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EVERY BAD THING MAMA EVER SAID

and other stories

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Sherry Ann Jackson

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ABSTRACT

EVERY BAD THING MAMA EVER SAID and other stories

By Sherry Ann Jackson

Set in the Texas Cotton Belt the collection explores Southern identity in the context of family mythology. *Every Bad Thing Mama Ever Said* revisits a family long established in rural Texas and is informed by cultural and regional transitions over three generations. Central characters are caught between rural and urban environments, past and present; the narrative addresses regional manners, lifestyle, and values. The compilation regards place and family identity as drawn from authentic social and physical settings familiar to the author.

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Thanks to Kasey, Joni, and Carrie Lynn, my good girlfriends between California and Texas. Kasey managed my life while I was busy in the elsewheres of my mind; Joni gave me continued self-assurance, never doubting my capabilities; and Carrie Lynn believed in me first-- back in the creaky swing on the crooked porch of Hopkins and Ranch Road 12.

Finally, and so specially, Chris Fink was invaluable to me personally and in my work. More than teacher, guide, and friend, he christened me a writer.

UpTmor Road

There wasn't a dry eye graveside when Junior fiddled his final stroke of Faded Love. He threaded the last note low and slow, drew it sweeter and higher to the tip of his bow.

Silence fell. Junior lowered his bow. Tulsie came off a drink, and her Southern Comfort ice plunked to the bottom of her cup. She rattled it around. Who could blame her; Papa George practically raised her.

Junior snapped his fiddle case closed and picked up the shovel. In the heat of the August afternoon Little Charlie escorted his sister, Tulsie, from beneath the burial tarp to his truck. Tulsie bellered the long walk, past the tombstones of the family dead, out the cemetery gates.

I'll miss you more and more every day, as heaven does miss the stars above. Remember, Junior pitched a shovel of dirt on his granddaddy, Papa George, *remember our faded love.*

Tailgate and Tonic

Little Charlie cracked a Pabst from the cooler on his tailgate. *Help yourself.*

Big Charlie pulled a half-rack of Schaeffer from his Chevy and bedded it in the slush.

There's a'plenty.

The Uptmor family trickled out the cemetery gates toward the gravel lot. *Where to now?*

Tulsie hunched beside the cooler sniffing, cup rattling. Aunt Sweetie pressed her to her bosom, drink and all.

Some place everyone can find. Willenwolf's beer joint--like when Grandma died.

Everyone knows where The Wolf is, Junior's eyes were red, even the outta towners.

Climb in back. Little Charlie scooted the cooler behind the wheel well.

Kids with me. Big Charlie lowered his tailgate.

Sweetie held a Kleenex to Tulsie's nose. *Blow.*

Coupe and Camino revved their engines Wolf's bound. Tops popped, wheels squealed, and gravel spit.

An Uptmor is an UpTmor is a Willenwolf

The Uptmors knew loss. The Uptmors, every one, experienced loss on a gravel road in the dark of night. They knew inner ache and emptiness. They were no strangers to wreck and ruin. Each had his very center plundered and pillaged. They shared a family wound.

It happened on Uptmor Road. When the no-name gravel road was christened the family name, it was cause for celebration. The family finally got their due recognition as prominent, long-settled farmers of the community. The posthole was dug, and the sign sunk pointing the gravel route through acre upon acre of Uptmor corn. It was cause for festivity, for fiddle and beer.

Celebration was short, however. Someone on that newly named gravel road defaced the Uptmor sign. Someone painted over the middle T. Someone in the dark of night made the sign read: Up mor Rd.

A few Uptmor eyes bugged. The T was pilfered from the very center of the family name. One Uptmor gasped.

The Uptmors strongly identified with their authentic German spelling. They held fast to

their T; it hung central like a cross on the bosom of their name. It was pivotal. The Uptmor T was symbol, not sound: the T was silent. Unspoken on the tongue, it stood like silent belief.

Take the T from an Uptmor and you have an Upmor with no T. Such rebels existed: traitors of the original spelling. Though pronounced the same, the deleted T changed everything. A line was drawn in the dirt: T Uptmors and No T Upmors.

The No Ts had taken it upon themselves to up and change the spelling, Americanizing themselves, and betraying family honor. They were, the Ts believed, turncoats. They were, everyone knew, the culprits who blotted out the T on the country road in the dark of night. A deeper line was drawn in the gravel.

Any T would tell you: *That road is named after the eldest living patriarch of all Uptmors. That road is named after George Uptmor, Sr., our own Papa George.*

Little Charlie Uptmor uprooted the vandalized sign, post and all, petitioned to someone with some do-how for a new one. Nothing happened. So he took matters into his own hands, by gumb. Little Charlie requested the biggest, fattest, most capitalized T old Henry Uptmor, shaky of hand but full of righteous indignation, could score with his wood iron. The new sign read: UpTmor Rd. Every Uptmor with a T slept better. *An Upmor is an UpTmor*, Sweetie Uptmor was fond of saying. And so she once said to Clay Willenwolf, Wolf's proprietor and bartender. *It's all the same folk and family*, said Sweetie with a T. *Now, hasn't no one ever mess with the spelling of the Willenwolf name. No one took out no L. Doubled no F. Added no nonsense E. No, siree.*

I'll do you one better than that, Sweetie. Clay leaned a forearm on the bar. *Them Upmors are UpTmors are Willenwolfs.* He pointed at Sweetie with an ah-ha smile out the sides of his

eyes. Sweetie shifted on her stool, and circled her lips on her Shiner bottle. Her eyes were round.

Clayton leaned away, scratched his back. *Yes, siree.*

By Way of Wolf's

It started as a hush on that funeral afternoon--one UpTmor whispering into the sundress shoulder of another. Two murmuring into the bolo tie of a third. It lit like kindling, and spread. Rose on a hiss and filled the air. It blazed like a back draft when the Ts lit from lowered tailgates. It steamed on the asphalt of Wolf's. It thickened the August heat.

Little Charlie was hot around the collar. He slammed his tailgate catching Tulsie's skirt.

He let it rip: *Someone stole UpTmor Road.*

It wasn't the No Ts this time. It was not the culprit name searing the UpTmor tongues. Besides, Little Charlie done wiped out the No Ts's gripes and grumbles and vandalizing ways. Took care of them right quick, and some time back. Called the No T Big Boys to Whiskey Creek Bridge at sundown, his hands still chapped from digging up the sign that old Henry had to re-T. *You boys know this creek's named after my grandpa, a one-time moonshiner, one George UpTmor, Sr? You might know him.* And he spat in the dirt, bit his lower lip and continued: *Now this bridge, that crosses this creek, is on a little road, if I remember right, name UpTmor Road.* Charlie looked long over his shoulder to the top of UpTmor Road. He was making his point. He turned back to the No Ts and sniffed. There were three of them and only one of him, so he kept talking. *Like the Good Book says don't no man covet another man's wife.* Little Charlie scratched his ear thinking where he was

going with this. *And that brings us to the UpTmor Road sign.*

You saying you think of that sign as your wife? And the three No Ts hooted; one slapping his hat on his thigh, one slapping the other on the back, the third joining in when he saw the other two laughing and slapping.

But Charlie knew he'd made his point. Before long the three No Ts quit crooking their arms behind their heads, thrusting and grunting their pelvises in a wifely way when they saw him in town. Little Charlie knew envy when he saw it: pure UpTmor envy.

And he knew it again. On the very August afternoon his Papa George was laid to rest. Nope, wasn't the No Ts this time. Another name blistered on the whisper of UpTmor lips. On the black burning asphalt of Wolf's, Little Charlie crushed his beer can on a boot heel.

Gonna kill me a Willenwolf.

One Good Kidney Deserves Another

This is Wolf's where the Uptmors drink in honor of their dead. This is the beer joint that lay Grandma Uptmor to rest. The watering hole that witnessed the days when every Uptmor had a T; the days before the line in the dirt was drawn. The days when a Uptmor was an Uptmor, and passels of Uptmors, every-which-a-one, scooted his graveyard boots to the Wolf roadhouse.

Wolf's warmed Uptmor bellies with beers. Consoled their loss with Lone Star. Changed bills into jukebox quarters. Tolerated Faded Love every fourth play.

George Uptmor, Sr., the oldest living patriarch of the Uptmor clan mourned the loss of his wife here. He punched Faded Love into the jukebox. Fumbled for quarters deep in his

pockets and held them out to grandkids. He treated the little cowpokes to soda pop and pork skins and eggs pickled to rubber in the jar on the bar. He watered the wagging tongues, funneled beer upon beer to his story-telling kin. Papa George listened to family tales, and told a few himself. He laugh-snorted, and sniffled, and two-stepped, tracing the circle-footwork of Faced Love on the sawdust floor. Papa, the one-time moonshiner, did not drink.

Done drunk up one kidney back when, had to get it replaced. Trying to hold on to the both of 'em now. Or I'll be peeing in a bag. Us Uptmors mighta come from nothing, but I've worked hard to have a pot to piss in, a lid to cover it, and a window to throw it out of. Not gonna trade all that for a plastic bag in my britches. My kidneys tend to pickle-up, kinda like that egg little Skeeter's reaching for elbow deep in that gallon jar, Someone git her an ice pick or some tongs or something. You'd think she was raised in a barn, Papa George was fond of saying. And so he said in Wolf's the very day his wife was put in the ground.

Hell, Papa, you just never took your borrowed kidney for a beer run. If I's you, I'd take it for a test drive. Move some oil through it.

Big Charlie tilted forward in a backwards chair. *Maybe you can rotate 'em. Preserve their tread with equal wear and tear.* A round of ha-has was followed by a round of beers.

Remember Man You Came from Dust

This round's on me. Clay lined frosty brown bottles of beer on his bar like a chorus line of dark-skinned girls. Thirsty UpTmors shuffled into Wolf's from Papa George's burial. Usually the funeral gatherings happened like this: Big Charlie played B-4, and Hank Williams, Jr. crooned his *Family Tradition*. After a few beers, a few tears, everyone sang

along the second time around. Kids cracked peanuts, shells dropped to the floor. Sweetie told stories that highlighted the one just buried: old stories with a new twist. Big Charlie, straddling a backwards chair, interrupted to elaborate upon Sweetie's embellished details. Tulsie spilled coins on the jukebox case. One-eyed it to punch C-5. Lowered her lids and lifted her cup. Swayed to Willie's *Whiskey River*.

Though UpTmors, hot and thirsty from Papa's burial, shuffled into Wolf's, not a one played B-4, *Family Tradition*. No beer -brave voices belted in singsong wonder: *Hank, why do you drink? Why do you roll smoke? Why must you live out the songs that you wrote?* Another question hung in the air. A question that only stolen UpTmor Road could answer.

They stood. They looked one to the other. They shuffled and shifted, and the ladies kept their bags on their shoulders. Big Charlie scratched the back of his neck. A kid cracked a peanut between two front teeth, eyes straight ahead, and slipped the shells in his pocket.

A mechanical hum rose above the quiet when a 45 slid into jukebox play. C-5 filled the air. Everyone looked around. A vinyl bag slipped from a shoulder. A jaw locked on a half-chewed peanut. A quarter rolled across the floor and heads turned toward Tulsie at the jukebox.

Wolf's front door opened and a silhouette stood against the stark daylight. The door closed and the form took detail. A white shirt beneath a leather vest absorbed the flash of beer signs. The black hat took shape; red neon pooled in the contoured crown, lit the brim shadowing the eyes.

Clay Willenwolf was bent into the cooler behind the bar. With six longnecks splayed

between his knuckles, he glanced in the mirror. Little Charlie stood with his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his black Wranglers.

Double Take the Willenwolfs

Travel UpTmor Road through acre and acre of country corn. Let the dust and thistledown settle, and meet the Willenwolfs. Sprouted left and right amongst the familiar folds of UpTmor and Upmor like so much volunteer corn, the Willenwolfs thrive, rooted in homesteads long-established. The eye cannot differentiate family from family, ranch house from ranch house: same porches, same slamming porch doors hanging rain-swollen on rusty hinges. Same tire swings strung low on the high branch of the sweetgum. Same patch of tire-grazed earth where corn-bred tykes, gravy-suckled and lard-lubed, take an after-supper swing. Same looking youngster be it an UpTmor, an Upmor, or a Willenwolf: a bulbous head cupped by big ears hollered at on a double name. Same cotton-picking family repeating itself.

Is There Something in Your Boot, Or Are You Just Happy To See Me

Little Charlie sauntered to the bar on lean, wiry legs. All UpTmors watched; he was a man on a Willenwolf mission. There were rumors of what lay hidden in the leather folds of his Tony Lamas. Some eyes went straight to his feet and quickly look away. Others stole hard sideways glances from stiff faces. No one wanted Charlie to catch them looking. All wanted to see if he walked funny.

Charlie's ruddy complexion dominated his small facial features and flat dark eyes. He

stood five feet, three inches in his boots. Someone once said he was too short to wear a hat-- Little Charlie's face became a fist. He dark eyes knuckled. That someone, on second glance, had a change of opinion, and decided Little Charlie looked in perfect command of an oversized hat. In any hat at all for that matter.

Clay Willenwolf's chorus line of frosty beers were breaking a sweat. *S' on me*, he said. Little Charlie's flat eyes didn't blink. *Sorry to hear about your Papa George*, Clay added.

Charlie moved his hand to a bottle and circled it with his fist. He took in the UpTmor clan over his shoulder and lifted the beer. *Grab a beer, y'all*, he narrowed his eyes and drank. *We don't have to act like someone just died, now do we?* The UpTmors, practiced in singing in unison, released a harmonious and collective sigh.

Bottle caps hissed. Big Charlie scraped a chair across the floor and straddled it backwards. Sweetie told the story about Papa George getting thrown in jail for moonshining. Big Charlie added that Papa was known as Doc back in his bootlegging days because, *How'd they say it? He was the 'man with the medicine.'* Peanut shells crunched underfoot. Tulsie spilled changed and punched away at the jukebox with a painted nail. *Family Tradition* filled the air.

Sitting on a barstool, Little Charlie hooked a heel on the brass foot rail. Charlie had learned to wait; he was confident in his mastery of timing. He flexed his leg, jiggled his foot, and rotated his ankle. He was hot inside his boots.

Hunkered at the bar the brim of Charlie's hat grazed his shoulders, and he lit a Pall Mall. Smoke curled over the brim of his hat. Charlie was a man with a deep conviction: family honor. Charlie held the unwavering belief that the greatest wrongdoing was taking something

not rightly owned. He turned that over in his mind, and rotated his ankle once, then twice. What Charlie concealed deep in his boot was tied to family honor, was tied to his sister, Tulsie--her honor taken from her by force by some old boy deep in a cornfield. Charlie retrieved his sister's honor, in the only way he knew how. He paid the price, and rightly so, but then so did old boy of the cornfield. The score, Charlie felt, was evened somewhat when what's wrongly taken is rightly retrieved. The thought made Charlie a bit more comfortable in his boots; he yielded their heels to the brass rail, moved his feet side to side, in perfect time to Hank Williams, Jr.

How are ya, Charlie? Clay Willenwolf leaned across the bar, and the music in Charlie's boots halted mid-beat; their leather stiffened. *I mean, I suppose, given the situation it must be tough, but other than that?* Clay rubbed a towel on the bar round and round in a spit -shine. *You just about in the clear?*

Don't know yet. Charlie's boot heel slipped from the rail. He drained his beer. *Just waiting for a sign.*

Clay's red and frizzled forelock moved in the breeze of the overhead fan. Long in the tooth and narrow of mouth his jaw hung soft as if unhinged. He leaned in close and breathy to Charlie: *Get you another Bud, buddy?*

Charlie nodded small from the brim of his hat. Behind him the UpTmors were in full funeral swing. Uncapping a bottle, Clay scanned the joint in the mirror. He didn't remove his hand from the beer when he slid it low to Charlie, but rotated the bottleneck a quarter turn and lifted his pale face. *Let me see inside your boot. Would ya?* The request was toothy and eager. *I ain't never seen one of them prison bracelets before.*

Sweet Corn, Cream Corn

Little Charlie figured his whereabouts were monitored at every moment. Luis B. Otiz, his soft -moustached probation officer, explained the technology of the electronic monitoring band. *Plus, L.C., yours got the latest feature: motion detection. Even if the signal is lost, we know the offender is on the move and at what speed.* Luis B.'s face rounded on a smile, and he smoothed his rumpled shirt over a protruding belly.

But if the offender, as you say, is moving fast and furious, but you don't know to hell-fire where, what difference does it make? Charlie drummed his fingers on Luis B.'s desk cluttered with files and family photos. A kid-crafted pencil can wound round and round with yarn lay on its side spilling ballpoints.

Luis knew the device wasn't fault-free; the signal could be lost in tunnels or dense urban sprawl. His enthusiasm wasn't dampened. Luis B. had faith in his client, had grown quite fond of the one he called L.C. From a large family, and a daddy himself many times over, Luis B. shared Charlie's sense of family honor. He wondered what he might do in the face of a lowlife scoundrel that violated his sister, or God forbid, pillaged the innocence of one of his tender-skinned daughters.

Nor did Luis' belief in L.C. waver when Charlie's signal was lost. *Little C, we lose you every couple Sundays or so.* A computer printout logging dates, times, and locations draped long over the heap of his desk. A baby's teething ring was pushed far to its edge. *'Bout 4 o'clock or so seems to be the pattern.*

Ah, Sweet Lacey, Charlie thought. *Sweet Lacey Sunday,* and he felt a churn in his groin,

a welcome rumble unsettling him south of his hips. *That's Lacey Callaway's no-good husband off to bid cattle in Ft. Worth.*

Y'all do it deep in a tunnel or something? Luis looked up from the printout. *Because data doesn't show you lost to urban sprawl. Yet something, somehow, snuffs out your signal.* Luis B's chocolate eyes were earnest.

Something like that. Call it cornfield sprawl. Charlie stretched his legs across the scuffed linoleum of Luis' office and crossed his ankles.

Just remember to surface, L.C. Don't disappear in there.

But Little Charlie had already wandered far afield, lost in lusty thoughts of blown pollen and silky-haired tassels of corn.

Now That's Some Faded Love There

While Junior rosined up his bow, Sweetie told the one about *Papa found passed out drunk in a ditch Christmas morning-- in time before his pickled kidney.*

Big Charlie relieving Clay from behind the bar, added to the stories nonetheless, leaning loudly over the ice machine scooping with the one hand and shooting a shot of Schnapps with the other: *thatuz Little Charlie found him covered in crusted puke, and you shoulda heard him-- a'bellerin' and blatherin' and carryin' on, crazy fool. Always was one sensitive sumbitch. Like he hadn't never seen a man facedown drunk in the dirt.* And while Tulsie finished off her pint, Junior adjusted his amp. And while UpTmors posed another toast to Papa, Little Charlie turned off his engine at the top UpTmor Road.

The truck halted in a cloud of dust. Clay looked window to window, back and

front. Nothing but miles and miles of flat farmland planted high in corn. Down the gravel road an occasional barn or line of pecan trees blipped the wide horizon. A bright sun sunk in the west sky below a spinning windmill.

Show it to me now, Charlie. Clay's teeth shone with saliva. *We're plenty far from everyone.*

Step on out. Charlie opened beers from the back of his truck. *You know, Clay,* Charlie sat on his tailgate, *certain things can mark a man.*

You can trust me. Clay drank and wiped his mouth with his sleeve leaving a wet spot on his blue cuff.

Can label him a curiosity.

Won't mention it to a soul. Does it look like a sports watch, or more like a battery pack? *You can trust me, Charlie.* Clay breathed from his mouth.

Now see, that's the thing, Clay. Charlie tapped his beer can. *I'm not right sure I can.*

And why can't you? Clay lifted his arms. *If you can trust anyone Charlie, you can trust me. Your own Grandpa trusted me. Does it hurt your ankle? Rub it raw or anything?*

Leave Papa George out of this. Charlie teeth were tight.

George, well, see that's the thing. We was real close. If George was here you could ask him if I was trustworthy; he'd tell ya. Yes, siree, he would.

The fields west of the road swallowed up the sun and the filtered light deepened their green. A cow lowed long and faraway. Little Charlie kicked off his tailgate and gravel crunched beneath his boots.

I mean, I've known him all my life. Me and your whole family go way, way back. Charlie crossed the roadside ditch into the fields. Me and George were like this. Clay crossed his fingers, followed Charlie close at the heels. Why, I'd give my left nut to your Papa George, and he'd a'done the same for me.

Charlie shouldered the way down deep rows of rustling corn. A field mouse scurried across the furrowed ground. Charlie swiped a leaning cornstalk out of his path that swatted Clay in the face.

Where we going Charlie?

So you're saying, Charlie spoke over his shoulder, that I can trust you like family 'cause Papa George trusted you?

Like family? Hell, Little Charlie-- we are family!

Charlie stepped around a break in the corn where stalks, bent and flattened, cushioned the hard earth underfoot: his ground blanket of leafy -green where lay his Sweet Lacey on a Sunday.

Did I ever show you this, Little Charlie? But you got to promise me something though if I show you my secret.

Charlie turned and sniffed. *All you gotta show me, all you owe me, is a sign. Or someone of your family does. And I mean to hold you responsible, get it back, if I gotta beat it out of you. On the very God-given day we put Papa in the ground.*

You're nuts, Charlie. Did you go Jesus in there? I guess going a little loony in the head helps you stand a place like you was in. Clay had his back turned, shirt lifted and was tugging at the waist of his jeans.

Wait. What you doing? Charlie stepped back. *You ain't one of those, are ya?*

Look close. It's kind of faded over the years. Clay craned his head around to look over his own back. *Look it. See there?*

Nope. Charlie sputtered and kept his distance.

Clay stretched the skin taut across his hip. A scar purpled and surfaced. *See it now?* Clay straightened, lowered his chin, and rubbed the back of his neck. *I gave your Papa George my kidney. He needed one. I had, well, two. It was a perfect match.*

Charlie looked at the scar; then Clay turned quick on a thought. *But Charlie don't no one hardly know about it. Your Papa George thought us Willenwolfs and y'all Uptmors might be too close in blood for folks to be comfortable with. Hell, it don't make no difference to me. Like I said,* Clay's face was bright, his forelock fuzzy, *any way you cut it-- we're family!*

Charlie took a step to have a closer look. Clay was more than happy to lift his shirt and bend over deeper at the waist. *Don't need to do all that,* Charlie mumbled.

Clay turned on him and dropped his shirt. *Now will you show me your prison bracelet?*

And To Dust You Shall Return

Charlie's signal was lost. Charlie didn't return to Wolf's that night, or any other night. Rumor had it Little Charlie wandered down Mexico way. And was living it up. *Got a Mexican senorita. Which means novia in Spanish--and Charlie's dang near fluent in the postcards he writes.* But hasn't no one seen Charlie since the night of Papa's party.

What everyone did see the morning after Papa's party-- his casket buried deep, packed

tight with earth all around-- was the UpTmor sign sunk posthole- solid at the top of UpTmor Road.

Does This Sombrero Make Me Look Short

This is Wolf's where the family buries their dead. Where UpTmors are Upmors are Willenwolfs that dance together, weep together, and sing together. Where the jukebox has been upgraded; the same 45s croon Willy and Hank and Merle, only louder.

This is where the story of UpTmor Road is told, is upgraded. Where it's said the splintered road sign was found buried alongside Papa George. Someone dug it up, *that was Little Charlie that found it--a 'belling and blathering and carrying on*, and plunked it back in place before the first rooster crowed.

This is where Clay tells the story. The story of Charlie's prison bracelet. *Rubbed his anklebone damn-near clean through*. This is where Clay is quick to lift his shirt: *Tell me if you need me to pinch my scar purple so you can see it real good*. Where Clay teary-eyed reports: *the last thing he says, if I can remember it right, Little Charlie says, What's given heals what's taken away*. This is where Clay wipes his eyes leaving a wet spot on his blue cuff.

This is where no one knows exactly where Little Charlie is. But everyone has his suspects.

Where Sweetie says *I seen him in my dreams in a two-tone poncho*.

Where Lacey, it's told, only says: *Little Charlie who?*

This is where old Henry Uptmor the wood tooler tells Clay he's never given a tattoo *and*

besides my hands are too shaky. This is where Clay wants it: right below my kidney scar with an arrow pointing up saying something about some Faded Love, like Little Charlie called it that night.

This is Wolf's where it's said the road sign was never again dug up. Where everything said isn't always true: where Luis B. Ortiz passes on his way to dig up UpTmor Road.

Maybe Lacey's Old Man Was Gone Months Upon Months of Sundays

A wood paneled station wagon passes the peeled window -tinting of Wolf's. Luis B. notes very few changes in the area over time His dark eyes are vigilant for any clues: after two years a signal has surfaced from Little C. A faint signal, a weak signal detecting no motion, but a blip nonetheless. A part of Luis fears what he might find.

Luis B. turns onto UpTmor Road tracking the site of the signal. He pinpoints location to the road sign that points the gravel route through acres and acres of countryside corn.

Luis B. Ortiz starts to dig.

Deep in the ground where the earth is cool, L.C.'s monitoring band is discovered strapped to the UpTmor signpost. Its tiny dot of red light is unsteady. Luis B. leans on his shovel, and wipes the sweat dripping down his forehead, stinging his deep brown eyes. A calf bellows in the distance, and the blue sky is mottled in the white of broken clouds. He throws the shovel aside and puts it all back: the band, the post and sign. Kneeling at the top of UpTmor Road, the belly of his shirt smudged with dirt, he packs the post with rich, damp earth. He packs it for Tulsie, packs it for sisters, every one. For tender-skinned daughters, he packs it all around.

Every Bad Thing Mama Ever Said

Red and white beach balls suspended above the seasonal aisle revolved in the Value-Mart air conditioning. Styrofoam coolers, beach chairs and umbrellas lined the overhead shelves. Water pistols, sand shovels, and swim goggles cluttered a pegboard wall. Mama jaunted around a toy bin in the middle of the aisle: inflatable rafts, swim rings, and more beach balls. My sisters and I halted at the display. Goose pimples chilled my bare legs.

“Thisaway,” Mama called over her shoulder leading us to Girls Swimwear.

We weren’t allowed to swim Speegleville, the local lake. Mama said there were holes in the bottom that would pull you under. “You can’t see ‘em, but girl, I’m telling you, they’re out there, and they’ll suck you right under.” Her teeth hissed on the suck part.

Mama grew up on Whiskey Creek, which was dangerous too. It ran through Grandpa’s farm in the south Texas plains, a stopover, Mama said, on return from our Galveston vacation. Mama once showed us where Little Pookie Heinz stood the day she was swished away after a storm and drowned. She lined my sisters and me on a high bank above the creek making us stand way back and lock arms. The tall milkweed tickled our bare legs, but we couldn’t scratch lest we break our hold.

“Bank is slippery,” Mama said, hissing slippery ss, and I felt the earth shift beneath my feet. “There’s quicksand in that very creek bed. Y’alls’ Uncle Junior, crazy fool, used to let it suck him under chest high til we other kids pulled him out.” Deep and far below the bank in the near-dry creek bed, I imagined little Junior waving his gangly arms above a gurgling and

gulping maw of earth. *Suck you under, girl.*

Mama stood at the head of the aisle with her arms crossed while we chatted at the display bin. Big sister Lolla planned to float the Gulf in a blow-up raft. "I can be Queen, laid back on my pillow, and you can move me across the water like Cleopatra down the Nile," she said. I wanted a raft myself; why should Lolla be Queen?

I chose the swim ring. "I'll be Baby Moses circling down the Nile in a reed basket," I told Skeeter. You'll be the pharaoh's daughter who rescues me."

"Uh-oh. See this, girls?" Mama stepped in. Standing over the bin, chin dropped, she peered over her glasses. The teased -out tips of her hair flamed orange under Valu-Mart's florescent lights. She'd stunk up the house just yesterday with her Toni Home Perm-- a stink tough enough to chew through her Clairol Red that she soaked up around her face with a rope of cotton. Mama moved her finger under the fine black print of a delicious blue raft; we leaned in. *Not a lifesaving device. Use with caution.* We put our toys back. I felt the waters of the Nile dry up in Valu-Mart's air conditioning, the whole Red Sea close over the seasonal aisle.

My little sister Skeeter almost drowned in Galveston.

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View Galveston Island from the observation deck! See dolphins, feed seagulls, and don't forget the camera! Indulge in a treat at Captain's Snac-O-Matic! A big belly of a man handed Mama a brochure through our car window. "Keep it moving," he barked wheeling his arm. We drove right onto the ferry.

Mama made us stay in the car but let us roll down the windows once we locked the doors. We were the only family in their car; everyone else was making his way to the fun things the brochure highlighted. We couldn't see much packed mid-sea the fleet of abandoned vehicles. The ferry took off slowly, but it felt more like a parking lot than a boat. A girl squeezed past our car fisting a bag of peanuts. Our eyes locked; she'd been to Captain's Snac-O-Matic.

"Well, would you look at that?" Mama said under her breath. We all strained our heads every which way. We wanted to see something.

"Right there." She nodded toward the horizon, and sat up tall hugging the steering wheel. In the distance was a gray sunken structure, upturned in the water like the huge nose of a sinking whale.

"What's that?" Skeeter sat up on her knees, while from the back seat I leaned in so close to Mama I could smell her Aqua Net.

"Sunk ship." Mama found it in the brochure. "*The Selma* from World War I. Made of concrete; constructed as a military experiment; sank 1922," she detailed the facts. "Shoot," she looked up and across the water, "no wonder it sunk. I coulda told 'em that." And we didn't get to buy peanuts or feed the birds, though we could hear the gulls caw-cawing overhead.

When we got to Galveston, hot and sticky from sitting in the car, we drove by the beach. Mama didn't stop or slow down. She said it was treacherous out there. That was the word she used: treacherous. Said the undertow could churn you head-over-heel on the ocean floor

like a polished stone. The riptide could impale you on sharp coral.

The ocean was rippled and green and a bit hazy in the distance. Oil-shined people sat under bright umbrellas, and kids ran toward the surf. The sand was dotted with beach balls, studded in buckets and shovels, and laid out in striped towels. We drove straight to Econo-Stay.

Mama wheeled our blue Caprice down so many streets, left and right, beyond the salty reaches of air that I no longer believed there was an ocean nearby. It made me feel hungry. I asked Skeeter if she was; she said she was starving. I asked Lolla; her stomach felt so caved in she was dizzy from low blood sugar. I pressed up against the front seat, propped my chin next to Mama's ear, and looked long out the windshield, "Everyone else got them some peanuts on the ferry." The street reached flat and narrow, lined close in shops with low-planed roofs.

Turning into Econ-Stay Motel we rolled past a blue pool of crystal water. Mama drove the length of the lot down the sun-bleached row of rooms. Out the back windshield the rectangle of water lapped thirstily against the pool's blue tiles. I wanted to swim. Mama said that if I didn't eat I'd get a headache. Then she said if I ate and went swimming I'd get cramps. "Them kinda cramps make you double over in the fetal position," she said. "And think about it: if you double over, idn't nowhere your head can go but underwater." We ignored her offer of drive-thru Whataburger. My new pink and orange bathing suit was a little big, and the seat sagged and leaked when I got in and out of the pool.

Tying her floppy sunhat under the chin, Mama stood outside the pool's wrought iron gate.

“Too much direct sun in this kind of heat will bake your brain. You got to keep your innards watered.” Jingling change in her hand, she headed toward the soda water machines. Her rubber thongs flip-flopped on her heels, swishing the hem of her muu-muu. The hem of her paisley shift was lengthened in a remnant strip of floral fabric. Mama got hand-me-downs from her sister Sweetie who she referred to as the “little sister who married big.” Mama said Sweetie’s store-boughts had nothing on her when it came to style; she could stitch rickrack in a way Sweetie could not buy.

Skeeter put a poolside chair in the water, announced it was her throne, and dipped her head back wetting her blonde pixie cut. “Just don’t splash my perm,” Lolla said. Lolla, snooty at thirteen, dog paddled to the deep end, neck all a-strain keeping her precious head of hair above water. Skeeter wrestled in the latticed chair in an effort to float upright and said that once seated in her throne she’d order Lolla beheaded. I stood on the deck while the butt of my suit leaked water and told Lolla her hair was already looking fuzzy. That’s when Skeeter went under, splashing and lashing and kicking. One leg of her capsized chair jutted high above the water, then disappeared, chair churling with Skeet trapped beneath. Lolla and I started screaming-- shrill from our throats, mouths wide open. Lolla even got her hair wet hollering so hard out the pool.

Luckily, some man, a big man in tight stretchy bathing trunks in the shallow end with his kid, strode toward Skeeter and pulled her to the surface by the elbow. “Careful, little lady.” He strode back.

Skeet was crying and coughing beached on the opposite deck with Lolla bent over her. I

ran around the edge of the pool feet slapping on the wet tile even if it meant I might slip and crack my skull. Lolla's face was wrenched up in a panic, and she pounded Skeeter between the shoulder blades: Skeet got some water up her nose.

Mama came running, hat flouncing off her flattened hair, dropping exploding cans that spewed and spun RC Cola in circles on the hot concrete. She wanted to know what happened, the whole story. None of us could tell her: Lolla blubbered, I whimpered, and Skeeter rocked herself, eyes squinched to slits, hands cupping her nose. Mama got the facts straight out quick from the man in the too-small trunks in knee-deep water throwing a beach ball back and forth between his hands. Mama thanked him up and down, said guardian angels came in all sorts of disguises, and ordered us inside. We dripped our way around the sticky cola on the sidewalk, leaving the latticed chair overturned in the water.

Mama shut the rubber-back curtains, and we watched cartoons on the bed with the AC on high. Skeeter said her nose still burned. I turned to Skeet reliving her ordeal, my mouth stopping mid -chomp on Whataburger fries. When Mama gave Skeet an aspirin from the first-aid kit, I finished up chewing, and turned my attention back to *Go, Speed Racer*.

Mama packed us up quick the next morning, and none of us mentioned swimming. We sped past the ocean the same way we came in. Grandma and Grandpa were surprised to see us on their doorstep three days earlier than planned.

"Well, we're lucky we didn't lose one," Mama bit her lip and shook her head. Though no one asked, she looked away and told the story of Skeeter's near drowning. We all looked at Skeeter while Mama talked, and Skeet, sad-eyed, looked back and forth into the faces of

Grandma and Grandpa. Back and forth.

Grandpa, who we called Papa George, farmed cotton and corn. Deep cultivated fields of corn surrounded the main house. Behind the barn were sprawling fields of cotton and the water tank that Papa George stocked with trout. Lolla wanted to pick some cotton the next day, so Grandma gave her a blue-tick pillow casing and said, "Pick to your heart's content."

"Girl, you might think you wanna pick cotton," Mama said, "but it idn't as fun as you imagine. Cuticles blister up and start to bleed after a while." She turned her hand, inspected her fingers and nails, and sucked on her teeth. While Lolla picked cotton on the edge of the field, Skeeter and I raced down furrowed stretches that narrowed to stitches on the far horizon.

Lolla ditched her pillowcase and ran toward us from deep downfield. Skeeter stopped and waited, but I kept going. I ran and ran, bare feet pounding the dark, warm, dirt, and I screamed into the hot wind willing myself to the farthest reach of field where cotton hemmed the edge of sky.

Back in the house, Mama snickered when Lolla showed up with a mere handful of cotton inside the tick casing. "Saw that coming," she sniffed.

"Idn't even soft," Lolla pulled at cotton fibers tight on the boll.

"Y'all know not to go up them barn steps, don'tcha?" Mama said.

We didn't. But no one looked surprised.

"Them steps are so old they're liable to crumble right out from under you."

Papa George had a two-story chip-paint barn. A flight of stairs fashioned from two-by-fours reached to the second level. Cousin Petey once told us there were secret panels in the walls upstairs where Grandpa used to hide his bootleg whiskey. Mama said Papa George once made a lot of money in liquor back when it was criminal.. “Folks called him Doc because he was ‘the man with the medicine.’ Your grandpa paid old man Raushuber who lived at the top of the road to take the rap if his’n still ever got raided.” They had a signal: Raushuber on’ed his porch light if the Sheriff was out sniffing about. Papa George knew to stay gone.”

The secret panels, Lolla said, were sure enough true. She’d seen them herself before I was born.

~

Striated shafts of dusty light escaped the threshold of the upper story rendering the stairs in half-light and shadow. I placed one foot on the first step. Pressed. Followed with a second step. “No telling what’s up there now,” Mama’d said about the upper barn. “Bats and rats and hornets. Dirt daubers. Squirrels with rabies.” She said my great-aunt Tillie once stuck her hand in the knothole of a tree and met up with a rabid squirrel. “Ain’t no one been up them steps for years and years. Even Papa George don’t go up them anymore. And you get hornets mad, girl, they’ll attack you like they did Rubilee that time. Damn near blinded her, stung up her face so bad.”

I looked up the whole flight, strained to see through a gritty beam of light that spilled across my face. And there I saw it : the empty socket. The missing step. The dead space where Mama fell through. It was the one she talked about. It was the black hole of every bad

thing Mama ever said could happen to me.

Mama said she took out that step as a scrawny kid way back when. "I didn't weigh no more than a popcorn fart. Papa George told me not to go up them, but stubborn fool I was, I went and done it anyway. One gave right out from under me and a big ol' rusty nail ripped my leg wide open before I hit the floor headfirst. It's a good thing Mama heard me hollering, or I'd of have bled to death. Lucky I didn't get brain damage taking such a wallop to my noggin. Or tetanus. We didn't get shots like everybody gets nowadays-- polio wasn't big yet. Weren't no Presidents on crutches. Many a night, girl, I laid wide-awake scared I'd wake up of a morning with lockjaw."

Mama said Jess Raidler's daddy got lockjaw once. "Had a loose toenail and his whole foot got gang-greened from everyday field soil. First, muscles clamped up in his neck. Then he went to convulsing, gnashing his teeth. If it goes into your chest, kid, you'll be put on a resp'rator for life." Mama counted quiet on her fingers. "And don't be so sure your vaccinations hadn't run out, Miss Priss. You're coming up alack every time by my figurings."

I took two more steps, firmly rooting both feet. There was no handrail. Mama said the termite-infested thing rotted off years ago, crumbled to sawdust. Half the way up, and no turning back, I felt the presence of Jesus, how He stumbled bleeding through His Stations of the Cross staggering in a crown of thorns. *Lord, be with me now;* I thought it. but my eyes and mouth were closed. I almost added *forgive me later*, but cut quick to *Amen*. Only the cruelest of Savors wouldn't later hear out a girl begging forgiveness with her jaw froze open.

Mama still had a scar on her leg from the fall. She'd show it to you grinning, if you wanted to see it, twisting the back flesh of her calf to surface the scar purple .She followed up with show of her other pockmark. Arching her toes into the floor she hiked her housedress above a shiny -sunken shin wound: "Never walk behind a horse. Lest you want a shattered shinbone."

My stomach was fluttering like a torn kite when I reached the break in the stairs. With a grunt and a wide stride of my knee I hoisted myself past the gaping hole that sucked in my Mama; I rose and stood solid on the topmost step.

My insides plummeted clear to the concrete floor when a flock of pigeons in a beat of frantic wings flapped high into the busy rafters of the barn. They paused in a flurry, then darted out the back cutaway window over the cotton-dotted fields and trout tank. Pulse thomping and ears ringing, I stepped onto the barn's second story and wiped the sweat from my lip.

Weren't no bats, no rats, no hornets. No squirrels with rabies. Just a wide-open floor covered in pigeon turds and little wisps of feathers strewn about. The roof arced biblically high in crisscross rafters and lattice, all splattered and splattered with pigeon droppings.

So this was once where the Weinburg boys fiddled long into the wee hours of Mama's Saturday night barn dances. Brushing the walls with light fingers to sense the hush of secret panels, I swept across the open floor, imagining homebrews iced down in washtubs beneath a yellow glow of red strung lanterns. Like Mama said.

Gliding wide around a corner, I saw tick pallets laid for youngsters, their folks

dancing late in the night. Roy Weinburg twirled his standup bass, and with a hike of my skirt and a shuffle of feet I sidled to the cutaway door to catch a cool breeze on my face. I slapped my knees and twirled my skirt in swinging circles; when the beaten boards buckled 'neath my stomping feet I'd fly free away with every last pigeon and hornet and squirrel.

Leaning out the wide cut of the back wall, I could see beyond the reaches of the farm. Behind the main house Mama moved along the clothesline with her back turned. Dress blowing against her thighs, she shook out sheets with a snap hanging them to dry. Fields of cotton met fields of corn, and past the cows grazing on a square of green lay the main road to town. The sky broke high and wide past the shadow of the barn eaves, and I stretched upward into the swoop of blue to feel the sun on my face. Bracing the frame of the cutaway wall, I leaned out the threshold and bowed my chest beyond the upturned blades of the plow below. The wind snapped Mama's sheets on the line and shimmied the silver surface of the trout tank. I arched my back on the wind that blew hot over the cotton- tufted fields, that rippled waves, cool and hazy, somewhere on a far ocean horizon.

Below, Mama's hands stopped on a crooked- hung sheet; she lifted her chin above the clothesline turning toward the barn. Turning, her skirt pressed and twirled against her thighs, and she moved toward the main house her hem twisted around her calves.

Good Horse Sense

“Bet can’t none of y’all even cut up a chicken,” I tell them.

“I buy mine cut already up, Mama,” Lolla says.

“You don’t just start in hacking and butchering,” I say. “There’s a method. First, take off the wings, cutting through at the joint.”

Skeeter butts it, “I happened upon one at the market both cut up and plucked clean. Don’t think I didn’t snatch up such a find.”

My girls laugh, and Sweeter -- she thinks she’s a real comedian.

Let her laugh her way to the altar. Her man’s going to want a good giblet gravy come the time the wedding champagne runs dry. Skeeter, my youngest, is engaged. To a Mexican. Well, a half-Mexican; his mama is white. She didn’t have a slew of kids, only three. And their family doesn’t talk in Spanish or anything.

They’re Catholic like us. All my girls graduated from Sacred Heart School. Skeeter was the only one went to St. Francis Kindergarten. It wasn’t in the best part of town, but still it was good Catholics, and she only went there one year, then straight into Sacred Heart. It was mainly Mexicans at St. Francis. So I guess it isn’t that big of a surprise she is marrying one, or a half -one. There were a smattering of blacks that went there too.

Skeeter was chummy with them all. I listened to the names of her kindergarten friends: Rosa, Julio, and Yolanda, those names were obvious. And Booker T-- no guesswork there. Others were more tricky, like Lucinda. That one could go either way. Lolla, my eldest, would

have a fit if I asked Skeeter if someone was white, black, or Mexican. Lolla'd say Mama that's racist, and call them Spanish not Mexican, when I was only asking a simple question that I didn't mean nothing by. Just curious. Anyone's naturally curious. So I'd ask Skeeter about this Lucinda, but when Lolla wasn't around: How many pigtails does she have?

My Baby's last name will soon be Ortiz. Cecelia Christine is her baptismal name, nickname Skeeter. My mother-in-law was the one squashed her good birth name to a gnat--Skeet being the littlest one and all the time pesky. Had I the foresight then that I do now I'd stopped that nickname from sticking. But all said and done, after being christened a beautiful name like Cecelia Christine, which was of my own picking both, my girl will be reduced to one Skeeter Ortiz.

I casually admitted as much to my sister, Sweetie, on the phone of a Sunday--the Ortiz part--just wasn't no way to get around it. All in all, Sweetie said she thought Skeeter made a good choice in Louis, my soon son-in-law.

"Looks Italian, if anything," I said.

"Tad bit oil-tycoon," Sweetie said.

"Especially around the eyes."

"He's got some pretty ones."

Louis has a good income. Some sort of boss, like a district manager, for Pancake ranch--a whole chain of them. Up in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Got him a business degree, and he doesn't cook or anything at his job. Wears real clothes there, not an apron. Does a lot of hiring and firing, mostly. Plus, got in on the pancake business ground up. Has some stocks

and bonds and looking to be quite stable if all goes right. Thinking of building a house already. Sweetie said Louis sounds real responsible, like he can think ahead. I threw in that Louis's brother wants to be a veterinarian, same thing as a doctor.

I rung -up my Baby, since none of my girls call me like they used to and mentioned the good things Sweetie said about Louis. Just being nice, yet my girl commences to embarrass me-- out to get my goat with the way she did it. She says wait a minute Mama; I got to say something to my fiance. And hollered out over the receiver at Louis, but so I could hear: "Shug, step on up here from the back of the bus! The wedding is on. Mama says you got the thumbs-up from Aunt Sweetie!"

Made me mad. I could have mentioned right there what else Sweetie said: If they ever have a baby girl, don't be surprised if they pierce her ears right off the bat. But I know when to keep my mouth shut.

I have my suspects if Louis was even there. I'm not dumb, though my girls all think they are smarter than me. I have good horse sense, always have. Just a stable way of thinking. That is something you're born with, and can't learn from a book.

Now, Daddy-- that's Melvin, their daddy, but I call him Daddy too --he is book smart. Just smart all over. Melvin's too smart for his own good. Too smart for school, is why he never finished. Like Daddy says, they asked him questions in school he thought was trick questions because anyone would know the answer to that. So he answered them tricky back and got them wrong and no one saw how smart he was inside his head.

Melvin has some sensitive nerves, which comes from being so much smarter than normal.

More than the drinking thing, most of his problem is his mama: May Alice Evans. Who thinks her hat hangs a little higher than everybody else's. Daddy was an only boychild, brilliant, raised by that persnickety woman. His daddy dumped them both when Melvin was just a pup. May Alice grew into an old- maid schoolteacher, particular and fussy, never remarried. Running back and forth between Texas and Louisiana until Melvin didn't know if he was coming or going.

She's Baptist, and an Eastern Star. Up and gave Skeeter her Order of the Eastern Star ring that Skeet wears on her pointer finger like common trash. The ring's set with a black glassy stone that May Alice built up to be pure onyx. The stone's inlaid with a gold star--not a solid star like you might see on a Christmas card with some Three Kings but an outline of one with O.E.S stamped in its belly staring out at you like a secret code. I told Skeet she isn't no more Eastern Star than a pitchfork in hell.

I heard some weird stuff the Eastern Stars do at their meetings. Not from May Alice, of course. She's as tight-lipped as they come. Moves a toothpick around in her clenched lips with nothing to say, all the time crocheting. Heard you get blindfolded during initiation into the Order. With someone standing over you wearing a drapey robe. Maybe waving a wand around, or some such fool hocus-pocus. I say give me anything with eyes wide open. Common sense. That cloak and dagger business isn't nothing but asking for trouble.

So I ask Skeet, are you Baptist now? And pull her hand straight out to look at her Hitler ring.

"It's a fashion statement, Mama, not a religious one," she says. "Besides, me and Louis

are thinking of becoming agnostic.”

She’s a bit uppity and all engaged to Louis who’s looking to build them a house in

What Skeet calls the DFW Metro-Plex, and shopping The Galleria like she’s too good for outlet malls, jeweled-up earlobe to anklebone, wrist wrangled in bangles that rattle round when she yanks her hand free from my looking at her voo-doo stone.

I lay it out straight: “Wearing that ring is liken to wearing a Shriner cap. Same difference, Skeeter. Same as if you plunked a tasseled hat on your head and paraded up and down a storefront with a bell and a bucket. Shoot, call yourself an Odd Fellow while you’re at it. You’d be a shoo-in.”

But I got to blame May Alice in the first place.

Skeet has a chip on her shoulder being the baby, and May Alice feeds into it. Like the rigama-roar my mother-in-law started with her crocheted picture frames. May Alice can work a reel of yarn; I’ll give her that. She can cast a line of stitches faster’n hook-flash. This is what comes of a woman that’s hemmed herself in by her own undoing: raised one single solitary child, turned an old- maid, never thought to catch herself another man. The stitching-bit suits her, never itching with nothing to say anyway, just chewing on a toothpick. And her commencing to cover picture frame after picture frame in crotchet all around-- an idea all her own she is quick to tell. If I’d seen where this was going, I’d goaded her back to previous handiwork: begged for more of her 10-Minute 12-Ounce Crocheted Can Cozies (which she got from *Stitch-In-Time* magazine) saying you can’t have enough of those in this kind of heat, May Alice; or announced I was low on Shoo-Fly Covers seeing how Melvin

hadn't fixed the hole in the screen-- is how I'd put it. Those she trims in hang-down beads to keep flies from crawling up on your pie or whatever, and keeps her good and busy. But lo and behold, she crochets her way straight to the family photos that were happy enough in a hatbox bottom of my chifforobe. Woman with nothing better to do, I swear.

May Alice takes over my kitchen table, separating out baby pictures in piles, one for each of my girls, not even the common courtesy to move out to the card table I set up nice for her on the back porch. More elbowroom out there, I say. She takes her toothpick full out her mouth, "Where's all the pictures of Skeeter?" Puts her pick back in.

Skeeter takes over the mouthing from there about how she was alack in baby pictures. "Isn't hardly any of me. Look, Mama, only one, two, count them yourself. And this one's blurry." May Alice fans out the puny two on the table as if my eyes didn't work good enough to see there weren't that many. That one was a bit fuzzy.

Well, I did my best, by the last kid I was tired, and I was busy, and my snap-happy picture-clicking days were given to keeping my lot watered and fed, hatbox already full-up with photos. Now May Alice opened it up a can of worms.

Skeeter studies a five- by- seven close up to her face: Jessanne, my second, in a seersucker sun suit sitting on a pony. Skeet turns green in the gills, opens her mouth to start in hollering but I take her bait: "Kid, you weren't even yet born when Hop Winthrop trotted his pony Pepper house to house taking picture of kids on it-- that he charged for. Wasn't like he gave anything away; always out to make a nickel, Hop was. Put ribbons and bows and jingle-bells in Pepper's tail and watched the money roll in."

Skeet composes the photos on the table. "We should plan how we want them before slapping them on the wall any which way." And for a girl who can't even cut up a chicken, much less baste one, she butters May Alice up but good. "When I have my own babies I want to be able to crochet their booties and blankets. Like you, Grandma. And of course I will take lots of pictures of them." And on she went about how she might buy her little girl a pony and maybe a piano and a trampoline too because she always wanted that stuff but never got them. Skeeter studies her layout. "I could might be a famous acrobat or piano player right now if I'd more encouragement." She tilts her head one way then the other, and shuffles pictures all around. "To this day I can't watch *National Velvet* without feeling gypped out of a pony."

May Alice crochets head down, hooking and pulling.

Can't no one sit and listen to that. "Where in hell- fire was I going to put a piano? Like I was suppose to knock out some walls and roll in a Baby Grand like you were Liberace. And the trampoline business is plumb ridiculous. Don't nobody own such a monstrosity, unless they're putting on airs. Now, if this *was* Russia and you *were* a trapeze artist I'd of stuck one up under your hind end to keep you from breaking your neck. Otherwise, you should've joined the circus. People that have a hankering for bouncing around and swinging from the rafters join the Big Top. I wouldn't of stopped you."

In walks Melvin. He stands in the doorway in his sleeveless undershirt scratching his belly looking straight ahead at nobody. It's the way he always does; you know he's showed up when he stands their scratching. Melvin, if I say so myself, is a handsome man, a big

man. Looks like Clark Gable, only with blue eyes far away when he's thinking. He oils and combs back his dark curly hair without mashing the natural waves out. Daddy has a funny habit of twiddling -nervous a loose curl atop his head. Moves the lock around in his fingertips mostly when he's thinking hard looking no where particular. He leans against the doorframe, not blinking, quits the belly scratch for the hair fidget. Satisfied, he shifts his attention to the kitchen table, blinks, and picks up the picture of Lolla with the windy hair. "Heart O' Texas Fair and Rodeo, October 1952," he says. Sometimes you don't want to be married to a man with a photographic memory.

"I say it's The Brass Rail."

"No. Wrong. Heart O' Texas Fair. Year Tex Ritter was rodeo guest star. 1952. Same year Queen Elizabeth was coroneted."

Melvin is a walking history book, but he is not helping matters none. I get him a beer so maybe he'll do more drinking than talking. May Alice shoves him a can cozy across the table, but Daddy's staring straight ahead: "We watched the coronation on that 12-inch GE One, first model General Electric put out. Lolla, just a tot, cried she wanted to be Queen of England. So Mama knitted her up a queen cape.

"Did I get a queen cape?"

"You weren't born Skeeter," I said. "Daddy, tell Skeet she wasn't born."

May Alice offers to crotchet Skeeter a wedding veil. I get Skeeter alone. "For a girl who is too good to shop at outlet malls, why would you want some common homemade veil. Have

you seen her Shoo- Fly Covers? All I'm saying is put two and two together."

May Alice takes over my kitchen table with a two-tiered tackle box, a contraption she calls her Craft Carry. Got her name painted on its lid: *M.Alice*. She writ it thick in threat with red nail polish as if every a bumfuddled fisherman might try and make off with it. She lays out flossy thread, tiny head hooks, and itsy beads poured up in three of my pie pans while I am trying to prepare supper. May Alice asks Skeeter if she wants her veil attached to a tiara.

I shell peas for supper, no help from no one.

Skeeter strings beads. "Grandma, I want something light and flowing. Lacey, like the veils them dancers wear, the ones that stomp around in frilly skirts and finger cymbals."

"But white of course," I say.

Skeet looks up at me.

"The veil, I mean." I snap pods, run the peas out ringing in the bottom of an aluminum bowl.

"*Mon- TEE- yuh*: spelled m-a-n-t-i-l-l-a," Melvin, still stopped up in the doorway, has taken on the accent of a Mexican bandit. "But in Spanish they can't say their *ls*."

May Alice gets him a fresh beer. Don't think I made any motion to get him a can cozy. Iset water to boil.

"*Flaw- MEEN -ko* is the dance: South American folk." He fiddles his coiled curl. Pops his Pearl, and drinks. "Beer idn't cold. Someone check the icebox temp." He walks out.

May Alice praises Skeeter's beadwork. "You're smart as your daddy."

"Don't make it look too much like a Spanish dancer veil," I smile. "Remember this is a

wedding not a fiesta. ” I smile more.

May Alice goes head-deep in the icebox messing with my controls. I busy myself at the stove. Skeet piddles beads. May Alice leaves the kitchen. My water boils.

“You might want to drape my lace tablecloth over your head and get a look at what you might be wearing come your wedding day. ” I get busier at the stove. “ I been around the block a few times so have a sharp sense for things upcoming. Saved you and every one of your sisters from mistake and tragedy many times over by being one -up. It’s a natural sense I have -- knowing more than I ever wanted, believe you me. And if you had the common sense that God gave a goose, you’d have a back up plan for a real veil, just in case. Actually, them big- brim sunhats are all the rage with brides these days. Tuck a cheery daisy or something in the band. That would be modern.”

“Louis’s mama says I should have a Red Velvet Cake. Says it’s a Southern wedding tradition, and that’s what they do in their family. Louis’s aunt can make it.”

There in the pot steam roiling up to the ceiling, I saw where that might lead: Skeeter’s cake iced in red carnations on a wrought iron table. Or a mariachi band sequined -up playing little guitars annoying everyone at their tables.

Melvin’s leaned up in the door again. May Alice waltzes back in with a thin white box uncovering a handkerchief laid up in white tissue paper.

“Never been out of its box. It’s a hankie your daddy gave me when he was just a boy. So its both old and new. But not borrowed as I give it to you. To carry down the aisle on your wedding day.”

Skeeter squeals and throws her arms around her grandma's neck. She pecks her daddy on the cheek. May Alice asks Melvin if he remembers giving her that hankie. I ask Daddy if he needs a beer.

"1941. Fifth grade. Field trip to the Alamo. Bought it at a little boutique on the San Antonio River Walk."

"Daddy, you didn't get me nothing from the Alamo, ha-ha?!"

"Mama, y'all weren't married yet." If it isn't Skeeter's joke, she doesn't think its funny.

"Battle of the Alamo! 1836. Six thousand Mexicans to four hundred Texians."

"We could stitch some beads on your hankie to complement the veil." May Alice does not know when to quit.

"Tell us more about fighting the Mexicans," I say, and pull a chair out for Daddy at the table.

"General Santa Anna and his men in full-battle regalia!" Daddy sits, and worries a pan of beads with his fingertips. "Our rag- tag team of men, Davy Crockett --in nothing more than buckskin and a coon cap, William Travis, and Jim Bowie see the Mexicans lined shoulder to shoulder marching in full- frontal. Bowie draws a line in the dirt." Daddy drinks, and stares long out the kitchen window. "With a Bowie knife. Few folks know he was the one invented it."

"Well, what do ya know," I say, "and May Alice maybe you could get that chicken out the box because we need to get on supper."

Mama?" Melvin leans back in his chair; wide-eyed he fiddles a curl. " Make our San

Antone sauce for barbeque chicken.”

“What sauce?” I sweep up peapods from under the table. “Lift your feet, Daddy.”

“No, my mama,” Daddy turns looking for May Alice who’s found it in herself to get off her tuff because she might be getting hungry.

Well, doesn’t my mother-in-law get a little spark in her step unwrapping the chicken and pulling stuff all out my kitchen cabinets. “Why, Son, you haven’t asked for my San Antone chicken in years.” Pulling on an apron and rifling through my kitchen cabinets May Alice hopes she remembers her “special recipe.” She washes her hands. “Skeeter, this was your daddy’s favorite dish I used to make him special in Louisiana when he missed Texas.” She orders me up for dry mustard, cayenne, and honey, like I ran a gourmet food shop.

“I don’t have them Cajun kind of things around here. Wet mustard,” I say, and plop it on the counter. “And here, ‘crushed red pepper flakes, ’” I read from a jar never opened, “been sitting here since the Alamo got shot up probably. And brown sugar. Best I can do. If that doesn’t work I have a bottle of Old Hickory in the box . Store bought. Good barbeque sauce if you ask me even if not so fancy.”

And May Alice quarters that chicken. Four pieces. I watch her. “You don’t cut your chicken all up?”

“ ‘Old Hickory!’ 1814. As Colonel Andrew Jackson was known in the Battle of New Orleans.” Melvin drinks, scratches, twiddles.

“Sing that song, Daddy,” Skeet says. “Like you used to: *In 1814 we took a little trip, along with Colonel Jackson down the mighty Mississip.*’

May Alice pipes in, *"We took a little bacon and we took a little beans, and we caught the bloody British in the town of New Orleans!* Song-faced and smiling about fatback and foreigners, she pays no ind to my question.

"Daddy, cut to my favorite: *We fired our cannon 'til the barrel melted down, we grabbed an alligator and we fought another round.* Sing it!

So Melvin leads the entire battle song chair pushed back, standing at attention, staring far out the window to remember all the words. Skeet and May Alice mumble along, speeding to the lyrics they remembered, yelling them at each other like it was some happy contest for everyone's enjoyment: *"We fired our guns and the British kept a comin', there wasn't nigh a many as there was a while a'go!"*

I knew the song.

I also knew that chicken merely quartered -up would be messy eating with you- know- who's Coon Ass Sauce dripping all from it. So concerned with singing, she slapped that bird in a small baking dish piling it too high for a tight foil seal.

"They stepped so high and they made their bugles ring, we stood behind out cotton bales and didn't say a thing!"

While May Alice whisked up mustard, peppers, and sugar, shuffling up like a chorus girl to sway beside Skeeter, I had the good sense to rightly prep the bird for the oven. First cleaving off the tips, I twist the chicken wings locking them around the backside of the quarters. Evenly spacing the my palms. Cracking the bones to make them lie flat.

Grapes Don't Grow There

I consider myself a strong and clear-headed woman. But I'm like anyone else: an ordinary person who has bouts of self-assuredness balanced by insecurities and guilt. This coupling keeps me introspective and honest. This self-check had been ingrained in me, I suspect, through my religious upbringing. I grew up in the Baptist stronghold of the southern Bible belt; namely in the Heart O' Texas, as Central Texans proudly proclaim it. And every good belt having a buckle, I, more specifically, come from Waco, which is the god-placed buckle of that good belt. However, I was raised Catholic.

Catholic school, Catholic uniforms, nuns that measured the length of my hem and my bangs in my pubescent years of the breaking-out-all-over 70s. And that whole bleeding knee Stations of the Cross thing weighing on me. Plus, I was christened Elizabeth Lourdes an over-baked, Catholicity name even worse than Mary Margaret. I had some nickname potential -- I could've gone for Liz or Beth, but no such luck. Lolla was the best Mama and Daddy could muster up and without much consideration. Yet, Lolla too, sounds so hymnal and Holy-Night-like. Any way you cut it, my name has Midnight Mass and stained glass written all over it.

I once had an opportunity for a whole new name, a Holy Confirmation name that I, thank God, got to choose myself. Though that too was waylaid when Sister goddamn Alphonsene trashed it before I could even reinvent myself, announcing to everyone during procession practice that there just *isn't* a Saint Farrah.

That's been the least of my disappointments. I've reinvented myself plenty of times, at this late date, in my forties, disillusioned by love in a multitude of novel ways, never marrying but raising a son in overrated, salivating-over-the-weather Santa Cruz. Coastal California has storybook weather of which I purposefully withhold my praise. The weather is so consistently perfect that it is almost trite; as if its god of weather was from a perfect mythological family whose birthright included good looks and prosperity, who skated through life as an unwavering overachiever. This was weather that didn't have to try very hard. This was climate that never had to work its way through college. California's golden weather hasn't *earned* my respect.

I spend a lot of time missing the South and regretting I ever left. Now, Texas has weather that works itself to extremes: sizzling-skillet heat, floods, tornadoes and icy whips of winter winds that lash across the naked plains. I could return there now that I've matured and secured my self-identity, sought so feverishly in my youth, and have worked through my I-hate-all-hicks issues. Just want to move back home and pickle some okra in the kitchen with Mama, by a lazy low river with thick slow mosquitoes, where my son's school would be homey and small, his peers refreshingly unsophisticated. And the men, like the music, are composed of three basic chords. I didn't always feel this way.

I could safely return because I escaped what once felt like the clutches of the South. I remember a time when I so feared being trapped there that I exiled to, nothing short of, the other side of the planet. I needed a whole new hemisphere. I traveled straight out of Waco to Sri Lanka with the Peace Corps as my ticket out of the South. I continued on to Japan,

Thailand, Nepal; all around the blasted world.

I remember my apprehension in an obligatory return visit to the States in the five years I was gone when Daddy's health started to fail. I lugged a heavy, oversized Tibetan rug to the airline counter with the help of an undersized Nepali. Paid kilo after kilo of cargo with a bulging wad of rupees, because if by some fluke I ever got stuck in Waco, Texas or anywhere in the South, that exotic rug, which any good Southerner would purchase for his ranch-style home, was my ticket to freedom. I was hesitant in letting it move away from me on the conveyer belt-- the rolled butt-end of that richly threaded carpet entered the slit rubber curtain like mud flaps slapping its rear in a good ol' boy sort of way.

I had a round trip airline ticket in my hand, paid for and stamped. But on the flight I kept skeptically reassuring myself of its validity. I looked it over in Bangkok, checked for typos in Taipei, carried it to the airplane bathroom just out of Osaka. Finally, somewhere over the Pacific, I walked toward the cockpit, was stopped by a stewardess in First Class who said she was sure my rug made it on, she had no reason to think it hadn't, and if I'd return to my seat she'd bring me a ginger ale.

That Tibetan rug is still in Waco in my mama's dark paneled dining room. Unrolled on her gold flecked linoleum under a cottage cheese blown ceiling. Laid over with clear plastic runners.

I didn't mention this rug to my best California girlfriend, Josie, who questioned my choices in home decor the day she came over to help me paint my kitchen. Josie is a wonderfully impassioned and outspoken person. She's moved quick to action, is quick to

laugh and quick to criticize. I tell her she has a Southerner's soul. She tells me I think too much and over-analyze. Says I put more consideration in selecting a flavor of jelly than she did in raising all three of her kids. Josie's a take charge kind of woman. She could make a wet noodle stand up and dance.

Josie's divorced with three kids, runs a day care out of her large mountain home, and has enough animals for a small petting zoo. She has boundless energy and is the type to offer help a friend paint on a weekend. The type of friend I need.

She marched right in on Saturday without missing a beat. "Take all that shit off your walls and I'll start taping." She then pecked me on the cheek in hello.

Josie was specifically referring to what she called my Tacky Texas Corner. Above my kitchen sink hung a wooden cutting board in the shape of Texas my son had made me one Christmas with the help of a brother-in-law. A clay armadillo perched atop its panhandle. Tucked at the edges of the cutting board was a comfortable clutter of various Texas memorabilia, mainly snapshots and postcards that I had found endearing, however kitsch: The Waco Alico Building, my hometown's tallest structure, which for that one superlative quality was postcard material. Reggie, my young son, called it the Alamo. Pressed bluebonnets. A photo of a sister posing with Willie Nelson. I took these down and put them in a box, Willie first.

"You've been all around the world and you devote your walls to Waco?" Josie was already dragging out furniture. "See, if it were me, I'd have silk-stitched mandalas or Indian batiks or Turkish tapestries. And yet this," she walked to the kitchen sink and stood pointing

at the wall, “is all you could come up with? Where, at least, is that incredible sunset photo of the Taj Mahal?”

Unlike my (or in all fairness, Mama’s) Tibetan rug, safely secured in place by plastic runners, I’d put away and forgotten a lot of things I’d procured in my travels. I did have an extraordinary picture given to me by a Scottish photographer with whom I had a romantic interlude while traveling in India. Our romance culminated in Agra where we walked the Taj Mahal late into dusk as he shot the descending sun silhouetting the marble minarets of the towers. The photographer, himself, was a truer piece of art. He had a smile as bright as his locks golden; unruly ringlets cascading from under his tam like coils of spun light. We’d parted at the lotus-padded pools, the orange sun sinking into the dark slit of the horizon. I was on my way to Srinigar where I met the French sailor, and then onto Rajasthan where I successfully shook off a trailing Moslem gem dealer who, making my acquaintance on a train platform, had a sudden change of travel plans. And he chatted and cracked peanuts in a seat next to me the whole way. For a while I attracted men in exotic headwear.

My little travel stories had ceased entertaining me in their telling. Through the sifting of those stories, the insatiable emptiness I’d felt in those years thrown to the wind was uncovered, took rise and surfaced on my emotions like the chaff of winnowed grain.

I’ve since concluded that the nature of love is, in essence, a yearning for something that remains absent, and perhaps that is why so often even attained love remains disappointing. Maybe that was why I was always on the leave in search of the new and unfamiliar.

“I must have packed that picture away in a closet somewhere. Maybe after painting I’ll hang it back up, if I can find it.” Love it anew, I thought, after its long absence.

I continued stripping Texas of its wildflowers and Lone Star magnets as if court-martialing it of its duty. Josie was back to taping baseboards.

“We need music,” she said leaving for the living room. I heard her riffling through my CDs.

Shoved behind the Waco Alico and a pressed black-eyed Susie was a yellowed wine label that fell into the sink: *Texas Bordeaux*. “Hey, get a load of this, Jos. You want exotic? I gotta label from a fine Texas wine.” I handed her the proof, placing it atop a John Coltrane CD she returned with.

“Texas Bordeaux? You know that’s theoretically impossible, don’t you? Besides, grapes don’t grow there, do they?”

“Well, they squeezed out enough for this one bottle.”

“It’s probably a joke. Really Nehi Grape or something.”

“Nope, drank it myself. A Texas friend brought it to me in Europe when I was out. Didn’t drink it until Amsterdam. Shared it with a Belgian girl. I remember.” I retrieved my label from Josie. I’d shared a room with the Belgian girl in a guesthouse in Amsterdam, and drank that wine while she read my Tarot cards.

Josie walked off again calling from the living room. “Don’t you have any normal music? Like Bonnie Raitt or something? I can’t do that frenetic saxophone player guy you listen to. He makes me nervous.”

“Get Reggie’s boom box and plug it in here. That’s what real painters do. Turn on K-PIG.”

While Josie was in full execution of her new task, I tried to remember what that Belgian girl’s name had been. My initial recollection was of her feet as she walked barefoot across our shared room to her dirty gray backpack. She had just removed the dark red polish from her yellowed toenails. Her feet looked empty; her toenails blind.

The Belgian had pulled out a dark looking deck. The Lunar Deck she called it, unbeknownst to many, the only valid deck that exists, she informed me. Ancient. Hers looked brand new and was swathed and swaddled in a loosening stream of purple silk that she unwrapped ceremoniously hand over hand. She lit a candle and then incense. Japanese incense, the best manufactured she announced, the real stuff, she called it. Authenticity abound, I uncorked my Texas Bordeaux.

She shuffled little piles of cards, turning over wands and pentacles and cards with gold chalices, asking me a series of questions. Belgian girl then turned over a card and stopped. That’s your card right there, she said tapping it with a red-chipped nail. And snickered.

I could still see that card: A young, blindfolded boy shouldering a hobo-like knapsack on a stick. He had one leg lifted high in step that would carry him smiling over the edge of a cliff. The Fool, the First Card of the Deck, the Zero Card, she said.

Is that bad? I asked and swished a swallow of wine around in my mouth. What about the one with the haughty empress on it, I leaned toward the table to get a closer look, in the ermine trimmed cloak and all the gold chalices at her feet. Maybe that’s me.

Oh no. This is you. It's all in the position of the cards.

Maybe the bitch with the sword? was my last ditch effort before she confidently plowed headlong into my reading, her French accent thickening, The Fool center stage.

"You get weirder all the time, Lolla," Josie said from the living. "I'm looking at your schizophrenic altar."

I put my wine label down and joined her at the recessed alcove outside my son's bedroom where I'd created a makeshift altar. I got a little uncomfortable when anyone approached it, especially if they started touching things. It was my own and I didn't want or feel the need to explain or proselytize my beliefs. Nor could I if asked because I wasn't quite sure what those were on any given day. Josie took inventory: "The crucifix, okay, I can deal with that. The black Virgin Mary? Okay, maybe."

I didn't say anything. The crucifix was from my daddy's casket. The Black Madonna had been my great grandmother's carried over from Poland. Josie sniffed a votive candle then put it down, but not in its holder. "Patchouli. Worse than sandalwood."

She continued, "Irate black chick with a bunch of arms, lost me on that one. Soapstone Buddha," she lifted each, "can do. Here's the getter though: this glossy photo of the human crystal skull. That looks downright ominous. Maybe it goes with the crystal ball." She rolled my clear quartz globe, the size of an enlarged golf ball, around in her open palm. I was ready for her to pitch it into the air and catch it in an overhand. She placed it back down on its stemmed prop: a miniature, carved ivory chalice. "But ah, you are lacking that blue elephant god-thing, like that Indian dude has hanging behind the register down at Tote-N-Go. That,

my friend, would tie it all together.”

There were stories behind each of those pieces; stories I didn’t tell. Not from a sense of secrecy, but sacredness. Or maybe embarrassment. If I were on a spiritual quest for certainty, I had failed miserably. I had defiantly rejected my Catholic upbringing and with it an attempt to free myself of a haunting childhood image: an oversized and bearded God, in the sky no less, sitting in big chair peering down on me in damnation. Looking like the Lincoln Memorial. Only, in sandals. Maybe I’d conjured up this image because Sister had marched us off to Confession, straight out of American history, last Friday of every month.

Yet, rejecting my inherited religion, I yearned for a spiritual replacement. I envied others their piety: my grandma who died with a rosary in her hands, her pale fingers grazing a black onyx bead; the temple-bound monks buttered in saffron robes trailing the emerald-wet wilds shrouded in morning fog. My yearning for certainty aside, I welcomed the wonder and promise of the theistic multitudes. It endorsed my search. If nothing else it was a temporary yet cluttered filler for some god-shaped hole in me. Rather than having nothing, I chose to overfill and maybe some day, like cleaning out an over stored closet, I’ll find exactly what I had been missing.

“I’ll see if he can set me up next time I’m down there,” I mumbled. And I didn’t want to have this conversation. Not even with Josie to whom I confided so much.

“I won’t even look inside this chamois pouch. Probably an umbilical cord or a dried monkey’s heart in it.”

Hanging on the wall above the alcove was a longhorn skull I’d bought at the Mexican

border. It's horns draped in Tibetan prayer beads. Her eyes met the bull's hollowed sockets and rested there.

"Let's paint," I said.

We carried buckets of white paint into the kitchen. Josie was satisfied with the warblings of the Dixie Chicks on the radio and started taping the windows with singsong flair. The wine label still lay where I left it, half -wet from the water-splashed counter top.

Josie's cell phone rang. It was her ex-husband who had her three kids for the day, plus mine. She conveniently arranged for us both to be freed up to paint. I'm not sure if Roger had a choice in the matter. As was usual, he needed her counsel on something concerning the kids. And it sounded like a pet was involved. I shot her a look wondering if Reggie was okay. She assured me by huffing into the phone and rolling her eyes. Between "Figure it out, Roger," and "I'm not there, it's not my problem" Josie taped away. I placed the wet label on the windowsill to dry and was pulled back into my musing of the Amsterdam Tarot reading. I mindlessly wiped down the counters hearing the Belgian girl's words in my head: The Fool is you. You are the Fool on an eternal search. The Fool has left home, yet is looking for home. He doesn't realize that his true home lies within. Note the red knapsack carried on his shoulder; an extension of himself. That is a symbol of self, home and purpose that he already owns. Notice he keeps it out of his line of vision and can't acknowledge it because he is focused without rather than within.

What a bunch of predictable and cliché bullshit, I concluded as I set my sink to soak in a dousing of Mr. Clean and Clorox. An inhalation of the strong bleach burned my nose and

throat. With it came a sudden, sinking stab to my heart as I remembered her name: Lieva. The Belgian girl, Lieva, had broken down later that night and cried in the alley behind an Amsterdam bar where we were getting stoned. In the half-escaped light of the bar's neon blue, she sobbed deep and low like a wounded animal. With a belly full of wine and a head full of hash, she told me she felt lost and alone, that she had disowned her family from which she survived long-term abuse and had lived through a personal hell. Her family didn't know where she was. She said her pride would never allow her to go back, yet, now, she didn't know where she belonged. She feared she belonged nowhere. And I didn't know what to say or do. I was stoned and stunned and a little embarrassed for her abashed and sudden outpouring. In my paranoia-induced high all I could think to do was hand her a red bandana out of my own dirty backpack to wipe her tears. And that reminded me of the hobo Fool in her deck. I leaned against a dumpster feeling sorry for her and at a loss on how to console her. I concluded that she had projected her own fears of abandonment and loss as judgment onto me in the Tarot reading of the wandering Fool. That she was the one running naive and scared.

I stared into my kitchen sink and I felt ashamed at my insensitivity and having passed judgment on her. We had both been purposeless wanderers trying to disown our points of origin. And in that foreign, neon-lit, party town alley, I was an escaped stoned-drunk fool on a forward lam. I was on an empty joy ride. She was a blind wanderer come full circle, reduced before my eyes to ground zero. We had blindly judged the other; still I was the guiltier party. The bottom of my bleach-soaked sink was as white as a polished tooth. I bit

into the enamel with steel wool and scrubbed.

“Lolla, tell me what your purpose is right now,” Josie hollered over a caller on the radio’s request line. I looked up with a Brillo pad in my hands and realized Josie had been long off the phone. “Look around you and tell me where we are at and what we are doing.” She had moved behind me hugging my shoulders. “This is what I do with my daycare kids to get them back on track,” she said with a squeeze. “Forget the sink for godsake. Help me move this fucking refrigerator.”

We walked the refrigerator away from the wall, and Josie clapped her hands clean announcing “painting time!” She turned up the boom box and opened a bucket of paint and made a damn good attempt at out singing Wynona Judd.

On a corner cupboard shelf one framed photo remained: Reggie as a naked toddler, smiling knee-deep and on the go across the waters of the Blanco River in a panoramic view of the Texas Hill Country. One foot stepped high above the water, his plump little sausage arm lifted over his head for balance, his fist clenched in a yea-haw semaphore. Fool hobos and blue bar lights evaporated as I placed him carefully in the box.

I filled Josie’s tray with thick white paint before retrieving my roller and paint rags from the other room. I straightened up after Josie, replacing CDs and closing stereo cabinets. The faint backlight of my altar was still on and my hand paused on the switch, wondering what Josie saw when she looked at it. I took in all the little gods and images while attempting to disconnect myself from their stories, their places, their people; tried to extricate them of my personal history. But I couldn’t do it. I turned off the light. It looked the

same.

When I returned Josie was crouched over the tray, phone clinched between ear and shoulder, talking to her youngest daughter. She was evening out the paint on her roller, moving it back and forth, over and over on the edge of the tray, her voice low and soothing. A hollow outline of Texas, distinctly yellowed at its borders, stared blindly out at me from the blank wall. Josie stood and, with one thick swath of paint, it was gone.

The Razor

Slip past his grip. Escape his rage. Lock the bathroom door. Crank on the creaky faucet. Fill the tub full blast. Bolster your nerve with his Kentucky mash stashed between the folded towels in the linen closet. Drown him out. Part the shroud of steam, deliver yourself to safe water.

Take a fresh and steely blue blade. Place it in the head of the Pa's razor. Watch the wings of the blade cover, one and the other, enfold the double-edged blade. Feel the full weight of the heavy razor in your hand that shaves his dark and bristled beard. Hate him, defy him. Forget him. Think of the night that opens before you.

Lift a leg from the purling water, arch your foot, and watch the water pearl on your pink-painted toes. Sweeten yourself, pretty yourself for the pretty one that awaits you in the stolen dark of a borrowed car. Think of him with the soft- fuzz of face that loves you first tender and new beneath a first -sliver moon of a Saturday night. Settle Pa's razor at your ankle to run clean and smooth the length of your lean leg. Watch the blade bite into the tender ridge of your hard-flexed tendon. Shave deep the skin that rounds and gives curve to the turn of your ankle. Bleed. See the blood color the bath water. Watch it awash and fluid, streaming like an unfurling red ribbon loosening from your ankle.

Cut the jetting faucet. Round it off slowly, creakless, with one turn then two. Listen. Step from the tub. Towel. Press your ear to the door. Dress. Hush. Abandon the bathroom, the bloodened tub of water. Slip past him passed out on the couch, his iron grip unscissored,

his snores sawing the walls.

Protecting Jess

It wasn't so much myself I was worried about, but Jessanne. And, of course, Mama back home. I knew Jess was my charge that summer in Louisiana. I wasn't clear why she and I landed at Grandma's alone; we both felt out of place. Being the eldest, I guess Mama thought of me as the head lineman of our journey. So if I was to man the switches and the flags, Jessanne, only five -years -old, was riding caboose. I did what I could to make it an adventure, to wave happily while leading her through new territory. Though inside I felt like we were jettisoned cargo, cast -offs.

Mama put Skeeter, my baby sister, with her mother: the grandma at home in Texas that everyone liked. I guess the plan made sense. The arrangement happened abruptly, and Mama avoided explanation. I, in turn, avoided Jess's questions as to why we were going to Louisiana, what would it be like, and how long were we staying. At 10-years-old, I knew when to figure a situation out by listening and watching, knew when to comply and not compound worries.

Jess and I slept in Grandma's living room, the front room of her shotgun house on rollaway bed shoved up against the buffet. All windows were open to the muggy Louisiana night, the air stirred by an oscillating fan. Grandma held strictly to our bedtime though it was summer, something Mama never did. She and my Uncle Sonny stayed up, their voices carrying from the kitchen.

One night of our second week there, I lay on my belly feeling the ruffle of my gown

flutter on the back of my knees in rhythm with the fan that rattled back and forth. Grandma and Sonny's muffled voices competed with the din of the fan. Grandma was concerned about a litter of stray kittens under the house.

"Did you say your prayers, Sister?" Jessane was still awake.

"Go to sleep. You should be asleep; it's late." The cotton mattress sunk in the middle. I shifted to its edge and heard the slurpy release of Jess's sucked thumb.

"What'd you say? In your prayers?"

"It's private. Go to sleep." I hugged the edge the mattress. A splash of light reaching from the kitchen pooled in the door's threshold, slippery on the hardwood floor.

"I prayed for, all y'all," Jess said, "and you, even though you're with me, and Skeeter in Texas at Grandma's. " Jess spoke in a singsong lists, minced her thoughts in phrases in a drone that followed at my heels all day. "And Grandma, both grandma's, and Mama. And that our house is okay."

I lay still feeling the fan move over me and away.

"Sister?" Is Mama at Grandma's? In Texas still?"

"Yeah. Maybe. I don't know. She's at Grandma's, or at home. She's resting. And quit buggin' me, I'm sleeping." The fan paused at the end of its swing; on a wheezy hiccup it strained back. The hem of my gown fluttered.

"So I prayed for Mama at Grandma's, or at our house," Jess added, "and for Nina Ray, and Uncle Sonny. And myself too, of course, but last.

The phone in the kitchen rang. I strained to listen above Jess but it was just a church-

person calling Grandma. Not Mama, the way her neck and shoulder jackknifed on the phone receiver miming a cigarette to her lip fingers, a gesture that said *fetch me my Pall Malls*, and turning away speaking low to Grandma in Louisiana. Daddy drunk again. But a vacancy about Mama landed us here this time. More than a need for money or a listening ear from family without her usual tension that allowed me to brace the situation. I struck a match for her Pall Mall that she leaned into with nothing in her eyes. The fan moving over me snuffing the flame.

“Are you going to be ready when Gabriel’s horn will blast?”

“Shush, Jess, it’s late.” I rolled onto my back.

“The Bible says it. Reverend Petty too: Gabriel’s horn will blast.”

“It’s a Louisiana thing, a Baptist thing. That’s just what they say in this Grandma’s church.”

Holy rollers, Mama called them, Baptist nut cases on your Daddy’s side of the family.

The fan moved back and forth

I heard kittens on the front porch upset their food bowl, and scamper away. Jessanne put out milk and bits of ham hock for them that initially only the mother cat ate. I told her not to.

Jess breathed steadily, a damp curl pasted to her temple. Her thumb, like a played -out trumpet, fallen slack from her mouth.

“That thing still around? Grey -striped?” Arms folded Grandma worked a toothpick in

her mouth and looked over the weed-choked cinderblocks stacked against the porch.

“Thought I seen it creeping around here again. Ignore it. Ain’t nothing but an old barn cat wandered up. Don’t touch it, it’s dirty; might could have rabies.”

Jess and I had seen the mama cat surface from under the porch into the bright day with a kitten in her mouth. Jess squealed sending the Mama low on her haunches back under the porch. We peered into the murky underworld of the house, our eyes adjusting to the thick shadows. Mama cat moved beyond our reaches, her flaccid underbelly swinging low, settling in a far and dark circle.

Jess asleep breathed steady. The kitchen’s back door slammed followed by Nina Ray’s clipped, hard-heeled walk. I burrowed lower into the bed, and closed my eyes.

You smell like alcohol. Grandma, arms crossed, leaned against the kitchen sink.

Well, I should, ‘cause I’ve been drinking. I just came in for some coke-cola and I’ll be on my merry way.

And what does your daddy say about that? Sonny, you gotta handle this.

I’ve washed my hands of her. Sonny sat at the table, brushing crumbs from the oilcloth. She don’t listen to me; I’m done with her.

Hard steps across the floor. *Ain’t you got no soda waters, Grandma? What you got is this pitcher?*

That’s tea. And this idn’t no restaurant no how.

Can’t mix rum with tea.

Goddamn you girl! A chair scraped across the floor.

Mama said that cousin Nina had been abandoned by her mother, by the purest of dark-eye, coon-ass trash, and dumped on a drunken daddy and a Baptist grandma, and she didn't know which was worse.

Our first day in Louisiana, Jess and I walked the weedy path to the back of Grandma's property where Nina and Uncle Sonny lived. I hadn't seen my cousin in four years. Nina's bedroom door was closed donning a poster of a busty woman holding a can of Schlitz. I knocked, "Surprise! It's us!"

"Well, you can open it yourself. It ain't locked."

Nina sat on her bed, chin resting on her knee, painting her toenails. Her floor was strewn magazines, dishes, clothes, albums, papers, and shoes. Her walls, painted a suffocating shade of turquoise, were splashed in black light posters and pictures of long-haired rock stars in silver studs black leather. An *End Freeway* street sign was propped against the wall behind an orange highway cone splattered with tar. Empty Tall Boy cans, long necks, wine and liquor bottles lined the shelves above her bed.

"Hey," I said.

Nina looked up, her face densely freckled as I remembered it. Yet her eyes were lined heavily in black liner, her lips painted in pale, frosty lipstick. Nina had grown into a teenager; she was not my age anymore.

She dropped her chin and resumed painting her toenails. Her hair was a brassy blonde with roots dark. "What a drag for you to have to end up here," she said.

"Well, just for a little while."

“Hey, Nina,” Jess piped in, “I was just a baby when you saw me last. Least that’s what everyone says. Do you remember?”

I’d talked a lot about Nina Ray to Jess between Texas and Louisiana as a highlight to the trip. Jess was too young to remember Nina, but I shared so many stories with Jess about Nina I’d creating a shared history between them.

“Yeah, but all I remember of you was you crying all the time.”

“We’re going to the Crawfish House in Monroe tonight for supper,” I said. Grandma says to ask if you want to come.”

“Sounds boring.” Nina blew on her toes. “Think I’m gonna hang out with my friends.”

“Grandma says they cover the table in newspapers. Don’t even use table clothes,” Jess said. “Is that right? Nina Ray?” Jessanne looked long at Nina who remained engrossed with her toes. I knew Nina was nothing like the mythical cousin Jess expected. Even I had trouble superimposing the two Ninas into one composite figure: the Nina of my stories and this Nina in the flesh.

“You mean you’ve never eaten crawfish before?” Nina looked at Jess.

“Yeah, we have,” I answered, “just, well, the newspaper business, I think that is what she meant.”

“Yeah, yeah, newspapers on the table. Piled with crawfish heads.” Nina screwed the top onto her fingernail polish, and pitched it on the floor. Nina’s eyes darted between me and Jess, “Hey, y’all ever suck head before?” Her eyes were dark switches.

“Huh?” Jess asked.

“Sucked head.”

Jess turned her face up to me, smiling on short and evenly lined teeth, and shrugged. I felt her hand in mine.

“See, there’s people that suck head,” Nina leaned back on a pillow, “and people who don’t. To get to the good stuff, like the juice, you gotta suck head.” She snickered.

Only white trash sucked crawfish head, Mama always said.

“Ah, never mind,” Nina said, Y’all would never get it.”

Jess sat on the floor and painted her toenails, and Nina announced that she was probably going to a party that night. She pointed over her head at the empty liquor containers, “I got other fish to fry, as the saying goes. That top shelf we drunk up in one night. Took us all night, but we did it.” Nina eyed her liquor bottle collection. See that third bottle? On the top? Don’t try it; stuff tastes like piss water.

I said I wouldn’t.

The fan paused and jolted. Grandma’s voice carried from the kitchen. *The girl is nothing short of out-right wild. Something’s gotta be done. And you gotta be the one to do it. You make her go to church tomorrow, if nothing else. We gonna have a wild heathen on our hands.*

Sunday services made me sad. Grandma’s church was what most made me miss home. Miss Mama. Grandma’s church wasn’t anything like the Catholic Mass that I was accustomed to. At home in Texas, Mama and I often left the other girls with Grandpa and

Grandma and go to mass alone. It was one of the few times I felt the advantage in being the eldest daughter; a privilege not imposed with responsibility. I imagined me and Mama pulling on our gloves, whispering secrets like two girlfriends linked arm-in-arm and leaving the little sisters to their child's play: running through the cotton fields, swinging from the rafters of Grandpa's paint -peeled barn like so many chattering monkeys.

St. Martin's, my Mama's childhood church, had graveled parking and a powdered film of dust settling on the tops of my patent leather shoes by the time we reached the church steps. Closing my fist around the door's big brass handle, I could almost taste the cool water of the baptismal fount, and feel wet kiss of my fingertip anointing my forehead. The church was transfused in muted light amber, gold and indigo, in colors stained in sacred things.

Jessanne twitched in her sleep and she curled up on her side, her small toes dotting her upturned soles like pale petals on a daisy. I worried about Jess being able to sit still through Reverend Petty's long-winded sermon in the morning, without rustling around in her seat and kicking the back of the pew, provoking pinches from Grandma. I heard my sister's rhythmic thumb sucking as she nestled the back of her thighs against me. The press of her legs prompted a twinge of guilt in me with what happened to Jess the previous Sunday.

A couple of thumps and cat-leaps resounded on the porch and the empty rocker creaked. Deserting that rocker last Sunday morning, leaving Jess alone, allowed the whole thing to happen.

That morning I'd sat on the edge of the porch rocker pulling jess close to me, water

his net. They'd be scratching wild and crying in sharp little kitty-cries on pink and wide-open mouths. He'd scooped them into a potato sack. One might struggle to escape, but Nina would enjoy retrieving it in chase. Maybe the mama cat would be spared. Surely she would, but I didn't know. Those details didn't concern me because Jess, awakened, would come out on the porch. Hair still tangled in sleep, she'd move her thumb to her mouth, screen door slamming behind her.

What would she say taking in the scene: Grandma carrying away the tabbies crying in a burlap sack. Sonny following with a cinder block. Nina leading the way to the slough. How would I respond when she turned to me taking her thumb from her mouth?

The welts on my little sister's thighs looked more tender that day. I wanted to address the whipping with Jess, but I just didn't know how. Plus, I had to be careful with what I said; I didn't want to set Grandma off if it got back to her

We sat cross- legged beneath the tree, and I poured my attention stripping the willows of its sweet green bark. "Sometimes things hurt us, Jess. Sometimes things we don't understand." The bark resin was gummy and I held out a long strand of peeling. "Things can happen to us that we feel we don't deserve, but those things happen to our outsides. We have to take those things that hurt us on the outside and try to figure them out on our insides later." I shifted and our knees touched. We sat together and peeled bark.

The house was finally quiet except for the droning of the fan. The kitchen light was off. Grandma went to bed and Sonny left. Perhaps to home. Perhaps to the slough to drag drunken Nina home cussing and carrying on, breaking it to her she had to go to church in the morning. Maybe not. I would see them all soon enough tomorrow morning before church.

Grandma would be dressed and moving about the front yard. Maybe Nina would be there too. And Sonny would come around the corner of the house with an armful of burlap sacks. He'd be carrying a shovel, maybe. A tire tool? A fishing net. He'd stop, retrieve a cinder block from below the porch, expose a square of dark and wormy earth to the morning light. Grandma might lure the kittens with Jess's feed bowl. The whole litter would eventually scamper out from underneath the house. Sonny would trap them under

of the Almighty that Jacob made such a hairbrained deal with the rich guy it all being part of the plan but of course the rich guy took all the streaked and spotted out of the flocks before old Jake could get to him.

The church was getting stuffier, and I didn't think I could keep Jess still much longer. I too fidgeted and shifted in my seat, stifling long sighs welling up in my chest. Jacob knew the rich guy was yanking him around but *rich in Faith* he fed the damn solid, *nary a streak on a 'one*, by stripping *bark of poplar and almond trees, exposing the sweet and white inner wood*, placing them *at the watering troughs so they would be directly in front of the solid-coated, mind you, the dull and one-colored flocks when they came to drink. And this herd of one color mated and multiplied and bore only the streaked and spotted and speckled into the hands of Jacob.*

So Jacob got one over on the rich guy, and skadaddled off to Canaan with a bunch of streaked Bible sheep to do some big -prophet *hence directed in Divine Command to further God's covenant with Is-ra-el.*

That night it down-poured loosening out willow swags in the hard summer rain. The next day Jess and I spent most of the next day retreated under the tree re-lashing the vines. We found that the bark strippings of the thicker willows made for more durable ties less likely to loosen. It was peaceful there away from the tension of the house, and the recent explosion when it was learned that Nina Ray was letting some boy from Grandma's church sneak in through her window at night. So there'd was lots of yelling going on, mainly from Grandma to Sonny and how important she still thought church was.

rightful owner, mind you-- and you have a picture of Jacob directed by the hand of God to the Land of Canaan. To found Bethel in faith. In short, his voice rose, to enact the Lord's Holy Plan.

Jess slumped back into the pew.

Now, how? you might ask. How did poor old Jacob, a mere sheep-herding man, an honest man owning no more than the dirt between his toes, with nary a sheep, nary a goat, nary one puny new-born lamb to call his own-- how did it come to pass? Jacob who toiled years and years for another man, toiled on the sweat of his brow for twelve long years tending the flocks of another man, a rich man? And how did it come to pass that he rightfully own herds of the speckled, the spotted, and the streak'ed and upon these creatures of God rode on a ticket of prosperity to the Land of Canaan. And I don't mean prosperity in the Cadillac, greenback, money sense, Saints; I'm talking about a man who was rich in Faith!

I rested my arm over Jess's lap to keep her from thumbing and riffling the gilt-edged pages of her Bible. In the drone of the Reverend's delivery, Jacob struck a deal with the rich guy who wouldn't pay him for his years of hard work: *For my wages let me go through your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every brindled lamb and every spotted or speckled goat. And my honesty will testify for me in the future. Any sheep in my possession that is not speckled or spotted, or any lamb that is not streaked, will be considered stolen.*

Of course it was God speaking through Jacob because somehow it was writ on the palm

It's a simple choice, Saints! According to the Reverend we were saints, every one. He who sees will see the Lord, he who knows will know the Lord, he who chooses the Lord as Savior will see and know and choose, his voice feel, his Savior's divine mission. When do we know our God-given mission? We know it day by day. Is it spelled out for us? It is not. Does it seem mysterious and alien and maybe just a bunch of pidgin gibberish confusing us and blinding us in our darkest hour?

I think it does.

Reverend Petty gripped the lectern, dropped his chin, and closed his eyes in a moment of silence. Then, *Genesis 30*. He said it like it hurt.

We sat, we rustled, we shuffled Bible pages. I was still helping Jess locate Genesis find her page and while smoothing my slippery sash beneath when the Reverend boomed. *Take Jacob!*

We got our last flounces, rustles, and shuffles in.

Imagine if you will, Saints, flocks and flocks of spotted lambs, herds and herds of speckled goats, flocks and herds of streak'ed, strip'ed, mottled creatures! A page turned, someone's cough.

Throw in some camels and donkeys.

The Reverend had snatched Jess's attention. Her right leg stilled mid- swing. She sat taller in the pew, touching her sandaled toe to the floor, and her head high *Take Jacob, a poor man, a hardworking family man. A man like you, and me. Now put him right in the middle, in the very midst amidst these miles and miles of healthy, thriving livestock-- as the*

trampled by the path to Sonny and Nina's.

I took Jess inside, and wiped her face with a cool damp cloth. "Sorry, baby girl," I said.

"Guess we both need to leave them cats alone."

Putting on her church dress, I noticed the red welts rising on the back of her thighs.

"You don't have to do my hair," she said, her back turned. "We don't have time." Her cowlick sprung high and coiled on her forehead.

The church was stuffy and hot and the Reverend Petty was fired up for his sermon. Jess kept fidgeting and shifting in the pew, its hard, sticky surface irritating the back of her thighs I figured. When we arose in response to the Reverend's command, I untied the sash of my dress and spread it on the pew for Jess. Grandma took note of what I was doing, but I didn't look at her.

When a blind man and one who sees are both together in the darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness. Reverend Petty paused and faced down the standing congregation. He took a deep breath and paced behind the podium studying his steps in thought. He halted, looked up and adjusted his heavy horn-rimmed glasses on his face. The air was thick and there was shuffling and rustling in the congregation.

The Reverend chuckled in a private way, and swept his hand through his hair, which was black and wavy and oily, but mostly in need of a good trim. He exhaled long, and propped on the lectern.

emptily. I threw the chenille spread over the bed; Grandma hated when we left a mess. I chose Jess a church dress and laid it out on the bed; we didn't have time for deliberation on her outfit. The morning light was just slanting into room, and I drew the curtains to keep the later heat of the day. Grandma was in the front yard picking up fallen rosebuds beneath the long- swinging vines of the weeping willow tree; it was Jess's makeshift playhouse.

Jess and I spent hours bunching and binding willow vines into festoon swags. We gathered wild tea roses from the overgrown bushes against the fence that were bursting in miniature buds. I studded the swags with roses, tucking them in the rosy vines. Jess running back and forth to the bushes, cheeks flushed, a shoulder tie on her sundress flailing loose. She filled her skirt with pink rosebuds and delivered them in a spill at my feet. spilled them on the tops of my feet.

Jess squealed. I pulled the curtain back. Grandma grasped her at the wrist lashing her legs with a fist of willow switches. Jess jumped around her in circles. When I ran out to the porch, flinging the screen door banging it against the house, both of them froze and looked up. Grandma dropped her switch. Jess's cry crack broken on her mouth. She ran to me and buried her face into my chest. Her body trembled, and she sobbed shuddering breaths. All I knew to do was hold her. .

"Told her over and over to leave them cats be. I am not gonna be over run by a buncha hungry mouths to feed." Grandma busied herself moving about the yard, picking up fallen chinaberries "Wouldn't listen to me. And I'm not gonna have another one that won't listen on my hands." She pitched the chinaberries one by one over the fence into the tall weeds

“I want two ponytails. Two. But just in the front. On either side.” Jessanne fisted clumps of hair on either side of her temples.

“ I know, like we did last week. You gotta mess in back still.” And I spun her around again.

A grey -ringed tabby bounded around the corner of the house and sprung to the balls of her feet. “Was that Tabatha?”

“They all look the same. I don’t see how you can tell,” I said. They were, every one of them, grey-striped tabbies. Jess went into passionate descriptions differentiating the kitten in the litter.

I interrupted, “You need to quit feeding them kitties. They’re wild cats. They aren’t house cats. Never will be. And Grandma don’t want them around here. You’re encouraging them.”

“But what are they gonna eat?” Jess’s eyes blossomed steady and round and steady. in question.

“They learn to fend for themselves. They chase birds and stuff. They manage.” I thought about it for another second, “Or lizards.”

“But I want to feed them. I want them to be my cats. At least that one-- Tabatha. I can tame her.”

“No you can’t. And they won’t ever be your cats. Grandma doesn’t want them. Besides they’re too wild and too far-gone.”

With that I went inside to get some rubber bands for her hair, leaving the rocker swing

bottle in hand, spraying down her wild halo of hair, readying her for church. She had a cowlick on her forehead, a stubborn sprung coil. Jess squenched her eyes closed and contorted in the tickly spray, her face was a dimpled ball. Jess sucked a fisted hand scratched in little beads of fresh blood. "You better leave them dang kittens alone," I told her.

"I just about had that one. She's getting to know me. And not be so scared."

I turned her back toward me and started on the sleep-matted locks at her nape. Her white cotton nightgown that rose high above her knees in the front dipped low to her calves in the back, and I straightened it on her shoulders.

"I call her Tabatha," Jess said. 'Cause she's a tabby. She's the one that's spotted gray and white in the front but striped on her back." She looked to the skittish kittens poking their heads above the porch and darting away. "Right there! Here kitty, kitty! Did you see her?" I sprayed her down and didn't answer.

"She cutest one," she continued. " Her tail's ringed in gray and white and gray and white. The tiniest tip of her tail's all white. Like it was dipped in paint."

I spun Jess toward me. "Be still. I'm in a hurry. Grandma's gonna be ready to leave and your not gonna be ready." A nervous kitten, which I pretended not to notice, sprung onto porch nosing a dead June bug belly- up in the kitty milk

"That one isn't her," Jess said. The back door slammed; Grandma was dressed and ready to leave.

"Be still."

When Shelby Wailed

“Nope,” Mama said every 4th of July. “Remember what happened to Petey? Firecracker exploded in his hand. Lucky it didn’t plumb blow off his fingers. He coulda been blinded.” So every 4th when Petey and the whole pack of boy cousins fused and fired Black Cats out at Lake Waco, Mama rounded up me and the sisters behind Aunt Sweetie’s camper, and made us duck and cover. “Plug up your ears,” she’d direct,” another’s fixin’ to go off.”

One 4th at the lake, Aunt Sweetie whipped out some sparklers, handed one to each of us girls. Had a punk to them before Mama exited the Sanican. It was like fisting a piece of exploding heaven: fizzles of reds, spits of golds, sizzles of blues. I savored every sweet forbidden second that the fire ate the slender stem of my sparkler.

“That’s it, that’s all,” Mama snapped, barreling out of the port-a-pot with her shorts unbuttoned. “Get a spark fly in your eye and you’ll be so blinded up you’ll never see another 4th. And even my sad joy for the sparkler’s long, spent ash was distinguished.

When my little sister Skeeter went and stepped on a hot sparkler coal, Mama made me hightail it for the first-aid kit. When Skeet was made to sit down the rest of the evening with her foot propped up, me and my big sister Lolla had to sit right there with her.

We get it all: Bottle Rockets, Roman Candles, Ground Blooms, Smoke Bombs, Piccolo Petes, Lotus Spins, and M-80s --if we can find them, and we make sure we do. Such is the tradition on our annual summer trip to Texas to visit family.

Last 4th, my sisters and I, with our kids in tow, return from the Texas Renegade Fireworks Center and Warehouse. Two cop cars are parked at her neighbors house, a small crowd people huddle on the dusky driveway. My daughters and nieces are rifling through their loot: two hundred dollars worth of fireworks. Celeste, me eldest, wants to light a sparkler.

“Just don’t burn my seats,” Lolla says, passing me a Bic.

“Hang it out the window,” I say. My niece Iris wants a sparkler lit too. “*Far* out the window,” I add. When Diane and Hailey want to throw a firecracker out the window, I tell them to wait, that we’re almost home.

Lolla rolls to a stop and motions the neighbor lady over. “What’s going on Jewel?” The kids slide open the panel door of the Suburban. We all wanted to hear.

“Cops got called. Someone complaining about the fireworks from down at the corner house; those Raedler boys getting rowdy with fireworks. Now the heat’s down here.” Jewel leans into my window, jostling her sobbing 4 -year -old daughter in her arms. “Cop took little Shelby’s sparkler away,” she hisses under her breath. At this Shelby wails.

I call a cop over. “‘Cuse me. We can’t shoot firecrackers?”

A female cop struts over. “Not in the city limits,” she says. She pokes her head in our open panel door. “See y’all got your own stockpile of explosives.” She clicks on her flashlight and scans our fireworks spilled on the floor at the kids’ feet.

I bolted around in my seat. “ We can’t have any blasted-ass fireworks? They’re sold all over the gosh-forsaken state!”

“So is marijuana, ma’am. Doesn’t make it legal.” She’s calm, collected. She’s a jackass.

“But not on the side of a highway in a commercial warehouse!” I’ve twisted around gripping the back of the seat in a headlock. “A newscaster was waving a sparkler on the 5:00 news for chrissakes!”

“Look, it’s against the law to set off fireworks within the city limits. You’re not even supposed to have them in your possession within city limits. We don’t want to have to come back out here folks, and we’re not going to look the other way.” She looks long up the block. “Even if it means going from house to house.”

We pulled away. And Shelby wails.

Marching into the house, I pull scissors and tape from Lolla’s kitchen drawers. I package up my fireworks to mail home to California; wrap them tight in brown paper, knot them tighter in string. “Don’t put my return address on them,” Lolla says and bites her nail. “In fact, put them deep in the closet. For now.” Lolla escapes to the laundry room

“Let the Fascists arrest me for a few sparklers!” The night of the 4th and the kids are plugged into Nintendo. Lolla’s bent over a pile of dirty laundry. “I’ve done way worse!” No one is listening to me. If only they would ask: picked up for drinking, smoking pot, skinny-dipping, and shoplifting some potted lip-gloss all under the age of sixteen. A stint in juvenile hall. Only busted for a DUI in college, but sold a lot of pot. Carried Mexican Quaaludes over the border. Still slow in paying speeding and parking citations. Still get nervous every time I see a cop on the road, and it still feels good to defy them. I want a cop to stop me while I am driving barefoot them; I will challenge him when he tell me it is against the law. I know that it isn’t because I read

it somewhere. I make a point of kicking off my shoes when driving, even if it risked my shoe lodging up under the brake peddle.

A week later back home in California, I shampoo my carpets, furniture backed up against the walls, the couch barricading the front door. A cop pulls up to my curb. My girls are leaping from the sofa to the coffee table to the recliner. There's a knock at the door. I am in cut-offs, a man's undershirt, and my Texas Rangers baseball cap. I freeze.

I've got illegal cable, hooked it up myself. I threw away a jury summons. I have five ancient White Crosses in a plastic film canister in a kitchen drawer that I've had since college. My car registration is past due.

My fireworks are due to arrive.

I pull my cap visor low on my forehead. I leap onto the couch barricade and pushed press my ear to the front. I listen. Then lean into the round and bulbous eye of the peephole. A uniformed stranger, refracted and tiny, looks back at me.

Dancing Girls

Me and mama are dancing to Hank Williams. She has reeled me in, after spinning me out and around. It is my favorite snapshot. The camera caught us at this moment: Mama hugs me close from behind, my arms are crossed against my chest, our hands are clasped. In this one-beat pause, she nips her bottom lip; there is music all over her face. Smiling over my shoulder, our eyes are locked. When I can't fall asleep, I reach for the snapshot, study it by the green glow of the clock radio. Beyond our moment frozen, I hear Hank Williams play on.

Years before Mama was confined to a wheel chair and when I was in high school, the picture was taken. Mama loved to dance and Daddy was no kind of dancer. She compensated with four dancing daughters. Not that she ever taught us to dance, we just did; she transferred its appeal to us.

Saturday was Country Music Night on TV when we were little kids. Mama'd adjust the foil-draped rabbit ears of the black and white, then push the unit flush against the wall. We got The Buck Owens Music Hour, The Bill Anderson Show, and Ernest Tubb Tonight, back to back, 8 o'clock, Channel 10. And we danced. Living room furniture shoved up against the walls, rug rolled back, floors sprinkled in baby powder, we danced. Pausing only on Mama's occasional directive when Smiley, Bill Anderson's steel guitar player, took a solo. His name wasn't really Smiley, but that was what Mama called him.

"Looky girls, Smiley." Me and the sisters would have to pause mid-step, mute the snap of fingers and look at a grainy close-up of the grinning guitarist. "Sits there so calm-like

and smiles up at the camera. Sucker just a'playin away at that steel. Would never know by just lookin." And when she peeled her attention away from the screen, rolling her eyes up to the music in her head and digging in on flexed elbows, we all start up to dancing again.

We'd also debrief at the end of the night, after the shows. Mama'd ask, we girls would answer: "Who was your favorite tonight ?" Skeeter, the youngest, bottled and shirtless, remained anchored to the coffee table, having spent Country Music Night on bouncing knees and dipping diaper. In a wide-eyed stare, exaggerated by the sudden void of music, Mama answered for her, "Baby Girl liked Smiley. "And Skeet would flex on dimpled knees, bouncing on an empty beat. It was all the confirmation we needed.

"Mine's Buck," Lolla would pipe in, and commence to sing *I got a tiger by the tail, it's plain to see*. And one by one, through the process of elimination, each girl would stake her claim to a favorite. There were no wrong choices.

There were also the family wedding dances. These occurred at the VFW or West Fraternal Hall in Leroy, Texas: cotton and corn country where Mama grew up. "My folk" Mama called the wedding-going farmers and cattlemen, mostly relatives, most of whom I could never quite figure out how I was kin. Worse was when Mama tried to explain.

"That there's Henry Willemburg, Jr.: Rubilee's nephew's, you know Big Chuck's, wife's brother. "Hey, Henry!" She'd wave her arms across the hall at a round bellied, red-faced man, guffawing in a huddle of people, fisting a plastic cup of beer. "Get over here! Are you gettin' more goodlookin' or is my eyesight gettin' bad?" That was my clue to run off across the hall, find the other kids and avoid a possible introduction.

And while the country band kicked in and all the Henrys, Rubilees and Big Chucks danced, if you were a kid, you did this: Kicked off your shoes, and joined the Saw Dust Slide. This involved winding into a long run to slide across the saw dust floor at the back of the hall. Over and over again. First, and early in the night, just on the feet, progressing into butt slides, and finally full-on belly slides, until someone got hurt. Our fun was acknowledged, yet non-seriously begrudged by the grown-ups. They directed loud complaints to us in suspiciously close earshot of one another. "Girl, you'd think I raised you in a barn. Can't take you nowhere." It prompted another reprimand, from another parent, to her own. "Quit running around like a wild hoodlum. And where's your shoes? Looks like we can cha'k those sock up for ruin." And off we'd run, all a'slide and skid, as the music whang-whanged and started up again. The grownups claimed dance partners with the circling of a waist and an arm draped across a shoulder. And they commenced to two-step in a counter clockwise shuffle-and-glide.

The partnering instinct awakens in a girl around twelve years old. And the female population at the ripe age of adolescence dwindled at the sawdust run. The boys our age loyally stayed on staking dirty-sock domain in the run and slide game. We girls wanted to dance. Enter the dancing Henrys and Big Chucks.

Mama was well liked, and I, popular through proximity, never lacked for a dance partner. She was easy to locate across the great sea of partying people. This is what I looked for: the most prominent huddle of folk, leaned in together, over abandoned beer cups pooled on a banquet table. A circle of convening heads, like a school of feeding fish, with faces baited in widening grins. And when the circle broke, the heads thrown

back in explosive laughter, there'd be Mama, buoyed in the middle of all that attention.

One helluva storyteller. A real hoot, they called her.

Making my way to the table, to get a quarter from Mama for something other than the free music, food and drink, I'd be met by some old guy, peeling himself away from Mama's fan club. "Jeanette, I'm dancing with your girl!" He would still be red in the face from laughter sidling me to the edge of the floor. On a dying chuckle, and over the rising music he'd say, "What a cut-up your mama is!" And as he shook his head once as if to by-golly off the last of Mama's lingering funny, I completed his thought, "Yeah, a real hoot." I knew where it was going. And it helped conclude the matter.

Mama's Folk were there to dance, and my partner's giddiness would be quickly rerouted to a spirited scoot of his boots. Generally these aged dancers didn't give me much undo personal attention. Their minds seemed to be in two places: inward on the music, and outward on other dancers -- eager to acknowledge long unseen friends and family, so as to shuffle me backwards toward them, for their long awaited reunion: "If I could ter-*ust* my eyesight, I'd might could say you're gettin' better lookin'" but the recipient of the compliment would be spun out of earshot, by a boozed and twirling partner.

Smelling of Old Spice and oiled up in Bryl Creme, my dance partners were long-time country dwellers, none too tall, all heavy bellied and spindly of leg. Their build I thought similar to the upright walking Sir Froggy of a kindergartner reader: inflated tummies with knees bowing outward in step, as if buckling under their girth. And likewise to Sir Froggy, their jaunty strut and forthcoming nature cut them a wide berth in

the community as cheerful, pragmatic characters. On occasion I might dance with a retired deputy, or constable -of -sorts, who retained some remote clout in the county; the type of guy that had some half-assed badge somewhere in a bottom drawer.

Such were the men who two-stepped me through my adolescence, my teens, until I cut a path in the sawdust into my own dance haunts, away from Mama and Folk. Going off to college, earning my own quarters.

Mama, in her late 50's, had her first back surgery, which compromised her dancing. Yet she danced vicariously through me gaining privy to my social calendar with a barrage of questions during my occasional weekends home. She asked about the bands I saw and the songs they played. She wanted to know where I danced, which girlfriends came along, what men I danced with.

A lot of our catching up took place in the car, running her on errands. My trips home involved driving her to the grocery store, taking her to the doctor, the hairdresser, church. She didn't like to drive much after her surgery and her walker became a more common sight.

When I sufficiently answered her initial deluge of questions, and temporarily satiated her pumping for particulars, she'd quiet as we halted at a stop light, looking over each corner of the intersection as if piecing my stories into a comprehensive whole. "All's I say," she'd break from thought with the changing of the light " is, girl, have fun while your body still can." And the traffic inched forward.

Texas is a refrigerated state, and even in the height of a heat wave, the frozen food section of the Piggly Wiggly raised goose bumps on your arms. Chill the back of your

neck bending into a freezer. We shopped a lot in frozen foods; she found it harder to stand at the stove too long. On one of these excursions, after another surgery, I was guiding Mama on her walker gently by the elbow. We were making our way down the freezer aisle lined in glass doors. The tiled floors were buffed to a high, icy shine. I tried not to look at the scar at the base of her neck, inching above her loose and scoop-necked housedress. I hurt to look; it made me ache for her.

I forced my attention, instead, on the florescent-bright aisle before me, yet the chill of the air and the freezers infused my spine. The stark chrome trim of the frosted freezer doors cold bladed my back. And each step was shot through with icy pain. And I hurt for Mama more, and loved her more than I ever had.

I started suggesting I run her errands alone, but she insisted on coming along. She didn't want to be a bother. But I suspected that in her later years, these store runs were her outings, her entertainment. That realization felt like a knife run through me too.

Though Mama and I were a generation apart, I see now that I'd never moved that far from her traditional country and western music and dance, but in college you wouldn't have caught me at any place as old foggy as a VFW. I took what felt like a sharp detour into more progressive country, (such was the buzzword then), more country folk, and Texas blues. In the 1970's, Willie Nelson, well, he started growing those pigtails and having his campout concerts. Willie's 4th of July Picnics were kind of latter-day Woodstocks, but smacked a strong regionalism-- more bandana, less tie-dye. More boot, less moccasin. The Red-Headed Stranger billed the likes of Jerry Jeff Walker, Ray Wylie Hubbard, and Gary P. Nunn at his summer extravaganzas. Yet, it was the same as

Mama's music, I suppose, except the musicians were younger, longhaired, hip. They smoked dope and sang about it. They were outlaws. They had three names.

Willie grew up in Abbot, Texas, just up the road from Leroy, my Mama's hometown, and they were peers. To hear Mama tell it, friends. Mama's brother, my Uncle Junior, cut his teeth learning fiddle with Willie and the boys. Way before Willie's braids--an ass kicking for sure. Way before anyone would pay to see this high school barn band: one lousy on the fiddle, another that couldn't sing, neither good looking. Mama was there. And she mentioned more than once that she was known to fill in on the tambourine if the boys were ever in a pinch.

So we maintained plenty to exchange about music, even though I was hip, and she was not. She could connect just about any of my outlaw musicians to someone she was well familiar with in her hey- day. If she could not claim an immediate familiarity, she'd relentlessly enquire of all band members and eventually trace his lineage, many times removed, sometimes through marriage, to someone who knew Junior. And therefore knew her, too. I was always surprised at all the mileage she got, and how well connected up were Johnny Gimble, Bob Wills and His (o-so-many) Texas Playboys and, of course, reliable 'ole Willie.

In final reference to someone or another in the band, she'd conclude the matter: "When you see him play next time, tell him you're George Uptmor Jr.'s niece." She'd pause between each identifier to emphasize the importance of its accuracy. "Don't just say Junior. Then say you're Jeanette Uptmor's daughter." She'd look dead at me and fall silent, as if a minute was needed for the strict particulars to embed themselves in my

long-term memory. “And tell him I said hi.”

I said I would. And looked away knowing there was no way in hell that Mama, Junior, or Leroy, Texas was an identity I wanted to tout. In college I strove to bandy myself about with a more “Austin” repute. More rolling hill country, less farm. More wildflower, less corn. More outlaw, less in-law.

In my youth I considered aging a matter of choice. Not so much in physique or form-- I’d seen tires wear out, tractors give out, and old things rust--but in spirit. I thought a person chose to relinquish her enthusiasm, her fervor for experience and movement. If life was infinite in allure, any person not acting on its appeal was doing so consciously and by choice. And this is how one chose to be old.

Form does somehow dictate function; I didn’t know that then. Nor did I acknowledge that Mama’s searing passion was alive and burning in a body that was wearing out, giving out, rusting.

Meanwhile, young and oiled, I danced on.

And true to my image, my college friends and I frequented the popular Texas music establishments of the renegade hill country: Big Annie’s, The Devil’s Backbone Tavern, and Cheatham Street Warehouse. We called them clubs; they were cool, they were timeless, they didn’t have the manicured hokiness of a VFW that underwent timely upkeep and modernization. These places were contemporary in all their antiquity. And unlike the fraternal halls of home, my haunts had crude board walls, rather than paneling. Old farming implements rusted on display, rather than decomposing in a junk pile out back. The air was stirred on elliptical creaking ceiling fans, rather than a window

RefridgedAir. And rather than the Illumi-Lite plastic Coors clock ticking above a vinyl trimmed bar, my places were solely alit in the vigor and buzz of neon red and blue.

Our most frequent hangout was Cheatham Street Warehouse: a defunct warehouse turned music hall. Shabby and peeling of paint, it was backed against the Katy Line above the banks of the San Marcos River. Inside, the band played against a wide-open wall: the doors of the warehouse, rolled open to the black and cricketed night. Between sets me and the girlfriends would hop across stage, through the freight doors and, if lucky, get high with the band. The night air cooled the sweat on my body to a fine mist as I threw my head back blowing the sweet smoke into the stars. Me and the girls would then have a scurried and stony- go down below the tracks -- a quick strip -and -slip into the river. The night waters of the San Marcos closed over me dark and seamless, teleporting me an underworld away from the press of hot bodies and smoky air of Cheatham. When we heard the thomping bass of the band, we skirted back up the banks.

We'd often lost our seats but had our reserved box seating, as we girls called it: a broken butcher's case. As was common amongst some Texas folk to have an extra radiator lying around a yard, or a hot water heater on the front porch, Cheatham had a defunct refrigerator case along a side wall. Clamoring up it took a bit of teamwork, or a hoist on the butt by one girl to another.

Sitting atop its angled viewing case we took in the music. Before long it was up- and -down the chrome monstrosity to dance, get beers, go to the bathroom. Or catch the band on another break. Up and down the thing, all night long. When the crowd pounded their boots on the wooden floor in a unified stomp, we stood on the meat case and

stomped along. Music rose from the wooden floors, vibrated through the metal case, pounded low in my diaphragm and rose pulsating in my chest. And I have never felt more alive. Music, which I'd followed for so long, turned and met me, homed itself in me, penetrated my inners all while stomping on top a broken sausage case.

But things get more complicated with age and I have lost the desire to climb up and down broken appliances. I don't go dancing much any more but am nostalgic for it. I live on the West Coast and none of the men here can dance. I can't find my music; my bearded and braided outlaws have been replaced with tam-bearing ska musicians and World Beat. Nor do I have a pack of dancing girls to run with. Besides, it's not as flattering in one's 40's, running all over town chasing music, as it is in one's 20's. Kind of like hoisting my ass on top of a meat case, I'm not sure I would do it even if I could.

Yet, I feel music alive and coiled in me, ready to spring forth, like new upholstery in an aging car. Maybe I should dance more, while the body's still holding up. It might not be hard to find Willie playing somewhere on this Pacific coast. And I would dance even if it meant dancing alone. Maybe I'd walk up to him between sets, lean in to him and say, "I'm George Uptmor, Jr.'s niece. I am Jeanette's daughter."

And when the music started up again I'd kick off my shoes, wait for someone to shuffle me out onto the dance floor. And just cha'k my socks up for ruin.

Small Hand Gun

Jessanne fired and missed again. She hated the empty cans on the fence. Her shot was a dry kick of dirt in the fallow field beyond the fence.

Jessanne needed to hit a can. She needed her daddy to quit yelling *godbless, Jess you're just not trying*. Jessanne hated her sister hitting the can with a hollow ring. Hated Daddy saying now *that's* my girl to her sister, who hit the can Jessanne needed to hit, the can Jess hated.

Jessanne hated his 6-pound Winchester rifle. Hated the too big, too loud, too long 20-inch barrel that felt like failure exploding in her small hands. That felt like a full-on kick to her heart.

Jess needed to be bigger, older. Twelve, thirteen, old enough to drive. She needed larger hands. She needed a smaller gun. She needed a bigger target. Her sister could hit the 15-ounce tin emptied of its petite French peas. Daddy, the 8-ouncer; its giblet corn label riddled with holes. Jess needed a full 64 ounces, whole stewed tomatoes.

Jessanne needed approval. Jessanne needed praise. She needed Daddy to quit hollering *you're not focusing, girl*. She needed to be filled with love and affirmation. Jessanne wanted to explode. Jess hated that she couldn't explode because she felt like an empty can.

Goddamn Jessanne, you need just a mere ounce of concentration for chrissakes. You need control. It's aim, girl. It's intent. It's power. It's bringing down the stag. It's everything you're gonna need in life, Jess. And she emptied six full rounds on her one can still standing.

Jess needed a parking spot. Jess hated this town. She hated parking three blocks away from the pawnshop. She hated her job, her 40s, her body. Jessanne hated the emptiness she felt. She needed a gun. She wanted a small handgun. Jessanne wanted the Colt Detective .38 Special. Jess hated that they didn't take Discover. She needed to charge it to Visa.

Jessanne needed control. She needed concentration. She needed focus and aim to bring down the stag. Jess had a small handgun. She would target love. She would target approval. She would target praise and power. She had a full six rounds. Jessanne had one moment of everything she needed in life.

A Story's Worth

Mama said never ask Daddy about his daddy.

We asked why not.

Mama said just don't. It makes Daddy upset, you know, crazy.

So we never asked Daddy about his daddy. We did not want him to go crazydrunk and cussing, mean and breaking things.

Mama said it wasn't even a story worth telling.

We figured it was. Figured it had to be some kind of story.

Daddy said he'd been a POW in the Korean War. Mama said he was really a trombone player in the Army Band. Daddy said the Ruskies and the Korean Yankees tied him up on his back in the dark and dropped water between his eyes day after day.

A damn good trombone player, first chair, Mama said. And never a hair out of place. Never saw the front lines, never got a scratch on him. Daddy didn't like dirt, didn't then. Kept his fingernails clean and trimmed like he still does. Just blew his way through the war in a fancy band uniform playing for the likes of General MacArthur and other highfaluting folks.

Daddy said the yellowbelly Commies tried to brainwash him.

Just don't ask him about his daddy, mama said, unless you want him to go stark raving mad.

Daddy said he kept from going crazy in the dark so thick you couldn't see your hand in

front of your face by imagining a little point of light that he chased around in his mind and hitched and climb into bigger and bigger until he escaped floating above the pissant gooks till they were nothing but annoysome gnats needing swatted at.

Daddy's trombone was holed up in the attic. So was his Purple Heart.

Seemed daddy had no relatives. Well, his Mama, of course, but she died when we were little, before even some of us were born and that was okay since Mama didn't like his mama so much. Then, come to find out, Daddy had a Cousin Jake, story goes. Who worked at the Pentagon. But no one had heard from him in years and years. We figured that this Cousin Jake had to either be Daddy's mama or Daddy's daddy's brother or sister's kid because that's how cousins work. We figured this in stick figures with a crayon on the attic wall: side by side we drew Daddy's mama who was dead and Daddy's daddy who we couldn't ask about. We drew each a stick figure to their sides that meant a brother or a sister, either which, because it didn't matter boy or girl they just had to have one or the other we figured out in our figurings of who this cousin Jake come from exact. We then drew every one of these four -- mama, daddy, brother and sister whichever-- a stick figure kid each beneath and smaller. In the end the stick figure family proved that for daddy to have a Cousin Jake that worked at the Pentagon either his dead mama or his secret daddy to have had a brother or a sister. And we knew that Daddy's mama was an only child just like Daddy was which was one reason they were both so mean and selfish, Mama always said. So that meant Daddy's daddy had to have a brother or sister either one, but Mama said we'd have to be crazier than Daddy hisself to open up that

can of worms.

We opened Daddy's trombone case in the attic because that's where we ran after Daddy went crazy and drunk with eyes bulging gutting the light fixture from the ceiling dangling on a black wire because we kids left the light on too much. And then the house was dark. All this without no one mentioning his daddy to make him crazy, which proved Daddy went crazy over lots of stuff not just things Mama said not to mention. But we already knew that, knew it wasn't a story worth telling.

We drew a map on the wall around the stick figures making them bad Korean soldiers and added more stick figures for good American soldiers to figure our secret plan of attack on the Yankee yellowbellies and whoever wore Daddy's Purple Heart was General Jake in the Pentagon where prisoners were tied up who wouldn't tell their secrets so you had to drive them crazy.

The plan was to capture a prisoner who was also a trombone player. So we did, and took him to General Jake's torture chamber who turned around surprised still drawing on his map of attack as if he didn't order us himself to bring in the enemy spy who played the trombone.

Tell us about your daddy. Who is also a spy just like you are, General Jake said to the prisoner who stood blowing his trombone.

We tacked up a sheet on the high window in the attic that was hard to reach so it was kind of dark though a beam of dusty light shone in because it hung crooked. We took turns dripping

water between our prisoner's eyes tied to a chair holding his head back and blowing the trombone in the prisoner's face to make him go crazy.

Who is your Daddy? We know he is a Commie spy.

Our prisoner said no no he would never tell so we poured probably more than dripped water between his eyes to drive him stark raving mad until our prisoner sputtered and kicked and flung himself out the chair which fell over crashing and didn't want to play anymore if we were going to pour water up his nose and General Jake hissed shut up if we're too noisy daddy will come up and kill us all.

We will have to cut off your fingers if you won't tell. We taped the prisoner's fist round and round with duct tape.

You will never play the trombone again, General Jake said.

That sent our prisoner went crazy. He charged The General tearing at his Purple Heart. He beat the trombone against the floor and walls. Tore the sheet off the window ripping it in tangling spasms and fought it rolling and convulsing in ghostly fits on the floor flooded in the hot light of day from the stripped window. Then went dead still.

Our prisoner gone crazy gave in. He turned his head to the attic threshold cut in the floor and revealed the face of the yellow-bellied coward peering in.

Dead Precious

The cabinet latch closed with a trigger click. Mama tromped around the corner, china clattering in the cabinet. "My It'ly plate," she stopped solid in her garden boots, and the whole house quit rattling loose. "Which one of y'all did it?" She tightened an eye on me and my sisters-- her brow cocked surefire high on her forehead. I tried to empty my face out hollow.

Lolla looked blank as a bale of hay.

Skeeter was the only one said anything -- and said it singsong satisfied, " Wudn't me." Went back to peeling the skin off her ring baloney, as if Mama'd come flouncing in from the flowerbed announcing it looked like rain.

"And Missy Britches, you don't even know what I'm talking about being so quick to answer."

I got shot full-aware of how dumb a thing it was Skeeter said, but Baby Sister didn't have a feather ruffled one skinning the meat off her baloney skin between short even teeth.

"What plate?" Bale o' hay spoke. This out-beat the idiot of Skeeter. We all knew what plate: The It'ly Plate.

Mama's lip twitched like it was flicking away a horsefly. Then curled smug- up like the shudder under her skin was all shook out. Mama was hitching up for one of her hissing and spit-slinging conniptions. Slapped her palms smackout, bit her fingertips into the formica chipped tabletop, and leered into us, every one. She went snarly in the teeth

and raspy in the throat, all her words the same gnawed-off note, “How many plates from It’ly do I have?” Her eyebrows plowed up together, buckling on the mad furrow dug between.

“ Just one.” Skeeter scraped the bottom of the mustard with a knife looking into it empty. “Give to you by your sister, Precious.” She dropped the knife in the scraped out jar ringing hollow. “Dead in her grave.”

~

Mama was bent on resurrecting dead Precious since her sister’s broke plate was fated to the border of the flowerbed beneath the pawpaw tree: half-moons of throwaway plates, circled and scalloped one against the other--some butted, some overlapped, some a bit weedy in between. The It’ly plate buried round with the rest grabbed notice-- gold roses bloomed deep inside blood-red glass. But Mama called the color Rome- red, said that was china not glass.

We all knew that plate was give to Mama by her sister, Precious. Because of Precious’ great fortune, passed on before me and the sisters fell off the turnip truck-- was how Mama story-told it to anyone who’d listen, Precious had some high-falutin husband, lieutenant, sergeant, colonel or something, who paraded her all over before she died, to faraway places that no one knew where was. Not even Mama, come to find out, when someone had the gumption to ask: Where’s that at? So she got to lumping the travels of Precious all together calling it Over Seas (said it with a turn of her wrist like it was so many places, don’t even ask). Made it sound like a fairytale of a place, if you ask me, overblown. Like Precious blew off on a horse with some wings over a bunch of

oceans. With some guy in blue strung up under the arms with loopy gold cords, brass buttons all up and down his coat front. Some medals to boot.

Another thing made clear to us: don't run past the china cabinet. Easy to remember even during a heated chase of a sister through the house because Mama's china had its own nook, more a shotgun hallway than anything else, off the kitchen. Nothing in there but a china cabinet on one wall with some drawers underneath, though all was in them was an old ball of twine, not even one piece but added to, and Mama's cracker box with important papers, and some old tin foil she tried to straighten out and save if it was a big enough piece.

Mama said the cabinet shelves were made poorly thin, but who was going to build some thicker ones for her she wanted to know. Skeeter said Linwood would, who was Old Lady Oxnard's son always in and out the pokey who needed to stay busy or he drank too much.

"He's back home, out The Pen," Skeeter said. "Old Lady Oxnard said. Plus I seen his truck with all the junk in back."

Mama told Skeeter to call her Mizriz Oxnard.

Skeeter told Mama that she was you're the one named her that.

Lolla told Mama that Linwood out The Pen would gladly come banging around in here building shelves. Fresh out the slammer in here with a hammer-- not a hot idea. I told everyone the true problem extra loud: Too much stuff on those shelves was why they sagged -- dishes galore, two gravy boats when we eat ours out the skillet, and Avon bottles collected to kingdom- come. "And that Bluebird of Happiness alone's

upward a pound of squat- solid glass,” I said.

“I give it two,” said Lolla.

Showcase for the It’ly plate was the real purpose for the china cabinet. Though a big to- do for a while was the Model T Avon bottle car: Special Collector’s Edition whose starter shaft was a plastic cap you cranked off if you needed a splash of Old Spice smelling stuff. But that wore off. Especially after Old Lady Oxnard got ahold of one herself who Mama said had no more appreciation of Avon bottles than her left foot.

The It’ly plate was spirited off to the flowerbed that circled the pawpaw tree though it sure didn’t lose none of its ghost. Mama made me, Lolla, and Skeeter, weed the foxtails and goosegrass choking up the border. Old Lady Oxnard came out her house, set back behind ours, and waved real big at us. The center of their yard was a gravel turnaround, weeded up in barnyard grass all around, something cows won’t even eat out the ditch. Oxnard made her way to our fence. Linwood’s legs were poking out from under his truck parked up under their pecan.

Skeeter asked Mama if Linwood ever murdered anybody. Linwood in and out the hoosegow didn’t faze me and Lolla anymore.

“Linwood wouldn’t hurt a fly, not on purpose.” Mama said. “Only trouble is when he gets to drinking; he runs, well, things down.”

“Yeah,” Lolla said. “Like people.”

Oxnard hollared up under the truck at Linwood for him to come out and help us then scooted herself to the fence looking to jabber. Oxnard was squat and thick calved, bloaty round the ankles. Wore a loose- cut housedress so full-up with boobs and belly it

hiked at the knees. Ruddy in the face, she had a short forehead sprouting wavy salt and pepper hair deep on her temples.

I told Skeeter Linwood wasn't nothing but a junk man. Lolla said a wino. I uprooted a gnarled plug of goosegrass. "Dumb as dirt," I added.

"Linwood!" Old Oxnard hollered over her shoulder at Linwood still laid up under his truck. "These girls could use some help." Oxnard propped her elbow on the fence post digging in to talk. "He's touchous," she said. "Has some sensitive nerves. Plus was born the last of eleb'en. Fine if he stays busy-put--but none too anxious. He get bored or overexcited either, makes him hit the Boone's Farm. They just come out with Country Peach."

Linwood trotted over with a trowel. I dug a fresh space in the circle of broken plates and Mama planted her Italy plate special because she had an audience, announcing they broke the mold after making that plate. Then she went to gnawing the fence post to Old Lady Oxnard on the Pope of Rome *consecrating* it -- a swanky way of saying blessed. Mama called her "Babe" when straight to her face which was Oxnard's first name of Barbara chopped up friendly by people who liked her. Probably started by her family when she was little seeing how that was the only way such a name would've stuck. Mama threw in a Babe or two in all the right places with a turn of her wrist to get Oxnard listening hard so she could work the part up good about the Pope in robes all red the day he worked his sign of the cross all up and down it. "Or so the story of that particular china goes-- according to Precious, now gone," Mama said, with a Lamb -of - God knock to her heart, and without missing a beat went on to paint a picture of Precious

at the Vatican on her knees holding it flat-out at Pope John Sucha-Sucha Number, though I figured Mama counted up and subtracted his Highness' Xs and Vs and Is way before telling it-- isn't no one that quick. And on she went about the It'ly plate. Or china. China or no, a plate is a plate. And a broke plate ends up driv in the dirt with the rest of its kind--only the good half showing. Like the mind doesn't think how the buried part is broke- up or half-gone. Pope or no Pope any plate poking up holy out of the dirt might just as well dig in to meets its Maker.

Then the magpie problem.

No sooner than we plunked that plate in the ground, three of them swooped down on it pecking at themselves shiny. They'd conglomerated all in the pawpaw. Having babies left and right. The mama magpies were out to protect their brood is why they swooped. Least that was Babe Oxnard's how-come, with some of Linwood's thrown in.

"And look it--I just gave them Precious' plate to pick at," Mama said weak and breathy coming to a screeching halt in her Precious story. The It'ly plate shone a ruby in the sun, couldn't none of us help notice, and it gave Mama some charge back in her voice to hurtle more fence talk of dead Precious. In the next headlong breath, she worked bless'ed Precious up to some sort of plate-keeper crusader called to the Vatican by Pope John Whatever Number.

Linwood had some brainchild of an idea to hammer hubcaps on the tree trunk, give them magpies something to peck at, he said, and they'd forget about that It'ly plate. I piped in pure and simple that it was the weeds in the yard, (didn't say whose yard), that was an open invite to any a hungry bird.

Mama let up a breath on sacro-saint Precious a second, pulled her neck back our side of the fence to look deadpan at Linwood: “ You hit the nail on the head.” Paid no mind to my fact about problem grass. Oxnard nodded up and down, walking the fence, arms crossed like she herself come up with the grand plan for the dead hubcaps ditched in the grass of their trashy yard.

“It’s the weeds, Mama,” I said. “Isn’t nothing a little Round Up won’t cure. Y’all can yak your ideas til the cows come home--but no cows’ll even eat that grass--only *birds*.”

Linwood went ears up on my mention of Round Up. He was big on the stuff. Big on duct tape, too, and jute rope-- them all going together somehow. Fix-It-Up Linwood could only tape it up, rope it off, or kill it dead.

~

“You can hammer that thing out silly,” I said, “ but isn’t no magpie want to peck at that.” Linwood soon woke me up of a Sunday morning hammering out hubcaps. Mama shoved me out in the yard to pick up custard apples fallen from the pawpaw that the birds hadn’t poked bad holes in yet.

The sky was pumped up solid blue though the day hadn’t broke out hot yet. Oxnard set Linwood to work first light. She encouraged him his “ yard projects” which was what she called all the junk he drug home from the dump and puked all over the yard. I don’t see how an old mattress lumped up against their pecan tree could ever in a month of Sundays be a project, when it was just an old tick mattress chewed rat -through slumped over soaking up good rain.

Customary to Linwood happening home, Babe Oxnard prodded him to and from the

dumps -- give him a purpose, but not a thrill, I guess. Linwood drove a beat pea-green GMC, sideboards piled scrap-trap high with dump-run. Army blanket chewed -through, thrown atop, and strapped every which way like his precious cargo might blow out the back end.

Rolling in from the county pit, Linwood laid his plunder out in the yard, then Oxnard sent him out once more. He come back with something busted, switch out the gutted for the rusted, and be off again. Hubcaps came to earn him so many fresh hoots of approval from Mama and Oxnard, he must've sapped the entire countryside of every one ever ditched or fallen off a car, and when the juice ran out on those dug up flatter ones more run over. He set up a wompy-jog jackhorse under his pecan to hammer out hubs smashed flat in the face. Linwood had to sledge hammer one backside out; it was bowled dang near inside out.

Their grass that Sunday morning was spotted in anemic yellow circles where Linwood gathered up left for dead hubcaps strewn in their yard since forever-when. He nailed them round and round the trunk of our pawpaw. The whole lot of them, Mama, Linwood, and Oxnard decided the custard apples needed saving too. Old Oxnard was thrilled I bet, rainworms not even good and crawled out their yellow grass circles, and Linwood hammering up our tree early light.

Henry Koulock passed on the road going to Kolache Kitchen where all the old retired farmers sat jabbering drinking coffee at the same table. Henry slowed, craned his head out the window far enough for dirty road wind to kick up the flap of scraggled hair swathed atop his head. He waved to beat the band. Such friendly neck -stretching and

hand -flapping was nothing but a cover-up for being nosy. Why else would someone want to choke up on a lungful of dust unless it gave him something to chew on at Kolache Kitchen.

Linwood neared the fence and scatted away a bird near Mama's plate. "Same bird, Jessanne, I seen him yesterday," he said. Went back to hammering his hub.

I pitched a pecked -up custard apple into the pawpaw branches and a flurry of magpies fluttered out. They hung suspended against the sky ready to swoop, then dove back into the green of the tree. One pecked down on Mama's plate. In the circle of ceramics rounding the flowerbed, the light penetrated the It'ly plate blood -red like wine. If that plate was pieced -up in a church window, it'd look soaked- up in a prayer or two. You could imagine a mess of folks glassed in behind it mumbling an all-together Our Father with their necks slacken down. The lick of morning sun warmed the plate's inside roses shiny gold.

"Dagnabbit," Linwood said. " 'Nother one's pecking your mama's plate." He put a hand on his hip, and pressed his lips into a straight line. "That's okay, I got more good ideas to keep them birds in their place." Linwood's insides talked straight aloud to his outsides when he should've thought quiet without a bunch of blather.

Hop and Dot Winthrop passed on the road in Koulock's dust not even settled good. Mama called the Winthrops bohemians -- they ran a junk shop, The This and That, out the back of their house. They sold a mish-mash of stuff, none of it going together. They wanted to be a General Store but didn't have enough new stuff still in wrappers that people needed again and again, so they also sold any old whatever they got

their hands on as a back up, even if half-used up. When the tornado ripped a wall off the Lazy-Boy warehouse on Old Kingsley Highway Hop and Dot bought up a bunch of vinyl recliners that had some water damage on their bottoms that they didn't mention-- only tilted you way back in the fanciest one saying *close your eyes and tell me that isn't the most comp-terble sit that ever was.*

Linwood watched Hop's truck pass. "Kinda early for church, idn't it?" He adjusted the bill of his snap -visor cap-- a style of hat that should be *tweed* so if you *were* the Queen's son it would suit-up with knee britches and suspenders. But Linwood's was faded black denim trimmed in long yellow stitches. Like something greasy crawled out from under a car. Like it should be sewn on with a Bard-All Oil patch to advertise its purpose for looking that way.

"Not for Mass. Not if you go to Sacred Heart," though I knew the Winthrops were Methodist which was only a tad better than being Baptist. Mama said the Oxnards were Baptist to the bone but didn't go to church which was a good thing because that makes holy rollers more preachy, and Old Lady Oxnard was already full enough of herself. She said they were not only Baptists but bohemians to boot-- obvious by the junk in their yard.

"Plus, some people go early, so they can do Confession," I said. "Of course, I'm talking Catholic. And you can only Confess, if you've been Confirmed." Linwood slowed down on the hammering of his hubcap but didn't say anything. Then he hopped the fence with it and walked clear around our pawpaw trying to find some empty trunk to

nail it into. Every hubcap on the tree reflected Linwood upon Linwood circling around.

“I’m 11, now, but Holy Confirmed a full two years ago, earlier than most. By a special bishop. I was only nine.” Which was the truth. It was the same year Lolla was Confirmed, though she was 12, the age you were supposed to be. There was a big shot bishop visiting the parish that year, so Mama argued her way through Father and all the Sisters until they let me be Confirmed early. Don’t remember the important bishop’s name because the bigger deal was choosing my patron saint name: St Bernadette. Joan of Arc ran a close second until Lolla said being burned at the stake was a dead end claim to fame when St. Bernadette saw the Virgin Mary eighteen times over the course of her life.

“I hear that Pope of yours wears a big ruby ring,” Linwood said. He quit stalking around the pawpaw, satisfied it was hubbed- up but good. “Some people kiss it.” And he had the gall to snicker-snort.

“You know bishops and popes are two different things. Popes are higher. *The* highest.” I sat on the tire swing strung on a long branch of the Oxnard’s pecan tree that reached into our yard. I rolled a rotten custard apple underfoot.

Linwood, run out of tree trunk, commenced to nail a hubcap on the dang fence while talking around a nail in his mouth. “Only one Pope is, at a time; I know.” He stood back from the fence, eyed it up and down as if he needed a plan before slapping up the rest any which way. “But if there’s one thing I wouldn’t kiss that’d be no Pope’s jewel.” He squatted at the fence on his haunches, hunkering in to hub it up into a complete eyesore like the pawpaw.

“I am sure he doesn’t stick it out to just anyone’s nasty lips,” I said.

The morning was warming up, and the magpies were taking short dips outside the tree. Mama stepped out on the porch to shake out a rug, so I got off the swing to look more like I was picking up fruit not rotted.

“Besides, you can’t just march right up to him,” I said. “The Pope lives in the biggest palace in the world. Actually he has his own city. It’s so big you can’t walk it. The Pope gets toted around in a limousine.”

“There’s a Princess in India, a little girl,” Linwood said. He looked up at me from his squat and took the nail out of his mouth. “Whose feet never touch the ground.” He plucked a foxtail grown tall at the fence post and peeled its stalk in milky strips. “Carried wherever she goes. Once a year they bring her out of her castle to parade her around in a canopy -carriage that’s embroidered up and made of velvet. That carriage is built high on long poles. Aren’t no wheels.” Linwood loaded his mouth up with nails and turned his attention back to the fence. “She’s lifted in that carriage high on folks’ shoulders.”

“Just because her feet don’t touch the ground doesn’t make her a saint,” I said.

“Nope. Just a born princess.”

“Nothing but luck. Probably some heathen- child, spoiled rotten, when there’s lots of poor kids in her country starving with diseases. Bet she doesn’t help them, how could she, laid back on velvet bolsters with her feet propped up. See, saints appear to people again and again.” I toed a circle in the dirt. “Especially to kids who don’t believe in God because no one ever told them. Deprived kids with sores on their legs and stuff, suffering from potato blights. Or the Bluebonnet Plague. In places like Poland. And Portugal.

Places where missionaries go to help them. In one place they built a church, at this cave, by a river, because Saint Fatima appeared and helped this sick little girl cross that water. That girl coughed every time her feet got wet trying.”

Linwood lifted his cap, and swiped his forehead. As I suspected Linwood was bald on top which was why he wore the hat. He grinned up at me, an empty hole loping out the side of his whistle. He put his cap back on, and closed his grin, and none too soon. It made him look his whole and usual self that I was used to, and saved me the suffering of seeing all he had missing.

Mama was on the porch tying on her sunhat, and I picked fallen apples fast. Glimpsing Linwood uncovered of all he had lacking, he seemed less the crusted over grownup I always figured him. Obviously, his outsides were beat and dried up rough but inside he wasn't done yet-- spongy enough to press any which way you wanted. It was like his top layer got scorched too hot too fast, but stick a knife in his innards out pull some jiggly batter.

After her It'ly plate was courted off to the pawpaw for good, Mama got busy-body with the birds and the yard, chumming up with Linwood. She relieved me that morning of my apple-chore, come wandering out under an umbrella, widow black, in a springy brim sunhat tied ear-down over the crown and knotted up under the chin with a purple scarf. Her face hid behind dark shades that slid down, every time, bending over gathering up fruit. Mama, protecting herself from swooping magpies in her crazy - dress, plus our hubbed-up yard, embarrassed Lolla first, so I didn't have to feel it too much.

“What do people think driving by?” Lolla was slunkered low in the rocker on the screened porch. In a shoulder -slouch that ate up her neck, and her legs poked straight out, she squinted long up the front road. Lolla’s heels dug in the floor so hard her rocker back was wound stiff- up with no to or fro. Ever since she started at Sacred Heart Catholic High, getting a uniform and all, she worried more about what folks thought.

A truck came down the road, and Lolla slunched lower down. “Who is it and are they looking? Looked like Bucky Rinwald’s daddy’s truck,” she said.

I waved, “Buckie and another guy. Like his friend probably.” It was a lie; it was Old Man Rinwald alone.

“Leo. It might’ve been Leo Hinton with him.”

I said it looked like the cute guy could’ve been named Leo. And that they were looking at the house like they wanted to see her. Lolla stretched her neck up quick like a new kitten all nestled up then hears something; she darted a look toward the road. Then to Mama in the yard. “Does she look crazy? Or just stricken, maybe, with a good disease like cancer, or a brain tumor, ” Lolla propped -up an elbow, “and is why she covers herself from the sun.”

She sounded hopeful; I said that hands down Mama looked nothing but nuts.

“Maybe everyone will think she’s sick,” Lolla straightened, her rocker jerked, “sick in a good way.”

Of course, Lolla didn’t give a flying flame what I thought. If you weren’t her best damn friend, Pammie Gudacheck, who practically lived at our house because she took Church Choir too, Lolla didn’t listen to you.

Linwood ran out of hubcaps before he ran out of fence, so he strung up old kitchen utensils--oversized spoons, ladles, spatulas, even a meat cleaver-- banging and clanging on fence and tree alike to scare away the magpies. He called his rattley contrivances mobiles. Mama called them wind chimes. The cling-clanging-est mess you ever heard. Lolla told Mama our place looked as bad as the Oxnard's, couldn't tell one from the other, and she quit inviting Pammie Gudachek over though we were still in the middle of summer. And Lolla practicing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," with her one lonesome voice. No high part from Pammie.

But I saw the truth of how the whole deal got out of hand: Linwood had a good dump run that over-excited him and got him to drinking, toting home a box of Country Peach. So instead of shooting Linwood off on little errands, Oxnard started keeping him busy home- put doubling up on projects. Mama was nipping from that box of Country Peach that Linwood hoisted up on the fence. He poured her up in a enamel mug, gray-speckled, that looked straight out of a mess kit or something dug up from the dumps itself. "Tastes more like Koo-lade than wine," Mama scrunched up her shoulders giggly. She and Linwood were in more cahoots together against the birds. Mama's tied-down hat brim, once springy, got more frayed- up and pecked out droopy by the swooping magpies. I was pretty much convinced she was slap-dang over the edge when she stood close to Linwood him strung up a silver bladder from a wine box drained and inflated in our pawpaw. Crossed her ankles looking on from beneath her bird-splottered umbrella, sipping her cup o' Koo-lade. Old Lady Oxnard had the gall to say

that Mama was dealing with her upset about Precious and the plate. "She's more touchous about it than any of us might could imagine, bless her heart."

When Oxnard sensed Linwood strung out on stringing up anything elsemore, she got him back to working on his truck, jacked up, hind wheels spinning. "The trouble with Linwood," Old Lady Oxnard said, "he always ready to get gone, but don't have the means to stay gone. Working on them truck wheels is a sign of his wanting gone. Even if he isn't going nowhere yet."

At first this sounded like a bunch of cockinbull, but seeing how Linwood's new project involved spinning the back wheels of the truck-- going but not going-- maybe Oxnard knew how to put ideas inside the head of him.

Linwood got up some new go with a project more bohemian than hubcaps: tin cans. He cut the bottoms out of empty ones. Slit them rim to middle in even cuts round and round. Splayed them out like pinwheels and stuck them on the hub nuts of his truck jacked butt-up. Gassed the pedal and made them makeshift wheel-mills spin their tin like metal petals on a flower. Mama cheered him on, "Thems some *fuh- ancy* Hollywood hubcaps you got whirling there, Linwood." So Linwood pumped the gas pedal with a crow bar, poking low inside his truck, then popped up over the roof smiling big-out at Mama when he got a good rev and spin going. Mouth parted on his empty tooth all agape.

What with Linwood grinning, his engine squealing, tin cans splayed and spinning, and trashy gadgets dangling about and a sliver wine bag too, I did open on a notion, but

not for long: Maybe God was punishing me. Figure in the swooping magpies appearing sudden, Mama half slottered under a splattered umbrella, and our yard turning into a hubbed -up bohemian landfill. Putting all the pieces together, it circled back to my punishment for breaking the It'ly plate. Plus, God was punishing Lolla with all this too. . She was part to blame even though she stood pointing at *me* at the time, eyes as big as saucers, hand over her mouth, cabinet latch covered in her fingerprints. Dang It'ly plate broke itself : both of us there arguing, opening and slamming cabinet doors. See, Lolla cooked and I washed, and she wanted her fried okra be served up in something fancy when I said we could dish it from the selfsame skillet she cooked it in as I did not want to be slaving all night over a sink of dirty dishes.

So God was divvying out part of the guilt to Lolla in a way that made sense to me: Mama and the yard, all along, embarrassed Lolla more than it ever did me. So Trust His Will was what I figured. He knew how to get to any a one in wondrous ways.

Linwood, come late summer, got all the mileage he could from spinning his Hollywood hubcaps, and went back to tinkering underneath his truck. I couldn't help but think it was a good place for him. Like the boys at school say some girl's so ugly she needs a paper sack over her head, Linwood needed a whole truck. That's mean, and I should take it back, so here's the truth: With Linwood, it wasn't so much I judged him because he wasn't too hot to look at, it was more the heebie-jeebie feeling he gave me. I admit I let my eyes decide straight off he wasn't a joy to behold. I admit that sometimes out of sheer laziness I reckon things up quickly without milling it around in thought too much. It's the simplest route, even if it isn't right, and it'll get you in trouble. It's what

God and church and Catholics say not to do. And the Ten Commandments, if you bunch them all together, let you know your actions shouldn't jump from what feels first-natural but should be sprung from your best insides even if you need to dig around for a minute to turn them up. Then you won't be nasty and hateful spewing out a pack of lies, and not honoring people like your father and mother. And you won't snatch up stuff of somebody else's, or covet your neighbor or anything, just because your greedy eyes want it. This was clear to me; they wouldn't have let me be Confirmed so early if it wasn't.

~

Linwood had a funny look on his face when I walked up on him doing it. "Don't you tell your Mama," he said. Linwood was smashing up the It'ly plate with a hammer on his jackhorse.

It was midday late summer too hot for anything to move. The heat, and the high sun overhead, made everything stock-still and blazed down upon with no shadows--the fields, the pawpaw, the pecan, the Oxnard weeds all around. The road burned empty and bright deserted in its own hot haze and thistle. The bowed chrome hubcaps reflected the heat and every strung-up spoon and spatula and ladle hung still and shiny. Wasn't one magpie out anywhere pecking. Not a flutter or flit of a wing in or out the pawpaw.

I looked quick to our flowerbed; Mama's Italy plate was sunk there still. I stepped up to the jackhorse, and Linwood had an It'ly plate that was a dead ringer for Mama's. He took his hat off, swiped his forehead, and looked straight at me. His eyes were wide circles that showed something else beneath. It was the same as looking into pond water that lets you see what all there is to catch fishing. He had his hammer

hoisted over the plate, and I didn't even start in yelling.

“ Lookie, Jessanne, if your mama sees this one here, she isn't going to feel her real It'ly plate so special. I first got it to give her as a present--then got to thinking. It was propped up at Hop's shop, and anyone seen your Mama's plate could've bought it up. Like my own mama or someone. Good thing I got it.”

He looked into the pawpaw branches, his mouth a straight a line. The wine bladder, hung still, reflected blue sky and high clouds on silver. “This one isn't blessed by no Pope or anything. It didn't belong to Precious, or no one like it. I think it'd just make her sad that a phony one showed up.” Linwood looked at his hammer.

I leaned against the grill of his truck, didn't say anything, couldn't look at him direct. The wine- balloon rotated a bit in the pawpaw showing a thin white cloud that traveled, and blurred. Then it filled up like a mirror, solid blue. Linwood lifted his hammer, and his denim work shirt pulled snug across his shoulders. I let him smash that plate up but good. Crushing the gold roses planted deep inside to gold dust, pounding the ruby glass into red shards and splinters. A film of powder coated the toes of his boots.

When the late rains kicked in hard and summer ended, Linwood disappeared. Oxnard said she sent him out on an errand though she knew better, and he never came back, and she just hoped he didn't get picked up or run anything over. I figured he spun his Hollywood hubcaps to dumping grounds elsewhere, which was fine by me.

Mama's It'ly plate around the flowerbed sunk further in the ground. I helped it a bit with my toe, pressing it into rain- soft mud when no one was looking. The magpies dwindled, then went sudden away. The wine bladder lost its air, and Lolla yanked off

what she could of Linwood's mo- biles. The hubcaps were nailed solid in place. Mama yelled that whacking them off the fence would only tear the fence up, it was already on its last leg and then who was going to fix it. Her frayed up sunhat hung on the hook of the bathroom door, and Lolla started invited Pammie Gudachek over again after choir. Mama's speckled Koo-lade cup filled on the fence with rainwater.

Of course Linwood's jackhorse stayed right where it was, under the pecan, his hammer rusting. One good rain washed up bits of the smashed It'ly plate on the ground beneath it: sparkly remains of red and gold. The shiny shards and slivers risen on the mud could've been a message of forgiveness from St. Bernadette. Or maybe dead Precious was in cahoots with St. Bernadette and they were sending me a vision.

I stared at the glittery mud and listened for a message inside my head. The screen door slammed and Mama came blathering out to the fence, Oxnard waddling out to meet her. Can't no saints compete with that. I turned the water hose on; it sputtered and juttered up a cough of water, and drowned out the blather of Mama and Babe. I climbed up on the fence, thumbbed the hose nozzle, and turned a high arc of water onto Linwood's mud. I looked at the sparklies hard. I listened. I squinted.