To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Brandy Michelle Yates entitled "Empress' Story." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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Michael Knight
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We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Acceptance for the Council:

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Carolyn Hodges
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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
EMPERESS' STORY

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

Brandy Michelle Yates
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Abstract

Empress' Story is a creative thesis written by Brandy Michelle Yates in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English degree. Empress' Story explores four days in Empress' adolescent life in which her best friend, Roni, is raped by a deacon in the church they both attend. Empress' Story is not a coming-of-age story; instead, it focuses upon race, gender, rape, and religion in a small Southern town. The way the town handles the rape of Roni is an example of the social context and stigma that surround the deeply personal actualization of people and their actions. This thesis looks to explore the deeply intricate complexities of the nature of humanity.
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Introduction

A Place to (Re)Create From

I do not remember much of my childhood, of yesterday, of last week, but I do know where those moments took place. I can relate any moment anyone brings up at any family gathering to the place it happened. Momma said I was not born, that she found me hanging on a star. That star was atop the Methodist Medical Center in Downtown Birmingham. I graduated from a high school that was built on top of a collard patch donated by a farmer. (I do not know if he donated it, but that is how I remember it.) I often have to call my little sister to remind me how we played, how we interacted, what happened at some event I cannot recall. If she can remind me where it happened, there is a greater probability I will remember what happened. For Empress' Story, I called on her to remind me how we acted as children, to remind me what I was like as a child. As an adult, I keep calendars and lists of things to do, notes, hoping that, in writing, I can piece together my life for myself. I sometimes even ask my mother, but it is much less often. When I do, though, she tells me stories about a set of encyclopedias that were given to my sister and me by our Poppie, my father's father. I am not sure if I am making this up, as I often do to fill up the blank spaces of my memory, or if it happened, but I think I remember foraging through my daddy's barn in the back yard and finding them, mislaid in a box under a pile of other things we no longer found useful. Mom's memory tells her that she kept this set of encyclopedias in a closet inside the house, that, sometimes, she would lose me while she was doing housework, cooking, working in the yard, or caring for one of my two other sisters, she could find me in that closet, looking through those volumes. That, on family vacations or long drives, I would carry one with me as a
companion. What she did not know is that I was not reading the kind of knowledge that your average encyclopedia offers. This set, called *The Book of Knowledge*, covered all the introductory areas of study that any young student needs, but it also contained, near the back of each volume, a novel or a set of short stories. I do remember skipping all the other sections to get to that end section of stories. With a copyright ranging from 1923 to 1946, the knowledge was outdated, but the fiction was immortal and always timely, something I knew without knowing that I knew. Something that I understood years later reading Ray Bradbury’s introduction to *The October Country*, "Homesteading the October Country". He says, "When I finished my first short story in the seventh grade I knew I was on the right path to immortality…From the age of twelve I knew I was in a life and death match, winning every time I finished a new story, threatened with extinction on those days I did not write" (xi). A sense of knowing, a sense of comradery accompanied this reading of Bradbury. I often thought, as a child, how transient our lives as human beings are, what little affect we are able to make on the world around us, on the people in it. Writers were the only people that I could tell were able to do this, to affect the larger world, in a way even those written about in the history books could not. Historical figures were not able to write their own stories, to tell their lives in their own words. D.H. Lawrence says it beautifully, in the manner of expression that displays his background as a son of the working class, as the son of a coal miner: "I am a man and alive. For this reason, I am a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog" (quoted in Tiverton p. 17). The novel, for me, is the closest we ever get to the "whole hog". It is the most expansive mural of humanity.
I would not say that, for this master's thesis, I set out to write a novel. I would, instead, say that I pursued the master's as an opportunity to finish this novel. Although I do not consider the complete draft here as finished, I do consider it a complete draft, a good start.

I began blindly, sitting in an uncomfortable, ugly oak chair in a blandly beige painted dormitory room in the junior year of my undergraduate study. I was lonely and sad, much the same disposition as the years before I came to sit in that angular chair. After more than ten years of silence, my baby sister had recently told me that she had been raped as a child under seven by a deacon in the small country church we had attended as children. Empress' Story grew out of my own insistence that I confront the reality of what my sister had told me. I was also still trying to allocate a place in my life for the ramifications of my own sexual abuse.

I began writing one night while only being mindful of two things. Setting and Voice. The setting was that place from my past that had been so pivotal in directing me to my future. The little white church that I had loved and hated with equal passion, I knew all of its intricacies. I had only recently begun to appreciate my own voice.

Since that first night that I wrote blindly into some beginning, I let myself be lead into Empress' world. I cannot, completely truthfully, say that I made choices as a writer except that I made the choice to let myself be lead by Empress, that I chose to follow her into places, I often felt, were too scary for me to go.

Looking back at the work I have done on this still unfinished piece, I notice some of the areas that could not be described in experience as someplace I was lead. Sometimes, Empress hid from me as completely camouflaged as when she covered
herself in the red dirt of the abandoned mine. Throughout the process of getting to this
draft of Empress' Story, I often felt like I was figuring out an intricate problem that sat
before me without all the necessary pieces. In times like those, I picked up the reigns and
decided on some boundaries so that I could keep going. I made choices when I could no
longer feel Empress leading me. But, in these choices, I took all my cues from her.

Realism, more so than believability, was important to me in creating Empress'
Story. Actual linear, chronological time accounted for, characters that carried out
biological functions, all the complexity of life that does not allow for simple character
traits were pursued even when I was aware that they were possibly, at times, trying on the
reader. I wanted the novel to reflect life. Sometimes, life is boring. Sometimes, you do
not have anything better to do on a beautiful summer day than sit in the house and eat
cereal and week old milk. Often, fears are ungrounded. Often, you are not aware of the
thing you should be most afraid of.

One thing that I learned early in my writing career was that my stories were not
working because I did not invest myself in them. I was not a part of them in the same way
that I was able to step into my part as a character on the stage when I acted during high
school. I decided that the way to remedy this was through the first person narrator. I
knew, with Empres' Story, that I could not fully relate first hand experience of being
raped as a young girl. The nature of the sexual abuse that I had experienced was not
nearly as terrifying or physically violent. It was mostly psychological and a longer term
than one singular event. But, because every Southern woman I had ever known had
endured either sexual abuse or rape, I knew I could be that rape victim's closest friend.
I also believe that the reader has a different experience with the first person narrator. The first person narrator demands a level of intimacy with the reader that the third person does not even ask for. Third person, by its very nature, allows and encourages the reader and the writer to step back from the events encountered on the page. I knew that Empress' story could have no such allowance.

It also seemed the most natural narrative voice to assume. It was what came out on the page that first night in Rast Hall.

The actualization of those things that happened on the first page were a culmination of academic experiences up to that point. I was an English major with a concentration in creative writing in the Honors Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. While there, I met an exceptional group of writers.

Vicki Covington taught in her workshops that any writing will do. Vomit everything in your head onto the page and clean it up later was the process she taught, the one I teach to my students, and the one I am most comfortable employing.

She also taught us setting in a way I never looked to learn from other Southern writers. Vicki Covington taught us that, just as God started with a place, Eden, we too must begin with a setting. All other elements of the story would grow out of that place, organically, just as the story of humankind grew out of Eden. With Empress' Story, I began with place. I started at Dora Second Baptist Church, the church at which I was raised. Empress, Roni, Sadie, May, Deacon Brown, Brother JayD, Sam all grew up from the red dirt over the graves on the hill and the gravel driveway separating the church from the fellowship hall. The fiction of the novel, the plot and characters, had a foundation in the reality of that place.
Vicki Covington also taught me something about myself as a writer. In the "Prologue" to _Women in a Man's World, Crying_, she summarizes many of her classes and our conversations. She says, "I knew, then, that I was a writer. And it was the beginning of my coming to understand that the things I'd always fretted over in myself - the fact that I was an observer and not a participant, that I was a loner, that I felt out of place in the world- all these things are wonderful qualities for a writer to have. In fact that's just the way we are" (x). I felt, in her, a kindred spirit. And, because I had found a kindred spirit, an untamed soul, I was able to accept my place in the world at that point, early on. She encouraged me to write what I was most afraid of, write about sex, write about incest, betrayal by the ones you love, misunderstandings with mortal consequence, everything you are scared of. And, I did. I wrote a horrible piece of lesbian erotica. I wrote about the family moments that I could remember that defined my worldview. I wrote without boundaries. I vomited on the page, and, together, Vicki and I cleaned it up.

Embedded in this kind of writing, what Vicki focused me in upon, is the mandate that the writer be bare, naked before the audience of readership. In writing the things you are most ashamed of imagining, you must be honest.

I saw all these things employed in her stories. _Gathering Home_ seemed a product of time and place. The stories of _Women in a Man's World, Crying_ were the product of simple life experience. In "Writers Don't Wear Petticoats", she compares writing with childbirth. You do not consider it as it happens; you allow yourself to do what your body is pushing you to do, let it out, create. She denies that writing is an intellectual exercise but emphasizes the act itself. You sit down at a piece of paper. You cover it in your naked self.
Ada Long, an encouraging friend and the creator of the UAB Honors Program, tried to show me how to focus my writing enough that the reader could understand it and, more importantly, explained to me the importance of appreciating the voice embedded within my Southern accent. In her, I found a loving friend and consistent encouragement. In her poem, "My Mother Left Me," I saw the sheer power and violence of the mother-daughter relationship. In "Clairvoyant" much like Ray Bradbury's *From the Dust Returned*, she raised the everyday life of a North Alabama family to the level of eccentric in a way that I did not notice until I reread the story years later.

Ada suggested that I work with a poet, Tony Crunk. As Ada accomplished through her stories, Tony verbalized during his term as my mentor that poetry is not mysterious, but that mystery is bound up in everyday things.

Dennis Covington discussed with me how a writer works to improve his craft, how he moves from reading and believing in fictional characters to creating his own that his readers believe in. He taught me to be aware of the technicality of writing and the physicality of the places that the characters inhabit. He reminded me that trailer walls are thin and that poor people cannot afford personal space. He said that I wrote from a place as dark and mysterious as the hollows of Alabama. I appreciated that place anew after he had described it so beautifully.

Besides these and other influential people I encountered during my undergraduate years, the unique coursework of the UAB Honors Program allowed me a new perspective on the world around me. Because of Ada and the other teachers she gathered for us to learn from, I was able to understand the context of literature as well as to better understand the context of my own life and my place within contemporary culture. As a
result of this, I was especially affected by the character of the elderly male scholar in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* who was forced to sell his collection of books one by one to buy food for himself and his servant. I have sense learned the rarity of a personal collection of books during the time period, but, even before I knew that, I felt a deep seated anger and a physical pain, one that has only grew, toward a capitalist system that would mandate such sacrifice to simply live, to meet the most basic human needs of food and shelter.

Raised as part of the working class, I was very much aware of money, of how much money provided basic human needs. Most of my anxiety and panic leading up to beginning my undergraduate study was directly related to my position as a daughter of the working class. The only way that I would be able to attend school was to find funding. At every level of education, this has formed my experience. But, I was determined to do so many things. I wanted to live a different life than my parents, different from the generations before my parents who had worked in the coal mines before the union won them a wage that could be lived on, sick days, a lunch period, and more. I wanted a life that was not scheduled by the capitalist system. I wanted more than to work and go home. I wanted to find fulfillment.

But, I feel a kindredness with writers of the working class. For the purposes of writing this novel, I looked back into people discussing their experiences as such. Another set of Poppie's books I received after his death was a set of Foxfire books that consisted of recorded oral histories from the mouths of the people who inhabited the Appalachian mountain chain. I looked to these narratives as a way to hear the voices of the working class, to see a detailed account of their everyday lives. I looked to Dorothy
Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* to figure out how to let a child tell her story. I looked to her essays in *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* to have a better understanding of how I wrote by orientating myself in where I was writing from, by immersing myself in place. I looked to her collection of short stories, *Trash*, to surround myself with Southern voices, places, and actions.

In the introduction to *Trash*, "Stubborn Girls and Mean Stories", Allison singled in on the impact of the situation to which she was born. All of her life experience shot from the intricacies surrounding her placement on her family tree and where that family tree was placed in the world. She says, "The central fact of my life is that I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family…" (vii). Here, we see the importance of place upon the individual. More so than other regions of the United States or other places in the world, the implications of being Southern create an intricate impact upon a life. I do not believe that a writer can write well from any other experience than their own. Like Allison, I believe that who I am now directly links back to the moment of my birth, to whom I was born, and how. I know that the single experience of an individual life is the thing that most impacts that life.

As Allison explores in her work, I am consistently conscious of the effects of silence in the South. As a Southerner, you recreate your own memories before you could remember, you recreate your family's history because no one will tell it to you.

Unlike Allison, I write from a place on the continuum that is farther away from autobiography. I start with something real and write into my imagination. I start from the
smallest detail I can remember and work my way into recreating the world that surrounded it. That is what I did with Empress' Story.
Sunday

I walked up the first step of the white church. My black patent shoes were bothering me, and I had just put them on in the car on the way over here. The strap was too tight across the tops of my feet. The little heels clicked up the country blue painted steps while the little black ribbon bow jumped with each movement. I almost missed a step and scuffed up the side of the right toe. I looked down to smooth the black velvet across my stomach. It stuck out too far. Momma said I should start doing some sit-ups.

The round black iron rails on each side of the stairs framed, on the left, the newly built fellowship hall and the cemetery, and on the right, a hill with the proverbial three crosses glaring down from on high.

The fellowship hall was sitting on the hill to the left behind the church. Gray chunks of gravel with little patches of grass grown through provided the steep walkway up the hill to the double doors painted the same country blue as the steps leading up to the same double doors of the church house. The fellowship hall was long and wide, etched into flat ground cut out of the back of the hill that sloped towards the cemetery. Inside, pale purple cheap carpet spread up in between two nurseries that were never used. It was like Granny said, "Children of all ages needed to be in church from birth 'til they had their own."

I don't remember actually having any sort of class in the nurseries, but Roni and me used to go back there after Sunday dinner and rummage through all the craft supplies to see what we could find to make stuff with.
Both nurseries were built with the good intentions of keeping the screaming down during the sermon. The rooms were decorated as if they were used, though. The nursery on the left was used even less than the one on the right. It was for the small babies that had to be held and nursed and absolutely cared for. There was a used babybed from the thrift store that was scratched oak. The four poles had circles etched in them, done obviously by machine and not by hand. The little blanket inside had a generic bunny with little pink feet and a yellow belly. A rocking chair was off to the right where the babies spent more time being rocked than sleeping in the bed.

On the white painted cement block walls were paper pictures that had been torn out of Sunday School books that showed Jesus surrounded by children. He was always very pale with brown hair and a beard. He wore a white robe that looked more Greek than Jewish with that little red sash like a prom queen. He leaned toward the group of barefoot children with his hand, palm up, extended towards them.

He never smiled.

He never frowned.

It wasn’t a look of contentment either. It was a deep sadness, a quiet desperation Jesus had that I connected with. I understood that those children were barefoot, and Jesus always had those designer sandals his dad bought for him.

The rest of the room was bare.

Across the five foot foyer was the other nursery for older children. It had a short-legged table with miniature chairs made of plastic and metal instead of oak like the baby bed. One big chair with longer legs stayed at the head of the table for the teacher. A case
with three open shelves was pushed back into the far wall. It was overrun by glue, colored construction paper, and, again, pictures of Jesus and a crowd of children.

Every once in a while, the pictures would change. Mary entered at Christmas, a cross and a tomb at Easter. But, not much else changed in the pictures, and I learned to create that white Jesus in my head without those pictures, arms extended while I was barefoot. In my mind, he was always looking at me. I was the child in the crowd he made contact with. I had the same look on my face as he did.

Now, at that moment, the look on my face was different. I was annoyed that we were, again, late for church.

I looked down at the scuff on my shoe as Momma opened the creaky door. She slipped in through the crack pulling me by the arm to follow. It was just me and her this morning. My stepfather was sleeping in as usual, and my older sister, Maureen, was doing the same thing for sure. She didn't matter anymore, though. She'd moved out three months ago, thank god.

It was the third Sunday when the congregation ate after church which meant that Momma wouldn’t have to cook. We never missed the third Sunday. I was the only one who listened to her; so, Momma always dragged me along. I didn’t really mind except that we were always late, and it embarrassed me.

Momma and I stood in the walk-in area behind the main sanctuary. It was so small though that you couldn't really call it that. The church was just one big room with additions where absolutely necessary. A thin wall and another oak table with pamphlets and flowers on it separated us from the pews of people.
I tried to close my eyes while Brother Roy prayed, but I was watching Momma’s feet. She had on perfect traditional heels that were higher than mine, and the foot was more streamlined. My shoes were for little stubby feet like I had. Hers were long and thin, so proper in their glistening red like lipstick.

Momma had a dress to match with a red background and little white polka-dots. The lace collar on her neck was so big that it hung down over the little shelf her breasts made. Her white hat was tilted to one side slightly. Her makeup was perfect. I had tried all morning to make my eyeshadow as evenly toned as hers and my cheeks pink but not too pink. Her face always looked unreal to me as if the layers of makeup were too thick to show if she could laugh or smile. I watched her face when she talked just in case it made any change so that I would be sure to notice.

I looked up now and noticed her eyelashes looked much longer when her eyes were closed like this. One little tear dropped down and landed on the lace collar. Air conditioning always made Momma's eyes water. I stared. I started to reach and wipe it off so that the little water stain wouldn’t be visible. She always told us, my family, to tell her if her mascara were smeared or if her eyebrows were bushy. I assumed it would be the same with this stain on her collar, but, then, I remembered that my eyes were supposed to be closed. I squeezed them shut quickly. If someone saw me, though, I would know they had their eyes open. I could get them then. They couldn’t get me into trouble. If I got into trouble, Momma would tell Sam, my stepfather. He always threatened that I’d get the hell beat into me, but he'd never do that. That’s what they said, anyway. I’d get the hell beat into me. Is that possible? I wondered.
Ok, if hell is a place, it couldn’t be stuffed into you like maybe breading into a
turkey at Thanksgiving. That’s gross. Maybe they stuff the pages of the bible that talk
about hell, like Revelations or something right into your nose or mouth so that it can go
straight to your brain.

It seems improbable, but weird things happen all the time. Momma told me that,
if I accidentally ate a watermelon seed (but I ate them on purpose sometimes) that a
whole vine would grow out of my bottom, and I would never be able to use the bathroom
again. Or, if I ate an apple that was not ripe, just one bite would give me a stomachache
for a week. You had to be careful just to live.

But this wasn’t it. Other weird things were true too. People always die three in a
row, just like that. I know that’s true. That happens all the time. Just a month ago, one
Thursday, Mrs. Easter died. Then, Posey Dockins died. Then, Mackie Ray died. It was all
within two weeks, I swear.

And, Momma told me an Indian rode up and down the railroad tracks on a horse.
Her grandma had told her that. It was part of the stories that were told around a bonfire of
underbrush from land that was cleared yearly. Her grandma smoked rabbit tobacco and
didn’t wear panties. She walked through the woods to get to town. She didn’t wear
panties so that, if she needed to pee, she just squatted in the woods and went. She didn’t
need a toilet seat or running water or an outhouse even.

Momma said her husband, Grampa Wess, was the sweetest old man who loved
her no matter what. When she talked about him, I wish I had been able to meet him.

In my mind, I can see him just as Momma described. He had never been able to
read. He would have Grandma Wess read the bible to him after dinner as he rocked on
the wooden rocking chair he had made himself on the porch he had built himself as the younger children played in the dirt front yard. Grandma had to sweep the yard so that the dirt looked like it was somehow clean. As for dinner, Grampa Wess didn’t eat a bite until all of his children were fed.

A wife that doesn’t wear panties married to a man that is selfless is somehow unreal. A woman who doesn’t wear panties seems real. A man who waits for his family to eat before he does seems unreal, lost, gone from the world now as I enter this church where his son, my grandfather, my mother’s father, was a deacon.

Everything seems unreal: my mom’s pale, skinny hands, the picture of Jesus with that look on his face in the painting above the lectern, the piano singing the same notes every Sunday, the people in the pews with their lives. It must be all just a fantasy of life because what is real is women who don’t wear panties.

Momma pinched my arm, and I got pulled back into this world I can’t keep myself in. The whole congregation was muttering amen as mom and I rushed to the back left pew. Granny was sitting there. She embraced us and said how happy she was that we had come and, no, nobody noticed that we only came on the third Sunday to eat. They were just happy we were here. Bullshit. I can’t keep the monologue out of my head, and I almost get into trouble many times because I don’t always remember not to verbally say what I am mentally thinking. I almost shouted bullshit in the awkward silence after amen.

Granny was beautiful just like mom. I always knew if I created my own religion with my own sanctuary, women like my mom and granny would be in there to worship.

Granny wore a red dress suit. The skirt went past her knees, and the jacket had little roses embroidered on the collar. A pin in the shape of a dog was fastened into the
breast pocket. It was cute with a fake diamond collar. She had on some huge round pear earrings to match the necklace draped across her chest in between the lapels. Her shoes matched this red perfectly with too dark stockings underneath. Her skin had started wrinkling up, but it just made her look more knowledgeable and more perfect. I wanted to reach and touch her stockings to feel the silk glide against my palm, but I knew it was inappropriate. I looked at them, and Granny caught my eye and whispered that I should be listening to Brother JayD, the preacher. I made myself do this.

I heard his voice crescendo and soften for effect. He was a real preacher, called by god itself. No college education; no experience in reading or teaching, especially the bible. His testimony was pretty average, but I remembered it because I was often reminded of it.

He was in the marines, ignoring god, the usual. Boys back then did a lot of things they weren’t supposed to, he would say. I always mouthed back, “Nothing has changed under the sun,” but mom would jab me with her elbows in my ribs to shutup. He said his Momma had prayed for him, and god never ignored a praying mother. He would cry every mother’s day, his mother’s birthday, Christmas, Easter, and most other national holidays that his mother was the reason he was going to heaven, he missed his mother but god had taken her to a better place, and so on. Truthfully, he was a sweet little old man who always looked genuinely glad to see me, told me I was a pretty girl and a true child of god. He dyed his hair black and fought cancer til it won. He had spots on his face from the chemo, but his hair was jet black. His wife was a big ole woman with hair as white as snow. Her granddaughter, who was my age, said women dyed their hair to look like her
grandmother’s. Whatever, her granddaughter was a bitch and always trying to impress someone.

One night, he was compelled to go to a bible study group that met on the ship. That night, the lord Jesus saved him. That was salvation night.

The night he was called to the ministry he had been driving around “avoiding Jesus, running from the lord” when he was so moved that he had to pull the truck over or he would have had a wreck.

Now, he has tried to retire for years, but the congregation can find no one to replace him. Some of the older folks have said that they would quit church if he left. This just breaks his heart, and he starts to cry and says he won’t leave until the good lord takes him off the face of the earth. But, every year, he sends in the same letter of resignation to the secretary who then reads it to the congregation. The congregation votes whether or not to keep him on. It is a scandal if he is not voted back in 100%. One year, he had two nos. I happen to think it was him and his wife.

He looked tired as he again took his seat on the front middle pew. He had to sit on a little pillow because the chemo had wrecked his whole body. I felt real pity for people who experienced pain. It has always been them that have awaken me from self pity. They make me realize that I know no pain; I know no sorrow.

He asked his daughter, the pianist, to sing a verse.

Extended syllables seemed to be written into the music.

“Come unto me, unto me, unto me. I will give you rest, give you rest. Take my yolk upon you. Hear me and be blessed.”
The little old lady in front of me cracked every note, but her voice was sweet to me.

“I am meek and lowly. Come and trust my might.”

By this time, half the church was crying, but no one had made it down to the altar. Brother JayD continued pleading, “Come, you weak and weary. Give your burdens to the lord. Let Him save you. Let Him save you.” A few amens trickled in. Poor guy, he had been preaching to a crowd that got saved forty years ago. I felt sorry for him that no one had come to the altar. He held his worn black leather bible tucked under his right arm while his left arm was held up and out, calling to the flock.

After two stanzas, his hand slipped to a flat plane that motioned the pianist to stop playing.

“If no one will come, we stop. But, the lord is always calling.” He smiled until all the little white spots on his face from the chemo were covered by the pink spots from the chemo. “I would like to invite you all to come eat with us up in the fellowship hall. There’s food for plenty, and we’d love to have you. The ladies have fixed it up for us, and it’s waiting. Brother Roy, take us to the lord in prayer.” He almost whispered this last line as he bowed his head and took the short walk to the end of the aisle where he shook hands after the sermon was over.

He broke my heart, and I suddenly wanted to cry as I watched him with his eyes closed. I watched the little pink and white spots and hurt for him. He had to go to chemo every week then. I hoped, for his sake, that everything worked out with his god and his heaven. I wanted him to be able to preach and not have to sit on his pillow or wait for people to come to the altar. I hoped he said prayers over the banquets in heaven.
Another amen was said in unison. The people in the pews filed out to get in line to shake the preacher’s hand and then eat.

I tried to imagine what chemo was like from what they had told me. My mouth and throat seemed scorched like I had been sunburned on the inside. My body ached. My head pounded and seemed to sway with the blood that pumped through it fiercely. My arms were weak. My fingers didn’t want to move. At this, I stopped. I felt sorry for him again, decided I didn’t want to shake his hand because I might cry and make mom mad.

I snuck out of the pew on the side closest to the wall of windows, just plain, no stained glass. I watched Momma and Granny go up to Brother JayD, smiling. Momma followed Granny just like I followed Momma around. It was a strange little movement, us three in a line.

I made it the three feet from the back pew up to the opening of the stairs for the second floor. I silently shut the door behind me and closed away all the noise of the sanctuary. The staircase was quiet and dark. The carpet was thin and pulled. It was a dark, dingy yellow and some shade of red that I don’t remember ever having seen before. It was some kind of brown red. About eight steps went up to a sharp left turn. About fourteen more steps and I was on the second floor. All of these were the Sunday School rooms. Only the young people met up here, though. Kids were in the nursery in the fellowship hall. Women were in the left side of the sanctuary. I always watched the men walk up to the fellowship hall wondering why things were separated so. I found out it was all about the Sunday School book. Well, that’s what Brother JayD said, but I looked. Both books were the same. But, the men walking up the hill, it was this moment, so strange. A bunch of birds making various paths. These birds wore their suits, their
overalls, their jeans and t-shirts. These birds carried bibles under their arm and swerved up the hill to the fellowship hall beside the graveyard. I could picture these men as birds swarming up the stairway to the second floor. I stood looking down the stairs. It made me feel brave. I could fall. I could fall and break ribs or break my neck even.

A little rustling disturbed these suicidal thoughts, and I felt suddenly that I was not alone.

This feeling of alone, this feeling of nothing, of life and death colliding inside me was always around so that I felt distant from the rest of creation, from all other humans. But, I had understanding. I could connect to other people’s pain. I felt the desolation, the weakness of JayD when he would never have even considered saying a word to me.

A faint pat continued down the hallway. Five doors down, the light was on. I stepped lightly, quietly, feeling sneaky and quick witted at once. I passed the Sunday School rooms with their closed doors and darkness on the right. On the left, the single locked door of the attic stored away all the wings for the Christmas play angels and the bathrobes for the wise men. Each step was excitement. Someone else had slipped away from the service. Someone else didn’t want to shake Brother JayD’s pink spotted hand.

The noise stopped; so did I. I was afraid I had been heard. The light switched off. I couldn’t see. I grasped the walls on both sides of the narrow hallway. I slunk down between them on my knees, crawling, dragging my dress and my patent shoes on this dirty carpet towards that door at the end of the hallway. Whoever it was knew I was here. They heard me. How the hell had they heard me? It was quiet up here. My breathing was coming quicker, little short gasps.
I made my way, sometimes stopping, sometimes holding my breath. In my mind, I went through each pew trying to remember who had moved out, who left early. There was no way to know. All the old ladies left early to prepare the food which included taking lids off Tupperware and heating bread. Somehow, those two tasks took them the entire twenty minutes it took Brother JayD to get through the sermon. They sometimes brought their grandkids with them to show them what a life of service looked like. It looked like burnt cornbread and soggy rolls.

I had been still for awhile now, breathing only when I had to but not gasping so as not to be heard. I was about eight feet from the room when the light flipped on. I felt my body pull back from the light. The rustling started again. It was louder now, not restrained. Maybe I could have looked under the door. It was slightly cracked. Maybe I could have peeked in the crevice. I went back down with my palms on the carpet. A staple stuck in my left hand by my pinky. I winced but didn’t cry out. I sucked at the little spot and kept going.

Before I could reach it, the light got bigger until I was in the middle of it. I couldn’t see. It was like I had just come out of a cave. I was blinded. A slight figure towered over me. I recognized the voice at the first syllable.

“Empress, what are you doing down there?”

She was down on the floor in front of me, sat her behind on her calves, parallel with me.

“I just put my hand down on a damn staple.”

She frowned. “You shouldn’t cuss in God’s house, dumbass.”
I stared at her. “You said dumbass, dumbass. How in the hell is that any different?”

“Ass is in the Bible,” she stated, raising her chin a little, as if this wiped away every other context in which it could be conceived.

“I don’t give a damn. I cuss inside, outside, upside, and around any damn church. Besides, God don’t live here.” She gasped and put her open palm over her mouth like the good little southern belle she was. “He, she, or whatever the fuck it is wouldn’t live in this dump.” She looked away from me, and, suddenly, that’s not what I wanted at all. I didn’t want her to look away from me; I wanted her to look at me. I lowered my voice and stared at her, whispered to her like she was the only one in the world to talk to. “I’m just saying I’m not going to act any different no matter where I am.” It worked. She looked right at me with the light blinding me behind her. I could only see her outline and tried fiercely to make it out.

She got up and turned around to close the door. We were sitting in the hallway in the darkness now. The noise downstairs was almost nonexistent. Everyone must have already went up to the fellowship hall to Sunday dinner.

“Why did you do that? Now we can’t see a damn thing.”

“Oh, you cuss just to cuss.” I sat back against the wall with my knees up. My dress was scratching my thighs. It had slid up, but we were in the dark; so it didn’t matter. “I don’t want us to get caught up here,” she said, making here a two-syllable word. I liked to hear her talk. I often begged her to tell me stories so that I could listen to her and not have to say anything.
“Why would we get in trouble?” I tried to sound cool, uncaring just like when I cussed or sat with my legs apart when I had a dress on.

She breathed out a “Pssss...” trailing off quickly. “You know we’re supposed to be up there in the fellowship hall. Granny will be mad that I didn’t come help her get it all ready. I told her I really needed to hear the preaching cause I had talked back to Momma this week.”

“Oh, my god,” I said with my head cocked back with disinterest.

“I was just kidding with her, Empress. I didn’t want to go up there and help her. Those old women always pull me away from her and ask how my Momma is. They won’t shut up.”

“Tisk, Tisk, Veronica Angelique Silvering. Respect thy elders.” I leaned in when she laughed at me. She always laughed when I called her by her full name because I usually just called her Roni. She leaned her head back against the wall. She was sitting with her legs crossed, covering her knees with her dress like a lady.

She looked right at me and, we were so close, that it took me off guard. I pulled back a little. She noticed and pulled her head back also. It is strange that that single moment was so uncomfortable. I stood up before she could say anything, before she could laugh at me again. I put my hand out to help pull her up. She took it and stuck out her other one for me to grab too. I took it and yanked her up. Her body was close, and our hands were still together in another uncomfortable moment. I dropped them and stepped back.

“We should go. They’re probably looking for us now.” Roni said as she looked down at her little fingers laced together. I looked down too. Her eyes were intense,
always staring through whatever she looked at to something on the other side. I felt so vulnerable when she spoke in her quiet little gray mouse voice.

“Yeah,” I said and turned to go back down the dark hall before she had a chance to look up at me. I walked fast toward the stairs. She was rushing to keep up. I was halfway down the stairs before she had reached the top. I shot through the closed door at the bottom, rounded the corner to the rear exit, and raced down the blue front porch steps. I slowed down when I reached the cement sidewalk that finally gave way to gravel. Up the hill, never looking back, I made my way to the blue doors of the fellowship hall. I took in a breath, focused what energy I had and went in. I couldn’t get a good full breath. The air was hot in there. There were too many people in too small a space. As I expected, Roni’s granny had been looking for her for thirty minutes. I knew church hadn’t been out quite that long. I lied and told her that I hadn’t seen Roni. I made my way through the crowded long tables and metal mustard colored chairs. People were sitting so close that their elbows touched when they picked up their fork. But, no one noticed. A full plate of food is enough to distract anyone from a small girl.

Aunt Ada caught me going out the back door. "Empress, where have you been?" I just looked at her. She didn't seem to notice. "Now you tell your Momma to bring you over to Deacon Brown's house this Saturday; he's been so kind to have all you kids over and him taking care a his mother and all." I just kept walking. Aunt Ada could find mother herself.

I walked out the back door of the fellowship hall. Just up the hill to the left, the cemetery sat calmly.
It was the strangest thing. The cemetery looked the same no matter what time of year it was. Summer, spring, winter, and fall there were the same dead trees, the grass covered with dead leaves, the never changing names etched in stone.

I didn't know most of the families that were buried there. Some members of the church had plots in the newer section, the farthest away from the church and across the road behind the fellowship hall. I didn't think that part was every really intended to be a cemetery. It certainly didn't have the same feel as the main section. It looked more like a dump with stones in the middle. All the old plastic daisies and lilies were thrown over there after homecoming each year and, somehow, they never made it all the way to the dump.

I never walked on that side of the cemetery.

I always walked the same path. Ronia and I had gone this way since forever. We walked all the way to the top of the hill and started up at the Pickleseimer's plot. Then, we headed straight back toward the woods through the Stephenson's family plot and circled behind the dead oak to the Coalman's and up to the top where the Indian graves were. Around the Indian graves were more majestic looking stones from the late 1800s. They were tall structures; some had rounded tops, and others were squared. All of these had cement covering where the actual bodies were laid in the ground.

The full circle was always what drew my attention though. The end of the circle was the poor side of the cemetery. Aunt Ada had told me lots of times about the graves on the back side of the hill, kind of hidden behind the top where you can't see them from the church or the road. These graves were marked with some kind of farm equipment.
pieces. Nobody I talked to ever knew what they were, and I could never get the people who were old enough to know to walk all the way to the backside of the cemetery.

The poor graves all looked the same. Five or more graves in a row. Each grave had dirt in a slender line raised over the body. And, there were three markers to each grave. There was no stone with a name on it. There were simply three rusted pieces of metal. They were shaped like a horseshoe with one side out straight. There must have been at least 20 graves like that: no name, just marked with a piece of metal.

I stopped at the very top of the hill and sat down on a cement block that was part of an enclosing for a family plot. I looked off down the back of the hill to the people that were too poor to buy a headstone and compared those lives to my black patent shoes that I had managed to get mud and dead leaves all over.

A spooky feeling started creeping over me, and I became scared to be back there alone. I'd heard real life ghost stories over everything from dinner to open caskets. I believed as much as I believed in Santa Claus who I was sure brought me presents every year on his reindeer sleigh.

I jogged straight down the front side of the hill closest to the back door of the fellowship hall. I slid a little and almost sat down, but I managed to stay clean enough that Momma wouldn't holler at me.

Brother JayD, Brother Roy, Deacon Brown, and a bunch of the other men of the church were standing out back. I slowed down as I approached them. Brother JayD had one hand on Deacon Brown's back and the other was holding a smoldering cigar. Their heads were huddled together.
I could hear Brother JayD's voice, still in preaching mode: "Now, fellas, tonight we gone have a meeting to praise the lord with. Some colored family's trying to buy that land near the tracks over by maw Easter's..." Everybody blurted out a god rest her sweet soul. Mrs. Easter had been dead a few months now. Brother JayD looked around the circle of eyes. "We can't let maw Easter's good name be runt cause some nigger wants to move himself in there now. We let one in, next you know, it's gone be nigger niagra falls." Grunts of "yes," and "uh-huh" followed until Deacon Brown noticed I had walked up from the road. He was the first one to spot me coming. He straightened his back and looked me right in the eyes.

"Now, Miss Empress you're a pretty little thing now, all grown up, it seems." The rest of the circle looked my way. I stopped. I tried to smile, say thank you, like Momma had taught me along with don't chew your nails. But, I never liked it. I didn't feel pretty.

I tried to walk past them, but Deacon Brown grabbed my arm. "Stop right there, honey, didn't you get taught to respect your elders. Now, I'm talking to you." I looked at him. I never liked him. He always acted like a son of a bitch. Oh, but my mamma loved him. She said if she'd been ten years younger she would have divorced Sam, my stepfather, and run after him. Sam never would come to church, and that just irked everybody - except me.

Brother JayD was pulling at Deacon Brown's other arm and talking to me; "You go on in there, Empress, and get you something good to eat. Us men got to take care a some business that don't concern you." I yanked my arm away from the deacon. He glared at me till I turned around to shut the door behind me.
The kitchen was quiet now that everyone had already gotten their food. Tables were set up in a squared-off u-shape. I could hear the noise from the other room. All the congregation was talking over lunch. I glazed the food with my eyes. Granny had brought dressing. It was the first stop around the food line. A cheap brand can of cranberry sauce was sitting beside it in a ceramic bowl with a blue heart on it. Corn out of a can, green beans from the Posie garden, and fried chicken bought at the Food Mart completed the line. Slim pickens this Sunday. Half of the elderly population was out with some kind of flu bug. This always cut down on the choices for Sunday dinner. There was still banana pudding, though, and someone had made macaroni and cheese.

I picked up a red plastic plate and a white plastic fork. I got two full spoonfuls of Granny's dressing along with a half of the can of cranberry sauce. I covered the rest of the plate with macaroni and cheese.

I walked through the door past the baptism to where the tables were lined in rows. Granny and Momma were sitting closest to the left wall, farthest away from the baptistry. It was a room full of women. I imagined that all the men were out back meeting with Brother JayD and Deacon Brown.

Neither Granny nor Momma paid me any mind as I took a seat two chairs down from them. The macaroni had a faint powder taste; and the dressing had enough sage to choke on, but I knew Momma wouldn't cook today, so I forged through.

Granny had already pushed her plate aside and had her hands folded in front of her face; she was looking at Momma.
"Now listen, Momma, I knew from the first day I met Sam you hated him and nothing's changed, Momma. He goes to work; he don't beat me; hell, he don't hardly bother nobody. He certainly don't bother you."

Granny was right on top of her. She always was. I never saw Granny lose an argument. "I'm just saying, May, if you could get him to come to church just ever once in a while."

"Momma, I know we only come here once a month, but it's just real hard. Maureen's so stubborn just like Al, that son of a bitch, and you know Sam considers Sunday a day of rest. You know we all need to praise the lord in our own way."

"May, don't go changing the preacher's words just to satisfy whatever needs you have of them."

I loved watching them argue. It was better than a bear fight at the zoo.

Aunt Ada was making her rounds, gathering up the salt and pepper shakers off each table. Our table had a set of cucumbers with holes in the top.

Aunt Ada was beautiful. She had wild gray-white hair. Everybody in the family thought it was so unladylike to let your hair get so unruly. She was not actually my real aunt. Momma had no sisters. She was somehow kin to Granny, but I never really figured it out, maybe a cousin or something.

Aunt Ada swooped into the conversation. She leaned over Granny's right shoulder. "Now what are you gals a hollering about. May, I heard you with that "s.o.b" talk plum on the other side a the room. Now, we are in church." She laughed loud and slapped Granny on the back. Granny just glared at her and readjusted her stiff shoulder pads. I laughed a little into my powdery macaroni.
Mama was quiet, watching both of them.

"May, you listen to me, honey, and leave Helen here alone. I got just the thing fix both you up." She leaned in towards Momma and quieted down. "You tell Sam I said he could come over to the men's meeting at my house tonight after evening service." Granny got a slight smile around the corners of her mouth.

She reached out and slapped Momma's arm. "Now, May, that's it. Ada, you are an absolute doll. May, you tell Sam I'll bake him a pie if he can do this simple thing."

"Momma, I just don't know. It's so important to ya'll that he be part a that club. I mean he really don't hate nobody." She leaned in to the center of the table. "Ya'll know he works with coloreds over at the mill. I just don't think he's fit for it."

Aunt Ada looked offended. "Don't be saying we hate, Ms. May; we are Christian people. We are sitting in a church by the baptistry where I first came to be cleansed in the lord, and I ain't having that talk." Aunt Ada's feathers were all ruffled. She took a breath to calm down. "You know we are just trying to keep things the way God intended. If we have them around our children next thing you know we gone have little black babies, and I ain't gone live to see Eudora brought down to that, not while I'm living."

Momma looked down at her cold food and picked up her fork. "Alright, I'll talk to Sam as soon as I get home." She looked up, "But, I ain't gonna promise he's gonna show up."

Aunt Ada and Granny smiled at each other. Ada said, "You tell him we'll look forward to having him."

Aunt Ada walked off with the cucumber salt and pepper shakers. Granny got up after her and said, "May, you go on home now and talk to him. I'm gonna clean up here
and head home myself. You mark my words, girl. It's gonna be ugly if Sam don't make himself known to the boys here."

I watched Granny walk to the kitchen. Her left knee was bad. She never really straightened it out when she was walking.

Momma picked up her white paper napkin and laid it in her plate. She looked at me for the first time since I had sat down.

"Come on, Empress. We need to head home." She exhaled and got up from the table. I followed her into the kitchen and dumped my plate in a garbage can by the back door. Granny didn't look up from washing the dishes when Momma said bye.

We went back through the lion's den outside. Brother JayD was still chewing his cigar. He said to Momma, "You sure look mighty pretty, May. You tell Sam we'll be happy to have him at our little meeting." He patted me on the head as I walked by. Deacon Brown was following us out the door, his Momma in tow. He had his arm around her waist. She was leaning against him. They were making their way to a pickup parked behind the fellowship hall. It was running.

"I'll tell him. See you fellas later." A round of grunts followed my Momma. She noticed the Deacon, smiled at him. He looked her way and laughed, "Refuses to use a cane."

"I don't need a cane," his mother retorted.

"You're a good man, Deacon Brown. Taking care a your mother like you do. However do you find the time between your shifts at the mines, and being a foreman too. It just seems you got your hands full a something all the time."
"Well, nobody else here to do it. Me and Momma have a good time. She's still able to make that famous dressing once a week. That's why I stick around." His Momma grinned from under his arm. They looked kindly at one another. Mother watched him make his way over the uneven ground to the pickup. I walked behind her to the car and didn't look at the crowd at the door.

Momma slammed the door on her baby blue Ford Pinto. She stuck in the key and rolled down the window at the same time. I rolled mine down all the way. It was a hot day. I hung my head out as best I could without absolutely kneeling in the seat. Momma worked the gears like she was a machinist. She reminded me of those posters of women that had worked in the factories during the war. I could see Momma with a blue pants uniform and a handkerchief holding her hair back pouring molten steel.

Our house was about a half mile from the church. Granny's was about two miles in the opposite direction. It didn't really matter. It was Eudora from Ten Mile Creek all the way up to Bailey Bridge. Momma barely slowed down as she slid off the asphalt into our red dirt driveway. A recent storm had blown some of the underpinning out from under the single wide trailer into the driveway. Momma had to swerve to miss it.

She hurried up to the makeshift porch of reused wood. It was multi-colored, reflecting all the different uses that the wood had once been put to. The screen door slammed behind her.

"Sam, goddamnit, I about got killed with that underpinning in the driveway. Now, by god, I know you are taking this lord's day off but, God ain't gone mind you putting that pinning up. Hell, at least get it out of the driveway."
Sam didn't look up from the television. Sunday afternoons were M*A*S*H day. Nobody interfered with that. I went straight past them to my room.

Thank God Maureen had moved out. She was living with some boy in the projects up the road. I was glad to finally have some privacy. I had read in the paper that The Great Gatsby was coming out in theatres. The pictures in the paper made Mia Farrow look angelic or at least she looked rich. I knew I wouldn't see it, but I had found the book at the library. It was quite a read. I didn't really know what was going on most of the time, but that didn't stop me. I picked it up off the floor by the bottom bunk. Now that Maureen was gone, I didn't have to climb up top any more. I sat down, after closing the door, and tried to imagine that eye, the one that was always watching, always watching. I could barely concentrate over the blaring tv. That must have meant Momma was trying to talk to Sam. He always blared the tv instead of just telling her to shut up. The screen door slammed. I went to the living room/ kitchen to see what had happened.

Sam had turned the tv down; Momma was gone to Granny's to pout about her marriage. It was business as usual. Sam had unpropped himself and sat with his hands holding his almost bald head. He was wearing a soiled used-to-be-white tank top and pair of shorts with black socks. He looked at me when I walked in the room. I tend to drag my feet.

"Hey there, honey. How was church?"

"Oh, it was just fine. You know Granny's always telling me to hush and listen to the preaching."

"Well, Empress, I just don't know if you need to be hearing that preaching." I looked at him; that was crazy talk, even for him. "I'm sure you know your Momma and
your Granny and, hell, everybody else down at the church want me at that colored hating meeting, and I ain't about to go. Those fellas I work with at the mill treat me decent, always have treated me decent, and I ain't about to show my ass like the reverend."

He was getting excited about all this. I usually just listened to him. I didn't know what to tell him. Anyway, I didn't think he was asking for my advice. Thank goodness, M*A*S*H came back on. So, I really didn't have to say anything. I went to the refrigerator. There was nothing but old milk and some bananas. I bet Roni's kitchen wouldn't be so sparse, and it was always quieter over there.

"Hey, Sam," I yelled over the tv, "I'm going to Roni's."

He turned down the volume and turned to see me out the door. "You be careful now and come on back when we holler at cha'."

I waved and made my way out the door.

Roni's trailer was two back away from the road from ours. It wasn't really a trailer park we lived in. It was just two acres cut up into smaller lots that were rented out individually. Roni lived on the back acre. We lived on the front. There was absolutely no grass anywhere on the land. It was just red dirt. And, when it rained, it was just red mud. Woods surrounded the two acres. There was often trouble from racoons, snakes, that sort of thing.

I made my way up the four cement blocks to Roni's front door. I always knocked, and they always said the same thing: "Come on in, you know it's open."

Roni's Momma was a hermit. She never came out of the house and never talked to anybody besides just who she wanted to. I guess that's why all the hens at church were so nosy about her. She always liked me, though. I remember the first time I walked in Roni's
house. Well, ok, I don't remember it, but Momma has told me the story about a hundred times.

She said that I was just able to walk, still stumbling around and pulling up on anything under three feet tall. She brought me over to see Sadie, Roni's mom, (they used to go to school together). Momma said as soon as she followed me in the front door that Sadie stood stock still with her hand over her mouth and her eyes wide like she had seen a ghost.

Well, she had seen a ghost. Or, at least, something like a ghost.

"Sadie, what is the matter with you?" Momma said, but Roni's Momma kept backing up towards the wall. She finally reached out for my Momma's elbow and whispered, "May, the Black Man walks behind that child."

It spooked me for years after Momma told me that story. I studied my shadow wondering if that was the Black Man. I checked out mirrors as I walked in front of them. I once saw a nun in a shoe store (even though there are no Catholics anywhere near Eudora) and asked her if she could see any Black Man following me. She just smiled and said, "The Lord will watch over you child, as does the Black Man." Jesus, that just freaked me out even more.

I never really found out anything about the Black Man. Sadie just crosses herself every time I walk in her living room. And Sadie's not Catholic either. She's the only person I ever saw cross herself, though.

She was making the sign by the time my foot hit the rug in front of the door. "How do you know it's always me, Sadie?"

"I can sense the Dark Man coming."
"Why can't I see him? How do you know he's there? Is he evil? If he's evil, then why ain't I ever hurt by him? And what does crossing yourself every time I come in gonna help?" I said to her.

"Oh, I ain't scared of the Black Man, Empress. You shouldn't be either." Then, she repeated the nun: "He takes care a' you." Jesus. "I cross myself to let him know I'm on his side."

This conversation had been repeated a lot in the past. So, I just left her to watch *The Addams Family* reruns.

Roni's bedroom is in the back of the trailer like mine except her room feels like a shoe box too full of mice; it's so tiny. She has a twin bed pushed up against the wall under the window with a Yogi Bear comforter on it. I have always liked Boo Boo better than Yogi. He was much cuter.

The door was open. Roni was always looking up at me when I came in. It was like she was expecting me, just like her mother. I didn't ask her if she saw the Dark Man. Frankly, I liked being her friend, and I didn't want something like that to freak me out into not talking to her.

Roni's room was covered in little figures that she carved out of chewing gum. There was a sunflower on her windowsill made out of watermelon bubble gum.

"Empress, you gotta see this. It's the coolest thing. I got this new stuff from the Food Mart. It's called Pop Rocks. You gotta try it." She crawled over to her bed and pulled a little pouch out from under there. It sort of looked like a pocket of chewing tobacco. "This is strawberry. It's really weird. You put it on your tongue, and it kinda sizzles and pops like bacon or something." I just looked at her. That didn't sound like
something I wanted to try. Bacon sizzling in my mouth kind of gave me that same feeling from the morning when I tried to imagine Brother JayD's chemo treatments.

"Yeah, I don't know Roni. I'm not really in the mood for anything strawberry. I didn't really have much lunch."

"I heard Momma talking to Aunt Ada. Something 'bout Sam not wanting to make it to the meeting tonight."

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, look, Empress, you just gotta try this. Hold your nose and close your eyes and I'll put in a few." I looked at her unconvinced. "Come on, just try it."

I let out a humph and closed my eyes. "But I ain't holding my nose. I don't know why anything strawberry would stink."

Then, the sizzle of bacon frying, but it was strawberry bacon. It didn't hurt either. No chemo and no burning meat here.

I opened my eyes. Roni looked completely satisfied.

"See, I told you it was good, now didn't I?"

"Whoa, that was freaky. Gimme some more." She yanked the pouch away before I could grab it.

"If you want it, you gotta trade something." She always said it like she was going to get something out of me. She never did. I didn't have anything to be got. I thought about the empty fridge at home. Nothing in the living room. Hallway, nothing. *The Great Gatsby* was sitting on my bed.
"Well, I do have a book. But it's so hard, you probably wouldn't even know what was going on no way." Like I did. "But, it happens to be the same title of a certain movie with a certain Mia Farrow in it."

"Like in the paper?" she said in awe.

"Like in the paper," I said. "I could let you borrow it, or we could read it together. But, I ain't sharing unless you're sharing."

"OK, deal," she said. She shook my hand and extended the pouch of strawberry bacon.

"We can go back to my house, and I'll get it."

"OK." Roni got up to put on her cheap white canvas loafers. The red dirt had dyed them an orange brown. I followed her back to my house, her Momma hollering, "Where ya'll going?" but not caring enough to venture out the front door.

Momma was back home when we walked in. She usually didn't stay long at Granny's because Granny wouldn't listen to her moan and groan. Sam was gone. Roni sat by Momma on the couch, and I went to my room and picked up the copy of *The Great Gatsby* from off my bed.

"Well, what's it about?" Roni asked as soon as I'd come back to the living room.

"It's mostly about this big eye that can see ever body and ever thing."

"You mean like God?"

"Well, sorta, but, uh, anyway, the eye is watching this man who drives around in his car a lot. He's got a real nice car." At that, Momma looked me dead in the eyes, and I shut up and sat back against the couch so she could watch her program. Roni did the same.
We sat there, still and quiet like we were hunting for rabbits, through *All in the Family, The Jeffersons*, and two episodes of *Hawaii Five-O*.

Sam finally got back home. He was dressed in a brown suit and a yellow tie. I didn't even know he owned a suit. His face was blood red; he looked about ready to explode.

"May," he was shouting coming up the steps, "I hope you're so happy that you turn blue for making me sit through that hollering mess with the reverend." He stopped when he saw me and Roni there. He stopped trying to pull his tie and jacket off at the same time. "Now you girls head on back there to your room and play. Let me and Miss May have a word here."

I got up stiffly with Roni following close behind, and we walked to my room. I shut the door quietly, and we both dropped to the floor to try to hear.

"May, they are gonna try to kill people."

"Now, don't you dare say that, Sam. Now, Brother JayD is a good man. He preaches to us that needs it. Deacon Brown has cared for his mama all these years, and she don't even know she's in this world. They're all good men."

"No, they're not. They want to try to burn the coloreds outta Maw Easter's old house. Hell, it was her own son that sold it to them in the first place. They ain't bothering nobody out there by the tracks. They're going out there tonight to "make a statement," as the reverend says, with their fiery crosses and ghost sheets."

"And you ain't going with them, Sam. My God."

"No, I ain't. And that's that."
Footsteps were coming up the hall. Roni and I jumped up on the bed, and I opened the book and put my finger in it like I was deeply interested. Momma opened the door.

"Roni, why don't you go on home. Did Sadie say you could go to the Deacon's swimming party?"

"Yes, ma'am, I asked her this afternoon, after church. She said it was fine that I had a whole summer vacation to waste in a swimming pool if somebody'd provide one for me."

Momma smiled at her. "I'll pick you up at about one. I'll have Empress holler at cha' when we're about ready."

"Yes, ma'am."

I watched Roni slide off the bottom bunk and walk out the door. Momma shut the door behind her, and I decided not to stay up and read but to go ahead and go to sleep so tomorrow would come fast and I could go swimming. It was like the night before Christmas; the sooner you went to sleep, the sooner Santa/Momma would come. But, it was summertime, not the end of December pushed right up behind the beginning of the new year. And, with me and Roni, summertime meant sneaking out to the graveyard.

I felt so daring like I was one of the three musketeers going out to save a princess or stop a midnight cargo that held the king's precious jewels. Wait, maybe it was the prince going to save the princess from the ogre. Whatever it was, it made me feel brave. Deep down, I knew I was just as pussified as the next twelve-year-old girl made to wear a velvet dress far out of season. But, surprisingly, Roni was never afraid. I guess she had
some of her Momma in her after all. She walked through that graveyard in pitch dark just like she was walking through the Food Mart to pick out something for supper.

Roni and I had went out the first time on a dare from the preacher's granddaughter. She said we were evil and if we went out in the dead of night among all the Indians and convicts buried in the cemetery, that the devil would sure be out there to meet us.

Well, I just stared at her because her voice irritated me to listen to, but, before I said my usual "Go to hell" (That scared her. She, of course, didn't cuss.) Roni had said that if the devil was real, she wasn't scared of him, and she'd meet Lois, that's the preacher's granddaughter's name, right smack at the top of the hill by the Indian graves if she wasn't too scared.

I didn't say anything. Devil or not, I wasn't real excited to be skipping around a graveyard at night. I got spooked there in the middle of the day. I'd been told all the stories about the snakes that live in the crumbling tombstones and the ghosts that slept in tree branches, not to mention the local teenagers that everybody knew went up there to drink on the weekends because the law never made rounds since the sign had been posted. It'd actually been Deacon Brown's idea. They voted on it and had made it themselves. Brother JayD had made a phone call to the local police, letting them know that there was no longer a problem with anyone being in the cemetery after dark because they had got a sign.

Now, you and I know that having a damn sign doesn't make a bit of difference when it comes to teenagers getting drunk on the weekend or anything else.
But, because of the preacher and deacon's efforts, a sign had been resurrected. It said: "Property of Eudora's 2nd White Church/ No Coloreds Allowed/ Absolutely Noone Allowed in the Cemetery after Sundown/ By Order of Pastor JayD and Deacon Brown."

Of course, neither Pastor JayD nor Deacon Brown had any reason to step foot in the cemetery after dark. So, it was usually just me and Roni and the teenagers drunk on the weekend.

The preacher's granddaughter didn't show up that night that she dared us. Roni had been at my back door. She had actually told her Momma what had happened. Of course, her Momma said she had no reason to be afraid of the devil, "Roni, you know the Black Man follows Empress. You'll both be fine." That didn't make me feel any better about going to the cemetery to meet the devil.

I could see it now. Roni leading, me following, some dark man behind me, while we all walk in a straight line to meet the devil. It was like those books I had read about the Salem Witch trials. They had went to the woods to sign the devil's book. They danced naked and put dead frogs in cauldrons. It seemed exciting, but I was scared.

Roni came to the back door awhile after Sam and Momma had went to bed at the other end of the trailer. She told me she would come, but I didn't believe her.

"Empress, what are you doing? Why are you still in your jammers? We got to go if we gone meet Louise at the graveyard tonight," she whispered furiously through the back door. The washer and dryer were in the same hallway. I was backing towards them as she spoke. She had to be kidding, right?
I bumped against the washer and leaned my elbows against it, trying to look cool.

"Yeah, uh, Roni, I got this test tomorrow and all. And, uh, Sam done said he'd jerk a knot in my tail if I just wasn't real well rested for it and all."

I knew she wasn't buying it. It was summer. There were no tests. Stupid excuse for a lie. She was glaring a hole through my heart.

"All right, you damn pussy." I raised my eyebrows in disbelief. There was no way in hell that Miss Veronica Angelique Silvering had just said a cuss word.

"I guess you can just set here and rot cause I'm going to that damn cemetery and show that damn Louise that I ain't scared." And, even though she was mad as fire, she didn't slam the door. She didn't want me to get in trouble.

Her voice got quiet from the angry whispering she had cussed me with.

"Now, Empress, quit acting like Louise and get on out here and help me." She motioned with her hand and pointed to the place beside her like I was supposed to be standing there.

I kept staring at her. I wasn't convinced one bit.

She walked up the back cement block steps and walked in the house. She carefully closed the thin aluminum door behind her and marched right past the washer to my room. Red clay had fallen off her shoes to create a path to my bed. She was crunched down, looking underneath to find my shoes. She tossed the stained canvas loafers my way and got up to go to my closet. It had a sliding door covered in the same brown and beige lined wallpaper as the room. Sam had gotten thin pieces of presswood and covered them. They didn't exactly move along the track well; so, Roni had to kind of shove the door open. I went in my room and shut the door behind me so that we wouldn't wake up
Sam and Momma. Momma had to be down at the truck stop by 6am. Sam had to be
clocked in at the mill by 5am. They were both usually up by four and went to bed real
early.

Roni was pushing her way through my clothes by the time I grabbed her arms and
held them down so that she couldn't move. She didn't fight me; she didn't look at me
either. "Empress, I'm going. You're going. Now, get some clothes on and let's go."

I let her go and sat down on the bed. "Roni, I just don't know about this." I looked
down at my Scooby doo pajama bottoms. I looked back at her. "I mean what if the devil
really is waiting out there? I mean, he could just take us straight to hell or whatever the
devil does on weeknights." I looked back down. Roni had come to sit by me.

"Is that all you're worried about? I got that all covered." She put her arm around
my shoulders and patted my arm on the other side. "I talked to Momma about it." She
drug her arm off me and reached into the deep pockets of her blue jeans. She pulled out a
salt shaker that was glass and aluminum and a tiny mirror that was dark around the edges
like it had been glued to a makeup compact or something.

"How in the hell is that gonna save us from the devil?" I asked.

"Well, this salt protects us against evil. Momma said to through a pinch over our
left shoulder as we left the house and it'd bring us good luck so we wouldn't trip over a
branch or nothing. Then, when we get to the cemetery we sprinkle some of this salt
behind us all the way. Then, when we meet up with Louise, we sprinkle a little salt in a
circle around us and step in the circle at the same time, together. That protects us, see?
And, Louise is going to be outside the circle. And this mirror here, well, wait, ok,
Momma said the devil was real vain, he likes to look at himself a lot. So, we give him this mirror, and he can look at himself til we get away."

I looked at Roni. I wished I could say a salt shaker and a mirror made it ok to meet the devil and Louise in the cemetery at night.

Sam and Momma were still hollering, but I didn't pay them any mind.
Monday

When I woke the next morning, Momma and Sam were already gone to work as usual. I pushed a plastic lawn chair up to the sink and reached up to get the magic charms. The milk in the fridge was two days past the date on the carton, but it smelled and tasted ok. Sam had left the paper on the table, and the TV was on low. I set down the plastic spoon on the Styrofoam bowl. Momma said she didn't have time to wash dishes and work. Sam did the laundry.

Cartoons were still on, but I liked the quiet of the house in the daytime when nobody but me was there. I turned off the set. Went back to the spoon drowned in the bowl. I wiped it off on the cottony underside of the plastic tablecloth. Two little cows sat in the center of the table. The salt shaker cow shook its tail. The pepper shaker mooed, lips up and round.

Not much news today. I flipped through to the comics. Charlie Brown wasn't funny. I turned to the crime listing. I liked reading it because sometimes I knew the criminals. Often, the cousins on my Momma's side were listed for various things: assaulting an officer, public intoxication, the like. The newspaper always used these technical terms. Momma just said, "Drunk as a skunk, ain't nothing new." These were the boys Momma had grew up around. They worked on cars. Momma even changed her own oil in the car, fixed up little noises, changed Sam's oil.

Most of the crimes that went down at the Foodmart were crimes of necessity: bread, crackers, even condensed soup I often saw tucked away into thin jackets full of holes and cigarette burns. Roni stole a pack of bologna every week when she went with
her mom to do the shopping. She took it to the old man that lived three trailers down
from her. He didn't have any family to take care of him, she said. Somebody had to. He
got food stamps but sold them to buy three packs of Pall Malls a week. A car came up
missing every two to three weeks, often linked back to my mother's cousins. The liquor
store robberies linked back to them too, just not as much. They'd break down the cars,
sell the parts to buy liquor instead of stealing it. And, then the domestic disturbance calls
in the poorer parts of town on the outskirts of Eudora. They were frequent but mostly
unreported. I knew about them from hearing Granny talk. She'd say so and so beat up his
wife/girlfriend/sister/daughter. They'd come to church dragging a leg or holding an arm
or wearing sunglasses inside. Granny thought it was something. She said that's exactly
the down and low the church van was bought to pick up and bring to the lord. But,
Granny made a point not to speak to them as did most at the church. Everybody should
have an opportunity to come to the lord, but you didn't have to be cordial if they weren't
wearing their Sunday best especially if they didn't own any Sunday best. Most of the kids
I went to school with were in this category, and I seldom saw any of them there.

I threw away the bowl and spoon, saw that Momma had left a note on the counter
above the garbage can. She'd be off at three and would be home to take me and Roni over
to the swimming party. I needed to be ready by the time she got there. It was about noon
according to the rooster clock over the stove. I went into Momma and Sam's bedroom,
the farthest from the kitchen. The cream and brown striped comforter was pushed down
to the foot of the bed. Sam's good clothes were laid over the cedar chest under the
window. I took off my gown and socks and panties at the foot of the toilet and turned on
the shower. The hot water only lasted about twenty minutes if I left the water pressure
I always hurried to bathe and just stood in there until it ran out. I had a fine bunch of pubic hair now that I washed with shampoo as I did my hair. It'd caused some problems. Roni and I had had to stop showering together, and it had gotten around school the year before. Even my bathing suit was lower cut this year to cover it. I kinda liked it. It was soft.

I lay my head against the hard plastic and stood in the shower until it was on the cold side of lukewarm. I towed off with a lime green towel Granny had left over here. I folded it so I could dry off without just rubbing skin against skin through the holes. I walked the length of the trailer back into my room, rummaged through the closet looking for an outfit to wear over my bathing suit. A pair of blue jean shorts and a pink and white striped shirt with no holes seemed the best choice. A pair of flip flops from the closet floor finished the ensemble. I had leaned all kind of neat new words like "ensemble" from the books I read and didn't understand. So, two years back, for Christmas, I sat on Santa's lap in the mall and asked for a collegiate dictionary, which I had heard was the best kind. I knew it was one of Momma's cousins. But, I went along because I wanted that dictionary. It was Harry. He had an unshaven beard under the wiry white one, and his Santa suit was covered in dirt all down one leg. Momma just stood beside us with her arms crossed, weight on one leg making her hip jut out. She looked young for that one moment. She look like the teenagers I walked by going to class in school. Her bottom lip jutted, and her eyebrows were raised in annoyance. She had on a black sweater with gold buttons. Momma said we gave our own meanings to gifts. The dictionary'd be a good one because it had so many meanings already. Words were important to Momma although I never saw her read, not a newspaper, not a TV guide, not even a magazine. She'd dropped
out of community college shortly after starting. One'd been built not ten miles from the
house in Wallace's efforts to bring education to everybody in Alabama. Community
colleges had been built most places I knew of: Cullman, Jasper, every fifty or so miles.
Momma had gone cause her daddy was a farmer, among other things, which meant she
could go for free. She'd wanted to be a nurse, but the blood and the children had bothered
her.

She'd said the whole world, life itself, was built on words. Marriage vows, the
Bible, talking. Contracts in words. She said the teachers made a contract to teach us by
showing up, and we had a contract to learn cause the state said we ought to. I kept as
many words of Momma's as I could find. Before I forgot, I went back to the kitchen and
got her note. "Empress if you won't to go to that swimming party be ready to go and go
get Roni and tell Sadie be back before dark and don't mess up the house and be quiet
Sam's gone to sleep to work an extra shift tonight love you baby." I loved how my
Momma jumbled things together in a heap to be sorted through. Her words were fun to
break down after we started doing it in school last year. I liked to rewrite Momma's notes
in my head. Empress, if you want to go the swimming party, Roni and you should be
ready when I get home. Tell Sadie we'll be back before dark. Don't mess up the house. Be
quiet because Sam will come in and go to sleep since he has to work an extra shift
tonight. It was more fun that the puzzles I sorted through with Granny when I was
especially bored. It was written on the back of a receipt from the Foodmart. I put it in a
shoe box I had covered in newspaper with the others. I had kept them since I was little.
"Go see Sadie when you wake up love you baby." "Sadie and Roni gone to see Marie call
Momma when you wake up." "Getting off early today be ready to go when I get home
love you." I felt like most of my life could have been threaded through those notes. I read them sometimes if I missed Momma while she was at work.

I grabbed the newest looking towel I could find out from under Momma's bathroom sink, went back to my room to get *The Great Gatsby*, and headed over to Roni's.

Sadie was asleep on the couch when I got there. Roni was on the floor on her stomach in her room. She had a blueberry dog, a pink rose, and mint ball in front of her in a triangle. She picked up the mint ball when I came in. "What do you reckon I should do with this, Empress?"

I looked around her room. She had lots of gum figurines sitting in the window and on the chest in front of the mirror. I didn't know.

I sat down across from her and the triangle of bubble gum, the towel and book still in my hands. "How about an eye?"

"Like in the book?"

"Yeah, an eye."

"What should it look like? Is it a woman's eye with eyelashes?"

"No, no. It seems like a man's eye to me. I told you it's a big billboard like they have going to Birmingham."

She rolled onto her stomach and started kneading the gum. I leaned back against the chest of drawers and opened the book where I had marked it.

"Read to me, Empress. I like it when you read to me. You do the voices. I like it."
"This story doesn't really have any voices." She was thinking back to when we had read Roald Dahl's *The Witches* together. I could do the witchy voices real well. Almost better than Sadie. All the w's were v's.

"Well, just read it anyway."

I read, and Roni pulled and poked the ball of gum, stopping me only to ask what certain words meant. I made up their meanings or what I thought they might mean, offered to go get my college dictionary. Roni didn't want that much of a pause or I'd have to rewind to the beginning of the chapter for her to remember where we were. I often didn't think she was listening while I read. I'd peer over the top of the book at her or sit up tall to where she lay on the floor. That'd only make me lose my place. She moved her eyes from the gum to me, and I'd immediately pick up. Every once in a while, I'd insert my own language to be sure she heard me. She'd look up at those times too with a "What?" expression, a question in her eyes. We worked steadily through the early evening, Roni on gum and me on Fitzgerald, until I heard my Momma come through the screen door. Sadie must have woke up by then because they talked for awhile before Momma came back to get us.

"Come on, Empress." Roni and I both rolled from the floor. Momma was wearing her uniform from the truck stop. Blue jeans and a cornflower blue thick cotton shirt. May was written in cursive above the pocket on her left breast.

Momma stopped in front of Roni. "Sadie said you can't go, Roni."

"Yes she can," I said.

I went to the living room where Sadie was still on the couch.
"Why can't Roni go? You said she could go." Roni was following behind Momma. Not saying anything, she sat on the big chair by the couch.

"I just don't think she should." Sadie was looking at the coffee table. Roni sat with her hands in her lap, watching.

"Well, why not?"

"I just got a bad feeling, is all."

"A bad feeling? A bad feeling? Sadie, you say that about once a week. Now, come on. We want to go swimming. We ain't been all summer. You done told her she could go." I always went to bat for Roni. She'd sit passively by and wait for whatever trophy victory I could win for her.

Sadie sat up and pulled the afghan over her legs.

Even though these feelings were really as frequent as I said, we still all took this pretty seriously. Momma said Sadie said something was wrong in the world a full week before the murder of JFK. Two days before my daddy died, Sadie and Momma were sitting at the table eating, and Sadie kept telling Momma it was ok to be lonely, that she was strong. Sadie told Momma later that she just thought he was going to leave, but there was a rock fall at the mines. He did leave. It was just more permanent than Sadie predicted.

But since then, all Sadie had to do was shiver and Momma halted all plans.

"Empress, Roni can come over and play later, when you get back. Or, you don't have to go at all, the way you're acting," Momma said. She had a hand on her jutting hip. Now it was me against both of them.

"We really wanna go." I said
"You really wanna go, Roni?" Sadie asked her.

She nodded her head, and the hair that was tuck behind her back fell beside her face.

"Honey, it's just that you could drown or get bit by a snake. You might get a tick bite or a leach. That's river's filthy."

"I'll take care of her, Sadie. She can swim just fine. I'll watch her. I'll take care of her." I tried to look strong as I said it. I put my hand on my hip like Momma. It was imposing, intimidating.

Sadie looked around me, behind me. The Black Man.

"Empress, do not let her leave your sight."

"O.K." I dropped the hand I'd let slip to my hip. Roni stood beside me.

"Thank you, Momma," she said, smiling at me.

We put our arms around each other's hips and went back to Roni's room to get our suits. Momma stayed in the living room, talking to Sadie. Roni kissed Sadie bye. We followed Momma out to the pinto. Sadie came to the door and crossed herself, mouthed "take care" to me through both shields of glass. Her lips were still moving as I watched her until we hit the highway.

The pinto bumped up to the main road. The red dirt trail to the pack of trailers sat a good four inches below the asphalt. Deacon Brown's big house was about thirty minutes past the church and the graveyard, way out in the country. He had a place on the river, surrounded by oaks and pine. I'd never been there, but Momma had told me about it, said it was a big beautiful house. He was a foreman down at the mines, and his only family was his Momma. He was alright, I guess. Gave out candy to the kids and old people on
Sundays, fruit at Christmas. I mostly looked out the window on long drives, looked over at Roni sitting beside me in the back seat. She was still pulling at the same piece of gum. I had my book with me, but I didn't open it, watched the passing trees, some old houses. The highway ran down towards South Alabama and the Black Belt. Lots of pretty houses and trees the closer you got to Florida. A couple of summers ago, when Sam was getting a lot of overtime, we had went to the beach. One of the rest stops had a sign posted: beware of poisonous snakes. We had poisonous snakes in North Alabama too. Some pine rattlers around caves, there were lots of caves in North Alabama, and water moccasins. One of my friends from school, Oatie, had a nest of moccasins under his back porch one time. They had a pond behind their house, right behind it, mostly for fishing and feeding the cows on the back acres. A whole nest. Man, that sounded scary. I never went over to his house to play after that. I didn't like snakes. I wondered if that was what was going to happen today. Something had to happen whenever Sadie got her feeling. And, Roni, I couldn't save Roni from a snake bite. Maybe she would almost drown. Maybe she get food poisoning. I went through the list of everyway I could think to die. Suicide. Sam's aunt had killed herself, but I never got the details. It was mostly just whispered at the funeral. Broke leg. You couldn't die from a broke leg. No, I think snake bite most probable under the circumstances. Probably a water moccasin.

"You girls better go ahead and get changed," Momma said from the front seat, both hands on the steering wheel.

Roni pulled a few more times at the piece of gum and carefully placed it upright in the floorboard under the front seat.
I left my shoes on and pulled off my shorts, tried not to look over at Roni changing. Her pubic hair didn't look as thick as mine. Her belly was smooth. Momma was staring at me in the rearview mirror. So, I paid attention to getting my own suit on. I put my shorts back on over it and left off my tank top. Roni did the same. Momma had had a talk with me about looking at other girls since we had had to start changing for gym at school. She also found a picture I had drawn of a naked woman. She was pretty much an inflated stick person with u's for boobs. She said it was ugly and told me to tear it up and put it in the garbage. I tore it up in front of her, but I kept it under my socks in the sock drawer. I always put away my own socks. Momma would never find it. I had never shown it to Roni.

Momma rounded a corner too fast, and I flew to the center of the backseat. Roni hit the door. I scooted back over to my side, and Roni uprighted her gum eye.

Momma came up slowly to pull in behind the other cars and trucks, most missing a back bumper or a headlight. Gray wiry tape stuck over taillights and rusted paint. Roni and I weaved between the tight parked graveyard of cars. Deacon Brown and his mother's house stood on a hill above the river. We made heavy steps down toward the other kids. All the preacher's grandkids were there. It looked like there had been some kind of boat dock or ramp leading into the water. The grass was scraped away so that when the kids came out of the water they were covered in mud before they got to their towels to dry off. I found a rock away from the mud and pulled off my shorts and sat my shoes on top of them. I watched Roni, walked behind her down to the dark water, making sure nothing slithered across her path or that there were no rocks she might trip over, fall, drown. No snakes would be around this much noise, though.
Roni and I never much played around the other children. The preacher's granddaughter was especially annoying and always wanted to hang out with us. She knew I didn't like her. But, Roni was always nice which I told her didn't help the problem. I was sitting in the mud on the bank. Roni had her hands on her hips watching me when Jen walked up. "Hey, are ya'll gonna go in or what?"

Roni said "Hey, Jen." I kept playing in the mud. I liked rubbing it on my feet and drawing shapes with my fingers.

"Empress, what are you doing? You're going to get filthy. You are filthy."

"Shut your mouth. Don't you have anyone else to play with?"

Jen cocked her head. Her blonde curls bounced. "My best friend went to Georgia to visit with her grandmother." She said it like, I just won a million dollars, and I'm beautiful.

"Why the hell didn't you go with her?"

"Empress." Fake shock on Roni's part. She was quite the little actress.

"Roni, why do you hang out with her? You know she lives in a trailer. You're too pretty to be best friends with her. You could come to my house this summer. We could play dress up. I just got a whole makeup kit for my birthday. Say, why didn't you come to my party. My Momma sent you an invitation by the U.S. postal service. Didn't you get it? I know you would've noticed. It was gold and white with lace around the edges. Momma bought those invitations at Macy's in Birmingham, sewed the lace on herself, just cause I wanted. Inside two envelopes, the card said, "You are cordially invited to celebrate Miss Jennifer Marie Whitsom's … "

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Roni reached down for my muddy hand. We walked into the water and started to swim out. Miss Jennifer Marie Whitsom was still elocuting her speech in her pink bikini. "Jen is such a bitch. I don't why she thinks she's better. Her dad ran off with his secretary cause her Momma wouldn't put out. Everybody knows that."

Roni didn't respond. She stopped swimming and rolled on to her back and floated in the water. There wasn't much current. It had been a dry summer. All papaw's plants had shriveled. I peed in the water and swan away so Roni wouldn't swim through the warm spot. There were wild scuppernong vines growing along the bank. I tried to remember if they were sweet smelling enough to draw snakes. I started worrying about snakes swimming under us. I thought there was a better chance of them lying on the bank, soaking up the sun.

"Do you think that your mom's right? Do you think something's gonna happen today?"

She had her eyes closed.

"If not today, then tomorrow. Maybe the day after that. Sometime. For sure."

"You're not scared?"

She dipped back into the water, arms and head bobbing.

"You said you'd take care of me, Empress."

"Yeah, I did," but I wasn't looking at her. I was surveying the area. I was a body guard. Momma told me one of her older uncles had been asked to protect the president, be a presidential body guard. Turned out he'd been killed in the war. Either way, it seemed a patriotic duty. But, everyone said he had been so strong, held up the front end of a car when he'd been working on it with papaw when it was about to fall. Jack broke. I
looked at my puny arms. Seemed they'd gotten smaller after I got all this hair on my crotch. Maybe it was related. Granny said a whole woman's body changed when it was getting ready to have babies. Have babies. Whoa. Granny's sister had died having a baby. She was buried on the top of the hill behind the church in the family plot beside my Granny's mom and dad.

"Even so, you reckon I might should stay over a couple of days."

"Well, sure, you know Momma lets you come over anytime."

"Yeah, but she always crosses herself, and it freaks me out."

"You should be used to it. Come on, I'll race you back."

"No, I think you should take it easy. You might get wore out and drown."

Roni laughed a little and dog paddled back to the bank. We tiptoed around the sides of the mudhole, jumping from one grass patch to the next. Momma caught us climbing up the hill.

"There you girls are. I been looking all over for you. Are ya'll gonna eat?"

"Yeah, I'm hungry." I hadn't ate since the cereal this morning. I didn't think Roni had ate at all. She was up and down. Wouldn't eat barely enough to live for weeks at a time. Then, she'd eat everything in sight. She didn't answer Momma but followed behind me as I followed Momma to a rickety picnic table. Two horses were pieced together with leftover two by fours. Those were covered with a sheet of plywood. The same little old ladies that got together Sunday dinner were crowded around, arranging cold sandwiches and chips. I got two halves of a ham sandwich, half of a tuna salad, and half of a chicken salad with some chips and pickles. Roni got a spoonful of coleslaw. We brought our Styrofoam plates back down to the rock we left our clothes on. I spread out my shirts and
t-shirt, and we sat on them over the pointed edges of the uneven rock. I watched the other church kids sitting in the mud and wading in the water. There weren't many of them. Granny said our church was made up of a "dying generation" and that, if we didn't send that van more often down to the camps, there soon would be anybody in the pews. A little bitty boy, one of Ada's grandkids, was rubbing his socks in the mud, was covered in it up his arms and on his wide nose. I kept watching Roni, making sure she wouldn't choke on the coleslaw, but it was finely grated, so I mostly just ate around the edges of the sandwich halves. The crust was thicker with less of the mayonnaise filled insides.

Roni finished her coleslaw, and I decided I didn't want what was left of the ham. We went back up the hill to the bucket sat at the side of the picnic table. I picked off the ham and dropped our plates in. Deacon Brown and his Momma had an old gray mutt that had been sniffing around since we got there. I found him under the side porch and threw him the meat. He licked the ground and jumped on my leg. His hair was matted, and his paws were covered in mud from sniffing around the river. His ear felt like it might have a tick in it. I lifted it up and looked inside. I saw the lump, felt it over. I certainly didn't want to dig it out. The mutt sat its behind in Roni's lap where she had sat down, whined when I picked at its ear. Roni scrubbed beside its backbone and tried to hold the ear I was looking at. I'd need a hot needle to do this.

"Think somebody's got a needle and a match?"

"Put that nasty mutt down. He could have worms or parvo," Momma rounded the corner of the house. "Get out from the side of the house. People going to think you're sneaking around. Get out there and play with the other kids. Scoot." Momma shooed us around the house and down the hill. She stayed at the top, walked up the stairs to where
Deacon Brown and his Momma sat on the porch. He looked strange, swang with nothing moving but his big bird legs, neck swiveling on a flat plane. He watched me and Roni run down toward the water, pointed toward us, talking to my Momma who yelled at us as soon as we were ankle deep. "Empress, Roni, get out of that water. You just ate. You going to drown of cramps. Not for thirty minutes."

That was it. Momma had saved Roni. That was Sadie's awful feeling. We were going to go swimming after eating. Roni was going to get cramps and drown. Momma saved her.

I perked up my shoulders and happily braided grass into rings and necklaces with Roni until called down that hill that we could go swimming. I ran down the slope and jumped over the mud into the water. I pushed Roni, held her under, rode on her back like I was riding a whale from the commercials of amusement parks. We swam until both of us were tired and bored, looked at each other, showed the pruniness of our fingers, and headed back toward the mud hole. My nose was so burnt that I could feel the smoke rising off the meat. I walked right through the mud this time and cleaned my feet against the grass as I made my way up the hill.

We kept walking until we were out of the direct sunlight that gleamed off the water. Deacon Brown was standing on his small front porch watching us as we climbed the steep of the hill that sloped down to the river. He was a tall man; he always had on a floppy collar shirt and trouser pants, some deep beige color, even in this hot weather. He was standing at the top right side of the third step. His porch was a small cement rectangle painted over in chipped white paint. The iron railings were old, and rust peeked
through the orange paint that was layered on there. Roni and I were headed back to the road where mamma might have been waiting around the cars.

"You two come in here and get something to drink. It's hot enough out here to kill a dog." I kept walking, but Roni stopped. "Empress, come on. I'm thirsty. The least you can do is jus' say thank you for this party." I looked at her and followed her lead as she walked towards his dark orange house. It seemed too big for just him and his Momma.

He was waiting for us inside the foyer, and we followed him down an unlit inside hallway to the back of the house where the kitchen was. Eggs were everywhere. There were little egg salt and pepper shakers. There were egg magnets on the off-white refrigerator. There were even egg coasters lined up on the bar that separated the kitchen from a small den where a dark brown television sat under the window. He reached in the refrigerator and brought out a glass that was already made, a whole cup with ice and what looked like some form of red kool-aid in it. He handed it to Roni who gulped it down. She never could take the heat.

He reached in an orangey wood cabinet and got out a glass for me. He filled it with ice from the freezer then got a pitcher of the red stuff out of the lower part.

I watched the way he moved. Something like a scarred pussy or a rabbit or something. He kept his hands closed and didn't move his arms out all the way.

He handed me the glass. We all sat there, saying nothing. He started talking about how they, the deacons and the preacher, were trying to get a playground put in down by the pond on public property for the kids in the neighborhood. He just kept talking, without either of us answering. Well, Roni was nodding and taking whole swallows. I was lifting my cup to get a drink when Roni put her hand on my arm. "Empress, I..." and
she just trailed off. I looked over at her. Her eyes gleamed glassy, and her head sort of leaned to one side. Her eyes kept trying to close. She tried to set the glass on the counter, but she dragged her hand, and it flipped over. The thin red watery liquid dripped to the floor. She slumped against me, and I tried to hold on to her. I looked over to the deacon for some help, but he was leaning against the refrigerator with his arms crossed against his chest.

He casually shifted his weight and walked towards me. I was struggling to keep Roni from falling. He pulled her against him and picked her up like he was a husband dragging her through the threshold.

"Veronica probably just got too hot. Why don't you go on home, and she can rest here for a bit."

"I'm not leaving her," I said. I stared back at him. His whole demeanor seemed to mock me.

"Don't be ugly, Empress. Everybody know's what an attitude you've got. I'm the adult. I'm in charge here. I said get your ass out and wait til your mamma gets here."

"And, I said I'm not leaving her. My attitude's my business, big man." He grabbed me by the arm and somehow still held Roni. He dragged me back down the hall toward the front of the house that overlooked the river. I thought he was going to try to throw me out. I was ready to push him off and wake Roni up myself. She seemed to be passing in and out. She raised her head some just to let it flop back down.

But, before we reached back to the front door, he dragged us both into some side room. It was a bed room. The full size bed was pushed up against the wall; it was covered in a peach comforter. He threw me in first and locked the door behind him with Roni still
in his arms. I went towards him; I tried to wrench her free, but he put his hand squarely on my chest and pushed me back. I fell against the bed. He put Roni down on it beside me and picked me up by the shoulders, shoving me back towards the left side wall. I could feel his fingers inside the muscles of my arm, and I fought him. I kicked at his shins and punched him in the side with the arm he wasn't holding. He opened some knob in the wall I hadn't noticed. It slid open, and he grabbed me with both hands to push me inside. He kicked me as I tried to get by him. He finally slid the door back, almost crushing my fingers with the quickness and force. I tugged at the door. I kicked it.

There was no light in here, no window, but I could make out the tub, toilet, and sink. I finally stopped kicking the door. There was no sound coming from the room. I put my ear against it. A tiny slit of light seeped through from under the door. I slid down.

I saw the uneven top of the brown-orange carpet. I saw the bottom of the comforter where it scraped the carpet. I saw Deacon Brown's ugly brown loafers. He was standing with his toes slipped under the side of the comforter. It was bunched over his feet.

I saw Roni's blue bathing suit fall to the orange carpet.

He picked up one foot, then, the other. The comforter started swaying against the carpet. The lace edge raked across the brown and orange. I beat on the door. I pounded it until my fists were red.

The back and forth continued; the comforter still scraped the carpet. I hit the door and ducked back down to look under. Roni's bathing suit was gone. The swaying had stopped. I was still. One loafer stepped back down, then, the other. He walked towards the door.
The locked popped, and the door opened. I looked around him. Roni looked asleep on the bed. I pushed past him to get to her, but he held me still, looked right in my face, both hands below my shoulders on my arms. "What are you gonna do? You gonna tell? You tell, and I'll let everybody know you couldn't protect her. You can't protect her. You ain't nobody, littly pissass girl, nobody. And, I'll tell everybody you let her down. You let her Momma down. You ain't nobody. I know the foremans at the mill. You want your daddy fired? I can get him fired. I can get him gone. All us mine foremans has a beer every week with the mill foremans. Ain't nothing but a word on my part, and your little trailer ain't no longer occupied. You keep your mouth shut, you hear?"

He shook me once, walked out the door, shut it behind him.

I walked up to the bed. Roni was quietly breathing, lying on her side with the covers beneath her chin. "I'm awake, Empress." She looked into me, eyebrows mashed together in railroad lines in the center of her forehead.

I climbed into bed with her, hugged myself against her. She tucked her head into my neck under my chin. "Are you okay? Did he hit you?"

"It just hurts." She put her hand between her legs and crossed her arms over her chest. She spoke quietly and didn't move. It was getting dark through the window.

We lay that way for awhile, Roni curled against me, until I heard footsteps in the hall and Momma's voice.

Deacon Brown's lilt came behind it. "I can't believe you been looking for them. Why, you should've just come ask me. Veronica said she was tired, and I told her she could take a nap back here. We don't even use this bedroom, don't have any use for it all these years since my sister moved up north."
"Really, you know I hardly remember your sister. It's been so long. Does she ever come visit, every now and again?"

"Well, she did come two years ago for Christmas, back when mother was having the heart trouble. But, she didn't stay long."

"That is such a shame. And, they don't help you at all. I just don't know how you do it, got your hands so full."

The Deacon was smiling down at Momma when he opened the door. I looked right at Momma. Roni was squeezed tight against me.

"Come on, girls, we better get back. It's past dark."

I didn't move. Roni was faking being asleep. Momma came to the side of the bed. She was looking at the Deacon. "They must have got worn out, playing so hard."

"Yeah," he nodded.

"Come on. We got to go."

Momma patted my butt. I tried to turn to get down off the bed, but Roni held tight to me. I pulled her with me. We got up. I pulled Roni to walk in front of me. Momma followed but caught us at the door where the Deacon was still standing. "You girls give him a hug. Be polite, now. Thank him for this party."

I dashed inbetween him and Roni, he had already been reaching for her, and squeezed him as hard as I could, locking my arms around the bottom of his rib cage. I saw him as the skeleton we had studied in science, all his bones, the dangly legs and arms, the wobbly skull, heart-shaped hips, the cage of ribs. I imagined them breaking in two, one by one, accordion style, like dominoes across his heart, piercing it, the blood bursting out. Momma pulled me off him when she saw he was wincing.
"Empress gets overzealous sometimes," she smiled.

"Go ahead Roni. We need to get going." He went for her, and Roni started to mouth some thanks, but I pulled her hand down the hallway, back through the kitchen, out the door, down the porch. All the way back to the pinto in the gravel driveway.

Momma never locked her doors. I opened Momma's door, pulled the seat forward, and crawled in. Roni followed behind, closing the door, uprighting the seat. She had stepped on her bubblegum eye. She held it in her lap and started crying. Her hair was still wet and clung to her cheeks and jaw.

I held her hand until Momma got in, slamming the door behind her. "You girls forgot your clothes. I had to walk all the way down that damn mountain to get them." She slung them in the back seat without looking, cranked up, pressed the clutch, and geared right and up into reverse. I snaked underneath the pile of clothes and shoes and got Roni's hand back. She didn't look at me, just out the window, but her grip was fierce.

Momma sped along highway 5, the pinto grunting to get up the bigger hills. It didn't have much power. When we were halfway back to Eudora, she looked at us in the rearview mirror, hands at ten and two on the wheel.

"Well, nobody drown, nobody got bit by a snake, you girls didn't choke, it'd sure be nice if Sadie was wrong this one time." Sadie wasn't wrong. Something had happened. I just didn't know what. I kept looking out the corner of my eye at Roni's arm. I'd already taken in her face. No bruises, not even little finger marks. But, I'd always known her to be tough. Like Sadie. They didn't flinch at god or devil, snakes, spiders, you name it. When the mines had fell in, Sadie took it in stride, already had canned goods of her Momma's ready to send over before the news started covering the story, had me and Momma and
Roni bring them over to the families after she was sure they knew. Every little two room shack we walked in, they hugged Momma, said they were real sorry, their eyes red around the rims from their own fathers, husbands, and sons gone. There was even one woman, had two half-grown kids. They were close enough to graduating that they took evening jobs at the Foodmart and the gas station instead of quitting. Said their Momma would've wanted them to finish. I knew the girl from school, black hair and dark eyes, a red scar like spilled oil under her right eye. I had seen her in the hall. I think her name was Alice or Allison. And, there was a black man. Momma wouldn't take the canned vegetable soup to his house, said it wasn't safe to be over there. Roni and me went with Sam. The shack was one room instead of two, all the little faces huddled in a corner at their Momma's feet. I'd catch them staring at us when they thought I wasn't looking. Their Momma was a small frail looking woman. She made Sam black coffee in a porcelain bowl with a crack down one side, but it didn't leak. They didn't talk much, just about the bad soil red dirt made, how the vegetables wouldn't grow. I saw Sam write down some recipe for fertilizer that sounded pretty gross. She nodded thank you, and saw him to the door. Said the vegetables meant a lot in these "hard times". She gave Roni and me two biscuits wrapped in a stained rag to take with us. We haven't been out that way since, past the mill, across the railroad tracks.

Momma started slowing up when we got to town. She pulled into the Foodmart and rolled down her window the rest of the way.

"Stay in the car." She was digging in her blue jean bag Granny had made. It had two back pockets on one side. When she slammed the door, the window beat against the inside.
"Roni, what'd he do? Are you okay?" She stared out the window toward Henry's Drugs.

"I don't know what he did."

"Did it hurt? Did he hurt you?" I didn't know what to ask.

"Yeah, it hurt. It still hurts. It's like a throbbing hurt. Down there."

"Where?"

She pulled the shirt off her lap where Momma had thrown it. Her hand was cupped between her legs. She was squeezing them close together.

I had heard Sadie talk about healers. They would put their hand over the place that hurt and close their eyes. She told stories about people coming from Birmingham, Oneonta, cousins from Mississippi, cousins from up North, aunts and uncles nobody had heard from in years, all to see her great-grandmother. They wanted her to touch them where they hurt. Headaches, cancer, even warts sometimes. Momma said she was a witch, had wild black hair with strings of silver gray at the temples. Her and Sadie went and saw her when they young, before either of them had us. Momma said her and Sadie would sit around a weed fire with her, smoking rabbit tobacco, and listen to the old woman tell stories about an Indian that rode his horse up and down the railroad. A ghost Indian, now buried up behind the white church. I'd been to the grave lots of times. It was on top of the hill, separated a bit from the rest, and the only ones with triangular shaped flat creek rocks at the head and foot, stacked in a pyramid over the body. Three of the same graves in a row. Sadie's great-grandmother died before Roni and me were born, but Momma said she was a hermit like Sadie. Never went out, people came to her.
I didn't really know how it worked, what I was supposed to do, but I cupped my hand over Roni's.

I watched the doors to the Foodmart and waited for Momma to come out. I didn't want her to hear us talking. I read the painted words on the doors a few times and looked around for other things to read. There was a sale on one pound bags of Martha White flour and corn meal as well as Eagle syrup and the cheap brand of barbeque sauce. I hoped Momma would get some of the syrup. Before Sam would take me fishing at Sersip camp or if the mill was on strike, we'd snack on Eagle syrup and peanut butter. He'd slap a big spoon full of peanut butter on the scratched gray plastic plates Momma bought at the Coleman County Flea Market and pour out the gold syrup slowly. It would stack against itself, thick and gold as honey. He'd fork it in the middle of the pile of peanut butter and swirl in the syrup until the peanut butter was thin and outlined in gold. We didn't get to eat it often cause the syrup was so expensive, so Sam and me scraped off every little bit of the plate we shared. You had to eat it with milk or water to cut the sweet. Drinking it with coke made you want to throw up.

Momma opened the door with one hand and hugged the brown paper sack in the other. She slung her purse behind her arm and dug in the sack with other, pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She fumbled with the sack trying to open it, changed arms, and walked quick to the car. With the same hand holding the pack, she opened the door, threw the sack and her bag over to the passenger seat across the console. Momma pulled an unfiltered out and felt around the floorboard for her lighter. She said matches made you cough more even though they cost less, but I knew she just hated fooling with them. I
peered around the seat to see what she got. A pack of bologna and some bread had spilled out with two more packs of the unfiltereds.

She hadn't smoked all weekend. Sam had to work late the Friday before which meant Momma had to wait on his check, but he'd gotten some overtime. But, it made her not be able to cash his check til today. Sam told me that before they started getting checks, he'd have to stand in line after work at the Brinks truck to wait for an envelope with his pay and statement. Everybody's money had to be counted out to them. Said it took well over an hour. I'd always imagined her standing beside him in line to get the money and go buy cigarettes, but that was before I was born, before they knew each other.

She found the lighter and hunched over it, cupped the air around the end of the stick even though there was no wind coming in the window. She sucked in hard, leaned against the seat, and stretched her legs past the pedals. The smoke caught in her hair.

I took my hand off Roni's, glad Momma hadn't noticed and told me to get my hands out from between a girl's legs. I scooted to the middle of the back seat and leaned into the front.

"Let me have some."

Momma looked back at me and smiled a bit, tossed the pack over the seat. It hit the window and fell under the seat. I got it and put one between my teeth. Momma was watching me, as she often did, in the rearview.

"Don't chew on it. You'll slobber all over it till it's not fit to smoke. You wanted it. Don't waste it."
I sucked all the wet in my mouth down my throat and tried to hold the stick between my lips, but it jiggled unsteadily. She tossed back the lighter, and I picked it up from the seat beside me. I clamped my lips against one end and ran my thumb over the place I'd seen Momma light from.

"No, you got to press down on it. Here." She got it from my fingers and lit it. She leaned into the back seat to place the flame under the end where little slivers of tobacco had started to hang out.

Nothing happened.

"You got to suck on it. No, not hard. Just a bit. My god, you'd think lighting a cigarette harder than getting into the golden gates of heaven."

I held in any cough I thought might come. I didn't want Momma to think I was chickenshit. But, I didn't cough.

"You're not even smoking. You're just holding it in your mouth." Momma must have seen me look proud. "Swallow it like that lemonade slushie you sucked down last summer so fast it gave you a headache. Suck it down low in your belly."

I did. I gulped it down and held it there, afraid I'd react in a bad way, like puke. My older sister'd snuck out one of mom's unfiltereds once. She got me out behind the trailer, by the woods. She'd lit it fine, but coughed and choked so I felt sorry for her. I didn't want to do that.

"Let it out. God, breathe girl." It chimneyed straight into the front seat and billowed out the window across Momma.

"Don't hold it til you turn blue in the face." She turned back, muttered, "Goddamn," out the window and pulled her leg up to her chin. She took another hit and
laid her arm out. I fumbled with it and tried to hold it between two fingers like Momma, but I almost dropped it trying. Roni reached out and took a puff like a pro. I told you about that man she stole bologna for. He must've taught her. I never went over there. He kinda creeped me out, talked long and slow, endless stories about every family within fifty miles, his included. But Roni liked listening to people, listened to stories about most anything. She reached to the open window and flicked the unfiltered with the same precision Momma did and handed it back to me whenever I reached for it, which wasn't that often since I was scared of dropping it and burning the floor, puking, coughing, and choking.

Momma smoked languidly, that’s like lazily but smoother, has a sort of elegance in it. And, that’s how Momma looked. She was relaxed, slowing down. She was enjoying every hit, every breath blown out the window, every inhalation.

Roni seemed to have been smoking faster than her. She was about finished and offered me a last hit. I waved it away. She seemed to want it more. She sucked it in low and held it like I had done, but she let it out slow in one steady puckering of her lips.

They tossed the still smoking sticks out the window, Roni first, then Momma. Momma rolled up her window halfway. Roni leaned into it as Momma picked up speed. Her eyes were closed when she felt under the pile of clothes for my hand again.

Momma sped up and slowed down, rolled through the four stop signs in town, didn’t look in the rearview, just out the side. I kept trying to look at Roni right in the face, but she turned and watched the passing blur of green and brown pines.

Sadie was standing in the trailer door when we bumped over the grass patches and uneven red dirt like she had never moved. I knew that whatever had happened was bad. I
saw the comforter brushing the carpet, back and forth, back and forth. I ran through the
catalogue of what few words I could remember looking up, scenes in novels of
comforters moving back and forth against carpet. Some adult thing. Some thing they did
to each other.

Roni walked toward her house without telling me bye or waving thank you to
Momma. She always did both, sometimes more than once a day. She ran funny, straight-
legged, almost skipping, but with some kind of limp. I took off after her.

“Empress, get your butt back here. You spent all day with Roni. Act like you got
a family. You spend more time over there than where you live.” I dragged up the porch
behind Mother. Sadie watched me until I shut the torn screen door. She didn’t seem to
notice Roni slipping in under her arm.

Momma and I headed in opposite directions once we were inside. She went from
the door to the couch, sat down and lit up, watched tv. I went to take off the bathing suit,
the phone a quiet thud in the background, Momma whispering intensely low so that I
couldn't make out syllables even, parts of words. The slick skin sucked against the wet
cloth. I rinsed it in the sink to get out the river water and hung it to dry over the shower
curtain rod. I peed and wiped good like Momma said to. Drip dry is not what ladies did. I
slipped on my nightshirt, soft and worn see-through in some places. I heard a clash of
plastic against plastic when Momma put down the phone. Sam was already asleep. He
was hugged against himself in the bed, both arms crossed over his chest. He slept pushed
against his edge of the bed, a big empty space on Momma's side. I took each step quietly
past him, turned the knob behind me before I pushed the door into its frame. Momma
didn't look up when I walked behind her to my bedroom. Before I got to my door, she
yelled and told me to fold the towels and put them up. I made a few trips from the hall and carried them to the living room, made a pile at Momma's feet. As I was doing it, I went back over in my mind the back and forth, back and forth, the same rhythm in folding the ragged, colorless towels. Momma didn't talk, just smoked with her legs crouched up under her, pushing the buttons on the remote past the same shows. I put the towels away quietly, past sleeping Sam and Momma not talking, went back to my room and sat on the side of the bed holding my hands, figuring hard what I could do.

I waited.

I waited long and hard until Momma turned off the tv, and the house was quiet and dark.

I waited until I was sure they were asleep and wouldn't hear me.

I put on an old pair of canvas knock-off keds and slipped out the back door closest to my room.

It was dark outside, and there was a chill like mid-October even though it was summer. Something wrong in the air, a creepy dread soaked in skin, crawled through my body. I walked the short distance to Roni's trailer, watching the crowd for anything moving or un, rocks, ground, creatures. The door was open by the time I got there. Sadie was standing on the little makeshift porch.

Something swirling and opaque in her face. She was scared of something. Something had scared Sadie Silvering.

A little brown snake scooted beneath the underpinning. I could barely make it out. I wondered how long Sadie had been waiting on me.
"I know about the snake, Empress. I know how many snakes come and go round
the trailers."

Her eyes were wide, and she was breathing fast.

"Get in here and tell me what's wrong with my baby."

She walked in behind me and took off the crochet shawl she had been wearing on
the porch.

"What happened, Empress? I know you don't leave her side. May said she was
just sleeping. May said he couldn't have hurt her," she had me, held me hard above both
elbows, screamed desperately in my face.

My Momma had lied.

"Sadie, I don't know what happened. She was just bleeding, he just gave her some
kool-aid, drug her in some room, threw me in a closet, Sadie, I don't know. She was
bleeding."

Sadie interrupted. She grabbed me, put both her arms around my head. I could
feel my hair getting wet at the top. She whispered words I couldn't understand.

"My baby, my baby," she chanted.

She pulled me to the couch and into her lap, held me against her and made me tell
her. Her face was splotchy, and she looked old, broken against the brown and beige
wagon wheel pattern of her couch.

We sat that way for a long while, Sadie looking past me, out the door of the
trailer. She only interrupted intermittently. "She said Roni's so little he couldn't of got in,
that..." and silence. "Who else goes to church now?" It was always changing. I updated
her. "That group of men, you know Empress, they stand out back sometimes, who's out
there? Who was out there when you went to the gathering on Sunday? Around the
preacher?" I went around the circle, down the list, as I saw them beside the cemetery.
And she stared out the door. I wanted to ask her if someone was coming. She said "no"
aloud and kept rocking me, stopping every so often to sit me down, walk to Roni's room,
open the door, walk back to the couch, and pick me up again.

Sadie being scared made me scared.

We sat that way all night.
Tuesday

I woke up when Sadie sat me down on the couch and got up to make a phone call. I laid against the soft worn pillows, my heavy head an indentation inbetween the fluff of the sides. I could barely see over the humps, wiggled against the couch, the windows now light against the cream colored walls. It was early dawn. Sadie was pacing, holding the phone, looking out the screen door and the windows, watching the light of day come up through the house. She went out on the porch, climbing the steps of the porch, her voice moving, coming up close and moving farther away so that her conversation came in alternating altitudes to me. Talking to herself. The whole county talked about how she talked to herself. I couldn't make out all she said. But, my body was clenched against me, me against the couch, pushing, a hollow feeling low in my bowels. My hair was wrapped down below my chin. I didn't move it away.

She stopped at the top of the steps and put the phone to her ear, halted while it rang.

"Ada, this is Sadie Silvering." And back down the stairs, circling up and down, dragging red dirt. Her feet were darker each time she reached the level of the trailer.

"I know it's been awhile since I seen you, church or otherwise. I don't get out much these days."

"No, no my health is fine, but my baby girl ain't so fine. I want you to call the boys for me. I'm calling you to get the boys moving."

"I know he's one a them. I still know what goes on down there, don't have to be present to know."

"They will act on a call from the community, whether it's one a the boys or not."
"Yeah, yeah. I got a witness. May's daughter."

"Yeah, I know that Ada. I know how it works. I don't care what they do to him. They better do something, or I'll do something."

"No, I don't know what I'd do."

"Well, something's got to be done. I mean, that's what the boys are there for. It ain't just drunk Saturday nights…"

"Yes, I do know they get drunk at their meetings. Everybody knows that, Ada. And, they owe me. I keep my mouth shut ever time some house comes up burnt or lord knows what else, I keep my mouth shut."

"Alright, no I don't have to watch. I know, no women around. I know the rules, I just never had to call them before."

"Yeah, I hope never again too."

"Call them, Ada."

She hung up the phone. She walked in the house looking like she was coming out of the woods from making a deal with the devil. "I tried Sadie. I wouldn't let her drown. I watched for snakes. I made sure she didn't choke. I wouldn't even let her eat the chicken." I was puking up the words, convulsing in my chest and throat. Sadie put her hands on my face. Her nose was almost touching mine. "This ain't going to kill my girl, and you better not let it kill you neither. Plenty of snakes in the world, Empress, and you and Roni are going to cross many of their paths. I know you wouldn't let a thing, a, I know," Sadie cradled me, said she saw love in my eyes, protection, and told me to go to sleep, that she had a real important favor to ask me in the morning that would make it all right. She walked me to Roni's room. She was covered in Christmas colored afghans and Scooby
Doo. Sadie lifted up the covers and laid them back over us. Roni’s back was turned to me. She looked at me through half closed eyes and smiled a bit. "Empress." I tucked myself in beside her, and she scooted in to my stomach and chest. I laid my arm across her belly. Sadie left the door open and walked back through the house. You could feel Sadie, knew went she went away from you. I held tight to Roni and sucked in hard air.

I had horrible dreams that night, terrors were all around the room. A hollowed corpse was sitting at the foot of the bed, reaching for Roni, and I was breaking off its bones, cracking them into dust clouds until I stomped on a pile of ashes, wallowed in them. Dreamed I walked back to my trailer covered in white and gray like Momma's ashtrays, and she just shook me until the powder covered us both. She cried to bath me, said she wanted me to be clean. Momma kept making herself cry, but the dust stuck to my skin and clothes everfastly.

I woke up to her face, angry in my ear. "Empress, what the hell do you think coming over here in the middle of the night when I told you, I told you to keep where you belong." She kept talking. I was half asleep, couldn't keep up with how fast she was talking against me. She was pulling my arm, my other latched to Roni. I took her with me, and she fell to the floor. Momma dragged me past Sadie sitting on the couch, looking at me in the most peaceful way.

Momma took me to our trailer, told me not to dare come out, do not dare go back over there, locked the door, and took off in the pinto. I was sure she was late to work.

I sat where she left me, just inside the door. I laid on the floor with my knees pressed hard into my chest, the hollow in my stomach deafening, rubbing my cheek against the carpet until it burned.
It seemed like I had never seen the room before. The little kitchen was quiet, one of the chairs turned slightly towards me. The aluminum door had pen sized dents along the edge that opened. The country blue curtains over the stove didn't move. A bag of cereal slid down off the pile on top of the refrigerator. My whole body jumped inside.

The door banged. I didn't know if it was real. I turned over the lock. Sadie crouched in front of me, her face close to mine. She pulled me to her, again. "You will not break. The universe takes care of you. It is your job to take care of others, like my Roni." I listened.

"Tonight, Empress, tonight. Do you remember how to get to Old Yerkshire through the woods?"

I stared at her.

"They're going to do it tonight." She was so excited. She was talking fast. "They're taking him out to the mouth of the mines, the one that closed down. Come on, Empress." She pulled me up to sit in front of her. "You have to be down there waiting when it gets dark. I know they'll take him down once it gets dark. Go sit in the mouth of the mines until ever one of them comes and goes. You'll see an awful, an awe full thing." She slowed down a hundred miles.

"Promise me, Empress."

I nodded against her chest even though I didn't know what she was asking me. It was my way to make things right. I could make things right without the Dark Man. All by myself. In the real world, like Momma said.

“I’ll do it.” I said it out loud, for Sadie, for myself, for Roni.
“Dark. As soon as it gets dark. And be careful not be seen. They see you, and they’ll take care of you and me both if they think I sent you there. Careful and quiet. You need to be quieter than the woods at night, girl. You’re going to see the devil’s work done by the lord’s people.” She laughed darkly.

“You want some breakfast? I’m going to make some biscuits and tomato gravy.” I’d never seen Sadie have this much energy. It was wholly unlike her.

“No. I’m sick to my stomach. I want to throw up.”

She drew back from me with involuntary revulsion, that’s getting grossed out and not being to stop yourself from it.

“Take you a cool bath. That’ll make you feel better. Cool down a hot stomach. If that don’t work, lay a cold rag over your belly and your face. Then, you better nap for most of the day, so you can stay out tonight.”

“Sadie,” I looked down, still sitting on the worn carpet by the door, calling after her as she started down the stairs, “why does everybody call you crazy?”

I knew this wasn’t polite. Momma slapped me one Christmas when I asked Paw why he shook all the time, why he couldn’t eat corn out of a fork like we did. I hid under the table for an hour and a half and cried. I was real little, maybe three or four. I only remembered it cause I felt so bad for hurting Momma and Paw’s feelings. My feelings hurt too. Everybody had already opened up their presents when I crawled out from under the table.

But, you could say things like that to Sadie. It didn’t hurt her feelings. She knew how people talked.
She stopped on the last step and turned around to me. “Empress, you need to learn now and remember forever that people are scared of what they don’t understand, what they don’t know. And, in this part of the world and many others, there are lots of things people don’t understand. Do you know why the grass is green, why the sky is blue, why it rains every…?”

“Well, we learned in school that chlorophyll…”

“You’re missing the point. You’re too smart for your own britches, girl. Not good for a smart girl like you to be in this place where there’s just not a whole lot of the kind of know-how you got. But, there’s plenty for you to learn about the world here, child. And, you can start that education tonight at the mines.”

I watched her walk out. She took her time walking to her old trailer. It was one of the few times I could remember seeing her outside it. She waved to me and shut the screen.

I stood there for a while, looking around the camp. Old Mrs. Doughtery's oldest son was out back of their trailer at the shed, cranking and recranking an old push mower he had propped up on a rusted metal gas tank. He'd crank it a few times and lay back down on his back underneath. I never understood why he didn't just flip it over like my cousins did so you could get to what you were trying to fix. Everything was pretty quiet. Most everybody else was at work at the mill or the mines or whatever business paid low around town.

I rubbed my belly where it ached low and shut the door behind me. I didn't want to forget and have left it open when Momma got home from work so that she'd think I'd went out and disobeyed her. I took my clothes off in the hall, gathered them up in the
laundry basket, and made my way naked through the house, covering myself even though I knew Momma never pulled back the curtains. She said keeping out the sun helped to cool the house during the summer, but the heat still got in and it always seemed to bake the waving sheets of cigarette smoke when she sat at the tv burning one.

I turned the corroded faucets, hot twice, cold once, and let the tub fill up to my shoulders. I slunk down and drug the rag under the water, slinging it around like I imagined mermaids would do with their shimmering scales. I had always wanted to be a mermaid. Look up at the world from underneath. Two towns over, toward Birmingham, Roni and I had went to a birthday party at a public pool. The water was see-through, and, if you opened your eyes up while you were underneath, there was the most beautiful light reflections through the water, always moving, lines of white, jagged like Christmas garland. I would hold my breath and sit on the bottom of the shallow end where all the Mommas held the babies. They didn't splash much because they were so scared of the water. And, I could see straight up through the tree branches to the sun. I imagined I would sit on the bottom of the ocean and read, swim around with schools of clown fish. Those were my favorite, the most colorful of all the fish in the science book. I told Momma after that that I wanted to be a marine biologist. "A what?" she said. We read all about them swimming in the ocean, catching fish to study, collecting sea weed, and I didn't know what else, but it sounded like a good job, more fun than Momma sitting at the truck stop, and I didn't want to get as dirty as Sam did at the mill.

I ran through all the jobs I might have, all the people I could be one day. I could have a house like in the Happy Valley, in *Rebecca*. All the hills different sizes, and you could just stand out on your balcony and look out over them anytime you wanted to. It'd
be windy. I could have big parties, balls where everybody got dressed up and ate until they were going to throw up, little ham rolled up with sweet cherries on a stick, macaroni and cheese served in glasses with little roses painted on them. It would be beautiful. I'd have a big house, huge. Momma and Sam could live in one wing, that's a whole side of a house. I'd let them have whichever side they wanted, and I could have the whole other side to myself. I'd have a library that was three stories high, shelves of books, and the bookcases would be in a dark, fine wood, flown in by jet from Morocco or Indonesia, from the other side of the world. I'd have two big fireplaces, one on each side, made of marble from Italy or Japan. No, that would probably be a bad idea. If some of the fire got out, it could burn all the books. I had read about World War II for a while. I was real interested in it for a time after Momma got to telling me how my papaw had been in it. So, I found every book I could in the school's library about it. I knew where all the sections of the library were. I knew where f-l was. I knew where p-r was. World War II was in the section closest to the door. And, that war started with burning books. The whole world got involved after a man, he was a president or something, started telling his people to burn their books. I didn't want that to happen in our big beautiful house. So, there couldn't be any fireplaces in the library.

I laid the wet rag over my face and closed my eyes behind it.

Whenever I wanted to get away from here, I always imagined a little place in the Happy Valley. It just sounded like a good place. I didn't imagine many exciting things there, mostly just sitting around, playing in the grass. I imagined Roni was there with me sometimes. We'd lay back and look at the night sky, big before us.
I wondered if she stopped bleeding. Sadie would've told me. Maybe Roni was alright since Sadie didn't seem to think she was hurt too bad.

I remembered from this one book that I read this part where this man was in a car with this girl. He was taking her home. And he pulled down her sleeve, real gentle like, and put his hands on her boobs, her nipples and stuff. And, she seemed to like it.

I know that was ugly. It was a free book I found at the White Cross Mission one time. I threw it away. But, I read that little bit a bunch of times. I didn't tell Momma. I knew I was ugly, and I didn't need her to tell me again.

He just did that. Pulled down that girl's shirt, and she showed him her titties. I don't think she tried to cover them up. And, he just squeezed them and bit her. I know I shouldn't be talking like this.

But, sometimes, I did that. I squeezed my little titties before I go to bed. I laid on my stomach, so Momma couldn't see me if she came in. But, I felt real bad afterwards and didn't do it for a while.

I pulled the rag off my face, it was getting cold, and looked down at my chest. Ant bites and ant hills, that's what Granny called them when we didn't have any hot water and had to go down to her house to take a bath. And, that's what they looked like, all swollen and pointy at one end.

Uncle Albert noticed one time when we to Granny's to cook out on the patio. He said, "I smell you plum over here girl, and your titties are pointing at me." He was Momma's little brother. We didn't have much to do with him cause Momma thought he was trash. She didn't hear him say that to me, but Granny did. She laughed and kept on frying the tomatoes. Smell me. I wondered what I smelled like. It was probably dog. I had
been playing with three puppies the neighbor's dog had had. They were little rat things with round heads.

The water was getting cold, and I was ready to get out. I sat up and scrubbed the soap over the rag. The white crust got in the water and floated toward the sides of the tub. I washed hard under my arms, in my butt, and between my legs. Momma had always rubbed me raw in those places whenever she had to bathe me. It wasn't that often anymore, just when I was real sick and couldn't do it myself.

I held my breath and went under the water, shook my head to get the soap out of my hair and rubbed at my legs and belly until they weren't slick anymore.

I dried off but left my back wet and most of my legs and shoulders. It would be hot for sure. The tin roof soaked up the heat and dripped it through the trailer.

Roni was sitting on the couch facing a black tv screen when I walked through the living room. Her hands were folded in her lap over tightly closed legs. I hadn't even heard her come in. I must not have locked the door behind Sadie.

I moved back the coffee table, careful not to upset the loosely pieced together broken glass in its fake wood plastic casing, and sat on the floor in front of her in my towel.

"Hey," she said, not looking up.

"Hey." I tried to keep the towel wrapped around me, covering me up, but it was thin and small, full of ratty holes.

"I thought you might be taking a bath. I didn't want to bother you none."

"Yeah." I didn't look at her either.

"Momma said you had a headache."
"Just my stomach hurts. Not bad."

"Oh."

We sat for a while, quiet. I didn't know if this was one of those things Momma was always telling me wasn't any of my business, so I didn't ask her what happened when Deacon Brown locked me in the bathroom.

"Empress," she looked up at me, well down, since I was in the floor.

"Yeah."

"I'm pretty sure I can't have any babies now. Which is a shame cause I always wanted some." She kept talking and started crying. You couldn't really hear it in her voice or even see it. It was laid behind her eyes like an old dog, too sick to move. "I was going to name it Jay like in that book you were reading to me or maybe Big P, after you, like in the middle of your name, P, even if it was girl. Like my name. I like it when you call a girl by a boy's name or a boy a girl's name, not anything crazy like Sue but when we named that cat we found Princess even though he was a boy."

"Don't worry about having your own kids, Roni. Momma told me about these people that left their kid outside a hospital somewhere, that people do that all the time, and the hospital keeps them until somebody wants them. You could have one of them babies that don't have nobody."

She thought about that for awhile or thought about something. She was quiet until I started to get up to go put some clothes on. When I moved from the floor, she wrapped her tiny hand around a bunch of towel and held on.
"Momma put her finger inside me, Empress. Cleaned out all the dried blood. It was brown and gunky coming out of me on that rag." My teeth fit together hard, ground and knocked in my head.

Saltwater glistened beside her nose. "She said I was so little she didn't see how."

I hugged her to me, took off the towel and wiped her nose. I kneeled in front of her on the floor and held her head against my naked neck, let her hide underneath my hair, and felt a stream down my back dripping from her.

Let me get a hold of that son of a bitch, that bastard, I prayed. I didn't remember ever praying before. I ran through every cuss word I had ever heard, read, imagined. I wanted to hold him, should have crushed him when I had the chance.

Roni slid down to my chest, and I wrapped around her where she hid inbetween my ant hills. I wrapped the wet towel around her, pulled to try to get her in my lap. She pushed at me and looked down at my body.

"I think I should try to kill myself. You know, Momma's going crazy. She hasn't sat down, just walks from one end of the trailer and back, checks on me every minute. She walked me over here, Empress, like... Ever body's going to think I'm a slut, like your sister, uh, I didn't mean no offence."

"You know I hate my sister, and you know you better not kill yourself, or I'll kill myself and haunt you and make you so miserable you'll wish you never died." I said it with my whole body clenched against her's, against this thing that had happened.

"Promise you won't leave me, Roni. You promise no matter what. We're going to move out of here. I'll get away from my Momma, and we could visit yours. We could move all
the way to Birmingham where nobody knows us. I could work at a dairy bar, and you could cook. We could have a dog." I stared at her with her face down.

"You can't leave." It was a direct order, a telling, not an asking. I grabbed her shoulders with my little hands, and I shook her, tried to shake into her some kind of belief in me, that I could make this right. That her leaving would be so much worse than anything anybody else could do to us. Why would she want to leave me, her Momma. Her Momma loved her. Mine just put up with me, let me know every so often how much easier life would have been without me and Maureen. I'd heard her and Granny talk about her trying to get rid of us one time. They were in the kitchen, and I was swinging on the porch outside. Granny always left the window open cause the kitchen got so hot when she cooked.

I heard Granny slap her when she said she'd went out when Maureen was in her belly. Sadie'd told her to go into the top of the cemetery at the Indian graves and say this certain saying and eat this certain root I'd never heard of anybody ever eating before.

"Every soul has its cross to bear, May. You pay for all your sins through your children, and your paying hasn't started yet."

Momma was crying when we left Granny's that day. I'd ask her what was wrong, but I didn't think she heard me.

I stood up, the towel wrapped around Roni's back. I wasn't going to let her leave. " Besides, I'm taking care of this tonight. Nobody's going to talk about you."

I walked in my room and shut the door. Cried because I felt like I didn't understand anything. I sat against the door and hugged my knees. The carpet scraped hard against my backside.
I crawled into bed naked and laid back against the pillow, didn't cover myself up.

I sorted through the hair until I found the hole low and close to my butt. I'd touched myself before, but never inside. I stuck my fingers in there, all I could fit and more, until it hurt. I rammed them in hard, pulling the muscles tight in my arm like I was punching a ripe melon, trying to split it open, wrapped my thumb into the hair, wanting to feel what she had went through when I wasn't there with her. I pushed back hard against the pillow, cried out and didn't stop until I was throbbing between my legs.

I thought of his face, saw Deacon Brown on top of her like this movie Maureen showed me one time when Momma and Sam had gone to visit his Paw in the hospital in Mississippi. Rough and mean, like rabid dogs fighting.

The tips of my nails showed a little blood. I yanked up the covers, wiped them off, and cried hard in heaps and breathed into those covers. Sucked in a moldy smell. Felt like a cord had been held tight against my throat and that my stomach had rose up and run back down.

I stayed that way a long time, holding those covers to me tight, running through every minute I was in that bathroom, how I could have kicked the door or picked the lock if I'd had some flat piece of tin.

How I could have saved her. What I could have done.

I knew I'd get nothing out of telling Momma. She'd say that's what you get, going in stranger's houses. But, Deacon Brown wasn’t a stranger. He'd been sitting third pew from the back with his Momma every time Momma and me went down to third Sunday supper. And, she knew him. I'd heard her talking about it to Sadie, who didn't pay her much attention when she talked about any man other than my Daddy and Sam. Saying
what a good man Deacon Brown was, taking care of his Momma all these years, that he had a good job at the mines, could take care of her and us. She'd smoke her cigarettes and cross her legs and cuss Granny that she hadn't introduced them before she married again.

I thought about how things would be different if Momma had married Deacon Brown instead of Sam, how we'd be going to church a whole lot more, I was sure, how we'd live in that big house by the river with him and his Momma, how he might do what he did to Roni to me whenever he wanted, how Roni wouldn't always be right next door. I wondered what kind of things would happen after I grew up, if Roni would marry some man and move far away where I'd never get to talk to her.

I put on some old clothes and walked through the house to the bathroom to wash my face. Roni was gone. I hadn't expected her to stay and wait out my tantrum.

I scrubbed my face and under my nails. I sat on the toilet and looked at the picture Momma had hung on the wall beside the shower. A boy and a girl were kissing. The girl was holding a pail, and there was a well behind them. They were bent at the middle, only their lips touching. All the color was washed out. It looked almost like these watercolors I had seen in a book about this man called William Blake. He was a prophet or something, rewrote parts of the Bible and drew pictures of it too. I wiped easy; it was sore down there, washed my hands again.

Then, I just went in the living room and sat. For hours. I didn't turn the tv on. I didn't read a book. I just sat. The house was so wonderfully quiet and calm. I just wanted to set there and soak it up like I wouldn't have to walk all the way through the woods to Old Yerkshire. I wouldn't have to think about what ugly thing I'd done in the bed or about the ugly thing that had happed to Roni. Nothing. I laid back on the couch and closed my
eyes, laid my hands across my stomach. I imagined each hill, every stream, climbed up
every tree and looked out over the Happy Valley. I walked through each room of my
mansion in my mind, deciding what color carpet to have, what kind of wood to burn in
the fireplaces, how much food I'd have, how I'd invite everybody over for Thanksgiving
and Christmas. Granny and all Momma's cousins. Momma's cousins might tear up the
house, though. Sam's parents that he hardly ever got to see. I'd invite painters and writers,
people who acted in theaters or played things like oboes and violas. Everybody I could
think of. And, they'd all come, and we'd laugh and eat, rub our bellies from being so full.
It would be wonderful.

I sat thinking that way until I feel the sun cooling off. I wanted to make it through
the woods to the mines before it got any bit of dark, so I'd be waiting when they got there.
And, I had to get out of the house before Momma or Sam got home and would want to
know where I was going.

I went out the back and started through the woods behind the trailer park. I
crossed quick when I got to the highway. Somebody might see me and tell Momma I was
going to get run over.

The woods going towards Old Yerkshire were all grown up. Nobody went
through this part of the county since the mines had closed. I was in a hurry, racing the
sun. I should have left earlier in the day.

The opening to the mines was smaller than I expected. It was just about the size of
two short people walking side by side. All the kids at the white church had talked about
it, dared each other to go in. None of us ever did it, though. With all the stories we had
heard about men dying in there, we were all scared it was full of angry ghosts, the men
who knew the company hadn’t protected them, no gas leak warnings, not enough good equipment, the union not moving fast enough to save them. Sam had some friends die in there, guys he went to high school with, and one woman. He’d taken her to a homecoming dance before he quit school. He brought it up every once in a while. There had been a rock fall before I was born. And, the mines closed up after that.

I walked in as far as the light shone, maybe ten feet, probably less. I knew I needed to be farther enough in not to be seen but close enough to the outside to see what was going on.

I found a big rock that would hide me. I settled down behind it and leaned back. Gray dust covered my white shoes. I had gotten it all over my pants and shirt too.

I pushed my palm into the dust on the ground and held it in front of my face. It was almost completely covered with little slithers of skin shining through in only a few places. I rubbed it against my face, my neck, my arms, every bit of pale peach that wasn’t covered in cloth. I got the chalky stuff in my mouth, my nose and ears. I grabbed handfuls and ground it into my knees. I couldn’t pick it up fast enough. I laid on my back and rolled, closed my eyes and held my breath, until I felt saturated by it.

I could feel it in my ears and nose. I tried to wipe most of it away from around my eyes, but my hands were covered. But, I shouldn’t be seen.

This whole thing seemed like this one hunting trip Sam had took me on.

We wore gray camo with longjohns underneath. He took me down to South Alabama. It was swampy down there. I knew there were snakes crawling all around under the trees and in the water. We went in the woods before it was dark and sat still and quiet until the moon came out cloudy.
I sat, practicing being quiet and still, like I had on the hunting trip, but we still
didn’t bring any deer meat home. Sam said I made too much noise in the woods, wiggling
on the dried leaves and broken twigs. Momma had the stew all ready to go. Potatoes,
carrots, and onions were all cut up and bagged in the refrigerator. She stewed them
anyway, and we just ate stew without the meat.

I sat like that, like I was on a hunt, waiting. I had to be quieter than the woods.

I looked around, expecting to see a way to tell that humans had been here. I
couldn’t tell that they had. No hats with broken lights. No old lunch boxes, just the rocks
and the dust.

The opening seemed dark and endless and very far away like this place in Florida,
Wakulla Springs. We came back by there one time when we went with Granny to visit
her brother after he was sick in the hospital. You could see straight through the water to
the long grass on the bottom. There were birds and fish and turtles, alligators that floated
not ten feet from the bank. Scary looking garfish swam out in front of the boat. And, all
this water came up from this huge cave in the ground on one side of the river. The water
was clear, then blue and green. It got darker the farther down it went until it was
completely black. It scared me to be floating over this huge black hole in nothing more
than a small boat that could flip at any time.

The mines looked like that. I shouldn’t have remembered it because I spooked
myself thinking about those garfish, that dark cave spilling water up into that river, and
all the ghosts of the men that died in the rock fall.

Fear could just creep into you, had a way of crawling up next to you, slithering on
all fours and taking a seat so that you didn't know if what you saw out of the corner of
your eye was real. All my nightmares. I never felt fine till the sun had been up long enough that you could feel its heat. I'd lie still in my bed and be so scared to open my eyes, curl up as tight as I could against myself. Maybe they wouldn't notice me. Whoever the they was that seemed present sometimes like that feeling I told you about Sadie leaving the room, you just knew it. The they of my nightmares felt real until the house was warm.

Above all of this, it was getting dark outside. I was awful hungry, mad I'd forgotten to eat something before I sat out walking. They would be coming soon. Somebody. I wasn’t sure exactly what I would have to do. Just sit in here, from the way Sadie talked. Watch.

The darker it got, the more I just wanted to get out of there. I was itchy, couldn't sit still. I was breathing so hard and fast that I was sure any deer could hear me in a twenty mile radius, that's a line that cuts through a circle, we learned that in geometry, just a fancy way to say a straight line that's twenty miles long, that's pretty long. But, according to Sam, deer were a lot better than people at hearing or smelling.

With the heat of the late afternoon, the dusty powder had turned to a sticky mess all over me. I rubbed at it, peeled it off my shoulders. I stared at one ledge of uneven rock across the way, focused on it and pretended I was not sitting in a mines in a dark wood I wasn't sure I could find my way out of. That was a real problem. I didn't know if should wait it out, stay all night, or if I could stand sitting here until morning to try to get back to Eudora.

It must have been two hours when I started hearing them come toward the mines. The sound of dry sticks cracking and leave shifting got my attention in the almost silent
night air. It sounded like a bunch of them, all coming together toward the mines. I didn't want to move my head for fear. I had been sitting on my butt against the rock wall. I twisted to sit up on my legs so I could peek in between the rock and the wall. I couldn't see anything. I remembered there being a big open place of dirt right outside the mines from when I walked over here in the daylight. It sounded like they stopped there because the twigs and leaves weren't making any more sound. It sounded like they were getting something out of the woods. One single sound of footprints would go off through the woods, making the sound of walking through dry woods. Then, it would come back and logs hitting logs would echo through the cave. Soon enough, I saw a couple of matches flicker and get thrown down. They were trying to start a fire. As soon as it got lit, they started talking, not even whispering like I would have done if I had snuck out in the woods. But, I guess as far as I had walked from Eudora, nobody could here us all the way out here.

They sat crouched down in a circle around the fire. I could make out a few of them as they walked close enough to the light. Ruby Pearson's oldest boy was sitting closest to the woods. He had been in that circle outside the fellowship hall. I knew it had to be them. Why else would Sadie have called Aunt Ada? Brother JayD was talking towards the mines to a man I couldn't see. He had the back of his head towards me.

"I'm sorry we have to do this," he was mouthing. "We don't like to do this to one of our own, but rules are rules and if we don't follow them then nobody will."

"I reckon so. I mean, I know. I walked out here, didn't I? I didn't fight you none."

John Ed Robinson, whose wife played the piano, came to sit across the fire from them, sat with his legs crossed, leaning back on his arms. "I just don't get it Ricky. You
could've had anybody you wanted from here to Cullman county. All a woman wants is somebody to pay her bills. I know you ain't spent all your money taking care of your Momma."

Deacon Brown turned his head so that I could see half of his face lit up by the fire. I sat up without thinking on my knees and hugged that big rock so tight its sharp points dug into my stomach until it hurt.

"It's that tight pussy, ain't it? You remember my older brother Dean. Hell, he fucked our little sister til he moved up to Fort Payne, even after he got married to Evie Charles. Said it was that tight pussy."

"Yeah, I guess," Deacon laughed.

"Well, a man ain't a man unless he's made a few mistakes, that's what the good book tells us. Best to go on ahead and get it out of you, sow your oats and all, so you can settle down before your Momma passes on."

The Deacon nodded and threw a limb into the fire.

John Ed kept talking. "Yeah, I tried it one time with my little sister, but she almost bit my right ear off, said she's sick of us trying it all the time, that she's going to tell Momma about us being sick bastards and all. I still got the scar where she did it, almost bit the whole thing off. It just hung there. I wrapped up a bandage around it, hoping it would grow back together. It did. It just ain't pretty." He was rubbing it as he spoke.

"You know she took off after that, after I tried it and Dean moved off. Hell, I don't really know where she is now, sent Momma a postcard of magnolia trees from Charleston more than two years ago. Ain't heard hide nor hair since."
"Your Momma's missed two weeks of service."

"Yeah, she knows. Said this dry weather was causing an ache in her hip. Hell, she says the same thing when it rains. Wet or dry, Momma's hip hurts her."

"How's that?"

"She busted it a few years ago when she fell in the garden."

"You should be doing that gardening. She's too old. You should be doing all that. People should be able to rest in their old age."

"Hell, I tried, Reverend, said I planted the beans too close, that they grew up and chocked each other. Said I couldn't plant a straight row of greens to save my hide."

"Well, maybe you should just bushog that plot of land."

"Yeah, I told her nowadays, she could buy any vegetable she wanted from the store out of a can. Insists they ain't real vegetables, just somebody's leftover slop."

Brother JayD laughed and said, "Yeah, I know how that goes. My poor old Momma, rest her sweet soul, was the same way. Never would eat nothing out of a can."

God, I hope he didn't start crying over his Momma like in church.

I stared down Deacon Brown. I wanted to run at him and pound him in the ground. Grind him up and wallow in him to go show Sadie I'd took care of him. The way it looked, they were just going to stay out here talking all night.

I got tired of everybody always talking about their Mommas.

Brother JayD finally pulled himself up. "Better get on with it, Deacon. I got to work tomorrow. I know you do too and John Ed over there."

Deacon Brown had started shaking just the littlest bit. I could see the match shiver when he lit them over and over, tossed them into the flame. "Yeah," he said.
"Now, we're going to have to leave some marks on you so Sadie don't say nothing about us not doing our job."

The Deacon was holding his elbow with one hand, looking down at the ground, and shifting from one foot to the other.

Brother JayD swung at him, didn't wait for him to get back up from where he fell on the ground. John Ed made his way around the circle of fire and got in Brother JayD's way. They were hitting him so fast he couldn't even cover his face. I felt sorry for him for just a minute before I remembered I hated the son of a bitch. Then, I started cheering them on just as quiet as I could, pounding my fist into my hand every time they hit him.

When they both looked worn out, they stood up above him, wiping sweat and hanging their hands from their hips. Brother JayD pulled the Deacon off the ground and started dusting him off. John Ed helped, getting his back and shoulders.

And, he started crying. The Deacon just wailed up into the stars and crouched down with his face covered. Brother JayD and John Ed looked away, out into the woods.

Brother JayD talked to him without turning around. "Come on, son." He turned around. "Now, we didn't bring the boys out here with us. What more do you want, now? Told Ada I'd take care of this myself. Nobody going to know what happened out here except what we tell them." He looked frustrated, his face still red and glistening in the firelight. "We have a place in this town, you know, doing what's right by everybody. Can't let you slide through the cracks or nobody'll give us the respect we deserve as upright citizens of this organization. We told you all that when you got inducted."
"I remember, sir," the Deacon snorted all over himself. It was sick and sad. "I don't know why I done it. I ain't had a woman in years, taking care of my Momma and all. I just got these natural urges to…"

"Now, we don't need to go into all that. You done what you done. Hell, boy, you know it happens all the time. And, I know them girls try to act all innocent. Like they don't want it. Specially Roni's age, just swishing around with their new titties and hips jutting out their sides." He looked past the top of the flames and back down to the Deacon. He wet his lips and gummed at them. "Just don't need so much talk, so much attention brought to what we do here. Keep things quiet. Let it all slide over. Nobody'll even know what we're talking about if we brought this up in a month." He put his hands on his hips and looked at both of them, his head swiveling between them. "And, there ain't no reason to talk about this to nobody."

John Ed nodded, and the Deacon shook his head.

"Now, I got to get going. And, you two better head on too." He started towards the darkness outside the ring of light. He looked back to the Deacon. "I'll be giving you a call tomorrow. Make this all right. Don't worry none about it." John Ed walked over to the Deacon, patted his shoulder, and followed Brother JayD into the woods. Their talking got quieter. Deacon Brown pulled up a big branch and sat on the thickest end of it. He stared at the fire for a long time, long after I couldn't hear Brother JayD and John Ed any more. I could see his jaw had started swelling. Every couple of minutes, he barely tapped at it with his fingers and pulled them away. He started rocking himself, rolling over the log he sat on, his arms wrapped all the way to his back.
My feet had gone numb underneath from sitting on them so long. I quietly shifted to sit back against the wall, putting on my weight on my hands to muzzle the sound. I figured he might stay that way awhile, didn't look like he was in a hurry to get back to his Momma. My legs tingled and ached like needles pricked at them. I rubbed and patted. The dust came off in spurts shooting up like this picture I saw of a hole in the ground in a place called Yellowstone. It's out west somewhere. That hole shot up water. The book said the water was so hot it gave this one woman burns like from a fire when she walked over it accidentally.

I could do that. I could burn him like fire, push him into it. He was already so beat I could just finish it, beat at him, that son of a bitch. "Bastard," I mouthed without thinking. I sucked in a breath and covered my grimy lips with my grimier hands. I didn't know how I'd explain to Momma where I'd been so late or how I'd got so dirty. My clothes were ruined for sure.

My legs still hurt. I turned around a stretched them straight, laid back against the rock. But, that wasn't comfortable either. I kept moving around, rearranging my arms in my lap and butt against the ground.

For Roni, I wanted to run out there, close my eyes, and just hit whatever part of him I could get to. For Sadie, I wanted to sit still and be quiet. For myself, I wanted to be underwater somewhere, all the world above just a buzz coming in on the waves.

But, I was here for Roni, a witness, but I didn't want to sit back and be quiet anymore. I pulled myself up and ran. I was out of breath by the time I started wondering why I hadn't made it out of the cave yet.
It was completely dark. Each side looked the same whether it was a tunnel or wall. I felt around in front of me until I found the slimy side of rock. At the same time, some small creature moved underneath my foot and almost made me fall. I caught myself against the rock, scraped the side of my face against. It felt like cornmeal mix smeared on my face when I could tell by the wetness that I was bleeding.

I was scared, feeling trapped like those men must have felt in the rock fall, running through every story I knew of kids never coming out of mines when they went in there to play, kids falling down wells and their soaked, half rat eaten bodies pulled out, stories meant to scare me that now felt real, but I could tell the general direction. I just ran in the opposite direction, keeping a the same powdery feeling hand on the wall, ignoring every rock on the ground, everything that moved when I went over it.

When there was no more wall to hold on to, my body dove in the direction I had been leaning, not realizing I had put so much of my weight on the hand. Outside the cave, I was not able to see any better than inside with nothing to hold onto now. The little fire of brambles of thin branches wasn't even smoldering. I stood still, wondering how long Deacon Brown had been gone, if it was still possible for me to find him in the woods and get my punches into him. I knew I'd never have a chance like this again, all alone with him already beaten down.

I held my breath. I was breathing louder than anything in the woods, and I couldn't hear over it. I held my breath until I distinctly heard feet swishing through dried leaves and tiny rocks being thrown against the bottom of tree trunks to my left side, the same way I'd came. I took off, finding the bed of hot ashes too late to save what was left of my dirty shoes. I hopped, trying not to scream out when the smoldering bunches of
paper-thin crust stuck to my ankles and soaked their heat through the cloth of the canvas. I ran, as weak and tired as I was, I burst toward him in the woods, not stopping to listen anymore or get back my breath. It was so dark in the woods I might as well could have closed my eyes and felt my way just as good as when they were open. When I thought I might be getting close to him, I slowed to jog then to a fast walk. I finally halted to stepping slowly over the ground, the sticks and rocks bumping my feet slightly, so I could tell when to step down and when to lift up my foot. I stood still again, feeling the hunt, wanting to find him, positioning his distance in front of me as a few feet. I saw a blot of darkness moving, pushing back limbs, grumbling, "Who do they think they are? We ain't the county or even the city of Eudora police. Got no right." I brushed the ground over with my hand until I found a fairly heavy rock. I hurled it at him with all the strength I still had in my puny arms and hurting back from staying squat down so long.

It missed him. From what I could tell, it went past him. So, I was closer than I thought. I found another one. He must have felt something go by because he stopped walking and started looking around. "Sadie's done sent the devil after me, damn witchy granny woman." He took off running, hitting every branch on the way, ducking and hopping, but never slowing down. I walked quick behind him, trying to stay close enough to find my way out of the woods since I didn't know how to get back to Eudora. I'd never been this deep in the woods when it was this dark. Roni and I only went out when the moon was big enough to see by.

I followed him all the way back to the highway where his truck was parked. He didn't stop running, stood still long enough to open the door and lock it behind him the
same minute he cranked up the engine. I ducked behind a tree and didn't come out til he was down the road aways.

I knew walking the highway at night wasn't a good idea. If Momma didn't kill me for showing up halfway through the night covered in dirt, walking the highway would sure do it. I crossed and stayed in the edge of the woods, close enough to see the road but far enough in that anybody passing wouldn't notice me. I probably blended in good with the night and darkness, anyhow.

The trailers were a good walk from Old Yerkshire. By the time I had walked through the woods and along the highway, I knew I was too tired to deal with whatever Momma had waiting for me. I just didn't think I could walk in the house. I slinked around behind our trailer. All the lights were off except for the small one on the back and front steps that Momma left on after she went to bed. Maybe she wasn't out looking for me. Maybe she was. I sure get it if I made her and Sam stay up all night when they had to go to work the next day. I knew Sadie'd be up. She usually slept during the day, anyway. And, she'd want to know what had happened.

I made my way around her house in the dark, staying close enough to be hid in the shadows so but far enough away that I wouldn't step on a snake. Alabama has lots of poisonous snakes. I'd been taught about them since I could remember. Maureen told me one time, I don't know if I believed her, she was always a liar whether it helped her out any or not, she was sitting on the porch at Granny's swinging in one of those little baby swings that they strap you down in when you're so little you could fall over. And, a snake crawled by her, stopped at her feet and kept going. Said she couldn't cry or anything, she's so scared. I'd always heard that snakes stayed where it was quiet and dark and wet.
They didn't like coming around people, didn't liked to be bothered. So, I don't know if I believed her, but I always remembered to be careful outside in the dark in Alabama.

Sadie was standing in her doorway. I wondered why, if she knew I was coming, why she didn't already know what I was going to tell her had went on.

"You know, I shouldn't known," she said in the dark of her porch, crossing herself as she spoke, "the Dark Man wasn't with you last night when you came over, or I was just too upset to notice him. Lord, child, you look like you just finished a shift at the mines."

"Well, I just came out of it."

"But, he's with you, so you're fine. I don't understand…" She stood still in the doorway. "Wait, now, Deacon Brown didn't touch you, Lord." She wasn't speaking to me. I just happened to be there while she mouthed things out loud. "My god, why you're fine. He didn't touch you." I think she noticed I was still looking at her then. "Well, get in here and get washed up. What went on down there?"

"My Momma, Sadie…"

"Your Momma showed up? Well, ain't that a sight. Why in this world would she have…"

"No, Sadie, I mean you know Momma never hit me. And, I don't want her to start, but if she finds out I been down to Yerkshire mine and walking the highway at midnight…".

"Oh, I told her you's over here after you left today, before it even got dark."

Thank goodness.

Roni, who I hadn't even noticed was there, quiet and small, got around her Momma and hugged me, dust and dirt and all.
"Look, now both of you's covered in it. Let's get you in the tub."

"They beat him, Sadie. They beat him good."

"Well, I figured. Who was it?"

"Just Brother JayD and John Ed Robinson."

"They got him good, I bet. JayD don't like for none of his own to have to be taken care of; just likes getting those poor old Doughteries, don't have enough to feed their dirty chickens and, lord, the black folks by the river."

"They bloodied him, the preacher pounded him right in the face, bloodied him up good." It didn't seem like Roni was listening at all. I thought she'd want to know. Might be glad. "And I went after him too." I looked for her to perk up, but she didn't.

Sadie stopped in front of us, leading us to the bathroom, and put her hand on her hip and pointed her finger up at me. "I told you, don't let them see you, don't…lord."

"He didn't see me. None of them did."

"Good," she harrumphed and kept walking.

"He did say, though, that you'd sent the devil after him."

She laughed low. "I might have."

She ran the water into the cracked tub, and I started taking off my clothes, the dust covering the floor.

"Put those in the sink. They're filthy. I'll have to scrub them up in the sink so May won't have anything to run her mouth about." She started running water over them, left the room and came back with a box of bleach soap. "You know I always loved your Momma, Empress, even if she did have her share of human flaws, but, lord." She shook
her head. "I just don't know how I can after this mess." She poured in the white sugar looking stuff thick over the gray pile of clothes and started rubbing it in with her hands.

I sat in the warm water and turned off the faucet. Great dust clouds spread and settled to the bottom of the tub. A washrag plopped in the water in front of me, and Roni stepped in.

Her shoulders slumped like a scarecrow's, held up by a pole. She sat with her legs bent and crossed at the ankles, got a bar of soap and started scrubbing her foot. Her down there hair billowed full, and little air bubbles floated to the top from it, got lost in the soapy suds.

I bet it was soft and warm and close in there. Like when you hug a person that's so much bigger than you that you kind of get lost in how much of them there is. It must be the most wonderful place in the world for babies to want to stay in there so long, comfortable and soft and warm, just sleeping all the time with somebody hugged up close.

Roni switched feet, and I picked up the rag, soaked it, and waited for her to hand me the soap. She did, without looking up at me. I dug the washcloth in hard. It would take a whole lot of soap to get me clean.

Roni lay back in the water. Her legs on both sides of me, and I could see the little pink inside all the hair. I could feel the breath stuck in my throat. My eyebrows crawled up to my forehead, and my eyes widened at the sight of it. I had always wanted to ask her what it felt like in there, if maybe I could see or feel underneath all that hair. But, I knew that wasn't nice. Momma had let me know only ugly girls asked to do, even wanted to do, things like that.
Roni came up fast out of the water and hit her head on the faucet pretty hard. She rubbed at it. I went to rub at it, but I just got soap in her eyes. She had to turn the faucet back on to get clear water to wash them out.

I rushed to get clean, Roni and I passing the bar soap back and forth until we were done. I figured I could just try it on myself, not mean like I'd done yesterday, just soft and easy. See what I felt like down there, when nobody was looking.

Sadie wiped her hands on her printed dress and came back with towels. She laid them on the toilet. "What color were these clothes before you wallowed all over in them?"

"That shirt was blue. I think those shorts were green."

"You think? You don't even know what color they were?"

"They're just my old clothes."

"All the same, I don't want May to have a thing to say about them. I'm going to dye them back."

"I don't think Momma would notice my old clothes. I get them dirty all the time."

"Yeah, it could get her questioning, though."

Roni and I dried off and went to her room where she gave me a set of pajamas. Their trailer was set up pretty much the same way ours was, little kitchen and living room in the same place without any walls, a bedroom and bathroom on one end, a bedroom on the other.

Since I was spending the night, I knew I'd be going along with Sadie's sleep schedule. When we got our clothes, she was hollering at us from the kitchen.

"Are you girls hungry? I'm about to starve. What do ya'll want to eat?"
We walked in there to see what the choices were. Sadie was already rumbling through the cabinets of glass jars her Momma and her canned every fall, cans of fruit from the Foodmart, bags of corn meal and flour.

"How about some butterbeans and cornbread? I'll cut up some weenies with onions and tomatoes, some okra. That'll be good with the cornbread."

I didn't know how Sadie and Roni always had so much food. We didn't buy groceries at my house til all the bills were paid and Momma had her cigarettes. And, even then, it was only on the weeks that Momma and Sam got paid.

Sadie started taking out buttermilk, eggs, onions, all kinds of things, and her cabinets were always full of those canned goods, peeled potatoes, vegetable soup, peeled tomatoes, stewed tomatoes, okra, turnip greens, collards, anything you could want. The sight of it made me want to eat every last can, pour it in my mouth til I was sick from so much food. She could feed everybody in the trailers for a week.

Since I could ask Sadie and I had always wondered, I did.

"How come you always got so much more food than everybody else?" I asked while she was started peeling off the hide of the onions. "I mean what do you do since you don't have a job like Momma and Sam and everybody else I know."

She kept on peeling and started to cut off the ends of the onions. "I sell services, goods and services. Me and Momma sells most of those canned goods. And, come harvest time, I help her and Paw get in all the corn and beans, turnips and things, melons, you know. And, I just keep what we don't sell. Freeze it up for later."

"What do you mean, 'services'?") I'd heard Sam talk to his friends from the mill when they'd come by the house for him to give them a ride to work when their cars broke.
down. They talked about women with red hair and red lights in their windows selling "services" farther up in the county. Granny always said women with red hair were your common, everyday whores. She'd told me to shut my mouth when I told her how I thought red hair was so pretty. One of the older girls that helped in the library had it. And, I'd just watch her when I went in there, pretending to be reading my book. I wondered, surely not, if those were the kind of "services" Sadie sold. I'd always heard whores didn't make that much money, not enough to buy all this food.

"Well, Empress, some people want to know things they can't ask nobody else."

I sat down at the table across from her and started unwrapping the weenies. Roni got a knife and started cutting up the okra. Sadie got some bottles with dark thick liquid in them like ink boiled in a pot from under the sink. She set them on the table and got a big glass bowl, filled it full of water. She pushed my shirt first, then my shorts, down into it, started dropping little bits from the bottle into them, like she was shaking salt and pepper on mashed potatoes. She stirred the clothes with a great wooden spoon. The light orange soaked in the deep purple.

"Like what kind of things?"

"Oh, I don't know. How do get God to bless your marriage even if the only reason you got married was cause your girlfriend was pregnant. How to not get pregnant. What to do if you want a boy. How to get someone to fall in love with you. How to get back at someone after they done something awful to you." She looked at Roni cutting the tails off the okra. "All kinds of things. People come in here asking every kind of question you could ever think of." She went back to stirring the clothes.

"And, you know all those things?"
"Well, some of them. You can help people out even if you don't know it all. You just got to know a little bit more than they do."

"Yeah, I guess that sounds about right."

Sadie stopped stirring and let the clothes set. She got out a black skillet and poured in some grease, started taking all the cut up tomatoes, okra, onions, and weenies by the handful and throwing them in. Pretty soon, the kitchen and living room were covered in a greasy smoke. There was a hiss from the skillet every time Sadie stirred or put in another handful. I watched her working one arm hard with the spoon, her other hand propped high on her hip, her head tilted away from the smoke and grease.

I had always loved to watch women cook. I remembered sitting at the table in Granny's kitchen, mixing up the cornbread. She wouldn't let me near the stove. One of Momma's cousins had been burnt bad when they were little when Granny was out in the garden. Since then, she did the cooking if any was done.

"Girls, get out from here. It'll be done in a bit. I'll holler at you."

I didn't really know what there was to do this early in the morning. I went and laid down in front of the tv. Roni turned it on. My legs were starting to ache from all that walking. And, I was awful tired. I pulled the afghan off the back of the couch and closed my eyes.

I woke up with Roni smacking my thighs.

"Get up. The food's ready."

I ate in a hurry, almost dreaming about a meal like this, my plate piled high, two big pieces of cornbread sopping up the juice.
Roni and Sadie talking were a quiet rumble in the background of my dream. I left my plate on the table and dragged my feet back to the couch.
Wednesday

The next morning, I wasn't sure I had moved at all. It must have been pretty late because the house was burning hot. I had sweated through my pajamas onto the afghan. I slung it off me into the floor and pulled up my shirt to cool off my belly.

Roni was sitting quiet in the chair by the couch, watching the tv turned low. I pulled myself up to lean on the cushion. I'd never seen this show before. The people on it acted crazy, always crying or screaming or talking about so and so murdered so and so. Everybody was real pretty, though. All the women wore lots of makeup and tight dresses. The men's hair looked like they'd just had it cut, and some of them were wearing makeup around their eyes. They lived in houses full of expensive looking things. Everybody was hugging and kissing and crying against one another.

Roni noticed I had woke up and got up to change the channel. She stopped on a newstation that came out of Birmingham. It got louder.

"Can you hear it alright?"

"Yeah," I muttered, my voice gravelly and low.

The man was wearing a brown suit and a light blue tie.

"And so the Atlanta zookeepers decided to name the new baby tiger Lola. She seems happy now, reunited with her mother after a tiring labor process. The drive over to Atlanta is a nice one, and, if'd you'd like to go see Lola and her mother, they are both able to be viewed now by the general public at the Atlanta zoo."

The baby tiger sure was cute. It looked more like it was hopping than running around the rocks and short plants. It would run up to its mother fast, paw at her, and run away again.
The picture changed to some burnt and smoking square surrounded in weeds and red dirt.

"A sad story coming out of the small town of Eudora this morning. The lives of two adults and three children were claimed in a house fire. The sheriff speculates that the fire started sometime early this morning. A neighbor of the family called the fire department at 5:36am, reporting that flames had been spotted inside the house. Let's hear from this good Samaritan. Paul has a special report for us. Paul."

"Yes, Gary. We are here in the small town of Eudora. Now for those of you who don't know, Eudora is located about 46 miles northwest of Birmingham."

The screen became a map of Alabama with all the names of cities beside stars. The counties were written large in the background with squiggly lines separating them.

"It is a small rural community with most of the inhabitants located on or below the poverty line according to the last census of the Federal government. With those kinds of numbers, a single house fire like the one you see in the background, could affect any number of the surrounding community members. To your right, I have here with me a local man…".

"That was Maw Easter's house. Oh my god, Sam was right. You remember, Roni, Sam and Momma were talking about it after he got back from the meeting with those church mean. Oh my god, they did it. They killed those people." I couldn't believe it. I was sitting straight up and talking so fast I couldn't really even tell what I was saying. "But, last night, how could they've done it last night? I was out in the woods with them. I saw. I saw them out there. You don't think Sam would of done it? No, no Sam couldn't kill nobody. Hell, he won't even let me squish lizards that come into the house."
"Hush now, let's hear what they say about it."

Like the news would ever tell anything but nonsense about cats stuck up old lady's trees. Sam said everyone of them was owned and operated by the Rich people and only talked about things rich people wanted to hear about. We didn't watch the news at my house much.

"outside making sure my car'd start. Sometimes, it don't start good in the mornings, sitting up all night, not being used. I saw that house there just covered up all in flaming smoke, smoke jumping out the windows. I went right in and told my wife to call the police. Them people just moved in, not a few days ago, still had a bed out on the porch, not even put in yet. Poor children, they had two girls and a older boy. I saw him out with his daddy unloading the car, and them girls played out in the yard. Everyday my wife saw them."

"How do you expect this will affect the community, Mr. Wilkerson?"

"Well, that was Maw Easter's house. She died less than a year ago, just a wonderful woman. She's at church every Sunday, singing her praises to Jesus."

"Gary, as you can see, this house fire has changed the landscape of this small town. The fire marshal speculates from information he has gained from the neighboring houses that a small coal furnace is to blame for this tragedy. A neighbor reported that one was centrally located in the front room of this three room house. Coming to you from the tragic scene of a house fire that claimed five lives. Gary."

"Thanks, Paul. The sheriff's department has ruled out arson as a possible cause and looks to let this young family be put to rest very soon."

Upbeat music came on behind him, and the picture of the burnt house melted away. "Now, wondering what to
feed your family on these hot summer afternoons. Melba White has a pear salad recipe that will have everyone excited to sit down at the dinner table. Melba, what's cooking today?"

"That don't make no sense. Why, in this heat, would anybody have a stove on?" I looked over to Roni who had curled her legs up into her chest.

"Nobody would have a stove on, not just leave it on all night. What's arson, anyway, and who's the fire marshall?"

"Arson is like when somebody means to burn something down, sets it on fire themself cause they want to. On purpose. I don't know who the fire marshal is. Maybe he works for the state instead of Eudora, comes out to investigate and stuff like Sherlock Holmes."

"Sherlock, what did you say?"

"He's this guy in a book that goes around figuring things out, like crimes and murders."

"Oh, we didn't read it together?"

"No, it was when I was real little. When I was in Mrs. Pickles' class." We called her that because, when she got mad at the class for not paying attention, her face would wrinkle up like a pickle. We said she was just as sour.

"I was in Mrs. Morgan's. I wonder why we didn't get in the same class."

"Somebody told me, you know Raylene that her Momma worked in the office, she told me her Momma said we got separated cause we talked all the time. I don't know if believe her, though. She wanted to give me this real ugly string friendship bracelet one
time, and I told her how ugly I thought it was and said I didn't need any more friends. I think she just didn't like me after that."

"That sure was ugly, Empress. No wonder."

Roni sounded like a Momma sometimes and so much older, telling me not to cuss or talk ugly, and please and thank you. Which was weird since I never heard Sadie tell her any of those things.

And, the way Roni always sat like a lady, her Momma never did that. Sat with her legs wide at the knees, the little printed dresses she wore slung in between them. Momma said Sadie didn't know how to take care of herself, that that's why she'd never got a man. But, I'd never heard Sadie say she was wanting for a man. I think Momma just thought everybody did.

Sadie was good bit bigger than Momma. Her floppy arms would sag out the sides of her sleeveless dress. She didn't wear makeup, and her hair was always done up in a knot on the back of her head, low or high, depending upon the heat. She didn't dye it, had bits of white gray at the temples. Momma just hated it. It always hurt my feelings when Momma talked about her.

But, I never knew what to say back. Knew Momma argued at me a lot better than I could argue back. Momma won everyone I'd seen her be a part of, me and Sam, neighbors, clerks down at the Foodmart trying to tell her something wasn't on sale anymore, that time a teacher wanted to talk to her about me at school. I remember Momma standing in door, taking off her nice blue cotton sweater and gray heels. "That idiot teacher of yours got me out of a full day's pay to say you's staying in the bathroom too long. I said, 'I guess sometimes people got to do their business.'" Sam laughed at her.
"Oh, Sam," she said, "she didn't it was that funny. Sat there like a prune shriveling up.

Lord, and she's ugly. Old bat eyes covered up by eyebrows as big and hairy and this snarl
like she swallowed a full mouth of two-week old milk. How do learn from that woman?"
The teacher left me alone after that. It was the only time Momma had to go to school
because I'd got in trouble, if you can even call staying in the bathroom too long getting in
trouble.

Momma won arguments with everybody but Granny. She must have learned it
from her. I thought if I paid attention and took notes in my head, one day I could win
arguments with everybody but Momma and Granny. But, when Momma was talking mad
at me, I couldn't get a hold of what she was saying fast enough to even talk back to her.
There was no way I could remember enough later to think about.

Roni layed out with her legs hanging over the side of the chair. I decided I needed
to be home before Momma or Sam. I wanted to see if he knew anything about that house
fire. He'd tell me if he knew. Momma'd just tell me to keep to my own business.

I got up and walked around the couch which got Roni's attention.

"Where you going? I was going to eat. You want to stay and eat?"

I was tired of always eating over here, never having anything in the kitchen at
home. Momma preached twice a week on not taking nothing from nobody. I'd ate over
here enough.

"No, I think I'll go on home so I can talk to Sam. I'll eat over there."

"What are you going to eat? Moldy bread and ketchup crackers?"

"Don't you dare get snooty with me just cause some man fucked you." I can't
believe I said that. I still feel bad about it. And, I don't know why I just said it. Food
seemed a sore spot for most people I knew in Eudora, except for Roni and Sadie. And, I didn't want her thinking I was poor because I wasn't. Momma said we had plenty. Lots of other folks not able to make it, but we did just fine.

"You're just like they are, Empress. Sorry white trash. Ain't got nothing. Ain't never going to have nothing." She was shaking her head like a chicken after its neck had been wrung.

I picked up my clothes off the backs of the kitchen chairs where Sadie'd left them to dry. Momma would never believe these for a minute. They were fine and dark and would stick out in a pile of my old faded clothes even if I stuck them in on the bottom. I'd have to try to bleach them out a little.

Roni followed me to the door.

"Granny said that's the way your family's always been. Always will be. Said I should be hanging around people so common."

I stared at her, sucking my breath hard, up in my nose, down in my chest. I bit on my lip so tight I thought I might cut clean through. I hugged my still wet clothes to me and went down the steps, grinding my bare feet into them as I went.

"Go on then. I'll just eat by myself." The screen cracked against the aluminum siding of the frame.

Sam was walking up to the trailer just about as I was. I was crying and gnawing at my tongue by the time he set down his lunch pail and got down on his knee in front of me. "Lord, Empress, what's going on, now, honey?"

His forehead wrinkled up at me, and I just threw it all up like I had a fever.
"Roni called me sorry and white trash and poor, and said we didn’t have no food. And, she was so snotty and ugly, and Deacon Brown fucked her, and I told her that, and everybody knows, and I think she hates me, and Momma won't listen, and I don't want to live here no more. And they beat him, and they burned down those black folks house and killed their babies, and I'm leaving here, and I ain't never going come back. Even to visit." I was huffing and snotty, had cried all over myself.

"What an ugly word for a little girl to say now. Where ever did you hear that? You know your Momma and me don't talk like that around you."

I was still going. He had barely interrupted me. "When you and Momma went to Mississippi, Maureen showed me dirty movies where people were doing that and now Roni thinks she's better than me cause he did that to her."

"What happen to Roni was an awful thing, now. Not any need in talking about it. And, she's your closest friend in all the world. It ain't easy to find a good close friend when you need one. Lord, girl." He stood up. "We better wait and let May talk to you about women's business." Sam never knew how to handle anything with me. He always put it in Momma's lap and went on about his business. That's just what she said about him. She might have been right.

He picked up his lunch pail and put his arm around my shoulder, started steering me up the porch steps.

"I don't want to talk to Momma. She's already told me it ain't none of my business."
He harrumphed in place of an answer. Went in, sat down his lunch pail, and started to looking through all the cabinets and refrigerator. We both knew there wasn't anything to eat in them.

"Tell me what happened at Maw Easter's place, Sam." I blew snot on my shirt, well, Roni's pajama top. It was wet and sticky on my belly. "I know you know."

He talked slow. "I don't know if I should be telling all this to you, Empress. I mean, you talk so grown sometimes I forget you're still just a little girl."

"Sam, I want to know. I think I went to school with one of their kids."

"No, no way you went to school them kids. They were…". He looked down at me. Maybe he realized I'd tricked him into talking.

"What?"

"They hadn't even started school yet, Empress. They ain't been moved long."

"They said on the news that the fire marshal said they had a coal stove burning in the front of the house. Sam, it don't make no sense. It was probably ninety degrees by sunrise."

"Didn't I tell you about those news people, just make things up. I wouldn't start looking for them to tell me anything I needed to know. Fire marshal's the same way. He just says what his boss want's to hear and don't nobody want to hear that…".

He quit talking, but I knew how to get him started back. I pulled on his work shirt, untucked it, and kept tugging. He couldn't stand not to be neat. Momma said that was "one of his only saving graces."

"Quit. God, you are driving me crazy. Why do you want to know about all this?"

"I just want to know, is all."
"Well, that ain't the way it works in the wide world." He looked down at me, and I begged with my eyes.

"Fine, damnit. You promise not to speak a work to your mother. She'd say I's toting tales."

"Absolutely promise." He kept looking at me to make sure I meant it. I smiled up at him.

He sat down at the table.

"Roni Holloway, that I work down at the mill with, he lives over across the road from Maw Easter's. He said he saw Deacon Brown's truck parked before the sun came up this morning over in the empty lot where the little one room jail used to be before they quit using it."

"He didn't call the cops."

"Empress, you know nobody calls the cops. Mighty heap of trouble to get involved in things like that. Then, they'll watch you for years, your whole family. Besides, every one of the cops in Eudora are friends of Deacon Brown's and Brother JayD's. I don't they'd done anything if Roni'd hollered at them, even before anything happened."

"But, Sam, that whole family died." He stood up.

"It's an awful mean world, Empress."

It was an awful mean world.

"Well, nothing here for supper. We might should wait on May and see what she wants to do."

Sam didn't have to tell me not to tell Momma. I already knew it.
We sat and watched tv for a while until I realized I'd left my clothes somewhere. They weren't sitting on table or the couch or chairs. I went back outside and saw them in a pile laying in the dirt. I ran and scooped them up, red dirt sticking all over them. I got a garbage bag out from the cabinet under the sink and hid them in the bottom of my closet under a pile of winter clothes. I washed my hands all the way up to my elbows, so I wouldn't look guilty of anything. If I got in trouble, Momma'd start asking me questions. And, if Momma started asking me questions, I might start talking again. If I told her what Sam'd told me, he might not answer my questions from now on.

We sat and waited til Momma pulled up. I didn't get up to open the door. I was hoping she'd just ignore me. She came in the door with a bag from the Foodmart. She didn't look at or speak to either one of us. Took out a pot and filled it full of water. She took out a plastic bag of weenies and dropped them. Sat a loaf of bread and a few slices of cheese on the table. I didn't want weenies again. She turned up the heat and walked over behind us.

"Hey honey, did you have a fine day at work?" Sam looked at her over the couch. She started to smile but stopped.

"Empress, what are you still doing in your night clothes. Those ain't even your night clothes. I'm tired of you never doing anything to help around here. I work all day. Sam works all day. And, that's how you repay us for putting food in your mouth and clothes on your back and a give you a place to live? Get in there right now and take a bag. Get dressed. We've got to be at church at six."

"Why in the hell are we going to church? It ain't Sunday."
"Do you hear the trash talk coming out of this one's mouth?" She was talking to Sam, looking over me, telling him with her eyes and how her face was set that he better get up and do something about it. I was glad I could be sure he wouldn't tell Momma I'd said that real ugly word earlier. She would have slapped me, for sure. "Not a bit better than her sister. And, you see where she ended up, Empress, out there at the projects shacked up with some sorry boy that can't keep a job."

"Now listen to your Momma, Empress. Get on in there and get cleaned up.

"I want you to wear that blue summer dress, Empress, and those new church shoes."

"Honey, do you want me to go with you?"

"Sam, I don't care what you do. Sit on your ass and watch tv. Why don't you take up drinking like your no count Daddy?" He knew she didn't always mean just what she said, but it looked like it hurt his feelings for her to talk about his Daddy that way. He went in the hall and started putting in a load of clothes to wash. I went to take a bath.

"Empress, hurry it up. We have to be on time tonight."

I hurried taking a shower. I didn't want to make Momma any madder when she was like that. I still had soap on my legs when I toweled off. She smacked my butt when I walked through kitchen.

"You ain't hurrying fast enough. Used all the hot water. Never seen somebody stay in the shower all day like you do."

She went back into her bedroom, and I went in mine. I took down the blue summer dress Granny had bought me last Easter. It looked stupid with those black patton Sunday shoes. I put some lace fold over socks on. That helped a little bit.
Sam didn't look at me when I passed him folding clothes in the hall.

I sat at the table and laid my head down. The weenies were boiling on the stove. Sam came in to stir them and got down the pack of paper plates. He started forking them on the plates, the watery juice coloring the paper gray. He sat it down in front of me and along with some mayonnaise and ketchup. I got two slices of bread from the loaf and covered them in cheese and ketchup. Sam said down beside me and started smearing his with mayonnaise. The weenie tasted rubbery and gross in my mouth, but I ate it. Sam sat down his dogs and started making Momma's the way she ate her's. The cheese broke up of the top, ketchup on one side. He sat it in front of her place.

We ate quietly which was the best way to be because Momma could twist around your words til you wished you hadn't said them.

She sat down in fresh clothes and new lipstick. Her hairspray was so thick smelling you could choke on it. She crossed her legs and bit down into her weenie sandwich, getting the fuchsia stuff all over the bread.

"Empress, go brush your hair. You look like, lord, I don't know what you look like." I sat down my half-eaten food, kind of glad I wouldn't have to get through the whole thing. All the brushes were in the bathroom.

A glaze covered the mirror, and I couldn't really tell how my hair was looking.

"Bring me that brush," Momma yelled from the kitchen.

She sat me down on the couch and yanked and pulled and brushed half of it up top where she held it tight enough to raise my eyebrows. "Come on." She pulled me back into the bathroom and sifted through the drawers until she found a clasp. She clipped it in and pulled my hair tight through it. I knew not to say a word about how it hurt, how it
was giving me a headache. Momma slipped on her heels, and I followed her out the door to the pinto. Sam waved and put another plate in the garbage.

She stepped on the clutch and gas, and I held on to the seat as quietly as I could. She didn't say a word to me until we parked in front of the church steps. "Get my Bible from behind the seat." I found it in the floorboard under one of her work shirts and a pile of paycheck stubs. She put on another coat of lipstick without a mirror and felt her hair into shape.

We must have been early because there were still people outside, moving up the steps, crowding into the door. Brother JayD stood on the top step under the awning, Bible in one hand, shaking with the other. Momma and I got in line. Ruby Felder stood in front of us. She was the only one I recognized in the group of old buzzards.

"It was Sadie's daughter all right. Heard it from Ada myself." They were whispering close to each other's sagging cheeks. "But, lord, Effie, boys will be boys. And, Deacon Brown is a good boy. Had him in my Sunday School class more'n ten years ago. He'd sit there with his little pants creased so neat. Raising his hand and answering all the Bible questions."

Another woman interrupted her. "I just don't know if I believe it myself." She talked in a different way, held her head up at an angle I'd never seen before.

"If my Donnie took care of me half as good as he does his Momma, I wouldn't fell and almost broke my neck last Christmas."

The women nodded around the circle. One patted her side.

"Every man I know would've done the same if left to their own wicked ways. He just needs a good wife, take care of all that."
"And, those Silverings. My daughters told me Sadie'd been loose in school. I bet that girl of her's is the same way."

"You know Veronica's a bastard child. Never even knew her Daddy."

Hushed "no's" were followed by a hushed "yes."

They were taking turns talking. I couldn't stare at them or Momma would have something to say about it. I stared down at the country blue pain chipping around the iron rails screwed into the concrete. God, if I could've hit them, it would have been so sweet.

"And, you know he was just the hand of God removing the darkness from Eudora."

"I know it. I couldn't stand living knowing those colored folks would be going to school with my grandchildren, seeing them at the grocery store. Lord, they might even want to come down here to church with us."

"I know, I know."

"That's the way it would have been."

"Let one in, let in a multitude."

"They would have took over the whole town. Only white folks left would have been us old bitties."

"They'd steal from us in the dead of night."

"My boy that works at the college in Birmingham. He told me this was going to happen anytime. Said all the coloreds were moving outside the city now."

"Well, it ain't going to happen here. Not with good men like the Deacon to save us."

We were moving up a little at a time until Momma was turned to Brother JayD,
holding on to his spotted fingers. "I'm awful glad to see you Ms. May."

"We're glad to be here, reverend." She put her hand on my back and pushed me through the doors.

The Deacon was the man everybody was talking about except for George on the back pew. He never talked to anyone, had a stutter he was ashamed of.

The groups of people pointed his way sometimes. He was sitting near the front behind the piano with his Momma. Looking at him gave me a sickness in my throat and an emptiness in my belly. Why couldn't I have caught him in the woods?

Momma and me slid in beside Granny by the upstairs door. She patted Momma's leg and didn't say anything. "Why are we here? Momma, I want to leave. Do you hear what they're saying about Roni?" I whispered.

Momma yanked me to her. "Empress, you say another goddamn word, and I'll beat you in front of everybody. Don't make this no harder than it is." I jerked away from her and went to sit at the end of the pew by myself.

Brother JayD walked down the aisle and sat on the front pew by his wife. All the grandkids were behind them. The church quieted down, and the music started. Granny was singing along to "The Old Rugged Cross". She peered down at me from the other side of the pew. I thought that a crow would have looked at me the same way if I were some carrion that was about to be devoured. Carrion are those dead things a crow likes to eat. Crows eat all kinds of disgusting dead animals. I looked forward quickly and mouthed a few stanzas until she quit looking at me.

It seemed that the sermon was going quicker than usual. I did want to know why we were here. It was not the first Wednesday of the month when Momma went with
Granny to women's meeting, and I didn't give a damn about being in church since the river party.

The preacher made his way up the little three step altar to stand behind the pulpit. His hair looked freshly dyed that shoe shine black. It stood out against the pink and white spots on his face.

"Brothers and sisters," Brother JayD started, "today, we cut short the beautiful music to celebrate a special soul that has been received into the bosom of our Lord Jesus." Brother JayD smiled wide and clutched his big black leather Bible under his left arm.

Never had I been to a service that didn't consist of a tightly followed schedule: 45 minutes of singing, 20 of preaching, then, a 5 minute altar call.

He lost his smile and looked down to the ground. "I'm sure y'all know of the recent unpleasantness concerning young Miss Veronica Silvering," he looked up, "but I have a special announcement. Deacon Brown, please make your way up her to the front."

I looked around the little rows. Roni was two pews to the left sitting beside her Granny. Why would Sadie let her come back here? I shouldn't have said what I did to her.

She didn't take her eyes off her hands clasped in her lap. Her feet didn't touch the blue carpet under the pew. Her legs were not crossed under her light yellow dress like they used to be; her shoulders were slumped down where they had been perfectly upright just weeks before. Momma always said she had better posture than me, that I should work on picking it up after her.
Deacon Brown went to stand beside the preacher at the top of the altar, dragging his feet, but in a bigger hurry than I'd ever seen him. It didn't look like they'd beat him too hard last night. He didn't have a bruise on his face.

Roni kept her head down.

Brother JayD put his arm around the Deacon's shoulders; he seemed to pull back some like his shoulder hurt him. Deacon Brown started, "I would like to thank ya'll for coming to the Lord's house today." He paused. "Today is a special day in the Lord's eyes." His eyes actually started watering. "I know you good Christian people know the Lord works in mysterious ways, but what I didn't know is that the devil's at work too." He put his hand to his chest. "He comes at you and whispers in your ear: Good Deacon Brown, he says, I got something gone do you some good. I got something real good. I'm gone..." but he broke off; some kind of tears came, and my own Granny with her beautiful shoes and perfect wrinkles put her white lace handkerchief to her eyes for this man.

I looked over. Roni had not moved.

Why the hell would Sadie have let Roni come back there? Why did I come back there? I hated that place.

Brother JayD hugged the Deacon hard. I watched as the Deacon wept openly in his arms. I heard yelps of "Lord, Jesus, forgive him," "Lord, watch the poor sinners," from Brother JayD and "Lord, forgive me" and "Oh, Jesus" from the Deacon.

Brother JayD turned to face the congregation with one arm still draped around the sniveling deacon. "I want all ya'll to turn your backs on the past and embrace this
forgiven soul with the right hand of Christian fellowship, but before that happens, I want
to ask young Miss Silvering to come up and know first hand what it is to forgive."

Roni looked up in an absolute panic. Her Granny nudged her hard in the ribs. I
thought she would tump over. She grabbed the pew in front of her and tried to hoist
herself up. Her Granny pushed her. She kept her head down and dragged her feet up the
aisle to where Brother JayD and Deacon Brown stood beside the piano.

Deacon Brown grabbed her up and hugged her tight. He went down on one knee
and kissed her cheek.

She never raised her head.

I held so tight to the pew seat, I thought for sure I'd break my fingers. I slid down
and grabbed at Momma. She slapped my hand away.

Deacon Brown turned Roni to face the congregation. Her white knees stuck out
beneath her yellow dress.

"Come, Christians, fellowship with this forgiven soul. Extend the hand of
Christian brotherhood."

Everyone was standing around me; the whole church was on its feet. I couldn't
move. Roni wasn't moving.

I watched as each Christian extended to Deacon Brown the right hand of Christian
brotherhood, reaching over Roni's head, never looking down at her.

When the line was finished, and Brother JayD and Deacon Brown had made their
way out of the church, I went up to the altar, took Roni's hand where she stood watching
her shoes and dragged her out the back door, neither one of us looking back.
Vita

Brandy Michelle Yates was born in Birmingham, Alabama on December 25th, 1982 to Sandra and Robert Yates. She completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a creative writing concentration at the University of Alabama at Birmingham with both University Honors and Honors in English and as a graduate of the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Honors Program in 2005. She is now completing a Master of Arts in English with writing concentration at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.