

Naked Like Any Country Baby

by Jessie Roy

Residential College Creative Writing
Honors Thesis in Fiction, 2010

for Whitney, bronze & peach & candied oranges

Naked Like Any Country Baby

“You seen anything yet?” George was sitting shotgun with his bare beefy arm out the window of my sea-green 1949 Buick Super.

“Nothing but that colored place ten miles back.”

“Look out for a diner. Or a barbecue joint. They got those down here, don’t they? Damn it, Rich, I’m starving.” George put down another swallow of beer and belched long and loud. We were coming from a funeral in LaFontaine, deep in Cajun country—an old maiden aunt that neither George nor me had met more than twice. All the cousins drew lots to see who had to go represent the family, and the two of us came up short. I didn’t mind. There was a girl in Shreveport who meant to marry me whether I liked it or not, so I was glad to get out of town for the weekend. Two hundred and fifty miles later, we still had one last day off work, plenty of beer, and no place to be in any kind of a hurry.

The truck in front of us was kicking off gray smoke so I hit my brakes to let it pull ahead. Through the smoke I saw the sun catch on something metal. When it all cleared up, there was a tin shack with rippling heat floating out the windows and some picnic tables out front. There was a sign too, just a square piece of wood propped up against the building, painted with the pink outline of a pig complete with curlicue tail. What sold me

were the girls sitting at the tables.

I pulled over and parked at the side of the road. George flipped his bottle out the open window before getting out and stretching his arms wide. There were five girls, four brunettes and a redhead, and one of them was holding a baby. We were too far back to see if they were pretty or not, or how old they were. I tugged at my shirt, hoping to make it fit better, but it stayed old and frayed and too loose around the shoulders. While we were stumbling down the hill toward the shack, drunk and tired and hungry, one of the brunettes stood up, wiped her hands on her skirt, and smiled. Her hair was braided and coiled, old-fashioned, and her dress looked homemade even from ten yards off. Her body wasn't stylish either, too skinny in places, wide flat hips counterbalancing her small breasts. But the way she wore the dress, the way she stood in her clunky square-toed shoes and reached up to adjust her braids, it was the most sensual thing I'd ever seen. She had star quality. I wanted to run over and tell her that, because I thought it might get her to sleep with me. But she motioned to the redheaded girl and then they went into the barbecue pit together. I knew that even if she fell for whatever line I came up with, her girl friend would laugh at me, and I was in no mood to get laughed at by some cross-eyed farm girl.

While I was staring after them, George walloped me hard on the arm. I don't think he meant to knock me off my feet, but he was a lot bigger than me and drunk besides, so I went rolling sideways down the hill. For a minute I thought it was the thunderbolt of love, that or the pretty brunette's boyfriend. I only rolled far enough to get dirty. Then I picked myself up and popped George on the shoulder.

"Nice try, shithead. Which one of those girls do you like?" he asked.

"With the braids. The one that just went inside." I thought about the delicate

insides of her, unfolding soft and pink and sweet like the heart of a ripe fig. “So you keep off her, you hear?”

“Sure thing, little cousin.” He squeezed my shoulder in one of his paws. “We gonna get you laid by a earthy country girl. Girls like that, they got big ol’ muscly legs, they crush you up in between ‘em. Nothing like that skinny high school girl you been going around with.”

“You gone on about Sharon enough this trip, anybody’d think it was you she was fixing to marry.”

“Well, I know Sharon, and I know you, and I figure she’s goin’ to catch you before too long. Might as well scare up some country pussy first.”

“Shush, George, they’ll hear you.” I smacked George on the arm to hush him up while we passed the girls at the picnic table. They were all looking at us, clear and frank, like farm people sometimes do with strangers. They only looked away when the baby started bawling. His momma had a green dress on, her black hair piled up on top of her head, and a smear of red barbecue sauce across her chin. She picked up the little boy, just toddling age with a shock of black hair, and fed him a spoonful of mashed-up beans. The other two girls—one stout, with a round flat Spanish face, the other skinny and rangy and about thirteen—whispered something I couldn’t hear over the little boy’s crying.

“Evenin’, ladies,” George said, his hands in his dungaree pockets. “That’s a hearty little child you got there.”

I almost snickered but didn’t dare. The stout girl grinned, and then they all started giggling, so I felt like I could laugh too. I was glad George had said something first. It was like being in the zoo, the way they looked at us, like they were waiting for the baboon

to wake up and do something funny. George cleared his throat.

“How’s that barbecue?”

“Not bad,” drawled the youngest one. “We just waiting for Jeanne and Lizzy to come back with some more.” The stout girl nudged her. I wondered if they were sisters. They could have been mother and daughter, if you squinted. The sun was so bright I was doing just that. Even the tonic was melting out of my hair. I wished for my hat, but it was locked up in the trunk, and besides I was dressed up like my ma hates for the weekend, blue jeans and a white undershirt, and I would have looked stupid.

“You want to go see about some pig, Rich?” George said.

They giggled again. I nodded, wiped the sweat out of my eyes with the back of my hand, and wandered off to the right, over toward the shack. Columns of shimmering hot air floated out of the vents and open windows, which even open like they were didn’t let in much light. The thick, tomatoey barbecue smell was so strong it was choking out my other senses, anyway. I had to stumble in, blind, my hand cupped over my eyes to keep the smoke out, so that I barely registered when the redhead pushed past me into the open air. I blinked a few times until my eyes got used to it. Then I took my hand away, and there she was, and me lurching like a drunk fool.

Even in the dim light of the shack I could see the sweat standing off her skin like sparks off a live wire. She glowed, bronze and peach, and I imagined her body without the shabby gray dress, all of it that beautiful color. In that first second I absorbed every detail of her, down to the black pins that held the coil of her hair at the nape of her neck. I was photographic paper and she was the brightest thing around.

She was holding up a tan ceramic plate so the counter girl, a little Negro not twelve

years old with a gum-wrapper necklace, could heap pulled pork onto it. The girl with the braids was turned a little away from me, so her face was in profile, and she stood so still and looked so noble that the sweet slope of her forehead, curve of her nose, childish roundness of her chin, might have been a queen's profile on an old-time coin.

I hitched my dungarees, tucked my shirt in a little tighter, and stepped forward. She trained those big green eyes of hers on me, wary, scared almost, but I thought I saw a flicker there that might have been something else. I took another step toward her.

"Can I ask you a question, miss?" I said.

She nodded her head, looking up at me under her lashes, sweat pooling in the thumbprint of her upper lip.

"How long is your hair? When you let it down, I mean."

She smiled and looked away, pressed her lips together, then turned back to me.

"Who wants to know?"

I have always been bad at talking to girls, and I had nothing lined up to say after that first question. For a moment I thought she was telling me to get lost, but the smile said something else.

"Me," I said. "I want to know."

She balanced the plate of pulled pork in her left hand, twisted her shoulders away from me, and drew a line across her lower back with her right thumbnail. The fabric pulled tight and for one second I saw the contours of her muscles, the dip of her spine.

"Rich!"

"What?" I said.

"Get me some ribs, okay? I could eat a horse right about now." George stuck his

head into the shack. “Hell, you never know with these places, might well end up doin’ just that. Oh, how d’you do, miss. Excuse my language.” Usually George didn’t bother me much, but right then I wanted to haul him out by his shirt-front and warn him off.

“Oh, you all right,” she said. She gave him the same little smile she’d given me, and a wave crashed in my belly. Then she looked at me, one long slow look, and strode out the door, proud and tall in her square-toed shoes.

George snorted, but I wouldn’t look at him. Then he snorted again and pinched my arm. “Richard Wyatt Wallace, you’re chasin’ poon, and us coming from a funeral. Didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Shut your mouth. It ain’t a real funeral anyway, we barely knew her.” I thought about the old woman in the box in that hot dim church, her old women friends, their bound-up white hair and long bulky skirts. Only yesterday, but it seemed like forever, the way time stretches out in July, in a fast car, when there are strange places to see and pretty girls to meet.

George ribbed me some more while we ordered our food, right in front of the little colored girl, but she looked like she’d heard it all before. When we carried it out, the girls were still huddled around the table. I tried to catch the eye of the girl with the braids, but she wouldn’t look at me. None of them would. They all looked straight down at their pulled pork, except the woman in the green dress, who I saw now had to be their chaperone. She looked me in the eye, a mean look, but didn’t say anything.

“What the fuck was that?” George hissed in my ear.

“I think we offended them,” I said, steering us toward the farthest table from them.

“Who knows how they do things down here.”

“I guess they don’t want city boys stealing their juicy little farm girls out from under their Frenchy noses,” he said. “Prob’ly eats ‘em alive.”

I laughed a little, but mainly I was trying to think of an excuse to go back over there, something to say. I didn’t want to just give up, but I didn’t see any way to push through. She hadn’t even said ten words to me, I realized, and she might never say any more. I might never hear that sweet soft foreign voice again. I was twenty-two and soft-headed and every girl seemed like the end of the world.

When we drove off, I looked back longer than I should have, and let the Super drift off into the field to my left. I careened back onto the road with the brilliant flash of her skin popping behind my eyes. George spat out the window and I shifted up, up, up until we were carving our own path south into the unknown.

We went looking for some fun once we checked into the motel and all that. George’s idea was just to drive around until we saw something to do, but I was sick of driving, so he took the wheel. It was a Friday night, around nine o’clock when we set out, and I kept thinking of the lights and noise of the Red River District in Shreveport: the bright clean cars, women in fur all year round on the arms of men in sharp white suits, the swell of violins drifting out of a hotel restaurant and the clatter of good clean shoes on pavement. I could never afford any of that, of course, but I took Sharon with me once, just to listen. I wanted to tell her all about the places I was going to take her one day when I got rich, the clothes I was going to buy her. It was only the second time we went out together, just the two of us. She got bored pretty quick, though, so I took her bowling instead.

I bought her cokes and paid for her bowling shoes and kissed her chastely only letting my hands drift a little bit until finally, on our fourth date, Sharon let me screw her in the back of the Super. She lay still the whole time except for that split second when she lifted her hips to let me take off her all-American white panties. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth when I slid into her. Just for that moment she looked like a little girl. Then when it was all over she just scolded me for the wet spot I left on her dress, and made me lend her my jacket so she could cover it up. I never got that jacket back. She wore it all around town like it meant that we meant something. But we didn't. I was going places and I wasn't taking a wet blanket like Sharon with me.

I couldn't stop myself thinking about the girl with the braids. If I took her to the Red River District, would she understand what I meant by it? I thought so. I thought she would look perfect in a mink coat with a string of pearls around her throat. She had that kind of face. I felt like I knew her already. Now I'm not sure how much of that I was making up for myself, looking at a farm girl and imagining a princess.

While I was thinking, George was getting us lost. There were no landmarks to speak of—a tiny grocery, a post office, a school, and then just farmland as far as the eye could see. Every now and again we'd pass another car, or a couple of little colored kids walking along the side of the road, but otherwise there was just nothing.

“Got to be something in this damn parish,” George said. He was chewing on a stick of the jerky we'd brought with us. “Got to be someplace to drink and meet some girls.”

“Well, stop and ask somebody,” I said.

“You see anybody to ask?” He was right, but I kept my eyes peeled anyway. Time was ticking on and I could feel a black mood settling on my shoulders. Cool air whipped

in through the windows. Just when I was about to tell George to turn back, he hit me too hard with his elbow.

“See that?” Up ahead, in the scattered glow from the headlights, was a crossroads. A few buildings, nothing special, but one of them had lights on in it and one lone farm truck parked out in front. We pulled up to it, George parked the Super, and we both looked in to a small crowd of white farm people, on wooden stools or benches, laughing and dancing and drinking. The place was rough-hewn, bare wood walls like a little country church.

“Should have known. You know they all drink like nobody’s business down here.”

I shrugged. I wanted to feel sorry for myself, I guess, disappear into the crowd, and George and I were going to get no end of hassle in a place like this. All I wanted was to put some liquor down and listen to George talk shit for a few hours while I got good and drunk.

Inside we ordered a bottle of whiskey and set ourselves down in a booth in the far corner. Some people stared—it was clear everybody knew each other except for us—but they were mostly too busy throwing dice or dancing or just too blind drunk to bother us. The place was a Papist Den of Sin like you see in those little pamphlets from the Baptists—women shouting and whooping and sitting on men’s laps, twirls of smoke from their roll-up cigarettes floating up to the rough wood-beam ceiling of the bar. Some of the men drinking and gambling were barely older than my little thirteen-year-old cousin. Over at one of the tables, a baby girl sat on her mother’s feet, picking up handfuls of sawdust from the floor and rubbing them between her chubby fingers.

“Here.” A scrawny old woman brought a bottle of Virginia Lightning to our table,

along with two glasses, a metal pitcher of water and a bowl of gravelly ice. I knew better than to ask for soda water. George paid her and she left us to drink our flat cheap corn whiskey.

George started to pick up his glass and then set it right back down again. “Look who we got.”

I turned around. Over by the door were the two girls from this afternoon, the redhead and the girl with the braids, only she’d uncoiled them so they lay flat down her back. They were talking to two country boys in mud-brown shirts. The girl with the braids had her back against the wall, her arms folded across her stomach, and one foot propped up behind her. She was smiling a little, like one of the boys was telling her a joke. I stood up and made my way through the tangle of people. I didn’t look back, but I knew George Wallace was right behind me.

“Howdy,” I said to the boys, looking from one to the other, straight in the eye. “You mind if we cut in?”

For a second I thought there was going to be a fight or something and I wished we were somewhere else, on neutral ground, instead of here right in front of these boys’ brothers and cousins and friends. But they backed off, snickering. As they walked on into the bar one of them said “dumb Aggie trash,” good and loud, but I pretended not to hear. I turned to the girl with the braids.

“What a chance,” I said, “you and me both being here.”

“Where else?” she said. “Nothing else to do this time of night in the whole parish practically. Monsieur Chauvin, he do good business ‘cause everybody have to come here.”

This time I asked her name. “Jeanne,” she told me, “Jeanne Alcide.” Her shoes

were muddy and I picked out a constellation of mosquito bites on her left wrist.

“I’m Rich Wallace.”

She nodded, and looked over at something behind me, her eyes a little fearful, her soft lips pressed together. I turned and saw the two country boys at a table with a few other men, most of them older than us, and all of them staring at George and me like we were Martians. I felt a soft touch on my hand and turned back to Jeanne.

“Mister Wallace,” she said, brushing the back of my right hand with the pads of her fingers, “how about you and your friend take us for a drive?”

“*Vieux* Gustin, he keep her on a short leash, you know.” Lizzy grinned so that her mouth seemed to take up her whole face and levered an elbow into Jeanne’s side. George was driving and I was leaning over the seat to look at the two of them, almost featureless in the dark.

Jeanne grabbed Lizzy’s arm and held it away from her, smiling, like sisters would do. Then she said something in French to Lizzy, soft and playful, that got a teasing giggle in response. She turned back to me. “My daddy’s strict, see, he keep me in the house most days. Lizzy and me, we being wild girls today.”

“How wild?” I asked.

They looked at each other. I saw their profiles laid out in front of me plain as a cameo. Then Lizzy leaned forward in her seat and kissed me quick on the cheek. She sat back and they both laughed, but I didn’t. I was watching Jeanne. I knew who I wanted.

“Aw, c’mon, don’t forget me,” George said, leaning his head back over the seat. I was looking at the girls too, so all I saw was Jeanne’s hand clamp over her mouth before I

felt the car slam into something, then careen right over it. George must have stepped on the brake because suddenly the car was stopping hard and I was thrown into the dash. Then stillness, then a scream. I reached into the backseat and gripped a small rough hand.

“Y’all okay?” I asked.

Everybody said they were, but the girls sounded shaken.

“What in the Devil’s own hell was that?” George asked. A child, my stomach told me, an innocent child, so that I was afraid to get out and look. I held onto Jeanne’s hand.

“*Une chevreuille,*” she said.

George’s foot had been so heavy on the gas that we didn’t just hit the deer, we jumped it a little and started to drive over it. Otherwise it would have been good eating, he said, but the front left tire had popped its belly open and crushed the flanks, so we might as well leave it there in the road. I made myself look at the thing, outlined in the headlights, and my stomach kicked over backward—all staring eyes, splintered bone, dirty gray guts spilling out like pillow ticking. Soft-hearted and soft-stomached, that was me.

Even though it was dark, and she was quiet, I could feel Jeanne crying beside me. I was happy to have someone to comfort, something to do besides just stare at guts and bone.

“What’s the matter, Jeannie?” I asked.

She sniffled a little, and then in this high-pitched child’s voice, she said “I just like deer, is all.”

“Me too,” George said, “to eat, anyway.”

Lizzy laughed. I could feel Jeanne stiffen. I reached out my arm to her, took her

shoulder, and she took one small falling step toward me and let me catch her in my arms. The top of her head fit just under my chin and I smelled her hair, a rich odor almost like the smell of cooking vegetables. Her dress was puffed out a little at the shoulders and I crushed the fabric under my hands. There was no noise except for the car rumbling.

We got back in the Super. This time we swapped, silently, Lizzy up front with George and me in the back with Jeanne. George backed us up and we drove around the body of the deer, out on into the country in the black dark with three-quarters of a tank of gas. The headlights lit yellow pools ahead of us, packed dirt and gravel and arching trees. I slid my palm flat across the seat toward Jeanne, hoping to touch something, hand or thigh or the rough fabric of her dress, and just as my heart was giving up I touched her cool calloused fingers and she opened her hand to me.

“It’s bad, bad luck,” she said.

“That what they say around here?”

“No,” she shook her head, “that what I say. Bad luck to kill a mama deer.”

I leaned over and kissed her, while the car bumped and grumbled onward. Her lips were soft like the lips of every other girl I’d kissed. Back then I didn’t know that this was a thing that women did, they trapped you with their softness, their smallness and scaredness. While I was kissing her I was thinking how big and tough she made me feel, how powerful, and I just wanted her to adore me. She was nothing like Sharon—she was purer, sweeter, more what a woman should be, and I wanted to give her everything just to see that grateful look on her face.

So I told her about the Red River District. You ever been to Shreveport? I asked her, and of course she said no, so I told her about the white suits and the violins, shiny

shoes and perfumed hair, like it was a fairy tale.

“Sounds like something right out of the movies,” she said, holding my hand tight.

“Like something you wouldn’t believe, even when you were looking right at it.”

And she told me how it was, cooking and scrubbing and planting all the time. They didn’t even have a clothes washer, not even a radiator, just a washboard and a wood stove, like the last fifty years hadn’t even happened down here. She told me about the worry of never knowing if the crop would turn out, never knowing how you would eat that winter. She let me run my fingers over the callouses on her palm, so rough and so wrong on her smooth soft skin. I had this vision of her in a bright shining kitchen, fixed up with everything she could ever need, smiling at me, kissing my fingertips and telling me how much she loved me and how happy she was. I held on to that vision for years afterward.

In the middle of our talking, George had pulled over again and he and Lizzy were kissing and necking in the front seat. Lizzy kept making little moany noises and I was scared they would get so hot and heavy it would spook Jeanne. She let me kiss her, hold her hand and touch her neck and shoulder, but I didn’t try any further. Ever since that first moment she looked at me in the barbecue pit I had known what kind of girl she was. I knew what I was getting myself into.

“What time is it?” Lizzy said suddenly. I tried to make out the numbers on my watch but I couldn’t see a goddamned thing.

“George, cut the lights on.” I got out and walked around to the front of the car, held my wrist up to the headlights. “It’s coming up on one o’clock.”

“Oh, *bon Dieu*, I got to get home.” Lizzy rearranged some cloth in the dark, maybe fastening buttons, I couldn’t see. I got back in the car.

“Naw,” George said, fumbling with something, “I thought y’all were wild tonight.”

“This is as wild as I get, *cher bébé*.” Lizzy said. “Now come on, it’s up this road a ways and left at the—you know, *les rues qui traverse, cette chose-ça*.”

“The junction,” Jeanne said. “Liz, I can’t go home.”

“Sure you can,” I said. “We’ll get you home safe.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. You don’t know old Gustin. I’ll get worse than a beating.” She squeezed my hand. My heart was pumping so loud I thought she must have heard it, or felt it in my hands, the rushing heat of it.

“Aw, you come with me,” Lizzy said. “You know my mama likes you. You stay with us. Tell him you come to help me look after her.”

They showed us where to go. It still looked like nowhere when we let them out of the car, but Lizzy said it was just a short walk to her house. I got out so I could move around to the front seat, but mostly to get one more moment with Jeanne. I ran my left hand up her arm to the shoulder, to the neck, to the bare skin there that was so warm and so fine against my nervous palm.

“Listen, Jeannie, you come wait out here in the morning. I’ll be by in the Super.” I grabbed her around the waist, pulled her close, her breasts against my t-shirt. “Come on. I’ll take you to the Red River District and all. I mean it. You and me.”

“*Mon mari, l’américain*,” she said, teasingly. I kissed her. When I let go, the air against my lips was an alien feeling, like waking up from a dream.

As soon as I slammed the car door, George reached over and walloped me hard on the knee.

“What’d I tell you about country girls, huh?”

“Cut it out, George.”

“How far you get?”

“I said cut it out.”

“Didn’t look like much from here. Come on, I saw her looking at you. Pretty as a picture and wild underneath, huh? How far she let you get?”

I walloped him back, harder. “Goddamnit, George, cut it out. Goddamn hell.”

“Jesus,” he said, “what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.” I shamed him silent. It was a childish thing to do and I knew it, but he was looking at this big and true and joyous thing bursting up from me and he was naming it small and dirty. George was closer than a cousin to me—our daddies were brothers, but we might as well have been the way we were raised, four doors down from each other our entire lives. But right then it was like we were strangers, like he was looking at me and seeing a schoolboy with mud behind his ears instead of the man I was. In my heart I saw that my past was George and my future was Jeanne.

“George,” I said.

“What is it now,” he said, and I thought suddenly that maybe I had upset him, maybe I had made him feel small too.

“I just don’t like you talking like that about Jeanne. Not about her. She’s not like that.”

“Oh, hell, Rich, sure she is. Hanging around honkytonks late at night, getting in a car with us—sure she is.”

“She ain’t either. Jesus. She knew she could trust us.”

“Like she knew she could trust those raggedy-ass farm boys back at the bar, huh?”

“Shut it, George, or I’ll shut it for you. I mean it.”

“Fine. Fine. You think what you want.” He was silent for a minute as we tracked on into the night. Then he sighed. “I just don’t see what’s so great about some backwoods Frenchy trash—”

“Shit, George—”

“—when you dropped Sharon like she had the clap or something.”

“I’m sick of talking about Sharon.”

“She’s a nice girl, Rich!” He banged on the steering wheel for emphasis. “She’s a neighborhood girl, she’s pretty—and sure, she must be touched in the head ’cause she likes you, but what in the hell is wrong with her?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“You ain’t ready to get hitched, fine. But you’re doing a shit job of sowing your wild oats.”

I rolled my eyes. The truth was, I hated that Sharon was a neighborhood girl. Everything was old news to her. I hated the sound of her gum and her bobbed hair and the way she and my mama talked behind my back. And Jeanne, the way she looked at me like everything I said was new and magical, her sweetness and her goodness and her country manners—how could I go back and marry Sharon, remembering that there were girls like Jeanne in the world and one of them loved me?

But I didn’t say anything to George. It seemed wrong to give my reasons out loud where George could twist them, make them petty and foolish. Eventually he reached out and squeezed the back of my neck in his big hand.

“Kid, you know you’re my family, and I love you, even if you are a dumb sonofabitch.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Here, fetch me a beer out the backseat,” he said, and we drank and talked about nothing until we got back to the motel. Everything was closed up by then, and we had to wake up the old man to let us in. He shuffled out in a brown sackcloth nightie with a black coat thrown over his shoulders, jowls dripping down past his jaw, and swung the door open for us without ever quite opening his eyes.

I stripped down and laid out, just a thin lump of cotton between me and the wooden slats of the bed. I had one moment to see myself driving the Super, my hand on Jeanne’s thigh, taking us back up north to Shreveport. I could almost feel the prickle of her goosebumps under my fingers, the ends of her long loose hair brushing my arm as they blew in the wind, the engine kicking with life. Then I closed my eyes and I was asleep.

I woke up at dawn with a dry mouth and a headache. It was one of those hangovers where every inch of your skin feels bruised and raw, like somebody’s been whacking on you with a meat mallet. George was still asleep with his yellowing sheet pulled up to his eyebrows.

“George,” I said softly, but he didn’t answer, so I got up and found my clothes from the night before. I buttoned my jeans, tucked in my shirt, and laced up my boots. When I opened the door, the sunlight hit me in a warm blast, smoothing over all my aching skin. I got into the Super and cranked her into life.

At first I was just driving. I coasted up and down a few dead ends, roads that ended

suddenly at a clump of trees or a big wide field or a stretch of bayou. I kept expecting to see that deer still busted open, covered in flies, but I never did. Then there came a piece of road that felt familiar, and a patch of dappled shade opened up and I saw her.

Jeanne was sitting under a tree, eating a slice of cold cornbread out of a folded napkin. Her hair was loose and long falling black and gold to her waist. She looked up and saw me and I wondered if she had expected me or just hoped, because she was all calm composure but her eyes had a bright yearning in them.

I helped her to her feet, her rough little fingers so small in my hand, and we looked at each other in the half-shadow of a tree, smiling. A nervous joy seized me and I just stood there, smiling like a fool, wanting to kiss her and wanting to memorize her and wanting to lift her up to the sky.

“How you do?” she asked.

“Just fine,” I said. “How you do?”

“Good.” She put her little hand on my chest and looked up into my eyes. A shiver like a rippling creek ran through me from my scalp to the soles of my feet. “Rich, would you do me a kindness?”

“Sure,” I said. “Anything.”

“Take me home,” she said, and the creek turned into a river and I shook all over with the fear of losing her. I saw myself driving back up to the motel with nothing beside me in the front seat but air.

“Oh, no, *cher*. Just for a minute,” she said. “I got to get my things.”

It wasn't far, just a ways down a dirt road, two farms over. I was watching her out

of the corner of my eye, watching the wrinkles at the corner of her eye for any sign to what she was thinking. She didn't say anything until we hit what might have been a turn-off and might have just been a trampled-down patch of earth.

“Turn here,” she said. “And drive slow.”

I crept up along the rocky path as slowly as I could, but the Super still made all kinds of noise. Jeanne was looking out the window with her fingertips pressed to the glass. It was a chilly morning and the glass must have been so cold against her skin. I didn't know what she was looking for. I couldn't have known. But we turned a clump of trees and there was a small white house, paint peeling away from the sideboards. Glossy leaves dusted the ground, sparkling in the cold morning sun, on account of a fig tree just in sight beside the house.

Jeanne was still looking out the window so I kept driving. Slowly a wide brown field came into view, striped up and down like a giant piece of licorice candy.

Jeanne saw the man before I did.

“Stop the car,” she said, so I hit the brake and the clutch. She slid out of the car and ran to the door of the house. Her black hair lay loose down her back and she was so beautiful as she ran. Then I saw the man in the field. Her old man, I thought, or a brother maybe. He was just a brown-black blur sticking out of a pair of tall white boots. There were a couple of young boys behind him, or maybe girls, kicking the dirt in over the furrows. I watched them, trying to see what they were doing. I grew up a city boy, the son of an oilman. I'm no farmer. I kept watching until I heard a baby scream and the house door slam open.

There was Jeanne, walking tall, a brown dress slung over one shoulder and a black

dress over the other. She had a little cloth bundle in one hand, and she looked straight ahead, at me, or through me, like Sodom and Gomorrah were burning behind her. A little boy followed her out. He was screaming at the top of his tiny lungs but she didn't seem to hear. He was maybe three or four, naked like any country baby, and his feet and hands and face were dirty, and his little willie hung pale and useless between his legs. His hair was just black fuzz over his forehead. He stood there and screamed but he didn't come any closer, just stood there, screaming. Jeanne opened the back door of the Super and put her dresses and her bundle away. Then she came around to the passenger side and got in next to me. She looked at me. Something in my heart fell all the way to China when I looked her in the eyes. She was so beautiful. It was right then that I knew the boy was hers. There was no mistaking it. It was written on her face, in the lines around her mouth.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked, her voice flat and quiet. “Drive.”

I sat there a moment longer just looking at her. Then I looked to the field. The man was still there, crouched down with his hands in the dirt, his two helpers beside him. I saw a movement in the corner of my eye and I looked to the house. The woman in the green dress stood in the door, her hair piled on top of her head, watching us. Finally she stepped out toward the little boy and gathered him up in her arms. I guess that was what I was waiting for. I couldn't just leave him alone. It was hard enough to shift up and drive out of there when I did. It was only when we had almost reached the main road, and the house was well out of sight, that Jeanne looked back. She put her fingertips to the glass and turned her face away from me. I thought she might be crying. She was so young, so beautiful. I couldn't have known about any of it. About the little boy, or the man in the field. Then she turned back to me and her eyes were dry. I kept on driving, while the sun

climbed up and up into the sky.

Everything was different for me after that. It was like finding out that something everybody agreed on, like arithmetic or grammar, had been wrong the whole time. Because I loved her. From the first moment I saw her, I loved her. Later on I told myself I didn't, that I had just needed a wife to get my ma and pop off my back, but if that was true I could have just married Sharon back home and not this farm girl from nowhere, this dark and pretty gypsy. I didn't marry Jeanne, anyway. By the time we got back to the motel, her mouth had smoothed out and her face had the same stillness I'd first seen on her, but I'm not stupid. What she did, for a woman, that was like a man killing somebody, I think. It makes you hard.

The look on George's face when he saw me and Jeanne sitting there the way we were, it was so sorry and pitying that I almost wished I had come back alone. I wished I had dumped her out in front of that little white shack and come back alone. It was what I should have done.

Nowheres and Nothing

When I was living in Ferris, burning my way through one job and the next, almost joining the army every six months or so, there were plans to build a Piggly Wiggly in this old field off US 29. They raked out the ground, but something happened with the politics and it never came to anything, it was just a vacant lot. I used to go out there on weekends to drink a little and meet girls. Mostly it was high school kids—sometimes I'd recognize one or the other, somebody who'd played Belle Rose High in football, or from the ag fairs I used to judge. But I hung with Leroy, and he didn't like them to stick around too long after they bought what they came for.

The girls weren't as pretty as I remembered from high school, but maybe that was because I'd been around a little in the meantime, seen Leroy's class of woman. I don't know what it was about him—Steve McQueen chin, Italian leather boots, good drugs, or just the motorcycle—but the women who hung off him had breasts white as clean cotton and wide round hips, go-go boots and the longest hair I've ever seen. Women thought he was the best looking of any of us, I could tell. Buddy, Sonny, John Simon and me barely had a chance.

We were drinking Coors out of bottles, shucked into our jackets because it was cold for March. Buddy and John Simon had a fire going, just a little spitting thing. It kept

putting up smoke from the damp wood they were trying to feed it on. The five of us, a fire, Leroy letting us smoke his weed for free—this was a good Saturday even though the cold meant all the girls had their coats zipped up. All the girls except Adelle. She was wearing a powder blue dress that buttoned up the front, ribbon trim at the waist, a little girl's dress, but she left it open at the front more than her momma would have liked. Sonny had his daddy's car backed up to the fire, the hatchback hatched up, and she was sitting with her legs dangling, smacking these white plastic shoes against her heels.

“You hear what Marsha was saying earlier?” Leroy asked.

“Marsha who?” Sonny lit a cigarette and handed his bottle of Old Crow to Adelle. It was hard to tell when they were on and when they were off, but they looked to be on tonight. Her hand was in his jacket pocket, anyway.

“Marsha Jackson. The majorette chick. She was saying the Dead are playing Duke next month. She wants to get a van and all drive up to North Carolina and see 'em.”

“Sounds like more of her bullshit. Who wants to see the Dead?” Sonny said.

“What happened to your expanded consciousness, man?” Buddy hit him on the arm with an empty beer bottle and ducked the swing he got for it. Sonny's daddy pulled him out of USL after he got arrested in some two-bit demonstration, and the hippie jokes just kept on coming after that. He didn't look it, with the crew cut his daddy made him get, but for us then, anything that wasn't snap beans and accordions was real youth counterculture.

“*Bec moi tchu*, Buddy.”

“Anyway, I told her I'd ask around, see who wanted to go. Y'all interested?”

Everybody kind of shrugged, and Adelle said “Sure, sounds like fun.”

“Sorry, *cher*,” Leroy grinned, “your momma would have me locked up for

kidnapping. You couldn't pay me to take you over a state line.”

“What do you want to go on that dumb trip for?” Sonny asked her. “It's just one of Leroy's dumb fucking plans. Just wait 'til he gets Marsha to screw him, the whole thing'll fall through.”

They weren't what you would call friends, not since Leroy broke Sonny's arm. Sonny bought half an ounce on credit, the price went up, and he wouldn't pay the extra five bucks on principle, so Leroy busted his arm. Not on purpose—he was hanging off the ladder on the water tower, just off the ground, so when Leroy shoved him his right arm got caught in the rungs and went crack like a wishbone snapping. I felt like I should wish for something right when it happened, so I wished for the two of them to grow up and quit tussling *comme des petits*. It was that or wish for Beth Frederick to take me back, but I didn't think of that quick enough. That son of a bitch Leroy didn't even help me carry Sonny back to his car so somebody could drive him to the hospital.

At least Sonny didn't get his daddy involved. He could have, but it would have come out sooner or later that Sonny's arm got broke over drugs, so he put it out that he fell doing a daredevil stunt off the water tower. Adelle set her sights on him after that, sixteen and too young for me even, I thought. Or maybe not. Her big sisters were more my age—Cathy, the oldest, was married now, to some town boy with a clerking job at the Ferris Winn-Dixie, neither of them too smart or too good-looking. She'd been something at sixteen, though, or even younger, like she grew into her womanliness when other girls were still waiting for the first buds on their tits. Adelle had the same thing going.

It was her size that made her seem so young—my hand from heel to fingertip would have reached almost from one shoulder to the other across the collarbones. She

carried this white plastic clutch purse with her lipstick in it, but it was always getting dirt and cigarette ash on it, so she had to polish it on her skirt. That's what she was doing now. Then she opened the clutch, took out her Virginia Slims, and tapped the hard pack against her palm.

“Well, maybe I feel like going to a concert. I could find a way to get there. My momma can go to hell for all I care, I'll go anyway.”

“Hoo-wee!” Buddy whooped. “Nice thing to say about your momma.”

Adelle shot him a look while she lit up. It was dark, but I could just barely catch that unformed quality to her prettiness, a softness around the eyes, the nose almost too big, the chin almost too small, so that you just knew it couldn't last much longer. A baby would lose it for her, or drinking, or just the years rolling on until she was twenty-one and plain in too much makeup.

“Forget it, 'Delle.” Sonny wiped off the neck of the bottle with his sleeve and took another sip.

“You really want to come?” Leroy asked. “Sure. You just got to ride with somebody else. You know your momma don't like me.” He gave his best shark grin, cast pale gold in the firelight. I had this cousin, Lucy LaTour, back before she went off to the city and married a Baptist. Leroy used to flash that grin at her—wicked and wild—years ago, years and years, before she stole all that money off us, her flesh and blood, and took the train east. I remembered that ten dollars she slipped out of my pocket when she thought I was asleep. I pinned that on Leroy. He was tied up in it—I knew that, even if I didn't know all of it. Him and that grin.

Sonny made a low scoffing noise like an animal warning a man off its territory. He

handed the whiskey to Adelle, but she pushed it away, still looking at Leroy with her leg swinging and her little white shoe going smack smack smack against her heel. Leroy put his full beer down on the hood of my Falcon and leaned back, crossing his arms. I watched to see if he was grinding his teeth or not. There were a couple of things you had to watch for with Leroy, and one of them was cheap speed. He went on and off it, depending on how his money was holding out. Lately he'd been flusher than usual. The speed amped him up a little so it was hard to tell how far he would go. He was always looking five minutes into the future, listening to something I couldn't hear.

“Sure,” Leroy said. “Sure. We goin' all sleep in the van, Marsha says. Her Nonc Antoine, he got that window blind business, he says we can borrow his for the weekend.”

“Marsha's a tramp,” Buddy muttered.

“Hey, you'd know better'n me.” Leroy tapped the ring on his pinky finger against the window of the car, tap tap tap with the smack smack smack of Adelle's shoe. “You should come, girl. Tell your momma whatever you want.”

“I told you we ain't going,” Sonny said. I stepped back a little so there was a clear path between them. Sonny's arm hadn't healed right and it wouldn't open all the way, just stopped at a weird angle like out of my old geometry textbook. He had a good doctor, too, they had just waited too long and it healed itself crooked. He didn't seem to throw a punch any different.

Adelle stood up carefully, brushing the wrinkles out of her dress. “And I told you I go where I fucking well want to go.” She stooped carefully, an unlit cigarette between her lips, and took up a piece of burning bark. It must have been hot but she never dropped it. There was just enough flame to light her smoke. Then she tossed it back into the fire. I

watched the brittleness of her gesture and I thought, this girl is scared shitless. But she never let on. I don't think Leroy noticed, or Sonny. I only did because I didn't give a shit about her and I could see her clear as daylight, right past the cotton-candy pink lipstick and the lacy bra she was flashing to everybody.

She picked her way around the fire, heels sinking into the dirt with each step. She held the hem of her skirt daintily in the fingers of her left hand. When she got to Leroy she dropped it and reached out to clutch his shirt front. She put her fingers on his chest where the top button of his shirt was undone. Leroy kissed her on the mouth and reached around to grab her ass with his free hand, hiking her dress up around her thighs. Buddy and John Simon had their mouths shut and were just watching like they'd never seen a girl kiss somebody before. But I was watching Sonny. He was clutching the Old Crow bottle so hard I thought he was going to shatter it between his fingers. Then he took a drink, screwed the cap back on, and tossed it behind him into the back seat of the car. He swung the hatch closed and went around to the driver's side. Leroy and Adelle were still necking but Leroy's eyes were open and he was watching Sonny. After a moment, the car started and he drove off down the dirt path to the road. The headlights lit up a backhoe frozen in the act of digging up a mouthful of soil. Then he was gone and all there was left on his side of the fire was Adelle's purse sitting in the dirt where she'd left it.

“Aw, hell,” John Simon said. He rubbed the heel of his hand against his long nose and sniffled.

Adelle came up for air and wiped her mouth on the collar of Leroy's corduroy jacket. She was standing on tiptoe, I noticed. “What a big ole coward,” she said. “What a big nowheres and nothing. Can't he take a joke?”

“Some joke,” I said. Leroy's momma had been in the drunk tank every Friday night and most Saturdays, and when she died he took it hard. There were a few times we boozed up and talked about missing our mommas. But it's not much to pin a friendship on, being motherless. And even if we'd grown up the same, all dirty feet and beans every night, he was selling grass to town kids now—even the ones who were really kids, still stealing cigarettes off their daddies. He was all flash clothes and pretty girls. He had to have them all.

Leroy was grinning at the spot where Sonny had been, picking his front teeth with his right thumbnail. I used to wonder how he did it, when we were kids. That smile that froze people and burned them up at the same time. Used to practice it in the mirror my daddy kept in his trunk. Higher one side than the other, teeth showing, eyebrows low. He was looking right over Adelle's head. She stepped back and straightened her skirt out, tapped the ash off her cigarette. I let out a breath.

Then it all went back to normal for a while. Buddy's girlfriend showed up in a truck with a bunch of other girls from Lafontaine, and he went off with them. The fire died down so we were all standing in the near-dark, shivering. I kept looking up to my left where I knew the water tower was, even though I couldn't see it. I knew every one of those flaking blue letters, FERRIS in all capitals with dripping edges like they were made out of water. I used to stare up at them when I worked for the city clearing culverts and scraping up roadkill and all of that. I would just stand there with my shovel looking up and daydreaming like I could climb up into the sky. If you made a map of every place I had lived in my life, it would be three parishes wide and two high. That fire in my belly that had driven me out of my daddy's house, seventeen years old kicking rocks all the way to

the main road, I thought it would take me all the way to China and back. But in five years I had still not left Ferris, fifteen miles from Belle Rose. I could have walked it in a day.

“Timmy, *cher*,” Adelle said, “I can't see nothing in this dark. Where you put my whiskey?”

“I ain't seen the thing.” I reached out to steady her arm. She was wobbling on her stupid little shoes. Her skin was cold and goosebumped and I wondered why Leroy hadn't given her his jacket. He was off showing John Simon how to drive the bike, dragging up and down the deserted road. Whenever they cut the engine I could hear Leroy laughing high and crazy, splitting the silence.

“Maybe we should build up the fire,” I said. “I don't know. Shit, I might go home.”

“And miss all the fun?” Adelle leaned away from me and shook her hair out. “Oh, I forgot. Sonny took the whiskey. Jesus, you must think I'm stupid or something.”

“Not stupid,” I said. “Too drunk maybe.”

“Yeah,” she said. She sat next to me on the hood of the Falcon. “Timmy, I can ask you a question, right?”

“Sure.”

She took a deep breath. “You think Leroy really wants me coming along? You think he likes me better than Marsha?”

I sighed. “Hell, I don't know.”

“You think he's a good man, right? I mean, you're his friend.”

“I don't know, 'Delle. Sure. I mean he ain't a bad man.” She seemed happy with that. I didn't know what else to tell her, if I was going to be honest about it. “You done

with Sonny, then?" I asked.

She turned her head toward me, quickly, sizing me up. "He's nasty," she said. "Or he can be."

"You think Leroy isn't?"

"Maybe," she said. Then she took my bottle of beer out of my hand and drank the rest of it down. She had Leroy's momma written all over her and I wondered how to tell her that Leroy was just looking for another way to break Sonny's arm.

I grabbed a stick and shifted the embers. The fire was too far gone to relight, but I poked around a little trying to get some more warmth to flare up. The trip probably wouldn't even come through. Marsha was like that, she was always planning something that would never happen. She would get old before it could happen. I thought about me and Leroy in a van full of girls and I put Adelle there too, before I could stop myself, and I was afraid to look and see who she was hanging off of. I didn't want it to be me. Lord, I didn't want it to be me. Any more than I had wanted to get pinned down to Sonny's sister, when we was young. Not that I was looking to be hard and alone, like my daddy, but there were some girls who would grab you tight, wrap you up in their hair and their smooth skin and their girl smell, try to witch you stupid, and all because they knew they were almost out of time.

She handed the empty bottle back to me, but she let her fingers brush mine as she did it. A pulse shot down through my spine and settled in my gut. I flipped the bottle through the air, into the dark, and heard it thunk off a tree and down onto the dirt. There are some moments when you wonder what you're going to do right before you do it. I felt tired all of a sudden, and small, and I thought again about joining the army—letting

somebody kick some direction into me. I put my hand on her cheek. Her jaw was small in my palm. Then I kissed her like I was making a decision with it, even though I knew I was just scorching the earth behind me.

I drove Adelle home, all the way to the far end of Lafontaine, with the tang of her whiskey and the scratch of her tongue in my mouth. She had her hands folded around the purse in her lap, pink nails tapping, and even though my thighs were tensed and my palms waiting for her skin, there was a part of me that just wanted to open that purse. Her fingers drifted up to trace her collarbones, tuck her hair behind her ear. I had heard from men who would know that girls did that when they wanted to sleep with you, and I'd seen Beth Frederick fussing with her bangs once or twice, at the beginning. I should have known when she stopped that it was over for us. It wasn't the same now, not with Adelle. She had a brave face on like my little cousin T-Nonc the first time he got lifted up on a horse all by himself. You might even have believed it if you weren't watching the corners of her eyes.

I kept looking over at her, with the dirt roads under us. There wasn't much of a moon, nothing but headlights lighting up one dirty yard full of junk after another. Washed out plastic toys, rusting tin buckets, broken bikes and headless dolls. I found the salmon pink trailer where the Poiriers lived, on the corner of Coker and St. Paul. I started to slow down to turn into the driveway, but Adelle put her fingers on my arm.

“Pull around the corner.”

I knew I should let her be and go home. That was what my brain was telling me, through a muddy fuzz of beer. But home wasn't anything but a fixed-up garage apartment

one block past the Ferris Methodist Church—all full of promise when I first saw it, but then I had been nineteen years old and hunched over from sleeping in my car. I had lived there too long. Now it was as small and cold and full of angry feeling as my daddy's shack.

She was smacking that purse against her knee with a sound like her shoe had made against her heel. Her thighs were bare under the thin cotton. I parked, cut the headlights, blinking in the sudden dark. I waited for her to open the door and stumble out, half hoping that she would. Instead she just sat there looking at me. Her eyebrows low over her eyes like a stubborn child, but a flicker of something grown-up, deep and jagged.

I grabbed her around the arm. Just above the elbow, my big hand around her little arm. I wanted to kiss the pink lipstick right off her face, smudge the black ribbon of eyeliner, see what she looked like without it. Like when I stripped her naked something in my gut would be laid out in the daylight, where I could see it. Her lipstick was slick and cool against my lips. I crumpled her dress against her thigh, her hip. Her skin burned under my palm. The pads of my fingers brushed her plastic clutch and it was impossibly cold, next to that fire in her flesh. Adelle kissed me back but she didn't do much of anything else, so I stilled, slowed my kisses. She put her little hand against my chest and pushed me back into the driver's seat. My stomach sank. If she got out of the car now I would have to drive back to Ferris alone knowing that I wasn't even as good as Leroy, as Sonny, knowing I was no better. I heard her shoes thump against the floor of the car as she slipped them off. Then she lifted her legs, draped them across my lap, and put her arms around my neck. I caught a flash of white panties and soft pale inner thigh as she did it. She put her lips against my ear.

“Oooh, yeah, *cher*,” she whispered, and kissed me again.

When it was done, nothing was different. She was so small, we could sit in the passenger seat with her legs around my waist, and when I began to breathe again I felt her shoes under my boots. I had crushed them like little white birds. My hands were trapped between her back and the glove box. I could feel her breath come in sharp gulps. Adelle untangled her fingers from my hair and they hung there between us, hovering at her throat. Her bare feet were crammed up into the seat cushion. I waited for a knowledge to come over me but nothing did. I wished I knew how much loyalty I owed Leroy, whether this would cut our ties or just be the start of one more string of petty tussles.

Then the moment broke and she lifted herself off of me. My shirt was hiked up and my belly chafed from the rub of her dress, crumpled up between us. I pulled it down, tugged my jeans and zipped them. Adelle opened the car door and slid out barefoot.

“Your shoes,” I said, trying to brush them back into some kind of shape. From the dim light in the car I could see my own footprints on the little bows at the toe.

“Aw, hell,” she said, and put them on just like they were. Then I lifted her purse up in my hand, wiped it on my shirt, and handed it back to her. She looked straight at me. I knew then what she knew—that she would never be hanging off me, that I was nothing to her. That even if it was just Leroy trying to get back at Sonny, she had known it all along and she had planned for it. She looked older than me, and smarter too, with her dress wrinkled down the front and her lipstick smeared all to hell. Before I even knew what I was doing I reached my hand out and put my thumb in the dip of her collarbone, just inside the open collar of her dress. I did it like I was putting my mark in that cold little crater,

rolling the pad of my thumb the way the cops made me do when I got picked up for DIP last summer.

“You keep your damn hands off me, Timmy Alcide.” Adelle swatted my fingers away and buttoned her dress up to the neck. “What if my momma saw?”

“Y'all live around the corner, she can't see. And shit, I wasn't doing anything.” I tucked my hand around my neck, gouging at a pebble just under my skull, to keep it from flying away like that. I just wanted my hands on her skin. I wanted to feel that pale velvet over small light bones. I wondered who would touch her next, if it would be Leroy or Sonny or somebody else. She was just standing there still, pitched forward on her heels, sizing me up. I could almost feel the goosebumps on her skin. Then she turned and stalked off through the brown grass clutching her arms to her chest.

My gut filled up with bile at the thought of driving home. I slammed the car door shut hoping she'd hear it, hoping she'd take it as a violence. Meaning it like that, but not really. I sank down in the seat, thinking of Leroy dragging down country roads on his bike even now, with morning not far off. I scraped my boots one against the other and reached into the backseat for my jacket. If I slept the sun would wake me, and why not? I had nowhere to go. I didn't have a job, even though I knew if I called John Simon's cousin he'd let me pump gas for two bucks an hour. There was a part of me that didn't want to make any promises, put any more roots down. I swung my feet up into the driver's seat, tucked the jacket up under my chin, and waited for the big black sky to swallow me into sleep.

It wasn't the sun that woke me, even though it was white and blinding when I opened my eyes. First a voice grating its way into my sleep, gravelly but female. Then a

knocking on the window of the car. I blinked crust out of my eyes and looked up at a small woman with a low forehead, round around the belly, white blonde like her daughters. She was wearing a green housedress—the kind that tie at the middle and even brand new look like they've been washed a hundred times.

“Mrs. Poirier,” I said. I sat up a little more and rolled down the window. She had Adelle by the neck like a wrung pigeon. With all her makeup scrubbed off she was such a child it made my heart hurt to look at her.

“You, Alcide boy. This girl here, she won't tell me where she been all night. So you goin' tell me instead.”

“How the hell should I know?” I was trying not to look at Adelle, but my eyes caught on hers and wouldn't let go. She looked small and hung over and helpless.

“Don't you dare cuss like that in front of me.” Adelle's momma shook her for emphasis, so that I sat up straight and cleared my throat knowing any sass I gave her would get shook out on the girl.

“I mean to say I don't know, ma'am. How you been, Adelle?”

“All right,” she said. She looked like she was going to be sick. If I'd been throwing back whiskey like her I would be too.

Mrs. Poirier set her teeth and stared me down like I was a dog gone after the chickens. She wasn't not pretty, for her age anyway, but she had an old whore's look, too much paint and hateful eyes. “What do you think you're doing anyway, parked out here?”

“Too much to drink,” I said. “Thought I'd sleep it off. Y'all live around here?”

Adelle smiled at me with one corner of her mouth. Her lips were parched like liquor had sucked all the moisture out of them. It was strange, like I hadn't ever kissed

them. I had that feeling of waking from a dream or a bad drunk, when you're not sure what happened and what you made up in your mind.

“You watch it, Alcide.” Mrs. Poirier let go of her daughter's neck and shook her hand out so that I wondered how hard she'd been gripping. “I'd recognize your car anywhere. And I know your daddy. If I ever see that you come whipping distance from my girl, I'll have him after you. You watch.”

I blinked. Adelle leaned in the window and smiled a cold and angry smile at me. I knew the look. It was a look I had felt from the inside when I stormed out on my daddy that last time. I thought with an ache what it must be like to see that—to stand at the window watching your flesh and blood kick pebbles all the way to the road and away. Then she said, loud enough for her momma to hear, “You're a lousy lay anyway,” and Mrs. Poirier began to cry.

Then she spat on my window. It turned into this circus, her momma wailing in the background, and Adelle with her pale white lips screwed up, spitting foam onto the jutting edge of glass between us. It dripped down like washwater down a dish, like when I used to work the kitchens at the Ferris Country Club. My tongue was glued to my teeth. Leroy would've hauled her up by her hair and made her love him again, and I knew that, but I didn't do a thing, just let her walk off down the road toward the railroad tracks and town. She had ditched those fragile little shoes and had her feet stuck into yellow mudboots that swallowed her legs up to the knee. I couldn't have gone after her if I tried. I just didn't have the energy to do it. I had aged out of that fire, somewhere along the line, whether I liked it or not. Now I was the kind of man who got stuck with weeping mothers.

Mrs. Poirier was bent over, digging her forearms into her gut where the housedress

was tied. There were some kids playing in the yard behind her, whacking sticks like swords, and they all paused with their weapons raised high when they heard her. They were looking at me, waiting for me to do something. I opened the car door with a click and stepped out into the sunlight. I reached out my hands to comfort her, do something, but she shook her head and just looked at me. Her eyebrows were caught up so tight they nearly overlapped and her nose was the color of watermelon flesh. She looked at me like I was the lowest piece of dog shit on God's earth. She had narrow hips like Adelle's, and thin legs, but her middle had thickened out and her arms were fat. She wasn't old, though. Barely gray, and she still had curves where you'd expect them. If she'd started having babies around seventeen, eighteen, that made her my own momma's age.

“What are you still doing here?” she asked, thick with snot. She wiped her nose on the back of her hand and shook her head again. “Go home, boy. Get outta here.” She turned to walk back down the road toward that pink peeling trailer.

I couldn't just let her go like that. Telling me what to do, looking at me like I was good for nothing. “Hey,” I shouted, “hey,” chasing after her without even shutting the car door behind me. But she didn't turn. She didn't once turn. That feeling of getting left like that, it was sick in my stomach. I stopped at the edge of the Poirier yard, I don't know why. Mrs. Poirier picked her way around a rusted lawnmower and a molding beach chair to get to her door. She climbed up the stoop and paused, hand on the doorknob, her yellow hair hanging in her face. “Hey,” I said again, but not so loud this time. Then she was gone inside the house with the door shut tight behind her. I heard the thud thud thud of sticks clanging together, a little boy's laughter and jeers. I was still holding my baseball cap in my hand, so I smoothed it out and put it back on my

head to keep the sun off. I don't know why it ate me up so much that she walked off like that. The next time I see Leroy, I thought, I'm going to bust his head in. Or maybe I would just leave Sonny to it. Let the two of them bite off one piece at a time until they were both all ate up.

I stood there waiting for a while, I guess, even though my brain was whirring so fast it felt like no time at all. All down the street, like clockwork, women hustled their starched and combed broods out for the early Mass. The boys with the sticks got called into a tiny white house and came out twenty minutes later with clean shirts and sour mouths. Nobody ever bullied me into a clean shirt when I was their size. The littlest one was staring at me with his pink baby mouth hanging open. I must have looked like some white trash Romeo, hanging there at the edge of the yard with my hands in my jean pockets and an itch of stubble on my jaw. I guess I was waiting for somebody to come back and finish things—to cuss at me, or kiss me, or dump a bucket of cold water on my head and tell me to get lost. But nobody ever did. They just left me standing there.

Dirty Liar

The door knocker thudded once, twice, three times. Lucy Thompson looked up from her Macy's catalog and registered for the first time the radio playing in the kitchen, a cool crisp all-American voice chattering on about that heiress, that Hearst girl. It must be the girls from the First Baptist Women's Group, she thought, come for coffee and pound cake like I offered at church.

"Just a moment," Lucy cried out. She cut off the radio, wiggled into her pumps, and fluffed her hair with her fingers. Celia would be with them, and Celia always knew when you'd last had your hair done, just looked at you once and saw if it was flat or greasy or if the ends curled out when they should have curled under. It made Lucy think of Père Robichaud from the parish church, when she was a little girl, and the way he had always just known when she'd last said her rosary. They had the same eyes, him and Celia.

Lucy opened the door with a cheery smile and then froze it, looking.

It was Timmy. Timmy Alcide, her no good *fatras de cousin*, in a dirty ballcap and blue jeans with holes in the knees. Years since she'd seen him, and still the same old Tigers cap she remembered. He looked so strange, him and his dusting of beard and his left ear with a chunk torn out of it, there against the neat rows of pretty houses and tiny gardens.

“Hey, Luce,” he said. “This is some damn place you got.”

Timmy busted out a grin that said how glad he was to see her, but she was no dummy, she saw the meanness and the mocking in it. He would take something from her and then laugh about it. That was how he had always been. And that ear, it was like somebody had been chewing at it, scabbed and crusting and less than whole.

“Sell it to somebody else, Timmy.” She let her body block the doorway, big as she could make it. “You think I’m dumb enough to let you in?”

He smiled in a way she couldn’t place, small with no teeth. She felt her own slightness between him and the house, light small bones brittle as ceramic.

“What, you come all this way out to Biloxi just to torment me?” He was silent, the space between them empty.

Finally he rubbed the heel of his hand against his stubble and said “Sure,” just looking at her, his whole body focused on the spot right between her eyes. He took off his ballcap and scratched his head. “I just want to talk to you. I don’t mean no harm, *cher*.”

Lucy looked away, off down the road at one yard and another, green grass all the way down the block. She shook her head. “You’re never gonna change, Timmy. Just the same as when we was kids. *Gros menteur, toi*.” You dirty liar.

His eyes, sharp and lidded, took what she said like it was nothing. The first Cajun she’d spoken out loud in years, her own language heavy in her mouth, and it was nothing to him.

He smiled again, pained and patient and sweet, again without teeth, like he was gritting them tight and didn’t want her to see. Then he opened his arms wide in a gesture of humility, and something about the sweat stains and the crusted ear and the motor oil on

his hands got to her.

“I just got to talk to you,” he said. “Come on, *cher*.”

“Fine,” she said. “Fine. But not here.”

Lucy knew just where to take him. It was close enough to walk, at the edge of their neighborhood where the nice little houses all in a row shaded out into boarded-up furniture stores. The kind of diner where the floors were always sticky and the stools all cracked with little sprigs of foam sprouting up. Timmy didn't look out of place there, but she did. The only thing to do was stand up straight and pretend not to notice.

He ordered apple pie, with a scoop of ice cream on top. She ordered a cup of coffee. They sat at a table in the back, away from the window. She knew how they looked together, his beat-up jeans and her neat gray skirt and jacket. They didn't look natural together. They looked like intrigue.

“You been back to Belle Rose?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said. “Now and then.”

“Anything changed since I left?”

“Not a damn thing. Not one damn thing in the whole place.” He was smoking his cigarettes fast, one after the other. He flicked them against his thumb in a quick rhythm, spraying ash and bright flecks onto the Formica table. He looked almost nervous. He'd turned his back on family just like she had, and he'd always been proud.

“How's your daddy? How's Nonc Gustin?”

“Hell, I don't know. You tell me.” A wisp of smoke curled tranquilly out of his left nostril.

She didn't know whether the last few years had made him harder, or if he'd always been like that and she just hadn't seen it. She had never had much understanding of him. They were cousins, sure, but in a little village like Belle Rose she'd have to look hard to find somebody she wasn't related to. By the time Timmy was grown he'd stolen something from everybody in town—liquor, money, jewelry, daughters and wives—and while nobody was quite willing to call in the law, they didn't want him around either. But of course he blamed his daddy. Gustin treated him bad, Gustin had it in for him, Gustin drove him away.

Nobody had driven Lucy out of town. Nobody had to. She was sick of birth, and death, and birth, and death. The whole thing over again. Somebody coughs himself into the grave and a squalling dirty baby takes his place. All she wanted was to live somewhere that did not smell of shit—from babies, from animals, from dying fathers—and the promise of clean sterility was enough to seduce her away to the city.

Lucy rubbed her thumb against the handle of the coffee cup, looked around at the families and couples and old men eating hot dogs, waited for Timmy to say something. He stayed quiet like it wasn't even him who had dragged her here, just tapping his cigarette. She remembered it—it was the kind of quiet you just naturally wanted to fill until suddenly you had been talking for an hour and he hadn't said a thing. It was like he just took longer to talk, like he didn't see the need. She knew she was about to lose her patience about a second before she opened her mouth and said “Jesus God, Timmy, what is it you come all this way to tell me?”

Something trickled down Timmy's temple—sweat, or hair oil, or both. “Well, guess who called me up couple months back?”

“Who?”

“Guess.”

She stared him down. He smirked and pointed his cigarette at her.

“Think back a few years, okay? It’s sixty-seven. Summer, July maybe. Right after Mamère LaTour died. Remember?”

“Leroy,” she said. “Leroy Aucoin.”

Leroy tasted like sugar, sticky residue in the corner of his mouth and underneath his tongue. His teeth were always dirty, his mouth always hot as the inside of a chimney. For three months in the summer she was seventeen, when she wasn’t wiping noses or tending the garden or standing over a hot stove, she was with Leroy.

“Sure. What about him? He get locked up like we all figured?”

“Well, he’s about to. He got into some dumb-ass shit, pardon my language. Anybody from home could tell you, so I guess I might as well.”

“Jesus, Timmy, what in the hell did he do?”

He dragged long and slow on his cigarette, picked a flake of tobacco from his lower lip, and trained narrow green eyes on her.

“He shot Sonny T in the leg, is what he done.”

He looked at her face like he was waiting for shock to wash over it. Sonny Thibodeaux, Betsy’s big brother. She remembered his red leather cowboy boots—Betsy had invited her home for dinner, a Friday, so there was shrimp and crawfish in the jambalaya instead of chicken, and Sonny was so proud of those shoes he put his feet right up on the table for everybody to see. They were so rich they had meat six nights a week. Would have had it on Friday too if they weren’t scared of what the priest would say.

Lucy held Timmy's gaze and nodded, one small careful nod. "Is Sonny all right? Did he get hurt bad?"

"I heard he goin' lose the leg. Sonny, him, he's sure pissed off. Listen, you got the wrong idea earlier. This is what I really come to tell you." The corner of Timmy's mouth twitched. "You know, he still talks about you."

"Who, Sonny?"

"You know who I mean."

So they were talking about her. The Lucy she used to be, the Belle Rose Lucy in her dirty dresses and mail-order shoes, they were talking about her. They were taking the life she'd had and chewing it over in their mouths like something ordinary, like a Boudreaux joke or who the Saints were up against this year.

"That's bull, Timmy. Seven years means something." She sipped at her coffee to stop herself saying more. To stop herself asking what the two of them had to say about her.

"Not to Leroy it don't."

"Yeah, well, he always was a little simple."

When she put down her coffee cup, Timmy grabbed her wrist. She tried to jerk it out of his hand, but he held on—he had always been stronger than he looked. He was a lot of things more than he looked. Good at keeping things hidden until the right moment, letting them be until he needed them.

"Relax," he said, "I was just looking at your bracelet."

"Yeah, that's what I thought you were doing."

"Goddamn it, Luce, you ain't seen me in years. How do you know I ain't reformed since you been around last?"

“I know you, is how.” She frowned but let him stretch her arm across the table, running his thumb over the small rubies. There was a trembling in her fingers and she breathed deep to calm it.

“Expensive?”

“My husband gave it to me. You a jewel thief now?”

“*Il faut manger*, eh?” He grinned. She could feel the pads of his fingers against her wrist, and they were dirty with something, greasy and cold. His fingers left a film on the bright clear jewels. Finally he let go.

“Timmy,” she said. He looked up from her wrist. “What’d he shoot him for?”

“Oh, Sonny tried to pull rank. You know how he is. One year up at college and he knows everything better’n anybody.”

“What do you mean, pull rank?”

“Leroy was bringing some shit into town from Ferris, selling it to the local guys. Weren’t nothin’ but skunk grass, ever’body smokes that nowadays. Sonny tried to kick him out of town and Leroy taught him a lesson. He didn’t figure Sonny would go to the law. As you can imagine he ain’t too popular right about now. Sonny, I mean.”

“And Leroy—are they locking him up? For how long?” She coughed right afterward but he still heard the catch in her throat, the quickness of her breath.

Timmy grinned, big and mischievous and taunting. “Don’t act like you could give a shit what happens to him. Anybody could see you’re still in love with his ass. Pardon my language.”

“I ain’t neither. And you can quit pardoning your language. I’ve heard it all a few times before.”

“Ever’body thought y’all were gonna get married.”

“He would never marry me.”

“Pah! You were never gonna marry him, that’s what it was. Maybe you remember it different.”

They both fiddled with the things on the table in front of them. Then Timmy’s eyebrows choked up in the middle and he gnawed on the inside of his lip.

“Thing is, you know Leroy’s a dumb ass, right?”

“What do I know what he’s like now?”

“Well, he ain’t the type to grow up much. He decided he didn’t want to get locked up, and what he don’t want to do, he don’t do.”

“Shit, Timmy.” Something like hunger rolled over in her belly.

“They came for him at the house, his Tante Brou’s place. He took a swing at a cop and ran out the back of that damn little shotgun shack.”

“Did you see it? Were you there with him?”

“Naw, he told me how it all went down. And he ain’t here in town, if that’s what you’re thinking. He’s gone to stay with his *cousins* in Texas. From there maybe Mexico. That’s if he’s not lying to throw me off his trail.”

“Shit, Timmy, what I’m thinking is he must be dumber than I thought, ‘cause they goin’ come after him no matter where he go. He goin’ get shot.” She was talking louder than she meant to. A little girl in torn white sparkly tights looked up from the next booth. Lucy’s fingers rubbed at her scalp.

“How ‘bout another cup, hon.” Their waitress hovered over Timmy’s shoulder, looking at Lucy with a spiritless expression. Her muscles flexed to hold the full pot of

coffee still in the air. She was blonde—dyed—and had the kind of angular, stubborn face that would always look poor no matter what you put on it. Her belly swelled at her polyester uniform.

Lucy breathed, long and deep. “No thank you. And you can take the dishes away, if you don’t mind. We’re finished.”

“Suit yourself.” As she leaned over Timmy, he tilted his head up to look her right in the eye, grinning. Lucy turned her face away.

The first time Leroy kissed her, they were arguing and then it suddenly turned into something else. He was just a boy from the next town over, a friend of Timmy’s, nobody important. Leroy bunched up the fabric of her blouse in one hand, right at the small of her back, and kissed her. Sugary grit on his teeth. Lucy felt sweat pooling in every hidden place of her body.

She never told Leroy about the baby she decided not to have. She knew the same way her sister Grace had always known—woke up one day with a twinge in her belly and sure enough, the week she should have bled there was nothing. Grace was huge and swollen then; Lucy could see just what she’d look like in a few months. Early in the summer, Grace had announced her condition at the breakfast table, and the children fidgeted, and her husband Bubby swore and attacked his salt pork with a knife.

Lucy announced hers to no one. She spent a few days deciding what to do. The part of her that loved Leroy wanted to have it, marry him, wash his shirts in a bucket and cook up a big pot of gumbo for him every night. The other part didn’t know exactly what she wanted, but whatever it was she sure wasn’t going to get it in Evangeline Parish. The

more she thought about it, the more that little clump of something in her belly felt like a knot tying her to Leroy, and her whole being shivered at that feeling.

So she took care of the baby herself, the way she took care of everything, the way you had to take care of everything. Every girl in town, the wild ones like her at least, knew that Doc Pitre knew some women over in Ferris. She called on him quietly and he gave her an address and a word.

Lucy hitchhiked part of the way and walked the rest. It was a hard walk—rough gravel roads and fields of sweet potatoes whose vines caught and trapped her feet—and she knew it would be harder the next day. This is a woman’s lot, she thought. Her feet ached in cheap thin cotton sneakers.

The women lived in a tiny sea-green house with a torn, creaking screen door. She gave them the code word that Doc Pitre had given her, and they ushered her inside. The taller woman was bony and gray-haired, the shorter stocky and a little mannish. She’d been a nurse, the mannish woman said. She knew what to do.

“I haven’t got very much money,” Lucy said, smoothing her faded old skirt over her knees.

“That’s all right, sugar,” the tall woman said.

“How much do you have?” the shorter woman asked.

Lucy wiggled the bills out of her sneaker. They were slightly damp and she was suddenly ashamed of her sweat. She shuffled them between her hands, lining them all up evenly.

“Forty-three dollars,” she said. Twenty-seven from her own savings—the money that was meant to get her out of Belle Rose—the rest scammed from one friend or another,

or outright stolen from Grace and Bubby.

“It’s fifty. He ought to have told you it was fifty,” the shorter woman said.

“Let it go.” The tall woman took the damp money, pressed it in her skirts to dry it, and tucked it away in her blouse. “It’s fine, *cher*—it’s plenty.”

They covered the couch with a plastic tarp while Lucy stripped off her underwear. There was no use being ashamed of her nakedness, so she forced herself to be quick and businesslike about it. They used a flame to sterilize the wire and it was still hot when it entered her. Lucy knew that she might die. In her stillness she thought: this is what I will do, this is what I will risk, for a life that is mine. She lay without moving, the skin of her thighs and *fesses* and lower back sticking to the plastic, until her belly began to seize and kick from the inside. Then a deep cramping agony, pain so blinding she lost her bearings and just screamed.

Her blood in the plastic wash bucket looked bluish and brilliant and sticky. She thought of her youngest nephew, the softness and delicacy of his bones, and she thought she might vomit. Her skirt was still hiked up at her waist, her worn cotton drawers and slip folded on a spare white chair across from the couch. She reached to cover herself but a pair of hands pinned her arms.

“Better clean yourself up first, *cher*. Let me get you a rag.”

It was scratchy and warm. Her body was numb except for a deep ache, a burnt and hollow feeling. She scrubbed for a long time.

Lucy paid for the pie and coffee. Timmy tucked his cigarettes back into his shirt pocket and settled his ballcap down over his eyes. He watched her take the bills out of her

purse, his eyes trained on her hands as she flicked through fives and tens. She left a four-dollar tip, just because she could, because there was nothing stopping her.

“That’s some tip,” Timmy said as they were standing up. “You always throw money around like that?”

“When I feel like it.”

“You ought to send some of that back to your momma. Ever since your daddy died, well, she’s not doing too good. There’s lots of people at home could use money like that.” He looked at her, a look she knew, a look that meant more than the words coming out of his mouth.

“How much you want?” she asked.

“A hundred. Get me down to Texas, maybe get me and Leroy across the border. Then who knows.”

“Sure,” she said. “Who knows.”

“I mean it.”

“Sure,” she said again. “Here, you’ll get that or more for the bracelet. Take it.” She unclasped it and held it out in the palm of her hand.

“Your husband’ll notice.”

“I’ll tell him I lost it. It’s insured anyway. You can sell it somewhere. I’m sure you know people.”

He stuffed the bracelet into his jeans pocket like it was nothing but rhinestones. She mourned it briefly even though it was not the only piece of jewelry she owned, or even the most expensive. Somehow it deserved respect. She respected all of her things.

He didn’t move to hug her. Whatever had been shadowing his smiles was gone

now, along with the quick intensity that might have been nervousness. He scratched at the back of his neck and she remembered the way he used to sweep all the coins off the table when he'd win at *bourré* or poker—not gloating, not apologetic, but as if they had always belonged to him. As if your quarter had been sitting in your pocket all day just waiting for him to win it.

“Want me to tell Leroy anything for you when I see him?”

It was a limp lie. Who knew where Timmy was headed. She didn't expect her money to make it to Leroy, or her good wishes either. That wasn't the point. Timmy could have what he wanted.

“I don't know. Tell him not to get his *tchu couillon* thrown in jail, okay?”

“I sure will.”

“Now get out of town.”

He nodded, rolled his shoulders, and plodded off. He looked like any worn down young Southern man. There was nothing to distinguish him.

Lucy clutched her purse against her belly as she walked home. She stood where Timmy had stood looking up at the neat brick squatness of her own house. When she went inside she shut the door tight behind her and locked it, even though she knew Celia and the others would be by soon if they hadn't already. Then she set herself to cleaning, weak hands scrubbing, bare wrist startling her each time it caught her eye.

There was no one to call. Nobody at home, nobody she trusted, even had a phone—not Grace, not their momma—not that she knew the number to. Vieux Frederick at the post office might pass a message along, but then the whole town would be talking about

her. No way to know what had really happened, except to write or visit, and that she was not strong enough to do. Not strong enough to walk old roads in new shoes and see the houses that might have been hers.

She thought of Sonny, that snob, crumpled and screaming, blood dripping down his red leather cowboy boots. She thought of Leroy and the baby that had tied them together, the way it had dissolved into just so much tissue in a plastic wash bucket. It ached her now, so that seven years and a piece of hot wire meant nothing. Moving and marrying and a bracelet of real rubies meant not one damn thing, could not tie her down, so that somehow she was there again in that sea-green shack lying naked to the hips watching wire blacken and feeling her own pulse keep time in her throat.

Lucy saw herself, a childless woman in pumps washing her own counters. They were black walnut, polished with something to keep them from staining, but she was washing them just the same as she'd wash pocked linoleum. She scrubbed harder. The bitterest thing was the not knowing. She thought that she wanted to know but it was so confusing, and what if nothing at all had happened, what if Timmy had conjured Leroy for no reason except money? That was the purest and likeliest thing, and she began to believe it. She began to believe that she had been cheated. There was a burn in the shape of a crescent moon, a crisp black semicircle, and it would not be lifted. She scrubbed harder and harder.

Saint Augustin

Her teeth were the same yellow-gray color as her braids. Timmy could see because she had her wrinkled old mouth open, warbling “I’ll Fly Away” at his daddy. Singing for the old man’s soul. Her voice had that tremble that old thin women get. She was sitting between Timmy and the sickbed, in the wicker rocking chair that Gustin had lashed and re-lashed so many times. Not that there was any strength left in his hands for that anymore. Timmy put his palm flat against the fly-specked screen door and pushed.

The old woman fell silent, looked at him. “For this, my son was dead, and is alive again,” she said.

“Yeah,” Timmy said. “Père Robichaud, him, he called me up.”

She wore a long brown dress down to her ankles and her hair in two braids like a little girl, but she was seventy at least. That horse nose—that was a Lejeune nose, no doubt. An old widow like that, under Gustin’s spell even with that cancer sickness in his stomach, the smell of puke and shit and bleach soaking into the walls of the little shack that should have been torn down years ago.

“Luke 15:24. He never said.” She stood up, more smoothly than he’d expected, and rooted her knotty fingers on Timmy’s forearm. “You’re a good boy, to come home like this.”

“Yeah,” he said again. He wasn’t raised to disrespect a grandmother, but he was no boy at all, much less a good one. The bad blood between Timmy and his daddy went deep, and the weak singing of a Lejeune woman wouldn’t change that.

“Don’t you remember me?” she asked, squeezing his arm. “Madeline. Widow to *le défunt* Monsieur Poirier.”

A great-aunt of Cathy and Adelle’s, then, or a grandmother maybe. He tried to find their sharp brows and flashing eyes in her face but he couldn’t do it, there were too many years between them. If only she would let go of his arm. She still stood between him and Gustin, surprisingly tall, smelling of cumin and pepper spice. A stew, with meat and tomatoes, that was the smell that floated in underneath the stink of sickness. He felt some of the hate shake out of his stomach when he smelled that stew. He realized, then, that he hadn’t heard his daddy’s voice. Didn’t know how long he had to live, if he was still alive. She could be standing there because Gustin was dead, because she thought Timmy would care if he was dead. That was the smell, a death smell. He shook Madeline’s hand off his arm and brushed past her.

Not dead. Breathing, shallowly. The skin of his daddy’s cheeks was peeling, like all of the water had gone from his body and left him small and parched. His hair was mostly gone and his cheekbones were like twin hills in the collapse of his face. He was shrunk down under a quilt in the iron bed, his old bulk leaked away into the bleach buckets by the bed. He wasn’t even old, was the strange thing. Somewhere in the back of Timmy’s mind he had known that Gustin would lord bitterly over grandchildren and great-grandchildren, huge and steel-gray and stubborn as a concrete wall. But here he wasn’t even old and his eyes stared out into nothing.

“He come back to the church, at the end,” Madeline said, clutching his fingers in hers. “Pere Robichaud gave the last rites yesterday, but he hung on.”

“I got the call yesterday,” he said. “I been living in north Texas. Up to Oklahoma for a while. I didn't leave an address, no number either. I don't know how he tracked me down.” The old priest's voice had been thinner than it used to be, rattled in his chest, but the altar boy in Timmy remembered it. He barely remembered to call his foreman before he threw on his jacket and drove four hours straight to the peeling white house he hadn't seen in twelve years. It was all still preserved, though, still standing by some miracle of beams and roofing in the middle of a tangled, grown-over field. Even the fig tree looked sickly.

“Would you leave us?” he asked her. He hadn't looked Gustin in the eye yet. He was still a thing, small and bodily and silent. But he could latch on to Timmy with one look. He could make his son a child again, pass the poison between them without even touching.

“Of course, *cher*. There's a gumbo on—*saucisse boucannée*, if you got the appetite. You just call us at the church when it's time.” She let go of his hand only to grab his chin. “*Soyez fier, mon petit*. He got his face turned toward Heaven for sure.” Yes, there were the eyes—black-brown, sparking, much too dark for the blondness and paleness of the Poirier women. Or maybe it was the Lejeune women, really. It was strange seeing the puzzle pieces of Adelle's strange face now that she was old, fat, married, forgotten.

“Yeah. Heaven,” he said, leading her to the door. “You got a ride home?”

“I just live past the tree line, over west of here,” Madeline said. “Not too many neighbors these days. Don't you worry about me. I got *ma bru* keeping my house.”

“Sure,” Timmy said, with his back to Gustin. The old man's presence warped the room like a weight. It was a struggle not to look at him. Madeline started off down a furrow in the fields, tucking her dress out of the way of her lace-up boots, not hunched over like some grandmothers but straight-backed and slow picking her feet through the vines that had overtaken the rows of cotton. They used to pay women to help with the picking, colored and white, and Timmy would hear their singing from his first bucket of chicken feed in the morning until the heat of the afternoon set in. Madeline could have been one of them, under the low hot clouds, but there had been nobody to plant this year and the field was wild. Nothing to pick.

He sat with his daddy all that night until the sun rose, almost, smoking one cigarette after the other to keep himself awake. When he looked the old man straight in the eye it wasn't the same as it used to be—just a flat green nothing. There were electric lights now, ugly squat lamps that Timmy lit in the night so that he could see the coarse brown wool rising and falling over Gustin's chest. The whole inside of the shack was ugly. Dirt brown telephone, mustard yellow gas range. Twelve years made a lot of difference. There was no trace that Timmy had ever lived there. There were just two rooms—one with the bed, one with the stove—and as a boy he'd slept on a mattress of cotton ticking on the floor. Indoor plumbing hadn't come in until Timmy was almost fourteen, and still there was just a toilet in the corner with a curtain hung up around it. Tubs for washing. More primitive even than the apartments he'd lived in these past few years, broke and transient.

It took almost eighteen hours. More than once Timmy wondered if he wouldn't live forever like that, a pale wire of pain. Maybe he had his own ornery schedule and didn't

know that the doctor had given him up, the priest had blessed him, his son had come to bury him. Didn't see his son at all. His eyes moved but Timmy wasn't sure what he was seeing. Once he hiccuped blood, then fell silent again. The sores at the corners of his mouth were outlined in red.

It got tedious. Not like the movies, where death comes on the heels of forgiveness. There were morphine shots to give him, so when his breathing got louder and shallower Timmy dug them out and studied the instructions in the box. Gustin didn't move when he peeled back the blankets and the pajama top and disinfected the thin skin of his upper arm. Timmy's hands were steady and clean. He remembered the hurricane when he was a boy, riding on his daddy's shoulders to keep clear of the rising water. A piece of roof tin had cut his arm—not deep, not so it bled much, but wide and shallow. Gustin's big hands had washed the cut clean in the rain and then a week later, when it still hurt and had swole up purple, he wrapped it with honey until it healed. Timmy held his daddy's skin flat, angled the needle, with a gentleness that pained him.

Gustin's eyes closed in the blackest part of the night, but it was well morning before the last mouthful of air rolled around in his chest. Just sitting, rocking, there was a lot of time for Timmy to think. Sometimes he found himself humming quietly to the rhythm of the chair's creak. He cast his mind back for the plots of movies he'd seen and muttered them to himself to keep awake. There was no sentiment to it. He was just waiting to call Doc Pitre so he could bring a death certificate. If Gustin died while Timmy slept, there would be a delay. He would be stuck here in Belle Rose longer than he had to be.

But when he did die finally—cleanly, nothing in his stomach or his bowels to spill—Timmy couldn't get out of the chair to make the call. He tried to remember when he had

stood up last—five or six hours back, to piss, but since then he had been in a slow hypnosis, rocking. The muscles of his legs were cramped up and he had to force them straight, stretching one after the other, with a panic and a shaking rising in his chest. The dusty brown telephone was across the room. Too far to reach. He dropped his head to his knees and breathed, let the oxygen reach his legs. He listened to his own heartbeat slowing and speeding and slowing again with his breath. The bloody core of his body ached. When he felt himself settle like water coming down from a boil, he took up the cold plastic phone and dialed an old number he still remembered.

“Get me Doc Pitre,” he said. “And hurry.”

“Aw, naw, *cher*, he done retired. He puttin his feet up at home. You want the young fella come in from Lafayette, now. Don Cole.”

“Tell him Gustin Alcide is dead. The house is on one of the old plots off Guillory Road, half a mile past the junction. White sideboards. I need him pronounced before I bury him.”

Timmy found the shovel out back, in the old outhouse that had been boarded into a tool shed. He hefted its splintering shaft, rusting blade—dull with age, but the ground was soft this time of summer. He picked a patch in the yard where the chickens used to run, far enough off from the fig tree that the roots wouldn't get in the way. Just him, him alone, sleepless and griefless, ready to dig.

There was a woman he left behind, in Oklahoma. Pretty and round, Helen, a round name, soft curving lips and fat arms and a round ass. A fleshly woman made of spheres. Even her toes were short and fat and round. Her fat lower lip was dimpled like a candied

orange slice, and her sweat had a lemonade tang to it that he loved. He missed that taste. It ghosted on his tongue as he drove the shovel into the earth over and over again. He was digging slow but steady, the grave measured and outlined but still barely a foot deep, when the doctor showed up in a gray Pontiac with bird shit on the hood.

Doctor Cole had dust on his shoes, dingy black pants, a white coat and a stethoscope around his neck like a picture of a doctor in a kid's book. "Don't get many house calls these days," he called out, keeping his feet picked up out of the mud. "You must be Alcide the younger."

Timmy didn't move to shake or introduce himself, just leaned on the shovel, his hands stinging and blistering, bare, splinters spearing the soft flesh of his palm.

"What's your father's name? Full name, I mean." Doctor Cole fished into his briefcase and pulled out a piece of paper and a clipboard. He stood poised with a pen like a man who made his living filling out forms instead of healing people.

"Augustin Alcide. No middle name, not that I know of." Timmy grunted another shovelful of dirt out of the ground. The doctor scratched at the hair-prickled roll of fat at the back of his neck, then wrote the name intently.

"You want I should have a car sent out? Mr. Frederick in town can take care of the arrangements for you. Plot at the churchyard, all that."

Then he stood there, like he was waiting for Timmy to do something. But he was busy digging. If he stopped now the hole would never get dug before the full heat of the day. So he just knocked his head towards the house and looked back to his dirt. It was black and wet, but he could barely smell it over the reek of rotted figs. The birds had got some of them, but most of the summer's yield was getting chewed up by bugs, melting into

the earth. Another shovelful, then another. Dimly he heard the Pontiac roar up and drive away. He worked as hard as he could, but he was just one man, and the sun angled high before the hole was waist-deep.

Inside the house, on the chipped surface of the table, there were two pieces of paper—a copy of the death certificate and a brochure on Grief Management. He threw that away. The certificate he took out to his truck and shoved in the glove compartment not caring if it wrinkled or folded. It was good to breathe air without the iron rankness of death. He flexed and released his hands, feeling the wind rasp on his raw skin. Dirt clung to his palms as to the skin of an onion just out of the ground.

He had let his mind dance around the actual burying of his daddy. It wasn't like Timmy had never touched a dead man before. But when it was someone you had known. Whose hands had soothed and frightened you. He knew those hands fierce on his jaw, on the back of his neck, and now they were nothing but fleshly weights. He put his palms to his face and smelled the blood that beaded up from each scrape.

When Timmy was ten years old, his father had once stamped out a man-sized patch of field and lay flat with his rifle for hours, well after dark. He had the gun aimed at the fig tree, which was not so tall then but glossy and weighted down with green buds. Timmy might have been too old for the third grade but he was not stupid. He listened, he heard what was going around. Some older boys, John-Simon and two of his cousins, thought it was tough to sneak right up to the house and knock the unripe fruit off mean old Monsieur Alcide's tree. More than once, he had snapped awake to his daddy shouting "*Fout-pas-mal* sons of bitches!" out the window, and the rustling giggle of fleeing boys.

He wasn't much surprised at what things had come to. No one knew Gustin better

than Timmy. He had made a science out of every noise, every movement. Now he knew that the safest thing to do was to lie fully clothed on his cot under the blankets, as if asleep, and slip out the back if Gustin's footsteps sounded vicious.

He wasn't listening for the gun, not really, so when he heard it he was shocked out of the sleep he didn't know he'd fallen into. He fumbled for his slingshot, under his pillow. In a rush he knew that what he should have done was run out of the house, to the road, cut the other boys off at the woods and turn them back. Because he had not done this one of them was dead.

He listened for the footsteps. Maybe Gustin had just fired a warning shot to scare them, would be satisfied tonight and sleep off his meanness the way other fathers slept off a drunk. When he finally heard the steps, they came slowly and steadily. Too heavy to be one man carrying a shotgun. Timmy lay in a darkness of pure black terror. Then a thud, the settling of something earthly, and the door creaked open. He held the slingshot like it could protect him. When his father came to the side of his bed, holding an oil lamp, his hands and shoulders soaked in blood, Timmy knew beyond a doubt that he would be the next boy to die. The old man held the lamp low at his side. He jerked his head to the door. Timmy clutched his slingshot and followed.

He had smelled death before and he smelled it now. He expected to see John-Simon's pale and dirty face on the corpse, so when his father swung the lamp over it and Timmy saw that it was a deer and not a boy, he began to cry. His relief came out in hot sobs. He clenched his stomach to silence himself, but old Gustin heard. His big dirty hand squeezed the back of Timmy's neck and pressed his face to the wounds in the doe's flank. They smelled hot and like blood and like death and like metal.

“Cry and you don’t eat none of it,” his daddy muttered. But when old Gustin butchered the thing, there was too much shot in the meat. They could not eat any of it. It had been a kill for no reason.

Timmy wrapped the wool blanket around his daddy's body and buried him like that. No coffin, no time to build a wooden box for his dignity. The air itself urged him on. Tufts of wool stuck to the tender flesh of his palms. He didn't bother to roll the old man gently into the grave, either. Once he began to lever the dirt back into the hole, he couldn't stop. He shoveled faster and faster. His hands burned and his back was stiff as a plank, but something let go in him and he just couldn't stop, like a wind-up monkey slamming its cymbals together over and over and over again. He kicked at the dirt, too, just to fill the grave faster. His jeans were caked up with wet dirt almost to the knee, his t-shirt was glazed with sweat, but he didn't once stop until the earth was heaped up in a soft and swollen mound.

Timmy's heartbeat rang out from his chest to his fingertips. Half a worm wriggled down the rusted blade of the shovel and into the ground. There was the sun on his neck again, burnt red for sure, there was the smell of rot and ripeness in his nose. He clapped a hand over the back of his neck to shade it and let the shovel drop with a clang. No one around to hear it. Not a soul anywhere, not for miles and miles.

He stripped naked and washed his clothes in the sink, white ceramic with rust rings and blue-gray stains. Dabbed the dirt off his cracked boots. He wrung out the cloth until it stopped dripping and laid it out on the hood of his truck to dry. Walking around in his

BVDs like that, he didn't feel any shame. The house was his, after all, and the land it was on. There was a lease in Gustin's old blond-wood trunk that said so. Timmy didn't know if it was kindheartedness or distrust that had kept him from drawing up a will, but either way there was just the two of them. It would all have to go to Timmy, unless his momma came back. He had this picture of her walking right out of a hole in the sky, dark curls around her cheeks, lit from behind. The air shimmered sweet as raw sugarcane. But he knew it was a little boy's dream, because when he put the word orphan on himself it fit just as snug as the drawers he was wearing.

He stood half-naked looking out over the field for a while, the choked-out, wasted crop. The feeling he had now was like a hangover almost, like his guts were made out of razor wire, like his brain was whittled down to a point. He rubbed the hair of his thighs one way, then the other. The fat gray clouds crowded up to the ground, ripe with rain. The air tasted bitter. There was something keeping him from leaving. Not his clothes, they were near enough to dry. Something pulling at him like the need for a cigarette, insistent. He sighed, dressed, combed his hair. Checked his teeth in the side mirrors of the truck, even though he hadn't eaten a thing in over a day. There were two near the back going to rot.

The seat of his jeans was still damp and the loose dirt clung to it when he sat down cross-legged next to the hole where his daddy was buried. Timmy lit a cigarette and tapped the ash into the mound. There was nothing to say and he knew it. No violence he could do to the old man that would stick. He thought about spitting on the grave, or pissing on it, but there was no point. His stomach seized up and rolled, and he half-expected to puke up a gut full of tequila or something, but then it stopped and he knew

what to do.

The stew was still on the stove, but that was nothing, that was some old church woman bottom-feeding for another soul. He opened the cabinets—just homemade canned jams and pickles, some rice, and a tin of coffee. The labels on the jars were all looped and tangled in this old-fashioned government school handwriting. There was a jar of pickled figs near the back picking up dust, but through the dim glass each round fruit was the size of a baby's fist, swollen with juice and tender. The lid popped right off and he stuck his sore and grave-soiled fingers into the clean sterile jar. The vinegar syrup stung his cuts and scrapes. He ate each sweet sour figs right down to the stems, pulpy splinters which he chewed and swallowed. He thought of a fig tree growing in his belly, small at first, branching into his muscles and veins, his limbs, his hands and feet and head, bearing bitter poison fruit. A death like his daddy's. He felt sick at the thought. But he knew it was waiting for him, just this side of his old age. To lay down his head under Evangeline Parish soil. He thought he could do it, if he had to.