, we think National Pulp can help grow the name of The Festival of the Dying Trees into a catchphrase for the entire Southeast.”

“You act as if it isn’t now.”

“I mean like Derby Day in Louisville, River Street on St. Patrick’s or Mardi Gras on Bourbon. We’re prepared to make an unprecedented commitment, Ms. Breckenridge.”

Circumstance compels Karen Breckenridge to withhold commentary on Ehrlich's explanation and goad the suggestion of an offer. "Most commitments are unprecedented. That's their nature."

Pete Ehrlich cuts a glance at Jon Phelps, pushes his sleeves back into the cuffs of his jacket, and say, "Imagine a festival with someone of every stripe. Parties for families new and not yet imagined, high-minded and low-humming, sober and seeing triple. Imagine world class artists, stalled and galleried, in-demand performers, outposts from the Music Television Channel. Have you heard of MTV, Ms. Breckenridge? A little Japanese dance is one thing, but I can just see Phil Collins and the boys going all out on Forsyth Street! And National Pulp banners on the biggest stage you've ever stood on. That'll let the world know that Macon, Georgia, is the best little city in the South! We want to totally rebrand the celebration. Grow the shows and expand the name."

"Expand the name?"

"Jon."

Jon Phelps leans over the table. "Ms. Breckenridge, we want to unveil the campaign by christening 'The National Pulp Festival of the Dying Trees'."

"They've fried your brain with the Salisbury steak! The National Pulp Festival of the Dying Trees?"

"Name in full on all promotional material—print, live and broadcast—per contractual obligation."

Karen Breckenridge scowls at Pete Ehrlich. "You mean to tell me you want to name our festival, a celebration of the beauty and constancy of our unique strain of

cherry trees, gifted to us nearly fifty years ago by the Japanese Embassy, after a lumber company? And shout it from the water tower, no less? It's almost sacrilegious. We celebrate trees, we don't clearcut them!"

Pete Ehrlich responds, "That's certainly one way to think about it, if only the most obvious way. You see, what people fail to realize about National Pulp is that we are a conservation company; we're as committed to environmental sustainability as we are to economic prosperity. Yellow pines are the South's only truly renewable natural resource. We're a *green* company. That's the word we use, *green*."

Karen Breckenridge makes a face, says, "You could just as well call it *yellow*."

"National Pulp plants two saplings for every pine we harvest. Look it up. Nobody, and I mean no man, woman or conglomerate, plugs more seedlings in Southern soil than National Pulp. Why would we destroy our environment? That'd be bad for business, now wouldn't it? We build ecosystems."

"I wouldn't know how many of those seedlings you *plug* in actually have a chance of making it. But the truth is, it's the whole idea of a timber company front-and-center for the *dying* of the trees. We're talking about a different kind of dying, here. You clearcut, and a pine plantation is not an ecosystem, not any way you look at it. I know that much."

"And Forsyth Street is? Listen, you have to put a little more thought into it than that, Ms. Breckenridge. Individual trees can't live forever, now can they? And what idiot would want them to? Sustainability isn't about longevity; it's about death and rebirth and death and rebirth, *ad infinitum*. Cradles and coffins are both made out

of fine Georgia pine, and when they're made out of Georgia pine harvested and treated by National Pulp, well, let's just say they both'll turn water away. You're a sensible woman, Karen. You're a practical woman, at the end of the day. All I need you to do is to be yourself."

--- 22 ---

Since childhood trips with his father, Detective Greene has checked first the shower, then underneath the bed or beds of every hotel room he finds himself in. In this shower he finds nothing to complain about, but underneath his bed he finds, to his disgust, a lone Reebok tennis shoe, greyed by wear and with a frayed shoelace.

Who does this shoe belong to? A medium-build woman with a slight inward pronate, it seems. But *really*, who? The last guest? The guest preceding her? The guest preceding both of them? A visitor to any of these? And who would leave one shoe? What kind of person can keep up with one shoe but not the other? What sort of things would that type of person do in a hotel room? With what level of disregard? In what state of undress? One shoe on and one shoe off? Shouldn't the maid have discovered the shoe? How close could she really have inspected the room if she missed a whole shoe? What else did she miss? Who wants to even think about that? And Christ-almighty, where's the other shoe?

Detective Hotchkiss, having stepped out onto the balcony while Detective Greene went through his routine, returns to the shared room, sliding the smudgy glass door back into place. "Greene you won't believe it. I just saw a humongous tattooed

gentleman take the most fantastic piss off his balcony. Right off the balcony into that drainage ditch we stepped over coming in. Must've taken him fifteen minutes. I began humming Ravel's "Bolero" when he started and he didn't finish until I'd hummed the whole thing. I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't see it with my own two eyes, and it made me think of something my wife once said to me—hey, what's wrong? You look like you just had your heart broken for the first time."

"I want another room."

"Another room? If there was another available room within thirty miles of Macon we wouldn't be sharing this one. Are you going to grouse like a grandma the whole way through this trip? Look, I'm sorry you're lonely, but look at it this way, if we work through the weekend you don't have to go home and be with yourself. We've got a job to occupy ourselves with. This girl may be in real danger, and I bet you they have funnel cakes at that street party tonight."

--- 23 ---

It is because of the nostalgic prestige the old Macon guard has fixed upon the invitation-only Bon Odori dance performance that it is hot ticket, not because there are especially discerning enthusiasts among the local crowd. But like any artist worth his salt, Umuno Hei performs in accordance with his own expectations, not in accordance with the expectations of any given audience.

A crane among storks, it is obvious to even the untrained observer Umuno is the star of the troop, the principle of the narrative-in-movement, both the hunter and

the hunted. Lithe, powerful, and precisely focused, Uuno Hei demands total silence before he begins his numbers. His dancers are not so much beautifully executed as they are exquisitely rendered, for he claims his art is inhabiting the soul of the character, not hitting marks in time. Anxious terror is at the soul of the hunted. Ghostly memories are at the soul of the hunter.

Hei is above carrying a drum, but he claps like a whiplash (though they are glazed over from handling so much toffee), at dramatic moments during his dance, and he steps painfully high. His neck snaps with the beat. His long black hair flickers like a flame quivering under the breath of a night watchman. His chest heaves as he manifests the pulsing of the hunter's heart, whipping his body faster and faster as the music builds and the dramatic ceremony is executed.

Skeptics of the form are pulled helplessly in by his story in dance, and now Karen Breckenridge basks in her own glory as the once-apathetic crowd is elevated to vicarious compassion and the Belgian attaché to her left sobs on her shoulder. Everyone is enrapt except the man in the seat to her right. Pete Ehrlich dozes, and seems to whisper in his sleep. Karen Breckenridge could not make out what he whispered, so she gently pats the Belgian on the back and leans toward the American in case he repeats himself. As Uuno Hei's ceremony reaches its bitter climax the VP does repeat himself, and Karen Breckenridge believes she hears correctly: "Popsicle sticks."

Downtown, just around corner from where Raekstraw's Food for the Soul sits on Forsyth Street, Detective Greene sees the dying trees for the first time.

There is a beautiful uniformity to the rows of trees lining the streets. The trunks are ash gray and are no thicker than Hotchkiss's burly forearm. They each begin to branch off about seven feet above the ground with sturdy branches aimed out and slightly upward. At their peaks, the trees stretch about two stories high.

From the first of the branches to the uppermost boughs the branches are completely covered in white blossoms. The waxy green leaves have disappeared in the darkness of night, but the white blossoms capture the streetlights like light fabric and take on a reflective glow like the moon on a clear summer night. The petals curve at about the angle of an eyeball and coalesce into a little crown shape in the center of each blossom. The crown emanates bright, ethereal reflections, giving the air around each tree the appearance of a crisp haze. The haze gathers heavy in the petals, and when Detective Greene stretches his neck as high as he possibly can he sees that the blossoms are already growing heavy on the branches that bounce under gracefully under the accruing weight of the flowers.

--- 25 ---

In the first-floor hallway Lil steps lightly, and comes to a complete pause as she peers around the pine-paneled corner into the lobby of The Commodore Inn. She cannot get a clear view of the desk, so she inches around the corner, stretching her neck and

holding her breath. When a short, round man in a gray wool suite moves away from the desk and toward the automatic door she can see that there is a new desk attendant.

Lil approaches the young man at the desk with a smile. “I’m so glad I didn’t call down here,” she says.

The young man’s eyes are bloodshot and swollen, and he has an uneven and underground beard, that he scratches when he says, “Why’s that?”

“It’s always better to talk to someone face-to-face, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know, lady,” says the bearded young man, “It depends on what you want to talk about.”

“I’m Makeesha Steele, and I need to see if you have something that belongs to me.”

“Me? Or the lost and found?”

Lil peeks over the counter at the desk in front of the young man. “The lost and found, I suppose. Unless you have a small canister on your person.”

“A small canister? Why would I have a small canister? Who do you work for? Who sent you?”

“A small canister with film. There’s nothing in it but film, and it belongs to me.”

“Oh, film, sorry. I never know how people know what I have and what I don’t, you know?”

“So is it there?”

The young man disappears into the office behind the desk. He’s gone for ten minutes before he returns empty-handed. “At this point your film has only been lost

and it's still in the process of being found. I could have Sheree call up to your room if we find it by her shift in the morning."

"That's quite all right," snips Lil. "I'm perfectly capable of checking again for myself."

--- 26 ---

Downtown at the street dance, in the fray beneath the dying trees, Detective Hotchkiss catches a slender, sloshed young lady in ballet slippers and acid-washed jeans, stands her up, gently pushes her away, says to his partner, "I hadn't seen so many drunk kids since I picked up a security job at Sanford Stadium in 1977."

"Let's just hope the dying is reserved for these trees this weekend," replies Greene.

"Have you seen this girl," asks Detective Hotchkiss.

He has the attention of a young man with a haircut like a pencil-top eraser.

The man says, "I ain't, but if *you* see her, tell her I got something I want her to hold onto."

Greene has a go. He flashes the picture of the older woman to a fat man with a unibrow like a black corncob. The man says, "Yeah, I think she's playing keyboard with the funk band that just wrapped. Did she poison the singer? He was carrying on like somebody had got into his Cocoa Puffs."

Another man nearly vomits on the photograph, and his girlfriend turns irate with one of the dying trees.

Detective Hotchkiss finds one woman he thinks might just be sober, a fair-skinned and golden-haired young lady, shows her the photograph. She shrieks, “That’s my sister you filthy old windowlicker,” and she punches his ear.

With one good ear he hears his partner say, “These drunks can’t help themselves. No way they can help us.”

Hotchkiss replies, “I say we get an honest sleep and start for keepers in the morning.”

--- 27 ---

Toothpick-speared sausage balls between the knuckles of one hand and a G&T in the other, Pete Ehrlich interrupts a conversation between the Mayor of Dakar and Karen Breckenridge at the Little Palace Theatre’s post-show reception. “Ms. Breckenridge, isn’t there something sublime about a toothpick? The heart of a timber in every single one. Look at this tray floating by. A little forest of convenience.” He nods to the mayor, “Sausage ball?”

“Mayor Seidi here was just saying how lovely it would be to have contingent from Macon in Senegal one of these days. Have you ever been to West Africa, Mr. Ehrlich?”

“It sure feels like I have. You’re empty-handed, Mister Mayor. What’s the story? They won’t let you have a drink? My man Ronald at the rear bar’s flush with

Beefeater. Got real tonic, too. None of that quinine-free mess. Keeps away the fruit flies, know what I mean?"

The Mayor excuses himself and Karen Breckenridge asks, "You're not intimately familiar with Islamic culture, are you, Mr. Ehrlich?"

"Never been there, but maybe one day."

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Someone ought to. And you? You're the belle of the ball this weekend. I can't imagine that happens more than once a year. Must be nice when it comes around."

"The Festival of the Dying Trees is about several things, none of them being Karen Breckenridge, I can promise you that. But I wouldn't miss it for this world, or for whatever's next, Mr. Ehrlich."

Listen, about what's next, I know you've said you'll need time to think over our proposal, but we're staying till Sunday, and it would be best for every knight at the round table if you and I could make an announcement about next year at the closing picnic on Sunday. No reason to drag this out like a bad marriage."

"That won't do. I'm sure you and the company would agree this is not an arrangement to enter into willy-nilly. Your proposal is generous but it's also—"

"The thing is, Ms. Breckenridge, you don't understand how generous it actually is. Hold this last sausage ball for a moment." Pete Ehrlich fetches from his jacket pocket a cocktail napkin upon which he has written National Pulp's final sponsorship offer. "Take a look at that number. Now if you can honestly tell me we

can't make an announcement this weekend, then I can't promise how long that offer will stand."

Karen Breckenridge arches her eyebrows when she reads the amount, "Well, hmm, that certainly makes the cocktail napkin seem small."

Pete Ehrlich's grin curls at the corners when a ravishing redhead in a sleeveless sequined dress enters, addresses, "Ms. Breckenridge."

"Amy, dear, have you had the pleasure of meeting Pete Ehrlich from National Pulp?"

"Please, Ms. Breckenridge," says Pete Ehrlich, "That pleasure would be mine alone." The young woman's face flushes when the VP playfully kisses her hand, offers, "Gin & tonic?"

--- 28 ---

Detective Greene turns over again, this time to face his sleeping partner, just to try something different. Even in the days when his family traveled he could not sleep in hotel rooms. His father was always nervous, and would not talk about why. It rubbed off.

Officer Greene was present the day Detective Greene earned his stripes, the first black detective with the Atlanta Police Department. His father was proud. Since he was a boy Detective Greene felt the desire to make his father proud. It wasn't until

much later that he felt the desire for a son to make him proud. It seems he has waited too late for that. Who know what will happen tomorrow?

But tomorrow is a long way away, and it seems like it gets farther away the longer he tosses and turns. And if only he could get some peace from his partner's relentless, almost demonic snoring!

--- 29 ---

Geautreux, in a denim suit at white canvas shoes and with his voice carrying more than its usual rasp, vends *The Macon Star-Democrat* from his Saturday morning post in front of Cochran Reality.

“Buds come to life and every young and dumb somebody spring up all night like we got pollen in our veins, too. Now look. Eyes shut like we ain't got pollen nowhere but in our nose. Trees look better than we do this morning, And they dying. We must be dead. Wake up, dead folks! How many times you live?

“Bigwigs at the Bon show last night. Bon show the top story. The real story is \$30,000 worth of brain cells murdered on Forsyth Street last night. Don't read about that. Read about the Street Festival. More stalls than trees today. More stalls than buds, even. What you want? An old saw blade painted with a gristmill? Blue cartoon dogs made out of old bathroom tile to stick on your frigerator? A lamp made out of Co-Cola bottles? Bracelets made our of radio wire. All that mess got a second life.

Get you one, too. Diagram with all the stall numbers in the fold-out insert. But you one.

“Wake up like the dying trees. Dying trees, cherry trees, but the only cherries you see is painted on little girls’ faces. Little girls and they mamas at street festival. Show times today. Stilts. Rope dancing. Acrobats. Dumb mimes. Silk walkers. Slick talkers. Fire eaters. Giants. Something like food. Beer in a boot. Tattoos showing. Jury arts. Metal bent up like paper. Paper stretched out like wood. Tell us something. I don’t want to know. Barbecue smokeout. They take it serious. Get hot. Too many boots. Whatever come of it, I got it. Just like yesterday. Just like last year. Then the party for the bigwigs tonight. Glory Gala, but they don’t put that out there, ‘cause you ain’t invited.

“And next year? I got that, too. Does Sweeney’s? Story on page three. No sponsorship going to turn the whole thing around? The Trees of the Dying Festival? Buy you a copy and find out!”

--- 30 ---

Karen Breckenridge wakes in both her usual way and in a way that is completely unusual. To the former, she is alone. To the latter, she is disturbed. She has the feeling that something is happening that she is not in control of. Sunlight breaks through her window and falls at the foot of her queen-size bed, and she feels terrible. She does not rise immediately out of the bed as she usually does, especially during festival time. Instead, she pulls the covers to her chin. Is it the message from

Sweeney's that is bothering her? Is she ashamed she got rid of Otis? Is it something else?

When she does decide she must face the day she has the feeling that she must check all the rooms of her house. She has a large antebellum home with wooden floors throughout, and she puts on her old paisley slippers and her terrycloth robe. On the odd day once every few years when she wakes with the compulsion to check every room in the house, the notion feels overwhelming. The Festival of the Dying Trees is not such a big job to do all alone, but walking through this house of hers feels like it is.

--- 31 ---

“It would be impossible to overemphasize Mark Twain's greatness,” declares Detective Hotchkiss, deeply inhaling the morning air, wide-eyed and moustache neatly trimmed. “There is a passage in Huck Finn describing a sunset that captures all the feeling a man can conjure up about an age gone by, especially when he looks back and realizes he's surrounded by younger men and women not old enough to recognize his description as a true memory. They've only got the writing, and writing is so easy to ignore, Detective Greene. And when I look at that sunrise out there across the parking lot of this cozy little inn, I tell you I get the sense we are entering into a such an age. I'll spare you hearing me quote it, but take my word for it, you've never seen anything like it in all your reading life. What do you do with it? He was a master,

Detective Greene. A men among boys, until James. You'll break my heart if you're one of those who calls him overrated. Greene? Greene?

"Huh? Agh. I've never seen that one."

"Detective Greene. You look like a dead man on this splendid Saturday morning."

"I'd be alive if I'd slept more than an hour, maybe two, last night. I mean this morning. Whatever it was."

"What was the problem? I slept the sleep of the innocent. Why couldn't you?"

"Why couldn't I sleep? Are you delusional? With you snoring like a lumberjack? I couldn't've slept if you'd brained me with a Louisville slugger. I've never heard a man make a sound like that in all my life."

"It couldn't have been that bad. I snore, but it didn't seem that bad."

"Didn't *seem* that bad? How would you know? You were out like a light. I'm the one who had to hear it all night. I don't know how Jeanette stands it."

"Jeanette? I don't think she can hear me in her bedroom."

"Her bedroom?"

We keep separate bedrooms. It's the secret to a happy marriage, if you ask us. We never quarrel anymore, and we haven't slept together since the night Reagan was voted into office."

"I can certainly understand that," says Greene, rubbing his face to life.

--- 32 ---

Lil takes the pot from the hot plate and carefully pours cloudy broth into a wooden bowl, mixes in a pungent, crystalline brown powder, and blows across the surface of the bowl. Her lips move, quietly, but discernably, as if she is whispering to the broth.

Lil sets a dining tray on the bed, caresses the girl's fine, moist hair as the liquid cools. She takes the girl's head in her palm, leans it forward, and stuffs an extra pillow behind her back.

The girl's chest rises and falls smoothly, with long breaths that quicken slightly when her eyes slit open. Lil caresses her face, brings a spoon to her lips, and the girl slurps. Lil feeds her this way, slowly, until the girl finishes almost the whole bowl of broth, and then falls into a deeper sleep.

Lil examines the girl, the smooth pores, the supple cheeks, the ripe complexion, and thinks: This will be me one day.

--- 33 ---

Hotchkiss takes a swig of Guatemalan blend from his Styrofoam cup emblazoned with "Lack n' Happy," takes a look around the street carnival, says, "Looks like all of last night's drunks aged ten years and bore toddlers overnight. Shall we try this again?"

"Until one of us lands on a better idea."

“Attitude, Greene. This is a two-man job. Try to liven up a little or we’ll never find the girl or the woman. Why don’t you take the rest of this Guatemalan? It’ll change your life.

“For the better or for the worse?”

“That’s not the attitude that’s going to get this job done. Perk up. Look around. Little kids with cherries painted on their faces. Lawn chairs with marigolds painted on them. And look at that! That seems to be a twenty-two inch saw blade with a some kind of mill set on a river painted on it. Wouldn’t you like to own a home that was right for that?

“I’d like to get to my home in Atlanta, where things halfway make sense.”

--- 34 ---

Karen Breckenridge is four minutes late when she pulls the Cadillac into her reserved space Saturday morning, which makes her doubly nervous that the parking lot is empty. She unlocks the door and puts the instant on to brew herself, and goes looking for her employees.

She finds no one, but the phone doesn’t fail to ring. She answers, “The Festival of the Dying Trees?” It’s Councilman Peters.

“Karen, the report I’m hearing this morning is that rain is going to move in late tonight and hang out past churchtime tomorrow. Do we have an Plan B for the picnic?”

“You can’t say you have a Plan A if you don’t have a Plan B, Councilman, and I assure you we have an excellent Plan A.”

“I thought you would, but I woke up thinking about it at five this morning and couldn’t get back to sleep. One of those things.”

“Well they say no man can do anything about the tax rates or the weather, and after you failed to get out ad valorem issue through again this year, I’d say you aren’t beyond the scope of that little bit of pith, Councilman. Why don’t you let me do the worrying this Saturday?”

--- 35 ---

Detective Hotchkiss, using the back of his stout arm to wipe bits of caramel apple from his moustache, says, ”Detective Greene, look at that peacock prowling the promenade. If I was back on a beat I would wager he was casing the joint, if not for that get-up. Hound’s-tooth suit and yellow cufflinks on the sunniest day of spring so far.”

“Struts like he thinks he’s some kind of big shot,” says Greene.

“Or knows he is,” says Hotchkiss. “Struts like someone who’d rather be looked at funny than not be looked at. And he’s strutting this way.”

“Gentlemen, you two look like you’ve seen better mornings. Did you nip the bourbon till it nipped you back last night?”

“I didn’t start it,” shrugs Detective Greene.

“Not hardly,” says Hotchkiss. “I’ve just got a shard of caramel jammed between two teeth. Heck of a way to finish an apple, but you take the good with the bad, I suppose.”

“What’s it to you?” Greene asks the dapper stranger.

“I’m just curious to know if everyone has a good time here, that’s all. You could say I have a vested interest. You two just seem like you have things on your mind other than The Festival of the Dying Trees.”

“Maybe we do,” says Greene.

“Speak for yourself,” says Hotchkiss. “I’m having a great time, save for this shard of caramel. Do you by chance run this fiesta?”

“Not yet, but it’s only Saturday.”

“And have you seen this woman?” Greene shows a photograph of Lil to Pete Ehrlich, who inspects it.

“She seems familiar, in a strange way, but I can’t place her. Funny, it feels like I’ve met her before, but I’m sure I haven’t. Are you gentlemen local?”

“Not hardly, but happy to be here. Really impressed with the sheer scope of this thing, Mr. —”

“How about this one?” asks Greene, flashing the photograph of the younger woman.

“This one? Um, goodness, no, afraid not. Never in my life. Listen boys, I’m sorry I can’t help you. Say, where are y’all from again?”

“Detective Hotchkiss, Atlanta Police Department.”

“Good to meet you, Detective. What did these women do?”

“What makes you think they did anything?” smarts Greene.

“Cops are looking for them. What am I supposed to think?”

“We just want to locate them and ask a few questions, that’s all. Here’s my card. If you call Atlanta and ask for Chief Dewey, he’ll know how to find me and Detective Greene. If anything comes back to you about either of these two ladies, give a call, won’t you Mr. –?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Mr. –? Your name?”

“Oh, right. Jon Phelps. You gentlemen don’t work too hard now. I hear there’ll be fire eaters through here before long, and I wouldn’t want you to try a free sample.”

--- 36 ---

Karen Breckenridge knows how to put out fires, and it’s not by going through what she refers to as the *chopper prannels*. She flips her Rolodex, picks up the rotary, and makes her appeal directly to Earl Sweeny, President, CEO and Founder of Sweeney’s Sweets.

“Karen, it jimmied my heart in two to send that letter. It really did. We’ve been down through the valley and up to the lookout point together, and I’d consider you family if I didn’t think it would cast a pall on you these days. I can barely bounce my granddaughters on my knee without feeling like a deadbeat, I’m so down about the way things have turned out. The last two years have been the blitzkrieg with all

the competition outsourcing to the Caribbean, and when we didn't get anything close the usual Christmas bump, well, we couldn't even afford to ship on V-Day. We're not just cancelling sponsorship, Karen; we're rolling up the carpets. Come June, Sweeney's Sweet's goes into liquidation."

"Oh, Earl."

"This is it. I'm sorry, Karen."

"I'm sorry too, Earl. You're cut from a different bolt. Businessmen don't like you don't make it anymore. Trust me on that. You'll always be loved in the Heart of Georgia."

Karen Breckenridge hangs up the phone and answers the knocking at her door. "Well come in before you smash the darn thing to splinters! I was on the phone!"

"Ms. Breckenridge."

"Amy, you're supposed to be down with Councilwoman Sanders hosting the Arts & Crafts jury. What do you think you're doing here?"

"I need to talk with you about something."

"You're going to need to do more than talk if you want to keep in good stead with me, what with Councilwoman Sanders down there with nobody to distribute the ballots."

"When you introduced me to Mr. Ehrlich last night it was the first time I had met him in person."

"So."

"So I spent an hour with him in the porch, and then I got really sleepy."

“You look like you’re about to pass out now. Snap out of it.”

“That’s the thing. I can’t. I told him I was sleepy last night, and dizzy, too. And he offered to give me a lift home. And Ms. Breckenridge, I don’t think he’s a very nice man.”

“What are you talking about? He offered you a lift. How much more *nice* do you want? Don’t start anything funny. This is serious business, Amy.”

“I know it is. His driver gave me a lift, but then he wouldn’t let me get out of the car alone.”

“What did he do? Be specific.”

“I can’t. I can’t really remember. It was almost like I had taken something. But I know he wanted to come in, and I didn’t know what else to do, so finally I told him he could. But I only told him that because I knew Stanley was waiting inside for me, asleep on the couch. When we walked in the door, Stanley sent Mr. Ehrlich on his way. You should have seen him. This morning Stanley was mad at me over it. I’ve barely slept, and I feel half-dead.”

“And that was it?”

“That was it. I know I’m late for the jury introduction. But I was scared, and I feel sick. I just thought I should tell you.”

Karen flips purposefully through her Rolodex. “I can go to Forsyth Street today. I can make my way over there. I’m not too old to work day and night, and don’t dare think any different.”

“But I can—“

“What you can do is go see Dr. Sadler. I’m going to call him and get him to meet you over at his office. I want you to get some blood work done and I want you to get it now.”

“Are you sure?”

“If I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t have said it. I want to see a little color back in those cheeks at the ball tonight. My god, girl, you look about like one of those blossoms out there busy dying.”

--- 37 ---

The floorlamp by the door throws an arc of light at Lil’s feet. She leans forward in the stuffy armchair and her elbows flutter in and out, but her hands do not reach the arc of light. Her hands work diligently. She is sharpening a dagger on a whetstone as the girl sleeps.

When the blade is sharp enough to slide through cold leather Lil wipes away the shavings with a cloth, holsters the dagger, and buttons it to the bottom of a wooden case, which also contains a short surgical saw, a set-blade scalpel, beaked pliers and ratcheted forceps.

Lil wipes her fingertips, slides the box beneath the sleeping girl’s bed, and fetches her purse from the table. She counts out \$62 in small bills, plus Makeesha Steele’s credit cards, and checks for her ticket to the gala. It’s there. At least she didn’t lose anything else. Lil buttons the purse, places it on the dark dresser, looks

down at the sleeping girl and thinks: Your mother could sleep through a hurricane, too.

--- 38 ---

Detective Greene, nod to the receptionist at the Macon-Bibb Consolidated Sheriff's Office, says, "Ma'am, I suppose you're spread pretty thin this weekend."

The receptionist snatches off her reading glasses, shakes her long sandy hair from her face, asks, "Y'all from the State?"

Detective Hotchkiss answers, "We'll try not take offense to that, ma'am. Detective Hotchkiss, Atlanta PD."

"Atlanta? I'd just as soon you said the state."

"And I'm Detective Greene. We would like to have a word with the Sheriff"

"You might see Sheriff Calhoun shoot by, but I'd call myself kin to a rabbi if he come back and said he had time to visit with y'all before Monday morning."

"It's the matter of a missing person we strongly suspect is in your town, so if you wouldn't mind."

"Well, you going to have to not mind waiting. He's with the Fire Marshall at the Smokehouse Challenge. Couple pit bosses from rival teams went at it last year. Frustrated they couldn't get their smokers on temp with all the rain we had. Said he ought to be a *presence* this year. Told him I wouldn't my mind presence when they pull out those dry-rubbed slabs, but you see where they stuck me, don't you?"

“Maybe they’ll call you in for backup,” says Hotchkiss. “Can we have a seat right there by the window?”

“Where else you going to sit?”

The receptionist returns the reading glasses to a spot low on her nose, takes a grip on *The Macon Star-Democrat*, gives the newspaper a shake.

Detective Greene lounges back in his burgundy, crushed velvet armchair, and closes his eyes.

Detective Hotchkiss says, “Fourteen years and I’ve never seen you with your head out of the game like this. Catch a quick one, if you can. Maybe it’ll do some good.”

Detective Greene neither replies nor opens his eyes.

Detective Hotchkiss waits, sets one thumb after the other, and steals a few glances at the *Star-Democrat*. He sits there for one minute, and realizes he can’t tolerate the silence for another one, says, “What do you suppose that, lah, dancer on the front cover is posing as?”

The receptionist seems puzzled, then follows Hotchkiss’s eyes to the cover photo, and says, “A birdman? I wouldn’t know about this kind of thing.”

“I think some kind of tree. If you asked me I’d say a tree on the cusp of hurricane season.”

“It’s hard to tell a tree from a bird sometime, unless you see it move.”

“Is it? And then, why do they call them, ‘dying trees’? Why?”

“You don’t know why they call them ‘dying trees’?”

“Afraid not.”

“Y’all don’t know the story about the dying trees? The famous dying trees of Macon, Georgia? I tell you something, y’all *Atlanta*’s they come.”

The receptionist folds the newspaper twice, tosses it on her desk. “First of all, they don’t die, so get that out your head off the jump—well, of course they die, but not no sooner any other thing that’s got to die dies. They shed. Bloom then shed in no more than three days time. Bloom and shed and don’t bare no more fruit than a hat stand—cherry trees, that’s what they are, but no cherries, like I said. I hope I ain’t got to explain to you that all cherry trees are from Ja-pan because if I got to explain something like that to you this story’s going to take more time to than I got to tell it.”

“How long does it take to settle a barbecue smokeout?”

“I don’t know, but I do know that these are cherry trees, and all cherry trees are from Ja-pan, whether you know it or not. So it goes all the way back to Ja-pan and all their curiousness with more little gods than they got royalty and more royalty than they got peons to primp on them—it’s about like this place sometimes here is what it is with a whole load of chiefs and a few lonely Indians sometimes, but sorting that out’s beyond my pay grade, if you know what I mean—and the story goes that these cherry trees—and this is just what I’ve heard all my life and you can pick it up or let lie, but folks around here act like you’re going against the gospel if you ask the first question—supposedly these cherry trees put out solid gold cherries. Now I don’t know if that means 24-karat or 14-karat or baby carrot or what, so don’t ask me, but the term I’ve always heard is *solid gold cherries*. Sounds loopy, but like I said, that’s their curiousness. Now, curiousness or not, you sprig up something like a grove of cherry trees bearing nothing but solid gold cherries is some place like that, it don’t

take Einstein to figure out that those cherries going to get picked, and I mean picked like they got the gift of everlasting life in the pit. So what happens to the—I'm Bonnie Hall, by the way. I feel like I know you now, for some reason.”

“Same here, Bonnie. Have you been working here long?”

“Been working here since Andrew went to school.

“Andrew is my son, the baby. But I was telling you a story that I thought you wanted to hear.”

“Please.”

“What do you think is going to happen to a grove of solid gold bearing cherry trees?” Bonnie removes her reading glasses for emphasis. “Let me tell you, they don't last no longer'n the only snow to ever fall on Macon, Georgia, is what. Soon enough, there's no gold cherries, no pits, no more cherry trees, except one. One lonely cherry tree out on a bluff, except she ain't lonely long because everybody from such and such village in Ja-pan come along with bushels and bags, and those that ain't got bushels and bags got hats and shoes off and up, and those that ain't got hats and shoes stretches out their grubby fingers far as they'll go.”

A chubby man wearing a cream-colored suit with stains on the sleeves enters, glances toward the detectives, places a Styrofoam covered plate that smells exactly like pulled pork slathered in vinegar-based barbecue sauce on Bonnie's desk, and continues down the hallway.

“One lonely cherry tree, feeling about I like the last jug of milk in the grocery store, I imagine, and the whole town wearing a path out to the bluff to get what they can get every spring. Now, more curiousness. When I say feeling like the last jug of

milk in the grocery store, I mean *feeling*. This tree—and again, I’m just repeating what I’ve always been told so don’t look at me like you want to look at me, but this tree sees good people—curious, but *good people*, turned to bad like a—well, I won’t say it, but I’m sure you’ve seen plenty of it in Atlanta. Brother telling brother a lie about where he’s going with his shoe off; wife pinching gold cherries when her husband’s gone for bread; children brought up thinking the world’s just gold cherries. That kind of thing.

“And, as I said, this tree is *feeling*. So here it goes, the last solid gold bearing cherry tree up and decides: no more cherries. No more gold, no more lies and what have you. On top of that, instead of flowering two weeks like you might see a peach tree, gives up the blossoms about soon as they open. Out of what you ask? Plain sadness.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking: where’d we get all these dying trees? Well I don’t know. How do they keep going with no seeds? I don’t know if they sprig them or graft them or what. Like I said, if you ask the first question folks look at you like you just said a blasphemy. But so many of our Macon boys died during the war—and if you don’t what war I’m talking about you can wake up Detective Black and ask him because I ain’t got time to explain something—”

“Greene.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Greene. His name is Detective Greene. You said Detective Black.”

“Well, I don’t—I didn’t name him. I’m just telling you, after that war they sent over however many and every year when they know they’re going to die it

means extra hours for everybody on the force, and nobody's allowed to take vacation time."

"Is the Sheriff in yet?"

"Well, I don't know, but I can call back to his office and check."

--- 39 ---

Saturday afternoon Emily Houzer catches Karen Breckenridge behind Troutman Plaza, setting for the Dancers of the Globe showcase. "Ms. Breckenridge, how do you assess this year's festival at the half-way point?"

"Half-way to perfection, Emily dear. Anyone who saw Umuno Hei in the Bon Odori last night saw a poem in the flesh, and if you told me there's been a finer rendition of that particular story ever in this hemisphere I'd tell you where you should go buy property."

"I've talked with some of the vendors and they've said business has been more brisk this year than any in recent memory."

"Shopkeepers downtown will tell you the same thing as the vendors, if you'll ask in their direction. The festival is a boon from Forsyth Street to Riverside Drive, and if you wanted to reserve a hotel room I guarantee you'd have to make a long-distance call. Any business left out of the action would do well to buy in next year."

"Ms. Breckenridge, what do you think the threat of rain might do to the remainder of the festival?"

“Threat? I hadn’t heard any, but the only folks I know that answer to threats are hostages and holdouts, and I’m absolutely positive you’ll find neither in Macon this weekend. The show will go on, as it always does.”

“And can you promise Maconites there will be a festival next year?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I suppose you could run a headline that Santa Claus was taking a year off, if you thought it’d sell copies, but I see no reason for anyone to expect anything but a top-shelf festival from now till the dying trees raise up their roots and march to Alabama.”

“So the festival will survive without Sweeney’s Sweets?”

“The festival will survive without Sweeney’s Sweets, the Sister Cities and even without Karen Breckenridge. And it might have to sooner rather than later if I don’t get out of here and get myself ready for the Glory Gala. I’m sure you understand.”

--- 40 ---

Sheriff Calhoun, his jacket draped around his high-back swivel chair and his necktie unknotting, says, “You gentlemen ain’t got enough trouble in The City Too Busy to Hate?”

“So much we can’t keep it in,” says Hotchkiss.

“I know that’s right. What can I do to help you put it back?”

Detective Greene presents the photographs.

“What do we got here? A young thing that’s probably never once had to light her own cigarette, and—huh, I don’t know. Her mother, maybe? Grandmother?”

“Young missing woman we think may be in danger. Twenty-two years old. Immigrant with no one to turn to. The woman with her is an acquaintance of some sort. Looks like a relative, but we don’t know for sure. They’re in town.”

“If she’s with a companion she’s not ‘missing,’ gentlemen. She’s just on a jaunt.”

“Her boss filed the report, and her apartment was upside down. And we don’t know what kind of acquaintance this is exactly. Threatening, maybe.”

“Maybe there’s a cluster of H-bombs blooming in one of those trees. It seems to me like you two boys would have better things to do. I don’t imagine there’s a shortage of real problems up there.”

“You would think,” says Hotchkiss. “But she was attacked earlier in the month too, and the assailant is still out there, presumably. Now tell me, why would they come here this weekend?”

“Maybe they’re in the market for old churches painted on sawblades, or some crap like that at the arts show? Maybe they want to see stiltwalkers? Your guess is good as mine. Look, this is just a big street fair with a couple parades and parties. The donors and high-dollar guests have their private parties in the historic district, fancy shows and then the Glory Gala on Saturday night. This year it’s a masquerade theme. Other than that, it’s a big drunk fest with bands from around the South. These don’t sound like the kind of people that would be into either of these, but you ain’t give me much to go on, though, so I don’t really know what to tell you. There’s a hundred

thousand people in Macon this weekend. You boys are sharp enough to see my force ain't got the manpower to do this thing right, so there's really no way I can help you."

Hotchkiss strokes his moustache, says, "I hear every word you're saying. We don't mean to trouble you, but thought it'd be best to let you know we're in town and what we're up to, just in case you need us, and vice versa."

"And I'm obliged. I really am. Take my card. Take two. I'd love to help, I just—"

"Sheriff Calhoun," Greene interrupts with a voice that creaks like he just woke up, "Do you know a Jon Phelps? I think he might have something to do with putting on the festival."

"Come again?"

"Jon Phelps."

"Jon Phelps?"

"That's right."

"Can't say I do. But if y'all sit there long enough I bet y'all can think of another question I don't know the answer to. Or I could just let you talk with Bonnie again."

Hotchkiss says, "Thank you very much. I learned my lesson when I asked her about the trees getting named."

"I bet you did. Which story'd she tell you?"

"Which one?"

"Yeah. There's a ledger full of those stories. You'll hear a different version depending on who you ask, and who you are. Truth is, they're just Japanese cherry

trees of some sort. They can live in this latitude no problem, but they can't bear fruit because of the climate, and their blossoms die as soon as they bloom. They're so sensitive to the change in the humidity here that they all bloom at once, and they all die together. All those other stories are bologna. You know how that goes. If a man put the truth in a box and tried to sell it, he'd go to the grave without a penny in his loafers.

--- 41 ---

At work and at home—in fact, almost everywhere—Brian wears gauntlets. Not foam gauntlets, but real Mexican leather gauntlets he's wetted and dried so that they've tapered to the shape of his forearms. Brass alloy studs give the gauntlets heft, and nothing in the world delights Brian more than to be asked about them. "I'd be defenseless if I didn't wear them," he always says, "And I don't care if you work in the basement of Bedlam or at Cot's Gaming and Costume Shop, no warrior wants to go around defenseless."

The shackle hanging from the door handle barely clanks and a little woman slips in, half-costumed already in an oversized nylon coat over a cocktail dress and a silk wrap patterned with guinea feathers covering her hair. First she finds the seasonal orders—heaps of film characters and flirty little deals meant to be tossed after the weekend—before Brian offers his services.

She is looking for a mask.

Brian directs her to the masks behind the counter. "Animal or spirit?" he asks.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Plumed or sleek?”

“Don’t care.”

“Sequined or texturized?”

“No difference to me.”

“Banded or supported?”

“Banded or supported?”

“Banded or supported. Do you want a mask you have to support with a handle? That’s the elegant kind to wear to a masquerade. You hold it up as you mingle. Or you could get one that stays snug with a band. Those aren’t as classy, but they keep both of your hands as free as you need them to be.”

The tiny woman considers what Brian has said. “Banded. Yes, banded. Animal, sleek and sequined.”

--- 42 ---

Back at the decrepit hotel room, Greene defies his better inclinations and collapses on his bed. Detective Hotchkiss turns up the last drops of a lightly roasted Guatemalan blend, his second cup of the day from Lack ‘N Happy, and says, “That man in the hound’s-tooth suit, he recognized the girl.”

“Of course he did.” Detective Greene’s voice is muffled by a pillow.

“What do you make of it?”

“What am I supposed to make of it? Who is he exactly?”

“Jon Phelps. I don’t know what he does, but he’s a crocodile. He’s a crocodile if I’ve ever seen one. You can put a crocodile in a hound’s-tooth suit, but that’s not going to stop him from biting you.”

“Who is he to us? I mean, who is he to her?”

“That’s just the thing. I have no idea. But if he has a reason to lie then we have a reason to find out why. We’re like the marksman at Mt. Rushmore in *North By Northwest*, Greene. We’re trying to take clean aim when it’s hard enough to see who’s Carey Grant and who’s Martin Landau. Cinematic triangulation, that’s what we’ve stumbled onto down here in Macon. Central Georgia might as well be South Dakota. We just need Hitchcock to script the ending. Thunder and lightning, Greene! Could Hitchcock ever draw up an ending! One of the great American filmmakers—maybe the greatest.”

“I didn’t know Hitchcock was American.”

“It doesn’t matter if you knew or not. Hitchcock knew he was American. Look here, what’s really going on? I can’t open my mouth without you getting snappy at me. I’m sorry you’re in the doldrums, but why do you have to go and make me lonely, too? We’re partnered. I don’t want to work through the weekend any more than you do, but we’ve both got to buckle down if we’re going to catch a break in this case. We need to be right there ready and wide awake when the it happens.”

“For all we know the girl doesn’t need our help! You don’t know! I don’t know, and I don’t have loneliness on my mind, so quit saying I do! I couldn’t sleep because you snore like a diesel chainsaw! Not because I’ve got a woman on my mind. And Hitchcock was so British he wouldn’t know what a biscuit was if you drew him a

diagram. Now let me get some rest unless you have an idea how we're going to get out of this mess!"

"Well," says Hotchkiss, as he rubs his moustache as if it's been bruised. He exits out the sliding door to the balcony, watches the sun go red and lazy as it sags towards the horizon, and runs through "Bolero" again.

Detective Greene wants to find the girl. He's lived his whole life to solve cases, to intervene for the victims. But he barely slept last night, and he has an insufferable sleep-deprivation headache, and it's making the whole business of putting the puzzle together and following dead lead after dead lead, that much more arduous; and then to hear his partner, his best friend, talk about life with Jeanette, when he'll go home to the television set and bologna sandwiches—he could just quit it all sometimes. Let somebody else go to work as a team and go home without one.

At times like these, the only thing that keeps him from quitting it all is the vision of his father smacking him across the face with a leather-gloved fist, which he had never done but would do if he heard his son talk this way. Here's what Detective Greene knows his father would say: "I didn't get spit on by them low-life's running the North Atlanta motel for your right to mope around like Stepin Fetchit. Iron it out and get to work."

But at this moment, Detective Greene needs a nap.

Hotchkiss finishes the song, takes one last look at the parking lot, improvises a coda, and returns to the hotel room. He nudges Greene awake, saying, "I've got it."

"You've always 'got it,'" snarks Greene.

“All we know is that Jon Phelps knows Fern. That’s something. We’re also pretty sure both of them are still in town. Sheriff Calhoun says all the high-dollar guests go where?”

“Just tell me.”

“The Glory Gala.”

“I don’t think Fern is a high-dollar guest.”

“Neither do I, but I’ll bet you a roll of two-dollar bills Jon Phelps is a high-dollar guess.”

Detective Greene shrugs his shoulders.

“This year the Glory Gala has a masquerade theme. I’m going. Sheriff Calhoun can get me in and the crocodile will never recognize me.”

“And you think you’ll be able to recognize him?”

“I told you, you can’t dress up a crocodile. You can smell one. And I’ll swing behind him all night. Either he knows where the girl is, or she knows where he is.”

“And who’s going to case for her?”

Detective Hotchkiss casts a look at Detective Greene. You seem like you’ve had enough of my charm this weekend. We could ask Sheriff Calhoun to loan us another car. And maybe while we’re downtown he can point me to a costume shop. I need a mask.”

Detective Greene sits up on the edge of the bed. “That’s the closest thing to a plan anybody’s had since Atlanta.”

“And might I suggest, when you’re on your on your own, stop by Lack N’ Happy for some of that Guatemalan blend? It’ll change your life.”

Perched on the porch of the Georgiana in a purple ball gown with silver trim and holding an elaborately sequined mask, Karen Breckenridge can hear rock music from the Sweeney's stage just a few blocks over on Forsyth Street. She understands that the Maconites at that block party believe, (because she has heard the rumblings from her employees and because she reads the letters to the editor in the *Star-Democrat*) that she is a Southern woman in the banal sense that she cannot long suffer any conversation of which she is not the principal subject. But as the brocaded, gowned and tuxedoed guests enter the Glory Gala, her party, she has the unusual desire to be unnoticed.

The Georgiana is an endlessly spacious Greek revivalist mansion that made it through the War, and it is elegantly lit and subtly scented with pedals freshly fallen from the dying trees now floating upon water in glass vases. Karen Breckenridge has situated herself at the top of the steps onto the veranda, where all visitors must pass through the ticket check.

When the Japanese Ambassador to Washington enters he is wearing a fox mask and a slim claw-hammer coat. Karen Breckenridge can tell it is the Japanese Ambassador because he does not greet her cordially, and because he is joined by a countryman in an even slimmer suit and a feline mask.

“Umuno,” she says to the slender guest. “The whole town is asking for an encore performance. We’ll have to rent a bigger venue the next time you’re troop makes the trip.”

Next, Karen Breckenridge greets the Antiguan emissary, whom she recognizes by the ribbon he has been wearing all weekend. She orders a waiter to retrieve the bottle of kir she had ordered especially for him, recalling how much he had enjoyed the black currant cordial at last year’s Western World Tourism Convention in Orlando.

He pats her shoulder, says, “Ms. Breckenridge, I feel I am sitting in with the symphony tonight and you are our most able maestro.”

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Detective Greene’s headache does not ease when the sunsets and cooler air rolls in. He rolls down the window of the unmarked Cutlass borrowed from the Macon-Bibb Consolidated Police Department so that the air might make his face feel fresher. The wind cuts in through the window and around his face, and he turns down the volume of the short-wave scanner so that the ride feels more peaceful. He will just drive, he thinks, until the headache goes away and then he can get to work.

Eventually he sees up ahead the Lack n’ Happy. He had not planned to end up this way, but something about the dingy blue and pink neon sign feels comforting to him, even if it’s only the familiarity he has with the parking lot, having sat there three times now while waiting on Hotchkiss.

Detective Greene notices that the wind is rushing slower, and realizes that he is slowing down. He is turning into the Lack n' Happy.

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Detective Hotchkiss, in an electric blue bandit's mask and a silver tux that's more costume than tuxedo, carries a slim glass of cava and a smirk out onto the veranda of The Georgiana. He immediately injects himself into an exchange between a lithe, flat-chested feline in a magenta dress, and a man he would've taken for Pancho Villa had Hotchkiss not overheard what he mistook for a Parisian accent.

"My wife and I vacationed in Paris once," he says, interrupting Pancho Villa. "We found it to be a rather ambiguous city. No one is smiling but everyone is kissing. She was charmed by that, and we bought every Jaques Brel record we could find when we got back to Atlanta." Hotchkiss sings in an expressive bass, "*Ne me quitte pas / Il faut oublier / Tout peut s'oublier*. Must be confusing to hail from a place like that."

"I could not say, but thankfully, as a child, I enjoyed plenty of ambiguity in Brussels," quips the masked attaché, "As did Jacques Brel. Now if you'll excuse us, sir."

"Don't worry. I'm just passing through. I'm going to bounce around until they uncork the last bottle of cava and see if that's before or after those trees out there are finished dying. Maybe that's the real story. The trees die of disappointment when all the bubbly runs dry."

“Then I suppose you were not present last evening for Umuno Hei’s perfect telling, through his inimitable style dance, the most provocative of all the stories.”

The attaché motions to the cat. “It was mastery.”

“Didn’t catch it. I had to work last night. Care to give me the *Reader’s Digest* condensed version?”

“Umuno Hei is not the sort of artiste to repeat himself, but if I may venture,” and the cat nods in assent.

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Also out on the veranda, a leggy woman in black velvet gloves and a peaked black mask laughs at joke told by a swoop-haired and smartly-dressed man wearing an owl-themed mask with gilded plumage and a Cartier wristwatch.

Between giggles she says to him, “Yes, and I’d say they’ve stood up straight like that ever since.”

Behind the unacquainted couple lurks a woman smelling of an unusual fragrance—mustard, salt and anise comingled. She is holding a glass of dark Sangiovese, but she does not seem to actually be drinking it. She is wearing a black cocktail dress and a raven mask, darkly purple and snug to her face.

She is alone until she is approached by Councilman Peters, who wears an bedazzled emerald and gold mask that wraps around his face. He says to the diminutive woman, “Beautiful night for the dying, isn’t it?”

The little woman in the raven mask cannot keep herself from grinning. She says, "In my fantasies I did not imagine it any more beautiful."

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The headache is gone, and Detective Greene steps lively into hotel lobby after hotel lobby. He visits a dozen hotels, and each time a clerk tells him they haven't seen the two women. Maybe they have told him the truth. He hasn't detected a lie yet.

The thirteenth hotel he stops displays the same message board greeting as the first dozen: NO VACANCY. As if the sign isn't clear enough, when he enters the lobby, a surly clerk yells across the way, "The sign says NO VACANCY!"

"It does," says Greene. "I just checked for you. Anything else you want me to double-check while I'm up?"

"You can check and make sure all the smart-asses are cleared out of the lobby."

"Where would that leave the both of us?" Greene replies. The woman at the desk has a large body but has a small head and tiny feet. She's oval-shaped, Detective Greene thinks to himself.

Detective Greene presents the photographs for the oval-shaped clerk and immediately he understands, by the look on the oval-shaped woman's little face, that

the she recognizes the women. But she doesn't admit to knowing them. "If I've seen them then they've blended with every other face I've seen this weekend. I've seen more different kinds of ugly in the past two days than a veterinarian. But good luck to you." The woman seems to turn her attention away from Detective Greene and back toward her computer.

Greene says, "But are you absolutely sure you haven't seen these two women specifically? At least one of them? Take another look."

"I don't need to *take another look*. Maybe I have seen them and maybe I haven't. But I don't remember either way. Sorry. Now if you don't mind, I got a heap of work to do." The woman moves her mouse and fixes her eyes on her computer screen, but Detective Greene can tell by her expression that she is not reading it.

"What kind of work? Nobody's here."

"You don't know what kind of work I have to do."

"I don't. But I know what kind of work I have to do, and I know that if you don't help me, something very bad could happen to this young woman."

"If you don't know what kind of work I do then what makes you think—wait. The young woman?"

"There's a younger woman and an older woman."

"What could happen to the younger woman?"

"Use your imagination."

"And the older woman?"

"She'll have to answer for it. You don't have time to hear the whole story, and neither do they."

“Well, I’m not really supposed to—”

“I know. But this young woman may be in a lot of danger.”

The oval-shaped clerk gazes at the computer screen, jiggles the mouse.

Detective Greene can tell he has reached her, but she needs a moment.

He says, “I’m Detective Greene. I’m from Atlanta, and you can trust me.”

The clerk says, “I’m Sheree, but you don’t need to remember that.” She rolls her seat back toward the wall behind and reaches into her purse, which is in another chair beside the door to the office. She fetches something small from the purse and rolls back toward Greene. “They’re staying here. Room 211. I didn’t tell you, but they’re in room 211. And the older woman dropped this.”

“Film?”

“What else would be in a black canister like that?”

“And the room. Do you mind if I—”

“Nope. Need a warrant for that. No other way.”

“Do you know if they’re back there?”

“I saw the older one leave just awhile ago. Had a black dress on like she was going to a party. Hadn’t seen the girl since they checked in. She looked zombied out, like she was on some kind of drug.”

“May I use your phone to make a call?”

“Local?”

“Yes.”

“Nope. Sorry. There’s a pay phone over there by the television.”

“One more thing, Sheree. Do you know where I could get this film developed immediately at this time of night?”

“There’s a truck stop out at Riverside Drive and I-75. They’ll do it for you in an hour.”

“A truck stop? Why would a truck stop have a one-hour photo service? And how do you know about it?”

“Mister, I really believe there’s some questions not even a detective wants to know the answer to.”

--- 48 ---

When the Belgian attaché finishes his story Detective Hotchkiss slaps him on the back, says, “I’ve always heard you should never tell one little bit of truth in a story unless you absolutely have to, and in that case, make the story as long as you possibly can so there will be someplace to hide it. I suppose you heard the same thing in Paris.”

Detective Hotchkiss excuses himself, turns to Karen Breckenridge, who has left the Antigua with his car, says, “Something tells me you have a story for me.”

Frowning behind the shiny-sequined mask, Karen Breckenridge replies, “I’m afraid I have no stories in me. I’m an editor, at best. And you are?”

The tall woman in the peaked black mask tugs at her black velvet gloves as she escapes far enough around the veranda that the Viennese string music of the Gala mingles with the rock music from Forsyth Street. The roof does not cover the expanse of the veranda and here she feels upon her bare shoulders, raindrops so faint that she is compelled to look upward. Perhaps the drops blew a long distance on the April wind because it is not so cloudy. The stars hang there on display.

Another guest appears under the starlight, startling the woman in the black gloves. She turns around and sees a little dark-skinned woman, and says to her, “Thank goodness. I thought you were that dreadful man again. I’ve never been so happy to see a raven instead of an owl.”

“Was he so bad?”

Diane says, “He certainly was. Half a ‘hello’ and he was telling dirty jokes and mentioning what we might do tonight. He can check that expensive wristwatch all night if he wants, but I suppose there will always be a woman nearby who will be happy to tell him how late it is. Rather sad, eh?”

The little woman in the raven mask nods her head.

“I’m Diane Hull, Director of Ottawa’s Convention and Tourism Bureau. Thank you for saving me.”

The little woman says, “My name is Makeesha Steele.”

Outside of the Georgiana, at the ticket check, there is a small stir. A man in a wash-and-wear suit and a W. C. Fields mask has turned belligerent. He has no ticket, but he says he has an open invitation to the party, where he intends to help himself to what he calls “Jumpy stuff.”

“If you worked at the ball field you’d be working at the gas station by now. Any man that can’t keep that job’s liable not to want it. Give me berth now, before I call this whole thing off and think about doing it next year or not. You don’t know me.”

“I don’t know you sir,” says the doorman. “And you don’t have a ticket, so please step aside.”

“You don’t need to know me,” says the man in the mask. But you better know who my cousin is.”

Back inside, Pete Ehrlich checks the time on his Cartier, and looks over the crowd of masked heads. Across the ballroom he spots a gentleman in a angular gray mask that suggests robotics, and he starts in that direction.

Behind him, Sheriff Calhoun, enters the hall. He is unmasked and wears a tweed blazer. He looks around the ballroom, loosens his necktie, and wipes perspiration from his jaw with his sleeve. He tugs on the sleeve of waiter wearing a white jacket and a clown mask, and whispers something into his ear.

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Karen Breckenridge is interested to know why an Atlanta Police Detective is in Macon for her festival, but the descriptions of the two women that Detective Hotchkiss gives her do not remind her of anyone in particular. She continues to ask the detective about the case, and then about his work in general, until she is satisfied the case has no impact on the weekend's events.

Detective Hotchkiss mistakes the line of questions as an actual interest in his line of work, and begins to expound upon the ways in which detective work is like architecture. He says, "We are all searching for a proper amount of light, you see?"

At that moment, Winston Maxwell, the emissary from Trinidad & Tobago is slipping by, and Karen Breckenridge catches his sleeve. She says, "Winston, you should absolutely hear Detective Hotchkiss's theory of track lighting and civil unrest."

"I should?"

"Without a doubt. Now if you two will excuse me."

Lil says to Diane Hull, “Then I take it you did not come here with that man?”

“That’s the last think I would want to do with that leech. You should have seen the way he practically leaned his body against mine when he was talking about himself.”

“Did he give you his name?”

“Did he give me his name? He rather dumped it on me, over and over, that and his title. Seemed to think I should be impressed. He’s a VP with National Pulp out of Atlanta, and he seemed to be rather pleased at himself for it. Pete, something. Oh, I think it was Pete. I hope I’ve forgotten it for good.”

Sheriff Calhoun declines drinks as he waits, and has grown impatient by the time the house manager reaches him. “I need Ms. Karen Breckenridge, and I need her quicker than you men can pop another cork.

The manager says, “I’ll circulate word. In the meantime, she’s wearing a dazzling purple gown with a glittering mask. I don’t care if it is a costume party, Karen Breckenridge ought to stand out anywhere this weekend.”

“Ms. Breckenridge,” says the man inching the sleeve of Karen’s gown. She gives him a nasty look. “I’m Jon Phelps,” he says. “I work for Pete Ehrlich. “You’d remember me if not for this robot mask.”

“I recognize you,” she says.

“I’ve just spoken with Pete, and we’re expecting to make an announcement at the closing picnic tomorrow about our sponsorship for next year. And the big reveal on the new name, of course.”

“If I were you I wouldn’t suppose to know what will happen tomorrow. Who even knows what will happen tonight?”

“It doesn’t take a crystal ball to see the festival can’t go on without our level of sponsorship. If you’d had someone else step up by now we would all know it, wouldn’t we?”

Karen Breckenridge recoils at the thought she has no other option, grows so angry she can hardly speak, finally says, “I have to go save my Bon star from the Belgian attaché. Poor thing will be forced to decline a marriage proposal if someone doesn’t intervene.”

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Winston Maxwell is in the midst of retelling the story about the dying trees that Karen Breckenridge told him in Orlando, but Detective Hotchkiss is drifting off. He is staring at someone who has just walked into the ballroom. “Are you looking for someone,” asks the emissary.

“Yes. I mean, no. But I think I recognize that executioner. I just can’t place him.”

“He is wearing a black bag over his head, cinched with a nautical rope. Are you quite sure you recognize him?”

“Yes. It’s the leather gauntlets. Where is your accent from?”

“Trinidad.”

“Really? I doubt you’d know a certain young woman from the island, but if I had her picture with me I’d love to show it to you.”

--- 57 ---

After turning over the canister to curious attendant who had more fingers than teeth (though he had only one index finger), Greene barely wants to touch the pay phone at the Riverside Drive Truck Rest. He holds it a three inches from his ear, but has no problem hearing Chief Dewey.

“Course I’m asleep, Greene, I been married thirty-four years, what else would I be doing at eleven p.m. on a Saturday evening? You act like you just rolled out of bed sometimes.”

“Sorry, Chief.”

“Don’t ‘sorry, Chief’ me. I ain’t mad you called late. I’m just mad you didn’t call early.”

“Uh.”

“Our manager at the café came clean this afternoon. I sent two boys up there to put the squeeze on him. Turns out he was paying that girl under the table all along. They used to have something, till she shot it down. Now he claims—and who knows where the truth is—now he claims she keeps everything from him, including the truth about the girl’s aunt.”

“The older woman is her aunt?”

“No wonder you made detective. Of course the older woman. She’d been coming around the end of shifts lately, asking for the girl. The manager’s curious because every time the aunt comes around, Fern gets cagey. Short more than usual, and I take it that’s pretty short. Finally the girl says it’s her aunt, a woman named Lil, not long in Atlanta. I take it she was wherever she was before that.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t interrupt. And this Lil wants to take the girl away but the girl somewhere the girl don’t want to go. I don’t know where that is from the manager’s story. Could be Macon, likely as not. But it’s obvious they aren’t one big happy family, because the computer boys run an Interpol background on Lil, and get this—“

“Yes?”

“She tried to cut a man’s heart out back in Trinidad.”

“Cut a man’s heart out?”

“Cut a man’s heart out. Drugged him up and scooped it out still beating like a kick drum. She’s wanted there.”

“I guess she is.”

“Wanted and unwanted. And there’s more. Manager says he thinks the girl’s pregnant.”

“With his kid?”

“He swears it ain’t, but I trust him about as far as I can throw him. Point is, that girl’s in a world of trouble. Now don’t tell me I got all this for you and you ain’t got nothing for me.”

“I know which hotel they’re staying in, but I need a warrant.”

“Don’t we all. But we don’t have to have one if you see them go in the room together. We’ve got probably cause. Stake it out, and I’ll work on—let’s see, I used to know people that way, but I had a head of hair back then. Anyway, I’ll work on it. Stake it out and quit standing there with your mouth open like you’re waiting on the case to solve you.”

--- 58 ---

Karen Breckenridge thinks she will find the Belgian trailing right behind the Bon star, but he is actually with Diane Hull, a competitive colleague from Canada. Hei is nowhere to be seen. Diane left the little raven lady out around the corner when she saw the owl man doubling back, and now she is doing the talking.

Diane says, “Ms. Breckenridge, did you know your our Belgian friend here was in Ottawa in January and didn’t bother to look me up? How should I punish him?”

“Dear, he should have to be Pete Ehrlich’s date to the picnic tomorrow.”

“Pete who?” says the Belgian.

“What a wicked idea,” says the Canadian, thinking Pete Ehrlich must be so rakish that he even tried Karen Breckenridge. “That would be an appropriate fate for him. What a time we would’ve had. I could have given him the city for a weekend, if he would’ve had it.”

“And who wouldn’t have Ottawa?” says Karen Breckenridge.

“Who wouldn’t have it!” exclaims the Canadian, oblivious to Karen Breckenridge’s dig, and she playfully slaps the Belgian’s arm.

He says, “Did I just feel a raindrop?”

Karen Breckenridge says, “You most certainly did not. That would have been—well, wait. Strangle me now! It’s beginning to rain.”

--- 59 ---

When Detective Greene shows his badge to the doorman he briefly pulls away the black eye-mask he found in the toy aisle of the Riverside Truck Stop that is supposed to make him look like the Lone Ranger. The big doorman asks if he is here to see Sheriff Calhoun.

“No,” says Greene, “I didn’t know he would be here.”

“I don’t suppose he didn’t either. No mask and no tux, so he shouldn’t be hard to find.”

Detective Greene has never been one for social gatherings, and wouldn’t step foot in this one if he didn’t know he had a solid lead. The photographs have been

developed and he carries them in a paper bag that says “Drop Anchor at Riverside & 75!” over a drawing of an eighteen-wheeler. As he makes his way up the steps he feels a raindrop, and then several raindrops, and he tucks the bag under his jacket as he walks around the veranda and into the Georgiana.

--- 60 ---

As soon as Detective Greene enters the mansion the sky opens, and there is a commotion both inside and outside as the revelers from the veranda rush into the ballroom. The rain came on suddenly, and as they shriek and shake as they take cover in the crowded ballroom, the guests see another unexpected sight.

Two waiters are wrestling a man to the floor. It seems the man groped Umuno Hei, after having too many drinks to follow the law and his own judgment, and took the slender dancer for a young woman. The man shouts as the waiters take him down, though his shouting is unintelligible, in part because he is so drunk but also because his mask, a mask with the face of W.C. Fields, has been knocked askew in the struggle and it now blocks his mouth from far enough to make himself heard.

Umuno Hei, for his part, still has his mask positioned where he can be heard just fine, and he screeches like a horrified child and bangs a pump on the bar. “Get him! Get him! Get him!”

Sheriff Calhoun, finds Karen Breckenridge and says, “That suit, Karen.”

Karen Breckenridge says, “No, please, really, strangle me now.”

The guests adjust stretch their necks and adjust their masks so they can get a view of the fracas. The waiters subdue the man in the W. C. Fields, spilling a vase of water and dying tree petals in the process. They press his face against the wet hardwood until his hands stop thrashing and his head stops gnashing. Petals stick to his jacket and his back heaves with heavy breathing and exasperation as the waiters turn his wrists over to Sheriff Calhoun.

“Otis,” says the Sheriff, “I don’t think you want to catch the cat you think you want to catch.”

“Assah nih,” Otis croaks.

“Come again.” Sheriff Calhoun pulls the mask away from Otis’s face. Otis’s cheeks glisten with saliva and water from the spilled vase. He sprays little bubbles from his mouth as he tries to speak. “Assasih. A tray.” Sheriff Calhoun cannot make it out. He gets on his knees and bends down over so that his ear is close to Otis’s mouth.

On top of the cocktail bar that looks down on the Sheriff and the drunk, the Belgian attaché holds Umuno Hei’s cat mask and strokes his shoulder. Hei calms down as the Belgian whispers consolations into the dancer’s ear and pats his black hair.

Sheriff Calhoun takes Otis by the shoulders and gives him a shake. “What do you got?”

Otis musters a deep breath, exhales, saying, “Assassins. A trainlo—” but runs short of breath and finally passes out cold on the hardwood floor of the ballroom.

Karen Breckenridge cannot bring herself to remove her mask, but anyone in the close enough to her can see the skin of her neck has gone bright red. As Sheriff Calhoun lifts Otis and begins to drag him out of the ballroom, she moves to follow. But as she is attempts to slip out the house manager grabs her elbow and asks, “Shall we shut the party down?”

She jerks her elbow away and asks, “Is there anyone in this town capable of making a decision without me?”

--- 62 ---

Detective Hotchkiss stops the house manager, who is shoing guests out the door. “Why has the band stopped? So they have a card game to get to or something?”

“Party’s over,” says the flustered manager. “Drive safely and account for the rain.”

“Party’s over? All because one man had a little too much and groped another man? That usually means it’s about to get worth the price of the open bar. What kind of party is this?”

“It’s a dying one, sir. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Detective Hotchkiss releases the manager, hails a waiter, “One last glass of cava. Please, the bubbles settle my stomach.”

There is an exit through the kitchen by which Sheriff Calhoun drags Otis out of the Georgiana. This is where Detective Greene catches up to the Sheriff, who says, “Ever have to drag out a drunk in Atlanta, or do they have a separate division for that kind of thing?”

“I can help,” says Detective Greene, “But can you help me first?”

“While I’ve got 200 pounds of dead weight on my shoulder?”

Detective Greene has already unsheathed the photographs. “This man is named Jon Phelps. I believe he may be at this party, and he is either in danger or is a danger. Have you seen him?”

Sheriff Calhoun looks carefully at the photographs. The photos are show a middle-aged man in good sharp an in a sharp suit entering an office tower. “I don’t know him, but she might.”

Detective Greene sees a red-face woman about his age in a purple ball gown. Sheriff Calhoun says, “Ms. Breckenridge, this is Detective Greene from the Atlanta Police Department, and he needs to show you some photographs.”

Karen Breckenridge brings her hands to her face. “I can’t,” she says. “He’s put me through enough. I can’t bear to see what he’s done. Please leave me alone about it.”

Detective Greene is confused. He looks to Sheriff Calhoun, who says, “It’s not about Otis. There’s someone else.”

“Who is Otis?” asks Detective Greene.

Otis's head bobs, as if he's heard his name and wants say something, but can't get himself together to form a word.

"Otis is my cousin. A very, very distant cousin."

"Ms. Breckenridge puts this whole festival together, Detective Greene. She knows everybody, and everybody wants to know her."

"Some more than others," says Karen Breckenridge.

"Then I'm glad to be in that very big group, ma'am."

Karen Breckenridge's skin, somehow, deepens to a darker shade of red. "You shouldn't be embarrassed by your cousin. But he probably ought to be prouder of you than he seems to be."

"He has a sad way of showing it, Detective Greene."

"Ms. Breckenridge, you can call me Del."

"Del?"

"Del. That's my name. After my dad, Delano."

"Very good, Del. And I'm Karen, from now on. Don't look at me frumpy like these Maconites, okay?"

"Got it. I'm no Maconite, that's for sure. Somebody was just telling me today that I'm as *Atlanta's they come*."

"Um, excuse me, but I have to get Otis in the car, and you wanted to show those photogrpahs to Ms. Breckenridge."

"What photos?" says Greene.

"The photos in that folder you're holding."

"Right. Karen, do you by chance know this man, Jon Phelps?"

--- 64 ---

Masks fall from faces like blossoms fall from the boughs of the dying trees as the revelers make way to the exits. But the man in the robot mask does not show his face. His head swivels like a transit as he surveys the faces emerging from behind masks in the ballroom. He cannot find the face he is looking for.

The Belgian attaché escorts Umuno Hei outdoors, covering the actor's hair with his tuxedo jacket as they rush out through the deluge. Umuno Hei draws his escort in close that they might share the jacket as they run. He tries to match his escort's steps as they jump over puddles and drains.

Just short of the door, Councilman Peters produces a plaid umbrella. Diane Hull, her hair beginning to fall, says, "It was such a clear night when I left my hotel room. Whatever made you think to bring that?"

Peters's wife, who had remained at home with their daughter, had in fact thought to send it with him, but the councilman says, "I'm in local government. Thinking ahead is what I do. Now, may I have the pleasure of sharing it with you?"

--- 65 ---

Detective Hotchkiss wanders into the kitchen in search of one last glass of bubbly when he meets his partner, who is sidled up beside Karen Breckenridge. "Greene? What's going on?"

“I’m working.”

“I see that.”

“What’s going on with you? Why are you back here?”

“I’m looking for something.”

“Karen has just made this whole picture clearer.”

“Karen?”

“And Del has made it crystal clear for me.”

“Del! Did you two just meet? When did you become Del?”

“Right before I found out that Jon Phelps isn’t Jon Phelps.”

“Then who is?”

“Pete Ehrlich,” says Karen. “And he’s here. Or he was here. He was wearing a mask like an owl.”

Detective Hotchkiss searches his mind a memory of a man in an owl mask at the party, but his mind is too cloudy.

“And the lady with Fern is named Lil. She’s from Trinidad, and she dropped a film canister of surveillance pictures with Jon Phelps—I mean Pete Ehrlich.”

“Trinidad?” The memory of meeting Winston Maxwell emerges from Detective Hotchkiss’s foggy mind. “I just talked with a gentleman from Trinidad.”

“Karen, can you take us out in the ballroom? Maybe we can catch Ehrlich or Maxwell before they disappear.”

“And what if we can’t?” asks Detective Hotchkiss.

“Then we’ll go the hotel room where the two women are staying.”

“We don’t know where that is,” says Detective Hotchkiss.

“Maybe *we* don’t,” says Detective Greene, “But *I* do.” Detective Greene and Karen Breckenridge start for the ballroom, but Detective Hotchkiss hesitates. Detective Greene stops, turns back to his partner and says, “Hotchkiss, something tells me you don’t need to find what you’re looking for in this kitchen.”

--- 66 ---

The downpour forced all Forsyth Street partiers into dives and tavern tucked around town, and underneath temporary awnings erected for barbecues and bands. The downpour helped the last of the heavy blooms on their way down from the branches heavy with rainwater and petals. Now the limbs are totally bare, and the street is quiet.

A circle of petals covers the ground beneath each tree. Though the storm was violent enough to push all the petals off their branches, it did not sustain for long enough to splash much of the pristine groundcover with mud. It is like there is a puddle of undergarments shed around the feet of the newly naked trees.

With the clouds blown eastward by the night wind, the moon has reappeared, and it conspires with the streetlights along Forsyth in a strange phenomenon. Around the bases of the dying trees the circles of white petals gather all the night’s ambient light, the way a movie screen captures the light of a projector, and the blossoms glow brightly. They gather the light so efficiently that they are able to focus all the fuzzy lights of the rainy night into a reflection that glows like stagelights aimed upward at the dying trees. Eerie are the shadows that the thick, naked limbs on the lower parts of

the trees cast against the thinner, angular limbs nearer the tops of the trees, and strange is the glow that rises from the shiny wet earth instead of the usual glow that rains down from the sky.

Between the two rows of the dying trees down Forsyth Street, two figures move as one through the attendant strangeness. The light from the fallen blossoms throws the figure against the buildings of the thoroughfare, and they seem to trudge like an injured, four-footed beast between the darkness and light. The skin of the beast is an oversized nylon coat. Beneath the coat the smaller figure, a woman, supports the much larger figure, a listing man, and prods him along with her arms curled under his shoulder.

The man babbles. The woman can't make much of his slurred words, but he seems to say, "Dry as the heart of a pine."

She strokes his back, steps long over a puddle, says, "I will take you where water is turned away."

--- 67 ---

Sheriff Calhoun is soaked through his clothes by the time he reaches his car with Otis McGuffey, and then the rain begins to taper off. He has to lay Otis on the wet ground while he unlocks and opens the rear door of his sedan, and Otis kept saying "Assistant treeloaders," over and over while being shoved into the backseat. Finally, as the Chief

works Otis's clunky legs into the floorboard and shuts the door, Otis lurches and lets loose a weekend's worth of drinks onto the floorboard.

Sheriff Calhoun snatches the door open again, says, "Thunder and lightning, Otis, I swear I'd kill you if I thought it would do you any good."

For a moment, it seems as if the release has done Otis's body some good. He opens his eyes slightly, asks, "You have my Allman Brothers tapes? I want to hear 'Sweet Melissa'."

--- 68 ---

Detective Greene and Karen Breckenridge find Winston Maxwell near the entrance to the ballroom, where he has stopped to tuck his sash into a pocket to keep it dry.

"The rain has all but died," says Karen Breckenridge.

"Nature has a knack for coming back around, Ms. Breckenridge, and this sash was a gift of honor I am rather smart with."

"As I've noticed. Winston, this is Detective Greene from the Atlanta Police Department."

"A pleasure to meet you, Detective, which stands in contrast to what I should say about meeting your Atlanta airport. Or, did I meet you earlier in the evening? Your title is familiar."

"I'd say you met my partner. We only favor when we're both wearing masks. But do you recognize this woman, by chance?" Detective Greene produces the photograph of Lil.

The emissary shrugs. “Perhaps, but I couldn’t say. She does not stand out in my mind.”

“Her name is Lillian Duminage.”

“Lillian Duminage! Yes. When properly announced she stands out.”

“What can you tell me about her?”

“What any Trinidadian could tell you: she tried to cut out the beating heart out of Gordon Chesterfield’s chest. A rascalion importer, he was, but an attempt at murder it was nonetheless.”

“And she was stopped before should could do it?”

“Either she was stopped or she stopped herself when she realized that Chesterfield in fact had a second brain where his heart should have been. And she escaped, which I gather you know.”

“Escaped to Macon, Georgia, apparently.”

“Then all the rascals of industry best sport chain-metal cardigans until she escapes somewhere else.”

Karen Breckenridge asks, “Anything else about the woman, Winston?”

“Heavens, Ms. Breckenridge, is that not a sufficient dose of gloom to carry out into a dark and wet night?”

At the exact moment Detective Hotchkiss tracks down one last glass of cava as it waits its fate by the dishwasher; Detective Greene, Karen Breckenridge, and Sheriff Calhoun converge upon him.

Startled, he asks, “Detective Greene, did you show the photographs to man from Trinidad that quickly? Can’t you go show him again.”

“Yes, I showed him. I also had photographs for Karen, and for Sheriff Calhoun, and now I’ve got a few for you.”

“For me? I’ve seen them.”

“Not these.” Detective Greene pulls from the envelope the prints of Pete Ehrlich.

Detective Hotchkiss has to down the cava to stomach them. Black and white stills of Pete Ehrlich, playing squash with a bandana wrapped around his forehead, ignoring his wife while waiting to enter the Piedmont Club, scolding Jon Phelps for passing his home phone number on to a reporter at the Atlanta Business Chronicle, checking the time on his wristwatch, observing a landscaping stake ribboned in pink on the lawn of the National Pulp headquarters downtown.

“What a twisted woman the wife must be,” says Hotchkiss, “To take such a keen interest in this crocodile.”

“Well call me warped too, because I’ve got an interest in your crocodile,” says the Sheriff. “Ms. Breckenridge’s assistant Amy was drugged last night. Dr. Sadler took a sample this afternoon. The only person to give her a drink last night was Pete Ehrlich, and I want to talk with him. But I couldn’t find him before the crowd let out.”

“Do you know where he’s staying?” asks Hotchkiss.

“Not yet, but I’d bet dimes to double nickels Ms. Breckenridge can tell us.”

“I can’t,” says Karen. I met him at the Chattsworth House, not at his hotel. But maybe Amy has it on file.”

“And where is Amy?”

“I sent her home. She’s had enough bad spirits for one weekend, and she looked like she was on the edge of death.”

“Well we need to pull her back and see if she knows. Can you go call her?”

Hotchkiss begins to say, “But Detective Greene knows where—” but Greene shoots him a nasty look and says, “Then we’ll try to find the woman.”

“You don’t know where she’s staying?” asks Sheriff Calhoun?

“No.”

Sheriff Calhoun gives a moment’s pause, says, “I’ve got drop off Otis anyway. I’ll leave word office, gentlemen, if you find a lead on where they might be headed. I’ll have the men on the force who’re still standing to double-back on patrol.”

--- 70 ---

As they walk toward the car Detective Hotchkiss stops suddenly, takes a look back at the riveted white columns of Georgiana, says, “What’s in the infernal crockpot, Greene? You just lied to the only friend we’ve got in this big little town and now you’re veering us away from our target right when the chase is on. Something’s been cooking since you went all sullen on me in the car ride down here, and you’ve been

quiet as a pathlight ever since. I'm your partner. Been your partner working on two decades now. Lonely heart or not, you need to square with me.

“Detective Hotchkiss, Pete Ehrlich is not our target. What would we charge him with? If he did drug the girl, I'm sure Sheriff Calhoun and the Macon-Bibb Consolidated Police Department can handle it. That sort of thing is in their jurisdiction. We don't know where he's staying, anyway. You're so wrapped up in him being a, a *crocodile*, that you lose sight of that. We're here to find the girl, that's it.”

“But don't you get it? The girl is where Pete Ehrlich is going. He's the one who tried her. For all we know he succeeded in raping her. He's a creep, a pervert, a predator, a darn sunning-himself-on-the-swamp-bank crocodile with a grin like a handsaw. We stop him and the girl will be safe.”

“Will she? And what of the woman?”

“The woman? I supposed she's the one who took the pictures if she's the one who dropped the film. In fact, I think it's rather possible she's here for revenge. We may find her where we find Pete Ehrlich, too. Heck, there's no telling what that woman is planning on doing to that man, if he doesn't do something to her first.”

“Now you're putting it together. But you don't know everything. I've talked with Chief Dewey and to Winston Maxwell while you've been drowning your gourd.”

“Excuse me? I'm perfectly together.”

“You smell like a fermentation vat and you look like you've been sleepwalking backwards on a treadmill.”

“Now you’re crossing the line. Keeping information from your partner and then personally insulting him.”

“I’m not insulting him. I’m just trying to sober him up.

“A cold shower would be more agreeable than your insults. But I suppose our hotel is too far away? How much time do we have?”

“It depends, but we better not, just in case. How about the Lack N’ Happy?”

“Splendid idea. Not sure I can remember how to get there, though, this deep into my cups.”

“I do. I went by and had some coffee before I got the photographs developed.”

“You went for coffee? What next? You’re going to tell me you have a date with Karen Breckenridge?”

--- 71 ---

The smells of mustard, salt and anise stew in the hotel room, hover like an invisible cloud that jitters the flames of the votives so that Lil’s shadows, one for every flame, shake wickedly upon the walls. She herself is as calm as a corpse, and her implements are spread about a black felt tablecloth on the nightstand before her. She moves purposefully between the two beds, between the two drugged bodies.

Lil pulverizes petals of the dying trees in a cup, squishes them to a pulp, adds a teaspoon of warm coconut oil, and stirs the mixture.

To her right, Fern sleeps uneasily. The girl is naked, but her body is covered with the sheet of muslin.

Lil sensed nakedness might bring pleasure to Pete Ehrlich even if he were unconscious, so she left his pants on his body. Only from the waist up is his body bare. Lil dips her fingertip into the grayish paste she has mixed from the pulverized petals of the dying trees. She collects the mixture evenly upon her finger, and in one smooth motion she draws a perfect circle around Pete Ehrlich's heart.

--- 72 ---

Detective Hotchkiss lounges on his side of the booth, absently gazes at a sugar caddy, lifts his coffee mug, and takes a hot gulp. Detective Greene plants his elbows on the Formica table, stares at his own shirtsleeves, tips his mug and takes a sip.

Detective Hotchkiss taps his knuckles on the table and says, "Isn't coffee the brew of the immortals, Detective Greene? I knew you'd love good coffee if you ever gave it a fair chance."

"I never said I didn't like coffee. I just said I don't drink it. There's a distinction."

"A distinction! I love it. Anything worth considering better have the possibility of distinction. A kiss is not just the touching of lips. Gratitude is not just thankfulness. A chess pie—oh my god, a chess pie!—is not just buttermilk and sugar. Waitress! Waitress!"

"Murder is not just killing."

"Greene..."

"Hotchkiss..."

“Come on, Greene. I won’t order the pie , if that’s what you want. What did Chief Dewey say? What did Winston Maxwell say?”

“Get the pie. I’ll split a slice with you.”

“Split one? Waitress! Waitress! Can we have two slices of chess pie, please?”

“Chief Dewey says the woman is named Lil, and she’s Fern’s aunt, not her mother.”

“Interesting. But what does that help?”

“Nothing, on its own, but he told me something disturbing about her. So I showed Maxwell the photographs, and mentioned the name. It took him a minute, but then he made a face like he caught a cramp in his throat and said, ‘Lillian Duminage’.”

Hotchkiss is rolling a half-empty sugar shaker between his palms. “Duminage. Duminage. Duminage. Menagerie. Mirage.”

“Stay with me now. Maxwell says everyone in Trinidad knows that name. She’s like a bogeywoman. Famous for killing. Schoolchildren chant awful songs about her. And they say she’s a witch.”

“Well isn’t that a dark narrative twist here among all this dying? She’s a witch. Maybe she’ll speed back up I-75 on her broom and we can take her into custody. You’ll have to read her the Miranda rights, though. I had a case with a warlock in South Atlanta once and it was months before I could get an—”

“She cut a man’s heart out.”

“She—”

“She cut a man’s heart out.”

“She cut a—”

“You heard me. She cut a man’s heart out while he was still alive. And now you look like you’re the one who’s caught a cramp in his throat.”

Detective Hotchkiss places the sugar shaker on the tabletop, sits upright in the booth and says, “And now you want to let Lil murder Pete Ehrlich. Don’t you? That’s why you’re sitting here sipping Guatemalan blend instead of staking out her hotel. You don’t want to stop her.”

“I didn’t say that. I said there is a distinction between murder and killing.”

“That’s a dangerous line of thinking, and it’s not in your job description.”

“My job description? You’re the one casting judgment. Didn’t you say Ehrlich was ‘A pervert. A predator.’ And wait, was it, ‘a darn sunning-himself-on-the-swamp-bank crocodile.’ Is that right? ‘With a grin like a handsaw?’”

“Now a man getting his just dessert is one thing, but—“

“Chess pie is more than just buttermilk and sugar. There’s eggs. Cornmeal. Probably a little Crisco in the crust. Don’t you want your dessert?”

“No. I don’t want dessert. That’s not what I want at all. What I want, Detective Greene, is to tell you a story. It is a story a Frenchman told me this evening. It was told to him through dance by the Japanese cat in the magenta dress. I don’t know who told him. I didn’t think much of it until now, but—well, just listen.

“There was once a witch in Osaka. She wasn’t so terrible, as witches go, but if she walked past your home your sake would turn into vinegar and your roof might begin to leak. Some believed she could make virgins become pregnant with fishes and

she could grow dragons from salamanders, but others said that was exaggeration. At any rate, it was agreed she was more of a nuisance than a terror.

“Yet she wouldn’t die. Always, they said, she must be getting up in age. Soon she will grow too old to live. But she didn’t. She would age and age, but somehow, at a point, she would become young again. This was troubling. The people of the city would say, ‘why is it that we must be troubled by the same witch that troubled our grandfathers, and their grandfathers, too? Why won’t she die.

“And finally, one of those grandfathers, a quiet old man with a pointed beard, spoke up. The old man said, ‘This old witch puts on ineptitude like a disguise. Her body is young and soft but her spirit is old and hard. She puts on new skin like she puts on a new cloak. Every generation she does this. Her magic is not growing dragons or birthing fish; her magic is immortality. She knows the recipe for life is also the recipe for death: the union of opposites, of light and dark, man and woman, good and evil—and she flexes power of them by putting them in opposition with each other. She finds, when her time comes, an unborn baby, a baby of one evil parent and one good parent, and she steals this baby. She does not take the baby. Rather, the baby takes her. She brings the parents together, man and woman, and she mixes a powerful lotion with the pulverized petals of a cherry blossom. Then she prepares the womb, and mixes another lotion. The contents are not difficult to obtain; any witch would know where to stock them, but the lotion must be mixed, not with a spoon, but by the beating heart of the evil parent. Only the beating heart can solidify the lotion so it can be introduced to the womb where it can work its magic. There, when the

unborn child is prepared with the lotion, the witch can enter. She can be reborn and live again within a new body, the new body and the same old spirit.’

“This infuriated the people of Osaka, and they looked at one another with accusative eyes. Who was evil? Who was good? Who was pregnant? Or pregnant with the witch?

“For decades the people had tolerated leaky roofs and flat vinegar, but this was too much. They became a mob, and following the lead of a handsome samurai with a pair of curved swords, they stormed up the mountain. Are you listening to me? You’re falling asleep.”

“Of course not,” says Greene. “I have my eyes closed so I can see what you’re saying. Do you want me to picture the story or don’t you want me to picture the story?”

“Just checking. So, yeah, picture this: the people of Osaka, led by a samurai, have torches and sickles, and they have uprooted the witch from her cave. She’s out on a ledge, high upon a mountain, with nowhere to go but off the cliff. So what does she do?”

After a pause, Greene opens his eyes, says, “Who, me? You’re asking me what she does?”

“Yes, you, what does she do?”

“How should I know? You’re the one telling the story.”

“Haven’t you heard enough of these by now?”

“Look, you’re the one telling the story, and I see something in it we need to know, but I don’t see why—oh, wait. Maybe I do know. She turns into a tree?”

“The witch turns into one of those cherry trees she used to make the lotion that went on the mother’s body. Gnarly, strong, with big white blossoms. Only, this tree, the witch, only flowers for two days a year. It’s a cherry tree, but it never bears fruit, never bears seed. But people think they’re so sad and beautiful that they graft them. They end up sprigging these trees all over the island.”

“And centuries later, after World War II, Osaka becomes a sister city of Macon, and gives Macon a stand of young trees?”

“Exactly. And that means?”

“Immortality?”

“Immortality.”

“And I suppose the people of Osaka live happily ever after.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. There’s the samurai. The handsome one who led the mob.”

“What about him?”

“He was a bad guy. And there was a good girl bearing a baby back at the base of the mountain.”

“So?”

“So, who knows, right? Who’s the hunter? Who’s the hunted?”

“Where’s the truth?”

“Who knows? But in the absence of truth, there is the law. And that’s where we come in.”

“Exactly. It never matters whether or not a story is true. What matters is whether or not the person hearing the story believes it to be true.”

“Especially someone who would—“

“Take it too far. Someone like—“

“Waitress!” Hotchkiss waves both hands. “We’ll take that chess pie ‘to go,’ please.”

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Lil places the mixing bowl down on the black felt and the mixture continues to swirl in the bowl. She positions the surgical saw, scalpel, and ratcheted forceps in close arrangement for the procedure and butts the hilt of the dagger in her palm. She raises the weapon above her head and takes aim at the top of the blue circle. But she hears something.

The door explodes open. Detective Greene tumbles in. He is followed by Sheriff Calhoun, two deputies, and then Detective Hotchkiss.

Lil hurries, takes aim again, plunges the dagger downward.

But Detective Greene lunges, tackles Lil before the knife pierces the skin of Pete Ehrlich, and he wrestles her to the carpet.

Sheriff Calhoun yells, “Nobody move.”

No one moves but Lil.

The deputies rip the dagger from Lil’s hands and subdue her on the floor.

Detective Greene says, “She fights like a witch.”

Sheriff Calhoun shouts, “Ehrlich! Wake up!”

Detective Hotchkiss says, “That’s a *perfect* circle. Did you free-hand that?”

Detective Greene kneels down beside Fern's bed, puts two fingers to her throat, and checks for a pulse. It's very slow, but it beats steady.

The deputies secure the dagger, handcuff Lil and turn her face-down on the floor.

Sheriff Calhoun takes Pete Ehrlich by the shoulders, shakes him, blows air in his face and says, "Pete Ehrlich, I'm Sheriff Henry Calhoun, Macon-Bibb Consolidated. Couple things I want to talk to you about."

Detective Hotchkiss asks, "Is there anyone else in here?"

Detective Greene checks beneath the beds, starts in the direction of the shower.

The deputies begin to walk Lil to the car.

Detective Hotchkiss asks, "Is that mustard, salt and, maybe, anise, I smell? Mrs. Duminage? *Duminage*? *Duminage*?"

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Geautreux, his voice strained and throaty from the weekend, stands away from the whitewashed brick of the Central Bank and vends the thick Sunday edition of *The Macon Star-Democrat* in flip-flops, a sweatshirt emblazoned with a hawk, and long red athletic shorts: "Trees dead. Every one. Flowers on the ground. Wet and brown. No fruit, no seeds. Just leaves—and that's what everybody from somewhere else about to do.

“First a picnic. They say, this for everybody. Everybody come. Young and old, close to the grave and far away. Perfume rich and fertilizer poor. They say, ‘everybody come to this.’ What that mean is, ‘don’t everybody come to everything else.’ Don’t everybody come to the gala, don’t everybody come to the Bon show. We go there, you go here. Then everybody come to the picnic. Pimento-cheese sandwich. Sweet tea. Lemonade. Pecan pie. Whatever.

“That’s the news they want you to read. You can read more if you flip some pages. Arrests last night. Nobody wants to say nothing about that. A man got a girl in a woman’s way. A woman got a man in a real bad way. Attempt at murder. What about it? I got nothing to say except I got nothing. That’s something. Sheriff won’t talk. County commissioners, city council, broad in charge—nothing to say. Two cops from up the road got nothing to say. Everybody all parades, picnics and free concerts. Can’t sell cotton candy at a funeral. Lest it’s trees that’s dying.

“And one more arrest. At the so-called Glory Gala. Miss-ess Karen Breckenridge’s cousin got tanked and then got put in the tank. Took him away again. But that ain’t news. Now is it?”

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Detective Hotchkiss pulls the crust away from the edges of his pimento cheese sandwich, tosses the crust into the garbage, says, “I wonder if the person who was *making* these pimento-cheese sandwiches thought they were done when they slapped

the bread together. I don't consider it a sandwich until the crust is off. That's when a sandwich is done. Greene? Who are you looking for?"

Ms. Breckenridge pours a glass of sweet tea for Diane Hull, says, "If you didn't get enough sleep last night, have two glasses. We put more sugar in this stuff than Earl Sweeney puts in his lemon drops."

Detective Hotchkiss swallows half of his pimento cheese sandwich, squints, says, "Why'd you really want to stay in Macon today?"

"Because I'm craving a cup of sweet tea. Excuse me."

"Excuse me? So you can go flirt with Karen Breckenridge? Detective Greene, that woman looks like an unmade bed! Have you lost your mind?"

"Eat another sandwich, Hotchkiss. I'm tired of hearing you talk."

Jon Phelps, noticing Karen Breckenridge is moving from Diane Hull to the next guest, cuts her off, says, "Ms. Breckenridge, I'm afraid the Marketing and Communications Department of the National Pulp Corporation is in a position where we need to tentatively rescind our sponsorship offer."

"Delightful news, um, I can't remember your name. But I know you're the guy who stands behind Pete Ehrlich and nods his head."

"That's me. Jon Phelps."

"That's right. Forgive me, Jon. I meet so many important people this time of year that I find it difficult to remember everyone else. But look on the bright side; since you've rescinded your offer at least you don't have to hear me turn it down. It was a pleasure to see you, though. Don't miss the dessert tables."

Councilman Peters gulps his tea so that he can hide behind the cup. His daughter wears a teal sundress and presses her face against his pleated pants.

Diane Hull gives him a nasty look as she walks by. His daughter notices, says, “Daddy, why is that woman looking at you like that? Did you do something bad?”

Councilman Peters spills ice and what’s left of the tea on his chin. He cups his daughter’s head in his hand and says, “Don’t mind things like that, honey. You’ll grow up to be like your mother.”

The Japanese Ambassador from Washington sits alone at a table. He is eating an egg-salad sandwich, but he doesn’t like the bread. With a plastic knife he scrapes the egg salad away from the bread and scoops it onto an apple.

Winston Maxwell sits down at the table. He says to the Ambassador, “If this food were any better I’d apply citizenship. And what are you doing there?”

The Ambassador inspects the man who has just sat beside him. He squints his eyes as he strains to read the man’s name and title on the sash that drapes from his right shoulder. When he is satisfied that he has read enough, he bites the apple and egg, and never says anything at all to Winston Maxwell.

Detective Hotchkiss begins to peel another sandwich when he is interrupted by Sheriff Calhoun, who says, “Nothing yet from our guy. They had to pump his stomach at Central State. They’ve got him I.V.’d up now. We’re going to get a statement this evening, if he’s cleaned out.”

“I imagine he won’t say much until he can get a lawyer, or until you can bring charges.”

“You’re probably right. And something tells me that lawyer’s going to be cut from the same bolt. Probably one of the Piedmont Club buddies.”

“And you’ll be lucky if there’s just one of him. He’s going to hear from us in Atlanta, too.”

“Then we’ll be in touch.”

“We’ll be in touch.”

Just before Detective Greene reaches Karen Breckenridge, the A&E editor from the *Star-Democrat* steps in front of him.

Emily Houzer bumps her glasses higher on her nose, flips to a clean page in her notebook, asks, “Ms. Breckenridge, are you satisfied with this year’s festival?”

“Satisfied? Emily, I’d be disappointed if I was only satisfied. I am on cloud nine after what anyone here will tell you was the best festival in a generation, and they’ll tell you that even before they have the pecan pie.”

“Speaking of cloud nine, did the rain last night crimp business downtown?”

“Crimp business? That little sprinkle? I doubt it settled the dust, much less put dampened business. Pouring and concessions end at two a.m. anyway, and business was booming so much this weekend that I’m sure the numbers were up. Besides, how would keep the dying trees alive if we didn’t have a little rainfall from time to time?”

“And will the festival itself be alive next year?”

“That again! If I live 800 years those cherry trees won’t die once without the city of Macon having a celebration, and you can put that on bold-faced type on the front of the A&E section if you please.”

“Ms. Breckenridge, in the newsroom we heard there was an abduction last night, an abduction of Pete Ehrlich, a VP from National Pulp that may fund the festival next year. Do you have any comment?”

“Gracious, Emily, have I been elected Sheriff? And you’ve been demoted to beat reporting? If you want to talk about crime you should turn to—Del! Del, it’s so lovely you stayed in town for the picnic.”

Detective Greene takes Karen Breckenridge’s hand, which she’s offered, allows himself to be pulled closer to her. “Karen,” he says.

“You’ll have to excuse us, Emily dear. Looking forward to the feature. Del, come this way with me. I have some people I want to avoid.”

Detective Greene holds Karen Breckenridge’s hand, follows along, carries her lunch plate, spends the afternoon by her side.

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“Shut the door behind you, Greene,” says Chief Dewey. “I swear, spend two nights out of the city and you act like you’ve forgotten which way to turn a doorknob. Now sit down. You don’t have all week.”

Detectives Greene and Hotchkiss, both bleary eyed and carrying coffee mugs, take seats across from Chief Dewey.

“What else?” asks Chief Dewey.

“Sir?”

“What else, now that Duminage is in custody. The girl’s being transferred to Atlanta Medical later today. We’ve got some questions for, for—“

“Pete Ehrlich.”

“Pete Ehrlich. But what else? What ball’s still in the air?”

“Questioning,” says Greene.

“A mountain of paperwork,” says Hotchkiss.

“And?”

Detectives Hotchkiss and Greene look to one another, shake their heads, raise their coffee cups.”

“Do you two know about the front-of-house manager?”

“The one with the information on Fern and Lil? What about him?”

“Shift manager found him in the restaurant’s walk-in cooler yesterday morning. No hands, no feet, and no heartbeat.”

“Dead?” asks Greene?

“In the cooler?” asks Hotchkiss.

“Of course he was dead, Sherlock and Watson. Dead, and with no hands and no feet. Someone carved him up. Do you have any idea who?”

They detectives think for a moment, shake their heads.

“Well it’s your assignment to find out who, and I suggest you start with the characters you’ve been chasing all weekend. You ought to know how to begin.”

Detective Hotchkiss says, “But Chief, we worked all weekend. I was thinking we’d have the next few days off.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re detectives, not airline pilots. Have an extra cup of coffee and get cracking.”

The detectives’ shoulders bend, they slouch in their chairs, look at their coffee.

Chief Dewey says, “Why am I still looking at you two? I’ve got work to do, too, you know. Lieutenant Parrot over in Neighborhood Relations wants to meet with me this morning. Says they’ve had an uptick in graffiti. Someone’s painting trains with all sorts of assassins riding in them. The train has no top, and sitting onboard are all these warriors. Guerilla fighters, hitmen, ninjas and knights. Strange, and all over town. I’m sure it’s nothing to get in a row about, but I’ve got to hear about it nonetheless. Now get out of my sight. Nothing ever got done by men who just sit there and think.”