



University of Tennessee, Knoxville
**TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative
Exchange**

Masters Theses

Graduate School

5-1999

Almost fall

Bonnie Kathryn Smith

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes

Recommended Citation

Smith, Bonnie Kathryn, "Almost fall. " Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 1999.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/10023

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Bonnie Kathryn Smith entitled "Almost fall." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

B. J. Leggett, Arthur Smith

Accepted for the Council:


Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

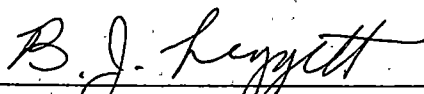
(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

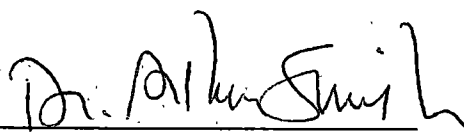
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Bonnie Kathryn Smith entitled *Almost Fall*. I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.



Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:


Dr. B.J. Leggett


Dr. Arthur Smith

Accepted for the Council:


Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of the Graduate
School

Almost Fall

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Bonnie Kathryn Smith
May 1999

Copyright © *Bonnie Kathryn Smith*, 1999
All rights reserved

Dedication

This thesis, which delves into the inner lives
of mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters,
is dedicated to my own family:

Sharon Lockett Smith, my mother,

Floyd Smith, Jr., my father,

Kelly Margaret Smith, my dearest friend and sister,

Patricia Carney Lockett, my grandmother, &

Floyd Smith, Sr., my grandfather

who have given me education, love, and light.

Acknowledgments

I am particularly grateful for the teaching, guidance and friendship of my thesis director Allen Wier. Dr. B.J. Leggett and Dr. Arthur Smith, the remaining members of my committee, are wonderful readers and teachers. Matt Forsythe, whose work I admire, is an invaluable reader and a friend. Abby Branda's kindness during my time at the University of Tennessee is unforgettable.

My dear friend and former landlady, Debby Stirling, was resourceful enough to provide the "research" behind the fall that physically gets Annie-O and Willie; the memory of her husband Ted Stirling and the life of my friend Ron Briggs embody the grace which redeems them.

Perhaps I owe the greatest debt for the encouragement I've received from my friends Missy and Walter Hubbell, Elizabeth Nelson, Alice Sneary, and Kristen Wilson, who are the family I got to choose.

Abstract

This work of fiction, which is the first part of a novel, seeks to investigate what happens to people who invent other people. By experimenting with point of view, character, language and realism, the author examines her own voice as a writer. Through the fiction of the world she has invented, the author orients herself in the world of the tradition out of which she writes.

Introduction

Almost Fall is a novel-in-progress centering around a crucial time in the life of the Whitcomb family. I began writing this work nearly three years ago as I was finishing up my senior year at Sewanee and taking a fiction writing workshop, which I'd been secretly wishing to add to my menu of classes since my freshman year in college. During this time, my landlady got in the wonderful habit of clipping bizarre stories she found in the newspaper and leaving them for me on the bar in her kitchen. Often in the late afternoons after returning home from my work and classes, I'd find the clippings taped to the bar, fix a drink, and sit down to unwind from the day. The idea for *Almost Fall* originated from one of those curious clippings. The story was that, somewhere in the southern United States, a married couple had plunged to the ground while attempting to make love in a tree. Like any hot-blooded character-driven creative writing student looking for a plot, I was intrigued.

As a student of New Critics, I immediately latched onto the simple conceit of the act of falling while trying to come together in a tree. The Edenic "marriage" of sex and a literal fall was definitely a

theme with which I felt comfortable working. Also at that time, I was reading and writing about Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and the echoes of that play in my own work are evident, particularly through my creation of characters who deliberately named their first child Rosalind after the Shakespearean heroine and, with even more deliberation, seek to make their home a Forest of Arden.

The first draft of what is now the first chapter in *Almost Fall* was told from the point of view of the character who is now Rosalind, the daughter of Annie-O and Willie. I was unhappy with this first draft because Rosalind, as a distant observer, couldn't really get into the tree-sex scene. So, I rewrote the then short-story from a third-person omniscient point of view. This second time, the story was entirely too distant, but the exercise proved successful since I, and the helpful individuals in my writing workshop, realized that the person who should tell this story was Annie-O, Rosalind's mother and the matriarch of the Whitcomb clan. Feeling much more relaxed with first-person, I again wrote the story from Annie-O's point of view. By then, the semester ended, I graduated, and I put my latest draft of the short-story (then called "Falls") out of my mind for the summer months.

When I matriculated at UT for the M.A. program in English, my plan was to concentrate in Renaissance or Modern literature. But, at the urging of my former writing teacher at Sewanee, Tony Earley, I enrolled in a writing workshop led by his former teacher, Allen Wier. After my first few classes with Allen Wier, I somewhat spontaneously decided to become a writing-emphasis M.A. student. I found that, in writing workshops, I was able to do the kind of close, responsible readings — of student texts *and* of published texts — that I'd been yearning to do. Choosing the writing emphasis was a good decision for me; as a scholar and as a writer, I believe that anyone who chooses to study literature should do some serious time "in the laboratory," i.e., writing some literature of his/her own, before sh/e endeavors to become a teacher of literature.

So, as I got back "in the laboratory," I seriously considered what I wanted to begin working on for my creative thesis. I submitted the latest version of "Falls," a shorter version of what is now the first section of my thesis, to one of Allen Wier's workshops and received some very helpful feedback. I decided that my thesis would be a collection of first-person short stories centering around the Whitcomb

family. My original goal, and the hope that I keep in mind as my writing on this now-novel progresses, was that what I wrote would not be another tired rumination in and on the dysfunctions of a typically eccentric Southern family; instead, I want to write a comedy of the old style, a story that starts out with lots of tragic potential and ends with hope — and marriage. *As You Like It* has always been in mind as I work on this project; getting characters into a kind of Forest of Arden, an ideal, idyllic setting where they can investigate themselves, their relationships with others, and their places in the power structures that exist within all familial and communal relationships, was something I greatly admire about *As You Like It* (and indeed, the entire body of Shakespeare's work), and I felt this investigation would be appropriate for the characters in the family Whitcomb. Also at the time I was deciding how I wanted my thesis to take shape, I read Rebecca Wells' *Little Altars Everywhere*, the novel that preceded *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (the pop novel that inspired women all over the country to form clubs, share "communion" together by passing around a bowl of bloody marys, and swear vows of eternal sisterhood). I was intrigued by the reports of Wells' smash-hit novels, so I bought them,

and though I felt both were edited poorly, I was interested in Wells' depictions of Vivian and Siddalee, the mother and daughter main characters of *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, the events that lead up to their distanced relationship, and the rituals of Catholicism and friendship that seemed to glue everyone together. Each chapter of *Ya-Ya's* predecessor, *Little Altars Everywhere*, was told from the point of view of a separate member of Siddalee's family, and, as in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a novel that I have in mind and frequently refer to as I work on *Almost Fall* (my life as a reader and as a writer metamorphosed when Addie Bundren spoke from beyond the grave), these first-person point of view shifts allow for great insights when one is dealing with the goings-on within a large family. At Allen Wier's suggestion, I read Evan S. Connell's novels *Mr. Bridge and Mrs. Bridge*, and was struck by the Bridges' beautiful and often painful restraints of emotion and sentiment. In the thesis, I realize that I am dealing with subject matter that risks sentimentality, and I have aimed for this Bridgeian kind of restraint, particularly in scenes that take place between Willie and his children.

If writers are divided into those who are driven by plot and those who are driven by character, I most certainly fall into the latter category. I have a very difficult time accelerating plot; I am much more interested in the gestures people make, the words that come out of their mouths, and the thoughts and off-center ideas that accumulate in their heads, and I feel that this weakness is evident in the early sections of my thesis. After working on the early sections from the points of view of Winston, Maria, and Rosalind, I grew frustrated that what I had was not the beginnings of a short story collection, but a series of character sketches. The first section from Willie's point of view (the section beginning "Sharla Marvon is gone") was the section in which I felt like plot was beginning to develop in a pronounced way.

With this section, "Buddy, It Was Breast Cancer," and the earlier section, "Breaststroke," which is told from Winston's point of view, I sought to set up a direct relationship between Willie and his second son, the son he feels he connects with least. In my mind, Willie and Winston are dramatic foils because they, more than any other characters in the novel, invent people. At the bottom of the pool, Winston invents his "witch woman" Harriet in a way that lets us know

he embraces (in literal ways) that which is magical or fantastic. I envision Winston as a gifted young man; he is able to see what's beneath the surface, but, because he is an adolescent, I have tried to make his voice fluctuate and waver so that we know his sixteen year-old consciousness is as metamorphic and fluid as the watery images on which he seems fixated. Willie has invented people in another literal sense; as a visionary, a man who has sought to tailor his world and the people in it, Willie wants the people he and Annie-O have created to remain in his Arden/Eden-like world, and when certain events — his own injury, Sharla Marvon's death, Winston's vision, Rosalind's engagement — become "punchlines" by propelling Willie's inventions out of the realm in which he invented them, he determines (through methods that would never be deemed logical by this author) that he must fashion a fence, a literal enclosure, around that which he has created. So, as a writer, I am interested in what happens when the man who has, to a great extent, played creator-god, falls.

What happens to people who invent people? This is the question I ask of myself as I, in a very mimetic way, invent people. I invent the house they live in, I invent the yard they play in, I invent the

vocabularies they possess, I invent the sentences they say to one another, and I invent the situations they will confront together. The characters in the Whitcomb family come out of their own inner worlds into familial interaction and, in a larger sense, into the consciousness of the reader; likewise, as I experiment with language, conflict, and seek to write out of our common literary tradition, I feel myself as an inventor/writer and as a reader/scholar, glide in and out of time, self, and space — not at all unlike Sharla Marvon.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
Before Apple-Picking	1
Lingerie and Hypnosis	22
Penpal	33
Breaststroke	38
Buddy, It Was Breast Cancer	44
The Fax	65
Dumb Bird	75
Ribbon of Highway	87
She's Hatched	97
See You at the Bottom	115
Punchline	129
My Kind of Women	145
Vita	159

Before Apple-Picking

Annie-O

I don't think we're born all at once, all in a watery gush of purple skin and crying Mommas. We're born in snippets, over a long stretch of time, in bits and pieces, sections, like the fractions I've been trying to explain to my kids at school this month. Tonight, when she knows it's around supper time, Mary Mac Ravenel up and calls me, seeming anxious to talk about her own child's trouble figuring out fractions.

"Yes, Mary Mac," I say. "Ben doesn't quite understand that one-third is bigger than one-fourth. It's a normal problem since three has always been littler than four in the past for them, and what I'm going to do, since Ben isn't the only one who's confused, is make a big pan of fudge and cut it into halves, then fourths, and so on, so the children can see with their eyes what happens with the whole fraction thing."

"Oh, how marvelous Annie-O! You're so inventive with them. I wish I knew your secrets."

What bullshit floods through the honey of the voices of women like Mary Mac Ravenel. They make me pray for grace in speech: *Help me O, Lord, to keep guard over my lips. Save me from words that hurt: from gossip and slander and lies.*

"So Annie, we've heard Willie's had a bit of trouble. I mean, I don't mean to pry, but I was down at McSwain's picking up some of their spicy ham, and Cornelia Marshall said her husband got a page to come in an set Willie's leg last Saturday."

I nod, but she can't see me. I twirl my fingers through the plastic curls of the phone cord and pretend it's her kinky red hair. I pull and breathe hard.

"So Cornelia didn't know what had happened and Jerry just smiled and said 'patient-client privilege,' but I was just concerned."

"Well, Mary Mac," I say. "He's going to be fine. It was a clean break, and he should have the cast off by Halloween."

I stop talking to see how long the quiet will last. *Let me speak only to encourage and cheer and to keep people on their feet, so that all my words*

may minister grace. Mary Mac seems surprised at the silence. Maybe even shocked I can hold it.

“Well, Annie. How did you all... I mean, how did he do it? Was he up in one of the barns or something? Maybe he was bailing in that old hayloft and the floor collapsed or something?”

“Mary Mac,” I say. “We had what became — well, Teddy’s dog was at the end of the driveway, and oh hell, that reminds me I promised I’d bring some of the late irises over for your bridge club tomorrow. I wish you girls would have those on Saturdays so us working women could make it! Will Jr. has to run down to the Wal-Mart for some things to take to Auburn, so I’ll send him with the irises. Thanks for calling, Mary Mac!”

I slam the phone down before the meddlesome Mary Mac can even breathe. One of the times I got born was when I found out being a sugar-coated bitch was more effective than being a blanched bitch. I know about birthing and borning and bitching since I’ve got five kids. I tell Winston to clear the table and go up to my chair on the porch. Willie is already there, staring at his open, glowing laptop, then looking up at me with his green eyes, grinning when he sees me. I get a bottle

of Maker's from the top of the chest of drawers, pour some in his glass and bite his earlobe. He asks me who was that, and I tell him the meddlesome Mary Mac.

"Meddlesome" is today on my Word of the Day calendar Rosie put in my stocking last year, and that's what Mary Mac is. I reach down into one of the clay pots by my chair and tear off a couple sprigs of mint, lick the leaves all slow-like, bruise them with my back teeth, and put two in my glass, three in his. He watches me.

"Annie O'Grady Whitcomb. Vroom, vroom, va-voom."

My Willie's hair has gotten thin and white, and mine is still blonde and long. Keeping it greasy is the secret. Too much shampooing and cleaning it kills it. For a second, I put my hand on his stomach, easing my fingers between one of his fat rolls, tickling him. He's all soft now like my thighs have been for twenty-two or more years now. In the reflection of his thick tortoise-shell glasses is my double-chin. I straighten it out by raising it and look a little longer at my lips. Too chapped, but still fat and pink. My eyes rebound off his in the glasses for a second, all four as green as those mint sprigs.

"Yell for Will Jr., will you darlin'?"

"Will!"

When my Willie hollers, his voice travels down through the crown molding and caulking and mortar of the house. It's not something our children can flee. My oldest son bounds up the stairs to our porch, and I reach up to straighten his cowlick.

"Baby, get two big handfuls of the irises out of the bed closest to the road, wrap them up in some wet paper towels, and take them over to the Ravenels before it gets dark. Do it before the Wal-Mart."

"Yes ma'am," says my good child.

Off he goes, orange-handled scissors from the desk drawer in hand, and Willie and I keep sitting, drinking, looking out across the croquet court and down past the hillside where Willie wants to put a new pond. Rosalind and her boyfriend John-John start off down the gravel driveway for a walk. Winston dives in the pool at the shallow end, and I cringe. On the croquet court, Maria sits Indian-style and writes on a legal pad. Teddy, all knees and elbows, runs around the basketball court in a big dramatic circle and misses a lay-up. The sky is getting ready to set itself on fire before the night falls.

A long gravel driveway leads from the county highway on the top of the hill back through my tulip beds to our land. The house is cedar, a wide house, and the porches are what we all love best. The top one can be accessed from our master bedroom, but the bottom one, the bottom one is where we all live, especially from mid-March to early-November. There is a rocker for each of us, plus four extras for whoever stops by for a drink or to look at whatever woodworking project Willie's got going in the basement in the hours between when he gets home from work and I serve dinner. There are carved circular indentations in each of the armrests that fit my highball glasses precisely. There are a couple of window boxes, usually empty during the school year when I'm teaching, but overflowing in the summertime with pansies or whatever's on sale and might look halfway decent through the Fourth of July hog cooking. I don't think much about the inside of our house, except for the kitchen where I stand peeling potatoes, deboning chicken, mixing juleps by the gallon on derby day, scraping the iron skillet and polishing the copper pots after supper is over and Willie is sitting in the great room reading *The Economist*. He probably had this structure designed in his head long before he met me,

long before he said, "you've already got me hard as Chinese algebra" to me on my doorstep: the famous first words of our blind date arranged by Willie's brother Hendree and his wife-to-be Floranne, who lived down the hallway from me in the sorority house. "Chinese algebra" started it all: the sex (which I'd never had on the first date before), the short courtship, the terrible time I had trying to convince the registrar to use my married name at commencement exercises since the wedding was the Saturday before, the honeymoon to a friend's cabin at Lake Martin. Willie still rents that cabin every Memorial Day weekend so we can go there as a family and set our goals for the year.

We are a tall household, except for Willie. The kids are blonde like me. Willie is not. In the family portraits, he always sits down so you can't tell he dwarfs below us at five-ten. Willie's a stock broker at the Edward D. Jones in town. Thanks to technology, he now gets to spend about three-quarters of his time at home, buying and selling through a modem. His soft stomach is a result of a combination of drinking and sitting at night. When Rosie was home for Thanksgiving and we got up early like we always do to finish the turkey and start in on the mimosas, she told me she thought he was drinking too much.

"He's a real sponge, Momma," she said, and I told her to stop being disrespectful miss smart college junior, to shut up and drink her mimosa. Will Jr. will probably be just like him. He has the same free and boisterous fraternity-boy-forever quality about him.

Rosie's started sleeping with her boyfriend. She didn't come out and tell me, though she probably would if I were to ask her right straight out. I know, though. I see it in the way she walks now, the way she touches the lobe of her ear when she pushes blonde strands back into her ponytail. I made that same move. New lovers want to look unassuming, as if everything is artless and natural, as if the things they are doing with their bodies are as useful as breathing. As if waking up and finding that your shimmery new panties are all tangled around your left ankle is the most natural thing in the world. The children still smirk at each other when Willie grabs me between the legs in the kitchen or licks me on the earlobe in the van. When I was in high school, I remember realizing *my god, my parents fuck*. It changed me. It seems to bother the boys. They seem to know that my flesh is not all mine, but they don't understand yet that it's not just his. I take care of

them all with this body. Hell, I let them live in it — their shit was my shit and my air was theirs — but they're still too squeamish to admit it.

Forty-five months total, three and three-fourths years of pregnancy. Each time I felt the walls contract, I took a swig of castor oil from the medicine cabinet above the stove and went out on that front porch to jump rope. As I jumped with my legs and raised my arms above my head and felt my belly flop up and down, each of their little heads slowly pointed towards the earth. Willie would sit in one of the rocking chairs and laugh at me, half-hysterical that another Whitcomb was about to be born, half-worried I'd fall off the edge of our house and lose the Whitcomb that was about to be born. My mother did it too, and there hasn't been a difficult pregnancy in our family for years and years. I breast-fed them all, and I carry their groceries in from the back of the van without help, and my knees get sore from kneeling out in the tulip beds to plant bulbs and tend shoots and finally, to pick out the perfect bloom for one of their dates' corsages (which I always make). I sang each of their little eyes closed when they were little to "Crimson and Clover" and "Tell Him" (by the Exciters).

And then, I would get up from that rocker and take myself into our room where, of course, I took care of Willie. I still do. After I come out of the shower, I slather lotion all over me because he hates when my skin gets scaly from being in the sun. I put so much lotion on me that I'm wet again, and I have to stand in the turquoise polyester dragon robe he got me from some import shop until I'm dry again.

Rosie started borrowing my dragon robe when she turned sixteen or so. About that same time, she started reading more and more. Even when she was little, she kept a flashlight under the covers with her, and when she started getting old enough to play basketball, I had to pry her away from her books to get her to practice. Willie made all the children at least try basketball since we are such a tall household. They've all played at the Y on Saturday mornings, junior varsity in middle school, varsity in high schools. None of them are much good. Now, when Rosie comes home from college, I ask her to bring all her literature anthologies and papers. We sit at the dining room table Willie made when we planned to have a big family, and we pour over Medieval, sixteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth-century anthologies. When she gets to twentieth-century next semester, we'll go through those too.

She puts checks by the poems she likes best, and she reads them to me out loud. I will always love to hear my children read. Rosie's voice is clear; she never trips over words like she used to trip over her shoestrings and long legs during basketball games. We named her Rosalind after the character from *As You Like It*. Willie and I love that play. It's the only Shakespeare we know really well. We had to read it in college, and even now, sometimes when he's coming onto me he whispers, "come on baby, let's devise sports," just like in the early scene when Rosalind and Celia decide it'd be fun to fall in love.

Rosalind and her boyfriend John-John have been here for this last week, relaxing before school starts back. Last night, we read William Blake, and she told me about this lecture her professor gave on his life. He said that William Blake and Catherine, his wife, never had children. She couldn't read when he met her, so he taught her to read so well she could write poems too. Anyway, Mr. and Mrs. Blake used to throw off their worldly garments, go out in their backyard dressed as Adam and Eve and reenact the Fall. They'd take strip down to nothing like the good Lord intended, she'd get an apple, he'd take some fruit, and on the story would play.

It's almost fall here. The apples in the orchard were like golf balls two weeks ago, and now they are almost ready to be plucked from their limbs. We take Will Jr. to Auburn next Saturday, and I have been trying to get him to give me a stack of his shirts that need buttons and shoes that need polishing. For the entire summer, he has spent practically every Friday and Saturday at cotillion soirees with his girlfriend Molly and fraternity rush beer bashes in acquaintances' families' barns. Molly's a meddlesome little bitch about my family. I have heard her at parties whisper to her mother that I don't keep the house clean. And that's probably true now that only Maria's here to help me. After the Fourth of July party, Will Jr. and Molly went out god knows where and he was picked up for DUI down on the main drag. His father brushed it aside and made Will Jr. promise to mow the croquet court and trim the edges with the weed wacker every summer. He has done it once. Will Jr. can play his father's strings almost as well as me.

But Winston is watching his older brother closely. He is sixteen now, and the boys share their father's '85 Town Car on the condition that they must take and pick up Maria and Teddy from school.

Winston has started wearing all shades of khaki like Willie and Will Jr. They are reversed stairsteps; Winston crept past Will Jr. when he shot up all at once at fourteen and is now the tallest Whitcomb at six-four. Watching Winston grow into Will Jr. grow into Willie is like sitting backwards in a train and staring as the land whizzes by you. Will Jr. has taken full advantage of all the perks that come with being the son of Willie Whitcomb: the permission for boisterousness, the coveted invitations to our house where the beer and bourbon flow freely for all as long as car keys are handed to me in exchange, the impromptu basketball games on our half-court down from the end of the driveway, girlfriends watching on their bellies from the pool and adjusting their bikini straps to they can raise up without exposing budding breasts.

Winston will miss his brother, but he knows he will take over the throne at school and revel in two years of quality time as the eldest Whitcomb son. Though I didn't tell Willie, when I was pregnant with Winston I was wishing desperately for another daughter. Rosie had just started kindergarten. We could stop there, and I could rest. Get my tubes tied. We wouldn't have to get an ugly old van, and Rosie's little hand-me-downs would be useful for someone. But Winston was a

beautiful baby, my kindest child. He rubs my shoulders when his brother aren't around, and he tells me to relax and that dinner was wonderful. I always put a bay leaf in the spaghetti sauce (since spaghetti is a meal I fix at least once a week), and Winston made up a game that whoever got the bay leaf in his sauce was lucky. Guests love this. I wish Willie would stop ordering him to cut his hair. It creeps past his chin now in flaxen waves that I love to touch. Winston looks like some old illustration of Ganymede, the cup bearer to the gods, from one of Rosie's literature anthologies. He plays the violin. My Willie likes Wagner and Joan Baez, despite her politics. He sings every verse of "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" in the shower some mornings. Sometimes I think he wishes Virgil Cane was his name and he rode on the Danville train. At sixteen, Winston is growing out of basketball. He was never that good, and he'd rather swim anyway. I wouldn't trade my Winston for a slew of girls, and I'll be damned if I tell his father how he smokes pot on the croquet court under the stars, long after he thinks we're all sleeping.

Maria's going to be trouble. She's devastated now that puberty has hit and her hips are getting big. She measures them and writes

down the number. She cried all the way home from our school shopping because she needed a size ten in her Levi's. Maria's so damned self-conscious. She fully expects every word out of my mouth to be about her and of a critical nature. Which is normal for her age, but never anything I had to deal with when it came to Rosalind.

I teach fifth-grade, but never had I had one of my children in my class. Rhonda Livingstone teaches the other class, of which my baby Teddy is a member. We've been doing summer enrichment for the gifted program all summer. Yesterday, we took the classes to the zoo in Montgomery (Teddy calls it Monkeytown), and on the long bus ride back home, Teddy plugged himself into a Discman and ignored me. He has been spitting mad with me all week now. He won't love his mother the same anymore. Ever. Coming home from the store, I paid no attention to the half-German Shepherd puppy meandering across the driveway, Teddy's own dog he found collarless on the playground, and I caught it under the wheel of the damned van. I had the music on too loud. Etta James. When I told Teddy, he screamed at me and called me a murderer. He picked the body up off the edge of the driveway, got a shovel from the barn, and took it out into the woods to bury it. All by

himself. My littlest baby, a gravedigger. This is how Willie and I began our own fall.

After I murdered my son's puppy, I fixed a bourbon and took off all my clothes, connecting all my stretch marks with my eyes. I get dizzy when I see how disgusting the tiger claw tracks across my thighs look in the daylight. I locked the door to our bedroom and sat naked and cross-legged on the bed, crying and occasionally getting up to straighten a picture frame and see how my face had changed since our wedding picture. I got down some baby books and albums, and I looked at the faces of my children and Willie. I put on some more Etta James, and I sang. I sang real loud as the bourbon warmed up my blood vessels and massaged the edges of my brain:

All I want to do is cook your bread
Just to make sure you're well fed
I don't want you sad and blue
And I just wanna make love to you
Love to you, oooohhh.

I didn't know if that bread cooking was all I ever wanted. I wanted. I wanted what? For awhile, I wanted for my children to be dreams and for me to be Miss Annie O'Grady, without a thought in the black and white world of the engagement photo by the bed. *February 1971. Hugh and Maureen O'Grady announce with pleasure the engagement of their daughter Anne to Mr. Willard Martin Whitcomb of Vidalia, Georgia. My hair is the same, and I'm standing at some kind of lectern. My hands are folded. I know a secret. No one said they recognized that smile. The O'Gradys will host an engagement party for their daughter and Mr. Whitcomb at their home in Stevenson on the first day of spring.*

I wanted sister friends. For us to call ourselves the Patron Sugar-Coated Bitch-Saints of North Alabama, to stay up late at nights and make fun of whoever was dumb enough to say Ashley Wilkes was better than Rhett Butler. Evenings all day long. *O Lord, support me all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done.*

When Willie got home from work, what we call the five-fifty light was making stripes on the bed. He wiped my tears on his oxford shirt, and I put on the turquoise dragon robe. We walked out on our

own porch and down the stairs to the first level porch. I put on my flip-flops, and we walked down the porch stairs, across the croquet court, down the grassy knoll of the ridge to the place where the land gets flat again. There is a small pond there that we fancy for our lake. We walked up the hill again, down the long gravel driveway and stopped to look closely at my tulip beds. We stopped in the barn to get some roundup, and I sprayed poison blankets over a crop of weeds. Willie caught me as I raised up, and he kissed me one lip at a time. I led him over to the orchard where the children helped up pick a few bushels before going back to school and school's excuses. Late every summer, we lay out the apples—apples on linen on lattice on linen on apples on linen—and mash them altogether in the press my Willie found in some dead farmer's barn. As always, Will Jr. and Winston started an apple fight, pelting whoever stood still enough with the hard, tart little hand grenades. The orchard's where I started rubbing Willie's shoulders and back, where he turned and said "Chinese algebra" before he started kissing me more, on the hair and eyelids and under the polyester dragon. This is all the flesh I want to know.

As I unbuttoned his oxford—I don't really know why I did this—I pulled him over toward the trunk of one of the bare apple trees. The tree limbs looked so unburdened without all the apples, and I let go of him, and climbed to the second branch. It just seemed like a way to get up closer to the sky, a way to bring Zacchius the wee little man up closer to god like the song the kids used to bring home from Vacation Bible School. Willie followed me, climbed up to that second limb and positioned his own wobbly limbs against the tree's biggest, and I could feel the wind make everything cool down. Apple trees aren't that tall, and it was easy enough to maneuver up there, easier naked. When Rosie saw Willie in his cast, she hooted then blushed and said she wanted to know nothing about logistics. He was on top, and the backs of my legs were scraping against a little knot in the branch, but it didn't matter.

We crashed when we fell. I laughed and looked up at the sky and reached over to grab an apple from the ground that we could share. I stopped when I realize Willie's cries weren't the familiar joyful ones I have heard from him for the better, the best, part of my life. His was the cry one makes when he knows without question—perhaps he even

heard it echo in his head—that he has broken a bone. I threw on my dragon robe and told my Willie everything would be fine and ran down the long driveway, my flip-flops sounding each step, to get Will Jr. and the truck. Willie must have lain there for all those minutes cursing half the time, figuring out the next project for the land the rest.

Legs heal themselves slowly, and in a way, I think my Willie enjoys being an invalid. It's a way to be quiet, to be still, to sit down beside me after dinner like tonight. He's got the bad leg propped up on the chintz ottoman I carried up from the great room. He sits in his rocking chair, still letting the corner of his mouth smirk with satisfaction at his ingenuity of carving the highball glass holders all those years ago. We talk and talk about the weather and the kids and my class and the curry recipe I found and what Will Jr. might major in at Auburn. I pour us some more, and Willie's leg starts to itch. I stick my fingernails down in his cast as far as I can reach to scratch his flaking skin, but it's not far enough, so I go get a fork from down in the kitchen. We've still got our universe, and especially on nights like tonight, it's still pretty good. I tell him it's all just another heave-ho,

that in falling from that tree, maybe we got some of our borning over
with together.

Lingerie and Hypnosis

Rosalind

A few days after New Year's, when Victoria's Secret started their big semi-annual sale, John-John and I drove over to Atlanta to the mall to steal some underwear for me for Valentine's Day. It's an observance we started two and a half years ago in 1993, the year Bill Clinton was inaugurated, the year when there was nothing wrong with America that couldn't be cured by what was right with America. John-John was twenty-nine. His mother had named him so on a bet she made with his father that the little Kennedy boy would break down during his daddy's funeral. Kinda sick. The kid held strong, saluted, she lost, and like always, John-John's father won out. My parents didn't know what the hell they were going to name me until my dad took one look at me, than at my mother and said, "Annie-O, let's devise sports. What think you of falling in love?" My mother got the cue.

"Rosalind," she said.

As You Like It. Simple and easy as the Forest of Arden. But when I told the story to John-John, I made sure to say, all sure of myself just like Mark Knopfler, "but baby she thinks she's tough, she ain't no English rose." Not that Rosalind really was either. She complained about the burrs on her heart. I found that out when I finally read the play, when I was eighteen, the year our lingerie junkets began, the year Bill and Al, Hillary and Tipper finally got off that damn campaign bus and rested their asses on chintz, down cushions, when Victoria's Secret wasn't yet tacky and garish, its outside still adorned with the fake mahogany facades and brass lettering and not the trashy hot pink hearts and scrawny women it has now. That first year, John-John was thrilled to be surrounded by tables laid with satin panties instead of Annie-O's Lenox holly Christmas china, thanking me and god that for once he didn't have to worry about ticks when he was around me and my family. The ticks are nobody's fault, nothing about me or my family's cleaning habits or anything. They just infiltrate themselves onto our scalps and skin by way of the animals. Momma horrified John-John that first Christmas. Our bulldog Pork Chop was rubbing up and down on her leg at the dinner table, and as she was running her

hands over his head, she noticed a tell-tale marble-shiny bump on the back of his neck. Daddy was talking about mutual funds or diversifying or one of those things I always get mixed up, John-John nodding after every couple of sentences, when Annie-O let out a high, breathy oooooohhhh-hweeee.

“Oh baby baby Porky’s got a tick right here above his collar! That’s no fun for the Pork Chop on this glorious Christmas Day! Rosalind, baby, pass me that candle right now.”

I picked up the lit blue candle, my fingerprints marking in its pliant wax and passed it to my mother at the end of the long, oval table. By then, she’d pulled the tick right off Pork Chop with her long, manicured fingernails, held it above her plate in one hand, took the candle in the other, and brought them together. The bloodsucker singed on impact. Mother passed the brass candlestick back to me, leaving the tick burning and still audibly crackling in the hollowed-out place on the candle’s top. The light got brighter, the flame longer. I glanced over into the eyes of John-John, my pensive Ph.D. candidate prize there in my house for the entire month-long break since a plane ticket back to Anchorage was more than he or his family could afford,

the boyfriend who had just that morning crept out from under my down comforter and back into the guest room way before even Winston was awake. My sweet clean John-John, looking not into my eyes but into the candle's flame where the tick was fusing into the wick.

It's endearing, his horror. He's made me check his head for ticks every night of every visit we've made to my parents house these four years. He'll make me check tonight too. As we walk down the driveway towards the barn, Will Jr. speeds by in the Town Car, and I feel John-John's hand cringe when we have to veer off the gravel and into the wild of the grass. John-John has been talking about Balzac and how I simply *must* read him. I think it was Balzac he was talking about the first night I met him, but it could have been Borges. I forget. When we met, he was sharing an efficiency apartment and priding himself on living on under one-hundred dollars per month, spending extra cash only on books from the only used bookstore in Auburn. Until me, he hadn't even splurged on a mattress. We were both drunk that first night, sitting on someone's apartment balcony and looking out across the way to the other balcony in the complex. Everybody was talking and drinking, and right there, in front of the whole crowd, he just

reached over and grabbed my hand. I loved that. Of course, in a few minutes, he had moved my hand onto his crotch, and I guess I didn't move it. Later, he swore he didn't think I was too easy, but sometimes I wonder if things would have been different if I was hard to get.

Prudish. Or maybe just a better temptress. He sure knows I'm easy now. My fingers are going up his arm and into the sleeve of his T-shirt tickling the hair under his arms. I'm at the point where I know what he likes, and my fingers are it. We are to the end of the driveway. County Road Five is still. The only sound we hear is Will Jr. accelerating down the hill.

"Didn't your mom have Will Jr. pick some irises for that Mary Mac woman?"

"Yeah, I think so. He's on his way there and to the Wal-Mart."

"He sure didn't do a good job of being selective. Look at that big gap in the flowers over there."

"Will Jr.'s never been known for being too awful selective. Looks like a mouthful of shiny white teeth that have been punched out in the middle."

I ball up my fist and make like I'm going to punch him, right square in the face. He blinks and noogies me on top of my head, mussing up my hair (like I care).

"God Rosie. I feel like I have no teeth or throat or esophagus. Annie-O must have put half a bottle of Tabasco on those chickens."

"She's still trying to test you out. I guess you're the first boyfriend she's ever wanted to impress in the kitchen, and John-John, you're the one who told her you like spicy stuff. But I agree. I'm on fire from my mouth down to my heart. We'll get some Tums or something when we go back inside. Shit, we sound like geriatrics."

"Rosie, I hope someday I can look at you when you are geriatric."

"John-John, you know the pathway to my heart. Will you go to the store if I ever need wetness-protection undergarments?"

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Better. Will you start collecting those cool ribbon-things from the cereal boxes that go on kids' bikes, so you can someday thread them through the spokes of my wheelchair?"

"Yes ma'am. I'll even order you one of those little Cheerios license plates with your name on it, and we'll put it on the *back* of the wheelchair."

"Damn, John-John. You're a keeper. Come on."

I put my elbow in the crook of his and turn him around towards the grass.

"Hey baby. What are you doing? Bugs, chiggers, the t-word, remember?"

"Shit, John-John. Let's go up into the hayloft. You've never been there. Remember, I told you I used to have my slumber parties up there? If you go up there with me, you can probably still sense the giggly spirits of thirteen year-old girls eating Fritos and parading around in front of each other in training bras. You like that, right? You know we used to hypnotize chickens up there."

"Rosalind Whitcomb, you have been lying about that ever since the very night I met you. If you hypnotize a chicken, I swear to god I will wear whatever underwear you've got on for the rest of the week."

"Yeah, my sweet Eskimo darlin. You're on. That is, if I'm wearing underwear."

I take off running fast towards the barn, through the tall grass and stop myself with my hands on the chain of metal fence enclosing the chicken yard. I turn around. John-John still stands on the gravel.

"You know," I yell at him, "since you are the one who actually takes my panties off the tables in Victoria's Secret and place them in your overcoat, technically they belong to you already."

"Yeah? So I guess following proper logical reasoning, you are a woman who has stolen panties from me. Get ready to surrender them to the proper authorities!"

I hoot. I don't guess I'd ever describe myself as one who hoots if it weren't for Annie-O. She says things like, "and then we all just hooted" and "that movie your Daddy and I rented last night was a hoot." John-John starts running towards me. I've gotten the chain open, so I run across the yard toward the barn and stand at the foot of the skinny ladder that goes up into the hayloft.

"Grab me a chicken John-John. A whole chicken. One that chirps and pecks and stuff. Hold the Tabasco."

"Go to hell, Rosalind."

He practically tiptoes across the yard, hell-bent on keeping out of the chickens' paths. They must be like the ticks to him. When he gets to the ladder, I am already halfway up. Somehow he is able to pick up a chicken by the neck. He hands it over to me tentatively like an acolyte hands over the body and blood to a priest. When I'm able to see into the loft, I toss it inside. The rungs are so skinny, only one of my hands will fit around them, and getting my tennis shoes from one rung to the other is tight. John-John starts up.

In the hayloft, I flip on a utility light and look around at the erratic positioning of the bales. There are solid stacks of three next to wobbling stacks of nine. The chicken runs around, jumping from one low bale to the next bale, avoiding the heights. I take four bales from the stacks and arrange them one beside the other in the middle of the hayloft. By this time, John-John has made it up and stands on the uncertain wood slats. Granules of hay lay around his feet. I walk to where the chicken is, grab him fast by the neck and sit down on one of the bales I've moved to the center of the loft. John-John stands in his place by the ladder. With my thumb and index finger, I start to rub the chicken's temples like Winston showed me when we were little on a

Friday afternoon before my slumber party arrived. Winston was eight then. He had names for all the chickens. I think the one he showed me was Naomi. I keep rubbing the temples, my small circles rhythmic and constant, feeling the feathery fur accumulate under my fingernails. The chicken's eyes get glassy. Sleepy, sleepy. I can't even see what John-John's reaction is. The chicken's pulse is there on my fingers. After a minute, the body gets limp in my hand. I keep rubbing. What's she seeing? The utility bulb is bright; it's making shadows on the wooden floor slats. I lay the chicken on one of the bales. He's out. Hypnotized and silent. John-John still stands by the ladder, staring hard and serious at me. Slowly I creep over to where he is and put my fingers on his arm hair. My fingers move up on their own past his T-shirt sleeve, up to his armpit. He follows me through the dirty bales over to where the chicken lies. We sit on the bales and our impact wakes her. Her violent screech rocks the whole loft, gets in the veins and arteries of every chicken meandering down below.

"Fuckin goddamned holy mother of Christ!"

John-John's fingers are around my neck. There must be prints.

"Damn, darlin. I think I won that bet."

He sits on the bales and unbuttons his khaki shorts. They are on the floor before I can even get my fingers on my own zipper. I ease off my shorts and my stolen designer panties. John-John shoplifts the off-white satin from my hand, and it's between his fingers long before I have a chance to hand them to him proudly as one who has just won a bet.

Penpal

Maria

Miss Jean Hao

1143 Plincos Apt. #3A

Davao City

Philippines 0987

Dear Jean,

Your letter came yesterday after school and I was so excited! You are my best friend and I can't wait to tell you all about what's going on here in this life of mine here in Alabama, United States of America.

Twelve is hard sometimes I know. When you said that you want to go out with that boy David but it's hard because you don't think you are pretty enough. I knew just what you meant. But your picture was beautiful! Momma and my sister Rosie are so much prettier than me.

Everyone says Rosie's so pretty, Annie-O's so pretty, and they never even think of me. I brush and brush my hair, and it's never going to be like Momma's. Momma's hair's silky like wet soap and mine's a lot of

rough tangles. Yours looks really silky too. Which shampoo do you use? I bet you don't have to brush it too much. Rosie has the prettiest skin of all three of us. Rosie is in college, and she has a boyfriend named John-John who is very hot. She has her hot boyfriend (probably) because she doesn't have scabs and bites like I do. The bites are leftover from this summer. We have lots of mosquitoes do you have mosquitoes? Chigger and no-see-ums too, and when I get the bites, I scratch them off so the bumps are gone off my skin, but there's blood, and once that's gone, the bumps come back. I scratch them away too, but more blood comes and the whole thing happens again. Jean, I think about them all the time. I can't help it. Even if they don't itch, they're there creeping back up under my skin and I hate it. They're always there like bugs. Did you know we have little bugs in our eyelashes and under our fingernails? They are mites. Everybody does and you can't wash enough to get them off. I just want everything to be smooth. Don't tell anybody that. I know you won't and I will keep quiet about you feeling ugly. Momma thinks I just keep getting bites and that's why there's scabs all the time. She says the mosquitoes get me because

I'm so sweet but we both know that's not true, ha! ha!!! Time for a new paragraph I think.

Have another secret to tell you. God is the only one who knows (Momma says I can tell him everything but I'm not sure he really wants to know), but I am really good at something and you have to promise never to tell anybody what it is. (You better be promising right now.) I can make myself sick whenever I want. It gets all the food out and it's the best diet because you can eat whatever you want and get skinny. I know it's gross Jean, but you said you wanted to be skinnier for that David boy (and for yourself too)!!! It's only gross for a minute then when you flush it down the mess is all gone. I just get one of my old toothbrushes and stick it right down my throat. It doesn't really hurt AT ALL and let me tell you, I have already lost four pounds and I've only been doing it since Daddy's leg.

OH SHIT! I told you about my daddy's leg when I wrote the other day. Remember, he broke it in our orchard when him and Momma were up in a tree. But this is the part I haven't told you. SHIT! SHIT! This is so sick. I found out from my brother Winston that daddy and Momma were having SEX with each other in the tree and I think

it's so GROSS. None of my friends here can find out. I tell them that his leg is broken because he was sawing off a branch and forgot that the branch he was sawing was the one he was sitting on. NASTY. I know your parents are divorced so you don't have to worry about them having sex, but I wonder if your mom and her boyfriend have sex. Do you know? I would have sex with Stephen if he asked me (probably), but it would have to be when I was at least fifteen. He gave me a note at school today and I've been saving it to read like I've told you I save your letters. It's good if I can save up my notes and think about them all through dinner and cleanup so they just sit in my backpack all sealed or taped or whatever until they bubble up finally when I open them. I like to know things are waiting for me and think about how they're going to be when I get to them. Will Jr. (my oldest brother) goes to college next week. He'll go to Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. Have you ever heard of it? Auburn is our favorite football team. Bama sucks. Who's your favorite football team? Anyway, Auburn has three mascots. Plainsmen, tiger, and war eagle. War Eagle is the one Will Jr. says is best. Anyway Will Jr. and daddy always sing that song "Take A Letter Maria" to me. Do you know it? I will miss

Will Jr. and it's not as good a song with just Daddy singing. That is the best song. It's about a man falling in love with his secretary and I LOVE IT. I also love Madonna and Trisha Yearwood.

Right now, Momma is sitting upstairs on the porch. She doesn't see me because she yelled Maria. Maria my bambina she yelled. I'm not going to answer her yet. I'm sitting on our croquet court on a blanket so the bugs can't get on me. This is where you can see the stars the best. Oh Jean, I bet we see the same stars! Yours might be in a little different order because of the hemispheres. Momma is yelling more and I think she can really see me now so I have to go. You are my sister of soul and I can't wait till you get this letter so you can write me back.

Love,

Maria

Breaststroke

Winston

Water is sticky. So sticky we have to use a towel to get it off. That's the best thing I remember from Mr. Wang's physical science class, and I think about it now here on the edge of the pool. So I stand on the edge of the pool and think about how anyone watching might think I'm a ballerina as I dip my right foot and pointed toes halfway into the water. This is supposed to be a test to see how cold the water is, but already, I know. It's the same as yesterday and Tuesday and so on. Not all that cold, nothing unbearable for August in Alabama. I curl my toes around the blue plastic edge, bend my knees a little, and dive into the shallow end the way I learned in Red Cross lessons, a dive that scares the shit out of our lady Annie-O. I scrape across the surface, rip through some molecules, and glide a little, glide all I can until I stay still for just a bit, hold it there for two seconds, and break the stillness with a pullout. Arms straight, straight to my fingertips, push the water back behind me in a circle, legs mimic the motion in a short delay. Knees toward chest, ankles rotate out and shove the water back behind. The arms go another step further. Still straight when I bring them

down to my sides, I whip my wrists around fast, bend my elbows, bring my palms face up on each side of my chest, and drive them straight out in a parallel. This motion makes me think of a picture in a history book: a woman, painted on a wall in Egypt, offering up her tits to the king, the moon, the afterlife or whatever.

I breaststroke to the other end, tap my fingers on the concrete racing-style and get back under the molecules as soon as I can. Here, I'm the fishman. Here, no longer fishboy, wet and smooth, faster than the spiders chasing me underwater, better than any boat. No more schoolboy, no more brother-boy, no more son-boy. I'm on vacation, ready to see and smell and fear my woman. Dad's sitting up on the porch with his busted fin, letting the liquid coarse through his insides. Here, I am the insides of the liquid. I feel her carry me when I stop my fins, still my arms. Carry me down and through, turn me inside out.

Gotta look out cause there are nets over on the right. Damn pole's attached to that worm.

Quick, bob up through the molecules, break through the sticky mess. One breath is enough, too much. I spit water, miss the grass.

*Want to share this water with the dry, dry grass and let the green grow
before my fish body's just fertilizer.*

I started out as a fish, there inside Annie-O, spilling out in a mess of blood and castor-oil, and thank god, water. Started before that up in Winston-Salem when Annie-O and Willie went for a long weekend to tour Reynolda House and Old Salem, stayed in a bed and breakfast down the road. Not the Salem with the witches. That one's down, down at the bottom of the pool, down under the drain. My witch lives under the pool drain. Sticky water's no problem for us. She's my woman, my Harriet Tubman, and I'm the prize passenger on her underground railroad.

*Breathe once. You don't need more than one breath. Get back down
there boy.*

God, nobody from school would ever, ever believe this. I'm not sure about anybody in the family. Rosalind just might. She's always believed in magic. Annie-O might. She'd hesitate, but I believe she'd probably come around. Who knows? Momma might be a witch-woman herself. But Will Jr. would say I've gotten too much water in

my ears. And Daddy would snicker and say, "Boy, you and I need to have a talk about whatever's been going on in your head."

So down to the drain I go for Harriet the Witch. The metal grid lifts off easy like always, and down I go, down through the metal pipes where it's dark like I like it. Then there she is, smooth and silky, duskier than any night. She's got a smooth black body, and I stick to her like water because she saves me. Annie-O prays for grace and Willie just wants beauty. If they could only make it to the drain they'd get both.

I see my Harriet, more wicked-looking than usual. She's got on her long black dress, shiny hair slicked back behind her ears the way I like it. Long lean silver earrings tug on her earlobes. Cool clear voice asks me how's my day been, and I open my eyes wide like the fishes in reply. All day and night, Harriet breathes in the gasoline that runs like the Mississippi under our land, and I've promised not to tell Willie unless the money gets tight. Harriet breathes it right in, lets it slide through her veins. It makes her wicked, makes her want to make me the fishman over and over again. I close my eyes and nod my head yes, yea, oui, sí, a-fuckin-firmative, baby.

Harriet pulls her witch arms around me like a wave. Her fingers tickle me right up there on the heart. Tickles my fucking heart! I pry my eyes back open.

Don't forget you're a fishman. Get a good look at the witch as many times as you can.

She's got the darkest skin made darker by the gasoline, softer and cooler by the black crude oil that I know has got to be running underneath our house. Daddy's always said he got a hell of a bargain on this land. I reach out my fishman fin and scrape her where she likes it, not too softly. She's my witch fish, squirming, bearing down a little harder with her fingernails on my water-filled heart.

Just when she knows I'm soaked through and through, just when she feels my gills start to explode, that witch conductor gives me a push. Puts her fins right under mine, slicker than glass or gas, and shoves me towards the molecules. Her kind of goodnight kiss for the fishman. Slams the drain, locks it. Cruel, cruel bitch. Up I dive, a road of bubbles follows me to rip through the damn surface.

And then there's Will Jr. on his way to the Wal-Mart, coming towards the pool from up at the house with a couple of beers in his

hands—one for me, one for the road—both cold from the booze fridge
on the porch. He's leaving for Auburn next week, leaving me alone
with all the witch women we got stashed under our land.

Buddy, It Was Breast Cancer

Willie

Sharla Marvon is gone. Sharla Marvon does not live anywhere anymore. For the past twenty-five or so years I've thought of her living somewhere and doing something: selling Mary Kay in Charlotte, doing manicures for Volvo-driving Stepford types in Dunwoody, and last I heard, raising emus for their meat and eggs somewhere up around Winchester, Tennessee. There was a time before I met Annie-O when I was going to ask Sharla Marvon to be my wife, my co-partner and queen. She had long black hair; her mother was an Italian who could put sauces and cheeses together like nobody'd ever seen or heard of in Vidalia, Georgia. Daddy would have supplemented his nightly prayers for my salvation with daily beatings if he'd known about Sharla and me. We were hot. She's touch me and I'd turn hard as Chinese algebra. Sizzling. If Daddy could have felt heat like that, I bet he's have said to hell with the quest for holiness; I've found the spirit right here.

My brother Hendree faxed me the obit this morning. I sat with my leg on the ottoman, held my coffee mug at my lips, watched the

piece of paper curl out from the machine and listened to the ink cartridge buzz out the exact amount of ink needed to spell her name. Something like heat started simmering up at the top of my skull and moved down my head and neck at a speed the same as the fax machine's. As the paper came out, the heat spilled down. "Sharla Marvon, Local Farmer, Goes Home at 49." My eyes moved to Hendree's handwriting up in the top margin: "Buddy, it was breast cancer. The funeral will be at Immaculate Conception, 10 AM Saturday. I'm sorry, I'll call."

Sharla was Saturday night. I'd never seen anything like it. She had a laugh that would reverberate through the halls of our high school. I knew her schedule better than my own. I knew that on my way to Biology I'd pass her in the Math hall. She was in every play the school put on, plays I was never allowed to see because of the "sinful nature of the theatre." My Daddy was Pentecostal, a minister from the time I was born until he got the job with the trucking company. His church was the Holiness Mission of the Seven Golden Candlesticks. It's from Revelation, like everything else he'd quote. (Annie-O's the one who finally showed me the rest of the New Testament.) Daddy said

getting the job with the trucking company was so we could have the benefits and he could save to retire, but everybody knew good and well the church overthrew him after everything Hendree for that Brother Adams at Wings of Faith in town. But while I was in school, he was still at Seven Golden Candlesticks, and we were expected in the front pew Wednesday nights, Sunday mornings, and Sunday nights.

When Sharla played Emily in *Our Town*. I disobeyed my daddy directly for the very first time in my life. The play opened on a Wednesday, a night we were supposed to be in church, and it was the middle of February. There was absolutely no way my daddy could see through a feigned sickness; I had to be genuinely ill in order to miss church, and I was feeling right as rain, so I figured out what to do. We'd had a snow, unusual for Georgia anytime, but an event I figured for a gift from God since he wanted me to get to see Sharla in the play. So on Tuesday night, I set my alarm for four in the morning, took off my shirt so all I had on was my briefs, and crept outside barefoot to run around in the cold snow. I lay down flat on my bare back in the frigid night and let my hair get sopping wet, tasted the glittering granules of snow. I remember how the snow tasted like heat. There is a fine line

between extreme hot and extreme cold. Barefoot, I walked up and down our driveway, forty or fifty times. I forget which number, but it was an even one, one I'd planned out in my mind as a reasonable number of laps in the cold that would make me sick. Laps I had to get the prize. I stopped feeling myself and started getting locked into the stream of light the moon gave the dark. I've been naked outside in the dark with Annie-O hundreds of times since then— on our way back and forth to the hot tub, going down to the lake, just going for walks— but that night was the first time I felt connected to something primal, even spiritual, I guess. The earth and the weather was helping me out, helping me get a fever, helping me get out of church, helping me get to sit in the auditorium and watch Sharla. The earth and the night was a co-conspirator with me, and I felt genuine gratefulness to it.

Shivering, muddled, I slipped back into the house and my bed, and when Momma came in to get me up for school, I had a hell of a fever. It was real, too; no way I could have fooled anybody in that house with heat from lamps or rigged thermometers. She tended to me all day and fed me little (starve a fever). But Hendree knew what I was doing. He and Sharla were in the same grade, and he found out what

time Sharla had to be backstage to start getting in her makeup. When five o'clock came, Momma and daddy drove off with Hendree and a casserole I'd been smelling all afternoon for Wednesday night church, and I hoisted myself out of the bed, still feeling pretty damned flushed, put on my clothes, and walked the mile into downtown. At the florist's, I picked out the six best pink unopened roses and walked the rest of the way to the school. Outside the dressing room, I stood and watched Sharla look at herself in the mirror. Somebody had been putting makeup on her, and she looked much older and wiser than I'd remembered. I was fourteen, a freshman, and she was a senior. That was a big damn age difference. That'd be like Maria going after someone Winston's age. And Jesus forbid, she's starting to look good enough to do it.

Sharla was sitting on a wooden stool. She had black pantyhose on her legs that wrapped around the stool's legs and a long, white oxford shirt hanging down over her full ass. Sharla's daddy was dead — Hendree said he'd heard he shot himself after he lost a leg in a hunting accident — and I remember wondering if it had been one of his shirts. Sharla's ass crept a little over the edges of the stool on both

sides. At that instant, I decided I'd never want any woman with a bony ass. Sharla Marvon's hair was facing me, long and thick and black down her back, fastened with a silver clip. A few stray strands framed her face in her reflection. Her eyelashes fluttered up and down like little paintbrushes, and she touched each set with her hands, getting some black mascara clumps off and wiping her fingers on the white shirt. I can remember nothing else about her eyes; not the color, not the way they looked at me. Her lips were pink and painted outside the lines making her look what I'd probably call whorish if Rosalind or Maria were to come downstairs fixed like that, but later, watching her on-stage, I realized the lights took the whorish away. Her cheeks were pink circles, puffy, leftover baby fat that I want on a woman. Seeing her on that stool was the first erotic second of my life. I got dizzy. I could feel the ducts in my mouth seep water under my tongue. In my mind, reels of film carrying images of Sharla's body under mine started playing in little snippets. I knew this was eroticism; I had heard the word from daddy in one of his sermons, and I'd been waiting for erotic to come along and grab me in the crotch. There it was. Sharla Marvon was erotica, and I was flipping the pages of one of those animated

cartoon books faster and faster as she looked in the mirror to see me with the roses, stood up, moving from the stool toward the door.

She walked right to me. We'd talked the day before, after school when I was waiting on Hendree to finish wrestling practice, and she wasn't waiting for anything. She asked me about Holiness Pentecostal churches, said she wasn't sure Catholic was for her when she found out women had to be nuns and not priests. Nobody had ever asked me about Holiness before. It embarrassed me. Daddy had embarrassed me with his shouting long before I ever knew what it was he was talking about. I told her I'd been saved the year before because daddy had been pressuring me; Hendree'd been saved when he was ten and what was I waiting for, I could be swept up by darkness himself if I waited any longer. She'd been confirmed when she was thirteen, and she'd heard her daddy say once you were confirmed, you could never get away from the Catholics. She said she knew they'd always snatch her back. She said one day she knew she'd be living in Santa Fe or Houston or Havana selling Tupperware and "blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus" would creep into her mind, beating its drumbeat around through her skull until she had

no choice but to get right to a mass somewhere. She said she sometimes pretended she was in a movie theatre during mass, that the priest was the director, and when he took the elements over his head and spoke the Latin under his breath, she always imagined he was saying "cut" right before he broke the bread. At that time in my life, I had only knowledge of Holiness—this breaking of the bread reference was foreign to me. I had no idea what she was talking about. But I did understand the part about the movie theatre and the director. In church, I always felt like audience, like observer. I told her I wasn't sure if Holiness was for her; I knew it wasn't for me. She said she couldn't tell her mom she didn't know if she was Catholic, and I said I felt the same about my parents, and that was that. She started walking toward the sidewalk that would take her home, and said by Willie.

Gone.

When I gave her the flowers she put one of her arms behind me and placed her palm flat against my back.

"You're a great Emily," I think I said.

"How could you know that yet Mr. Whitcomb?"

I couldn't have. I couldn't speak. I just kissed her, tongue and all, right there in the hallway. She tasted like dough with all the stage makeup on. I had tasted raw dough all the time when my Momma was making bread, so I knew the taste exactly. I kissed Sharla Marvon, and I counted to thirty. I even licked the place between her nose and her mouth to get a little more of the taste. After we finished, she put her fingers up to her face to try and blend the makeup back in. Still full of fever and not quite aware of what I had done, I said good-bye Sharla, break an arm, walked through the hallway and out to the auditorium, took a program, and sat down in the front row. I plopped right down beside Sharla Marvon's mother. She recognized me, and wiped away the print her daughter's pink lips had made against mine.

Vanished and gone.

"Somebody's Momma must really love him," Mrs. Marvon said.

I looked at her face, full like Sharla's, and I grinned. Sharla is, was, a good ten years older than her mother was then, so I guess she

looked about the same. Rosie sure looks like Annie-O did at twenty-one.

All day, the thing that I've been thinking about most about Sharla Marvon not being anywhere anymore isn't how we dated for the next three years while she lagged through beauty school and I finished high school or how she'd steal her Momma's truck and park out at the end of our long driveway so I could sneak out and do it with her in the flatbed until three or four in the morning, or how she taught me the age-old carnal joy of slow-dancing with no music; what I've been thinking about is how, later, when I was in college, after we'd broken up and before I'd met Annie-O, Sharla Marvon made me love Plato. Or at least what I can remember about Plato, the only thing that needs remembering—the ideal. The Platonic ideal. When I read Plato in intro. philosophy, I made the connection. Sharla equaled ideal, and even if I couldn't get a Sharla back, I'd get myself the ideal. The good, the true, and the beautiful would make up my life. Sharla Marvon was three things: good, true, and beautiful.

Gone.

I was a virtuous boy. Loved Hendree, loved Momma, loved Daddy, tried to love God even if it wasn't how Daddy thought I should. And now, I am a good and virtuous man. Out of carefully chosen pieces of cedar, I have built a big and beautiful house on a hill. I have four-hundred acres of farmland and woodland and two large ponds that some might consider small lakes in a county with a good school system and a growing economy. I have let the trees on my land grow green and tall when I could have sold them to a paper plant for profit. With a woman whose grace and humor goes beyond anything I could have picked off a menu, I have produced five people. I have named them. If, for any reason, I wanted to build a large barrier around the perimeter of my four-hundred acres of earth, shut out Peachstone County and the state of Alabama, home-school my children, disconnect all telephone lines, refuse delivery from the postal service, pick five mates for my five children so they could bring forth a sturdy army of Whitcomb grandchildren, and have my bourbon delivered to the end of the road, I could do so.

I have tried to surround myself with the beautiful. I started with the face and body of my wife, Annie O'Grady Whitcomb who has skin

that is so oiled and sleek that when I touch her chin or elbow or ankle or anyplace on her body where skin stretches over bone, it feels like I am touching a carefully sanded and shellacked piece of cherry. I cannot separate the features of her face; the brightness of her green eyes cannot exist without the fullness of her lips or the fleshy pieces of her cheeks. Her hair is still blonde with little curls in places only I know. Late in the nights, when we have loved one another so hard that there are no more droplets of love to be forced out of our bodies, my hands get so lost in her hair that I start to believe my fingers must surely be a permanent attachment to her scalp. After this loving, she will say, "baby you've got the power. You must love me or you couldn't do it like that." She is tall like an exotic Amazon and, when I'm on top of her, my face fits right into the curvature of her neck. Surely my nose has made an indentation into the curvature of her neck. Since the night my brother introduced her to me, she has had an unquestionable lust for me.

We have made all these children, five of them, pictures of beauty. They puzzle me. I don't deny that I see them as an entity; I mix up their names all the time in my own head and to their faces. But you

should see our family portraits. The faces are all beautiful. Scandinavian-looking human beings (gods and goddesses even) assemble around me. These should be people named Lars or Elsa who wear long braids under their helmets and sail the frigid seas all day long. I look disoriented in these portraits. I look like I don't quite know how I helped make this. These three women, always in long white dresses; three stairstep boys, men, each in navy jackets with gold buttons, each in khaki pants. I always sit down in the portraits. I'm barely taller than Teddy. I'm losing my hair; they all have thick blonde curls. Annie-O, Rosie, and Maria would have their curls all the time if it weren't for the weight of their long hair. All their legs are yards long, willowy like oak branches. My legs are tree trunks. But I look at those portraits and there is just all this beauty, and I pat myself on the back for assembling it.

I'll come right out and say it: they are my beauty. It's the good and the true that I long for in this world. Sharla Marvon had all three.

1. The good: She would talk me through any of the awkward silences that make new lovers ashamed. Small-talk type things. Reassurances. She was compelled by the things of the earth; for

her, no one who God deemed good enough to take place in his creation was evil. Redemption was always a possibility with Sharla. She seemed to know, even though she was very young, the importance of forgiveness — she seemed to forgive her father — and of the brilliant compassion of understanding.

2. The true: She proclaimed things I'd always wanted to know in meaningful, all-encompassing sentence form. The word "proclaim" never meant anything to me until Sharla. There was nothing she wouldn't say: "Move your fingers up here and be softer about it." "My father hit my mother. Maybe it's better for us that he's gone." "Willie, I'm moving to Charlotte now that you've graduated. The Mary Kay job will be good for me, and you're going to meet lots of gorgeous women in college. And I'll come visit you, you and your gorgeous wife and your gorgeous children, wildly honking the horn of my pink Mary Kay Caddie all the way down the driveway."

3. The beautiful. Sharla Marvon's movements were the slowest and the most planned out things I'd ever seen. Army generals could take a lesson from her masterminding. From reaching over

the seat to open the passenger door of her mother's truck to taking off her earrings and putting them aside as I went inside her so she wouldn't lose one.

I could add more to the lists.

Gone.

Sharla Marvon is dead. Breast cancer. Those were my first breasts. I was amazed how they grew harder and rounder as I touched them. I didn't know nipples could toughen up with a few short flicks of my tongue. They must have eroded away, at least one, maybe both, chopped off by some surgeon's knife before the end came for her.

I know I have to go to the funeral, and I don't think I can tell Annie-O.

It's not that she would be jealous or angry; she probably wouldn't. I haven't told her about Sharla Marvon. I mean, I may have told her she was my first (in love and in sex), but I haven't told her about the ideal.

And there's this damned leg. Damned cast. I can't drive with this handicapped fucking broken leg. It's a love injury. When Annie-O

bets me I won't do something like make love to her in a tree, I have to give in and do whatever it is.

She's been sitting beside me all this time on our porch outside our bedroom. All the time, I've been remembering Sharla Marvon; she's been looking at yesterday's newspaper and then up and out at our children: Maria writing on the croquet court, Wyatt shooting baskets, Will Jr., back from town, sitting at the edge of the pool with a beer in one hand and one in the wings, Winston bobbing up and down in the water like a buoy. Rosalind has gone for a walk with John-John. Annie-O just keeps replenishing my bourbon without my asking. Licking leaves of mint and placing them on my tongue. Lusty woman. She doesn't know I'm in the midst of a wake.

I have to go to her funeral.

I'll say Hendree needs me to sign some papers to close out that deal on the land adjoining Momma and Daddy's old house.

Winston can drive me. Will Jr.'s busy getting ready to go to college, raising some final cane before he leaves to go raise some more. He needs to mow the goddamned croquet court. Rosalind's

entertaining John-John. Winston's not doing anything but swimming back and forth to the drain at the bottom of the swimming pool, probably thinking about that damned violin and marijuana and figuring out new and interesting ways he can piss off his father.

"Annie-O, my love."

"Yeah baby."

"When's the last time I told you how I love to look at you and look out at the life and the people in this family we've made?"

She puts her hand on the top of my hard plaster cast.

"I don't know baby. It's been a couple weeks. The last time was when we were in the emergency room and you were getting your leg set. I was crying because I knew I'd hurt you, so I said I was just going to divorce you. Become a spinster schoolteacher and start wearing my hair in a bun on top of my head. Then you could live out the rest of your life injury-free. I said you could make love to petite women in beds. So you could be normal that way. Then you told me how you love to look out at the people in this family we've made. But baby, you'd had some Demerol."

I love my wife. This is the life I do want. Life and wife rhyme for a reason. I take her long arm into the crook of mine and stroke her skin lightly with my fingers. She always wants this.

I have to go to the funeral of Sharla Marvon.

"Annie-O. Love of my life. If our children weren't in lain view, I'd get off my perch and let you straddle me in that rocking chair you're sitting in."

"When the sun sets all the way, I wish you would."

"You got it, darlin."

We are so good. She is wearing pink lipstick, and it has made little fossil marks on the edge of the glass she's got in her hand.

"What's the name of that lipstick, darlin?"

"Lick My Tonsils Rose."

This is a game we play. She has names for all her lipsticks, a secret name she tells only me. Take Off My Panties With Your Teeth
Crimson. Let's Go Ruby. I Need You Now Plum. She is so good.

"Annie-O. We're going to have to find someone with a Caterpillar to clear out that brush by the barn. I'm out of commission."

"I'll call Mike Hutsell in the morning."

"Thanks darlin. Oh, I got a call from Hendree this morning."

"How's our Pee Wee?"

"He's good. Floranne's good. George and Kristen are good. You know that land next to Momma and Daddy's place we've been trying to buy?"

"The farm with the spring?"

"Yeah. They countered fifty-nine nine. We can get them down to fifty-five, I know it. And it's going to be a steal. I'm going to go down there in the morning and stay the night with Hendree so we can get the contract on it."

"Baby, I've got to teach the summer enrichment class in the morning. I could have gotten off. How are you going to get there with the leg?"

"I'm going to get Winston to drive me. It'll be good for him to see how business works anyway. He's got to get semi-practical sometime, for Chrissake's."

"Willie, have you told him yet? He may have plans."

"He's not doing anything but lazing around the pool."

"Whatever you say baby. I've got some newspaper clippings of the kids' stuff I want you to take to Floranne. Make sure she sends pictures of Kristen and George. And find out what we should get Pee Wee for his birthday. And Willie, you know, this might be a good opportunity for you all to start going through your Momma's things. She's been dead for six months now Willie."

"I know. Maybe we'll get started on that too."

I will have to tell Hendree and Floranne that I didn't tell Annie-O why I was coming. Winston will just have to tell his beautiful mother that he, his father and his uncle went to the funeral of an old high school friend at the last minute. She is not even the least bit suspicious. I want to go out by the pool with her after children go to bed. I will make Maria and Wyatt go to bed early. I will tell Winston and Will Jr. they can go out if they want. Hell, I don't even care if they see us together. It's good for my children to see how their Momma and Daddy love one another, how our bodies looked when we made them. I think that all of them have walked in on us at least once by now.

I want to be outside by the pool, under the night and in the air
with Annie-O tonight. When we are alone, in the elements, and when
we are anywhere, she anticipates the motions my body makes before I
make them. Someone divine has whispered secrets to her about the
places in me that are far beneath my skin.

The Fax

Annie-O

What I remember most about Sharla Marvon, about the first lust of my husband's life whose obituary is printed on the silky-feeling fax paper I grip in my hand — I've seen her in pictures but never in person — is how he used to say she was never all that far away. When one of the kids, Winston, I think, was looking through Willie's high school yearbook and found her inscription — "To Willie, the first and the best" — I, under my breath, made jokes about his "first" and all the kids seemed incredulous — skeptical, doubtful, dubious — that there had ever been anyone else their father loved besides me. I sympathized with their surprise.

When you are beside someone for many years, when you daily see their flaws and learn to anticipate, to love them, you forget that there could have ever been a place before you. And this morning, as I let go of the silky feel of the fax paper and walk over to make our four-poster bed that we bought in an antique shop right before we finished building this house, when I look at that bed, I start remembering. Our

bed smells like us. I stand on his side, the right side, and I take off the four pillows we sleep on and throw them on the green damask chair by my bedside table. There's a kind of wind, a sort of breeze, that ripples through our bedroom as I sweep back the simple quilt and cotton sheet — all we need to sleep under during these Alabama summer months. But it's almost fall, and I'll have to get out some more blankets for our bed soon enough. I lay my right arm down on the white fitted-sheet and smooth out the creases our bodies made in the beds as we slept last night. As Willie and I have started to settle into middle-age and the bodies we've accumulated, I haven't had much cause to think of my husband in terms of his flaws. As I make the bed, I don't see any evidence of his flaws. I see wrinkles in the sheets, and that's all. I can smooth those over with one swoop of my arm.

But I know Willie's flaws so well. They are clear to me: he has tendencies toward excess and he over-idealizes. That's all. No tantrums, no prejudices, no laziness (except when I demand it out of my own instinct to be slothful), never a responsibility left by the wayside. He is a good man, and when it comes down to it, there's

nothing more I need. His flaws are honest ones — the best kind any wife could ever hope for, I guess.

1. The excess: my Willie sees moderation as a kind of fear. He's never been afraid to want it all, and after all these years, he's passed that one to me. He's never been one to laze about in half-drunken mood on New Year's Eve. Nuh-uh. By damn, it's New Year's Eve, we're saying good-bye to a year we will never see again, and woman, bring me that bottle so we can raise another to you and me. And he's never been one to love halfheartedly. With Willie, it's all the way. He would most certainly, without hesitation, give his body and mind and spirit for any single person in this family we've assembled. If moderation means you have to think before sacrificing, he'll damn moderation until his dying day. And he's right; moderation is a kind of fear. So maybe that's my flaw too. But I'm not too awfully fearful of where it will land us.

2. The over-idealizing. As far as this goes, he just has a vision. Not like a mystic sort of vision, not like a ghost from the past —

it's just an image, somewhere stuck in the back of his brain — that we all fit. And that doesn't mean he doesn't know us. Not at all. That means he knows what we could be if we wanted.

And it's the wanting that complicates things. For example, I want to be good, and often I think of the bad and how it seems to suit me. I would love to be bad and leave this bed unmade for the rest of the day. After all, Maria's really right. Why make the bed in the morning when you're just going to get right back into it when night comes? But that's not really "bad" like cheating on your husband would be. But I don't want that; I never have. I'm bad in that I'm vain because I just want back the beauty that I know he remembers when he looks at me, I want to be preserve things as they should be; I want to keep the apples from the orchard this year that I saved for chutney in a jar that I can feed my family with next February. And then I want to see how those apples can live on after my family eats them through the grace and beauty of their actions. That's one reason why I've never bought the argument from vegetarians who say we shouldn't eat animals because they're living, and killing the living is cruel. "But," I want to insist to them as passionately as possible, "fruits and

vegetables and grains live too! We aren't killing them when we eat them! We're preserving them in our bodies and making them little immortal chickens and peas and apples when we use them for the energy we need to live our lives! And we're going to be food for new vegetables when we decompose as fertilizer in our graves."

But I've never gotten up the nerve to say that back to any vegetarian. That preservation, that idea of living on in a new form, is what Willie and I are all about. We're about making life go on as long as possible. And making it as good as possible while it goes on. And making it so that, when life inevitable ends, the dead metamorphose into the good again. I throw the two pillows covered in white-eyelet shams, the pillows we never sleep on, on top of the sleeping pillows. The bed is made.

I want each one of my children to be sustained and driven by the food I give their bodies. And I want to be a safe driver, a mother who would never get so absorbed in the sweet tones of Etta James that she would massacre her son's puppy in the driveway. But I'm not. I'm careless, a killer now.

I am a killer, and I am a woman whose husband has told her a lie she cannot understand. I can understand the need to preserve, the need to see things as they make their move into a new existence. Because that's all Sharla Marvon's doing. She's moving on from her earthly body into the throngs of angels or fruits or vegetables, and of course I would want my Willie to be there, at that little Catholic church, the only one for miles and miles, to see that. I would want him to go for that. He loved this woman before he knew me, and maybe even the idea of love she planted in his head when he was a stout little freshman in high school with a buzz-cut is what brought him to me. That's what I think of every time I think of Sharla Marvon, every time I think of that inscription I see in his yearbook. Sharla Marvon just may have made Willie and Annie-O possible. And I think I'm smart to think that.

So why in the world would he think I wouldn't want him to be there for that? Hell, I'd even go just to thank her.

He was so stupid, so utterly stupid, not to do anything with that fax. Not to shred it in the little shredder located just under his desk, not to wad it up and throw it in the trash can I never would have dared investigate before hauling it out back. He could even have taken the

trouble to remove the single sheet of flimsy fax paper from the tray and placed it in his briefcase. One fell swoop. Did he want me to find it? Did he want me to know what he was up to, taking Winston along as accomplice? These are not the actions of a man concealing something incriminating from his wife. His wife who I know he loves.

But still, there's the fax, and I go get it again so I can touch that silky paper and read the words. There's the headline glaring at the top of the page: "Sharla Marvon, Local Farmer, Goes Home at 49." Hell, she just raised emus, and they call her a farmer. If that's all it takes, I guess I'm a farmer too then for raising all these kids. And I stare at it, stare at the letters of the words until they become nothing but curved lines. Meaningless — sounds repeated over and over until they become gibberish. Sharla Marvon. I say it out loud and it takes some exercise for my groggy mouth even to say it; it's like taffy in my jaws. But she is dead. There can be no affair; there can be no adultery or flirtation. That is fact. And yet there has never been a threat of anyone else. In so many ways, our own love is as unfinished as the downstairs basement. We still have so far to go. We have to get Winston through high school, Maria through puberty, Wyatt through most everything. And we've

always had a running joke that we'd consider ourselves successful parents if none of our children get arrested in high school, so there's that. And we haven't even really started to think about what it will be like when they are gone from high school, at college, out of college, looking for jobs, marrying. We have barely even touched on how life will change after that. I hope we are even racier than we are now, lustier than we were when we first met. I hope he'll retire as soon as possible, and I hope we'll play the stock market together, and I hope we'll buy a big sailboat where I can strip down completely, lay out on deck, and finally learn how it feels to have tanned nipples.

So this woman, this Sharla, is my love's vision of what was. I know he is still dealing with his parents' deaths, and this lie to see Sharla, this betrayal, this using our son as an accomplice to betrayal (what *will* he have Winston tell me? For godsakes, will he ask our son to lie to his mother?): this is all part of the separation from the past, the final good-bye to the Willie that was, before he had to run out to the hardware store for the tubes of caulking and the drugstore for the tubes of Desiten. Sharla was the link. The link that's been sliced, gone home

at 49, resting in the bosom of the nave at Immaculate Conception.

Goddammit.

I wad up the fax, smash up the words that tell of Sharla. Dead from the page as she is from the earth. I'm saying my good-byes to the woman who may have made my husband who he is. But she's not a god, not a sculptor; she's just a woman, just like me. And I thank her if she made him who he is. And I realize I'm still naked from the night, so I walk from the little office back into our bedroom, which looks all ready for the day with its made bed, and into our bathroom. So this is the body I'm settling into, the body he's supposed to keep on loving. I slide into my robe, and tie the belt around my waist into a bow that I double-knot. He's left his coffee cup in the bathroom. A light brown ring, thin and cold, clings to the countertop. The cap is off the toothpaste, an oversight I've never minded before but irks me like the devil this morning because I know he brushed the teeth in the mouth that told a bold-faced lie to me, to Annie-O, his wife and mother of his five children. He kissed me while I was still mostly asleep this morning with that mouth, told me he loved me and he'd call me tonight with that mouth. This uncapped toothpaste cleaned the lying mouth of my

love. With a washcloth, wet with hot water, I erase the ring the coffee cup's left. I run the cloth under the faucet and make it new again.

Before I put the cap back on the toothpaste, before it's all clean, I brush my own teeth and prepare for the day. *Today O Lord, I resolve to be cheerful, magnanimous and kind. Thank you for the life of Sharla Marvon, and send her up to heaven on a highway quicker than any of those German highways Willie wants so much to get to drive on someday. Today I will seek energy from myself, and I will look to forgive. Always to forgive. And today, I will try not to kill any of your creatures who are not yet ready to be recycled into new energy.*

Dumb Bird

Will Jr.

Saturday morning and Momma wakes me before eight for Jesus' love to help her get the dumbest bird in all of God's creation out of the garage. And I was having this dream about Molly. The dream had been long and good. I'm pissed at Momma for ending it. Molly was under me. Her little white panties were around one of her ankles, and her ankles were around mine. Because she's short, little petite thing, her face won't line up with mine, but in the dream, we were face-to-face. I was looking right at her, and nobody was doing any blinking. Our bellies were breathing together, and then dammit, my Momma's yelling for me from the top of the stairs to get out of bed and grab the broom. I get up; she's Momma.

I follow her voice out to the garage. There's water on half the floor. The cars have been moved, and the garage door is standing wide-open. She's standing in the middle of the garage, and she's got on her bright-blue dragon robe thing. The dragon-slaying robe, Maria used to call it when she was little. In her hands, she's holding a mop

upside down, waving the yarn end around in the air. I stare until her waving motion sprays a little water onto the top of my head.

"Momma."

No answer. She keeps on waving the mop. This is weird.

"Momma? Hello? Have you been drinking on this fine Saturday morning?"

"Will Jr., get that broom over there in the corner. I need some help here."

"Good morning Momma."

"Will Jr., get the broom. Your daddy and Winston have already left for Hendree and Floranne's, and I need your help."

"Huh? Why were they going there? Momma, what are you doing?"

She takes another long wave with the mop. She brushes the ceiling with the wet yarn of the mop and makes a trail of water up there.

"Dammit Will. We have to get this hummingbird out of here.

Right after I got in the van to back it out so I could mop, I looked up to see him flying around the garage. Poor thing's probably been in here all night. I opened the garage door to see if he wanted to just fly out, but he just kept flying around in these crazy circles like some pilot at the Atlanta airport. We've got to get him out. He'll suffocate in here, it's so hot."

I flip the waistband of my boxers and rub my eyes.

"Good morning Momma. Let me get a cup of coffee."

I turn around towards the kitchen door, and walk inside. The coffee's on; it smells a little burned, and I guess Momma's been up for awhile.

"Shoo! Shoo!" I hear her yell. Her voice sounds a little high, a little impatient. Sometimes her voice gets like that when she's talking to me. I pour a cup of coffee and look around for a teaspoon for the sugar. The kitchen is a wreck. There are no clean spoons yet. So, I just pour some sugar from the bowl into my coffee and grab a ball-point pen from the countertop to stir it with. I lean on the threshold between

the kitchen and the garage and watch my Momma. Yep, the coffee is a little burned.

"Shoo! Get outta here, baby! Will, these hummingbirds are so small they just look like big bugs, but Will, they are just the most amazing birds. I know this is my fault because I've got those two big feeders hanging on the front porch, and that's what's attracted them to the house."

Momma's voice is tripping me out. It's like she's talking to her students or babies or something. Momma's hair is so pretty, even in the morning when she's got it back in a little clasp. So blonde and wispy. Sometimes I wish Molly's hair was blonde instead of brown. I want Molly to come over and bring that little black bikini so we can hang out at the pool. Looks like it's going to be a pretty day.

"Will Jr., I think this bird's been in here all night. He'll die soon if we don't get him back into the fresh air soon. Put down the damned coffee cup and get that broom."

Her voice hits a high point again. I want to make a joke that she sounds like Wyatt going through puberty, but I know enough to know that wouldn't be taken too awful well.

"All right Momma. I'm sorry. I'm just not awake yet."

I reach into the kitchen and put the cup down on the countertop.

"And close that door to the house. The last thing we need is the little hummer in the house, flying close to the ceiling fans."

"Momma, why are you mopping the garage? Where are the cars?"

"Dammit Will, I've been mopping this garage every couple weeks since your Daddy and I built this house. Your Daddy's car's gone, and I backed out the van onto the driveway. Grease from the cars and dirt. Bugs. Now get the damned broom from the corner and get over here."

"Yes ma'am."

Sometimes I think Momma's flipped. She's still freaked out about hitting Teddy's puppy, and I don't even want to know how she

got my Daddy up in that tree. Jesus. My own parents. I can't wait until I'll be going to Auburn so I won't see as much of this shit anymore. Momma's been hugging all over me lately. She knows how much she misses Rosie, and she wants to love on me all she can before I leave, but God, she's my Momma. When I want touching, I'll go and find Molly.

"Here's the broom, Momma."

I try to hand it to her, but she's still waving the mop around in the air and cooing like somebody standing over an infant's crib.

"Come on little one. You're going to have to head on down to the land of Brazil with your brothers and sisters in the next few weeks. Let me show you how to get back outside into the fresh morning air. Just follow me, little one."

She stops cooing and glares at me like she used to when I was a little kid and I'd write my name on my leg with the fluorescent stuff from a lightning bug's butt. I hold out the broom and try to hand it to her again.

"What?"

"Will Jr. I want you to help me shoo him out of the garage.

That's why you are holding that broom, and I am holding this mop.

Now turn that broom upside down, reach up there, and help me get this little baby out of this hot, dry garage. These birds are supposed to drink constantly."

We both start batting at the bird, trying not to touch him. I've never really looked at a hummingbird before. He's kinda fat for his size, and his beak looks like a little needle. But instead of heading towards the outside, he keeps going higher and higher, towards the ceiling of the garage. Every time his wings touch the ceiling, they whizz real loud.

"Is it hurting him Momma? When he hits the ceiling?"

"I don't know baby."

He flies over toward Teddy's new blue mountain-bike and lights on the handlebars. Momma, armed with her wet mop, creeps over toward him. As soon as she gets within a foot of the bike, he take off and starts circling the garage again. Momma stands the mop upright, and sorta leans on it. We watch. Circle, circle, circle. I move my head

around as he flies and get a little bit dizzy. I'm dizzy by it all. I wish I was still in the Molly-dream.

He lights on top of Daddy's smoker. Momma runs over, no creeping this time, and tries to cup him around her hands. She reminds me of some ole-timey picture of a falconer. But he escapes and circles again up towards the ceiling. His wings whizz again on the metal of the opened garage door.

"I know what to do Will. Stay right here. I'll be back."

Momma runs out the open garage door, her blue robe a blur. She's got the I'm-talking-to-a-little-kid voice again. I sit down on the stairstep between the kitchen and the garage. I watch the little bird circle. Momma comes back in with a bright-red hummingbird feeder in her hand. It's red plastic at the top, then there's a funnel of clear plastic full to the brim with sugar-water. At the bottom of the feeder, there's four little red plastic flowers with yellow lattice-work places where the birds feed. This is a good idea.

"All right Momma! Good thinking. Gimmie that mop, and we can hook the feeder through the hole in the mop handle."

I take the full feeder from my Momma as carefully as I can. I

spill a couple of drops of the sugar water on the part of the floor she's mopped, and she gives me a look.

"Bugs."

"Sorry Momma."

There's a piece of wire on top of the feeder where it hangs from the porch rafters, and I take that wire and loop it through the hole that's bored on the end of the mop handle. The feeder swings when I hold the mop from the wet hairy end.

"Careful Will. Try not to spill that sugar-water. Let's make as little a mess as possible."

The bird keeps circling. I guess I'm not in his little line of vision yet. I hold the mop up higher over my head, right in front of the little bastard. He circles, circles, circles, and so do I. Momma follows him with her head. Finally, after what seems like three or four minutes, he comes to the red flower and sticks his needle-mouth through the lattice.

"Yes, baby! Drink little hummingbird!"

"Come, on! Come on! He's gonna come Momma!"

I begin to walk slowly with the mop. He keeps on drinking for a

few seconds, then flies back into the circling formation in the area between the curled-up garage door and the ceiling.

"Shit. Okay, Will. I've got another idea. Give me the mop for a second and go get that hatrack over from behind the lawnmower."

There's a hatrack behind the lawnmower? I don't ask. I just do what my Momma says. She holds the mop and unhooks the feeder wire from the end. I bring her the wooden hatrack, and she takes it to the edge of the garage and the carport, right in front of the van. She hangs the feeder on it, careful not to spill a drop of the sugar-water. But right as she lets go, the feeder falls to the concrete and splatters all over the section of the garage she's mopped.

"Goddamn fucking piece of shit! Hellfire and damnation! I ought to smash this fucking plastic feeder to bits and just let you die, you stupid bastard bird! I ought to just let you kill yourself in the heat of this garage since that's what you seem so hell-bent on doing."

Momma sounds crazy now. I look at her for a second. Her hair clasp has come undone and is hanging from a few strands. Her dragon robe's got sugar-water spilled all over the front of it. I walk over to her and try to take the hair clasp out of her hair. It looks sad hanging here.

She moves my hand away and snaps it out herself. Then she puts the hair clasp in her pocket and runs into the kitchen. I hear her turn on the water from the faucet and slam the door to the cabinet. She's making some more sugar-water.

She comes back into the garage with a pitcher in her hand, and gently, carefully, she pours the mixture into the top of the hummingbird feeder. One of the yellow grids that goes on the flower broke off when the feeder fell, and I go over to pick it up while Momma's pouring. Slowly pouring.

"Here Momma. Let's put this yellow thing back on so he can drink through it."

"Thanks baby."

She's a little calmer now. I help her attach the feeder back on the hatrack. I have no idea what to say to her.

"This hatrack's really a good idea Momma."

I sounded stupid. We are careful, and not even one drop spills.

"He's tired," Momma says. "Let's just stand over by the kitchen door and watch him."

We leave the feeder, hanging almost perfectly still on the hatrack, at the edge of the garage and carport and walk back over to the other side where the kitchen door is.

"He's such a tired little fella."

Momma's voice is high and sing-songy again. I've heard her talk this way to babies we've seen on the street and to Daddy. We are quiet together. After a minute, the hummingbird stops his circling and flies straight toward the feeder. Momma grabs my T-shirt sleeve. He sticks his needle-mouth into the yellow grid and drinks, drinks, drinks.

Momma slowly walks to the hatrack and puts it out into the middle of the driveway, out into the already humid August day.

"Momma, should I close the garage door so he can't get back in?"

"No, let me get it mopped up so there won't be bugs. Go back upstairs, and go back to sleep if you want baby. Thank you. Take the broom over to the corner on your way."

Ribbon of Highway

Willie

Winston, my son, wastes.

Wastes time sleeping, wastes the money he makes mowing lawns (on marijuana he thinks his mother and I don't know about), wastes the gasoline, I the one whose femur will never be quite the same, pumped while he listened to a song he likes, patted his hands on his knees in a steady rhythm that pulsed through the car's metal body up into the plastic pump handle I held in my hands while I thought, damn you boy for not offering to help me. I'll be happy to take the wheel for you dad. To take the wheel. To control. To wield dominion over me, whose body is broken, whose old love is dead.

"Winston. Stop letting up on the gas then punching it all of a sudden. Try to maintain your speed instead of alternating like that. It's wasteful."

My son reaches over and turns up the music a little. Johnny Cash is in the tape deck — *Unchained*. This is a tape on which we can agree.

So far, we have made it to the interstate, eleven miles from the farm. I look out at the median, flat and browned by the dry summer. Alabama needs rain again. Today will be long and unlike most of my Saturdays. Sharla's funeral starts at ten, so we still have three hours to finish the one-hundred fifteen miles between here and Vidalia. In the walk-in closet this morning, I quietly finagled my suit pants over my cast to test and make sure they'd go, then rolled them down like Annie-O does her pantyhose to get them off again.

"Now Daddy, what is this business deal with Uncle Hendree again? Are y'all going to buy that land over around grandmomma and granddaddy's? What are you going to do with it? What do I need my suit for? I really don't want to go to any business deal. I'd rather hang out at Hendree and Floranne's. And when will you have enough land Daddy?"

"Dammit, Winston, don't you know what land is the best investment anybody can make? It'll always be in demand, and it'll always be around. Furthermore, Winston, this is the land that adjoined your grandmother and grandfather's house. The house where I grew

up. I would think that might mean a little something to you."

"Sorry."

Winston starts screwing with the gas pedal again. Up and down, fast and slow, wasting my money."

"And, Winston, we're also going to a funeral."

"Huh? What? You didn't say anything about a funeral. Who died?"

"Her name was Sharla, and she was a friend of mine when I was your age. Hendree and I knew her."

"Sharla? What, was she an exotic dancer or something? One of the ones Uncle Hendree said y'all used to go see?"

"No, Winston. She was a farmer."

"Oh."

"He gets quiet again. Turns up Johnny Cash. "I've Been Everywhere." The song is too fast to be a backdrop for an decent, well thought-out conversation about anything important. A roll-call of cities where Johnny's been fills the air. I know for a fact Winston has never known a Sharla. And even if he did, he would have absolutely no idea what to do with her. He would be all thumbs. He would over-

accelerate, under-accelerate. He couldn't handle a Sharla, and I don't know if he'll ever be able to. Even Wyatt is better with women. Girls. In the interstate medians, the highway department or the prisoners or somebody has sown poppies. South Carolina's been doing it for years, putting the prisoners to work, by God. Making something beautiful out of whatever sin they've thrown into the world. Might as well make them make something pretty for broken-legged men in the passenger seat to stare at on their way to their old girlfriends' funerals. Guthrie was right. These highways are ribbons, grosgrain like the ones Rosie and Maria used to put around their ponytails, all catti-wampus and off-center like when Annie-O hadn't gotten around to helping them fix their hair. I can unfocus my eyes, and the southbound lanes, the poppies, the white broken lines, and the northbound lanes become actual ribbons.

Bam! Out of the blue, Winston brakes hard. My cast slams against the bottom of the glovebox, and a sword of pain spirals through my knee. On the hood is the body of the small deer my son has slammed right into in the company car.

"Oh, shit, Dad! I didn't even see him! Oh, I'm sorry Dad!
Asshole deer!"

I am aware of him getting out of the car. Others whizz by in the left-hand land.

"Winston! Get the hell back in the car, boy!"

He does not listen; he does not hear me. Through the spiderweb of a windshield, I look. The deer is bloodied at the neck, breathing a little. Winston's hands are on the deer, stroking its chestnut fur, avoiding the bloody parts of its neck. I see him touch the bone of the nose. All of a sudden, I remember when Hendree and I would go to Uncle Ryker's house and stand on the sofa to touch the stuffed deer trophies on the wall. Hendree and I'd stand in the armchairs and stroke them in that same exact place above the black shine of their noses, give them names.

"Winston, dammit! Get back in this car!"

I do not move. Winston lifts the small body. He is unaware, or no longer paying attention, if he ever was, to the blood. I can see red on his arms and on the cuffs of his white T-shirt. Cars are honking, going around us. Passengers are rubber-necking, seeing what they can see.

Shaking, I fumble the latch and open the handle to the passenger door.

I smell the musky, wet scent of wildness.

"Look dad. It's a doe."

She is as small as Maria when I used to pick her up in my arms and take her from the four-year old Sunday school class into communion. Winston has got her in the grass beside the media.

"Dammit, Winston, move this car out of the middle of interstate into the median!"

He lays down the doe in the grass. I can see her take a few breaths. Winston pulls the car over to the right and immediately gets out. He has left the keys in the ignition, he has not closed the door all the way, and that that tiresome beeping noise is going off. Winston goes over to the deer, strokes her nose some more.

"Dad, I think the car's fine from the front. The only thing broken badly is the windshield. I just didn't see her jump out, Dad. I just didn't see her. She was so fast. Do you think she's probably in a lot of pain? Come on dad, let's get a vet!"

"Hell no, Winston. Winston, she's going to die. I've been reading that there's an enormous overpopulation problem anyway.

She's probably starving. They're even opening up some of the restricted areas to hunters."

"Dad, come on! You've got your cell phone."

"No vet, Winston."

"Well, then call information or the police or somebody. Why can we get a vet over here? We can save her. Dad, we've got to save her!"

"Look Winston, you've probably done her a favor. This kind of death is much shorter and less painful than starvation or disease. If I had to watch you die, I'd rather it be this way. I could never handle watching one of my kids starve to death."

I stop and look. She isn't breathing anymore. My sixteen year-old son strikes the nose of a dead doe and glares at me.

"Winston, baby. She's dead. Let's leave her here and get on the way. You couldn't help it. You were really good to move her over here."

I don't feel mad about the car. My leg hurts like hell from the impact, and I just want to get on with things.

Winston leaves the animal and gets back in the driver's seat, bloodied on the arm and silent. All along, Johnny Cash has been singing.

"Son, pull over at the next exit, find a service station, get a T-shirt out of your suitcase in the trunk, and clean yourself off. I could use something cold to drink, and we need to take a look under the hood to see if there was any damage. The radiator's probably the only thing that's in any danger, but even that should be fine since the hood didn't get any damage. Good thing she was a doe. No antlers."

"Okay."

He drives, and he is silent. We pull up into the parking lot of a Texaco. Winston pops the trunk and rummages around. I hoist myself out of the car and hobble over to the front. He is right. There doesn't seem to be any damage except for the windshield. The trunk closes. Winston sees me surveying the damage.

"I'm so sorry. Here, Dad. I'll clean it off. Dad, I'm really sorry about the windshield. How much do they cost?"

"A hundred dollars or so. Winston, don't worry about it. It was an accident. Nobody could have avoided it. You're sixteen, your

reflexes aren't used to road hazards yet. You did the best you could.

Nobody got hurt, that's what's important. The car isn't messed up.

The deer's grazing with God and the saints. Stop worrying."

He goes over to the pump and pulls a windshield washer out of a black, plastic box. Brown fluid drips on the hood of the car, and he begins to scrub back and forth where the blood and broken glass come together.

"Dammit, Winston. Don't get glass on yourself. It's just going to break up more if you keep doing that."

"I'm sorry Dad."

Slowly, he places the washer back into the brown fluid and walks into the gas station. The windshield really isn't that bad. Hendree'll know somebody to fix it when we get into town. I gas up the car, lock it, walk into the gas station to pay, buy two cokes for Winston and a six-pack for me. Back on the road, I can tell Winston is pretty shaky. I look out at the road through the cracked glass of the windshield. Through the slits of glass, the broken lines on the road are askew. I reach into my front pocket for my Swiss Army knife and crack open a bottle of beer. It's good and cold. I hate the tinny taste of drinking out

of aluminum. What Annie-O does is keep mason jars in the freezer. Then it doesn't matter whether we get cans or bottles; we just pour whatever into the icy mason jars, fresh out of the freezer.

Winston hovers in the right lane and keeps the speed around sixty. He's not punching the gas so much. I didn't even have to remind him.

She's Hatched

Winston

Daddy's got no idea. Zip. Not a clue I know what he's doing here in this Catholic church, Immaculate Conception. It looks a lot like St. Stephen's, our home church, even though ours is Episcopal. Both have that folk look of the 1970s — rafters and wood paneling, small stained-glass windows in organized rectangles up and down the side aisles. Sometimes I feel like there should be beanbags in our church instead of pews, it's so casual. And like St. Stephens, there's no natural light, so it feels dark in here, like you're in waiting in somebody's study and any minute, a guy looking like Higgins on *Magnum P.I.* will walk out of a mysterious door in a red satin smoking jacket and act genuinely surprised to see you there. I like our home church, St. Stephen's. I'm proud of the fact that we can wear khakis and sometimes even jeans, that we have incense on holy days, that our vocabulary is more interesting, that we have church at the lake in the summer (then we can wear t-shirts and bathing suits), and I tell all my Baptist buddies at school about the incense and the communion wine.

and the kegs we have at our parish picnics, just so they'll know what they're missing.

Here, in Immaculate Conception, there's a red carpet rolled from the back wood-paneled door all the way up to the front of the church, and I can smell the hothouse funeral flowers immediately as I walk in. Flowers, up there at the front, gathered around the shiny black coffin. Bet there'll be some of those weepy looking glads Annie-O hates so much.

Yeah, I've figured out he was her girlfriend before he met Annie-O. And it hit me sometime on the drive that Sharla Marvon was the one from the yearbook inscription. I remember the fun Rosie, Will and I used to make of the inscription this Sharla left in his yearbook about how he was "the first." I'm glad Daddy had this Sharla in high school since that means there hope for me too. But I do know. One thing that's different here in Immaculate Conception is that there's holy water, and I don't think very many Episcopalians do that. When we came in a few minutes ago, Daddy dabbed a little of the holy water from the holy water tank on his finger, then to his forehead, lips, chest. And I know exactly what he's up to. He's got the water, he's got the look, the

look I get when I go down to rescue my Harriet out from under the molecules of the swimming pool.

Daddy's had a witch-woman.

Just like me.

I was never sure whether Daddy'd ever known a witch woman or not. But as we stand here in this line, I can see an outline of her, lying about fifteen-feet away from where we're standing in a seashell-pink suit. She's got long dark hair, and I'll bet it's curly underneath like my witch's. It's not as dark as the shiny black coffin.

"Winston?"

"Yeah, Dad."

He's put his hand on my arm. Uncle Hendree's talking to someone he knows, someone who Daddy must not recognize anymore.

"I need you to know something here. This woman was a good friend of mine. And Hendree's too."

"Yeah, Daddy, I know."

"I knew her a long time before I knew your Momma."

"I think it's okay for you to know somebody before you knew Momma."

A fat woman with curly red hair in a navy blue-flowery dress that bunches up around her waist walks by us on our left. She looks much older than my Daddy. As she passes, she catches his eye and does a double-take.

"Willie?"

"Yes, yes, how are you?"

"Oh my God, Willie, I haven't seen you in years and years! You haven't been to any of the reunions, have you? I know I would have remembered. What are you doing now?"

"Oh, still the same, still the same. My family's wonderful. This is my second son Winston."

"Pleased to meet you."

I'm mechanic. I hate when I'm introduced to somebody and they don't introduce themselves back. Apparently Daddy's got no clue who this woman is, and she should have the insight to recognize that.

"What a fine-looking young man. Well, it's wonderful to see you, but under these circumstances, it sure is a shame."

"Yes, it is. It is."

Daddy doesn't sound like himself. I've noticed he doesn't sound like himself sometimes when we come back to his hometown. I wonder if I'll do that when I go back to Annie-O's and Daddy's house after years and years of being away. The woman realizes there are a bunch of people behind her, waiting for her to scoot her fat self on down the aisle. She reaches in a strained-looking way to hug my daddy, and I notice the sweat rings under her arms, and I get a glimpse of the top of her pantyhose through one of the gaping button openings at her waist.

"Who's she Daddy?"

I know he doesn't know, and I know she's still in earshot, so I say it in a normal voice.

"Shhh, Winston. We're in a church."

"Huh? Daddy, what were you saying a minute ago?"

"I don't know Winston, I don't remember. Now after we walk up here, we're going to sit down in the church because the Rosary is going to start. Then there's going to be a Mass. I know we aren't really supposed to take Communion here because we're not technically Catholics, but I don't think God's going to care. So just remember the service is almost exactly like ours."

"Except we can have women priests."

"Yep. That's right. That's a real sticking point for your Momma.

And for me too, of course."

"And no papal authority."

"That's right Winston."

Of course.

"Daddy, why didn't you tell Momma where we were going? I mean, I don't think she would have cared or anything. It's not like you are in *love* with this woman still or anything."

"Winston, hush."

Hendree has stopped talking to the man who doesn't recognize Daddy, and he's rejoined us in the line. We're about three people away from the shiny black coffin, and I can see Sharla even more clearly now. She's got lighter skin than my Harriet's, much lighter than the deer. And then, all of a sudden, I can stop thinking about how that deer's back in the grass, waiting to get stashed back under the land where she belongs, and the suffering's over if Daddy's right about it.

Until now I wasn't so sure. Until I saw him back there at the holy water tank, I wasn't so sure. Daddy was just the man who had the

keys, the man who had to say, "okay son, you and your brother can go out tonight." But there was a tear there blending into drops he made crosses with on his forehead and mouth — a regular holy water-daiquiri spilling onto Daddy's lips. I saw him take his tongue and lick the concoction — he can't tell me he didn't sneak a salty taste — as we made our way into the church. And now he's just ignored my question about Momma, and Daddy's usually always ready for my questions, always ready to give me his point of view as soon as he possibly can. But I'm not so sure Daddy is all right now; he knows about the witch-women. He knows about what I'm going through with knowing the women in my mind. But at least now I know that Daddy knows how some women can take on their own life inside your mind. Maybe he even knows how I have to struggle between Harriet and the girls I know who aren't from the dark, the girls from school who are always on diets, always going to the bathroom as soon as they finish their lunches so they can reapply their makeup. And believe me, I notice how they're reapplied their makeup. I notice how this girl Leslie who always sits with us at lunch will come back from the bathroom with lips that look so shiny I feel like I could see my own face in them if I

could stare hard enough without getting noticed. That's nothing special to have to remember. It's the girls like Harriet and Sharla that are the girls that live in our heads, mine's and Daddy's. I think guys like Will Jr. are able to have both — the dream and the real, all in one. Look at Molly. Molly's definitely got mistakes, but Will Jr. just doesn't see them. Daddy and I are just alike when it comes to getting confused with what's real and what's not. The problem for me and Daddy is, Sharla might have been just like a Leslie in high school, real for other guys. But for Daddy, I think she's become something not real. And I know this because of the way he put that holy water on his face to try to hide his tears.

Daddy knows how the dream girls, the girls from your mind, get to you with water, and he knows how the water they use is so sticky you can't ever get it off, not even with the best and most absorbent of towels. And the water they stick you with comes in all forms: pool water, tap water, snow from the sky, snow on the ground, melted snow, ice, water from the garden hose, mop-water, holy water, piss, sweat, milk, saliva, semen. They've got you. That's how Harriet got

me; she made it so I'd feel all safe and floating, so I could curl up with my knees at my chest and feel like I was safe.

We're at the front now. We're right in front of the shiny black casket and the dead dream girl. I'm not looking at her; I'm looking at my Daddy. Daddy's going to be all right, and so am I. He's been hobbling a little — there's going to be a rosary before the Mass, and I've never been to a rosary before. Harriet says they're beautiful services what with the counting and all. But Daddy's going to be all right. I just let him keep holding onto my elbow like I've seen him do to Annie-O at funerals before. I'm glad there's no music being piped out from behind the mass of flowers. Always hate when they seem to want you to think the music's coming from the body or heaven. But people are saying the same things just like I knew they would. Daddy's participating in the charades.

"Hendree. She still looks the same."

At this I look away from Daddy and to the coffin. No she doesn't. Dammit Daddy, I want to say but don't. She looks like roadkill lying on the side of the highway, and I know she was beautiful before. She looks suffocated. She looks embalmed. She looks tired,

glad to be dead after flying circles around the sun for forty-something years. But I don't. I just listen.

"Willie," Hendree kind of whispers. "You know Betsy Thompson, I mean, Betsy Higgins now, just said that at the last reunion, Sharla was asking about you and me. When's the last time you heard from her?"

"I don't know Hendree. I guess it's been at least five years. She had just gotten the emus going in Winchester, and she called up to ask me about some feed. We talked for awhile. I have no idea what she looked like five years ago. Don't you think she looks the same Hendree? I mean, as when we were kids?"

They're keeping up the whispering, as if Sharla couldn't hear them.

"Yeah. Yeah, Willie. She does. What a girl."

Hendree does not have me convinced. This Sharla had seen better days. She'd seem them and walked them and had them. Daddy's reaching. Reaching for what wasn't. I do it all the time with Harriet — reach for what's not really there, when it's apparent, with girls like Leslie who's always making the effort to eat lunch with me,

that I could have what is there, what is real. I turn my head from looking at Daddy's reaching eyes to the right, to the witch-woman in seashell-pink. Such a good color for getting back to the water. But the color's somehow not right on her. Her skin's got that olive look, dark and shiny, but there's the yellow light of cancer underneath. I saw that light when my Granddaddy was sick with cancer, saw it right underneath his skin like he was laying on top of a lightbulb.

I stare and stare at that color. It's like nothing else. Sharla.

Sharla what's her last name. My daddy's witch woman turned roadkill.

And then I blink.

Whoa.

I blink again.

Ohhhh. She's vanished. There's no more Sharla, no more seashell-pink death suit, no more witch lying on a lightbulb. There's the deer, (there's *that* doe!), and I hear myself gasp right out loud, feel myself take in a breath fast like one who's gotten holy water sprayed in his face. The deer is bloodied still, and she opens her eyes, glad to see that I've come. Even through the blood, I am overwhelmed by her.

She's beautiful again.

"Winston?"

"Daddy! Daddy, do you see?"

"Winston, are you okay?"

"Daddy's she's alive!"

Daddy puts his arm around my waist, firmly, and I am sort of aware of the people in line behind me, waiting to see Sharla, and I have a kind of inclination that I should turn around and *cling cling cling* a spoon against a glass so I can make an announcement to them that her body is no longer here. She is not here. Sharla is not in this black shiny box.

"Winston, let's go get a seat, okay?"

"Daddy, I want to stay here just for a second, okay?"

I want Daddy to see, so badly. I want him to feel better about all this.

The doe's eyes shine as she opens them. I reach down and touch her nose, touch her like I touch Harriet, smooth at first. I wipe away the blood from the biggest wound on her face, the blood and the wound caused by me, by my stupid immature driving reflexes, with the very

palm of my hand. I pet her like I did out there on the highway before she was gone, before I killed her.

And my touch is like magic. The wound evaporates. Soft, brown doe-skin is back. A regular sorcerer, I think I am. But it is not me who's the magician. She smiles. She loves him for making her better.

"Winston, son. Don't touch. Come on. Let's go."

Daddy is more forceful with his arm around me now, and Hendree looks kind of embarrassed to be with me. Hendree walks down the aisle ahead of us; he doesn't know, he doesn't see.

Out there on the highway, Daddy said I'd done her a favor. Overpopulation and starvation. He's right; I have. She's started to breathe now. I knew she would. *Whoa*. Her breath starts off labored and turns right into a regular breeze blowing air into the cuffs of my blazer.

"Winston, stop it!"

"Dad, she's okay."

Dad doesn't see the doe. She puts her hoofs on the side of the coffin and hoists herself out. She is quick again. Daddy turns around, and he pulls me with him back down the aisle, and that's okay because

that's where she's going too. And wherever she goes, I will go too. I watch her flitter down the aisle, quick and graceful, past the line of people and the pews where they sit, past the holy water tank, and out the tall wooden door of Immaculate Conception that somebody has propped open to let the light and the fresh air come in.

Daddy and I start back down the aisle, and he doesn't say a word. I can't believe it. I've never had any trouble believing in life after death, never had any problem with the resurrection or ghosts.

That was not her up there in that box.

We take a seat about three-quarters of the way back. Hendree, then Daddy, then me. Hendree starts flipping through the bulletin. Daddy keeps the kneeler on his and Hendree's side up since he's got to stretch out his hurt leg. I put my kneeler down, and get on my knees. We always kneel down before the service starts in our church, and I guess the Catholics do it too, but I'm not sure. Daddy always prays before the service. He can't get on his knees though, so he links his palms together, props them on the back of the pew in front of us, leans over, and shuts his eyes. I feel my kneebones against the wood of the

kneeler; the pad isn't too cushiony. I guess that's good because it shouldn't feel too good when you pray.

God, this is a miracle, I think. Two deaths untied in one day. I try to think of a prayer I know by heart since none of the words that come immediately to my mind seem enough. That's another thing I don't get about my Baptist friends. When they pray, they just say whatever comes to mind — "...and God, I just want to thank you for this day, and God, I just want to thank you for our time together this morning, and God, I just want to thank you for sending us the gift of your son..."

Why not commit words to memory, words that someone else has already written down and made sound beautiful? Don't they want them to be all thought-out and beautiful for God? Doesn't saying words that people have already said for years and years and years make you feel closer to those people? And closer to God? I know what prayer I want to say. I say it silently, in my own head. A voice just like Harriet's in my own head:

We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the

same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

That works. I love the sounds of the words. *Manifold. Flesh. Doe. Dwell.* I know it doesn't go at the beginning of a service, but it's fine for what's going on here. I sit up, fold up the kneeler, and close my eyes. It's like there's a film projection of the doe running down the aisle is playing on the backs of my eyelids, clicking reels, over and over. Daddy's still got his hands on the pew in front of us, praying. I see his body shiver a little, like he might be crying a little again. After ten or fifteen seconds, he leans back and whispers to me.

"Winston, honey."

His voice chokes a little.

"Yeah?"

"Winston, is everything all right? Maybe I should have left you at Hendree and Floranne's. Are you all right with this?"

No he should not have left me back at Hendree and Floranne's. I could not have missed that doe.

"Daddy, it's okay. I understand. I understand that you loved this woman, and that you love Momma in a totally different way. I know. But we've got to tell Momma about it when we get home, okay?"

"Winston."

"What? What Daddy? Say something."

Daddy's face is really white. He breathes a couple times, quick, like he's getting back his breath.

"Winston, I know. We'll tell her. We'll talk about it on the ride back. But Winston..."

"What? Daddy, are you okay? What?"

"Winston. Winston, what did you see up there? I mean, what did you think you saw when we were up at the casket?"

"Listen, I know I saw her. Sharla, in that dead body — she was not still beautiful — she became, she turned into..."

Do I sound crazy to him? God, am I? Am I crazy? Would you make me crazy when you wanted me to see what kind of stuff you can do?

"Daddy, I'm okay."

He doesn't say anything else. He kind of sighs, a tired-sounding sigh, and encloses his arms around my shoulders so I can't get away, just like I was little again.

See You at the Bottom

Maria

Miss Jean Hao

1143 Plincos Apt. #3A

Davao City

Philippines 0987

Dear Jean,

Got your letter right after I just sent you the one you'll get right before this one. What you said about that b--ch what's her name, I can't remember, who David was kissing at that movie is right. You don't need to be friends with her ANYMORE. Girls are supposed to stick together. Momma always tells me and Rosie to HANG ON to our girlfriends over any old boyfriend because they are better anyway. And harder to find than boyfriends. So do that. She sucks if she knows you like him and she's going to go and do that. To hell with her. You've got me for a friend! Just remember that! Anyway, it is a pretty day here in the great state of Alabama, and I'm trying to get a suntan. I

hate all this white skin. Momma says brown fat is better than white fat. I think she's right about that too. From your picture, it looks like you have BEAUTIFUL skin, so pretty and smooth. How are you? Anyway, I want to tell you what's been going on around here. Okay, yesterday, Daddy and Winston (my middle brother, the one who's after Will Jr., right before me. I know it's confusing. The order is: Rosie, Will Jr., Winston, me, Teddy. I have just learned about using parentheses and they are THE BEST for getting in stuff that doesn't go with the sentence). Yesterday Daddy and Winston went to my Daddy's hometown where he grew up to visit Daddy's brother and his wife, Hendree and Floranne (they are the parents of my cousin I told you about who is such a skinny little b—ch). But that's not why they went! They went because Daddy wanted to go to the funeral of this woman who he dated in high school and he LIED to my Momma about it. Anyway, Momma was fighting mad all day yesterday. I knew something was wrong with her but she only told Rosie what was going on. This morning, when she knew they were on the road she called him on his cellular phone (I heard her) and asked him where they were and when would he be back, and so she figured it all up and about

lunchtime, she fixed up her makeup and put on this pretty purple dress and her flip-flops and walked all the way out to the end of our driveway (I told you it was long) to WAIT for him and Winston to drive in. I mean, it was a BIG deal in our family. Rosie just told me. When they drove in a couple hours ago, Momma was standing at the end of the driveway, and what Winston said is that Momma was standing at the end of the driveway and she told Winston to please walk to the house, that she and Daddy needed to go for a drive. (Winston had to drive Daddy because of Daddy's leg, I should have reminded you of that earlier I guess.) So Winston's back, and Momma and Daddy have been on this drive for over THREE hours now. They don't like us to see them fight. They are still gone. I hope they don't get a divorce. Earlier I asked Rosie if she thought they would, and she said hell no Maria. But I don't know. I worry. I know Momma and Daddy love each other. Ahhh! Forgot the paragraph.

But I am sunning out here. It's really nice to have Rosie at home. I miss her so much when she's gone to college. I love summertime. Makes me even sadder to know that Will Jr.'s going to be leaving too. Everybody's leaving. Just Winston, me and Teddy, and Winston will

go too in a couple years. Everybody else is in the pool now. I don't want to get in the pool because I don't want my suntan lotion to come off. So that's what's going on with my life. I really want to hear about you! I DO NOT want school to start again —

Eeehhhhhhhaaaaaaaa! Cold! A bucket of water on my head. Got to find my breath.

"Will Jr. You got me *soaking* wet! And my letter! I've been working on it and now it's *soaking!*"

"Hey, hey, hey little sister! A letter. Take a letter Maria, do-do-do-dah-do-do, address it to my wife. Stop writing. We want you to come play with us in the pool."

Will Jr. and John-John and Winston have all crept over to where I've been sitting on the grass and scared the *shit* out of me. And gotten water all over my letter.

"Look at this! My letter to Jean."

"Here," John-John says. "Let me fix it for you Miss Maria."

He goes over to the edge of the driveway and picks up three

rocks. He uses them to pin down each page of my letter to Jean so it'll dry out.

"That was smart John-John."

I like him. He and Rosie are so cute together.

"Maria, get in the pool with us girl," Winston says as he and John-John scoop me up like I'm a baby. John-John holds my feet and Winston holds me under the arms, and they carry me over to the pool. This is kinda fun.

"One-two-three!" they all count.

They swing me right into the deep-end. Teddy is laying across a black inner-tube, and I open my eyes underwater and punch his butt right out of the inner-tube.

"My turn."

He makes a fist and slams it down on the surface of the water, splashing me all in my face. Will Jr. calls to me from the edge of the pool.

"Get outta that tube Maria. We got other uses for it."

"Shut up Will Jr."

"Ah, come on little sis. We'll give you a little prize."

"What?"

"A brew. Just one."

"Cool!"

I slide out the hole of the black inner-tube and glide up to the surface. Will Jr. gets a big case of beers and ties a rope around it and the inner-tube.

"Will Jr., what's up with that?"

"Oh, come on Teddy," I say. "Don't you know what a smartie our big brother is? He's keeping the beers cool in the pool."

"Cool in the pool!"

Teddy gets it. I swear, sometimes he acts so young. Rosie and John-John are in the shallow end. John-John's got his arm around her waist. Her bathing suit is one of my favorites. It's a solid bright-blue bikini that's *not* trashy looking at all like some bikinis because the bottoms aren't too skimpy on the sides, and I think looks really good on her. She bought it after summer last year. I was with her. I swim over to the shallow end.

"Hey Maria," John-John says. "Grab us a couple of those beers when you come."

I turn around, swim back to the tube, and grab a couple — no three— of the beers. I put one in each hand, and stick one under the left shoulder strap of my bikini. I can swim underwater like this, so I do, and I open my eyes so I can come up out of the water right in front of Rosie and John-John. Underwater, I see the bump of John-John's thing inside his swim trunks. I wonder what it looks like.

"Here you go Mr. John-John. Miss Rosie."

I hand them the beers that are in my hands like I'm a waitress in a fancy restaurant. Then, I slide the third one out from under my shoulder strap and crack it open.

"Hey, hey, Miss Maria. What are you doing with that?"

"Rosie, it's okay. Will Jr. said I could."

"Will Jr. said you could? Oh, that makes it fine then. Fine, fine. Way to go little brother," Rosie yells across the pool. "Way to corrupt our sweet little sister who was once writing letters to her *pen-pal*."

"Oh, come on Rosie," I say. "It's not like I haven't had beer before. You've been away for a long time, and you've missed some stuff."

Rosie looks at John-John. For a second they look like they're parents trying to decide if their kid can do something.

"Ros-ieee. John-John. You're not my mom and dad. It's just one beer, and it's no big deal. I take sips of Daddy's all the time."

"Okay, okay."

The beer tastes a little warm still, but it's tingly at the back of my throat, and I really do like the taste. It tastes fresh to me. I swim over to the corner of the shallow end and rest my shoulders against the side of the pool. It is the hottest time of the day, and it's August. Daddy calls this time of the year the "Dog Days" because all he wants to do is relax and have no worries like a dog. Being in the pool with all my brothers and sisters and John-John is the best. I wish I had a boyfriend too, like Rosie, so he could put his arm around my waist and play with my wet hair. I rest on the corner of the pool and watch everybody. Rosie and John-John float around together like they were one person. Teddy hangs by his hands on the end of the diving board. Will Jr. and Winston crack open beers and tread water in the deep end.

"Hey John-John," Winston calls from the other side of the pool.

"What?"

"What did the blonde say when she found out she was pregnant?"

"I don't know Winston. Tell me."

"Gosh, I hope it's mine."

They all laugh. I laugh too. Teddy laughs, but I don't think he really gets it. But I get it.

"Hey John-John," Teddy says, trying to sound as cool as he can. I know this voice.

"Yeah, Teddy. Whatcha got?"

"What does an Australian use to wash his ass?"

We all kind of laugh when we hear Teddy say "ass." It sounds funny coming from his little mouth.

"I don't know Teddy. What does an Australian use to wash his ass?"

"A bidet, mate!" Teddy does his best to sound Australian like Crocodile Dundee.

John-John cracks up. I mean, he really, really laughs. So does Rosie. And his laugh must be catching because then Winston and Will

Jr. start in. Everybody thinks Teddy is hilarious. This is funny, but I don't think it's that funny. John-John recovers enough to speak.

"My God, Teddy. That's great. Who told you that? How do you know what a bidet is?"

"I made it up. I guess Momma told me what a bidet is. One time, we were at Mr. and Mrs. Hartman's house, and they have this big fancy bathroom with two regular potties in little closets, and Momma and me went in each other them, and then there was this other third toilet, and while Momma was using the regular one, I started looking at it, and she told me what it was. And then I said I wanted to try it, and Momma laughed and said it was okay, so I used it! It really made my ass feel crazy!"

Everyone starts hooting again. I mean, John-John looks like he's going to need some oxygen. Just then, we hear *honk-honk-honk*. Daddy's car. Momma and Daddy are back. I wonder what happened. I wonder if they are going to get a divorce. Everybody gets kind of still for a minute while they park the car in the garage. Daddy yells out to the pool.

"Will Jr.! Winston! Come on in and help us carry in these groceries. Everybody start getting dried off cause we're going to have some dinner!"

Will Jr. and Winston hop out of the pool at Daddy's command. Daddy hobbles a little closer to the pool so he doesn't have to yell so loud.

"John-John, do you know how to light that grill on the back porch?"

"Yes sir. I think I can figure it out."

"Well, you do that if you don't mind. There're matches in the kitchen. I'll meet you out there and we'll get these salmon steaks going."

"Yes sir."

Our pool party breaks up. I still have half my beer left to drink.

"Rosie, stay out here in the pool with me while I finish this."

"Okay, okay. John-John, I'll be in a few."

Teddy crawls up the ladder and dries off with John-John's towel.

The two start running towards the house. Teddy's got a good head-start on John-John. It's good to talk to my sister.

"Rosie, do you think Momma and Daddy are going to be okay?"

"Yeah. I do. I think they just needed to talk together for awhile.

Winston said Dad was pretty shaken up by the whole funeral thing.

And Annie-O was just pissed that he lied to her."

"Good. I don't want them to get a divorce."

"Dammit Maria, they're not going to get a divorce. I told you that earlier. Maria, try not to be so dramatic. If two people were ever supposed to be married, it's Willie and Annie-O. They're not going to get a divorce. Sometimes couples just fight. That's natural."

"Do you and John-John ever fight?"

"Sure. We've fought before."

"About what?"

"Well, we got into a fight the other day about something stupid.

He was thinking that maybe he loved me more than I loved him. And that's just not true. Stupid fight. I mean, that's no big deal."

"Well, do you love him less?"

"Maria, no, no. I mean, I love him a lot. I think he just thought that I thought I might be missing out on something someday if we were to go ahead and get — nothing. You'll know soon enough."

"WHAT? What Rosie?"

Does she mean they are going to get married? My sister? Get married?

"Rosie?"

She giggles a little and puts her palms on top of my head.

"Shh. Quiet Miss Maria."

She pushes me underwater in the shallow end. I stretch up my arm and hold my beer up over the surface of the water. I think there underwater for a second. Rosie get married? I can hear my heart beat faster underwater. I push-off from the bottom with my feet and *blast* up to the surface of the pool.

"Rosie, I think it would be great if you married John-John. Do you really love him that much? Do you?"

"Yes Maria. I do. I do love him that much. Now keep quiet. He hasn't even talked to Willie yet."

"Oh my gosh Rosie! He's going to ask Daddy? Isn't that *romantic?*"

That is just so sweet. I want a man who will ask my Daddy if he can marry me too.

"Now let's dry off. Finish your beer. Bottoms up, Maria."

"Okay, Rosie. See you at the bottom!"

I hear Daddy say "see you at the bottom" sometimes when he and Momma are drinking together, and saying it, I really feel like I am *part* of something. It's a funny expression. I mean, I know something really, really important way long before Daddy does. I wonder if she'll ask me to be a bridesmaid. Or even the maid of honor! I mean, there aren't any other sisters, and aren't you supposed to ask your sister first?

Rosie finishes hers before me, and when I do, I feel a little dizzy for a second. Shake it off, Maria. Shake off. We dry off, pick up all the cans, towels, and t-shirts left at the pool. I go over to where John-John carefully laid out the pages of my letter to Jean. They are dry now.

That was so smart of him. I pick up the dry pages of my letter — the words are only smeared a little. Not enough to matter.

"Wait up Rosie!"

I run to catch up with her. Arms full, we walk together back up through the grass to the house.

Punchline

Rosalind

"John-John. Tell the one about the horse," Will Jr. says through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Which one about the horse?"

"The one with the chicken. And the mud. I'd tell it but I can't remember how it goes. I can only remember the punchline."

John-John wants to marry me. I can hardly grasp the fact of that as we sit here at the table, and I wonder what my Daddy said to him when they were fussing over this hot fish. I wonder what he said to my Daddy. The ice cubes in their bourbons would have clinked against the glasses during any silences. Marry. *I want to marry your daughter. I love your daughter. Your daughter, Rosie. Rosalind. I want to marry her, Mr. Whitcomb. Willie. Is that okay?* What will that be like, marrying John-John? Like Momma and Daddy? Better? Worse? John-John looks good in his green polo shirt and khaki shorts. Maria has put a little daisy, now hanging to the side like a neck-roll gone wrong, in the buttonhole next to his collar. His brown hair is shiny, longer than his ears like I like it, and almost dry from the pool, and he has a good tan

this summer, better than he's had even since we started dating. No good tans in Alaska. I give him a big grin as he glances from me back to Will Jr.

"All right Will Jr. I know which one you're talking about. Okay, there's this horse and this chicken, and they're playing in this field. It's springtime, and it's really a big pretty field, daffodils, big old cows chowing on grass, manure piles, the whole bit."

John-John is animated. We have not yet told the entire family about the news, the engagement. Maria figured it out earlier, and I think John-John must have talked to Willie, to Daddy, when they were on the back-porch grilling the salmon. But it doesn't take too long to grill salmon, and I'm wondering how much they got into the whole thing. He didn't give me the ring yet since he's getting his grandmother's from his mother in Alaska, so there's no glittery proof of what he asked me this morning, really early, when he crept into my bed after going out to one of Annie-O's flower beds to get a big bunch of irises. He laid them all over my chest and sort of nudged me awake.

"Rosalind. Rosalind wake up. We have to start this day off right."

"What?" I was kind of groggy, but I knew, *I just knew*, what he was getting at. Maybe I'd even been dreaming of it, and him coming in there like that was an extension of the dream. I made like I had no idea.

"John-John. What, pray-tell, are you doing with all those irises?"

He climbed into my bed right beside me.

"Rosalind?"

"Yes."

"Rosalind, spending time here with you and your family has sealed it for me. I love this place, this family. Everybody wants to be so *high* all the time. I don't mean drunk. I mean *higher*. It's what I want."

"John-John."

"I want to be your husband."

I picked up one of the irises off my chest and put the stem in my teeth.

"Okay," I said through the flower stem.

Then he started kissing me there with that flower in between our tongues. I shake myself out of the memory before it gets too good, and take a big bite of my salmon. I like to save up memories like that.

Except, I really have no memories as monumental as that. Not graduation, not a birthday, not a party. None of my memories are as important to the bloomin' rest of my life as that one, and I want to tuck it under one of the folds of my brain so I can bring it out a little later. I switch from the salmon to the salad, crisp and green. Instead of the proposal, I can concentrate on the crunching salad noises inside my mouth.

"Okay, so there's this gorgeous, gorgeous field with all these flowers and grass and cows. The cows are totally oblivious to what's going on."

"What does *oblivious* mean?" Teddy says through a mouthful of something.

"Oh Teddy, it means like you don't give a care about what's going on," Maria says.

"Don't be such a know-it-all, Maria."

"Okay, okay. Everybody just listen up to John-John's joke."

"Momma, I'm listening," Teddy says through another full mouth.

"These mashed potatoes are good."

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Whitcomb. They are fantastic," John-John says.

"Thank you John-John. How many times have I told you to call me Annie-O?"

"Annie-O, everything is delicious. Winston, Will Jr., didn't your Momma make a fantastic dinner once again? She made up this recipe for the salmon all by herself."

"Momma's the best cook in the universe."

"Yep Mom. It's allgood."

Allgood is now one word for Will Jr. I've noticed how he goes through all-purpose, multi-use phases with words. For awhile it was "surenuff," then the simple, drawn-out "word" like the black guys at his high school. It's allgood. Annie-O, Daddy, John-John and I have fixed salmon with little black olives and goat cheese on top. It is a good recipe. John-John better keep on helping out with the cooking. That's not something I've given a whole hell of a lot of thought to.

"Okay, so these cows are all completely oblivious to what's going on. And what's happened is that the horse and the chicken are over in

another side of the meadow playing together, and there's a huge mud hole that they don't see."

"John-John, what are they playing?" Teddy says.

"Um. I guess they're playing Twister."

"Twister?"

"Yeah."

"Damn," Momma says from her end of the table, suspending a forkful of salad in mid-air. "I haven't thought about that game in years. I guess that was popular in *your* childhood wasn't it, John-John? Willie, have you thought about Twister in years?"

"Nope, baby. I sure haven't. But I sure guess I've played it." I watch him wink at Momma from his end of the table.

I hear the irony in Momma's voice. "*Your* childhood, John-John," as if he's from a different generation or something. I mean, he's older, but not *that* much older.

"Momma," I say. "Twister isn't that old. Will Jr. and Winston and I used to have it. Come on."

"Okay, okay Rosalind," John-John says. "So this chicken and this horse are playing Twister over in this section of the field, and they

themselves are totally oblivious to this giant mudhole. The horse gets this really crazy position from his spin, and he reaches his left leg over so he can place it on one of the yellow circles of the Twister board. And you know what happens?"

"What? What?" Maria is enraptured.

"He slips right in that mudhole."

"Shit. A horse in a mudhole! What a bitch!" Since he can't remember the joke, Will Jr. acts like a Greek chorus, supplementing John-John with reinforcing backup commentary. Everyone wants to impress John-John, and I like this. My brother takes another big swallow of his beer. That's at least four for him, by my count.

"Yeah. So the horse starts crying 'Help me chicken! Help me! Help me! I can't move, I can't gallop, I'm totally and completely stuck in this mudhole! You've got to go get some help!' And the chicken is like, 'What have you ever done for me you old horse? You haven't always been the greatest of friends?' And the horse goes, 'Man, I promise, if you get me out of this horrible situation, I will be your true companion, your friend forever, your partner in whatever barnyard antics you can imagine.'"

Annie-O chuckles. I know *she* likes John-John. But what does Daddy think? What does he think?

"So the chicken finally promises to help the horse, and *he clucks, clucks, clucks*, but none of the other barnyard animals help."

I have never seen my boyfriend — my fiancé — so spirited, so vivacious, around my family.

"The cows are too absorbed in their grass chowing to do anything. And the farmer is off on the tractor somewhere, so he can't hear the chicken's pleas for help. So what the chicken decides to do is go back to the farmer's house and get the keys to his Mercedes-Benz."

"A farmer with a Mercedes? That'll be the day," Daddy says.

"No kidding," John-John goes on. "And while he's getting the keys, he gets some rope too. So the chicken hops into the driver's seat of that big black Mercedes and drives over to the big beautiful meadow where the mudhole and his trapped friend are. He gets out of the Mercedes and ties the rope to the bumper of the Benz, then he goes over to the horse and ties the other end of the rope around the horse's neck."

"What kind of a horse is it?"

"Teddy," Maria says. "Shut up."

"Maria, do not say shut-up. It's tacky," Annie-O tells her.

I give John-John a little grin. He knows tacky is one of the seven deadlies in our household.

"It's a big Belgian horse Teddy. Black. It's name is Plato."

"Play-doh's for little kids. No big cool horse like that would have such a stupid name. What about Nirvana? That'd be a good name."

"No, like the philosopher. Never mind. Nirvana's a better name anyway, but it really doesn't matter. What does matter is that the chicken's got this big black Belgian horse, Nirvana, tied to the big black Mercedes-Benz, and he gets back into the driver's seat of the car, and starts gunning the engine. He pulls Nirvana out to safety. The very next day, they've got another Twister game going in the same field, right next to that big mudhole again."

"Smart," Teddy says.

"Yeah, real smart."

I keep watching Dad, and he keeps eating away. He seems really intent on his food. I wish I could tell what he's thinking.

"So of course, what happens is this time, it's the chicken who gets stuck in the mudhole. 'Help me, Nirvana, help me! Go get the Mercedes!' the chicken starts hollering and clucking. 'Well, my chicken friend, there's no need for that,' the horse says."

John-John stops for a second and looks over at me. I know what he's thinking. He's thinking, "okay Rosalind. We've gotten to the vulgar part of the joke, and I kinda forgot about it, and now I'm sorta embarrassed, since I've just asked for your hand in marriage and all, to go and tell this dirty joke to your family. Should I cut it off now, or do I finish this? Am I going to humiliate you and myself in front of your family, or am I somehow going to be included by sharing this vulgar joke? Help me, Rosalind," he's thinking. "Tell me what to do. Blink once for go on; blink twice for stop now." I can't believe I know what he's thinking.

"Go on, John-John," I tell him. "Finish it. It's okay. They've all heard worse."

"Okay. So what happens is, the horse, Nirvana, he says, 'Well, my chicken friend. I don't need that big black Mercedes. I'm just going

to stretch out over the mudhole so you can—so you can grab onto my big—penis—“

John-John says *penis* like he's a biology instructor.

“—you can just grab onto my big *penis* and I'll pull you up out of the mudhole up to safety. And then, we can move our Twister game over to a drier section of the meadow, and hopefully, we won't ever have to go through this mess again.”

“This is so funny, y'all. Listen,” Will Jr. says as he takes another swallow.

“Okay,” says John-John. “So the chicken holds on, and the horse pulls him to safety, and the moral of the story is —”

Will Jr. erupts into boisterous laughter.

“Will Jr., son,” Daddy says, “get ahold of yourself. We all want to hear the joke too. Go on John-John.”

“Okay, so the moral of the story is: If you're hung like a horse, you don't need a Mercedes to pick up chicks!”

Teddy and Annie-O laugh so loud. Maybe even a little too loudly. Daddy giggles and looks down at his plate. Winston and Maria start in, and I look over at John-John, who can't hide the fact that

he looks awfully damn proud of himself by stuffing a big bite of salad in his mouth. I can't stand it anymore. I have to know what was going on with him and Daddy out by that grill. I cannot stand it. John-John's face isn't revealing anything, but the fact that he told that joke might mean it was good. But then, it was Will Jr. who made him tell the joke. I've got to know. These are the people who know me best, and I figure the best place for this information to get out is around this oblong wooden table my Daddy made and all its dishes and glasses and almost-empty bowls. I fix my eyes on Teddy's cute little scraped elbows propped up on either side of his plate (a minor rule broken).

"Daddy," I say. "Did you and John-John have a good conversation while you were grilling?"

John-John immediately looks up at me, doesn't say a word.

"Rosie," Daddy says. "We did, we did."

"What did you talk about?"

"Yeah, honey," Annie-O says. "Did you try to scare John-John away? John-John, we hope we don't scare you away. We like you around here."

"Are you and Daddy still having a fight," Teddy asks her.

That was a switch of topic. But still entertaining. Annie-O gives a look at Daddy.

"No, Teddy. We are made-up. Right Willie?"

"Right, baby. Your Momma and I had a fight because I told a story. But it's between us, and it's better now."

Do they feel uncomfortable having John-John hear this? I mean, this is personal. This is family. And if Daddy's thinking about the wierdness of John-John hearing about his and Annie-O's fight and at the same time thinking about John-John marrying his first little girl, Daddy's got a lot on his mind. This is new territory for Daddy.

"Well see the thing is I asked Rosie to marry me, and she said yes, and Mr. Whitcomb said yes, and I want everybody to know about it."

Whoa, John-John. *Whoa*. That was not the most graceful. But I check Daddy's face. He's trying to smile. Forkfuls of food are suspended in mid-air all around the table as if some sorceress has suddenly cast a spell of stillness around the Whitcomb table. It's wierdly still, and I try to revel in it for a moment. *My* moment.

"Yep. That's true. John-John asked if he could marry our Rosalind, and I said of course, if she wants to. Do you want to Rosalind?"

Daddy looks me square in the face. I haven't even had a chance to check Annie-O's face yet. I am. I am sure. Yes, yes, I want to marry him. Of course, I do Daddy. I wouldn't say yes otherwise. What are you going to do? Banish him if I suddenly say no?

"Yes. Yes, I want to marry him."

The candles flicker a little. I stare into one of the candle flames across the table, and Maria, who's directly across from me, starts getting a little blurry through the flame. She's smiling at me. Annie-O breaks the stillness by jumping out of her chair and walking over to where John-John sits.

"We are so proud. I am so happy. This is wonderful Rosalind, John-John."

Annie-O sounds more like June Cleaver than herself. And herself is more like Lucille Ball. But what does this occasion call for? I guess she doesn't know how she's supposed to be. She hugs my tick-fearing

John-John, and he hugs her back. Everybody starts talking and asking me questions I don't really hear but manage to answer.

"I want to give her my grandmother's ring, but I have to get it from my mother in Alaska, and we don't really know if sending it through the mail is the best think."

"Well, you can always send it insured," Annie-O says in their embrace, to the back of John-John's head.

"Momma," Will Jr. yells from the pantry. "Where's the champagne?"

"Oh good idea honey. I don't think we have any though. Why don't you get a couple bottles of that good Chardonnay out of the pantry? Here, I'll come help you."

She lets go of John-John and kisses him hard on the cheek. He puts both his hands on her shoulders and squeezes before he lets go of her. Winston has put on some Billie Holiday, the *Lady in Autumn* album, I do believe. The song is "Body and Soul." We can all agree on her. Even Teddy, who's now so heavily into the Dave Matthews Band he doesn't seem to know other music exists, thinks Billie's cool.

Everybody comes over to hug me. John-John's beaming. Everybody

wants him to be their brother. I look over to Daddy, and he looks a little lost. I walk over to him, and put my arms around his neck like I did when I was a little girl. I move a little like I'm dancing with him, but he doesn't start leading.

"Daddy, I love him so much. I love you and Momma, too and everything is going to be great. I'm so glad you said okay."

"I love you too honey. I love you too. You look so pretty. So grown up. I'm really proud of you."

Sometimes when Daddy says simple things like that I can't speak. What do you say back? We stand there still for a minute and I drown out all my family talking in the background. My Daddy finally starts to dance with me, and I just let him and Billie's voice take over.

My Kind of Women

Willie

Back when Winston started walking, I had to put a new lock on the door leading down to the basement. Since we kept them original, the steps were makeshift and rickety. Even before that, though, I can remember helping Annie-O toddle up them when she was nine months pregnant with Rosie and we were building the house. I held her gently around her waist so she wouldn't fall. In the evenings, after I got off from work, I picked her up from the little apartment, we went to get something to eat at Mr. B.B.'s, the barbecue place on the way out of town, and then we headed over to the house. We parked in the grass, and if it was muddy, I laid a two-by-four or plywood or whatever wood I could find over the mud, and we made our way walking over the plank into the basement. She wore the same dress, a bright blue polyester a-line kind of thing, her favorite maternity dress, during the last couple months with all the children. I'd like to have that dress down here. I wonder if it's still in the house. Annie-O said it was a color she liked, that its neckline was flattering enough so people would look at her neck and breasts and face, not so much at her belly.

But when I look at my wife, I always look first at her hair, long with sneaky curls around underneath the top layer of straight strands. And now, tonight, as I breathe in the air around this place and my body digests a light dinner of fish and salad and wobbles and betrays me a little from the drink it's trying to process (my body always, always responds to alcohol long before my mind gets fuzzy), as I have given my first daughter to an engagement I really didn't see coming, as I leave the dead body of the lovely Sharla Marvon in the grave where it will become an inevitable sort of mulch, I am back.

I am back in that time when our house was part real, part imaginary. And when my family was the same — part dream, part tangible: the tight, big belly of my wife, the feel of it hard and bright blue and smooth, our Rosie underneath that polyester that felt almost gritty when I rubbed my hands down it vertically. On those nights, the nights when my new wife and I checked the progress of our house and I added comments to one list of things to tell the builders and to a separate list of tasks for me to do on the weekend, I occasionally, upon entering that basement and ensuring neither my nor my wife's shoes got too awfully muddy, after taking a few glances at the footings or at

the pink cotton-candy insulation, took a long hard look at the face of my pregnant wife Annie-O. Those looks, the mind's freeze-tag images, are what adds up to mattering, to really mattering. All around us, all around her, was dirt, the cavern of the basement, and the concrete footings. In my memory, those rickety steps were what brought her up to the foundation, big, swelling, off-balance with our first child. I've never had the heart to tear those steps down.

As toddlers, Will Jr. and Rosie pretty much stayed away from them. Maria would stand at the edge and peer over, down into the dark basement, and say, "No, Daddy. You carry me." When Teddy figured out I made the animals stay out of the workshop, he lost any interest in going down there. But once Winston, our third child, the child smack-dab in the middle of our five, found out that the door from his Momma's kitchen emptied out into the black space below, we couldn't keep him away. At one, Winston would slowly, so as not to make any noise, turn the doorknob, turn around so his back was towards the basement, get down on his belly and slither down. But the creak of the steps would give him away. Annie-O could hear it from nearly anywhere in the house, and she'd put down whatever and come

to the kitchen two steps at a time, run through the open door and scoop Winston up off the steps and into her arms. He'd point toward the bottom of the stairs and use his first word over and over: "Dark! Dark! Dark! Dark!" Annie-O would sweep him up off his belly, carry him back up to her sunny kitchen, latch his highchair tray down, and start working on dinner.

But one day she didn't hear him, and after she found him down there hoisting himself up by the legs of my bandsaw, she called me at my office and told me to come home and fix the damned door so Winston couldn't go down to the dark anymore. I left the office on my lunch hour, stopped at the hardware store, bought a deadbolt, drove to the house, removed the old doorknob, and attached it so the lock faced the basement. I put the key on my keyring and there it still hangs.

So it's thanks to Winston — the child who wanted to go to the dark and the child who insisted just yesterday that he saw a woman leave her own funeral — it's thanks to Winston that I can go down to my workshop where no one can get to me. I wasn't rude about it; I told the boy, "hell yes, *son*, welcome to the family," I celebrated the engagement with everyone. I danced with my daughter and my wife,

and I drank my share of drink, and I made like I was happy to be getting a new son-in-law, a first son-in-law, out of this philosopher from Alaska, but I really don't know yet. I need to be down in my workshop first. My workshop is sanctuary within sanctuary. I'm so proud of it. I've got old metal lockers stacked up against one wall, a workbench that makes a huge L and extends all the way across two walls, and on the fourth wall, a rack I made to hold all the lumber. In the middle of the room are my bandsaw, my planer, and my lathe. I've been working on a computer desk for Rosie, and all that's left now is the finish. But tonight I say to hell with that.

I open the aluminum door that leads to the bottom of the hillside on which my home sits. The sun has been down for hours now. I hear voices from the pool and maybe even the hot tub too. Nobody has to be sent to bed since there's no school yet. The sky's big and that dim color of blue that lets you know black's almost come. Forgetting the sounds the crickets and leaves and grass make after the sun goes down and the sky gets dark is a bad thing. Sharla would never have forgotten things like that. I can see Sharla Marvon now, so audacious and sexy and astonishing, so *unchained*. The first person ever to give definition to

those adjectives, the meat behind the menu. Sharla would have packed up all her shit into a U-Haul and moved to Vegas or Milwaukee or Hattiesburg on a whim. Spent her nights getting free drinks from lonely salesmen staying in Holiday Inns and singing karaoke to "Chain of Fools" in hotel lounges. Hell, Sharla was the type who could just leave all the shit, all the personal stuff with meanings: the holder where lovers would pick and stick to one certain hole for their toothbrushes, the postcard taped up on the refrigerator from the art professor you know on sabbatical in Bern, Switzerland, the dance video your fourth child, your little daughter Maria, choreographed with her friends at a slumber party and forgot about (you and your wife have hidden it and plan to show as a joke it at the rehearsal dinner for her wedding). Forget that stuff. That's what Sharla'd do. "Make new meanings"; that's what Sharla'd say.

But with her she'd always carry the memory of the old. She would be able to resurrect in her mind the sound the leaves make when the wind blows when you're standing on a particular point in space right outside your workshop in your yard in the land you've owned in rural Alabama for what will soon be twenty-five years. She'd know

how to remake it all. When the family's going places she never wanted or anticipated them to go, she'd carry them in her head; she'd know how to keep it all, to preserve it. "Keeping" isn't just maintaining or preserving or holding onto something; "keeping" is guardianship, celebration, commemoration. Forts keep the enemy out. Prisons keep the guilty in. Remember this day to keep it holy.

What I want, what I am to do, isn't entirely different. I want to keep new meaning out of the same, the old, situation. To work with the materials, the media, I've already got and then go to the trouble of messing around with form.

There are stars out tonight too. And a moon that looks like an egg-shaped calcium deposit, something like what I imagined lurking in my urinary tract when I had kidney stones in late March of 1987. But then, when the stone came out in the hospital room toilet, me with my knuckles white against the funny potty handlebar, it was nothing like a moon. Only a granule of calcium, probably eight-percent or so of my recommended daily allowance as advocated by the surgeon general. The title of that book our Sunday School class is reading: *your God is too small, your God is too small*, circles around like a bird caught in a room, a

terrible tornado through my head. Big black-blue sky, not a single red light of a jet in sight, rustle rustle rustle go the green leaves on the trees.

Destination: home.

Back inside, back in the workshop, I've got all the materials any man (or any god for that matter) could ever need if he wanted to create: nails, six different hammers, sheets of sandpaper, a level, a tape measure, pencils, hand saws, electric saws, drills, drill bits, shellac, primer, screws, flathead screwdrivers and Phillips screwdrivers, pliers, wood glue. But all I need to get started tonight is a post-hold digger.

And lumber. Lots of lumber. Most of it new and stacked in the back of the truck sitting right outside. In my pocket is a receipt, dated today, for more than fifty-one hundred dollars worth of lumber that will be delivered by truck tomorrow. This fence isn't going to be the kind of work I usually make in this workshop. Down here, I'm usually an artist. A craftsman. But out there in the night, as I secure the posts in the ground and hammer the slabs to them, I'm going to be a laborer. I like the work I do in here much better — it's thought-out and this is crude — but the work I do here's slow work. This fence I'm going to build is going to be haste work, probably not too pretty all over.

In the section of my workshop where I keep the lumber, held up by the racks I made years ago, I take down what I already have. Sharla, the beautiful Sharla Marvon who even looks good in the pink blazer — her chest all flat, all different, now — helps me count them out slab by slab.

“Twenty-eight.”

Too small, too small, too small.

“It’s all right. I got enough.”

“Willie,” Sharla tells me, “if you want one post every six feet, that’s over four million posts to enclose one square mile.”

“Sharla, it doesn’t matter. I’ll get more. What matters is that we start building the fence as soon as we can. Tonight. I’ve got to make a move tonight.”

She laughs a knowing laugh, the laugh of an enchantress. I know she knows too much about how weak I can be as she winks at me and slides off that pink blazer. Underneath is a white oxford shirt that’s too big for her, and I wonder why I didn’t notice it being bunched up under the blazer. It’s hot down here, even though the sun’s long gone down. Late August heat is excruciating, and I usually just want to stay inside

under the air-conditioner during this time of year, but not now. There's work to do. Historical preservation kind of work to do. I know my lack of planning amuses her, especially when I usually have such foresight. It's true. I see her legs, covered by black tights. I love that word *tights*. I even call Annie-O's stockings and hose tights because sounds much sexier. Sharla walks over to the workbench all slow-like and, with her forearm, slides my level and hammer out of the way so there's a place for her to sit — a move I've watched Annie-O make forty-million times as she's smoothed out the sheets and quilts that cover our bed. Sharla hoists herself up on my workbench, and her ass hangs over the edge a little. And bam, we're back in high school, and I've gone to see her in the green room.

"Sharla, baby, I remember when I first saw you sitting like that. I knew you were going to make me crazy for the rest of my life, and look how you have. Was Winston right?"

"He was right if he thought I would love you for the rest of your life. Love you in a good way. In a way that's going to make you keep up your life."

"He said he thought he saw you transform out of the casket. Go beyond the grave, Sharla. He said that's what he saw you do there in the church yesterday."

"I did. I am. Look at me, Willie."

She's sitting up there on that workbench I created. Lots of things I made have sat up there before. Lots of things I've fixed have laid up there broken — chairs that have lost legs, picture frames that have come unglued, chopping blocks that need to be sanded. Have I made her? Have I summoned her? Did Winston? She sure as hell doesn't need fixing. She is perfect, bringing back all these memories of me before I was made better by Annie-O. I was so redeemable back then, somebody needed to rescue me from that town and from my parents' religion and their rules, and Sharla got to work on me.

And I know Annie-O will see I'm still redeemable now. I look at Sharla, and I tell her these things:

"In the car today, Annie-O and I drove and drove around and she told me how she felt crazy when she found out I'd lied to her about your funeral, felt crazy out of her head like things were spinning and she couldn't find a fixed point to spot herself with."

"Willie, I used to feel that way when I looked at you too. We were so young. You were so young. And still I felt that dizzy way."

"Well, Sharla, I did too. But I want to tell you about Annie-O and the lie. It was my fault, my fault. And then, when she pulled the car over on the side of the road, and she took my hands in hers and she looked me square in the eye and said she forgave me, she understood, I felt like I was spinning. I felt dizzy with the love I have for my wife, felt confused again on how wife and life are all I have, all I want."

Sharla, still sitting up on my workbench, listening to my every word, reaches out her magic arms to where I stand in front of her, below her, and puts her sweet soft fingers on my temples and rubs them as I keep talking.

"And then, Sharla, there's the engagement. There's this man who will take my daughter, my first child, and make her *his* wife-life. She's still so young. She's not even out of college. Is it possible she knows what this means?"

"Yes, Willie. It is. It certainly is."

Is it? Is it possible? Did I miss something? I need to make this space ours again, and Sharla, my woman of old, my enchantress back from the forest, is going to help me.

"Come on Willie. Let's get to work."

Sharla gets out of the magnetic-like field her motions have created around my temples. Her hands land on my shoulders, and she uses me as a balance as she hops off the workbench like a damned teenager. Sharla's so strong, even after the cancer and the casket. She takes me by the arm, and we throw the twenty-eight slabs into the back of my pickup. She throws the wood like she's a big strong man, maybe stronger than me, and she doesn't seem to mind when sawdust gets on her white oxford shirt or her seashell-pink skirt. I open the passenger door for her.

"See honey," I tell her as she slides into the truck. "There's still a difference between a man and a woman. Forget what they say."

I am a gentleman. I walk across to the other side of the truck and hoist my cast and leg into the cab of the truck with Sharla by my side. I'm really not supposed to drive but this truck's an automatic, and no law's going to stop me on my own land. This night is so beautiful, the

stars so clear, so well-designed up there in the sky. Tongue-in-groove, almighty-style.

And just when I've been complaining in my head about the heat, I notice it's beginning to cool off. Fall is back. Sharla and I drive out the dirt path towards the perimeter of our land. I hear the kids splashing in the pool. I see the light from the private porch that's only for me and Annie-O. Sharla cranks down the window on her side; like Annie-O and Rosie, she's not the kind of woman to give a rat's ass what the wind does to her hair. My kind of women. The wind is gentle and it does what it can to make late August a little better. Sharla and I barrel off the dirt road into the grass toward the perimeter of our land where we can do this work, build this fence that's going to keep the very earth from moving from where it should be. All the words I can think are: *it's good to know I live in a world where a man can still love his family. There's just so damned much beauty in all things. All of it. Oh lord, it's good to be alive tonight. It's good.*

Vita

Bonnie Kathryn Smith was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on April 16, 1975. She grew up in Athens, Tennessee, where she attended public elementary and high schools. In 1993, she matriculated at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee where in May of 1997 she received a Bachelor of Arts in English with honors. She entered the Master's program in English at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August of 1997 and received her Master of Arts degree in May of 1999. In the fall of 1999, she will begin working on her doctorate at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.