WHAT THEY DO: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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I

WHAT I DO:

AN INTRODUCTION

> How do we write a story? Our own way. Beyond that, I think it is hard to assign a process to it.
>
> (Eudora Welty)

In an introduction to a collection of fiction such as this, I suppose writers are to give readers a clue about how they construct their fictions. That is difficult because it is hard not to sound as if you are prescribing what all writers should do. I do not intend to prescribe here or to pretend I have read enough or written enough to be able to prescribe. In fact, prescription is something I object to. I will, however, simply relate two things I've learned during my six years of involvement in creative writing programs in an attempt to explain how *I* create a fiction. First, I have learned that when I concentrate too heavily on genre, on what a short story, for instance, ought to look and read like, I write extremely uninteresting fiction. Instead, I have to let each fiction become what it is. Second, in order for my reader to be able to understand each fiction and not simply reduce it to its conventional elements (plot, characters, climax,

denouement, etc.), I employ a consistent, characteristic narrator. That narrator gives my readers a constant from which to grasp the rest of the story. Now, let me spend a little time explaining.

The subtitle of this collection, "A Collection of Short Fiction with a Critical Introduction," is a carefully chosen title. I chose the words *short fiction* and not *short stories* because I am not at all sure what the definition of *short story* is. Furthermore, I do not think concentrating on defining *short story* as opposed to *novel* or *novella* or any other genre is particularly useful to me as a writer. In my notebooks from literature and creative writing courses, I have a variety of definitions of *short story*. These definitions have helped me pass tests and write essays about other fictions which have pleased teachers and professors, but not one definition has served me in writing a "short story."

For instance, I learned once that a successful short story follows a character through a challenge where the character tries to conquer the obstacle, fails, reflects on his failure, tries again, and fails again. Is that all a story can do? Is a story automatically bad or unsuccessful if the character succeeds, or do we simply label the fiction with another genre or sub-genre when that happens?

What happened when, once upon a time, I decided I needed to know what "they" thought I ought to be doing, how I ought to be writing short stories? I couldn't find the

answer. Definitions and prescriptions about short story writing differ and contradict. Austin M. Wright's "On Defining the Short Story: The Genre Question" notes the same problem with short story theory as I do. He says,

> Nowadays, despite the recent flourish of short story criticism, we dispute not only the definition [of short story] but the canon itself, the question of what works are or are not short stories. Hence the difference between those who trace the genre back to Boccaccio, *The Arabian Nights*, and the Bible, and those who would have it begin with Irving or Poe, or still more narrowly, Chekhov or Joyce. Some distinguish between the short story and the modern short story; for others the only kind of short story is the modern. (Lohafer and Clarey 46)

There is disagreement about what constitutes a short story, and the debate rages on.

Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey recently collected several essays by prominent critics and scholars that address the current status of short story criticism. The above quotation from Austin is from that collection. One section of that book is titled, "What Is a Short Story?" In the introduction to that section Susan Lohafer says in her first few sentences,

> The question "How do we define the short story?" is as old as the practice of short story

> criticism. Nobody seems to have answered it satisfactorily. That much we agree on. (57)

No one seems to agree. Everyone answers the question for himself in his own way. Yet, beautiful, successful, publicized, anthologized fictions continue to be written. It seems that a lack of agreement does not hamper progress.

For that reason, I do not feel it is important I be aware of conventions which say I am writing a short story or a novella or a lyric poem. I do not see that knowing these boundaries would make me a better writer, and as I said before, I usually write stories that seem forced when I try.

Look, for instance, at what the fifth edition of *A Handbook to Literature* says about the short story.

> It [short story] may be distinguished from the novel in that it tends to reveal character through a series of actions or ordeals, the purpose of the story being accomplished when the reader comes to know what the true nature of a character is; the novel tends, on the other hand, to show character developing as a result of actions and under the impact of events. (Holman and Harmon 469)

If I kept this in mind as I wrote my fiction, then I might not have ever let the narrator of "Hitting my Truck Instead of My Wife" change in the way he does. He develops as a result of the actions of an afternoon. Does that make this

a novel? Granted, the longer the piece, the more room a character has to develop, and granted most of my fictional pieces reveal character through actions, but I hesitate to limit myself with such definitions. If I had concerned myself with only studying short stories, then I would have never admired Browning's dramatic monologues and probably never come to writing fictions like "Ex-Relations" and "Reliable News" where the narrator is also the main character in the story, and figuring out the story means figuring out the psyche of the narrator through the narration, not through the action.

I emphasize this point so heavily because I am afraid paying too much attention to what a story ought to do will lead me to write trite, tired fiction. So, I call the pieces in this collection *short fiction*. Simply put, I made this stuff up (fiction) and each runs less than thirty pages (short). If I ever write something that runs thirty-one pages and you want to call it a short story or a novella, it won't bother me a bit. It is your privilege as a reader to label if you find it useful. I will simply call it fiction. I am not denying that there are conventions in fiction writing. I simply contend that conventions should not be prescriptive. So I let each piece be influenced and improved by whatever conventions from whatever genre that will help that fiction work best. I construct my fictions by consciously choosing strategies, but I do not worry about fitting any definitions or

prescriptions.

Eudora Welty's essay "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories" makes a similar point. She is advising young writers on how to read and write fiction. First she points out that "Criticism, or more strictly, analysis, is an impossible way to learn how the story was written. Analysis is a one-way process, and is only good after the event" (103). Instead, Welty suggests we look at short stories to "see a little how they are disposed, watch them in their motions, and enjoy them" (103). Welty's fear is that we as readers won't approach a fiction with an open mind. She says, "We are getting to be old, jaded readers--instructed, advised readers, victims of summaries and textbooks; and if we write stories as victims of this attitude ourselves, what will happen to us?" (104). What will happen is we will all write basically the same. What a shame.

All of this is not to say I blindly pound the keyboard with no method or intention, or that I have not been tremendously influenced by the fiction that has been written before. I will be the first to admit the fictions of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor serve as models for me. I have already mentioned Browning. But, if I as a writer attend to being like Welty or O'Connor, or decide I want to write an epiphany story now, or decide I should not develop this piece because it doesn't have enough plot, then I deny myself the possibility of creating fresh

fiction. As Welty says, a fiction "becomes" (103). I can not set out in search of it. Each piece is what it is.

I leave, then, any discussions about what short fiction or short stories proper or lyric poems *ought* to be doing to the critics and try instead to let each of my stories stand in isolation, to depend upon themselves. That is the reason, then, that I can not pound aimlessly at keys and call it fiction. I do have a method. In order for each fiction to stand in isolation, to depend on itself, I have to give my readers something solid, something consistent, a leg to stand on in their attempt to grasp my fiction. Hence, the second aspect of my fiction writing I promised to discuss. That leg to stand on is a consistently characteristic narrator, a convincing voice, a voice to read by.

Notice, I didn't say a reliable narrator. That isn't what I am talking about. I simply mean I create a narrator in the same way I create any character; I give it capacities and attributes and then keep the voice in character. Wayne Booth's term for such narrators is "dramatized narrators" (152). Some voice must tell every story. That voice must be convincing, must set up an illusion of story teller, and his/her/its way of telling the story must become somewhat predictable. For example, suppose I decide the way I can best convey the idea I have for a certain fiction is to employ a third person narrating voice which (1) is quite articulate, (2) can convey the

thoughts of all the characters, (3) comments freely on the actions of the fiction, and (4) blatantly tells the reader what to think of everything. (This, of course, over-simplifies. Narrating voices' characteristics can not be labeled and reduced this easily.) Now, if that voice suddenly does not make any comment on the final action of the fiction, readers become confused. They have come to expect that the narrator will comment on everything. Unless some characteristic of the narrator can convince the reader the narrator would not comment in this situation, I have let my narrator be inconsistent with his own character, and, therefore, have confused my reader. Once I have established a narrating voice's capacities, the voice (third or first person) narrates accordingly.

Take, for another example, the narrator of Katherine Anne Porter's "Rope." There is a characteristic voice. That voice tells the story by re-telling what the two characters, unnamed man and wife, say to each other in the course of one day. There are no quotation marks; the narrator never comments on anything said, just retells. That distance between narrator and characters is what lets readers see and experience the irony of these two bickering people. If the narrator had suddenly intruded and commented on the actions or attempted to explain the irony, the illusion of the consistent narrator would be broken. Narrators can intrude, but Porter has not created this narrator with that capacity. One quotation mark and

readers begin to wonder why the narrator chose to report this piece of dialogue and not retell it like the others, and the reader is not at all sure how to take the story any more. Such things do not happen in "Rope," though. The voice remains consistent.

A consistently characteristic voice, however, is not always an unwavering voice. Like a character, a voice can be fickle; it can fluctuate, change, or evolve. In that case, though, the fickleness, fluctuation, change, or evolution becomes the thing that characterized the narrating voice. Readers come to believe and expect the voice to narrate in that manner, and the voice remains a consistent, convincing voice. Perhaps the voice has the capacity to develop or confuse or be inconsistent, but I think the reader must be convinced the voice is within its capacities in order to react to that voice and not be confused by it.

The consistent voice, then, guides the reader--tells him what the story is about. Wayne Booth is one of the few who has recognized this need for a voice which acts as consistently as a character. In his *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* Booth puts it this way:

> No narrator or central intelligence or observer is *simply* convincing: he is convincingly decent or mean, brilliant or stupid, informed, ignorant, or muddled. Since there are few such qualities that even the most tolerant of us can observe in

> full neutrality, we usually find our emotional and intellectual reactions to him as a character affecting our reaction to the events he relates. ...[W]e react to all narrators as persons. We find their accounts credible or incredible, their opinions wise or foolish, their judgments just or unjust. (273)

When the narrator of a fiction becomes convincing, even to the point of having his own character, then the reader has a starting point. He reacts to that narrator, that voice which is telling the story. He figures out if this voice is unreliable because it often contradicts itself as in Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," or if this voice isn't capable of telling a particular character's point of view, as the narrator of my "Election" can not tell Maggie's or Alcoa's point of view, or if a narrator can tell several or all characters' points of view. And it does not make any difference if we are talking about a third person narrator which simply tells the story or a first person narrator who is involved in the action of the fiction. Either way, a convincing, consistent narrator, a voice which narrates according to its capacities, guides the reader in reading the fiction, whether short, long, prose or poetry.

Booth says that the narrating voice must be convincing in order for a fiction to work. Walter J. Ong wants to say a little more. For Ong, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," as he titles his article. That means two things,

he says.

> First, that the writer must construct in his imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort of role -- entertainment seeker, reflective sharers of experience (as those who listen to Conrad's Marlow), inhabitants of a lost and remembered world of prepubertal latency (readers of Tolkien's hobbit stories), and so on. Secondly, we mean that the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself. A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life. (12)

I create a character, a narrator -- first person, third, reliable, unreliable, funny, serious, articulate, inarticulate, consistently inconsistent -- it does not matter as long as that voice is a convincing voice, a voice which does not out step or ignore its capacities. In turn readers react to that voice, play their role because they know how, because they can not help but play it.

Readers know, for instance, not to believe everything Lena says in "Ex-Relations" because she is romanticizing it all. Readers know Agnes in "Reliable News" is talking to them as if they were sitting on her porch and listening to any other news. But if I don't give readers that consistent, convincing voice, then they haven't a clue what role they are to play, they haven't a voice to read by.

If, for instance, I suddenly let Agnes Louise Huffner blatantly say she was not sure she wanted to go out with Randolph, then I have let my narrating voice, who is also a character in the fiction, be inconsistent. In doing that, my story is no longer about the difficulty an elderly lady has facing a suitor, her husband's best friend no less. The illusion has been broken. Or if I let the third person narrator of "What They Do" suddenly leap into Merva's mind and filter the narration through her sensibilities for a couple of pages, then the illusion of my narrator is broken. The narrator I created in that story characteristically reports movements and action; it doesn't even report from any character's point of view. It is not that the narrator of that story could not have seen things through Merva's eyes; it just did not. That would make it another story.

I could now analyze story after story, like a real critic, and point out how this consistent, characteristic voice could be found in every fiction. I see no need, and I will tell you I don't find it in every single fiction I read. My job here isn't to tell you what they do or what they ought to do, though. It is to tell you what I do. In my fictions, I create a narrating voice with characteristic capacities in the hope that that voice will allow readers to approach my fiction and deal with it as something isolated, independent, not as something that fits a definition or reduces to conventions. It is my hope this

characteristic voice will allow readers to understand and enjoy each piece and not be concerned with whether it is a short story or not, if it fits the pattern or not.

I admire, enjoy, and (I think) understand the fiction of Eudora Welty, so it is no surprise her wish is my wish:

> Let's look at a particular story and see it solitary out in space, not part of some trend. It doesn't matter a bit for the moment who wrote it or when, or what magazine or book it appeared in or got rejected from, or how much or how little money the author got for it or whether he had an agent, or that he received letters in the mail when it was printed, saying, "It is found that your story does not reduce to the elements of a story." We're seeing this story as a little world in space, just as we can isolate one star in the sky by a concentrated vision. (104)

I hope my narrators elicit responses from you as readers. I hope you can play your role, that I have given you a voice to read by.

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II

RELIABLE NEWS

They probably wouldn't have started if I hadn't gone out to pick some purple hull peas, but I did, and so they started. And Lord I've never had them so bad. The aggravating thing about it is Joe would know exactly what to do about it. So would my momma. But everybody who knows how to stop them is passed on, so when I raised up to give my back a rest and scoot my bucket on down the row, I caught them in a deep breath. And those hiccups were there to stay.

They went on for a whole twenty-four hours, off and on. I never drank so much water, breathed in so many paper bags, and held my breath so much since I was a girl. I had that somewhere to go, or it wouldn't have mattered so much. Of course the news was done by the time I got the hiccups. I can usually get the news out, no matter how I feel.

I still write the Tipton news in the *Calvin County Gazette*. Every week in the Wednesday paper I get half a column. Mr. Curry comes and picks it up every Tuesday morning at 10:30. Randolph nearly missed getting his news in by waiting until a Monday evening when he knew it was nearly my time to work a little in the garden. I was

sitting on this very porch in this very swing, just got done sweeping it, and he came walking up the street saying he had some news.

It wasn't very good news either, really. He said the preacher's boy and the daughter-in-law were coming in the next weekend, and he thought it should be in the paper. I said, "Randolph, don't you know we should wait until after the visit so we can say what they do and who they see and how much the preacher and Polly and the congregation enjoyed them?"

I don't think Randolph saw that question coming. But it would be just like Randolph to think of something and make me put it in the paper just because he said it should be there and didn't want to change his mind. Joe said that's how he was when they were boys--once Randolph said something, forget changing his mind. So when he told Joe, "Joe, it won't do but for you to take this five dollars I got and buy Agnes Louise a nice wedding present, a necklace or something," then Joe knew he had to. Of course later on Joe paid the five dollars back--told Randolph he couldn't go to his grave without doing it.

I wore that necklace to church every Sunday forever, even when the chain got grey. The stones still shined real pretty, though. Wore it to the funeral in fact.

Randolph said, "Now Agnes, I thought about that. But what I meant was we could kind of put it in the paper and that way we could know and maybe get a potluck together for

after church or plan something, you know, so the boy can see his daddy's got a fine church."

There was no use convincing Randolph I could get on the phone and do the same. It didn't matter to him that the Presbyterians and the Baptists read the paper, too, and that I had to be non-denominational about the news. Randolph wanted it there. See, I had already written the news out, nice and clean on a piece of notebook paper for Mr. Curry. Randolph knew that's what I did on Monday evenings after I swept the porch and before I went to the garden. Saying the preacher's family was coming from Texas, after I said Betty Milton was in the Calvin Memorial for a foot operation to correct her crooked second toe, and Jaspar Wilkins enjoyed his trip to California to see his kids, according to Irma Simpson who rode to Aneleh with him to see a movie on his return, just didn't seem like news fit to put in the paper.

But I wrote it at the end. Gave it a small sentence: *We look forward to a visit from Reverend and Mrs. Bitterly's (of the Methodist church) son and daughter-in-law this week-end.*

As it turned out they weren't coming until the next weekend. But I didn't know it at the time, and Randolph was satisfied to get his piece in the paper no matter how small a sentence it got. Shows you right there you can't believe all you hear, especially from Randolph. Apparently he didn't care how my reputation could be hurt by

discredible news either. But I put the piece in, like a fool.

But Randolph didn't leave. And it was nearly 6:30, and I needed to be in the garden. I eventually got there, but only to pick a half a row of peas and get the hiccups, like I said. It was something on his mind. That was clear. He never so much as came farther than the steps since Joe died and stopped their evening visits. The two used to sit here in this very swing and watch me garden. But after Joe died, Randolph just came to the steps, talked through the screen, and only sometimes cracked the screen door open with his knee but stayed sitting on the steps. I never asked why, of course.

That's how I got the news, through the screen, but then Randolph propped the door open and sat down <u>not</u> on the top step, but on the very edge of the porch itself. Now understand I knew something was wrong, and I didn't hesitate.

"Randolph, you got more news?" He said no, Agnes Louise, he didn't. "Randolph, was there something wrong at the church when you cut the yard yesterday?" He said not, but that he had cut the yard. "Randolph, you want to come up on this porch and take a chair and get off that floor." No, didn't I know how he was partial to steps? "I know it, but you aren't on the steps now."

Randolph was silent for a while, and he was starting to drive me crazy, and I wished he was gone, even at this

point. Then he said, "Mrs. Agnes Louise?"

Nobody ever really calls me that to my face. Joe, when he used to talk to others, like Randolph for instance, and it became necessary to bring up my name to say I did something or said something, Joe called me *Miz* Agnes Louise. Actually he didn't even start pronouncing it different after we married. It still sounded single; he should have thrown that r in there more like it is spelled *Mizriz*, but he kept on saying it like *Miz*.

But Joe never ever called me that to my face; he called me Agnes Louise, or Al cause he said I was acting like a man when I learned how to use a chalk line and wanted to chalk every board he needed to use to make his cabinets. Then when he forgot about teasing me about acting like a man, he turned the *Al* into *Alley*. But he never called me *Miz* Agnes Louise to my face, even though that's how he called for me when he told the hospital nurse he needed to see me before he had to go. I could hear him saying it that way even in the hall.

But Randolph, who always called me Agnes Louise like everybody else since we were kids, was putting Joe's *Miz* in front of it. I didn't much care for it, and it took a minute for me to answer "What?" and then it took him a minute to go on.

"I was meaning to ask you if you wouldn't like to ride down to the restaurant tomorrow night and eat the catfish buffet. Grandchildren aren't coming to take you, are

they?"

He knew that Joseph and his kids sometimes did since they live so close and I'm so fond of catfish. I told him no. I think I meant that I wouldn't go eat fish, but he took it to mean the grandchildren weren't coming. "Then it won't do but I treat you to some catfish. They start serving at 5:30 I believe."

I hadn't noticed it because I was a bit put out, you know, but Randolph had somehow made his way from sitting in the doorway to standing on his knees right beside this very swing with his hands laid on the edge of the seat as if he was awaiting his communion wafer from the hands of the preacher. How he managed to get there without banging the screen door to, I don't know, but there he was. I was so outdone and wished he were gone so bad that I said I needed to be getting my purple hull peas out and excused myself to go in the house after my gloves and bucket.

It's not like me to run off company without even an offer of a glass of tea, but Randolph, for some reason, was bothering me there on his knees. He was wasting time. That's exactly what he was doing. Man never did work much, keeping the library and study hall down at school, never marrying or taking care of anybody but himself, hanging around here after 3:30 and watching Joe build his cabinets, and now keeping me from my peas. Before I knew it I had gone in the house and gotten my gloves and bucket and come back out to find Randolph back on the steps, saying he

would see me tomorrow. I said alright.

And he left, back up the street. Funny what you'll say to folks to get rid of them so you can go on and stop wasting time.

Course I was in a hurry when I got to the garden. He had made me late, and I worked up a sweat, I was picking those peas so fast. Half a row down and I caught them, just like I said, in a breath.

They kept me up all that night. I started trying to sleep about 10:30. It was no use because I just laid there with my bosom jumping up and down like I've never seen. I used to get the hiccups a lot when I was a girl, but I never had them this hard. Used to get them if I drank a Coke too fast when I was too thirsty. I suppose I get in a hurry sometimes when I get nervous.

When Joe came in and I had the hiccups he would say, "Alley, what have you gotten upset about to make you rush around this kitchen muttering under your breath and catching the hiccups?" But Joe had those hiccups gone in a very short while, even if he caused them. He would fool around a while acting like he was going to scare me by jumping out from behind the door while I was turned toward the stove. That never got rid of them, but he would try it first just so we could laugh about the time I got them when I was pregnant with Molly and he jumped from behind the door, jarred something loose, and got down in his back.

Then sometimes he set me breathing on a paper bag,

just so he could be trying something else after the scaring. But eventually he would say there was no help for me and start talking about the trouble he had finding his level that morning, even thought Randolph made off with it. Or he asked me to read him the news. I been doing the news for nearly thirty years now, every since the kids were in high school. Folks still saying how they enjoy my half column. Joe knew it was my favorite topic. Pretty soon talking about something else calmed me down enough that if we didn't mention the trouble again, I lost the hiccups.

Randolph wasting my time is what set me off Monday evening. Nearly threw off the whole week coming around right at 6:30 like that.

Since I couldn't sleep and trying was still wasting my time, I decided to get up and shell and blanch those peas, as few as they were. Seems like I got more purple on my hands that night than I ever did before, and I would have blanched the peas, too, except the hiccups stopped for about ten minutes somewhere around 12:30 when I got up to go to the bathroom and fell to cleaning out the cabinet where Joe's shaving things are. I went and did such a foolish thing as to throw razor and shaving cream all in the waste basket before I remembered the son-in-law just might be visiting sometime and forget his, so I got right back up and put that razor and cream back on the shelf.

The hiccups started back right before I went to undo the job I wasted my time doing, so when I finished shelling

the peas I at least had hopes the hiccups would sneak away again, so I put those peas in the refrigerator and went and laid down.

I slept some. I don't know how much, but when the alarm went off at 6:30 I did have to wake up. The kids tell me "Momma, why don't you forget getting up so early? Don't even set that alarm. Just sleep until you wake up. It will be good for you."

I dare say they don't have the foggiest idea what is good for me. Those kids don't understand the comfort of getting up at the same time every day nearly all your life. See, I know that bell is going to get me up at 6:30 so I don't waste time. Joe had to be working by 7:30, he always said.

While I was taking my coffee, I went out on the porch like I always did in the warm months. I enjoy watching those kids walk up toward the school. When I sat down in the swing and put my coffee down on the table, the one Joe made me light enough so I could push it around all over this porch wherever I needed it, like in front of me as I copied the news on Monday evenings, I saw what had happened and got so mad I could have spit. Probably did.

Randolph threw my schedule off so much the night before that I left the news on the porch, and the wind blew it off the light table and on to the porch floor. That's how it was when I slipped the bucket full of hulls out the door the night before about 1:00. I set that bucket right

on top of the news, and that dirty rim around the bottom of that bucket soiled the news.

You could still read it, but it had a funny caddy-corner fold in it now and a brown half moon of dirt right across the bottom of the news. In fact, right on top of Randolph's news. And when I saw that, I remembered how Randolph had come around putting me behind and making me get the hiccups or else I would have remembered to take the news in, and I would have had plenty of time to pick my peas and would have been asleep at midnight instead of shelling peas and cleaning out bathroom cabinets. I got so mad at the sight that I grabbed up my coffee, took a big gulp, and immediately began hiccuping again.

Now I had to recopy the news, which is not what I do on Tuesday mornings. On Tuesday mornings I take my coffee slow, bake something for Mr. Curry, watch my game show at 10:00, and then entertain Mr. Curry for thirty minutes when he comes for the news. Thirty minutes is all I can usually get him to stay cause he doesn't like to waste time either, and he has a newspaper to run. Bless his heart, ever since I accidentally run over one of those concrete blocks that marks the parking places in front of the paper office, Mr. Curry has been coming down to pick up the news. Said, "Agnes Louise, I hate to see you make that trip all by your lonesome. I bank in Tipton. I can just come get the news." It's only fifteen miles, and I don't know why he doesn't bank in his own town, but he comes and gets the

news, so I bake him something for the trouble.

I had to dress, bake, -- I planned a pecan pie, but that would take too long now -- and recopy the news all before 10:30. Needed to blanch those peas, too. I couldn't get any more coffee down and, I went without a brassiere until 10:00 because the hiccups were hurting my chest so much.

Recopying the news was nearly impossible. I had to know when a hiccup was coming or the jump would make my pen go flying off across the page making some funny mark. I don't know how many times I started over or how many times I wrote *Betty Ludwig went to the dentist in Aneleh on Friday. Her daughter accompanied her, and they bought some school clothes...* or *The men's Sunday school class of the Methodist church is collecting canned goods for the needy....* only to have my body jump after two minutes of silence and send my pen backwards as if I was trying to scratch out what I just wrote. I circled the kitchen ten times giving Randolph a piece of my mind. It took me all morning to get that news copied, I missed my show, and I almost went out of my mind when I had to offer Mr. Curry store-bought cookies.

The writing on that paper looked so childlike Mr. Curry asked me was I feeling all right, said I wasn't quite like myself this morning, and wondered if my blood pressure was up. When he left he called Joseph down at the school; he superintends there now. Joseph called all upset

thinking I was having a stroke. He said, "Momma, you feeling all right? Rick Curry said you had trouble getting out the news this morning."

I said no, I had just had the hiccups since last night and was having trouble copying. Joseph knew about my getting the hiccups when I get in a hurry, and he said if he could leave the school, he would come and make me tell him who made me mad. I told him he was foolish. Then he called his sister Molly in Memphis, and she called me on her lunch hour saying, "Momma, Joseph is worried about you letting people make you mad. Has somebody said something to you about the news?"

I spent my whole story-watching time on the telephone convincing my two kids no one made their momma mad. I swear sometimes they still don't listen to me.

Joseph called back at 3:30 when school let out. They had probably been stopped for about thirty minutes then. He said "Momma, we'll come around and take you to eat fish tonight." I want to tell you at that minute I let out the biggest air bubble, more like gas than a true hiccup. It felt just like somebody shoved a bone right in my heart.

I said, "Joseph, you can clearly hear that your momma's got indigestion."

I swear your children never leave you alone when you want them to, but when you are perfectly healthy, you get no phone calls or fish offers.

Joseph said, "Fine, Momma" and hung up like he was

kind of mad. Reminded me of his daddy doing that, who most of the time talked as much as anybody, but if he was mad, instead of rushing around and getting the hiccups, he just cut a little sentence and went out to the shop. That meant he didn't expect me to follow and make no offers to work the chalk line. Couple hours later he would turn up, gradually his sentences got longer, and before long he was talking as much as anybody again. But those couple of hours were long ones to me.

Of course if Joseph had not hung up on his momma, I would have had time to tell him I promised Randolph I would take fish with him, but now I didn't have time to call him back because if I was to bathe and dress and clean out my purse before Randolph came, I needed to start. Then I thought of the peas, shriveling in the refrigerator because after I hadn't gotten to them because of the news, the afternoon on the phone made me forget them again. And the baking. I would have to offer Randolph store-bought cookies, too, if he decided to come in and have coffee, even though he hadn't been past the front steps in all this while. Not until the night before when he came on the porch.

It bothers me to treat company to store-bought cookies, bothers me a lot. Unblanched peas bother me, too. I was really getting mad and in a hurry. You can imagine what happened to my hiccups.

Bathing was a mess because I got in the tub before I

ironed my dress, so I had nothing to put on when I got out, and I had to go to the ironing board in my robe. I still like my curtains open during the day, but I don't like being in the middle of the kitchen in just a robe. Had to stay close to the wall and pull all the curtains to before I could iron my dress, the green one I bought with my Mother's Day money couple years ago.

I didn't want nobody asking me about my health down at the restaurant, and I looked a little peaked because I hadn't slept much, so I put on a little face make-up, some rouge to give me a little color so I looked extra healthy. I hadn't put any on in so long that it was hard to do. When I got it on I don't think it looked to others quite like I thought it did. I sure didn't look like I used to when I was young. All this trouble, and I was ready at 4:45.

Except that I couldn't find my necklace right off. This green dress just needed a necklace, and my wedding necklace was the only one I had. It's kind of plain around the neck and looks funny if you don't set it off with a necklace, or else I wouldn't have bothered. Somehow I missed seeing the box the first time I rummaged through my underwear drawer where I still keep it, but I went back and I found it, fixed the coffee pot so all I would have to do is plug it in, took a peppermint for my mouth and a kleenex for my pocket, and went to sit on the porch and rest until Randolph came.

It must have been sucking on that peppermint. The hiccups stopped. I guess I was more tired than I thought, and swinging there on the swing in the evening like we used to after working all day, relaxing before supper, laughing about something silly Randolph said, or playing with the kids, made me sleepy. I nodded right off thinking about how that light table had been sitting on this very porch with a big red bow, which came from the attic out of the Christmas decoration, I happen to know. It was the red bow I always hung on the mailbox. That light table explained how come every time I had walked out to the shop that week Joe said, "just some furniture," when I asked what he was working on.

And I remembered Joe took thirty minutes to show me how light the table was and how I could put it in front of me to write the news on and how I could lift it into the swing when I swept the porch. I've been doing it every since, too. Joe knew just what kind of gift I needed. He said "Alley, Randolph didn't have nothing to do with this gift. I put it away at 3:30 when I saw him coming down the street."

And when Randolph came for birthday cake and coffee he said he didn't know that's what Joe was getting me and Joe said, "No sir, you didn't." I think that's when he paid Randolph back the five dollars. Joe was funny about things like that.

When I woke up from this little nap on the swing,

Joseph and the grandchildren were pulling into the driveway right behind Randolph. Joseph got out of the car carrying a paper plate of fish covered with aluminum foil. He told Randolph that if he had known he was around, he would have brought him a plate, too, but Randolph just looked at him and didn't answer.

As I came out the screen door I asked Joseph how come he never listened to his momma or bothered to ask her if she had any plans before he hauled a plate of fish to her house. As if I would eat catfish off a paper plate anyway.

III

WHAT THEY DO

Merva Meyers leaned over to pick up the card she dropped, spades-nine, put her thumb between two snaps on her house dress, and rubbed the ridge her queen sized panty hose made on her belly. As she leaned up she muttered, "Ain't cut out for stooping no more." She was only fifty-four. For the second morning that week, her two grandchildren were in the living room tossing a tennis ball between them, and Merva's back ached from sitting in the hard kitchen chairs for so long playing solitaire, casino-style, like her son, the grandchildren's father, taught her.

She needed that nine to go on the diamonds-ten; then she could move the cards in row three beginning with the hearts-eight through the clubs-three and turn over a fresh card from the face-down stack beneath. But the new card was just a diamonds-jack, so it ended the game. Merva scooped up the money cards up top and began to count their value out loud like always. "Five, ten, fifteen," for the hearts-ace through three. "Twenty, twenty-five," for the spades-ace and two. She paid fifty to play; got back twenty-five.

The oldest grandchild, the boy, walked from the living room to the kitchen table, scraping the tread on the bottom of his tennis shoes against the grooves in the linoleum. The boy peeped over Merva's shoulder as she punched the number into the adding machine and said to him without looking at his face, "Pick up your feet. Walking like your dad." She pulled the handle and the tape showed a red 120. Just then Ethelene came through the back door, immediately grabbed the fly swatter from the nail by the washing machine, and joined the boy as he perused the total. Ethelene, nearly forty, had worked for Merva's husband doing housework, feeding dogs, cooking meals, and gathering eggs. Now that he was dead, Ethelene still came.

"Now, how many games have you played this morning?" Ethelene wanted to know.

"Fifteen. Children been here since 7:30."

"That's pitiful, Merva. You are going to need a loan from the bank." Ethelene, smiling and patting Merva on the shoulder as she went by, stepped to the window by the kitchen table, raised her thin, strong arms, and slapped at a fly on the curtain. "There."

The boy said, "My mom's calculator doesn't make a noise and doesn't have a handle."

"This ain't no calculator, Jackson, and I ain't borrowing money from no bank, " Merva said and shuffled the limp deck.

"Doesn't print in red, neither. My calculator doesn't

print at all, but Mom's does. Like yours."

"It's an adding machine." Merva punched her fifty dollars to play into the machine and dealt out the cards for another hand, counting the rows out loud like she counted the money cards, "*One*, two, three, four, five, six, seven; *two*, three, four, five, six, seven...," and on like that, emphasizing the row number of the card she laid face up until she finally reached, "*seven*."

Ethelene stationed herself at the kitchen sink which held the one coffee cup Merva dirtied since Ethelene left the day before. Ethelene lifted the cup, placed it on the counter, and sprinkled a little Comet in the sink, swished it around with a sponge, and began scrubbing, still smiling her crooked grin which was slightly higher on the left side than the right.

Jackson said, "Grandma, me and Dole can't find nothing to do." Dole, two years younger than Jackson at ten, still sat in the living room looking through the doorway at her grandma. She had her hands hidden in the sleeves of her sweater, holding the ends sealed with her fingertips so she looked handless. She held her arms out each time Merva looked toward the living room, which was between the turning over of every new card, but Merva never noticed Dole's deformity.

"What about outside, Jackson?" Merva turned over another card.

"We can't go outside. It's looking rainy."

"Cards? Plenty of old decks in that drawer right there." She pointed with the corner of the spades-four she was about to move to row six. That made the loose skin on her arm swing back and forth.

"You could have told Mom it was alright for us to bring the Atari over here, or something." Jackson pounded the table with his fist as he said it. Dole began walking around the living room with her handless arms stretched out before her Frankenstein-style.

"Draw pictures? Pad of paper under the television."

"Atari on a black and white is better than sitting here watching you play cards all day. There is *nothing* to do."

Ethelene stopped scrubbing, suggested they collect pictures for their grandma and make a collage, but before she said it all, Merva raised her voice and said, "Dole, you want to draw Grandma a picture?" Merva said it loud enough for Dole to hear, even looked straight at the child who was still circling the braided rug. "Girl, come on draw me a picture."

Ethelene stopped smiling for a second, but didn't frown, then went back to her scrubbing and smiling. Dole released her hands from their hiding and reached for the paper under the television. Jackson spoke up, "She don't want to draw no picture." Dole sat back down in the chair.

"Put on the television, then. Don't bother me with nothing to do. Gave you choices," Merva answered and

kissed the card she was about to turn over.

Jackson obeyed by slouching back through the doorway to the television, turning the on button as if it were stuck, stomping across the braided rug until he was close enough to fall back into the divan, where he kicked off his untied, floppy shoes, then crossed his arms and repeated, "*Nothing* to do."

Ethelene hollered over her shoulder, "Boy, you are just like your father." Dole stayed in her dead granddad's chair, but turned a little more toward the television and returned her hands to her sweater sleeve. Ethelene added, "And your grandfather, too." She grinned at Merva, but Merva didn't look her way. She just kept flipping cards and scratching her neck with the edge of the card she held. She was only half finished flipping over the cards in her hand, and she already had seven money cards up top and row six only had one card still down.

"Sink's clean," she told Ethelene.

"Oh, it's a little dirty, though."

"Nobody making you come over here no more."

"He never made me, Merva. It's my job. Play your cards."

"Ain't paying you now."

"It's my habit now, Merva, you know. I don't have to be paid. It's what I do, like raising chickens was what Mr. Harley did."

"He's dead, and I ain't paying you."

It thundered just as Merva turned up the spades-ace in row four. Jackson yelled in from the living room, as if it were four rooms away, "See, now it sounding rainy, too."

Merva got up from her game. Ethelene said, "Oh, I don't think it's anything to worry about, Merva." But Merva was already in the living room standing in front of the children.

"What do they say on t.v.?"

"Nothing. They're just playing games. Dole and me don't like these games." Ethelene came in and sat on the edge of the recliner Dole sat in. She combed the child's thin hair with her rough fingertips.

"Look. Just as plain as day on the bottom of the screen. Severe thunderstorm warning." Merva went to the television and pointed at the shaded area for Jackson and Dole. "See that space that looks like a paint brush? It's our county." She outlined it with her thumbnail.

"It doesn't look much like a paint brush." Jackson sat up and moved to the edge of the divan and made his protest a second time. "Not a paint brush at all."

"Handle's short. Paint brush as plain as day."

Ethelene turned her smile into a laugh. "That's exactly what your grandma used to tell your granddad, too, `Don't look like no paint brush, Harley,' and he would always calmly tell her the handle was short." Ethelene winked at Merva, and then ran her finger through her own

short cropped hair to keep it off her forehead. Merva kept outlining the county with her thumbnail, not looking at anyone. "Did you know, too, Jackson, that a tornado destroyed all your grandparents' chicken houses the year you were born? That's why we worry so much about the weather around here. We worry more than we should, you guys."

Jackson said, "Oh."

"Weren't my chicken houses. Ever see me in them?" Though a weather bulletin was crossing the bottom of the screen, Merva still outlined the county and ignored the words.

"Just the once, Merva, and you know it. Are we going to the basement? I'll do the unplugging. " Ethelene stood up. "Always telling these children about their grandparents. All they need to know now is lightening almost killed their granddad twice before the stroke did kill him, and a hen house ain't yours unless somebody let's you in it. Couldn't even gather my own eggs." Merva clicked off the television and started back toward the kitchen. "Be sure and don't forget the dryer."

"Let's go to the basement, guys. Grandma will lead the way." Ethelene scooted out the television table, unplugged the set, and said, "There." Merva started to gather her cards, but Ethelene said, "That's the first good game you've had this morning, if you're not cheating on your calculations. You better leave it. Take another

deck." Ethelene smiled as she said it, but Merva just grunted before she obeyed.

"It's what I was going to do," she said. "You don't have to tell me every move anymore. You're the goose who went around shutting windows while the tornado roared. Fool."

When they reached the basement door by the kitchen stove, Ethelene said, "Hurry up, you guys," and patted her thigh like she was calling the dogs.

"Dole doesn't want to get out of Granddad's chair," Jackson yelled in from the living room.

Ethelene passed in front of Merva, letting the basement door pop shut. Still smiling, she said to Merva, "Now, I did it for you. Did you want your carpets wet?" Then she went to the girl, reached down and patted Dole's head with her fingertips. "Now you know Grandma wants to go to the basement when the weather's up. Isn't that what Grandpa taught us to do?"

At the same time Merva yelled from where she stood by the basement door, "Girl, don't you know lightening popped that television right there one time when your granddad wouldn't come to the basement." Merva tapped her cards against her left arm and rubbed the small of her back with her left hand. Dole started to cry and swung her still handless arms in semi-circles in front of her body. Jackson told her not to be difficult, walked behind her all the way to the basement with his hands pressing against the

back of her shoulders.

"Don't he just remind you of Mr. Harley?"

"House never has been mine. Never touched one chicken that paid for it. Your carpets were getting wet, not mine. Least you gathered eggs."

And then, in the basement, once more Jackson started with his, "Nothing to do." Merva made her way to an old rocker with no varnish left on it, reached for the radio, turned the batteries around so it would work, and tuned in the local station. Ethelene began dusting the shelves of canned pickles and green beans that lined the basement's concrete walls. She said, "Besides, nothing happened to the house and nothing happened to me, did it?" Merva didn't answer.

Jackson and Dole sat at the rickety card table softly hitting each other in the arm while they crinkled their foreheads. When Merva got the radio on and the volume so low all that was heard was a small noise, she said, "Not supposed to want to do something in a severe thunderstorm, Jackson. Only gooses hunt work to do during a storm."

"Dole needs something to take her mind off being scared, though." Jackson hit his sister a little harder this time, as if for emphasis. She frowned, rubbed her arm, and stopped playing the game.

"Storms mean you're supposed to sit and wait for it to

be safe, Jackson." Merva shuffled her cards, but didn't lay out a new game. They listened to the radio, straining to hear while it reported golf ball sized hail one county over, and they listened for the sound of rain but did not hear it. Ethelene rearranged the Mason jars on the metal shelves by size and contents. She wanted to know why Merva hadn't told her they were in such bad shape, dusty and rusted lids. She guessed she hadn't been down to check them since canning last summer. Merva answered, "Your department. Not mine." Ethelene continued arranging, using the step ladder for the high shelves. "Falling down on my job, I guess." She smiled.

The naked light bulb above the chairs dimmed. Dole put her feet up in her chair, and made a noise like a kid trying to run his car engine. Then the lights dimmed again but didn't go out. It wasn't even sprinkling yet.

Jackson said, "Grandma, turn on the flashlight for Dole, in case the lights go out."

"Got to reserve batteries."

"Your granddad taught us that, guys."

"Then I'll go get candles, because Dole is scared."

"Boy, don't you know a tornado could develop out of a thunderstorm at any time?"

"I'll go. I need the feather duster." Ethelene stepped down from the step ladder.

"Always wanting to go upstairs during a storm. Fool."

"Oh, I just thought I should shut that open window so

your bed wouldn't get wet. Didn't know you wanted a waterbed." She set three jars of tomatoes aside to be thrown away. "I didn't disobey you, though."

"Fool."

"No, it can't tornado. It isn't even severe here yet." Jackson passed Ethelene and was up the stairs and to the candle drawer before Merva or Ethelene could argue, though they both started to at exactly the same time. When he returned he carried a grocery sack full of things, not just candles. He almost dropped the sack when he got to the third step from the bottom, but Ethelene put her hand beneath the sack and supported the weight until Jackson got to the card table. Merva helped him put the skinny candles, one an old Christmas candle, the other two left from the candles used at Jackson's and Dole's parents' wedding, into flower shaped, glass holders. Merva reached for the matches on the table, but Jackson said, "I can light them. " She let him.

Then Jackson began laying out everything in the sack on the card table. He had the glue, all the magazines from the rack in the living room and from Merva's bed side table, and two pair of scissors, including her sharp pair, all in the sack. "Grandma, I got to go to the barn and get a board."

"Can't. Severe thunderstorm warning."

"Got to. Dole ain't never made a collage, and I learned how in school and have to teach her."

Ethelene said, "Good idea. Didn't your grandma tell you to make a collage before, guys?" Jackson was gone again, up the stairs, banging the back door as he went to the barn. Ethelene looked at Merva, smiled, and said, "Oh, I'll go after him. It's not bad at all yet."

"Good, fool. Shut all the windows while you're up there. Harley said so."

Jackson and Ethelene returned with a board nearly two feet by a foot and a half. "Lord boy, that's too big." Merva looked at Ethelene as she said it and shuffled the cards on her thigh a little louder than usual.

"I couldn't saw it because it's starting to sprinkle, so Dole and me will just share one board. I can teach her better that way." Dole still had her feet in her chair, but she started to pick up a magazine. Jackson told her, "Go ahead and get you a book and look for all the pictures you like and cut them out and we'll glue them on this board."

Merva said, "Got to have a theme. You can't just cut out any picture you want to."

"Well, you could but you don't have to." Jackson began cutting pictures.

Ethelene had finished the shelves and was standing over the card table rubbing the rough skin of her right hand with her left hand. "Oh, you should have a theme. Ask Grandma for a theme."

"Most generally people mind the woman they call grandma and don't go upstairs when they're told not to," Merva said while looking at the grandchildren. Then, looking at Ethelene, she said, "You don't have no reason to make a collage unless you are cutting out pictures that remind you of a certain person, or just flowers, or famous people, or hair-dos. Dole, don't you want to make Grandma a pretty collage of all the hair-dos you find in the magazines?"

Ethelene stepped behind Merva and ran her fingertips through her hair like she did Dole's earlier. "Did you know your grandma is partial to hair-dos, guys?" She began parting Merva's hair into small sections and rolling it on her fingers. "She was going to be a beauty operator until she married your granddad. Make her a hair-do collage, why don't you?"

Dole looked like she would until Jackson frowned at her and said, "No, this one won't have a theme. Dole is just learning on this one."

While it rained outside the children cut out pictures there on the rickety table with candles burning, even though the lights hadn't gone out. Merva just rocked in the squeaky wooden rocker, shuffling the cards against her thigh, but never laying out a game. Once she asked Ethelene if she unplugged the coffee pot, and she had. Dole had the dull scissors, flipped through the pages of magazines, but didn't cut many pictures out. Jackson cut

out something from nearly every page. Every now and then he told Dole, "You got to cut out lots of pictures. You're not doing this right. This is a big board."

Once, after it had been raining hard for nearly thirty minutes and Ethelene had all the shelves dusted and straightened and was looking through the boxes of old clothes, Jackson went up stairs to the bathroom. Both Merva and Ethelene looked his way, but neither said anything. Merva got up from her chair and went to look over Dole's shoulder. "Girl, what pictures you cutting out?"

Dole whispered, "I got a theme, Grandma. Don't tell Jack." Merva giggled, put her hand up to her mouth to hide it, but the sound came through. Ethelene turned her back to the card table and her smile turned into a grin. "Cutting out pictures that remind me of a certain person, okay?"

Merva said, "Good, because that's the way it is supposed to be done. Who?"

Dole said, "You," just before Jackson came down the stairs. But the girl didn't have too many pictures, just a picture of the soap that was in Merva's bathroom, a picture of the spades-three, a silver box of Kleenex, and a wooden chair.

Merva said, "If y'all are going to play, I might as well deal out a hand of cards. Jackson, run get me another deck of cards. These are too stiff."

"There ain't room on this table for it. You just rest and watch us and learn how to make a collage. I'll show you you don't need a theme."

Ethelene said, "Besides, he can't go upstairs. Don't you know a tornado could develop out of a thunderstorm, even a thunderstorm without thunder?" Ethelene held up a red knit skirt. "Now, do you really need to keep this thing?"

"Yes."

"Oh, you don't, though. This is a fire hazard." Ethelene threw the skirt into the Salvation Army pile. Merva just kept shuffling her cards and didn't lay out a game.

The children worked for twenty minutes steady while it finally rained hard, but never hailed. Dole worked hardest but only collected two more pictures, a white flocked artificial Christmas tree and a scene of a family working in their yard underneath a cloudy sky. Dole cut off the bottom part of the picture and just kept the cloudy sky, laid all these pictures out in a row in front of her on the rickety card table, and returned her hands to her sleeves.

Jackson had so many pictures his stack fell off the table. Merva scooted to the edge of her rocking chair to pick up pictures of a man and a woman buying a Dodge, a line of sixteen pairs of men's boot in all fashions, a football fan handing a referee a pair of glasses, and three

copies of an advertisement showing a boy hugging his mother for having a clean kitchen. She told Jackson, "Basement collects humidity. You're going to be picking up wet pictures off this concrete floor."

"I bet that dehumidifier needs emptying." Ethelene stopped sorting clothes to go check it.

As Merva groaned from the effort of straightening up and laid the picture on the table Jackson said, "I don't care."

All of the sudden Jackson called time and said they couldn't cut out any more pictures. Dole just held up her handless arms. Merva said she didn't know you could call time. She thought you collected until you got enough pictures, but Jackson took Dole's scissors and said it was time to arrange the pictures.

For thirty more minutes it rained softly. Merva stood up and walked around for a while, watching Ethelene sort clothes for a few minutes, telling her she was doing it wrong, then watching Jackson and Dole try to arrange the pictures on the large board. Dole would lay her cloudy sky in the corner of the board and reach for the glue. Jackson would say it wouldn't work there, take away all her pictures, and start his own arrangement. One by one Dole would steal the pictures back by pulling them toward her by the corners as Jackson rescued his fallen pictures from the floor. Ethelene suggested that they go ahead and glue at least one picture on the board; then they would have to

leave it there and that would make the arranging easier. Ethelene's Salvation Army pile was much bigger than the keep pile or the rag pile. Merva said, "If there was a theme it would be easier to arrange." Dole looked at her grandma who was returning to her chair with a grunt; then Dole returned her hands to her sleeve.

After fifteen more minutes with no pictures glued on the board Jackson said, "Dole's not helping. I quit." Merva kept shuffling without saying anything.

In a minute Ethelene said, "I guess the storm's gone and we can go get lunch."

"Storm ain't gone."

"Oh, now it is. We got some tuna, don't we?"

"Yea, but you better go to the store when the children leave."

"Now, I planned on it. Come on, guys." Ethelene was already on the third step of the stairs, carrying the garbage bag she put the salvation army pile in and patting her thighs like she was calling dogs again. Jackson picked up his tennis shoes and followed her upstairs in his sock feet. Dole followed Frankenstein-style.

Merva moved to the edge of the rocking chair and rubbed the small of her back. After Ethelene, Dole and Jackson were up the stairs she softly said, "Foolish goose. Storm ain't over. Tornado could have broke your neck. Shutting windows during a storm. " She reached for the

board with all the pictures on it and placed it on the arms of the vanishless rocking chair. She separated Jackson's pictures from Dole's, laying his pictures in a pile on the floor and spreading out Dole's six pictures over the two by one and a half foot board. She began arranging them. First she placed the bar of soap in the middle and the rest of the pictures around it in a circle. Then she placed the flocked Christmas tree and wooden chair side by side in the middle and the other four pictures in the corners. Then she lifted the pictures one by one and placed them in a neat pile in her hand, then rocked for a moment with those pictures between her two palms, then laid the pictures back on the card table.

She had to stoop down to pick up her deck of cards from the floor beside her. The board across the arms of the chair nearly fell to the floor, but she held on to it with her free arm. When she straightened up she said, "Lord."

Just as Ethelene came to the bottom of the stairs to say, "I guess you want iced tea with your tuna," Merva began laying out a game on the board, counting the rows like she always did, "*One*, two, three, four, five, six, seven; *two*, three, four, five, six, seven...," and on like that until she reached, "*seven*," and answered, "You know I do."

IV

HITTING MY TRUCK INSTEAD OF MY WIFE

My wife Em wasn't born and raised here. She was born and raised in Memphis, which isn't her fault. She tries too hard to fit in, though. To put it bluntly, she doesn't have a whole lot of common sense, which is a charming thing about her. But she doesn't look at it that way. One time Em said to me, "Your grandmother's shadow looms over me like an unreachable summit." Em acts like the boss around here, but she wants to be like Grandmother, a natural, resourceful wife, mother, and grandmother. But she just can't.

I was raised by my grandmother and met Em in Memphis when I stayed at Uncle Jack's for four weeks every summer. Em's family lived next to Uncle Jack, and she used to ask me questions about life outside of Memphis. One summer Em asked, "Is it true only incorrigibles come from the country?" She tilted her head in a way no girl had tilted her head for me before. I stood up, placed one foot on one of the front steps, leaned in like a shy country boy, grabbed her hand with one of mine, and stroked it with the other. I told her to judge for herself. Em said, "You just rejuvenated my security. I renounce Memphis men." I

said I loved her, too.

We were sixteen. There weren't too many Memphis men for Em to renounce, but it didn't matter in the least. As I said, no girl tilted her head for me before, not in a favorable way, and I've never found anything I want to look at more. So what if other men don't lust after your wife? It seems like an advantage to me.

So later we married, and I took her from the boundaries of Memphis for the first time in her life. When we drove up and Em saw the woods behind the house, my four dogs, and the actual front porch swing, she said, "Incredulous. Shangri-La." We only own ten acres.

They say you want what you can't have. Most girls I grew up with dreamed of going to college and having a career, moving to Memphis. Em was sort of backwards. Her mother had a career, real estate, and wasn't home much to be an unreachable summit like my grandmother was. Em didn't see much in that career woman thing and wouldn't hear of it when I said we could move to Memphis after we married. Em said, "It would liberate my femininity to leave Memphis."

So Em has made a career of reclaiming and redefining *housewife* as an occupation. But Em plans things and then they don't quite go right, because she's trying too hard. I feel sorry for her disappointment, so I pretend they did go right. She planned a romantic Saturday as a surprise, but Grandmother called me to let me in on it. Em called

her to see if she would watch Zak. Scared my grandmother. Zak's our first, four months old at the time, and Em hadn't left him since he was born. I guess I hadn't had her alone in a room to myself for more than five minutes since she put down this block of material she was trying to quilt and said, "Excruciation means it's time to visit the cabbage patch, doesn't it?" For a minute I thought she just stuck herself with a pin again, but her water had already broken. She had been sitting there grinning and bearing the pain, not sure if she was actually in labor, not wanting to be a complainer. She hadn't left the baby's side since because, Em said, "Babies miss the presence of their parentage."

On the phone Grandmother said to be on the lookout for a project, which is what she called things like Em's quilt block and this perfect Saturday for just the two of us. I got back from town on Saturday morning and Em was standing in the middle of the kitchen with her hair pulled on top of her head in a bun. She said, "Let's act primitive today."

She had a picnic basket with fried chicken, potato salad, and biscuits. Most people picnic in spring. Em and I picnic the last week of October. This is what I'm talking about when I say Em lacks common sense.

Take her biscuits, for instance. Em still tries, but she can't make corn bread fit for bricks, but the very first time she ever made biscuits, they were perfect. I could make corn bread. It's not much more than cornmeal and milk, but Em can't maneuver that, recipe or no.

Biscuits, the most complicated, delicate dish in the world, Em never thinks twice about. She makes these perfect biscuits, then packs them for a cold picnic.

Em's sense isn't common, but you have to watch her because she is watching you to get your reaction to every little thing she does. She's a good guesser about what you are thinking. So I told her, "Sounds like one fine lunch."

Grandmother told me not to be surprised if we got up in the middle of the night or after we finished our business or whatever and drove over to get Zak. She said new mothers never completely survive the first night. Soon as I got my town shirt changed for a flannel, Em said, "Grandmother thought this was another of my traumatic hormonal swings." My grandmother would never say that to Em, not since I told her about the unreachable summit thing. But she didn't have to say it to Em. Em just figured it out.

I took my ax and put it in the truck and drove us over to the small cleared spot where I had been cutting wood on Mr. Harnock's land. I work for him and he lets me get all the wood from his property I need to heat my house.

In the truck on the way over Em said, "We are a young, optimistic pioneer couple looking for a piece of virile land on which to alight." She brought along that quilt block she was still working on. Em learned to quilt from a book. Girls who grow up in Memphis have to learn that way.

I get aggravated at Em pretty often, which isn't to

say I don't love her to death. The thing about Em is she puts her entire energy into this country wife thing. She is simply trying to do what all people do, I guess, something they can't, or something that isn't practical for them. I'm the same way. It makes no sense for me to try to grow African violets, but I do. I over water, then under water, too much light, too little. I can't grow them. Em can't make corn bread.

No man could dislike Em's trying, though. It's like that tilt of her head she does for no one but me. It means I have her full attention. It means I "rejuvenate her security." So I don't want to discourage her just because of some quick fit of rage I have when I find she tried to fix the clogged sink herself, unscrewed the elbow joint, and flooded the kitchen. I love her to death, but it doesn't stop the aggravation of coming home to find your wife trying to re-upholster your chair when it was in perfectly good, comfortable shape to begin with, or coming home to find out your wife fixed your dogs a butterscotch rum pie for their birthday. Loving her to death doesn't tell me what to say when I walk in the door and the pressure cooker has blown up and Em is sitting in the floor with third degree burns on her hand, and the hand is wrapped in a dish towel and the dish towel is stuck in the blisters and Zak is hugged up to her breast and she says, "I don't know what to do." Not "it momentarily evades me what action to take," but "I don't know what to do."

I don't know what to say to Em. How do I tell her she is incapable of those things she tries and you are angry at her for her trying but are glad she tries. There's no way to communicate that.

We had our picnic, and I ate four cold biscuits so Em wouldn't guess I thought cold biscuits were a waste. We brought a quilt to lay on, but with all the recent rain we still got the knees and rear of our jeans wet. I acted like I didn't notice, ate my picnic, pulled Em beside me after we ate, and just looked at her tilted head and rubbed the scar on her left hand where she almost lost a finger cutting onions. Em said, "My duplicity confounds you" with the prettiest tilt of her head.

Em quilted some, and I chopped a little wood, just enough to make a truck load to carry back to the house. I loaded it. It came up a shower, and we got pretty wet trying to get the basket and all in the truck. But Em said, "Home's dismal; this truck is vivacious," so we sat right there in the cab of the truck and watched it rain, even made love underneath that picnic blanket in the cab of my filthy truck.

When I started the engine, I thought about the ground, but I put the truck in gear and tried to pull away anyway. I dug a rut under all four tires. I laughed about it. Extra loud. I told Em to button her blouse good because these pioneers had an obstacle to conquer.

I put wood under the back tires while Em watched. I

stopped once and told Em her man was hungry, though I wasn't. She got a chicken leg and fed it to me. It seemed to make her happy. Em said, "Your insatiable appetite." I raised my eyebrows a couple of times.

I was going to push and Em was going to drive, and I told her not to drive the back tires into the front tire tracks. I got covered with mud until the tires caught on the wood, then Em drove out straight until the back tires dropped into the front tracks. She realized what she did, turned toward me with this big tear coming down her cheek, then worked the gas pedal trying to get the truck out of the ruts until I got the truck door open and told her it was all right because there was no way she couldn't have driven into the front tracks.

She buried the truck. I went for the tractor. We were just a mile from Mr. Harnock's house. Em wanted to walk with me, but I told her it was too dangerous for us both to ride back on the tractor. I was gone an hour or better. It was almost dark when I got back. I hooked the chain up to the bumper before I figured out the noise I was hearing was Em listening to the radio. I asked her to turn on the truck lights, but she thought you had to start the truck to do that so she drained the rest of the battery trying to make the truck start. I didn't say a word. I boosted the truck, pulled it out of the ruts, left the tractor there, and drove us home.

When I got in the truck Em said, "Mad?"

I said, "No. Just bad luck." I was lying.

What do you say to your wife when she gives up, when you think you will never see that tilt again, when you think she knows you are angry and you can't hide it, when you love her to death but hate her stupidity at that particular moment?

When we got home, in as controlled a voice as I could gather, I told her I would unload the wood and then be in to shower. I would build a fire if she thought we needed one. She got out of the cab with the basket and blanket and went around the side of the house toward the door.

I unloaded three sticks of wood, but when I picked up the fourth I grabbed it with my gloved hands, raised it, and brought it down on the tailgate as hard as I could. I probably did that four or five times then threw that piece of wood ten feet across the yard like it was a shot put. I turned around and Em was standing there at the corner of the house. She was as still as she could possibly be.

She said, "You finished?" Not, "Are you going to terminate this hideous behavior" but, "You finished?"

I said, "I'm finished."

Em said, "Then I can go." She walked back around the corner toward the house and disappeared.

Stupid thing to try to beat up your truck. Em knew what I was doing because Em's sense isn't common. You can't protect anybody from their own sense.

V

ELECTION

From the start Jap Louis was meant to attend Tipton Elementary. It wasn't that his momma couldn't pay the tuition at Jeff Fulton Academy. She could have paid it or even managed to have Jap attend for free, and she told him that clearly the morning after she lost the election for a seat on the city council when he asked if Jap might not switch schools now.

"It ain't that I'm a bad momma, Jap, the way some try to make you believe." Jap knew she meant his grandpa, mostly, although his grandpa never tried to convince Jap of half the things his momma thought. Maybe she meant the kids at school, too. "And I did think once that I would send you to Fulton to make them see different, to see I would indeed pay for you to be educated. But now it ain't the same. I'm in politics now, so that means you get a public education. Understand?"

Of course Jap didn't understand any more than any other first grader would; he just knew he was tired of Burt Dawson saying his daddy said Jap's momma didn't even have a checking account at the bank, so how could she be on the city council? But Jap said yes, he did understand, and

that private education sounded like it might not be fun anyway. Actually, *private* sounded like a lot of fun, if he was taking private to mean what he thought. Having his own teacher to himself in his own room and no other kids to say anything to him--if *that* was private, he wanted it.

But that was his second choice. Jap would have liked to stay at home all day, the way he always had, going where he pleased, eating bologna sandwiches at any time of the day he wanted. Being at home by himself was Jap's favorite way to spend a day after his grandparents left, and he often fell asleep on the couch before his momma came home, even before she became a politician.

Maggie and Jap lived right in the middle of town, two streets down from the city hall, in the upstairs rooms of the old bakery Maggie's daddy used to run. They had all lived there in the tiny upstairs quarters for as long as Jap could remember--Jap, Maggie, and her momma and daddy, but Maggie had only kept the bakery open a year after her parents retired and went south to Florida to die. Then she went into politics. Since she closed the bakery, Maggie and Jap had been living off the equipment she sold, piece by piece, from the bakery. Her excuse to Jap, who cried and screamed at even the removal of a chair, was that she needed a job where she didn't have to wear flour in her hair. Things had been a little better when his grandparents lived with them, even if there was a lot of fighting going on. So Jap hated to see the bakery torn

apart.

The upstairs quarters were small. There was one large room in the middle which served as both kitchen and living room. It contained a two-burner gas stove, a refrigerator, and a wooden table exactly like the ones that used to sit in the front room of the bakery, the ones constantly occupied by old men drinking coffee at all hours of the day. In the other half of the room there was a large crushed velvet couch, a black and white television, and a Philco radio. Maggie bought the couch, but the television and radio had been her parents'.

Off the left side of the kitchen was Maggie's room, the largest of the two bedrooms, the room which Maggie and Jap shared until her parents gave her the family business and moved away. Jap's room was the tiny room his grandparents used to sleep in. He hated it because it didn't have a window.

That same morning after the election, Jap's grandparents called, all the way from Florida. Jap, of course, answered the phone. As soon as Jap's momma heard him say, "Hi Grandpa," she pulled her nightshirt, an old blue t-shirt, over her head and began waving her arms and pointing downstairs.

"Momma's downstairs in the bakery. I'm getting ready for school. I don't think she heard the phone." Jap knew not to say anything about the election. He had to remember not to do that until his momma won something. Instead, he

was supposed to say what good business the bakery was doing. Jap decided to not say anything about the bakery until asked, but before he hung up finally told his grandpa Mr. Ray did still come take his morning coffee at the shop and brought Jap a green apple Jolly Rancher. It was a lie, but it made his momma wink at him and made his grandpa giggle at least, which convinced Jap his momma was right, that if his grandpa knew the bakery was closed, he would be disappointed in Jap the same way his grandpa always acted disappointed in her, his own daughter.

When Jap hung up, his momma asked, "What did he say about me, Jap?"

"Nothing, I guess."

"What do you mean, *nothing*?" Jap shrugged to the table as she asked these questions. He really wanted to run out of the room, but the night before, after the election had been lost, Jap decided he wanted his momma to explain some things.

"Momma, will Mr. King be coming around now?"

Jap knew it was Alcoa King who put the idea in his momma's head that he should go to the public school, so if he was to have any objections about it besides the other children making fun of him and asking questions he couldn't answer, it would be for that reason only. Jap didn't like Alcoa because Alcoa only gave Jap more things to try to remember to say and not to say. In his scratchy voice he would tell Jap, "If your little friend say at school, `do

you know that fine big man Mr. King,' you can remember to say you don't, can't you?"

Alcoa had walked his momma home the night she went out for her vodka and came home to announce she was now a politician. It took his momma an hour and a half to get ready to go make her "little Thursday night purchase," but when she was ready, Jap saw she had on a new outfit, a tight coal black skirt and a black sweater with a huge red flower done in sequins across the chest. He wondered what piece of the bakery had been sold to pay for such a bright red flower. Later Jap saw his momma walking with the strange black man up the street, and for the two hours Maggie and Alcoa sat on the back stairs that led up to the rooms over the bakery that night, Jap heard his momma giggle that same giggle she used to try to tickle his grandpa with when she would come home after staying away for several days. And he heard her call Alcoa an "honest business man" more than once, to which Alcoa would answer, "Yes, I am a business man, and that's exactly why you have to be my politician. Too many people enjoy my services to put me in office."

When she finally got upstairs, she was carrying her shoes in her hand and laughing and began whirling around on the braided rug. "Jap," she said, "Momma's done found a job. Look, he gave me this vodka free and is going to get me some new hot rollers so I can keep up my appearances for the public." Appearances was Jap's momma's biggest worry.

That's how come the bakery was nearly empty now.

So because of Alcoa King Jap became a politician's child, and was sent to public school, and was given more instructions about what he had to say and not say and do and not do, and he knew his days of eating bologna anytime he wanted were over. He had to go to school and become a politician's son all at the same time--quite an adjustment.

His momma hadn't answered his question about Alcoa. And she wouldn't either, if she didn't want to. So Jap tried another. "Momma, what's a halfie?"

His momma looked surprised, but only said, "Jap, I don't know. You're the schoolboy," then turned to take out an earring. She had lost the race, but she and Alcoa had gone celebrating anyway, so she yawned a lot as she spoke with Jap this morning. "Why do asking, anyway?"

"It was in a book."

"Ask your teacher then, Jap, because I'm tired anyway. We'll go campaigning when you get in. Wake me if I ain't."

Jap hardly ever got explanations from his momma, like last week when he asked her who his daddy was. She said, "Jap, some babies are born to women with husbands. The husband becomes the daddy. I never had a husband, Jap, so you never had a daddy." Then she giggled and said she wished Alcoa could hear her. She was getting very good at explaining things to the curious public, and he would be proud. Jap wasn't very satisfied with the daddy explanation or the one she just gave him about *halfie*. He

thought she knew.

"What you running for now, Momma?"

"I don't know, but there will be another election, so we'll start today after school."

That meant Jap was to leave the rooms, even though it wasn't time for school yet. It meant she wanted to go to sleep and didn't want Jap there. He left, and went to pass a few minutes in the donut vat before he went to school.

The old vat where his grandpa used to fry donuts was one of the few things left in the bakery besides a dusty display case with the front glass broken and patched with yellowed hospital tape. The grease was gone out of the vat, but the inside was a little sticky, so Jap had lined the bottom with an old blanket. When Jap was sitting in the donut vat, if he wanted to, he could hear most everything said upstairs. If he was in a thinking mood, he removed the board from in front of the window his grandpa used to look out while he worked in the bakery and let the sunlight or the light from the street lamp shine on his face. But he could just as easily shut it all out--what was going on upstairs, the light from outside, the thought in his head.

He had developed that kind of a mind. So sometimes he would crawl in the vat and leave the board over the window and shut it all out. Anytime he got tired of his momma, which was often since she became a politician, he crawled into the huge vat. His momma never knew about this because

she never went downstairs to the bakery after she sold most of the equipment. When Jap asked her why, just to make sure she wasn't going down there and would find out his little hiding place, she said it was because the filthy place reminded her of her daddy, and Jap knew, she said, that she never liked her daddy much, or should she say he never liked her. He called her an unfit parent and said she didn't live right, Jap should surely remember.

Jap did remember. He remembered his momma making his grandpa cry, and his grandpa making his momma cry, but not nearly as much. And he remembered that not long before his grandparents left they had a fight with his momma that he never really understood but remembered and thought about every day. He was still trying to figure out what it meant. Right in the middle of that fight Jap's momma told her daddy she had named her son in his honor, and giggled as she explained. "My son is just like that Jap you couldn't shoot when you were in the war, Daddy: he was a nuisance to have around, but you couldn't put a bullet through his head. So that proves right there," she said, "I am a fit mother and live right."

Jap saved the vat from being sold by removing some parts so it wouldn't work, and it was because the vat reminded him so much of his grandpa that he escaped there. Somehow in the vat Jap could think, if he wanted to, and figure things out. His momma wasn't going to give him any answers; maybe the vat would.

That's where Jap was when he heard his momma yell from upstairs on that first election night, for the position on the school board. It was an eerie, screeching yell that could have stood for either pleasure or pain. Jap also heard Alcoa say, "Don't matter," when it was obvious Tipton didn't want Maggie on the school board. "We need you in the county government, and we don't have to start low."

Sitting in the vat one night with the street light shining full through the window Jap learned what a dry county was. At the same time he thought Alcoa's voice must have wrinkles in it because it never sounded the same from word to word.

"Just start by saying that for the sake of the kids or something you hope Cliff County is never plagued with liquor stores."

That was when the campaigning started. For the next six weeks Maggie made Jap wash his face after school and walk up and down Main Street holding her hand as if he were a toddler instead of a first grader. She would act as if she were interested in one of the same items in a store someone was looking over and fall into conversation with that person. It was less like stopping someone and asking for their vote, she told Jap, and if nothing else, she and the voter had a product in common--dog food or a particular mayonnaise which they both could agree was much better than another.

Soon the conversation would lead to the rumor that

some high county officials wanted to bring liquor to Cliff County. Then after a couple minutes, Maggie would look at her watch and say, "Oh gracious, I've got to get this boy home and start some supper," or "I've got to pick up Mr. Shepard, you know Mr. Shepard. I've got to pick him up at the clinic. He's having trouble with his piles again." No one knew Mr. Shepard, but they never let on. One woman even went so far as to ask about his liver condition.

Then, as if it were an after thought, Maggie would add, "By the way, if you vote--that's silly. I'm sure you do--I'm running for a position on the city council. Give me a thought if you would."

After two weeks she added a "God love you" to the end of each encounter. Before long most people knew that as a good Christian woman, Maggie Louis didn't want liquor sold on the streets of Tipton or anywhere else in Cliff County.

So that's how Jap's momma operated from the day she met Alcoa King until the night before, election night for the city council position. Jap made it a tradition to be in the vat on election night. He didn't want to stay upstairs with Alcoa and his momma. Alcoa had brought presents again, another election night tradition, and this time he handed Jap a flat package wrapped in brown paper.

"Boy, these are magical books. Better than school. They'll help you remember our secret."

Once Jap got snug down in the vat, he thought he might tell Alcoa sometime that he had told somebody he and his

momma knew Alcoa. It would be a lie, but then Alcoa couldn't come around anymore.

"Feel bad?" Alcoa asked Jap's momma after the results were in.

"No, Alcoa. Not at all." It took his momma a long time to say that. "What are we gonna do now?"

"We gonna get you out of this loft. Get you a little house with pretty flowers growing in front. Make people think you live right."

"Jap ain't gonna like it."

"We got to get Jap a daddy."

"I don't think he knows he had to have one."

"Make it a good daddy and make him've died good, too. He has to be dead."

"Jap won't want a house with flowers." That's when Jap clicked on his flashlight so he could see the pictures in the magazines better.

Thinking about all this while sitting in the vat nearly made Jap late for school. He thought of staying downstairs and spending the day hiding in the bakery, but his teacher, Miss Mona, would call and ask his momma if he was sick and his momma would be mad to be woken up. Besides, he meant to ask Miss Mona what *halfie* and *boozer* and *illegitimate* and all the other words meant that the kids said their parents were using about his momma. And he really didn't want to be in the vat now, after last night. So he just stopped his mind from thinking about it all

until recess. Then he tried to go sit in the grass behind the swings and be by himself, but couldn't be private like he wanted. All the kids followed him and reminded him of things.

"Are you glad your momma lost?"

"Maybe."

"My daddy said she might have won if people knew who your daddy was."

"Don't have one."

"Got to."

Michael Lawson broke in. "Is your momma getting any off that black bootlegger? You might have a little brother who's a halfie." Some of the children laughed, but Jap only thought of the pictures in the magazine.

He walked off toward the flagpole. The sun was in that direction, and it seemed to be the best place to go. It wasn't long before Jap got so hot he pulled his jacket off, then his shoes and socks. When he saw the red tulip there in the dirt around the flagpole, he set his eyes on it. His whole face smiled as if he had just solved a terrific problem.

Then Jap planted his feet firm in the dirt with his legs wide apart and bent at the knees as if he were about to bat. Right underneath him bloomed that bright red tulip and the sun was shining down hard on it. Jap was concentrating on the tulip and didn't notice the children beginning to surround him in a loose circle as he stood in

the bricked in flower bed around the flag pole in the Tipton Elementary School playground. Jap dropped to his knees and was clawing at the dirt around the tulip. He kept clawing long past the time he dug up the roots.

"Got to plant it in front of the bakery," he explained, but not to them. "People gonna know I live right."

VI

EX-RELATIONS

I came to Jonesboro to go to Arkansas State that fall just after my Aunt Audie turned thirty. It was Thanksgiving before I got to go home even once, although that was all right with me. Right after I left the letters started. I knew Aunt Audie would write, I don't mean that. I mean nearly every letter from Aunt Audie was followed by one from my mother the informant who thought she was doing me a favor by letting me know what kind of scandal my father's precious little sister was causing--like I didn't know more about what was going on than she did. I never hinted to Mother about Aunt Audie's letters, or to Aunt Audie about Mother's.

The first one from Aunt Audie said:

Lena,

I might as well tell you Bubba left in his truck last Friday morning and didn't come back. He just kissed me, called me his baby, and left for work like always. He didn't take a thing with hım, didn't slam the door or anything, but his truck did make extra big tracks in the drive as he left even though the ground wasn't any softer than usual. It wasn't because he

slept in any bed but ours or because I slept in any bed but ours. Don't think we lost the romance. He didn't even say he was leaving, he just never came back.

I don't know what your grandma or your dad will tell you, but on Sunday I left Mom's before it was even time to do the dishes because none of your aunts are as much help with the dishes as you are. They put knives in the dish water, for one thing. But I knew they wouldn't let me do them alone and would insist on being in my way. I just left in the middle of dinner when your dad said, "Audie, you know we support you, baby. One hundred percent."

Please don't disrespect your aunt for being a separated woman, Lena. Bubba's truck will come back.

Audie Creek

Every letter Aunt Audie had ever written me she signed that way, *Audie Creek*. It was like she thought while I was away for church camp or Girl Scout camp in the summer I would forget who she was, so she made sure to include her whole name so I could go look it up in a family photo album or something. She and I were nearly the only women in the family besides all the brothers' wives. Uncle William is the oldest of Grandma's kids, followed by my dad, Damon, Uncle Rollen, and then Uncle Jess. Aunt Audie wasn't born until eight years after Uncle Jess, when Grandma decided

she just couldn't stand it any more and wanted to try one more time for a girl. I was the first grandchild and Aunt Audie was only twelve when I was born, but I always called her *Aunt* because I thought she deserved the respect, unlike anybody else in the family.

I knew Aunt Audie and Bubba hadn't been fighting. In fact, of my relatives, they had the best marriage. But this Bubba walking-out was just what the family had been waiting for. When I was eleven, Aunt Audie married Bubba. I was her bridesmaid. In fact, I helped plan the whole thing. Aunt Audie and Bubba were secretly engaged when they were in the eleventh grade. Bubba didn't get down on his knee to propose or anything. He wasn't like that. In fact, I think I was sitting in between them on Grandma's porch the night they finally decided on a date for the ceremony. Aunt Audie had just graduated from Arkansas State. I said, "Wouldn't it be nice if you married on Valentine's day since it falls on a Saturday?"

Bubba grinned and Aunt Audie said, "Why I guess it would."

I worked extra hard to make Aunt Audie's wedding as romantic as possible since Bubba wasn't very good at remembering the little things. The unity candle and Bubba kissing Aunt Audie again after they were half way back down the aisle were my ideas.

My dad gave her away because Grandpa had been dead for a year and Uncle William refused. Uncle Jess wanted to,

but she asked Dad, and when they got up the aisle made out of a strip of white carpet down the middle of Grandma's living room, I heard my dad tell her it wasn't too late to change her mind. Had he said, "Audie, change your mind" she probably would have, but he didn't make it a direct command. That is one reason to thank God Uncle Jess wasn't the one walking her down the aisle. He and I had a stare down when the preacher asked it there were any present who knew why these two should not be wedded. I guess I won. He didn't say anything.

I could just imagine how the family reacted when Aunt Audie showed up on Sunday without Bubba. I could see Uncle Jess slipping around spreading the word. He would be more tickled than anybody about it, all the while acting full of concern for his little sister. They had all been waiting for this to happen.

Aunt Audie's letter was followed by a note from my mother.

Dearest Lena,

Don't mean to upset you, but Bubba left Audie. Your dad is furious. She left Grandma's crying on Sunday--that sent your grandma to her room in tears. We are sure Bubba must have left town with some younger girl. His dad did, his grandpa did, and his uncles did. Write if you hear from Audie. We need to help her, poor thing.

Love,

The family, of course, expected I knew the details. Aunt Audie and I were a lot like sisters. Aunt Audie being born so late made her more like the first grandchild instead of the last child. She probably would have been a spoiled brat if I hadn't been born when I was. I was something she could attach herself to and take care of, a responsibility. She used me to show the family she was ready to grow up, even if they didn't want her to. The family always seemed to forget Aunt Audie was the aunt. They acted like I was the one who was supposed to be taking care of her. "Lena, does Audie need any money do you think, or is Bubba giving her plenty?" "Lena, you go on over Audie's and make sure she gets to church on time." So, it didn't surprise me my mother wanted me to let her know if I heard from Aunt Audie.

Aunt Audie and Bubba didn't have any more problems than most couples, unless you count how the family reacted to the marriage, and how they ignored Bubba and told Aunt Audie what to do. I spent a lot of nights in Aunt Audie and Bubba's house, and Aunt Audie talked to me. The rest of the family she mostly looked at and listened to. That left them to speculation, and they speculated and called it the truth.

For instance, Dad said Aunt Audie married beneath her to get rid of our name, Devereaux. He said she always

thought it sounded like the name of a family trying to act rich without really being so. Maybe that was part of it. The part he was overlooking was how Aunt Audie didn't care about money but cared about Bubba, and if Bubba was poor, then she would live in poverty to be with the man she loved. Grandma said she married a Creek to make her father roll over in his grave. Grandpa is said to have despised Creeks, to have called them *white trash*, so Grandma labeled it a clear case of the Romeo and Juliet syndrome and predicted nothing but disaster for the marriage. She would be happy now that she was right.

Uncle Jess, of course, attributed the marriage to good sex. The Sunday after I told the family Bubba and Aunt Audie were getting married, Uncle Jess had one of his I'm-mad-but-I'm-going-to-be-funny-about-it spells. First he called Bubba a son-of-a-bitch (after Aunt Audie and Bubba left), and then gave us all one of his Sears action poses to show us how satisfied Bubba must have looked after a roll in the hay with Aunt Audie.

The Sears action pose had been a family joke since Uncle Jess went from relative to relative on another Sunday afternoon showing everybody at Grandma's (almost) what only Uncle Jess would notice. On page ninety-seven of the latest Sears catalogue there was a man modeling boxer shorts, and he was in what Uncle Jess labeled the Sears action pose. He was standing with his right leg propped on a box of some sort so he looked like he was waiting on a

bus or looking out the window instead of standing there having his picture taken in his underwear. The problem was this hiked leg made a gap in the man's shorts, and anyone who looked close enough could see the man's privates, or the shadow of them anyway. From then on Uncle Jess would strike a Sears action pose any time he thought he could get a laugh out of it. The family motto became *the Sears action pose will get you every time*. Obviously, Uncle Jess would say Bubba left because good sex turned bad.

Aunt Audie really married Bubba because she loved him. Bubba showed his thoughtfulness in funny ways, but he was sweet to Aunt Audie. I knew Bubba wouldn't just leave her. In all those years before his mom died, while Bubba was in high school, he was the one who chopped firewood and never cheated a customer out of a full rick. That's how they ate because Mother was right about Bubba's father being a scoundrel. But she was wrong about Bubba.

Aunt Audie's next letter said:

Lena,

Burgman's Department store went bankrupt, and I bought a mannequin from the auction. She is nearly perfect, except for a chipped left toe, virtually unnoticeable. I've got her in my living room, and guess what for? She is going to help me get rid of my thighs. I named her Bridget. Sounds skinny, doesn't it?

She wears a five, Lena, just like you, and I

expect if she is standing there in my living room with a cute outfit on, if she is standing there looking so pretty when I get in from work, I will plug in my aerobics tape. I know you've heard Bubba say as many times as I have that he thinks I just look healthy and a big man needs a big woman. I guess that's true. He is such a mountain. But like you say, I don't think a few pounds off is going to make me a small woman, so I am trying to train myself to exercise. If I can, then it won't be long until I'm wearing Bridget's clothes. Do you think it will work? She's a headless.

Audie Creek

I tried to be subtle about convincing Aunt Audie she needed to diet. Neither one of us wanted hips like Grandma. We had several long discussions about why thin women were the ones in the movies. I guess she finally realized weight was something she needed to be concerned with. She was right, though. Bubba never complained about her weight that I heard. But I am sure it bothered him; he just loved her too much to be blunt about it. She wasn't really big, just an eleven. But she did have to watch what she ate, and Bubba's favorite thing seemed to be bringing her home chocolate covered peanuts.

Then there was my mom's note:

Dearest Lena,

Your Aunt Audie has flipped out. Grandma went to

check on her. Found a headless dress dummy naked on her couch. We figure she is lonely. You and Bubba both gone. Jess had his police friend put out the word on Bubba. It seems he left for his lunch break at the gas company and didn't come back. His crazy sister keeps phoning your dad and telling him she thinks somebody hurt Bubba. She thinks his body will turn up in the river somewhere. He will turn up in jail somewhere, more likely. Your dad will find him then. He will be sorry. Audie is getting to be a mess. Am glad you aren't here.

Love,

Mom

All this time I was writing my mom back and writing Aunt Audie back and not letting the other know. To Aunt Audie I tried to not say much about Bubba after I said I knew every thing would be fine. Instead I talked about my classes and how I was having so much trouble in my speech class because it bothered me to speak in front of all those people. Aunt Audie majored in speech. She would send me pointers. Her going to Jonesboro those four years was the reason she and Bubba didn't get married right after high school. But Bubba told her to go on and put in those four years like her mother and brothers wanted her to, and he would have a house by the time she got back. He did, too.

It wasn't a great house, but the idea of it showed how

much Bubba was trying. For instance, he would come over to our house while Aunt Audie was gone, and I would help him write letters to her. When I was a kid, Mom and Grandma read to me from their Pocket romances because it was what they were holding when I begged them to play with me, so even then I knew the right things for Bubba to say, even if I couldn't spell them. He waited for her for four long years while Aunt Audie did the family bidding. It amazes me how Aunt Audie never hated her brothers but instead always did what they said.

In my letters to Mother I tried not to say anything about Aunt Audie except to say she knew I would never believe Bubba walked out, and I did have to slip in I knew for a fact Bubba wanted Aunt Audie to have a baby after she worked one more year. I was sorry later I told Mom. She didn't deserve to know it.

Aunt Audie's next letter said:

Lena,

When in the world are you coming home? Washing dishes at Mom's on Sunday is getting so bad last Sunday I took the lid of a sauce pan and passed it around collecting money for the "buy Lena a car so she can come home on Sundays and help me do the dishes fund." I got over two dollars in change, mostly from your uncles' wives, and I put it in a jar by Mom's phone. I am sure the fund will grow. Your mom says they are coming after you for Thanksgiving. I'll come

get you if I need to.

I bought Bridget a few outfits so I would feel guilty about not exercising. Since you've been gone I haven't had anyone here to remind me. I spent our entire clothes budget for the winter on clothes for her (my portion, not Bubba's. He needs some new shirts). That way if I want something new to wear, I'll have to get skinny for it. Jess brought in my mail just now and said to tell you hello. I'll send you my speech about why girls should never wear stripes, vertical or horizontal. It will get you an A.

Audie Creek

Uncle Jess carried the mail on Aunt Audie and Bubba's route. It was his second choice besides being a policeman. I don't know why that didn't work out. Maybe it was because he married Judy when she got pregnant with Tim and had to get a job quickly, and then he was too fat and lazy for all the running at the police academy after they divorced. I guess I don't know for sure because I don't care. I do know Uncle Jess didn't like me much. For instance, he skipped me but not my younger cousins when he was going around showing that picture in the catalogue. He knew I would hear it, understand it. God knows he was shouting the page number loud enough, but I never saw the picture until after we were home that night. Of course he

skipped Bubba, too.

The next letter from my mom:

Dearest Lena,

Audie has that dummy standing about three feet from her front door. Dressed it in a purple bubble skirt and a jacket with sequins (quite tacky). When you walk in the front door looks like that dummy is coming over to shake your hand. I refuse to call something without a head Bridget like your aunt wants. Jess has turned quite serious. Won't even make Sears action pose jokes about it. Spanked Tim last Sunday when he did. Family is falling apart because your aunt had to go marry a Creek.

Also, she is looking terribly skinny. Her clothes just hang on her. Bubba must have left her short of money. She must not be eating.

Love,

Mom

If Aunt Audie wasn't losing weight, the family would think of something else to point to when they said Bubba left her without any money, even though he hadn't and the gas company sent his last paycheck to Aunt Audie after he left. And I figured Bubba was somewhere holed up, waiting on Aunt Audie to leave her wretched family and say those crazy people would never come between them again. What did he care about money. I know that's where he was.

I figured out why Aunt Audie bought a headless mannequin, too. Aunt Audie was beautiful. Her hair was the thickest light brown hair I've ever seen. Catching her without an ounce of make-up made little difference in how her eyes shined. A face on her mannequin would only be a distraction. She just needed to lose weight. I wrote her and told her I figured it out and thought it was quite clever. The letter following that one said:

Lena,

Yes, I think Bridget is really helping me lose a little weight. I haven't lost much, and I don't really plan on losing so much that I look differently than I do now. I just want to slim down a little. I have her about six outfits now.

I notice you are typing your envelopes now. What a college thing to do. Jess brings my mail in and puts it on the table for me every day now. He said hello again. I can't wait for Thanksgiving. Will you stay with me one night?

Audie Creek

I wasn't typing my envelopes, and this was my first proof Jess was into something, though I suspected it a long time before. For one thing, I felt like Aunt Audie hadn't received the letter I wrote to say I bet the reason Bubba left was because he always felt like he made her an outcast from her own family. He told me that plenty of times when

I asked him, saying I was the only exception. I was sure he told Aunt Audie, too. I suggested in that letter if she and I could find Bubba, and I assured her we could, she could go to him and convince him she was willing to leave her family if that was the problem, then maybe they could get back together. I told her I would help, but her next letter sounded like I hadn't even suggested anything. At the time I thought Aunt Audie ignored it because she couldn't bear to think about why Bubba was gone. I thought she was in some sort of denial stage, so I dropped it. But after I heard her say I was typing my envelopes, and I wasn't, I knew Jess was screening my letters.

I knew it first of all because I knew Jess was capable. The family never did talk about it much, but some similar dirty trick was why he lost Judy. Unlike Aunt Audie and Bubba, Jess and Judy never did get along. She found out he was reading her letters from a cousin, a distant male cousin he suspected of being in love with Judy and trying to convince her Jess was no good for her. Of course the family whispered saying what Uncle Jess found in those letters confirmed his suspicion. I imagine what really happened was Judy caught Jess reading her mail and threw a fit.

One of my mother's last letters before Thanksgiving:

Dearest Lena,

Had your Aunt Audie over for dinner the other night. First, she refused. Dad went and got her and

made her come. As skinny as she is, I thought she wouldn't eat because she was too nervous. Found out different. She ate as if she hadn't had a bit to eat in a week. She missed Grandma's last Sunday. That's why we were so worried. Probably hadn't had a bite in a week. Bet she is at least a five now, but is still wearing her big clothes. Don't understand, but we guess it is because Bubba took all their money. Some younger woman is living off Audie's money, no doubt. Will be there to get you Wednesday at noon. Be ready. Will be a chore for your Dad to get off work.

Love,

Mom

At first I thought about taking Aunt Audie up on her suggestion she come and get me. I knew once I got her in Jonesboro away from the family, I could talk some sense into her. I decided against it, though, because I thought Bubba might have been planning a Thanksgiving surprise where he would show up at Grandma's on Thursday, get down on his knees right there beside Aunt Audie at her place at the table, and ask her to forgive him because he just couldn't live without her. I needed to at least make sure Bubba wasn't in town, and his sister would tell me the truth.

I was ready by noon on Wednesday, but Dad wasn't there. At two o'clock, I saw our car in the parking lot

out my dorm window and started down the stairs with my suitcase. I saw Jess before I saw Dad. He would come with Dad just to upset me.

In the car on the way home I pretended I was interested in a magazine so Dad and Jess wouldn't feel obliged to make conversation with me. Jess wouldn't have it, though. He was playing the sweet uncle.

"How is school, Lena?"

"I am flunking speech," I said because it was his idea Aunt Audie major in speech. My dad flashed a frown at me because he knew I had a C.

"Shame. You know Audie could have really gone far if she had done something with her degree."

"Why didn't you go to college, Uncle Jess?"

"Same reason none of us did. No money. We weren't like you Aunt Audie who had older brothers willing to pay for it." I wanted to say, *So it wasn't because of your little accident with Judy, then?* I didn't. He went on, "Not to change the subject, but I guess you are wondering why I came with your dad?" I didn't answer the question, thinking that was enough an answer. "Well, it seems, Lena, Bubba's truck has been found abandoned in Jonesboro. We went to the police station to check it out." I still said nothing. "You haven't seen him yourself, have you?"

"No." That ended conversation until we pulled into town. Then I said, "Dad, could you drop me off at Aunt Audie's? I'll be home in a while."

He acted hurt, said, "You mean your mother put all this time in writing you and worrying about you and you are going to see your Aunt Audie first? She'll be at Mom's tomorrow."

"Just for a minute, Dad. I need to." They dropped me off, and I told them I would either have Aunt Audie drive me home or I would walk the couple of blocks. Either way, I wouldn't be long. I shut the car door, and Uncle Jess's mouth started moving. I could hear it, but not enough to understand what he was saying. I really didn't care.

I went to the side door first. That was the one I usually came in. It was locked, but I banged on it. She didn't answer. I could hear music inside, so I knew she was home. Aunt Audie and Bubba listened to music much more than they watched television. They were dancers, so they didn't have a lot of furniture in the living room to clutter up the floor space. In fact, the biggest piece of furniture was the mahogany table with pointed corners they had the stereo on.

I went to the front door, banged a few times, then used my key and stuck my head in the door. "Aunt Audie. It's Lena." She didn't answer, so I shoved my head in further and saw her. She had "Shake It Up Baby" going loud and was dancing around Bridget. Funny, that was the song she and Bubba used when they tried to teach me how to dance. That was right after they married, and I was getting ready for my first junior high school dance. I

asked them to show me how to slow dance. They just giggled and acted embarrassed, said fast dancing was more fun. I know they were lying. They probably slow danced all the time when I wasn't around. They could really dance, but it was another one of those things, like speech, Aunt Audie couldn't transfer to me.

When I caught sight of her she was skinny--so thin, pale, looked like she might crumble like a dried magnolia leaf if you hugged her, which is what I wanted to do. I could just imagine how the family called her every day, asked if she had heard from Bubba, told her they told her so. They drove her to illness. She kept on dancing, but saw me and motioned me in. Aunt Audie wasn't a hugger, so I wasn't at all disappointed she didn't stop to give me a welcome. In fact, I think she thought this was the best welcome she could give me. She danced there around Bridget, but the moves were more jerky than they were when she danced with Bubba. She was dressed like Bridget, that purple bubble skirt and jacket, which wasn't tacky at all, but was too big for her. She finished her song and began clearing away a pizza pan and an empty Girl Scout cookie box from the stereo table.

She took them to the kitchen, came back, turned three circles, and said, "Haven't I lost a little weight, now? Be proud of me. And you know what? Bridget is now bigger than I am," and she looked at Bridget and laughed as if she were making fun of her. "I had to special order this

outfit because they sold out before Bridget's got too big for me. Took three weeks to get it in, but it came, Lena, and on the same day you came home to me."

I didn't have to answer because Uncle Jess and Dad came in the front door. I should have locked it back, but I didn't. Aunt Audie said, "What are y'all doing here. Did you know Lena was home?" Just then the blank tape following "Shake It Up Baby" finished rolling through the tape player, and the other side of the tape began to play.

It was loud and scared us all, but especially Jess, who yelled, "God damn it, girl. I'm tired of coming over here and hearing you play this shit all the time. What are you trying to do?"

Aunt Audie was trying to apologize and get at the stereo at the same time, but Jess wouldn't let her. He just kept saying, "Face it, Audie, Bubba ain't coming back. Face it." My dad just stood there. Aunt Audie was crying and saying if he didn't like it she would throw the whole thing out the back door, tapes and all. Jess said anything Bubba Creek bought wasn't even worth trying to destroy, and he ripped the stereo plug out of the wall. Aunt Audie just slowly walked to the bathroom, shut the door, it seemed, because it was the only way she could stop looking at Jess and saying she was sorry.

Jess was turning around to explain to Dad how something had to be done about their little sister, so when I shoved him, he just had one foot solid on the floor and

that wasn't enough to hold him. He went flying back with two arms and a leg in the air like those people you see in catalogues and magazines falling backward into some hay or dry leaves. He looked directly at me and smiled as he fell with that carefree look on his face that said he thought there *were* leaves or hay there to make it a pleasant fall. He was doing the Sears action pose just to spite me.

Beating up Jess was something Bubba should have done a long time ago. Aunt Audie was probably just scared of Jess, and if Bubba had shown her he could handle Jess, she probably would have told Jess to get his own firewood some place else. Bubba didn't always realize what would make him a hero in Aunt Audie's eyes.

Jess's head missed the corner of the stereo table by about an inch, so he just lost his breath, but I pushed him and watched him fall, just like I knew Bubba really wanted to. When Jess got up he said, "Lena, you are an odd girl."

I brought Aunt Audie back to Jonesboro in her car that evening after Dad and Jess left. I had to get her away from those crazy people. I figured Bubba wasn't in town, or Jess would know it. I grabbed her out of the bathroom and packed her a toothbrush and comb. There was no need to pack her any clothes. She had on the only ones that fit. When she asked me where we were going, I told her we were going to Arkansas State to take a speech class. She smiled and said all right. I asked her if she wanted to take Bridget, and if she did to put her in the back seat.

She started to, but then decided, since Bridget was a headless, she couldn't make a speech anyway, so there was no need for her to go. I told her to just put the tape case in the car then, and she did, as if she had forgotten she just promised Jess she would throw it out the back door.

I plan on finding Bubba, wherever he is. I know if he just sees Aunt Audie now I have her fattened up a little to a five like me, he'll just take her in his arms and weep forever. Wherever and whenever I find him, I know he'll be miserable. I always check any house under construction because I figure he is building Aunt Audie a better house for after their re-union. Every now and then Aunt Audie asks me if I don't think something might have happened to Bubba, that he might be somewhere hurt. I tell her not to think such nonsense; he is somewhere making a dream life for the two of them. She always adds, "Well, you know you can come with us, wherever we go."

We stay close to Jonesboro because I also suspect Bubba will eventually be in touch with me to help him plan to get Aunt Audie away from the family. He always needed my help on things like that. I left a note on the mahogany stereo table for the family when we left. I started to cut the letters out of a magazine, but decided it would take too long. Instead, I typed it, typed it just for Jess on Aunt Audie's portable. It said:

Dear Ex-Relations:

I have kidnapped your lamb and the black sheep. They are no longer Devereauxs. Have no fear, I will provide well. These are my gals.

Never Yours,
(never wanted to be)

Bubba Creek

If he had planned things right in the first place, this is what Bubba would have done anyway.

VITA

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