

DQ COUNTRY: A SERIAL NOVEL

By

LESLIE JILL PATTERSON

Bachelor of Arts
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, Texas
1987

Master of Arts
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas
1989

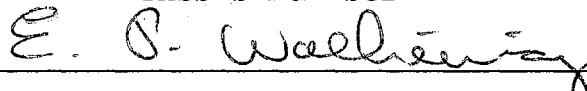
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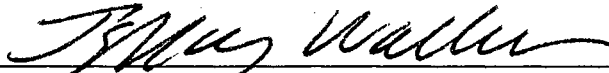
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

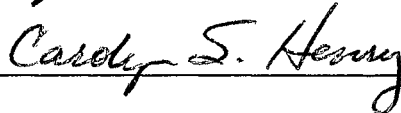
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Thesis Adviser








Dean of the Graduate College

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PREFACE

If contemporary writers and advertisers are returning to the serial format, they are doing so because of its commercial potential--particularly within visual media.¹ College students gather faithfully in dormitory lounges during lunch to watch daily episodes of their favorite soap operas, and primetime stories like Laura's murder on Twin Peaks and Jesse's battle with A.I.D.S. on Life Goes On exemplify how even weekly serials can maintain viewer loyalty throughout the regular television season. Less recognized perhaps is the use of the serial in television commercials. Resembling a soap opera, Taster's Choice advertisements narrate the growing relationship between two neighbors in a sequence of commercials released periodically, and the ads for Energizer Batteries and Sine-Aide constitute episodic narratives, albeit exceptionally short ones, told in two fifteen-second spots, the first one separated from the second by another, unrelated commercial.

¹ In his article on the economic exploitation of the serial as narrative, Roger Hagedorn traces the history of the serial format through its use in various mass media in order to show how it helps promote not only specific products but the particular medium in which it is used: "Serials appear in a particular medium precisely at that period when the real rival is not so much another serial in the same medium but another medium" (5).

Despite the financial advantages of employing the serial format, the history of installment publications indicates the authors and publishers initially utilized this technique to generate social unity as well as to procure an audience for religious movements, specific novelists, magazines, and newspapers. Sam Pickering traces the origin of part-issues back to the publication of religious tracts, claiming the widespread production of these tracts in continuous segments, during the Sunday School Movement of the 1780s and 90s, made the consumption of religious lessons and educational materials more appealing (124). Able to afford small pamphlet costs, members of the lower classes enjoyed reading these religious publications because they usually contained an instructive story, one which aroused and sustained their curiosity, not only because it provided readers with the only fiction available to them but also because it exploited the serial format, carrying its plot through many sequential pamphlets.

Just as these religious tracts helped stabilize society by satisfying the educational and economic needs of even the lower classes, so the serially published Victorian novel helped fortify social rapport by providing characters whose "lives" were witnessed and discussed across all socio-economic classes. The Victorian family sitting by the hearth, listening to monthly portions of Dickens, became a symbol for that conservative, stable era. At the same time, Michael Lund believes Victorian novelists eventually used the

serial format to reflect the age's growing sense of "cosmic isolation": the meetings and partings of the numerous characters in their fiction captured the crumbling of actual social ties ("Clocking" 25).

Because the installment publication of novels during the Victorian Age manifests the era's culture, the use of serial fiction in history and literary courses can be an effective teaching tool. Covering a wide range of texts and, therefore, time periods, cultures, and literary movements (not just Victorian ones), such courses could include texts like Byron's Don Juan, Sterne's Tristram Shandy, Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Joyce's Ulysses, and Conrad's Lord Jim, all of which originally appeared serially.² Even the recent installment publications of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude and Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities would allow for the study of contemporary fiction as it is influenced by this mode of publication.

Students enrolled in courses incorporating serial texts will also experience first-hand the consequences of reading part-issues and will subsequently learn more about the ideas behind contemporary literary criticism, particularly those concerning reader-response. Certainly what Barthes refers to as the hermeneutic code and the questions of narrative can be

² Don Vann's study of Victorian novels published serially would be helpful in teaching a course on that subject. The introductory essay discusses the technical problems faced during the composition of such novels, and then the book gives a detailed breakdown of those novels' installment publications.

pinpointed through the close study of individual installments, where certain narrative lines are either introduced, continued, or concluded (see Barthes). Even the complicity between writer and reader becomes easier to understand when the reading process slows down, when the reader must wait, while wondering what is going to happen, for the next installment to arrive before he can continue the story. As Wolfgang Iser notes in The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response, Dickens' serial readers participate in the writing of fiction when they expand the text or fill in its "blanks" (191), gaps inherent in all narratives but particularly obvious in the serial novel where breaks must span actual calendar days or months, and continuity depends upon the reader's ability to connect one installment to the next.

The reading of serial fiction also exemplifies what Stanley Fish discusses as the event of reading: the involvement of reader as writer and as anxious listener waiting for the continuance of the story proves, despite the Affective Fallacy formulated by Wimsatt and Beardsley, that literature is a movement or process. Literature is, Fish explains, a kinetic art, not an object that stands still, but "an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader" (386). The unfolding of narrative, piece-by-piece, as experienced through installment publications, is one of the best examples of language

signifying interaction rather than given, assumed meanings or facts.

And if the serial format provides an appropriate means of exploring theories of reading, it can, for similar reasons, reveal the mechanical techniques behind the writing of fiction which are more easily identified when a novel is read, as it is written, in small sections. Studying serial publications in the creative writing classroom can be an effective guide to the writing of novels. Methods of creating unity between chapters, developing characters, arranging incidents, and sustaining theme become clearer if students read a novel gradually. The author who is writing a novel for the first time can make the shift from composing short fiction to longer pieces less complicated and less intimidating if he divides his task into smaller, tighter (story-like) units. Because installment parts must stand individually, must satisfy artistic and emotional concerns alone (without the help of preceding or later installments, which are not necessarily tied to one another as the reader may enter a serial novel late or quit it early), they actually mirror the succinct wholeness--the thematic, symbolic, and narrative unity--of the short story. Using the serial technique, therefore, the new writer of novels will find himself working with familiar ideas and methods.

Because I have previously written nothing but short fiction, I decided, before I began the following novel, that I would adopt the serial format as the foundation for my

work, writing with eventual "monthly publication" in mind and even handing out the text, chapter by chapter, once a week, to the members of my dissertation committee, as a way of simulating a serial reading of my text. My reasons for writing a serial novel also include my personal interest in contemporary authors who seem particularly intrigued by current critical ideas, like those of Barthes, Iser, and Fish, and the notion that narrative structures should mock the reading process, mirror thematic content, and call attention to themselves.

I did not, however, choose a contemporary serial novel as my pattern because such novels tend to emphasize the commercial advantages of the format over its artistic ones, leaning toward the soap opera genre. Nor did I select a novel written by Charles Dickens, although he is typically and quite justifiably recognized as the master of the serial format. Instead I examined the influence of installment publication upon the composition of Henry James's The Ambassadors because that novel more closely resembles the one which I have written (for information on the serial breakdown of TA and my novel, see Appendixes A and B). Like mine, it relies solely upon a first-person narrative, and its complication arises from the placement of the protagonist in a foreign or uncomfortable environment. Rather than constructing an elaborate plot which involves a large cast of characters and many incidents, James builds a more psychological story, one which focuses upon the slow, mental

epiphany of Strether much as mine involves the emotional maturation of Maxine. There are, of course, many disparities between my work and James: I face different problems and ideas in the 20th century than he did in the 19th. Nonetheless the technical problems generated by the serial format and the content and structure of our stories remain similar.

Because James ultimately had over two years to plan, write, and revise The Ambassadors, it would seem that the serial format had no effect upon the actual composition of his novel.³ Certainly James had the privilege of writing without the pressure of serial deadlines or even the slightest risk of making any narrative decisions which could not be changed later. He was, however, aware that the novel would initially appear in segments. According to James, even the "Project of Novel," the ninety-page preliminary sketch of The Ambassadors, was itself "drawn up on the basis of the serialization of the work" ("To H.G. Wells" 406).

Several deviations from this careful "Project" reveal the effect of serial formatting. These changes, the deletions and the discrepancies, indicate James did acknowledge the limitations of installment publishing while

³ In September 1900, when Harper & Brothers of New York promised to publish The Ambassadors, James immediately began writing it and completed the book by July 1901, believing that it would be published serially in Harper's later that autumn. But Harper inadvertently gave James over two years to write and revise the novel after delaying publication until 1903, when TA finally appeared in the North American Review.

writing the book. Despite these complications, James was apparently enthusiastic about writing a serial. He describes his excitement in the novel's preface:

I had been open from far back to any pleasant provocation for ingenuity that might reside in one's actively adopting--so as to make it, in its way, a small compositional law--recurrent breaks and resumptions. I had made up my mind here regularly to exploit and enjoy these often rather rude jolts--having found, as I believed, an admirable way to it. . . . (8)

James, then, attempted to benefit from the serial format. Indeed, The Ambassadors' serial text confirms that, rather than weakening the novel, James used the plan to strengthen the novel's overall cohesion.

First, James confronted the most obvious superficial complications of the serial format--the forced monthly breaks in his narrative. In his article examining the consequences of the part-issue in another novel, Barros-Lemez explains that in every serial novel each installment break requires an "anchor" or "hook," a transition which "creates suspense and continuity, by binding the end of one episode to the beginning of the next" (107). The key to creating artistic transitions is to manipulate their potential for enticing the reader (making him wait) while simultaneously using them for thematic purposes.

James handles the installment breaks by literally marking the passage of time at each gap. New episodes open with phrases like "Two days later" (installment 8:194) or "three evenings after his interview with Mamie Pocock" (installment 10:253).⁴ The transition between installments 5 and 6, for example, presents the illusion of a forty-five minute span:

These last words were, in the liberality of their confidence, so imperative that Strether went through no form of assent; but before they separated it had been confirmed that he should be picked up at a *quarter to five*. (emphasis added, 144).

It was quite *by half-past five*--after the two men had been together in Madame de Vionnet's drawing-room not more than a dozen minutes. . . . (emphasis added, 144)

James's reliable record of "current" narrative time in the first sentence of each episode helps remind the reader where the story is, especially with the actual repetition of the hour between segments like 5 and 6. Further exploiting the inherent breaks of the serial format, James heightens his novel's theme by reminding the reader at every break that he

⁴ This preface follows the text, pagination and chapter numbers found in the Norton-New York Edition of the novel. However, installment numbers will match those of the North American Review. Subsequent references to the novel will cite page numbers only.

or she is in James's Paris where life is always moving, the train is always waiting, and the "clock of freedom" is perpetually ticking so loudly that one cannot help but keep "an eye on the fleeting hour" (131). He produces what he calls "the very most difficult thing in the art of the novelist" and, in this case, the sensation most complementary to his theme--"the real lapse of time, the quantity of time" ("To Millicent" 302).

While this method of documenting the passage of time is not the only way of shifting from one installment to the next,⁵ it benefits James's novel both mechanically and artistically. Similar to The Ambassadors, my novel incorporates transitions which show the progression of the calendar by mentioning the month in the first sentence of each part. By doing so, I hope to help the reader reorient himself to the current location of the narrative and to establish the independence of each installment by indicating the beginning of a new month, a *tabula rasa*. The reiteration of the month with the commencement of each segment, accompanied, later in the episode, by a town event

⁵ In his analysis of Bleak House as a serial novel, Lance Schachterle notes that Dickens moves from part to part by closing one number and opening the next with the same incident or idea told from different perspectives. Employing two points-of-view throughout the novel, Dickens often follows a segment ending with Esther's narrative with a new segment told from the other omniscient viewpoint. In other places, he simply shifts tone, following a serious look at an incident with a more comic view of it. The tenth number, for example, concludes with the ominous discovery of Krook's ashes and "leads to the eleventh which describes the comic inquest" concerning Krook's death by spontaneous combustion (217).

specifically related to that month, should also demonstrate the importance of the community calendar in Troupers and, therefore, hint at the destructive tendency of my characters to act in one accord, like gangs, lemmings, or troupers. In this manner, I attempt, like James, to heighten my narrative's theme even as I move (or rest) between installments.

James also provides a sense of closure for each segment of The Ambassadors which helps transfer the story from part to part. By giving the conclusions of some installments the feeling of looking forward--a subtle cliffhanger--James pushes the reader through to the next segment. Installment 2, for example, ends with "However, he would tell him all about it" (70), and the reader must wait for the third number, in which Strether tells "Waymarsh all about it that very evening" (70). Installment 3 itself ends with Strether again contemplating the words he wishes to say, this time to Chad in their first interview, and installment 4 opens with those words in a direct quotation.⁶

Other installments arouse curiosity without immediately satisfying the reader's questions at the beginning of the next portion. When James closes segment 8, Strether is escorting Madame de Vionnet to her carriage, but as installment 9 opens, Strether is having a conversation with Madame de Vionnet--several days later. Madame de Vionnet is

⁶ For other examples of this hanging closure, see installments 1 and 2, 4 and 5, and 11 and 12.

the link, but the gap is left open, at least momentarily, because the reader still does not know what happened after Strether accompanied Madame de Vionnet to her carriage and before their next conversation. Why, for example, are they meeting again? Similarly, at the close of number 9, Strether leaves Mamie Pocock waiting for Little Bilham, and at the opening of 10, Strether finds himself sitting beside Little Bilham having a conversation about Mamie. While the mentioning of both Mamie and Little Bilham make this connection smooth, the reader is not allowed to see the actual meeting between Mamie and Little Bilham, something he perhaps waited anxiously to see in installment 10. He is left hanging even after the next part begins.

Although I too wish to lure my reader into waiting for the arrival of each installment, I want to avoid closing and resuming my narrative with blatant cues like *he would tell him all about it*. In light of the contemporary reader's probable familiarity with television soap operas, endings which sound like an announcer stepping forward, out of the narrative, to say something like *Stay tuned for previews of next week's episode*, seem especially trite or easy. Nor do I wish to open a new installment by giving information which says nothing more than *Seen on last week's episode*. There is nothing artistic about a character who simply paraphrases what happened in the last number, even if he does so under the guise of a conversation with another character, a

conversation which begins with the question *Did you hear about what happened?*

Following the example of James's transitions which ask a question but delay the answer, even at the beginning of the next installment, I often close individual installments with a raised question which I do not immediately answer in the first sentence of the next segment. Instead I withhold the information by leaving a slight gap in the narrative which allows me to offer a more leisurely recapitulation of what has previously happened rather than a quick sum-up. Installment 2, for example, leaves the reader wondering, like Jerry Don, "What's going on?" Who exactly is having an affair with Gracie? What will happen to Noah now that Darlene is publically accusing him of seducing her daughter? I suppress the answer to these questions and begin Installment 3 with Noah's release from jail in order to draw any new readers into the story (i.e., Why has this man been in jail?) and in order to allow myself the opportunity to subtly reveal past events through the conversation between Noah and Maxine. The reader is not reminded that Darlene has accused Noah of statutory rape until page 2 of the new installment. He is told, through Noah's immediate dialogue, nothing more than "They said I [Noah] were a dirty old man," and it is only later, when Maxine is complaining about Darlene's power within the community, that Darlene's accusation comes out, and only then as a way of verifying her power to convince the community to embrace her rash opinions as their own. Other

endings where I raise narrative questions and delay the answer in the subsequent installment include numbers 3 and 4, and numbers 5 and 6.

More important than simply binding individual installments, James tightens The Ambassadors by enclosing the entire story in a frame where the last part answers the questions he raises in the first. Setting off Strether's infinite series of inquiries in this novel, the opening words in chapter I are "Strether's first question" (17), and in the closing scene, Maria poses her final question to Strether. "'To what do you go home?'" is her--as well as Strether's--final "unanswered question" (344). While the "Project" indicates Strether will meet Waymarsh before Maria Gostrey, the final serial text introduces Maria first, perhaps because this adjustment forms a tighter structure, places Maria, like Strether's questions, at both the novel's beginning and its conclusion. Situated at the same distance from either end of the narrative, Strether's two solitary outings (chapters V and XXX) also act as bookends, marking Strether's initiation into the novel's plot and his eventual withdrawal from it.

The first and final installments of my novel act as a frame for the entire narrative too. At the close of the initial installment, Noah asks Maxine if she can hear the Lord's voice, and the reader wonders exactly what that voice sounds like and whether Maxine will ever hear it. The answers to these questions arrive only with the advent of the final installment in which Maxine, and hopefully the reader,

comes to understand what Noah is asking at the novel's opening. Additionally, Maxine arrives in Troupers during number 1 and leaves during number 10. Roy, who is introduced as Roar the volunteer policeman in the first portion, evolves into Roar the volunteer fireman in the concluding chapter. Finally, the novel ends with the return of the heavy spring rain, the same rain which unnerves the zoo officials during the first installment after Noah sends his letter inquiring about the purchase of animals for the ark and the rain which perhaps unnerves the reader with its reappearance in the closing scene.

The raising and answering of questions and the appearance and reappearance of imagery between installments works like the overlapping cogs in a wheel to keep the serial novel moving forward--from one number to the next. While this process may offer a sense of fulfillment with each individual part, the serial novelist must eventually establish the overall plot line also, the final line along which the entire story is directed. Future chapters should be set up in earlier ones. James manages to keep The Ambassadors's narrative direction clear despite the serial breaks and despite his own preference for psychological novels, novels which build up to a mental revelation, through the stacking of conversations and the mingling of characters rather than a noticeable series of separate but causally related events.

He simply uses the installments as building blocks, each with its own narrative purpose relevant to the whole story.⁷ Installment I acts as a prologue whose function is to introduce the two competing systems--Woollett (Waymarsh) and Paris (Gostrey).⁸ The second installment presents Strether's duty or job as Mrs. Newsome's ambassador--first, as it is seen with Gostrey, and then as he thinks about it alone from the Woollett perspective. Part 2 could not work properly if James had not established the two systems of thought in the prologue. And Strether could not finally decide in favor of Chad's staying in Paris if he did not, installment by installment, confront and ask questions of each character, gaining information from every possible viewpoint. In this manner, every installment, every conversation builds on the preceding one and advances the novel's plotted destination.

Because I understand James's tendency toward a methodical revelation of a character's emotional or intellectual growth does not appeal to contemporary readers who require more action, I constructed my novel around

⁷ There are numerous methods of defining the plotline in a serial novel. In Bleak House, Dickens maintains two distinct narratives--that of Esther versus that of Lady Deadlock--until the two meet and form the final point of the novel. In The Rise of Silas Lapham, Howells also creates two different stories--one about Silas's financial decline and the other about the love triangle involving his two daughters and Tom Corey. It is when Howells introduces the Corey family into the narrative that the direction of the story becomes clear, the conflict set.

⁸ Waymarsh lives in Milrose, Connecticut. But while Strether makes a "distinction . . . between the voice of Milrose and the voice even of Woollett" (31), by the end of the novel, he learns there is no significant distinction.

several series of similar incidents that help the reader prepare for later installments. The direction of my novel can be easily followed by looking for the trail of these similar incidents: the recurring notes from the Lord, Darlene's habitual misinterpretations, the repeated references to articles in the Scoop, and the series of community events. Perhaps less noticeable are the narrative hints given by the juxtaposition of similar events in neighboring installments. Jerry Don's threat, at the close of installment 4, that he will be watching Roy and Maxine, foreshadows all the spying which happens in the next number, where Darlene spies on Roy, Roy and Maxine spy on Jerry Don and Honey, Jerry Don spies on Gracie, and Noah spies on Jerry Don. Noah's blind acceptance of Jerry Don's hallucinations as real in installment 8 predicts Maxine's acquiescence to help Darlene rid her house of wire hangers in the next episode, even though Maxine knows that doing so will not necessarily save Gracie from painful memories or improve Darlene's relationship with her daughter. And the ominous shift in tone at the conclusion of installment 6 provides the novel with its turning climax, after which the final catastrophe becomes inevitable. By building all installments around a series of events and by juxtaposing parallel incidents within neighboring installments, I attempted to draw the reader through the narrative ruptures of my story brought about by the serial divisions.

Just as these breaks interrupt the flow of the story, so they may also hinder the smooth development of characters, and the author must find a way to overcome the monthly time gap which might cause the reader to forget who characters are, how they are growing. James makes his characters quickly and easily recognizable through tags or stereotypes.⁹ Strether himself is, of course, an ambassador. Waymarsh, from the novel's very beginning, is labeled an "American statesman" (29). Miss Barrace assures Strether that she enjoys Waymarsh's company because he reminds her of her father who knew many American Ministers to the French courts: "'Oh your friend's a type, the grand Old American--what shall one call it? The Hebrew prophet, Ezekiel, Jeremiah. . .'" (77). The reader easily recognizes Waymarsh throughout the whole novel because he always acts as the prophet with a "sacred rage" who must warn everyone to quit his sins and face reality (41). Maria Gostrey, on the other hand, is tagged the European travel guide: "I'm a companion at large" (26). Strether accepts her services and so must the reader. She is the one character who realizes the truth about Chad and Madame de Vionnet's virtuous relationship and offers

⁹ In his booklength study of Dickens' serial techniques, Archibald Coolidge demonstrates how Dickens organizes his novel around two distinctive sets of characters which also help the reader categorize and remember the numerous personae who populate his novels: "Since the reader can almost always tell fairly quickly which characters are 'good' or 'bad,' he comes to every new incident with a fund of information (incomplete enough to keep him interested). When he sees a character who is 'bad' do something, he knows at once that the action probably will hurt one of the 'good' characters, but he does not know how" (97).

hints to the reader throughout the novel. Even James admits Maria Gostrey is his "*ficelle*," "the reader's friend," his authorial device or trick which aids understanding and suggests dramatic irony ("Preface" 12). Of course, the members of Woollett classify Chad as "an irreducible Pagan" (99) and Madame de Vionnet as "*the femme du monde*" (129).

Even Mrs. Newsome--a character who never physically appears--is easily recalled and expected to play some role in every installment. James tags her too. She is an "American invalid" (46) and a "Woollett swell" (50), but James also carries her through the novel with those haunting telegrams and letters which enshroud her with mystery. The reader waits, with Strether, for those horrible, demanding and threatening instructions.¹⁰ Coupled with the reader's vision of the other ambassadors from Woollett who act as reflections

¹⁰ Ironically, however, the reader never gets to read those telegrams. Only three times (another series of markers) do we learn what the letters say, and only secondhand. Never directly. These three instances, nevertheless, do more to develop her character than if James revealed the contents of her letters. The very first telegram Strether receives from Mrs. Newsome contains all of the news from home:

She abounded in news of the situation at home, proved to him how perfectly she was arranging his absence, told him who would take up this and who take up that exactly where he had left it, gave him in fact chapter and verse for the moral that nothing would suffer. (60)

Strether understands very quickly that Mrs. Newsome finds him expendable. Later, Mrs. Newsome sends him a curt one-sentence telegram which commands, "Come back by the first ship" (190). Finally, Strether realizes that, when Sarah tells him how Mrs. Newsome "has confided to my judgement and my tenderness the expression of her personal sense of everything, and the assertion of her personal dignity," she is simply repeating the "very words of the lady of Woollett" (278).

of Mrs. Newsome, her ominous communications containing strict guidelines for Strether tell the reader that if she is, indeed, an American swell, then perhaps such an American is not such a favorable representative of that country. Waiting with Strether, from installment to installment, for some word from Mrs. Newsome, the reader, by the novel's close, has seen her, like Strether, as she has always been.

James, then, successfully gives his superficial character tags deeper significance. They help recall the characters, but they simultaneously promote the novel's theme, which finally is that characters or people are not as simple as tags. Chad explains, "It's all so vague. One is when one isn't. One isn't when one is" (100). Although the other members of Woollett can never accept this theory or Chad's improvement, Strether does. For him, Chad is not a pagan or a victim. By the end of the novel, Strether feels it is Madame de Vionnet who is the victim. Even Mamie shows signs of becoming the Parisian woman rather than the mere "great parti" (55). While she may wish to mold and improve her own future husband like Mrs. Newsome and Sarah do, she accomplishes "a manner all unexpected to herself, a change of base; deep still things had come to pass within her. . . ." (250). When finally placed in the middle of Paris, in the middle of the drama, she surprisingly sides with Strether and not Sarah.

Finally, both Sarah and Waymarsh themselves engage in a relationship, enjoying Paris, even visiting the Marche aux

Fleurs together, an act which might not be regarded as proper in Woollett. In fact, Strether implies that Sarah may have fallen in love with Waymarsh and that Waymarsh enjoys her dependence upon him (242-43). Furthermore, according to the "Project," James originally planned for Sarah, Waymarsh, and the other members of Woollett to "return straightway home" without touring Europe as they do in the final text. In the end product, they are, despite their Woollett mold, capable of enjoying Europe. Eventually James undercuts every tag he has placed on his characters, tags which make a serial reading easier: one can only see, he seems to say, the appearance of others and draw *impressions*.

Adopting James's method of tagging characters, I give each of the characters in my novel some trait which is mentioned in every installment, some trait which eventually ties into my novel's theme as well. Gracie's eyes habitually signal her emotional state. They can be opened with fear or closed with anger, and the wild emotions displayed through her eyes become a recurring motif, cropping up again in the descriptions of the Chihuahuas, Honey, the profit cattle, and eventually Noah. Establishing themselves as typical unintelligent rednecks, Jerry Don often repeats the phrase Look out now as if to say something like Boy howdy, and Roy constantly practices holding a gun and hunting down criminals even though he isn't a genuine lawman. Darlene's obnoxious smile slowly begins to contrast with Noah's silly grin: she continually grins for attention, while Noah rarely feels

content enough to smile. Just as Mrs. Newsome never appears in The Ambassadors, so Mimi operates as a somewhat hidden force here. She comes into direct view only during the flashback of installment 4; otherwise Maxine mentions her only as a woman who still manages to spy, control, and punish others even though she is dead. She becomes the ultimate symbol for the vision of a dark and inexplicably angry god who, like the beast guarding the country highways around Troupers, takes pleasure in scaring everyone, chasing them down, shining bright lights of moral interrogation in their faces.

While James' skillful handling of the technical problems encountered during the composition of a serial novel serves as a guide I can follow when writing my own novel, it is his use of the installment format to actually mock the reading process while heightening his theme which particularly interests me. In fact, The Ambassadors's theme is one of the novel's strongest unifying elements. James carries the theme, and the reader, throughout the novel with several recurring words: *type, impression, see, appearance, consciousness, time, and scruple*. In chapter XI, James marks the thematic significance of these words in Strether's famous speech to Little Bilham:

It's not too late for you, on any side, and you don't strike me as in danger of missing the train; besides which people can be in general pretty well trusted, of course--with the clock of their freedom

ticking as loud as it seems to do here--to keep an eye on the fleeting hour. . . . This place and these impressions--mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I've seen at his place--well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped that into my mind. I see it now. I haven't done so enough before--and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I do see, at least. . . . [Life is] at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured--so that one 'takes' the form. . . . (131-32)

This single irrepressible speech, with its various but related topics, is the novel's thematic seed.¹¹ Of course, the novel's driving line is Strether's consciousness, impressions, and visions as he tries to live in Paris. He constantly attempts to see everything. He must if he wishes to draw fair conclusions about Chad. As the novel closes, he finally associates living with keeping ahead of the clock and knowledge with drawing one's own impressions because type-casting and confining scruples can cause one to fail or miss

¹¹ James himself confesses that the idea for The Ambassadors came to him when Jonathan Sturges related a similar speech William Dean Howells made to him while in Paris. James says he caught "a glimpse of a *sujet de nouvelle*" in the speech (140). Furthermore, James includes Sturges's narrative in his "Project of Novel," calling it "an interesting situation, a vivid and workable theme" (543).

opportunities. The reader learns this lesson along with Strether, following and perhaps even accepting James' stereotypes from installment to installment, as the narrative clock literally ticks off what precious time there is, until he learns suddenly that Chad and Madame de Vionnet are having an affair--a beautiful and admirable one.

Although it may be overly ambitious of me to work toward the same unity of narrative structure and theme in my first novel, I believe the serial format is particularly appropriate for Maxine's story. The Southern drama, with its odd and perhaps grotesque characters who lean toward and, in Darlene's case, often seek out the melodramatic, seems suited to the format's tendencies toward a soap opera storyline. Most significant to me, however, is the metaphor Walter Slatoff uses to explain the discomforts of reading:

Beneath the anguish or concern [sympathy a reader feels for a character], it is true, there may be the comforting awareness that the work is a fiction and that the ugliness and pain form part of a larger whole which modifies or justifies or even transforms them, but this awareness, I think, works something as a faith in God or a divine order does for an actual sufferer's immediate pain. In many works, it is the suffering itself which is etched most deeply in our minds. (144)

Faced with the immediate anguish he feels for fictional characters, a reader usually forgets that problems in fiction

are likely to work themselves out by the close of the narrative. We have only to remember that the writer has already completed\resolved them, and should a text generate enough suspense, we can simply "flee to the end of the work for relief" (145).

In the serial format, this possibility for relief is adamantly denied (the last pages are withheld), and the reader's trust in the writer becomes tested all the more strongly. Because my novel raises many theological concerns, the ability of the serial format to question, so blatantly, the authority behind the text, behind the narrative's eventual outcome, particularly interests me. Maxine strikes me as the type of person who would prefer to read the last page of a text first, meet the power behind it immediately, but unfortunately she, like the reader, is given only the opportunity of bumping into characters like Mimi, Darlene, and the conglomerate of Troupers who assume the identity of authority and constantly try to drive others into seeing\interpreting events the way they do. My novel asks, then, both structurally and thematically, who has control, who is God, and how can humans trust His control when He cannot be seen, when He is hidden behind the trees, behind such poor representatives as Mimi, Darlene, and maybe even Maxine?

I like the installment plan ultimately because it turns reading into an obvious process, teaching its reader, like

Strether and Maxine, to interpret slowly and, therefore,
write for himself.

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--for my own grandfather,

Patrick Mills

"The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth,
and his heart was filled with pain."

--Genesis 6:6

CHAPTER I

AUGUST

As if in some sick way my grandmother had acquired the ability, like God, to spy and discipline from the great beyond, my granddaddy Noah clung obediently to her religion after she died and began building an ark on the back forty. I would have dismissed his construction efforts as a relatively harmless although odd hobby, but in June he sent me an article from the city newspaper which reported how some joker kept telephoning the main office of the Jackson zoo inquiring how much it would cost to purchase two of every animal--one of each sex.

The officials didn't mean to frighten anyone. They were confident it was only a meaningless prank, because surely no one really believed you could shop at the zoo as if it were Piggly Wiggly. However, in light of that year's unusually heavy summer rains, the management confessed several employees were becoming a little spooked, and so they wanted the prankster to please quit disturbing them. And if Noah's taking actual steps to procure the blessed pairs of livestock wasn't enough to unnerve me, his accompanying letter was. *Dear Max,* it said, *I must be about the Lord's business,* and in parentheses, *Daniel 8: 27.*

With Mimi gone, I hoped Noah would put back on that silly grin I remembered, the one that stretched his whole face, pulled every feature, including his nostrils, into long horizontal lines. It was this old grin, the mere possibility of its reappearance, and not any genuine concern for his spiritual welfare, that convinced me to quit my job, drop my night classes at the junior college, pack the brown Samsonite I hadn't used since I left Trouper right after high school graduation, and return at the end of that summer. I wanted to cure Noah of Mimi's religion, work him over, plant something better, greener. But I could see the ark project was going to complicate things. Somehow his sudden concern for acquiring good lumber and learning exactly what a cubit equalled didn't seem playful, seemed instead downright ominous. And then, of course, there was Darlene.

The day after Noah's letter arrived, I received another letter postmarked Trouper, Texas, written in a hand I did not recognize, signed *Darlene*, a woman I had never heard my granddaddy speak of. Darlene wrote that she and several other women from the Ladies' Circle suspected my granddaddy had become involved in some sort of cult worship. Like Noah, she included several newspaper clippings in her envelope, this time from the local Trouper Scoop, intended to substantiate her concerns. Some stories described Noah's harmonica playing at the old folk's home on Sunday afternoons, and several others spoke about the alleged cult activities occurring in Trouper. Darlene wrote that Noah's

willingness to continue visiting the old folk pointed to his desire to maintain a walk with the Lord, but that the other stories suggested the temptation to turn away was currently very prevalent in the city. She believed Noah was struggling with such temptation and strongly urged me to please come and set him right with the Lord. *P. S. He needs a strong shepherd*, she said.

It was hard to take Darlene very seriously when all the articles referred to the participants in the cult worship services as *unknown* suspects, an exceptionally broad term which could have included Darlene herself. I did, however, learn some specific facts about this woman from those articles. It turned out she was multi-talented. She could give a good manicure, sing a fine Loretta Lynn, and cook the best and fastest DQ Country Morning breakfast in the county. I gathered all this, long before I actually met her in August, because, to verify her authority on Noah's spirituality, she also included several articles which mentioned her Christian charity and good works. In fact, some of the clippings spoke of both Darlene and my granddaddy, and to avoid confusion, she had most graciously color-coded the relevant passages, highlighting the tidbits about him in blue, those about herself and her many talents in pink.

Her letters came for the rest of the summer, about once a week. The handwriting remained big and open--full, curly letters with circles instead of dots for periods and lower

case is, and always there was one clipping about cult worship as well as the standard report from the old folk's home (with her highlighters, Darlene continued to differentiate between Noah's harmonica playing and her free manicures). Around July 4th, Darlene began sending articles on the appearance of gang-related activities in Troupers. Seeing as the town's population peaked at 515 people, I was finding it hard to believe enough Troupers even existed to form two rival gangs and therefore make their activities newsworthy. Because these articles were highlighted in blue, I guessed I was to assume my granddaddy was heading up those gangs, but Darlene never commented on the sudden inclusion of such information in her files on Noah.

Slowly but surely, it dawned on me that when Darlene added her customary postscript to every letter, she did not mean that Noah's shepherd should be a shepherdess. Otherwise, she would have remedied the situation without my help. She was, obviously, a capable and talented woman. She must have mistakenly decided I was male when she heard my granddaddy refer to me by my nickname--Max, and not wanting to embarrass her on paper, I continued to let her think it, told her only that I worked at General Dynamics (omitting the fact I was a receptionist) and that I had never been married (and so, she must have been thinking, was available for a divorced woman like herself). And always, I printed my short responses, closing them with *Sincerely, Max* rather than *Your Christian Sister, Maxine*.

No, I wanted to see her face when she first found out I wasn't a shepherd, an elder of the church, a mechanical engineer making a hundred grand a year. So it was understandable that when she opened her front door for her first meeting with Max and found Maxine standing on her front stoop, she immediately disliked me. I could feel it the way a woman can always feel it when she meets another woman who instantly dislikes her, recognizes her as competition. Maybe it was her quick recovery from the initial shock, her saying even as the door was still swinging open, "Why Max must be your nickname. How sweet. I always wanted one myself."

After that though, Darlene hid her animosity well. For an entire hour, we drank coffee, ate buttermilk pie, and pretended we were friends. It was that confusing drive, the one behind every woman's desperate desire to be friends with her fellow females even though every bone in her body tells her that, because another woman is a woman, you should never trust her. She showed me a picture of her sixteen-year-old daughter Gracie, who, she confided, was dating an untrustworthy older man ("One of your granddaddy's hired hands," she added) and she didn't know how to handle it, wondered if I might have any advice. She was glad to see I loved Noah enough to come to his rescue, and if I were going to stay in town for awhile, she suggested I could find a job at the Dairy Queen where she worked. She'd put in a good word for me.

Only once did she slip. She asked if I believed in the powers of feminine wiles, and when I said I wasn't quite sure what she meant, she said, "Well, I like to think of myself as a charmer. I'm a cover girl. And if you'd let me, I'd love to do your make-up. Give you some color." Then she waited. "Course it's too bad your fingernails won't grow, otherwise I'd give you a pretty manicure." I gave her that. I knew it was all an insult, and she knew I knew, the way we both knew I had purposefully let her believe I was male.

Sitting in Darlene's front parlor that morning, feeling the wind sift through the screened windows, smelling the humid, heavy odor of hot August pine, and listening to the weary clack-a-clack of the miniature windmill outside, I began remembering every important thing I used to know about Trouper--not just the way the women, like Darlene, operated--but the way the entire town worked.

I recalled, number one, how anything you did inside Trouper was known by everyone before you could drive yourself home, and if it was something controversial, it appeared in the next week's paper. Number two, the highway going into Trouper ran both ways, and you should never forget it because, and this was number three, if you stayed too very long (for example, over-night), you'd find yourself thinking like one of them, like a Trouper. You'd relax, lose sight of the way civilized people lived, move backward about twenty, thirty, a hundred years to that place where people believed God spoke directly to them, telling them who was chosen and

who wasn't, who was to build an ark and who wasn't allowed on it. You'd become Darlene or my grandmother Mimi, and you'd begin to confine creatures like Noah.

My grandmother started working on Noah at 6:00 a.m., the morning after my mother quit Trouper and forgot to take me and her purple toothbrush with her. Her goodbye note said she left the toothbrush in case she forgot to pack one the next time she came for a visit. She didn't mention me. Waving the letter and then her finger in front of Noah's face, my grandmother shrieked, "Maybe she plans on bringing a daughter with her every time she comes home. You know," and she kept waving that finger in his face for several seconds before the words came, "You know--she learned this from you. From your family. I don't know how. But trash. Our daughter's white trash."

And she began watching his every move, certain that sooner or later his methods of teaching evil to children--specifically to her babies--would resurface in his dealings with me. It was entrapment. She let him take me to the grocer's, the feed store, the cow sale, even the men's Bible class on Sunday mornings, and occasionally, at random intervals, I would look up and she would be there watching from behind the Hostess display, the baler, or the baptistry curtain. It was, and I give her this, quite amazing because she consistently beat us home even though several times I knew Noah grabbed me up and practically threw me in his

pickup just to race her back, get under her skin, make her heart pump quickly, nervously, as if the ranch were base and he could prove she was spying if he could only get there first, stand waiting in the kitchen for her to come rushing in the back door--too late.

Finally it came down to the tunes he sang while working. Hymns, or even lullabies, were not Noah's strong suit. His vocal repetoire consisted solely of two or three ditties my grandmother called *carousing* songs. At the age of thirteen, I already recognized Noah's quick and biting wit, and I always wanted him to tell her they were, after all, songs of the spirits and she should appreciate them. Instead, Noah did his best to disguise them by singing slowly and softly, as if a simple shift in tempo and volume could transform their words into ones of virtue.

*Well yonder stands Little Maggie
With a grand glass in her hand.
She is drinking away her troubles, oh Lord,
And fooling another man.*

Of course, as soon as my grandmother realized what exactly Noah was singing, she outlawed it--at least from my hearing. Later, when I turned sixteen and Mimi conceded she had done all she could to teach me right and it was time for me to decide whether or not listening to filthy trash songs was spiritually beneficial, I still never heard Noah sing "Little Maggie" in any other voice but a cautious whisper.

Along with the coiled rattlesnake tattooed on his chest and the smart western clothes he wore to church Sundays instead of the customary suit, Little Maggie indicated Noah

had once been something more restless than the stiff proselyte Mimi had molded. I adopted Maggie as a secret code, believed that whenever I joined my granddaddy in singing about her he knew immediately I admired him, loved the brittle odor of hay on his jacket, the dried half-moons of dirt collected under his nails, and the faint hints of something exceptional or rowdy in his nature. I spent the first half of my teenage years waiting for Noah to admit that my mother, having pushed the family's rebellious nature too far, had become worthless, that Mimi's attempts to teach me and him piety were worthless in the other extreme, and that only I knew how to love. But I passed my remaining teenage years in Trouper, under his roof, wishing he would never figure it out, having suddenly understood that his awakening would mean the loss of something even more valuable than his ability to laugh and tease. I began praying at night that he would remain unaware, spend the rest of his life imagining everyone loved him in the same shy, patient manner he felt for others, and that perhaps, if Mimi could die first, he would laugh again, having safely retained his ignorance.

What I saw in Noah, when I returned to Trouper that summer for his last year, initially scared me. He didn't find his laughter again with Mimi passed away, and his steady mental deterioration mapped out, in my mind, the loss of emotions resulting from the shocking discovery that you have spent your entire life doing for people who did not notice. It never occurred to me, and obviously not to Darlene either,

that his sudden eccentricities might be nothing more than the normal consequences of aging.

Instead of wearing his false teeth, he began carrying them in his back pocket, insisting they were safer there although he quite frequently sat on them. He adamantly refused to go to sleep at night unless he had rubbed his feet with Vicks and placed white cotton socks on them, going so far as to send me into town one night at ten p.m. because he had lost his jar of Vaporub. He swore the Vicks helped his feet breathe and did not crack even a slight smile when I suggested that perhaps his feet wouldn't suffocate if he didn't wear socks in bed. Even more strange was his sudden mispronunciation of words I did not recall him having problems saying before. Light bulbs became light blubs, heifer became halfer, and sausage and biscuits (his favorite breakfast) became soggy biskicks. I called his new hand Roar for an entire week before reading in the paper that his name was Roy; Noah simply said it wrong.

It was this man Roy who warned me Noah's odd behavior was not just something Darlene concocted in order to spice up the next meeting of the Ladies' Circle. When I left Darlene's house my first day back in Trouper, finally heading out to my granddaddy's place, the mid-morning heat of August still held a moist fog down on the road. Thick strands of it swept across my car and gathered at the road's curves and hilltops, making everything beyond those points seem like

vapor, like the world still forming. Occasionally the hairy limbs of the pine trees bordering the road poked through the fog, and once I turned a corner and discovered a line of telephone poles had split open the heavy tangle of trees, forming a clean sweep where the fog was slowly giving up.

An oncoming car burst suddenly from the fog, honked and blinked its headlights, and I figured there was a cop up ahead. I had forgotten that livestock often wandered on to the farm roads, so it was a miracle I didn't broadside that cow and Brahma bull when I rushed around the next corner. Unfortunately, Trouper policemen were frequently called out to remove loose cattle and swine from the country highways (as well as neighborhood streets), and there were three squad cars parked just beyond those animals.

One officer flagged me down. He was not in uniform and I found it pathetic that he had nothing better to do on his day off than respond to calls about loose cattle. He grabbed the crown of his Stetson, took it off, and held it to his heart: he was greeting a lady. Then he placed his hand on the roof of my car, spread his legs slightly, and lowered his head almost inside my window. "Think you were driving a little too fast? Fog and all."

I hated policemen. I hated that they, like Mimi, could make me feel guilty, squirmy. "Yes, sir." And I handed him my driver's license so that he would just stop talking and write my ticket quickly. If I'd been a serious smart aleck, I would have asked him how fast he clocked me, knowing the

Trouper P.D. didn't have funds for such equipment. You could tell from reading the Police Notebook printed in the paper, a column which related the horrid and numerous crimes committed weekly. Daily. *Policemen responded to burglar alarm at middle school and found teacher inside. Officer Thompson filed reports on vandalism: two bikes were knocked over at the city park. Sheriff answered 911 call about a break-in and arrested a man holding a sandwich. They were small town, small time lawmen.*

This one took my license and headed over to a uniformed officer, but suddenly came back to my car, stuck his head fully in my window so he could get a closer look, and said, "Hey, you're Noah's Max. But you're a girl."

"I'm twenty-one now. You can't call him." Already I was frantic to find a way of explaining to Noah my appearance in the Notebook when I hadn't even been in town twenty-four hours.

"Not going to. Not even gonna give you a ticket. I'm Noah's hand. He ever talk about me?"

"You're Roar? He's told me some. He didn't tell me you were a police officer."

"I'm not. Just a volunteer." He placed his hat back on his head, thumped the brim, leaned back on his boots, and grinned. "Bet you never thought anyone actually made a citizen's arrest. Did you?" And he made a gun with his thumb and first finger, pointed it at me, clicked his tongue and winked. "Be honest."

"You're kidding. You just go around arresting people? 'Stop. In the name of Roar. Stop, or I'll shoot.' And they don't laugh in your face? Blow your head off? You know, with one of those shotguns they display around here in the back windows of their pickups?"

"No. But I myself shot a man yesterday."

"You shot a man? You don't have a badge, but you shot him?"

"I shot him. He was robbing Bob's. I called 911 first. They was slow in responding."

"So you shot him." Clearly I was still in shock, but I nodded my head while I said this, thinking it made me look as if I hadn't noticed this guy was a fruitloop, that I actually understood why he, an average citizen who shot a man just the day before, wasn't himself currently behind bars.

"I'll be in the paper tomorrow," he said. "You ever hear of the Texas Rangers? I'm gonna be one someday."

"I'm sure." And although fearful that Roar the volunteer policeman would find me unappreciative that he, with all his authority, was letting me off the hook, I went ahead and rushed it, "Am I free to go?"

"If you're heading to the ranch, Noah ain't there. Those are his cattle." He jerked his head in the direction of the bull and cow still standing in the middle of the road. "He's to the sale in Jacksonville."

"How did those two get out?"

"Not sure. Noah was going to sell them today, but when he backed into the sale barn's loading dock, his trailer were plumb empty and the gates was flying wide open. I would have swore he just forgot to put them in. You know," and he tapped his right temple, "he's getting old. But then me and my buddies in blue over there found those cattle right here. Obviously he got this far with them. I'll have to look at the trailer. Must be something wrong with them gates."

"Is Noah okay? I mean, did someone do this to trick him? Someone in town told me there was some gang activity going on around here."

"Let me guess." He held up his hand. "I know. Darlene's already been filling your ears with that crap she prints in the paper. She's just dying for some excitement around here. A good story." He waved a real officer over. At least, he wore a uniform. "Jerry Don, come on over here. Darlene's trying for that Pulitzer again."

I remembered Jerry Don from high school. My girlfriends and I always made fun of him because he was one of those gangly boys who looked like they didn't have a butt when they wore Wranglers but wore them anyway. He had smooth sissy hands too, doughy, with fat fingertips and slightly long nails. His hair was curly--the way girls always want theirs--and he kept it cut so short it looked like fuzz. He told me he knew Darlene had been sending me letters. Her daughter Gracie told him and he had warned Noah, although Darlene herself admitted it to Noah a couple of weeks back. "Jesus,

she come right out to the ranch, wanting to interview Noah about his leading role in gang activities. The month before, she wanted him to be a cult worshipper. Noah's not involved in any gang wars. I will tell you this though." He leaned closer to my window, placing his chubby hand on the door, and whispered, "I been worried about Noah's vision lately. I think maybe he couldn't see to latch them gates tight."

It didn't matter that he'd spoken quietly. Roar the volunteer was on his toes, had his ears and eyes open, radar on. "Me too. I pulled him over the other day running through a stop sign. Old devil smiled as big as an oh-possum, then hand me his wallet because he couldn't see enough to tell which card was his driver's license. If that don't just scare the hell out of you. Blind fool driving down the road."

"Shit, you ain't kidding," Jerry Don said.

"How are you so close to Noah now?" Jerry Don didn't hang out at the ranch when I lived there, and for all I knew he was as big a nut as Darlene. I had already classified Roar as such. Roar and Darlene would, in fact, make a fitting couple but I didn't dare suggest it because any spawning from that union wouldn't help raise the average Trouper I.Q. any.

"I volunteer to help my buddy here." He elbowed Roar. "Sometimes. When Noah's got more than any one man can handle."

"We used to be in business together. Jerry Don and me. Dirt work," Roar added.

Dirt work. It amazed me that a man, even a Trouper, even Roar, would consider making a living by moving or selling dirt. "Well, I've never seen so many volunteers. I mean," and I was really brave here, "don't you think, Roar, that if you spent less time playing cops and robbers, you might have caught those gates?"

Jerry Don grinned. "Oo-ee, buddy! Look out now." And he slapped my trunk as I drove off.

When I found Noah at the sale barn, he was sitting on a bale of hay, filing his false teeth with an emory board. "Noah, what are you doing to your dentures?"

"I fell on them."

"Let me see." I lifted his face into the light so I could see if he had split open his lips or chin in the fall. His face was still deeply tanned, but I could see the pale skin of his chest where his shirt collar was unbuttoned. It wasn't a pink, healthy-baby flesh--skin new to the sun; it was sickly, blue, old skin that had just always been hidden from the sun. "Does your head hurt?" I asked. "Did you bite your tongue? Are your eyes dilating?"

"My butt hurts. Nothing like getting bit in the hiney with your own teeth."

"What? I don't understand."

"I were carrying my teeth in the back pocket of my breeches. I fell at the top of those little stairs over there. Slid the rest of the way down on my backend. I chipped this one." He pointed at a molar.

I was afraid I didn't really want the answer, but had to ask. "What were your teeth doing in your back pocket, Noah?"

"God told me to keep them there."

"God told you? A booming voice from heaven said, 'Noah, carry your dentures in the back pocket of your pants?'"

"No, don't be silly. He left a note. On the tractor in the barn."

"I see. Did He give you a reason?"

"They'd be safer."

"Safer from what?"

"I don't know. I's not to question the Lord."

"Did the Lord write and tell you to build that ark too?"

"Yes, He did. But He told me to halt construction for a spell. Left those instructions in a note on the tractor also." He looked around, suspicious, and then grabbed my sleeve, pulling me down to sit beside him. Staring off, around the other side of me, he whispered but barely moved his lips, "I found a note in the trailer after they discovered the cattle missing. Act like you need a dollar."

"What?"

"Shh. Ask for a dollar," he whispered.

"Can I have a dollar?"

"You need a dollar? Sure, Max. I think I can spare a dollar." He spoke quite loudly then, wanting to make sure everyone heard I needed some money. He dramatically handed me a dollar, and then whispered again, "Look at it."

I unfolded the bill and inside found a small piece of paper with large handwriting that barely fit on the little space. *Thou art to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, both male and female, to keep them alive with you. Since thou already ownest them, better hang on to these two.*

"Genesis 6: 19." Noah poked me in the leg, trying to push those words in deeply.

"What? What is this?"

"That first sentence is from Genesis 6: 19. He knows the good book, don't He?"

"Who? Who wrote this?"

"The good Lord did."

"Well the good Lord wrote the good book according to most good people, so I guess He ought to be fairly familiar with it."

"Indeed."

I looked at Noah. I looked at the note. I put my hand on his lap to prepare him. "Noah, God doesn't write personal memos. You don't really think He wrote this, do you? Isn't there someone who wants to play a joke on you or something? Maybe Roar?"

He quickly took back the note, glanced at it one last time, and stuffed it in his pocket. "Why would God play a joke on me?"

I shook my head. I took one of his hands, held it between mine, outlined the thick blue veins trying to burst through his skin because, over the years, he'd repeatedly scrubbed it with Lava soap until it seemed as though only one frail layer remained. "You're right, Noah. God doesn't play jokes."

Noah leaned toward me, stared at me. I could feel his breath on my face, hear him exhale, and for a moment I thought he was trying to decide whether or not to kiss me. But later that evening when he was driving me out to look at the ark, he again bent forward--over the steering wheel, into the windshield, and the sun shining straight in his face, made his reflection appear in the glass, made it glow like Moses' blazing vixage after the bush as if some divine enlightenment had been delivered directly to him from the Lord. There was something urgent about it. Noah felt he was late, and he wanted to show me how pressing every little thing was, wanted me to see it in his face like he could. It reminded me of those mad, dashing races against Mimi when he caught her spying--only now, crossing the finish line first seemed to be eternally significant, somehow final.

We pulled around the last of the pine trees that separated the front half of the ranch from the back. The ark was nothing more than a large, heavy shadow in the setting

sun, but insistent nonetheless. Noah seemed calmer. Just seeing the ark, knowing it was really there, quieted him, and he began singing the slow tune I remembered but suddenly felt uncomfortable hearing. *Well yonder stands little Gracie, with a grand glass in her hand. She is drinking away her troubles, oh Lord; doing the best she can.* Grabbing my hand this time, he asked, "Are you listening, Max? Stop waiting for a deep rumbling voice. Listen carefully."

CHAPTER II

SEPTEMBER

In September, about one week before the Back-to-School Revival at the Mount Zion Christian Church, Noah found another hand-written message from the Lord on his tractor. *So that you may know I am the Lord your God, thou shalt bury a tire (size 235\75R15) and a sack of household trash eight feet below the ground, and within thirty days, I, the Lord your God, shall cause it to arise.*

I had just completed a twelve-hour shift (7 to 7) at the Dairy Queen and was taking a nap when Noah came to show me the note. Granted a full day at the Dairy Queen in a town no bigger than Trouper sounds like a piece of cake, certainly nothing you would immediately call a long or harrowing day, until you remembered there were no other restaurants in town and Darlene, Trouper's main source of gossip, worked the grill and passed out the daily lowdown for free to all paying customers. I served the breakfast crowd, the lunch crowd, and the dinner crowd, which--because it was all the same crowd--meant I had already suffered through Roy and Jerry Don three times that day. They did this Bert and Ernie routine. I confess I laughed, at first, when I realized Jerry Don's wiry patch of dark hair stood straight up, naturally, like Bert's, and then Roy took off his Stetson, got his own hair

wet, using the water he was drinking, and fanned it out to look like Ernie's. But their act lost its appeal after the second time, and by dinner I was wondering just how many hours they spent watching Sesame Street even though their act was a little too violent, more like the Three Stooges.

So when Noah woke me from my nap and asked me to go get Roy as well as a shovel and the kitchen garbage, I was simply stunned. There's nothing like being awakened from that middle part of sleep, the heavy part which leaves you feeling like a newborn baby who can't even hold up its head much less swing its legs over the edge of the bed, stand on them, and then work a shovel.

Noah was carrying his dentures in his back pocket as usual, and opening my eyes to see those thin lips gathered and sucked into a dark empty mouth spitting out the words of Jesus from a piece of notebook paper seemed more like a nightmare than any divine disclosure. I momentarily thought I was dreaming something about Noah's soul telling me how to put his physical body to rest. "You hear? Get Roar. Tell him to fetch the shovel and we'll bury it near the ark. I think that's right and proper. Don't you?" Noah shook me again. "Hey, you awake?"

"Bury what, did you say?" I asked.

"A tire. Size 235\75R15. And don't forget the kitchen garbage."

"Noah, wait." I sat up on my bed, fully awake. "What are you talking about?"

Noah showed me the note. "It's so people will believe. Just wait 'til that tire come up." Then he looked a little disappointed. "It's not much though. Not really. I mean, he could've moved a mountain."

"It's dark outside. You want to bury a tire now? Can't you wait 'til tomorrow? There doesn't seem to be any time deadlines. Do we even have a tire?" I was trying any excuse I could. Darlene's rumors about my granddaddy and the ark were finally starting to quieten, and Darlene had personally invited Noah to participate in the Revival--to lead the very last invitation song. The big finish, she called it. But this burying a tire and some trash in the dark, this was exactly the kind of thing that made the newspaper, that labeled one a loony-tune or a cult worshipper. Certainly there was no need to share this project, literally the family garbage, with Roy or any other outsider. "Now, let's think rationally for a minute, Noah," I said.

But he insisted and fifteen minutes later I had driven over to Roy's place in the west corner of the ranch and was knocking on his door. Noah didn't trust me with the Lord's notes (I wasn't allowed to handle any of them for more than a few minutes at a time), so I didn't have it with me. Not that it mattered. Showing Roy a piece of notebook paper containing a message as silly and specific as *bury a tire (size 235\75R15)* wasn't going to prove anything, would only make me look like more of an idiot for having thought it would.

I wasn't thrilled about sounding like some nut you'd find on a talk show, someone with an unbelievable caption plastered under her face on national, daytime television. *Maxine: claims the Lord personally ordered her grandfather Noah to build a second ark.* So when Roy answered the door, I had no choice but to take an accusative tone in order to preserve some of my dignity. "I hope you're happy. It's your own fault. Sending Noah messages from the Lord. I know it's you. Well, it's backfired on you this time, because guess who gets to dig the eight-foot hole? You, that's who." And I pushed the shovel at him. "He's waiting for you by the ark."

I had to hand it to Roy though. He didn't laugh or snap at Noah once that night, even when Noah kept crowding him, blocking his shovel as he tried to move it smoothly in and out of the hole, saying over and over, "Hurry, son. Hurry. You got to throw your shoulders in to it." Even I wanted to shake my granddaddy after Roy stopped digging once and said he figured that hole would do, and Noah pulled out his Stanley measuring tape and told him he was a couple inches shy. Roy just winked at me and said, "Two more inches coming up."

Only when the tire was finally buried according to the Lord's specifications did Noah relax, seem suddenly sleepy. He was singing our song again. *Well yonder stands little Gracie, with a grand glass in her hand.* I could tell by the way Roy leaned forward and tightened the muscles in his brow

he was listening carefully to the words, trying to make sure Noah really had changed *Maggie* to *Gracie*. It made him nervous like it did me, and he joined Noah, attempting to sing *Maggie* over Noah's *Gracie* whenever they came to the chorus, as if by singing loud enough he could drown out Noah's mistake.

By that evening, I had learned a little more about Roy. I knew his name was not Roar, like Noah had said, because it appeared in the Trouper Scoop (I had to assume it was spelled correctly there) my first week back in town, in an article written by Darlene, tooting him as the most likely candidate for Citizen-of-the-Year in light of his role in the apprehension of that robber at Bob's Five-and-Dime, that man he told me he shot. His picture appeared in the paper again, my second week in town, when the Scoop ran a series of articles preparing for the kick-off of football season at Trouper High. Roy was the president of that year's Athletic Booster Club, and his photograph showed him sporting his high school letter jacket and holding a football like he was about to make a Hail Mary pass--only he looked awkward and uncomfortable. I simply decided he'd never played football, had lettered in some other sport, but Darlene told me he'd been the star quarterback who took Trouper to the state championship three years after I graduated. She said she found a whole bunch of articles on him in back papers one day. He'd apparently come from nowhere, moving from an even

smaller town to this one for his senior year, and had initially made a lot of townfolk mad when the coach named him quarterback over the mayor's son who'd been playing ball for Trouper since he was twelve.

"I really go for athletic men. Don't he look fine in that letter jacket?" Darlene asked. "You should see those old pictures. He hasn't changed a bit. Still has that square, football butt. The kind looks good in Wranglers. You know, fills them up."

Even though it'd been six years, I guessed Roy didn't look like he'd aged too terribly much. His stomach was firm, hadn't expanded, moved out and over his belt, and he did look good in his Wranglers. His face still had that teenage look too--no wrinkles, no 5 o'clock shadow. Young--except for that awkward look in his eyes, a discomfort which couldn't have been in those old photographs. An eighteen-year-old, star quarterback shouldn't look clumsy holding a ball. I gave him credit for being slightly embarrassed at being elected President of the Trouper Athletic Boosters only six years after his graduation, as if rubbing elbows with would-be athletes that were twenty, maybe thirty years older than him was a big honor, the highlight of his life since he entered the real world. "I think he looks sad," I told Darlene.

She jerked the paper away from me and looked closely at the picture again. "You crazy," she said. And when he came in the Dairy Queen for dinner that night, Darlene told him I

said he looked sorry. "Well just what *did* you say then?" she asked after I told her she lied.

Roy stared at me. "Well? What did you say?"

I looked around toward the grill area, hoping there would be some burgers for me to flip or fries to pull out of the fat. "I said you looked, you know--" I stalled, raising my eyebrows to indicate Roy should know what I meant, but obviously he didn't. "You looked unhappy. I said you looked sad. Not sorry. I didn't say sorry."

"I'm not unhappy," Roy said. "That's crazy. Why would I be sad?"

"I told her," Darlene said. Then, looking at me, "I told you."

But I knew I'd been right, and so did Darlene, when Jerry Don came in ten minutes later, and Roy grabbed his arm and led him out the door before Jerry could order, before Roy's food even came off the grill. After that evening, Roy began coming in for every meal, began hovering over me, cracking one-liners constantly as if to prove he really was happy. He started taking off his letter jacket and leaving it in his truck. I began to get the feeling Roy's insistence that I above all people knew he was content was something more than a moral victory for him. Maybe it was the way he told me my short haircut was sassy. Maybe it was the way he liked to hear me explain the difference between a Dilly Bar and a Buster Bar. Or maybe it was the way he sometimes

complained about what I did as if he were a neglected spouse or lover.

"You never call me Roar any more," he would say. "That was so cute."

Even more disturbing was the feeling I had that Darlene was completely frustrated with Roy and completely irate with me. It didn't even occur to me Darlene had an eye for him until one day when he was walking out the door, she said, under her breath but just loud enough for me and no one else to hear, "Guess he likes the idea of playing the sad cowboy."

After that, Darlene tried everything. She started with my make-over. She began toting a tackle-box full of Cover Girl to the Dairy Queen, announcing as she walked in the door each morning how she felt fresh as Kristie Brinkley and if I'd just let her, she'd teach me her tricks. "You need to pamper yourself," she said. "I bathe with Caress and brush my teeth with Close-Up. You got to flaunt your feminine charms."

And when I finally convinced her I thought men preferred the clean, Ivory look, she made herself over. She cut her hair short--like me. She stopped painting her nails bright reds and hot pinks, began using softer colors, even clear polish sometimes--like me. She slowly transformed her middle-aged wardrobe of loose sundresses and warm-up suits covered with puff-up painted cows and ducks to more of a twenty-something rodeo queen wardrobe of kelly-green ropers,

Rockies, and crisp white western shirts--like me. She began looking, in other words, a whole lot like me.

Work became really tense. I felt compelled to be exceptionally friendly to Darlene and cold to Roy, to let Darlene know I was on her side, wasn't the least bit interested in catching her man. I went so far as to pretend I was confiding in her, telling her what kind of man I dreamed about, making sure the details I gave were everything Roy wasn't and adamantly, hysterically almost, insisting I wouldn't settle for anything less than my ideal.

It didn't work. She talked less and less, and then she started delegating all the nasty chores to me: cleaning the fryer and the women's restroom. I could have taken this, but then she started doing something I have always hated watching other women do. She started flirting with Roy. Not casually. But desperately. Whenever Roy came in, she began her routine. It didn't matter if she was working the register or taking someone's order. If Roy walked in the door, her eyes stuck to his face, and her mouth pulled into this wide, open, show-all-your-teeth smile. And she would not, for any reason, look away from him until he acknowledged her pretty smile, said hello, and stared back at her for at least ten seconds. She didn't care if the customer tapped his fingers on the counter and said, "Excuse me. You were taking my order." She didn't care if the drive-thru line was hanging out the parking lot in to Main Street or if the kitchen itself was on fire. An ambulance racing down the

street, with its sirens wailing and blood pouring out the doors and windows wouldn't have turned her head. She came to a dead standstill until he gave her the full ten seconds.

Roy, of course, was stupid. He didn't know what her smile meant; he could only sense that, when he turned away from her stare after just five or six seconds, she was still watching him, and so he would turn back and smile again, nodding his head, until she was satisfied and quit grinning. One time he actually asked, "What? Is my fly open?" He didn't even catch it when Darlene begged him to help keep an eye on her daughter Gracie, whom she just knew was dating an older, experienced man. She thought if he would come around her house more maybe he could get something out of Gracie, maybe catch her coming or going with the mystery man. And should any information come his way about her daughter while he was out on the town, she said she'd really appreciate his dropping by to fill her in. Anytime. Day or night.

Darlene was completely exasperated after Roy, taking her plea for help seriously, began tailing Gracie during the afternoons and evenings, before and after supper. He kept a notebook with the exact times of Gracie's arrival or departure from the house and wore dark shades, as if no one in town recognized that candy-apple red, extended-cab "Dooley" with the lighted roll bar on top, parked only two houses down the block from Darlene's. And for a couple of days, Darlene was satisfied with everyone in town thinking Roy parked down the street because he was trying to hide the

fact that something was going on between him and her. Eventually though, Darlene became bored with Roy's investigation, because no matter what tactic she tried, no matter what subject she brought up, Roy dropped by the Dairy Queen between meals only long enough to read his notes, as quickly and professionally as if they were the official minutes of some uptown board of director's meeting, and then be off again because he didn't want to lose Gracie's trail.

Darlene resorted to more dramatic gestures. She must have decided an ex-star quarterback would find a woman in the spotlight highly attractive, so she worked on turning herself into the queen bee of the only event she could ever be queen bee of--the Back-to-School Revival. Never mind that Roy was not particularly interested in religion, especially when reviving it was going to interfere with a Friday night football game. He believed hard, physical labor was the most reverent from of worship. But Darlene volunteered her services nonetheless and made sure Roy noticed all the attention she was getting.

She ran her own picture in the paper and turned the Dairy Queen into the Revival Headquarters so Roy could see her in action at every meal. She began scheduling outlandish events that had never been seen at a Trouper revival. She planned a debating forum and started a committee whose goal was to decide if the song "When We All Get to Heaven" should be changed, in every hymnal, to "When the Saved Get to Heaven." The owner of our franchise threatened to dock every

employee's pay after Darlene went so far as to donate free Blizzards for the Ice Cream Social she'd scheduled after the last sermon on Sunday night.

I was on the verge of telling her she was making a fool of herself, that there was absolutely no way a twenty-four-year-old, ex-star quarterback would ever be interested in a thirty-one-year-old divorced mother of a sixteen-year-old daughter. In a town like Trouper, a guy like Roy would more probably go out with that teenage daughter and earn town approval for having done so much sooner than if he dated the older, experienced mother. It was okay for a young man to teach, but he should never be taught.

And then it happened. The day after Roy helped Noah bury that tire, he began teasing, instead of praising, Darlene's religious folderol, as he called it. I guessed he was feeling pretty cocky about everything, like he had everyone right where he wanted them, me and Noah included. "Darlene, sweetheart, you going to have a breakdown. Getting all excited," he said. And turning to me, "I tell you, Max. You should see her at these things. She sits on the old-timer row, right next to Noah, and you can hear her saying, 'Amen' or 'Lord, don't listen to that' depending on how she feels about the doctrine being taught."

I could picture Darlene acting like that at a religious gathering, but I could also tell by the blank look on her face she was deciding whether she should be angry or hurt that Roy just described her as an old fogey Bible thumper.

And it wasn't like Roy himself was anything special, didn't have his own quirks. "Sure, Roy, " I said. "Like you and Darlene are so different. Like you don't look just as silly riding around in that loud red truck of yours, arresting and shooting people as if this were Gunsmoke and you were Matt Dillon. Taking yourself so seriously."

But defending Darlene was a mistake. Roy was too slow to understand I was genuinely laughing at him. He thought I was flirting. "You finally noticed. I been trying to get your pretty attention for two weeks now. Jesus, I even dug an eight-foot hole for your granddaddy last night. To the inch, I might add. Trying to score points."

"What are you two talking about? I thought you were watching Gracie last night," Darlene said.

"Why, Max come calling at my front door yesterdie evening. Really, Max, you needn't come up with wild excuses to come visit. My door's always open." He was grinning, and I was trying to act as disgusted as possible, hoping Darlene would know Roy was surely exaggerating the situation. "You know, Darlene," he continued, "Max come to see me with another note-from-the-Lord story. I swear if I didn't know no better, I'd say she made all this up just to spend time with me. Or maybe Noah made it up, trying to hook the two of us together. Marry off his old maid daughter."

"I am not an old maid," I said.

"Wrinkles never lie." Clearly my being called an old maid tickled Darlene. Now was her chance to let Roy and me both know all my faults.

"Just what is that supposed to mean?" I asked her.

"I don't know." She tilted her head to one side and studied her fingernails. "But really, Max. I never heard of any woman being that desperate. I should've known you and Noah had ulterior motives for writing yourselves notes from the Lord. I'm just hurt you didn't feel like you could tell me you had a crush on Roy."

"I do not have a crush on Roy." I said those words with a slight pause for emphasis between each one. I meant business. "And just what are you laughing at?" I asked Roy because he was cackling out loud by then, and I could tell from the way his top lip curled up he thought he'd caught me. He was thinking, *I been tailing her for two weeks, and it's finally paid off.* "I mean it," I said. "If anyone in this room has been writing those notes, it's you." I jabbed my finger into Roy's chest. "You've been playing a sorry joke on a poor old man, and don't you dare tell anyone it's been me--because I have the hots. For you, of all people." It didn't matter what I said. He would twist it. My confession of love would probably appear in next week's Scoop.

Darlene didn't help any. She knew Roy wasn't my type. Women can tell these things. She might have been angry with me for Roy paying me more attention than he did her, but she was bothered by it exactly because she knew I didn't want

that attention, that it meant nothing to me. That Roy thought I was interested only gave her an excuse to be openly ugly to me. She could pretend like she believed it, like she'd known all along I was after Roy, like it was my desperate attempts to chase Roy and not hers that was the town's topic of dinner conversation. "Everyone always warned me," she said. "Ever since I moved here, I been hearing stories about your mama. Amy Jo Scoggins. 'You just never met a flirt like Amy Jo,' they told me. You must be exactly like her, Max. I hear she run off with two different men. One of them a Negro. I hear it was a sick love triangle. Straight off a soap."

"Darlene." Roy had a hold of her right arm and was jerking it back and forth. "Shut up, Darlene. Max here ain't nothing like her mother. Noah said."

"I don't hear nothing 'bout your daddy though," Darlene continued. "And you know what else?" She looked sideways up at Roy. "I bet those notes been written by them Negroes Noah keeps feeding out there to the ranch. They got outstanding DPS tickets. That's what I heard. I bet one of those men is Amy Jo's ex-lover. You ought to check that out, Max. See if they ain't the ones playing the big joke on Noah."

"You're running at the mouth, Darlene," I said. "You and I both know the story here." And she did know because she shook her arm free of Roy and went quietly to the grill. "You're a stupid idiot, Roy," I told him. And because everyone in the Dairy Queen was staring by then, I grabbed my

purse and left work early. I figured Darlene could handle the dinner crowd alone.

On the way out the door, I heard Roy say, "Oh. I get it. Who'd have guessed? I got two women after me."

By the time I got to the ranch, Jerry Don and Gracie were waiting for me. Jerry Don had come out because the station had already received several calls from some folks in town who were concerned Noah and I might be harboring some homeless vagrants who were wanted by the Texas DPS. "They're a couple of black men. They been knocking on doors, asking for food. You know, frightening people. Giving them the creeps a little."

"News travels fast, don't it?" Gracie asked. She was smirking, and I couldn't tell if she'd heard about the whole fight and was laughing at the speed of the Trouper grapevine or if she was laughing at me, shoving her knowledge of my mother and her escapades in my face one more time.

I hadn't officially met Gracie; I'd only seen that one picture of her in Darlene's living room. The photo failed to capture just exactly how beautiful she was. She had satin-like brown hair and a young-girl body--the kind where the hips had only recently become a new feature and so they weren't overspread yet. I knew this because she wore a slim pair of short cut-offs trimmed with eyelet, and I figured Darlene had sewn on that trim trying to make the shorts longer, trying to hid Gracie's slender legs. Legs for days.

"Is that why you're here, Gracie? So you can verify what Jerry Don finds." I said her name on purpose--stressed it--because I wanted her to know I was smart enough to understand who she was, could tell Darlene I'd spotted her with Jerry Don, an older, experienced man.

"I like Noah," Gracie said. "I would never spy on him. That's my mom's trick." She had come out, she continued, because Noah let her ride our horses whenever she wanted, although this was the first time I'd seen her at the ranch since I'd been back.

She apparently caught a ride with Jerry Don because her car was nowhere to be seen. I told Jerry Don he could look around if he wanted but I hadn't seen any homeless hanging around way out here. If he was finished with me, I was just going to walk Gracie over to the stables and unlock the tack room. "That's okay," Gracie said. "I know the way. If you just want to give me the key." Then she asked if Noah was out working on the ark. She thought she'd ride over and see how it was going because she hadn't seen it yet and was curious to find out for herself what all the hoopla in town was about. I warned her not to touch anything, because whether or not he was in plain view, Noah was probably lurking, making sure no gang members came and vandalized the boat. She laughed and said she couldn't believe all the people who took her mom so seriously, actually believed that series on gang activity she ran in her column.

Funny thing was, even after I said, "Have fun," as in Goodbye. See you. I'm going to talk to the nice police officer now, Gracie lingered, looking at Jerry Don the same way I had seen her mother watch Roy. Was she waiting for him to acknowledge her exit, give her some eye contact, confirm how pretty her smile was? I acted like I didn't notice because Jerry was quite obviously doing his best to ignore her.

It was crazy. Gracie wanted our attention. And we knew that, and she knew we knew. Yet we continued to act like we didn't know, like she didn't know, like she wasn't even there--waiting. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I slowly turned my head and acted surprised when I found her still standing there because surprise was the only reaction I could show when I'd been pretending for the last minute or so I didn't know she was there. I smiled at her, but Jerry Don stared straight at me as if he thought ignoring Gracie was more subtle than just saying a casual so long. Gracie gave up and walked away, but not before their story was quite clear.

When I turned back to Jerry, he was already getting in the car. I wondered if somewhere between my surprise and simultaneously watching both Jerry Don and Gracie as best I could, they had managed to communicate with one another anyway. "Don't you want to look around?" I asked.

"Already did. Before you got here. I's just leaving."

"How will Gracie get home?" I asked, wanting answers to more than just that question.

"I'll send Roy for her, since eventually he'll be around spying on her anyway." I didn't know if Jerry Don was disgusted that his friend was playing volunteer private eye or if he was simply letting me know Roy's detailed accounts of Gracie's comings and goings were bogus, were something he agreed to invent to keep his buddy out of trouble with Darlene. If it were the second, I'd have to give Roy some credit. He was, apparently, at least smart enough to take full advantage of a golden opportunity, letting Darlene think he was taking his spying seriously.

By Friday week, the Revival seemed to be going along without any hitches in sight despite the fact things were much tenser at the Dairy Queen after my confrontation with Darlene. She buzzed over her events planner and her newspaper articles, barely paying attention to the counter or the grill, only speaking to me once that week. "You should try to be more active--like me. You hitting middle age, you know. You might start to gain weight." I even had to close the register, a job Darlene had recently told me I wasn't ready for, three nights in a row that week because she was too busy. At least working late gave me an excuse to miss most of the Revival.

Much to my surprise, Darlene appeared to be quite successful at persuading every Trouper to attend her Revival.

She performed a miracle on Friday I would have never believed possible. Not even one of the twelve apostles could have pulled this off. She advertised that last revival meeting throughout the entire week as a Sermon on Conjugal Rights. "It's scriptural," I heard her tell someone. "Think how many people will come to Jesus that night. And our very own mayor has agreed to deliver the lesson."

As a result, at seven o'clock that evening, the high school football stadium held only a handful of Troupers. Several of the cheerleaders and band members were actually missing, and the visiting team out-cheered the home fans, according to the few who were there, during the traditional *We've got spirit. Yes, we do. We've got spirit. How about you?* And although we were playing Whitehorse, the town rival, and although it was the tightest, most suspenseful game that season, the general consensus declared the last Revival meeting the winner--hands down--if you were voting on excitement. Even those who watched the game kicked themselves for not going, asked to hear the story over and over.

I myself was not anxious to hear a man everyone referred to as Gopher get up and speak about sex in the marital bedroom. But the Dairy Queen closed especially for that night and I knew Noah had agreed to lead the invitation song. I confess, though, I attended mostly because I was curious to know what on earth a preacher could say about sex at a religious gathering. I felt better about being there when I

discovered both Roy (President of the Athletic Booster Club and ex-star quarterback) and his side-kick Jerry Don already sitting inside the tent, on the back row but in the tent nonetheless. I sat across the aisle from them, and when he saw me, Jerry Don grinned, jerked his head a couple of times toward Roy, who was blushing, and winked at me. I shook my head no.

About that time, my granddaddy came in with Darlene and Gracie. The two women sat on the row in front of Jerry Don and Roy, and Darlene started passing out blank paper and pencils to those near her, I assumed because she thought they might want to take notes although Roy and Jerry Don began playing tic-tac-toe on their paper. Noah took a seat next to Jerry Don on the very edge of the back row. Leaning across the aisle a little, he whispered, "The tire hath arisen."

"What?" I asked.

"The tire. The good Lord hath raised it from the valley of the shadow of death."

"Noah, you're starting to sound like the Bible. What do you mean?"

"The tire come up," he said. "Up." And he threw his hands into the air several times.

"It couldn't have." This was the situation I had been dreading most. Noah himself speaking about the Lord's messages in front of a large crowd--of church-goers no less.

"It did," he said. "I got pictures on this Polaroid camera." He pulled an instimatic out of his jacket and shoved some pictures across the aisle. "See?"

What I saw was the top of a tire barely sticking out from some dirt. "Noah, these pictures don't prove anything. For all anyone knows, you buried a second tire. This time just barely covering it so you could take these pictures."

"But the Lord didn't tell me to bury no second tire. I's telling you, Max. We got to share these pictures. He getting angry at his people."

"How do you know that?" Once again, I found myself asking a question to which I did not particularly want the answer.

Noah got up and walked over to me, stuck his lips right against my ear and whispered, "He left another note. In the ark this time. He told me which song to lead for the invitation this evening." His breath against my cheek and ear made me shiver, and I was beginning to feel a little spooked by all this, like those zoo employees who finally admitted Noah's calls about purchasing animals by pairs were unnerving them.

Noah sat back in his seat as Gopher began his sermon. I put Noah's photos in my pocket, hoping he might forget who had them and so not be able to show them to anyone else, particularly Darlene or Roy. I tried to pay close attention to Gopher, but he spoke with a large, booming voice which I guessed he thought was appropriate for the pulpit, although

he did more to frighten me than anything else. He began by telling about Adam and Eve and how God created females to keep men company. "If you know what I mean," he said. Then he told about the Bible saying in I Corinthians that spouses should fulfill their marital duties, that their bodies belonged to one another. But it was when he began to explain how bigamy wasn't permissible in the New Testament world, as it had been in Moses's day, that all the excitement started.

Gracie began giggling uncontrollably, looking back toward Noah and Jerry Don (I couldn't tell which) every few seconds. Her laughter woke Roy up, who asked far too loudly, "What's going on?" And then he snickered too. "Has he listed the specific duties yet? Did I miss it?" Darlene stole a couple of confused glances at Noah, but he buried his head in an open hymnal and was practicing how to conduct his song of invitation. Jerry Don looked across the aisle at me and mouthed, *What's going on?* The commotion caused Gopher to speak more quickly and loudly, trying to regain everyone's attention, until finally he was finishing his sermon, screaming at the top of his lungs, "The Lord is inviting anyone who has failed to fulfill his or her marital duties to come forward, confess, and be forgiven." He stuck his hand up to his head as if he were holding a telephone receiver, "If the Lord is calling you this evening, I urge you to answer now. Pick up and come forward."

I was already laughing out loud because no one in his right mind would come forward in front of a crowd of gossipy

Troupers to confess something like that. But then Noah, who had been personally directed by the Lord, began leading the most appropriate invitation song I have ever heard--"Let Him Have His Way With Thee." Gracie and I were really chuckling then, and I could hear several others around us, including Roy, begin to teehee also. Even Gopher had a grin on his face.

But not Darlene. She watched Gracie and then Noah and then Gracie again. She looked as if she expected a demon to come out of her daughter at any moment. And about the time she was climbing out of her row, I was busy noticing Jerry Don wasn't laughing either. Before I could get his attention though, to see if he would smile if I coaxed him, Darlene was already racing down the aisle, straight for Noah, screaming herself this time, "Stop him! Stop that old lecher! He's the man who's been sleeping with my daughter."

CHAPTER III

OCTOBER

On October 6th, after they released my granddaddy from the Trouper jail, I found him standing, as if at attention, on the corner of Main and Cherry, his hands stiff fists at his sides and his facial features tight, horizontal lines. Those lines resembled the grin I'd been waiting for since Mimi died, and I couldn't believe it was trying to turn up only a few steps away from a prison term for statutory rape. Noah kept the smile on his face all the way to the car, all the way around the corner, until we were a full block east of the police station. Then he asked if he could hold my hand, and when I turned to find his, I saw his lower lip begin to quiver and his upper one curl before the tears finally fell. He used the hand I wasn't holding to wipe them away as fast as he could, but his hand shook, wasn't working exactly like he wanted. "They scared me," he said. "They wouldn't even let me keep my teeth in my breeches."

"Oh, Noah. You can take them out now."

"Thank you." He let go of my hand to remove them, but instead of stuffing them in his back pocket, he laid them in his lap and grabbed my hand again. "They said I were a dirty old man. But it's okay." His upper lip was still twisted, and I could barely understand him because his voice

kept catching on the hiccups he had from sobbing. I had seen him cry like this only one other time.

"How can you say that? What makes it okay?" I asked.

"The Bible says they will persecute me for His name."

"Okay." I nodded my head. "Okay. If that's what you want, we'll think about it that way. That means you're special, doesn't it? That means they recognize you as one of His." I hated Darlene. It made me angry to second Noah's idea, to be forced to comfort a frightened old man by agreeing what was happening to him was okay, was all right, was to be expected--even from other people also claiming to be chosen. I knew he was being mistreated, not because of his enormous faith, but because Darlene simply knew she could do it, because she hated me, because she wanted Roy, because she liked being queen bee.

"It's not her fault." Noah said, as if he were reading my mind. "Darlene don't know. I ought to see her. I ought to make her understand I forgive her."

I didn't mind taking Noah to Darlene--not so she could see how forgiven she was, but so she would have to face him in front of the breakfast crowd at the Dairy Queen, wait on him, serve him whatever he ordered, even if he requested soggy biskicks and she spent twenty minutes, holding up other customers, trying to figure out what that meant.

It hadn't been easy convincing her and most of the other Troupers she was wrong about Noah. When a highly respectable woman like Darlene swears a man like Noah has seduced her

teenage daughter, people become adamant, outraged. After all, she ran the Back-to-School Revival that had record-breaking attendance; she visited the old folks' home on a regular basis; and she initiated the crack-down on cult worship and gang activities in Trouper. It didn't hurt her cause any that she also wrote for the Scoop, could control which crimes did and did not make it into the Police Notebook--what adjectives were used, what details given, how sensationalized it was. Noah, if you listened to Darlene, was nothing more than a cult-worshipping gang lord who claimed Jesus spoke directly to him, told him to build another ark of all things. Obviously he was a man capable of committing statutory rape, might even purport to do so in the name of the Lord.

To shut Darlene down, it took Jerry Don coming forward to confess he was the one seeing Gracie, to face statutory rape charges himself, although he adamantly swore he never touched Gracie in that way and people actually listened to him. It took Gracie, her own daughter, telling her, in public no less, that she was a nut, a power-hungry lunatic. It took Roy agreeing to treat her to dinner and a show, a romance, specifically a Robert Redford film. And it took special, personal attention from the mayor.

Having tracked her down at Elizabeth's Boutique, Gopher cornered her in the shoe section, caught her admiring her creamy feet in a pair of open-toe brown pumps, turning in front of the mirror to examine all angles--front view,

profile, and finally sitting with her legs uncrossed and crossed. Elizabeth swore it looked like something out of a Godfather picture: Gopher sat down beside her, put his hand so firmly on her knee she couldn't uncross her legs or stand up, and made her an offer she couldn't refuse. He told her she needed to admit a girl Gracie's age would have no interest in a man Noah's age. "If you don't march yourself down to that jail and have him released tomorrow morning, missy," he said, "I myself will. I'll get him out of trouble. Him and Jerry Don both. And you. You'll end up in some psycho ward. Just you watch."

She didn't go down to the station though. I heard she simply made a phonecall because she was too embarrassed and proud to admit in person she might be wrong.

So I didn't mind taking Noah to see Darlene, even though she surprised me at first. When Noah and I walked in, she headed straight for the register, insisted she take our order, and after our food came up, brought it herself to our table rather than calling our number aloud and making us come get it. I was proud of her, serving us gladly in public. But as she laid our tray on the table and began removing the red plastic baskets from it and placing them in front of us, she leaned real close to Noah and whispered, "It were only politics. They made me do it. Made me say you were innocent. Weren't by choice."

Noah stood up and walked behind Darlene, pausing for a second, before continuing around to my side of the booth. In

that one second, I hoped he was going to pound her head, hit her in the small of her back, at least pull her short sassy red hair, and you could tell she was scared too because she pulled her elbows into her body and ducked her head a little. But Noah simply stood there, breathing against her neck, speaking softly, "See how the Sovereign Lord come with power, how His arm rules for Him, but see also how His reward come with Him, for He tend to His flock like a shepherd, gathering the lambs in His arms, carrying them close to His heart." Certainly he sounded like a Bible verse again, but something about the lilt in his voice made it different, more naïve, as if he had no idea he was speaking poetry.

He asked me to switch sides with him then, so I slid out of the booth. As I stood up, Darlene turned to escape but couldn't because, with me and Noah both standing there, the aisle got a little crowded. For another tense moment, the three of us stood there--right up against each other. In my peripheral vision, I saw a man stand up from his table, preparing himself to jump in the big middle of us if he decided it was necessary. I looked at Darlene, but she was watching Noah because he only stared at the floor and was easier therefore to face. "Wouldn't Mimi be ashamed of you?" she asked, as if she knew my grandmother well enough, was more familiar than Noah with her wishes, could call her *Mimi* instead of *Mrs. Scoggins*. "Did the good Lord give you that speech in another note?" Then, turning to me, she whispered, "Why are you switching sides?"

"Don't ask me. Ask him if you want to know." I talked loudly, trying to say it like a threat, but really I just didn't know the answer.

Noah lifted his head from the floor and touched Darlene gently on the elbow. "I'm turning the other cheek, Sister. You get a look at the right side of my face now." Noah sat down and I saw the man in the background sit down also. Later, after Darlene left us to our food, I looked to see who the man had been. But in his place, I found Gracie, her eyes still opened wide, staring at us, frightened for Noah or Darlene I didn't know, but frightened nonetheless.

I guess Gracie's bare eyes and the mood swings they marked started the whole concern about drugs and drug-pushers that October. One minute her eyes were open in terror at what she was seeing, and the next they were overwhelmed with tears, bursting with them, sorrowful for no good reason. Typically, though, they were nothing more than slits, closed with anger at everyone, particularly Jerry Don. She couldn't forgive him for confessing, for taking the excitement out of her life, because it was much more thrilling to date an older, wilder man on the sly, with rumors flying about your virginity or the loss of it, than it was to be caught, to no longer have a secret, for the dull truth to come out.

It didn't matter what emotion Gracie displayed, Darlene's answer was always the same. "Why she's just higher than a kite. That's what it comes down to. I bet my life

Noah's getting the junk to her. And people making me apologize to him. Let him out of jail when we done had him secured tight. Never get another shot at him," she would say. "You bet. A man like that is a slippery one. Can't catch his kind twice."

And if little Scooter Mullins hadn't fallen out of the back seat of his mamma's old Pacer at the intersection in town, no one would have ever taken Darlene seriously. But several witnesses standing outside Bob's on Main Street, the three or four old men who gathered there to play gin rummy every afternoon before moving their game to the White Doggie around seven o'clock when things started jumping on that side of town, saw it happen. They said his mamma came to a complete stop at the intersection, exactly like the sign said, and after looking carefully both ways, was just fixing to put her foot on the gas, when--bang!--on a sudden the back door flung open and little Scooter fell into the street, practically landing on his head. His eyes were dilated something terrible, they said. Stuck open like headlights. Or maybe, Darlene suggested, he was just lit to the gills. No one ever suggested that maybe car designers invented child safety locks exactly because overly-curious children like little Scooter existed. Perhaps he simply wanted to know just what would happen if he pulled that long, skinny handle on the car door.

Coupled with Gracie's severe mood swings, little Scooter's reckless attempt to jump from his mamma's car

managed to convince every concerned Troupers parent there was a need to bring in a drug expert, teach them what signs of drug-use to look for in their children, show them how to stop drug dealers dead in their tracks. After listening to the Jackson narcotics officer the P.T.A. brought in for this special emergency convening, Darlene was convinced her daughter was shooting cocaine. She sped home, searched Gracie's room, and would have actually been disappointed if she hadn't found that plastic Ziploc containing a colorful array of small, round pills hidden in Gracie's own tackle box of make-up. When Roy telephoned me that evening from Darlene's and said she asked to see me especially, I said he could forget it. But then he told me she had taken some of Gracie's drugs and, as she thought she might be dying, wished to leave this life and face her maker without any personal grudges staining her soul. She wanted my forgiveness, my blessing.

Arriving at Darlene's, I found her lying prostrate on the sofa with a damp rag across her forehead. She gripped the edges of the couch cushion, pulling it up around her as if she were trying to hold her balance, keep from falling off the couch which, she told me, appeared to be tilting at a terribly dangerous angle. Roy fanned her with an issue of Redbook, and even though she was supposedly in the throws of a drug trip, she still wore that big, open-mouth smile, was letting Roy know she was beautiful even yet. But wisps of her short red hair were rising and falling with the motion of

the magazine, and one little strand flew up and fell into her eye. Forgetting her beauty-queen smile, she sat straight up and screamed, "My eye. My eye. I can't open it. The pain. It's finally come."

Roy rolled his eyes and brushed the hair out of her face. "Darlene, are you sure you took one of them pills?" he asked.

"Of course, I'm certain," she said, lying back down on the couch and placing that damp washcloth on her brow. But then she sat right back up again and asked me if the room was spinning.

"No, it's not," I said.

"Are there large ants coming out the floor vents?"

"No, there aren't," I said.

"I didn't think so."

"What do you mean, *I didn't think so*? If you aren't seeing any of that stuff, what are you asking me for? I didn't take the drugs, you idiot. How can I verify any hallucinations you're not even having?" I turned to Roy. "Let's kill her. I mean, if she took drugs, she's o-deeing anyway. So let's get it over with. For our own sakes. Just, you know, wring her little neck."

"I think you two should tie me up" she said. "I'm going to start hallucinating any minute. I can feel it. I might go crazy. I might try to kill you. You got to stop me." Darlene grabbed both my shoulders and shook me. She was simultaneously laughing and crying, and saliva was bubbling

out of her mouth, which she left hanging open. Only then, did it dawn on me Darlene might be in genuine trouble. Her hands were trembling like Noah's when I picked him up from jail. I grabbed both of them, was going to hold them in my own, but when I touched Darlene she jerked her hands back. They were freezing, and touching mine must have felt like gripping a hot skillet.

"Roy, we've got to get help. If she's really swallowed some of that stuff, we need to call an ambulance."

"No!" she screamed. "No! They'll haul my only baby to jail. You got to promise to take care of her. Hide her from the police. Clean her up. Please, I'm begging. You got to tell Noah to stop giving her that stuff. Be merciful. She's but a baby."

"That's it," I said, standing up. "I'm out of here. My granddaddy wouldn't know drugs if you poured them down his throat. He doesn't have any medication in his house but Vicks Vaporub, and he only puts that on his feet. Never ingests it, like . . . like you and Gracie. You're crazy."

"Wait! I'm sorry! I'm just scared. Forgive me. You got to. I'm dying. You can't send me off to the good Lord without forgiving me. That's the same as tossing me into the eternal flames of damnation."

Roy was patting her hands. "Come on, Max. What do you say? Give her another chance, will you?"

I wanted to ask him if he was out of his mind. Shouldn't he be making a citizen's arrest here? Possession?

Consumption? Harboring a felon? Wasn't he the Citizen-of-the-Year who shot a robber because 911 didn't respond fast enough to suit him? Wasn't he the guy who pulled Noah over for running a stop sign in the middle of nowhere? Now, confronted with a serious drug problem, he was just going to ask me to forgive her? "Did you take some of those pills too?" I asked.

Darlene jumped up from the divan and began running around the room in circles. "My daughter's on drugs," she screamed and waved her hands in the air. "Shooting. Tooting. Reefer, horse, smack, speed. Lord, who knows what she's getting high on? Spray paint, Maalox, even Doxidan. Maybe she's bulimic too."

At the risk of sounding overly-simple, I suggested she just ask Gracie what those pills were. Roy said maybe we could get Jerry Don to help us identify them. "Forget that," Darlene said. She sat down on the sofa--on the edge of the cushions as if she might jump up at any moment and run around the room, screaming again. "That officer who spoke for the P.T.A. said they were already investigating the problem here in Trouper. He suspects drugs are being dropped off and picked up out at Devil's Backbone. I want to catch those pushers, red-handed. Personally. Myself." She smiled at Roy. "Let's go catch them."

I placed my hand on her forehead to check if she had a fever. "Despite my previous misgivings, quite clearly you are on drugs. Only a toasted woman would suggest the three

of us go looking for drug pushers. Especially at the Backbone."

Devil's Backbone was a small strip of hilly land, kind of a neutral territory, between Noah's ranch and the neighboring dairy farm owned by Mr. Monroe. No one had cut the grass on that strip in several years, and even as far back as when I was in high school, the teenagers drove out there--especially in October, near Halloween--and cut narrow passages through the shoulder-high grass to race through it, speeding after one another as fast as they could on hands and knees because it was scarier, less controllable when you couldn't stand up, run, move as fast as you wanted. I considered it a rather frightening form of chase or hide-n-seek. It resembled far too closely any one of the scenes from Children of the Corn or the closing scene in The Shining, not to mention the fact that large rats probably nested there.

I never went out to the Backbone as a teenager; I sure was not going out there to spy on some drug pushers. Not that I believed those satanic stories about Devil's Backbone or that I was superstitious at all: seeing a black cat on Halloween, walking under a ladder, or opening an umbrella in the house didn't bother me. But I wasn't going to seek out drug pushers at a known satanic hotspot. That was like rocking the boat for the thrill of possibly drowning. Carry all the lucky charms you want, such behaviour isn't conducive to good fortune.

But I forgot I was standing in the presence of Roar, the volunteer police officer. "I think it's a great idea," he said. "The P.D. just bought a new bullet-proof vest, and I been dying to try it. Maybe Jerry Don will loan it to us." He made a pistol with his finger and thumb and dropped down beside the coffee table, barely poking his gun over the top of it, showing only one eye on the lookout.

"Maybe you're a nut," I said. "I'm not going anywhere I need a bullet-proof vest. Particularly with a pretend cop and a woman tripping on drugs."

"But we can stake out on Noah's land," Roy said.

"We might be able to clear your granddaddy," Darlene said.

"Who said he was guilty, Darlene? You're the one who's been popping pills. Although you do seem to have recovered quite nicely, conveniently."

Darlene laid back down on the couch and placed her rag back on her forehead. "Oh, I just forgot. I feel another spell coming on now that you mention it. Maybe we better go another night."

Eventually, I agreed to spend the next Friday night, Halloween night, at the Backbone, because, rats or no rats, bullets or no bullets, I figured I'd better go out there with Roy and Darlene if I wanted to prevent them from blaming Noah when I wasn't looking.

When we went to pick up Jerry Don (Roy figured we needed an expert lawman with us as well as the bullet-proof vest), he was acting strangely. Three trick-or-treaters were standing on his doorstep, and he was holding a bucket way over their heads from which he kept pulling out candy and plopping it into their Halloween sacks. We reached his porch just as the children were leaving, but he closed the door in our faces and said in a sing-song voice from the other side, "You got to ring the doorbell."

We rang it, and he opened the door. "Look out now!" he said, jumping back. "This is a scary bunch of spooks. You want a trick or a treat?"

"A treat?" I asked, because I wasn't sure if I wanted anything from this man. There was no telling what his treat would turn out to be.

"Hold out your hands. Come on now. I won't cuff them." He dropped some icecubes in our hands. It startled Darlene, and she dropped hers on the ground. I tried to peer over the edge of the bucket, but Jerry Don raised it over my head too and said, "Ah no you don't, you little devil."

Roy yanked the bucket from his hands. "There's nothing in here but ice cubes. Man, you been putting ice in little kids' bags. It'll melt and ruin their candy. What you doing that for?"

"They don't know no better," Jerry Don said. "They just listen for that ker-plunk in their bags. They don't care what you put in there. And I don't have no more candy in the

house. I done ate it all up." He said the last sentence with his face raised to the sky, like he was a wolf howling.

"Are you drunk?" I asked, and then turning to Roy, "Is he drunk? We're taking a drunk on our stake-out?"

Roy shook Jerry Don's arm. "What's wrong with you, buddy? You been drinking? Where's Gracie? Did you two lovebirds bust up?"

"I guess we did. You going to loan me your rubber duckie, Ernie? Cheer me up?" Then he started singing that Bert and Ernie tune. "*Rubber duckie, you're the one. You make bathtime lots of fun.*"

Roy joined in and when they were finished singing, he swept his hand in Jerry Don's direction as if he were saying voila, as if Jerry Don's singing a duet with him proved he was stone sober. "He's not drunk. Just depressed. Nothing a good stake-out can't cheer up."

"The stake-out. I forgot. That's why ya'll are here." Jerry Don shook his head like he was trying to sober up on the spot because it was back to police business. He looked at Darlene and me. "I tell you what, Roy. We shouldn't be taking two women out there. This is dangerous shit."

"Fine." I quickly volunteered. "I'll stay here by the phone. I hate to miss all the excitement, but it's okay. I guess." I didn't care about Noah's innocence any longer. I wasn't going to the Backbone with a drunk cop carrying a loaded weapon.

"Well, that's good, cause I'm going." Darlene said.

"You can't stop me. It's my daughter."

"We got to take Max so we can get on the property, Darlene. Roy will stay here with you. Won't you, Roy? You should really stay here in case we need to call for help. That's what a good officer would do," Jerry Don said.

"You'll wait here with me, Roy? I'll stay then."

Darlene couldn't believe her overwhelming good fortune--her daughter's drug problem was throwing Roy right into her lap.

"If you stay, Roy, I'll let you try on the bullet-proof vest while I'm gone." Jerry Don was already strapping on his holster and gun, like it was decided. Roy was looking at the vest and then me: it was a tough choice for him.

"Now wait a minute," I said. "If you're taking a gun, what makes you think I want to be going? What makes you think Roy, who's staying here in the safe comfort of your home, should get to wear the vest?"

"I promise, darling, you won't need it. This is just a precaution," he said pointing to his weapon. "Ain't going to find anything out there but a bunch of kids." He had the front door open and was pushing me toward it. Roy already had on the bullet-proof vest and was acting like he was searching the place, turning fast corners, ducking behind furniture, his pretend gun out in front of him, ready to shoot. Darlene was watching him with that sick smile. "Just exactly how much help do you think those two would be?"

"Fine," I said. "But I'm driving."

When we parked Jerry Don's pick-up on Noah's side of Devil's Backbone, we already knew a lot of teenagers were out there somewhere in the dark because we'd seen their cars parked in the ditch along the main road on the way out. One of the trucks faced the high grass, the lights on its roll bar illuminating the immediate area but ultimately not doing much good. It was like driving down a country road at night with your headlights on: the only thing you could see was the front edge of trees. Granted those pines literally glared, lit up white like fire, but behind them was nothing--just pitch-black space. It was the darkness that allowed you to imagine anything. There could have been more trees, but there could have also been a brick wall, the legendary monster of Boggy Creek, or simply a drop-off, the last edge of the world.

As a small child, riding along those roads at night with Noah, speeding, I used to envision some horrible creature hidden in that dark void, waiting, spying, rustling through that space, not hindered by tall grass, trees, or rocks, but rushing as quickly as our car could race, chasing our lights. It was something that could see more clearly than us, could see through the loud glare of our headlights, and would, whenever it decided, sweep from the front edge of those trees, yank the headlights off our car, shine them in our faces, blinding us to whatever was to come next. Maybe that was why I never joined other teenagers at the Backbone.

I was afraid if I ever heard a rustling behind me in the deep grass, I would turn and see nothing but a bright light and know something unspeakable was behind it.

So when Jerry Don first asked me to shine his headlights toward the Backbone, I said no. "Wouldn't a flashlight work just as well?"

Jerry Don walked around to the driver's side and turned the lights on himself. Whatever drunken trip he'd been on earlier, he seemed in control now. "You got to do what I say if you coming with me."

"Fine. I'll stay here," I said. "If I recall correctly, I had no desire to come in the first place. You made me so you could park your car here. Well, your car's here. I'll just stay with it."

"Nothing doing, Max. I need at least one witness verifying we found nothing out here. Nothing but a bunch of teenagers spooking one another on Halloween."

Crawling under Noah's barbed wire fence and moving closer toward Devil's Backbone, I saw a glow rising from the middle mound and heard something crackling and popping.

"They must have lit a fire," I said. "What happens if Darlene was right? What happens if we're about to walk into the middle of a satanic worship service?" I got behind Jerry, grabbed two of his belt loops and buried my face in his back. "I don't want to go in there."

"Jesus, don't let your imagination go loose, Max. You getting as bad as Darlene." Jerry Don passed his flashlight

over a shaded area of the tall grass and found the cut entrance. He held some out of my way. "Ladies first."

I could hear some teenagers laughing over the crackling and popping of the fire, and for just one second, thought I heard Noah's voice, that lilting one he mysteriously spoke with in the Dairy Queen the morning of his release. I left Jerry Don behind and raced forward, afraid those teenagers were laughing at him, were going to hurt him. Hitting a dead end of the maze and having to back-track, I decided to forget the cut path and began scrambling through the brush. It scratched my face and the swishing of its close behind me sounded as if something were on my heels. When I reached the clearing, I spun in a circle to see what I was facing, to see if someone was chasing me.

I saw Noah sitting near the fire, digging frantically with his hands, uprooting the dead grass, clawing at the dirt. He stopped suddenly, shifted somehow into a calmer mode, and speaking--not screaming, said, "A voice says to me, 'Cry out.' And I say, 'What shall I cry?' 'All men are like grass,' the voice says, 'and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.' And I answer, 'Yes. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them.'" Noah was crying again, not sobbing this time, but it was enough to make those kids laugh at him some more. They threw something in the dirt, near his legs, and I heard that loud popping sound. Noah shivered a little and then continued digging.

I knelt beside him. "Noah, what are you doing out here? Let's go back to the house. Don't you want to?"

"Maxie," he said, "I got another note from the Lord. He told me the devil's candy was stashed out here. For Halloween. I think them teenagers got it. Look at them. Don't they frighten you?" I looked around and saw some normal kids I'd seen around town and in the Dairy Queen. I thought it was only the flickering light and the dark that made the fire seem to lick at their orange faces and turn their smiles and laughter into something diabolic. But I confess, it rattled me.

I grabbed both of his hands, stopped his digging, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "Noah, you can't help them. Not by yourself. Let's go."

But he started speaking again. "The Lord told me, Max. He said, 'The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.'"

More things, whatever they were, fell near us, and that loud popping sound made even me jump that time. "Come on, Noah. Please. They're scaring me. Let's get out of here."

When I looked up, trying to figure which was the quickest and least obstructed way out of that clearing, away from the Backbone, I saw Gracie sitting in a shadowed area, all alone, those frightened eyes staring at me, tears running down her face, dropping off her jaw and chin, staining her shirt where they landed. She was mumbling something, but I

couldn't hear it exactly. I motioned for her to come help me. "It's okay, Gracie. Let's just get him out of here."

She stood up and, I remember clearly, was walking slowly toward me, and the closer she came, the more I thought I could hear her saying, "You shouldn't be here, Noah. Not here." But then I heard a bang, not a pop, and Gracie fell to the ground, a spot of dark blood spreading over the leg of her jeans. I threw Noah on the dirt, covered his body as best I could, watched the group of teenagers scatter, run screaming from the clearing, and saw Jerry Don holding his gun, still aiming it--where Gracie had been but now at me because she was no longer there to block a bullet's path.

"Good Lord," he said. "That was close. She was going to get you for sure. Higher than a kite just like old Darlene said. Wonder why she wouldn't want you and Noah here?"

I looked at Jerry Don, trying to understand what exactly pushed him out of control, just exactly how far he would go. Then I ran over to Gracie. "Are you crazy, Jerry? That's not what she meant. She was trying to help me get Noah out of here. We have to get her some help. Are you crazy? You shot her."

Jerry Don's hands trembled once and he dropped his gun. "I said--I said I was only trying to help."

Noah crawled over to Gracie, placed her head in his lap, kept brushing her face as if to move the hair away from her

eyes, and began singing, "Well yonder stands little Gracie, with a grand glass in her hand--"

Later, when daylight came and things weren't so spooky, so distorted and marvelous, Jerry Don reported to the Trouper sheriff how he had gone to Devil's Backbone, with my official permission to cross from Noah's ranch, because he suspected a drug deal was going down. He came to a clearing, encountered a gang of teenagers on the verge of rioting, and shot Gracie after she displayed signs of drug abuse and a willful intent to harm me and Noah. No one thought of testing him for traces of alcohol or narcotics.

While Gracie was still in the hospital, Darlene confronted her with the Ziploc bag full of colorful pills, and she quickly reached her hand inside the baggie, jerked one out before we could stop her, and threw it on the floor. As it hit, it made the same popping noise I had heard that night at Devil's Backbone. It wasn't a crackling fire. It wasn't narcotics. It was a snap-pop, and Darlene had swallowed one. The doctor said not to worry: if it hadn't blown up in her stomach yet, chances were she was safe.

Gracie no longer spoke to Jerry Don, seemed terrified of him, literally cowered whenever she saw him. Who would blame her? Rumors flew for several weeks that Jerry Don didn't really have any reason to shoot her except his heart was broken. He was a spurned lover. Gracie became the town heroine actually--the only woman in Trouper history ever to

survive a gunshot wound from her ex-lover. Even Gopher, the mayor, brought her a dozen roses on behalf of the city.

But Noah remained hysterical for several days afterward, rambling on about flowers, grass, and the devil's candy until Gopher decided there was genuine cause for suspicion and initiated an official investigation into the Trouper drug ring. He would begin his search, he said, in that bulky replica of the ark.

CHAPTER IV

NOVEMBER

When the first Scoop of November came out, it wasn't the front-page article on the upcoming drug investigation at Noah's ark that caught my attention so much as the one beside it--the one on the supernatural way in which tires will come back to haunt you. A representative from the Texas Department of Sanitation, quoted in the article, claimed tires buried even as deep as forty feet could reappear anywhere from three days to a year due to the earth's rotation and the conversion of matter into gas.

The article lacked a byline, and when I asked Darlene about it, she said the Scoop ran one feature article every week which spotlighted a particular profession. "We invite various experts from Trouper to write them. That particular one," she told me, "was written by Marvin Howard, the guy who runs the dump outside of town." I wanted to punch her when she shut her tackle box of make-up, checked her fresh manicure (I'd just watched her paint on the last sealer coat), and then looked back up at me with her Cheshire smile in place. "Why you want to know? You interested in Marvin? He's single." Not that I wanted to belittle Marvin's authority on solid wastes, but Darlene knew my interest in the article wasn't because I found it provocative, because I

was interested in chasing the man who wrote such a stimulating piece. Marvin, the dump owner.

I wanted information on him or any of his buddies who might have a reason for convincing my granddaddy the Lord wanted him to bury a tire so He could resurrect it as proof of His existence. I didn't push Darlene for the information though, because I figured if she did have it, she wouldn't be able to control herself. She'd spill it before I even asked. And I knew I'd guessed right when she came to the Dairy Queen the next day, grinning, humming, for an entire hour before finally asking, "Don't you want to know what Marvin told me?" Never mind she hadn't learned anything significant, even talking with Marvin. She just wanted me to want something she had. Marvin, she finally admitted, swore he knew nothing about notes from the Lord, believed, he said, that signing another person's name to a document was forgery. I gave up.

Luckily Noah didn't notice that article. He began having severe asthma attacks after the incident at Devil's Backbone and seemed to lose interest in everything except finding a way to breathe, to get enough oxygen into his lungs so he could at least sit up in bed. He stopped reading the paper, let Roy take over the cattle completely, and didn't even notice when the entire Trouper Police Department, all five officers, swarmed onto the ranch the day after Thanksgiving, and began pulling the ark apart board by board, cubit by cubit, looking for secret compartments, stashes of cocaine, proof that Noah was a drug lord. They demolished

the ark, leaving that pasture looking like the beginnings of a landfill.

So I was glad Noah only showed concern for how dry the air was. "Dry as popcorn," he said. "I just can't breathe. It scratches so."

Then Roy told Noah his mama had him how a Mexican Hairless in the house could cure asthma, so I spent two days combing the classifieds in every regional paper I could get, searching for a full-bred Chihuahua because Roy convinced Noah he'd better get a "whole one" if he wanted to be sure it worked. Finally I drove the two hours to the city and paid a hundred and fifty bucks for one at a pet store in the shopping mall. He was ugly. He looked like someone was squeezing his stomach and his guts were climbing up his throat, forcing those large eyes right out of their sockets. And, of course, without any hair, he shivered constantly.

Noah named him Speedy Gonzales, and I figured he did so because he thought my mother used to own a Chihuahua with the same name. But he remembered wrong. My mother's boyfriend--nicknamed Speedy Gonzales (and not because he was Hispanic, although he was, but because he was quick with women)--had a Chihuahua named Mr. Buttons. Despite the fact Noah's doctor warned me his medication often caused occasional but temporary mental disorientation, I became scared for Noah, not only because he named his new Chihuahua Speedy, but also because he started calling me Amy Jo, began begging me not to cut out again, pleaded with me to sleep in his room at night

on a cot, where he could keep an eye on me, so this time if I decided to leave, he would see me going and could at least wave goodbye, tell me he loved me, say *Be careful*.

For the entire month of November, I slept in his room on my cot, wishing he would wake up, miraculously be able to breathe, get out of his bed, head straight for the back forty, and begin rebuilding the ark. I would even help. Even if it were dark outside. Even if I'd just come off the long shift at the Dairy Queen. Nothing changed though. Night after night, while Noah slept soundly, snored even, Speedy watched over me, spied, guarded the door as if he too suspected there was some chance of my leaving. He curled up against Noah, threw his pointy muzzle over Noah's side, and immediately popped his bulging eyes open if I stirred the least little bit, if I simply pulled the covers up closer to my chin, if I simply got up to go to the bathroom.

Sometimes at night when Noah's breathing was too loud and I couldn't sleep, Speedy and I just stared at one another. He never blinked. It was as if Mimi had come back in the form of a Chihuahua to haunt me and Noah, to let us know she was still in control, that if we tried so much as to go to the bathroom without her permission, she'd start complaining, start yelping. She wanted to spy on Noah and check on my progress, see if he'd done right by me after she was gone or if he'd forgotten all she taught him and had fallen back into teaching me some form of immorality, carousing songs like Little Maggie.

I began listening for that eerie click again, the one which interrupted my telephone conversations, warned me that someone had just picked up the other phone, was listening in while refusing to admit it even after I asked, "Who's there?" Just a sharp click and dead silence. I began dreaming I was in my own bedroom again, that Mimi was still coming to check on me, make sure I was there--and alone. She used to come every night at midnight, and the crack of light from my opened bedroom door would shine in my face. It was like a scene from "The Tell-Tale Heart." I decided she was a lot like God, their sole enjoyment was to pinpoint my private thoughts, shine a light on them, dismember my body, and bury me under the floor simply because they were afraid of the look in my eyes.

In my nightmares, she became that nameless beast who guarded the country roads at night, the one I envisioned running effortlessly through the dark trees, always faster than Noah or I could drive. It didn't matter that we never saw her on the road home from wherever it was we'd caught her spying on us, we knew--felt it--she was already waiting for us in the kitchen. She could, when we arrived home, run outside into the drive, rip off our headlights, shove them in our faces, interrogate and judge us. I knew no way of controlling someone like Mimi, her God, or that beast, and they scared me.

Just like Speedy Gonzales and his bulging eyes, watching me while Noah slept, while I lay unprotected except for a

blanket I wasn't even allowed to pull closer around me without Speedy reprimanding me. It was simply creepy, unnerving.

And it was only natural I associated Speedy, a Chihuahua, with Mimi. She herself was kind of popeyed, but mostly Speedy reminded me of her because it was she who instilled in me an unjustified yet eternal fear of those tiny, nervous dogs. She'd made me afraid, from the very beginning, of Mr. Buttons, my mother's Chihuahua--the one she babysat for her boyfriend Speedy. Mimi initially kept him in the bathroom right next to the small gas heater she left continually lit, even in the summer, because she was always as chilled as that little bald dog. After my mother took in Mr. Buttons, going to the bathroom scared me. While I sat on the toilet, that beast would run about my ankles, barking and snapping at my toes, or my shoelaces, or (if I wore loafers) my underwear that lay around my feet. The heater didn't help any. Between my fear that Mr. Buttons would draw blood at any moment and the heavy, hot air gathered in the small bathroom, I perspired more when I was sitting down urinating than I did when mowing the lawn, hoeing the garden, or giving a new-born calf a shot.

I can't say I didn't like Mr. Buttons. Something about him was different than Mimi or Noah's Chihuahua Speedy. Maybe it was how he seemed to dislike Mimi as much as I did. He chewed up her shoes, and then he chewed his way through the bathroom door so she couldn't keep him in there unless he

wanted to be kept, which only happened whenever she wanted to be in there. I took some pleasure in knowing he must have nipped at her toes and underwear too.

And every Tuesday morning, when the Trouper Scoop came, Speedy tried to get it before Mimi could, would shred it before she could save it. It became a race similar to Noah's continual efforts to beat Mimi home after he'd caught her spying. Temporarily solving the problem, Mimi began going to get the paper earlier, before my mother woke up and let Mr. Buttons out. But he caught on to that trick and would nip at my mother's hands and feet until she also began waking up earlier to let Mr. Buttons out so he'd let her go back to sleep. Finally, Noah and I secretly began to wake up early also, once a week on Tuesday mornings, especially so we could see Mimi and Mr. Buttons both scampering down the main road of the ranch, toward the front gate where the paper lay waiting. He would yelp all the way down and she would scream back at him. "Stupid little pup. Got the devil in you. Sure as I'm alive." No matter how many times we witnessed those races for the paper, Noah always grinned and then snickered once, barely. Tuesdays were good days for him.

So I might have been afraid to shut myself in the restroom with that little dog, trap myself in his territory, but I admired the way he tormented Mimi, made her drop her usually calm exterior and scream with frustration because she couldn't control him.

Maybe that's why I forgave or ignored my mother's immoral lifestyle. I hated it for Noah's sake, but I loved to watch Mimi pout a little, pick at her lip, and tell my mother, "I know you think you want to do that, but if you'd listen to me, you'd know you really prefer to do this." Or if she were especially desperate, realized my mother wasn't buying it, wasn't going to let Mimi convince her *she* knew better than my mother what my mother wanted, Mimi told her something like, *The Lord told me this is the man you really think is perfect. This is the job the Lord said you really want to take. Or This is the dress the Lord said you really feel pretty in.*

For similar reasons, I didn't correct Darlene when she said my mother ran off with two men at the same time, one of them a black man. I enjoyed watching Darlene squirm because, like Mimi, she knew she couldn't leash a woman like Amy Jo. It didn't really matter who my mother ran off with so much that she simply ran off. Darlene couldn't understand why any woman would, and maybe she was afraid that, because my mother's motives were so mysterious and irrational, the same urge to run away might hit her as well, might come upon her all of a sudden, tempt her to leave everything behind--all her values, possessions, routines, even her faith--and just simply run.

To distinguish themselves from my mother, to prove they weren't that kind of a woman, Mimi and Darlene acted shocked at my mother's behavior. They kept a checklist of sins

which, when they appeared in someone else's life, marked that person as someone condemned to hell, while the absence of such sins in their own lives made them feel safer, somehow validated their tickets to heaven.

"Why it's beyond my understanding how any woman could run off. Just up and run off. With a man. Living in sin," Mimi would say. "Any moment now a bolt of white-hot lightning will strike her in the head. Fry her. Right where she's standing."

"I heard," Darlene whispered to me one day, like she were speaking of some random woman, some woman I wasn't related to, didn't call *Mother*, "I heard she actually subscribed to the Jackson paper because she fell in love with a married man who worked at a Stop-n-Go there and wanted to read the obituaries every day to see if his wife would die. That is what I heard."

Mimi and Darlene were both the kind of do-gooders who would tell a judge during jury selection that as Christian Americans we should nurture those who lived in crime, show them the light, the true way, rehabilitate them. But then, once in the deliberating room, they would adamantly cling to a belief in the stiff eye-for-an-eye punishment. "Give him the juice," they would say. Forget nurturing.

The best defense my mother could have taken, could use to combat such women successfully, was to embrace their tactics for her own purposes. And she did. Before she brought her boyfriend Speedy out to the ranch, before she

told us he was a drug-free parolee, out of jail after serving his time for robbing two banks, she must have planned her strategy carefully. As soon as Mimi said, "The Lord told me in a dream last night you didn't want to date him," she quickly answered that the Lord told her Speedy was a spiritual test in this life. She was to bring him over to the narrow path. Share religion with him. What could Mimi say to that? How was she to prove her Lord was the one and only, and Amy Jo's an imposter? Perhaps if we'd known then what God would write to Noah, we could have buried two tires--one for each Lord--and seen which one came up and which didn't.

So my mother's men didn't bother me much because I enjoyed letting it bother Mimi instead. Not that I was ever one to flaunt my private life, make it a public performance like Amy Jo, but I was old enough to understand Mimi had probably fooled around with Noah long before they married although I wouldn't go so far as to say she'd slept with anyone other than my granddaddy. What did bother me about my mother though was the way she fooled me. I thought she played jokes only on Mimi. But she tricked me and Noah too, and I should have seen it coming, should have known when she and Speedy pulled up in a new bumble bee yellow Mustang they were going somewhere without me, had already been to the bank and pulled out our savings account, the one we both contributed to. I should have known when they took me, Noah, and Mimi out to eat Mexican food in Jackson (in the middle of

August, with no holiday in sight) that we were having a farewell party, that my mother picked up the tab as her way of saying *See you around, Maxie. You've been swell.*

Maybe I didn't catch on because, as far as the new Mustang went, it obviously wasn't beyond Speedy's ethics or morals to have stolen the thing. And the restaurant they took us to wasn't all that nice either, not really someplace you take someone as a way of saying something important. It was more a joke than anything serious.

Beans, Burritos, & Beer was inside an old Seven Eleven building. The red awning over the door was fairly noticeable, but the old Icee machine inside was the dead give-away. For decor, brightly colored towels were thrown over the tables, and although there were actually four chairs at every table, none of them matched. Noah leaned heavily to the left throughout the entire meal because his chair wobbled in that direction, was about to collapse altogether. Granted, two genuine pinatas hung from the ceiling, but one of them was black--not your typical festive Mexican color, and the other was a Santa Claus--which could be highly decorative during the appropriate season but at any other time, say from January 15th to November 1st, was like finding a home with its outdoor Christmas lights still blinking at night during July.

When we walked in, the hostess was busy pinning a corsage to her dress. You could tell she was trying to look especially decked out. Her hair was parted down the middle

and pulled back with blue barrettes, one on each side of her head. She wore what was probably her best dress, the one that looked most like Sunday, only it was old and out-of-style. It was one of those thin chiffons with a narrow string belt cinching the waist and puffed short sleeves gathered with elastic just below the shoulder. It was something you might find in a small town department store run by a little purple-haired lady but never in any place claiming to be from the current decade.

She was having problems pinning her flower to her dress. "God damn it to hell," she said and stuck one of her fingers in her mouth before looking at it to see if she'd pricked it hard enough to draw blood. When she saw us standing in the doorway, she blushed and then tried to explain why a lady, wearing her finest dress, might get caught cursing. "It's my birthday. I'm a Leo. The flower's from my kids. They'll be here any minute." Speedy offered to help pin the flower, and I was thinking, *Yeah, right Speed-o. I bet you'd like to pin her flower.* Luckily the woman was quick enough to see the bitter look on my mother's face, understand the way she folded her arms across her chest meant she was angry, not cold, and she told Speedy, although she giggled first, "No thanks."

Things didn't improve any when the first thing Speedy and my mother ordered off the menu were Big Gulp Daiquiris. I thought maybe the owner had just adopted some of the Seven Eleven lingo, but our waitress actually brought the drinks

out in those tall, red Big Gulp paper cups. I'd never seen a daiquiri, or any alcoholic beverage, that big, and I was glad Noah was driving. Mimi's eyes widened and her nostrils flared when she saw the cups, but then she quickly lowered her head, acting like she hadn't noticed, wasn't shocked. I could tell she wanted to say something about the Lord not having mentioned drinking Big Gulps of alcohol in the Good Book. Instead she went on and on about how Noah had been elected Father-of-the-Year in Trouper.

"Aren't you proud, Amy Jo? Your own daddy, the best father in town." Maybe Mimi sensed my mother was planning on leaving and thought if she could convince my mother how great Noah was, she would stay around, would feel obligated to verify how great he was by acting like Daughter-of-the-Year. Noah's being elected Father-of-the-Year came as a relief. It was security for Mimi, buying time with Amy Jo, or so she thought.

Noah ignored our entire conversation. Didn't even flinch when my mother said she had some advice for me. "Don't ever get married, Maxie," she said, leaning toward me and swirling her drink inside that big red cup. "Husbands can come back to haunt you." I didn't even know if my mother had ever had a husband, so I couldn't tell whether or not she was speaking from experience. Maybe many husbands haunted her or maybe she'd decided, without getting married, that a husband was an eternal thing, so who'd want to bother with

one? "After all," she added, "getting married is like becoming insane. It just commits you to an institution."

"Yeah," Speedy said and raised his eyes up, looked at the ceiling as if his brain were up there and he was trying to remember something he knew or thought. He snapped his fingers. "Oh, and this is a good one. Don't think just because you buying the most expensive condoms on the shelf, you buying the best. It could just be an economy box." He nodded his head yes, approving his own advice. "You know. With more in it. Not necessarily better or reliable."

Mimi dropped her fork, and it hit her plate just right so that it went ahead and fell further, clattering onto the floor, scattering some Mexican rice. But Noah didn't even look up. He hunched over his plate even more, shoveling his food into his mouth as quickly as possible, having shortened the distance between his face and his food. When he did pause and raise his head, he had to lift it higher than normal because his glasses had slid down his nose from having hung his head at such a low angle while eating. There was a bit of chili on his nose, and Amy Jo slowly reached over and wiped it away, smiling at him, him grinning at her. It was the last time I saw that grin, his whole face creased with happiness, tight with it. We just didn't know.

The next morning when Mimi found Amy Jo's purple toothbrush and the note in which she said she left the brush behind in case she forgot to bring one on her next visit, Mimi held the brush in her hands, ran her thumb through the

bristles, and read the note over and over, speaking more loudly each time she read it, until she was finally screaming at Noah, "Maybe she plans on bringing a daughter with her every time she comes." And after she was finished being angry with Amy Jo, she turned on Noah. "She takes after your family. I don't know how or when you taught her, but she learned it from you. Had to. My family's decent, God-fearing people. Father-of-the-Year my hind foot." I wanted to suggest perhaps her not being elected Mother-of-the-Year was where my mother had gone wrong. Maybe she lacked the appropriate maternal guidance, and maybe everyone in town knew it.

Later that day, I found Noah at the ranch entrance, at the end of our main road. He'd found Mr. Buttons and was holding his little limp body. He said he reckoned Mr. Buttons mistakenly believed my mother was racing him for the paper. It was a Tuesday and I imagined Amy Jo and Speedy walked quickly to the car, seemed as if they were hurrying, were threatening to take Mr. Buttons' paper before he or even Mimi could get it. I hoped it was another car that hit him, not that bumble bee yellow Mustang. Accident or no accident. I didn't want it to be Speedy and my mother who plowed over him, finally stopped his yelping, closed those bulging eyes permanently.

I saw Noah cry for the first time when he buried Mr. Buttons. His face twisted up, and his breathing came in loud gasps. His whole body shook with the sobbing, and his hands

patted the dirt down again and again before he finally placed some rocks on top. Noah explained the rocks were to prevent other animals from digging Mr. Buttons up and eating his remains. I figured what he wanted to tell me was something similar to what he told me when I picked him up from jail in October (some fifteen years after my mother disappeared). He probably needed someone to hold his hands, needed to tell someone he was frightened, needed to convince himself Mimi's efforts to blame him for Amy Jo's running off, like Darlene's accusations that he was perverted, were understandable, excusable.

But even when I was only eleven, I knew there was something perverse about Mimi's God, something off-kilter in her religion that allowed her to tell me later that Tuesday how Noah placed those stones on Mr. Buttons's grave to keep that Chihuahua from coming back to haunt us. It was voodoo--symbolic of his desire to stop Amy Jo from returning. "Isn't necessary though," she said. "Your granddaddy didn't discipline her straight. She won't come back. She don't love you like she ought."

That last November, with Mimi dead and Noah's new Chihuahua Speedy taking her place at our Thanksgiving dinner, I watched Noah eat, saw him lean into his plate, move the turkey in as quickly as possible, his breaths coming between spoonfuls in loud gasps. After eating, he counted the three corn kernels he insisted someone place beneath his plate every Thanksgiving, and said, as always, they represented his

three blessings--Mimi, my mother, and me. I hid only one kernel under my plate.

Later that evening, I looked in the mirror to see if I was becoming anything like Amy Jo, and I decided you could never prevent anything from coming back to haunt you. Not tires. Not yapping dogs. Not even Mimi, because there would always be someone like her or Darlene watching when you didn't want them to, trying to frighten you, nip at your toes or whatever they could grab.

And when the police began tearing down the ark, I waited, wished they would hurry and find the drugs, because somehow I knew they would find some and I hoped finding them quickly would be enough, would stop their destruction. Whatever could be saved of the ark, I wanted it, wanted to sense its heavy shadow in the evening sunlight, feel the burden of everything it represented haunting me, knowing Noah wanted it there, built it himself because he believed, and I wanted to also, that he heard inside it the words of some God who joined him when he sang about Little Maggie, some God whose existence was as simple as a tire coming back from the dead.

CHAPTER V

DECEMBER

If it hadn't been for those notes the Lord kept sending Noah, I guess the police would have thrown him back in jail that December, this time for possession, for the six kilos of cocaine they uncovered in the ark. As soon as the two officers knocked on our front door to inform or warn me they'd found the cocaine, I began searching for Noah's stash of correspondence from the Lord. He'd hid it like it was also something illegal, and I felt terrible rummaging through his drawers and closet, checking the pockets of his dirty clothes, peeking under the bed and even between the mattress and boxspring.

Watching his little Max search his things for what he thought was condemning evidence made Noah's asthma return. He was trying to speak to me, but a lack of oxygen only allowed him two or three syllables at a time. "Max--you can't," he gasped. "Those are--sacred.--Don't--turn me in." Speedy Gonzales was circling about my ankles, yapping as usual, honing in occasionally for a nip at my jeans or shoes. He sensed from Noah's voice that I was up to no good, and tiny Chihuahua or not, he was going to show me a thing or two.

I gave up momentarily and sat down beside Noah, who had managed to sit up and swing his legs out from under the covers. He was ready to take action. "Now, listen to me, Noah," I said. "You have to understand that two police officers in a town currently anxious to prosecute some drug dealers--any drug dealers--just found six kilos of cocaine on an ark built by you, a man who speaks with God directly and was recently arrested for statutory rape. Things are not looking good."

"The Lord will protect me," Noah said. He couldn't understand what was happening to him. He seemed so alone, frail. He wasn't wearing his nightshirt so I could see his pale, almost blue chest with the snake tattoo. His stomach had grown slightly larger, rounder than his chest which looked like it had caved in with age.

Then, in a moment of inspiration, I thought of my mother and how she'd used Mimi's tactics for her own advantage. "Don't you see, Noah?" I asked. "The Lord provided you with those notes because He, with His infinite knowledge of the future, knew you would need them. He foresaw you would be accused of drug dealing and wanted you to be able to prove you built that ark for spiritual purposes, not financial or illegal ones. Somebody else is using your ark, and those notes from the Lord will prove it."

I was only half-lying. Somebody was using that ark, had set Noah up from the beginning to take the fall if it became necessary, to look like a daft old coot who claimed the Lord

told him to push drugs from an ark, an excuse even flimsier than the customary *The devil made me do it*. I wanted those notes to show the sheriff, to at least get him to recognize it was possible Noah was being sold down the river. I just chose not to tell Noah I thought the notes were bogus, were part of the set-up.

He believed me. It seemed logical to him that the Lord provided those notes to protect his reputation much like the experiment with the tires was meant to prove the Lord's existence, the validity of Noah's claims to be speaking directly with Him. He showed me how he'd hidden the notes inside the toilet tank, in a Ziploc bag, because he'd seen somebody hide narcotics there in a television show. The coincidence was a little creepy, and I told him he'd better not tell anybody else that story. Especially Darlene. I imagined she could turn Noah's familiarity with typical methods of concealing narcotics into decisive evidence he was therefore selling them.

Noah was fortunate because when I went to see the sheriff with those hand-written messages from the Lord, he leaned back in his chair, shook his holster belt, jiggled his pistols as if to let me know he was the one holding the ammo behind this operation, and told me he hadn't listened to Gopher. He'd decided he didn't care if Gopher was the mayor: as sheriff, he'd run his drug investigation the way he thought it should be run, meaning he began the investigation long before he ever sent those officers out to the ranch. He

didn't need to see the messages. With the information he'd gathered, he already figured Noah wasn't involved. "Drug traffic," he said, "has been increasing at the high school, and a couple of our informants have given us reason to believe the drug carrier is someone connected with the school. Someone who has means of obtaining admittance into the school as well as someone who can slip on and off your grandfather's ranch without suspicion. Jerry Don suggested we offer you and Noah protection until we can locate the core of our drug ring."

I couldn't help but feel silly discussing the drug problem in Trouper, Texas, using Miami Vice jargon as if we were in the middle of Florida, facing a bloody standoff with a couple of dealers from Bogota who were slick enough to run their traffic past the Coast Guard. I was tempted to ask if they had a "safe house" for me and Noah to hole up in while the bad men were being caught, but I didn't. Although (or perhaps because) Darlene kept feeding me information about drug-crazed kids running wildly through the halls of Trouper High, I wasn't completely convinced there was a drug problem. But just in case one did exist, I decided I'd better not pop off with the sheriff, should simply act grateful Noah wasn't their main suspect--particularly since the PTA was outraged again.

According to Darlene, the newly inducted secretary for the PTA, students were popping pills in the classrooms, right in front of their teachers' faces. Drug deals were going

down in the bathrooms between classes, in the parking lot after school, and even in the Dairy Queen during lunch. Darlene swore she saw two girls giggling in the bathroom while she was working, and she knew what that meant. They weren't simply writing their boyfriends' names on the walls or smoking a plain old Camel cigarette. "Can't pull one over on me," Darlene said. "They was shooting up."

Two women from the Old Timers class at church rushed into the Dairy Queen one day in early December just after they'd seen the high school chorus perform the Singing Christmas Tree at an afternoon assembly. They were horrified and couldn't wait to report to Darlene how two boys interrupted the production after "Silent Night," jumped up before the director was prepared to begin "O Little Town of Bethlehem," pulled their pants down to their ankles, mooned the entire audience, and broke out into "This Little Light of Mine, I'm Gonna Let It Shine." Those two women hoped that, as the only responsible officer of the PTA, the only female officer, Darlene would take care of this situation. One of those boys was Bo Mullins, older brother to Scooter, the six-year old who'd lept out of his mamma's car in October when he was allegedly soaring on some drug trip. Obviously the drug problem was way out of hand, was consuming entire families and defiling the sanctity of our Good Lord's birth and Trouper's traditional celebration of it.

Attention was, however, diverted from Darlene's role as PTA secretary two days later when reports from Apple Hill

slowly made their way to Trouper. The Trouper Troupers played Apple Hill High in the IA semi-final football game on Friday night, and the coach was arrested early Saturday morning when two Trouper cheerleaders reported another Trouper cheerleader had gone into the coach's motel room wearing a pair of black leggings and an over-sized, baby pink cashmere sweater and come out wearing a pair of coaching shorts cinched at the waist and an over-sized football jersey. "Her hair was completely messed up," one of the informants said. Other witnesses claimed marijuana smoke just rolled out the open door as she emerged.

When questioned, the cheerleader confessed she really didn't remember much after he gave her the marijuana cigarette to smoke on. "Dressed. Naked. It all happened so fast," she said. The football coach simply placed his head in his hands when the police interrogated him. He couldn't remember a darn thing, much less where he got the joints or even if he was the one who had them. "I think I'm just a patsy," he said.

"Of course," the Trouper sheriff said, "nobody believed Oswald when he said that either. I mean, it's just too convenient to smoke a narcotic which induces memory loss right before you fixing to seduce and drug a teenage girl. To claim you don't recall any of it. Can't recollect where you even got the stuff. That's the oldest line in the book-- *I'm a patsy.*" He went on to say it all added up. The coach matched the m.o. describing the Trouper drug lord the sheriff

had compiled, was certainly capable of getting in and out of the high school with no problems, no questions asked. And so he was arrested for statutory rape, possession and use of narcotics, and possibly for dealing--although further investigating would be required before the P.D. could officially charge him with the latter.

As the mayor, Gopher was shocked. And disappointed. Trouper lost that football game, and the Scoop quoted Gopher as saying it was no small wonder. "With sin like that among the ranks, we ain't going to win football games. It only goes to show wickedness don't pay off."

Gracie came to see me Monday morning when I was working at the Dairy Queen. Her eyes had on their frightened look, and she kept looking around to see if anyone was watching or listening to her.

"You rolling class this morning, Gracie?" I asked.

"I got to talk to you. To somebody." As soon as she spoke though, she brought her hands to her mouth and shifted her eyes from side to side, like she knew she'd already said too much and was trying to prevent the rest from coming out by placing her hands over her mouth, like she wanted anyone who might be watching to know she made some effort to shut up. Then she reached over and grabbed my hands from my lap and shook them.

"Ooo, Max. I think that coach really was the patsy cause I saw Jerry Don with that cheerleader just last week and he called her 'honey' and her name isn't 'honey' at all

although lots of boys call her that behind her back but never to her face cause her name's really 'Bobby' not 'honey' and what happens if she just made Jerry Don mad, if say he found out she was playing with the coach too and set them both up, kind of like shooting me, you know what I mean?" She spoke quickly, maybe thinking if she didn't get it all out she might never have the guts to even start saying it again much less finish it.

"Do you truly believe you made Jerry Don mad enough that he shot you for no good reason, for his own personal revenge? Did your breaking up with him make him that crazy?"

"I'm telling you." She stood up, walked to the back of the dining area, and opened the door leading to the bathrooms. I saw her look to the right, down the hallway, and then, just before she closed the door back, she opened it again and checked behind it. Only then did she come back to the counter and continue talking. "Someone's watching my every move. I can't explain it to you. Not yet. I just know they are."

"You didn't answer me," I said. "You really think Jerry Don shot you for revenge? Have you told your mom this?"

"He's bad news. I mean it," she said, and then jerked her head up because Jerry Don himself came in, walked right up to the counter where we were whispering, and ordered a Chicken Finger Basket, which was strange because it was only ten o'clock, too late for breakfast but not really time for lunch either. Gracie left, never once looking Jerry Don in

the face, but instead staring at the floor the whole way out the door.

"You still want the Finger Basket?" I asked. "Or do you got to keep hot on her trail?"

Jerry Don leaned forward a little, got right in my face. "Darlene asked me to watch her. And so did Gopher. They worried she might be involved in this drug thing."

I jiggled my head and shoulders. "I swear, Jerry Don, sometimes a girl in this town starts to feel like she can't even go to the ladies' room without someone following her, watching through the keyhole." Then I got right back in his face. "I think it's starting to get on my nerves."

About a week and a half before Christmas, Darlene realized the greatest tragedy brought about by the arrest of the Trouper football coach was the devastating effect his and that cheerleader's absence would have on the live nativity scene she planned to present in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen. She'd lost her Mary and Joseph, although she hated to admit she'd shown such poor judgment in casting those two roles. What would she do now that Joseph was in jail for smoking marijuana with Mary, who could hardly be called a virgin, since she was now at home, grounded for having sexual relations with Joseph in a Holiday Inn?

I laughed at Darlene's predicament until I went to church the Sunday before Christmas, the Sunday before the Monday the live nativity scene was scheduled to make its

debut, and discovered I was playing Mary to Roy's Joseph. My and Roy's generous offer to fill in for the original actors was praised in the church bulletin. Darlene said she forgot to tell me I had generously offered to do it, but now that it was in the bulletin, how could I refuse? "You might even discover a hidden talent," she said.

Public attention wasn't enough to persuade me; I certainly didn't care whether anyone believed I was generous or a good actress. But that Sunday happened to be the first Sunday since Noah's arrest in October that he actually felt well enough to attend church, and he, of course, saw the bulletin. "Max, you didn't tell me. Amy Jo played Mary one year when she was only seventeen. Mimi volunteered her, but she did it. Guess Mimi'd be proud of me for teaching you to do it also. Wouldn't she?" He held the bulletin out far enough in front of him so he could read it. "It can be our way of saying thanks for the messages. You know," he whispered, "for the Lord's looking out for me. For the proof I'm not the drug dealer."

So I played Mary. But I drew the line when Noah offered to let me borrow Speedy Gonzales. "A Chihuahua would not make a good lamb, Noah. Lambs do not yelp and run about your feet trying to bite your toes off."

I confess if someone had warned me how cold it would be, standing still, wearing nothing but a thin toga-like costume (although with jeans underneath because togas were, Darlene said, indecent without something else) or if I had been smart

enough to realize that playing Mary to Roar's Joseph would put me in an uncomfortable situation, I would have refused outright. No second thoughts. No guilt.

There I was, in Troupers, Texas, in the middle of a Dairy Queen parking lot, shivering, trying to keep the December wind from blowing my toga up around my head, pretending I was Mary, staving off Roy's advances, as if he were really Joseph, I were really married to him, and he'd just spent nine sexless months watching my stomach grow fat with a child he didn't put there. "So," he asked, "are you really a virgin?"

"Get that grin off your face," I said. "You sound as bad as Jerry Don and you look like Darlene."

Then he smiled--big like Darlene, making fun of her, and I laughed because I never thought he was smart enough to notice her open-mouthed smile, recognize she was putting on all her charms for him. But there he was, grinning, staring at me, even refusing to look away after I did, because I didn't give him a full ten-second acknowledgment of his pretty smile. He had her technique down perfectly. "But don't ever call me Jerry Don," he said, suddenly serious despite his making a face.

"What's up with him, anyway? You two don't seem to be good buddies lately. Did the Bert and Ernie team bust up?" I asked, trying to tease him, make him laugh about Rubber Duckie, the good old days.

He didn't laugh though. "I don't know what's up with Jerry Don. He's been hanging around with some musicians from Saguine who play in a little joint right outside of Jackson. Call themselves The Red Devils."

"He still help you with work on the ranch?"

"Nope. Told me I didn't need to be helping out the P.D. any more either. Said with the drug traffic going on, the last thing the sheriff wanted to worry about was some guy playing make-believe. I'm going to be a cop though." He made a gun with his thumb and first finger, closed one eye to aim, and pretended to shoot a criminal hiding in some nearby bushes. "Some day."

"I think Jerry Don scares Gracie," I said.

"I think Jerry Don ought to scare most women. Decent women, anyway. I heard he was pretty rough on that cheerleader they brought in about the coach. I can't figure him lately." Humming the Rubber Duckie song, Roy sat down on the grass beside me and the manger which only held a small toss pillow wrapped in a towel. He shook his head. "This is the sorriest damn nativity scene I ever laid eyes on. I'm freezing my ass off too."

Later that week, Darlene joined us in the Dairy Queen parking lot, dressed up like Gabriel. I was surprised she hadn't shown up sooner, that she'd left me and Roy alone for two days. She said she'd been spending time with Gracie. "I am, you know, a mother." Then she flashed her mouth open, showed her fangs, and held that pose for a few seconds. I

thought there was no way Gabriel, a beautiful angel from heaven, sported a set of teeth like that, or maybe he did and that explained why he had to reassure the shepherds and wisemen, tell them not to be afraid. It certainly frightened me every time she showed that face. "I heard ya'll been having a big time out here," Darlene said. "People driving by say you two been laughing like you having a party. Don't seem much like Mary and Joseph to me."

Roy winked at her. "Don't you listen to that gossip none, Darlene. Me and Max here been good as sweet sugar."

If Darlene got her way that night, she would have rewritten the Bible, would have mixed in some Greek mythology. Having been struck by Cupid's arrow and fallen for a mortal, Gabriel would have come down to hit Joseph on the head for having gotten himself involved with a loose, lying woman like Mary, a pregnant virgin. Certainly Darlene thought I was up to no good, moving in on her territory. She probably didn't especially relish the idea of my playing the perfect woman, perfect enough to give birth to the son of her God. And if anyone had driven by that evening (but not many did), we would have made Trouper history, because I'd bet that never before had there been a nativity scene in which Gabriel (a female angel in our case) got mad at Joseph for flirting with Mary, hit him over the head with a magic wand (as if Gabriel carried one of those), and then drove off in a green Subaru, not caring whether or not she successfully

convinced any onlookers they ought not to be frightened by the toss pillow lying in our manger.

Darlene ran straight to Jerry Don to tell him how horrible I was, and she told me later how he suggested that since it was the holiday season, Darlene ought to offer me the gift of forgiveness. So she gave me a rectangular piece of red construction paper on which she'd glued some pine needles and glitter: *Come to a dinner of forgiveness. Peace on earth; Good will toward men. Christmas Eve, 6:00 p.m.* I poked my finger in the white Elmer's seeping around some of the needles and a big blob of the glitter. My finger stuck to the paper, the glue still fresh.

"I've invited all your friends. Even Roy. So you'll know this is a peace offering. I want you to feel comfortable sitting in my home. You can even bring Noah," Darlene said.

"He's the one who ought to be inviting you to a dinner of forgiveness."

"Whatever." She stood there for a moment, shifted her weight from one foot to the other, looked around the room, obviously struggling with the temptation to say something catty, something about my mother or Noah being crazies, loose heathens. She tipped her head to the right and asked instead, "Are you coming or not?"

"What are you doing telling Jerry Don your problems?" I asked. I knew something was up, because no matter how great a counselor Jerry Don was, there was no way Darlene could

keep her mouth shut, could stop herself from saying something nasty when given the chance. Nothing except maybe knowing she'd get a better chance later. Had something even uglier in store for me.

"He's a very sensitive man. He gives good advice. It's getting you off the hook with me, isn't it?"

"Whatever," I said.

When Noah and I got to Darlene's house, Gracie, Roy, and Jerry Don were already sitting at the table. It seemed tense to me--a kind of family gathering of people who wished they didn't know one another, wished holidays didn't exist exactly because they felt obligated to meet in honor of them, like seasonal gathering was inherently in our systems, like we were lemmings and had a suicidal but familial impulse to gather every year and jump off a cliff.

"About time ya'll got here," Roy said, smiling. "I'm starved. Starving Marvin." He was wearing a red western shirt and a Kelly green sportscoat, a get-up meant to show his respect for the holiday festivities I guessed. He'd taken off his Stetson since he sat at the table, and his hair was limp and parted, where it wasn't supposed to be, almost directly above his left ear.

"Were you two busy rebuilding that ark?" Jerry Don laughed, not because he was teasing but because he knew he was the one of the officers who tore the ark down, took pleasure in it. Then he patted the chair beside him, "Now,

darlin', don't get all huffy. Come on, sweetheart. Come sit by me. Let me make it up to you."

"Yes," Darlene said, placing her hand in the small of my back and gently guiding me toward Jerry Don. "That's your seat. By him. Don't forget to pu your pin on."

I looked at the white china dish placed on the table by my seat. It held a garland of holly and a small, ceramic Christmas tree I was supposed to pin to my blouse. I knew traveling to Jackson to shop at Hobby Lobby was a female bonding ritual for women living in Trouper--a mecca of some sort. But I always adamantly refused to hang needlepoint on my walls, make my own ceramic mugs, or decorate my clothing with puff-up paint. There was no way I would attach a ceramic Christmas tree to my blouse.

"Look," Roy said, pushing a button on the Christmas tree pin he wore on the lapel of that Kelly green jacket. "My ornaments light up." He was grinning, but it was a sickly attempt, the kind of smile that is a little flat and creases your forehead, signals some kind of confusion as to whether or not you're really content. Was he grateful I'd finally gotten there because it had been horrible sitting in that room alone with Darlene and Jerry Don, or was he oblivious to the whole situation and genuinely captivated by that silly, twinkling pin? I would have asked him when no one was looking but my chair next to Jerry Don was conveniently located on the far side of the table from Roy.

The evening seemed eerie throughout the whole meal. We ate in silence, with only the clatter of silverware against the plates and serving bowls and the click of Darlene's high red heels as she moved back and forth between the kitchen and the table, bringing every possible thing she thought might make our Christmas ham delicious. But even her menu was creepy. It reminded me of the strange meals Mimi used to serve: ham and nothing but starchy side dishes--macaroni, cream corn, and whipped potatoes--except for one very small Tupperware bowl of green beans as if it were the only vegetable in her refrigerator and she didn't even feel the need to disguise that fact by taking it out of the Tupperware before serving it.

As soon as we were finished eating, Jerry Don wrapped one arm around my shoulders and let his other hand grab mine, which was resting on the table. He slowly rubbed his thumb, back and forth, over the top of my hand. "You're beautiful as ever," he said.

Roy sat up straight and coughed a little. He was trying to decide what to do. Gracie eyes tightened with anger, and I couldn't tell if she was mad at Jerry Don for hanging on me or her mother for laughing about it. Darlene was laughing so hard, she was shaking and no sound was coming from her wide-open mouth. "What are the two of you up to?" I asked.

"Look out now," Jerry Don said. He pulled his arm back a little and began running his hand into my short hair,

letting his fingers move slowly up the nape of my neck. I guess he thought I needed a massage, needed to relax. "I always wanted to sit by you. If we'd done this sooner, like at church, we could have been holding hands all along."

I stood up. "Why did you have this dinner, Darlene? What's the point?"

Gracie stood up also. "And why you been following me, Jerry Don? I thought that was Roy's job."

Jerry snickered. "Don't have a tizzie, Gracie. I won't shoot you again. Gopher asked me to watch you."

Gracie began shaking, crying. "You lie."

"Now, darlin', why would I lie?"

But Gracie just stood there shaking until she simply sat down on the floor, fell there almost, collapsed as if she were giving up, as if it were all useless. She kept shaking her head. "You're a liar. Gopher wouldn't."

"Get yourself up off my floor, young lady. Of course, Gopher didn't ask him to watch over you. I did. I'm worried about you."

Gracie looked at me, like that day at the DQ, and I knew she was trying to decide if she should talk. "They're going to tell you it's Roy," she finally said. "They're lying. But that's what they've planned. Mom's just stupid, but Jerry Don is mean."

"Tell us what's Roar?" Noah asked. "You in trouble, Roar? Maybe I can help."

"Wait a second, wait a second," I said. "Back up. Darlene, you asked Jerry Don, a man who shot your daughter, to spy on her? Are you nuts? He shot her, for Christ's sake."

"Noah's not the only one who God deems it appropriate to talk to," Darlene said, and she sat down at the head of the table, in the chair she'd left for herself, and placed her arms on the rests as if she were sitting on a royal throne, explaining her divine rights to the poor peasants. "He left me a message this week also. On the front windshield of my car. Under the right wiper."

"Darlene, you didn't believe the notes Noah got were genuine. So you're telling me, now you've gotten one, you think they're for real?"

Noah shook his head. "Maxie, don't you think they're real? Don't you?"

"Just a minute, Noah." I walked over to Gracie and put my arm around her shoulder. She was still shaking but her crying had become nothing more than dry little gasps. "It's okay, Gracie." Then I looked at Darlene. "So just what did your note say, Darlene?"

"The Lord said he was going to reveal the main drug dealer to me. Said it was someone with connections at the high school and at your granddaddy's ranch."

"I already knew that," I said. "The sheriff told me that about three weeks ago. That's nothing new."

"Maxie," Noah said again. "Don't you believe?"

I waved my hand at him. Wait a second, I was saying.

"The Lord said it was Roy," Darlene continued. Jerry Don says he can prove it. We thought we'd give him an opportunity to confess and repent, swear never to do it again. And we might not turn him over." Darlene was gloating. Forget her feelings for Roy. Here was a chance to prove how big a Christian she was, how the Lord hand-picked her to deliver his judgment.

"You're crazy," Roy said. "I don't smoke nothing but cigarettes. I swear, Max, they're crazy."

Jerry Don stood up beside me, stuck his face in mine, rolled his eyes around before running his hand slowly down my back. "Maybe I am crazy," he whispered. Then he pooched out his stomach and made his big western belt buckle tilt strangely forward. "Look at this trick. I can make that buckle go parallel to the floor." And he pushed his stomach out even further. "No big deal though. After a heavy meal. And I have eat big tonight." He patted and then shook his stomach.

"You're gross," I said.

Gracie was crying again. "That note. Mom's note isn't from the Lord. I know," she said.

"Get up, girl." Jerry Don snapped his fingers at her. And she did get up but also backed right out of the room, and I heard the door close as she left the house.

"Let's get out of here, Noah." I pulled his chair out and helped him stand up.

Darlene walked over to Roy and kissed his cheek. "Come on, sugar. Confess. If you don't, we can't help you."

Roy shook her off and walked over to Jerry Don, pushed him back into his chair, shoved his face with his hand. "You ever touch Maxie again. You ever touch Gracie again. Hell, you lay a hand on Darlene even. I'll take your dick off--slow--bit by bit. Granted that won't take long, you little prick. But it'll still hurt."

Jerry Don just grinned. "We'll be watching you," he said in that sing-song voice of his. And as I left the house, I heard him singing, quietly, that Rubber Duckie song.

CHAPTER VI

JANUARY

For New Year's, Darlene resolved to bring Roy back into the fold of Christian brotherhood, and she spent the first half of January following a daily calendar which mapped out her step-by-step plan before finally deciding he was hopeless. "My hands are tied," she admitted. "I have no other choice but to stop speaking to him altogether. It's scriptural. Matthew 18, verses 15, 16, and 17."

On the second day of the new year, Darlene took the first step. She went to Roy's house--alone--and refused to discuss their conversation, because the Bible said grievances should be kept private, even though she'd already told everyone in town, long before she knocked on Roy's front door, that he was a lost sheep in peril of eternal damnation if she couldn't persuade him to stop practicing wicked ways. That was worse than blabbing the details. As far as the typical Trouper was concerned, *wicked ways* meant things far worse than smoking some hash, probably referred to something sexual--sodomy, cross-dressing, homosexual activities, perhaps all of these committed simultaneously.

It was a great promotional campaign for the Dairy Queen, and Darlene could have been elected Business Woman of the Year because the lunch and dinner crowds began growing. The

place filled with smokers, and the air stiffened, became hard to breathe, Bob closed the five-and-dime temporarily because he got lonely after his regular, gin rummy crowd moved their game to the DQ so they wouldn't miss the excitement. People I'd never even seen before (which meant they were coming from neighboring towns) sat expectantly in our colorful booths, waiting for Roy, the famous Trouper quarterback, to walk into Dairy Queen, come out of the closet, confess every gory detail of his sins. Afterward, those rednecks planned to pound his face in, not for being wicked, but for being abnormal, queer.

Roy had until the 5th of January to respond. Darlene marked off the days of her calendar with a sharp check from her red pen, as if she actually enjoyed numbering Roy's final days, and when Roy didn't show up by noon on the fifth day, she planned phase two. This time she needed witnesses to go with her, two members of the Ladies' Circle, to verify that Roy refused to repent and impress upon him that his refusal was a serious matter, something Darlene would bring before the church elders if necessary.

Of course, taking a couple of women from the Ladies' Circle ended Roy's privacy. As official witnesses, they couldn't wait to get away from Darlene and start witnessing to all their friends how they had been personally asked by Darlene, secretary of the PTA and a personal correspondent with God, to help save Roy's soul, and subsequently they now knew what mysterious sin his soul needed to be saved from.

Everyone in town knew about Roy's supposed involvement in the Trouper drug ring long before Darlene ever moved into phase three--sharing it with the entire church. Her coming forward during the invitation song at Sunday morning services wasn't even exciting. No one fidgeted, whispered, or stretched his neck trying to see what was happening up front during the rest of the song, wondering what lurid sins Darlene was confessing, what reasons she was giving the rest of the congregation to pray about for her. We all knew. She was going forward for Roy's sins, kind of a vicarious repentance for him.

Darlene's investigative article in the Scoop didn't even surprise anyone. By the time that week's paper ran, Roy had already been asked to resign his position as president of the Trouper Athletic Booster Club. Owners of various businesses around town informed him he was not welcome in their stores. He was banned from the gas station, the Piggly Wiggly, the Dairy Queen, and even Bob's Dime Store despite the fact Roy was the Citizen-of-the-Year who stopped the robbery-in-progress at Bob's. Nor did the elders wait until that article came out. It only took them twenty-four hours to assemble and discuss Darlene's confession of Roy's sins before they showed up on his front porch, came to tell him the church felt obligated, in light of his unconfessed sins, to disfellowship him.

"I been blackballed," he told me. Those were the first words out of his mouth when I opened the door to the tack

room and caught him sitting in there all alone with the lights out. "Other than my own house, this is the only place I can still get into. I can keep company with a bunch of saddles." He had on a pair of coveralls, those golden jumpsuits that zip up I thought only grandfathers wore. It made him look older, out of place. He hadn't shaved in several days, but there were two spots just below each corner of his mouth that wouldn't grow whiskers, so his beard wasn't smooth, had instead that scraggly look. His hair was matted around the crown of his head and sort of flipped up toward the bottom. It looked especially dirty, separating into oily clumps, and I guessed he was working on at least a three-day old hat head.

"Jesus, Roy, you look awful." I sat down beside him. And that wasn't exactly what I wanted to say. "I mean, you still got me and Noah. Is there anything we can get you?"

"Not that I'm ungrateful or anything, Max. But if I recall correctly, my relationship with you and Noah is what got me into this mess in the first place. Half my problem is I done pissed Darlene off about you. Now my buddy Jerry's telling everyone how I'm the only one with connections at both the high school and this here ranch."

"What kind of connections do you have at the high school?" I asked, because Roy didn't strike me as the type who would have built, much less maintained, scholarly rapport with his old high school instructors. "You have a young girlie up at Trouper High you been flirting with?"

Roy slowly twisted his face around toward me and kind of snarled. "No, Max. Seems like I been chasing you for the last five months. Not that it's amounted to much more than chasing my own ass." He looked away and stared at his feet.

"I'm sorry, Roy. I shouldn't be teasing."

"No big deal. I shouldn't be yelling at my only friend." He laughed a little. "And you don't go giving Darlene any more wild ideas. Next thing I know, she'll add my name to the growing list of men arrested for statutory rape. No, my connections seem to be only with the male athletes. The Athletic Booster Club says I been using my official position to get drugs to them boys."

"You're kidding. Do you even see those athletes outside of watching them at games?"

"Nope. The whole thing's stupid." He stood up and started walking around the room, pacing. "You should've seen them, Max. That group of old men gathered on my front porch, wearing their best suits. Ties and all. They huddled around the door, peeking in the windows, too scared to ring the bell." He acted out the scene for me, kind of stooping, peering through an imaginary window. He stood up abruptly, the scene over. "Chicken shits. I guess they thought I was going to throw open the door and blow their heads off with that M-16 I bought last time I was down south making a drug pick-up. They stood out there ten minutes, whispering, before I finally gave in and just opened the door."

"So they really believed Darlene?" I just couldn't believe that any group of men, even a group of Trouper men, could be so thoroughly unintelligent that every last one of them would buy something Darlene said.

"They just kept reading the Bible at me. All those verses about not even eating with habitual sinners." He lowered his voice, mocking the typical elder rumble.

"'Trestest thou them like tax collectors and idolaters.'"

"You want Noah to talk to them?"

"No offense, Max. I love your granddaddy and all, but you really think that would help? I may be the town drug lord, but Noah's worse off. He's the town kook. At least everyone is afraid of me. They just think Noah's nuts."

"We have to do something. Really. They're acting like this is the wild west. They're going to run you completely out of town if we don't do something."

"I know. I been thinking something's up with Jerry Don. I think we should start following him. See who he's hanging out with. I been thinking he's got connections at both the high school and this ranch too. And Noah hasn't gotten no more messages from the Lord since Jerry stopped coming out to help me."

"He seems different to me. Weird. Not like he first did when I met you and him on the highway with the loose cattle. I guess first impressions can be deceiving."

"That mean you'll help me? You got the camera. At least Noah does. He took pictures of that resurrected tire."

"You got the M-16?" I smiled. "I say we're set."

Following Jerry Don, we noticed immediately how easy it was to find him. He was almost always parked outside Gopher's. If we managed to lose him, we'd find him thirty minutes later, staking out Gopher's block. If we wanted to go home and get some sleep or if we needed to go to work, we wouldn't miss anything. We'd find him and his squad car patrolling that same neighborhood four, five, even six hours later. Roy figured the sheriff assigned Jerry Don this monotonous task--protecting Gopher--for some unknown reason, during the drug investigation.

Jerry Don did seem fairly cocky about the whole thing. When he finally realized his bumping into us every hour or so wasn't a coincidence, he didn't lose his temper or ask us what the hell we were doing tailing him. He didn't even act nervous. Instead he waved, grinned, and occasionally gave us two quick beeps on his car horn. Eventually Roy and I quit driving around, trying to look like we were out for a casual spin, and started parking our car right behind his. Subtlety was no longer critical. Jerry would simply wave at us in his rearview mirror, although one day he did get out of his car, walk around to our truck, and ask if we had any aspirin. He had a terrible headache.

I told Roy it was time we turned the tables. Clearly it wasn't having any effect letting Jerry Don know we were following him. We weren't learning anything from our

efforts, and we certainly weren't making Jerry squirm. So the next morning when we pulled up at Gopher's, I brought homemade donuts with me. I leaned across the front seat, gave two quick beeps on our car horn, got out of the car, and walked up to Jerry's, whistling as I went. Roy just stared at me like I'd lost my mind. I tapped on Jerry's window, and he rolled it down.

"Top of the morning," I said. "Care for a donut? The way we find you parked out here at all hours, my best guess is you haven't eaten in three, maybe four days. You must be starved. Go on." I pushed the plate through his window and held it right under his nose. "Don't be bashful."

My tactics worked. I finally got some kind of real response out of Jerry Don. "You bitch," he said, just loud enough where I could hear how he stretched out the oo and b sounds.

"My, my," I said, playing with the sound of my voice as well by adopting a deep Southern accent. "Are we having a rotten day? It can get rather chilly on a January stakeout. Don't you agree? Have a warm donut. It might take the nip off." And I shoved that plate even closer to his face, actually brushed the tip of his nose with it.

"Get out of my face," he said and knocked the plate out the window, out of my hands. It shattered on the pavement, and the donuts rolled around in tiny circles at my feet before finally tipping over.

"Look out now," I said, making fun of his favorite line. "You do have some nerves after all, and it looks like I actually hit one." I wasn't exactly sure what I had done to set Jerry Don off. Maybe he didn't mind being followed by two people who seemed more afraid of him than they were anxious to get some dirt on him. Maybe he didn't mind me and Roy cowering in our truck as we drove past him, literally ducking our heads, looking stupid, as if we actually thought scrunching down in our car seats disguised us. Maybe he enjoyed watching us cringe every time he beeped his obnoxious car horn. But when I got brash about it, walked right up to his squad car with a plate of donuts, it wasn't funny any more.

"Did you see that?" I asked Roy when I got back in the pick-up. "I made him squirm." But when I turned to look back at Jerry Don's car, I finally saw who he'd meant to call a bitch. It wasn't me, but Gracie. She was tip-toeing closer and closer to Gopher's house, hiding behind various objects as she did--a tree, a bush, a fence, a parked car. It was about as subtle as me and Roy spying on Jerry Don in that candy apple red "Dooley." It occurred to me then that Jerry Don wasn't protecting Gopher. He'd been waiting for Gracie to show up, was afraid of her being at Gopher's for some reason. Maybe she had the goods on him. She could have telephoned, I thought.

Jerry Don jumped out of his car and began running straight for Gracie. I opened my door to go help her and

turned, before I left the pick-up, to make sure Roy was coming to help, had seen Gracie too, but he wasn't even looking at me or Jerry Don's car. His eyes were opened wide, and he just pointed to some bushes growing along Gopher's side fence. "What?" I asked. "What are you staring at?" I pointed the other direction. "Don't you see what Jerry Don is about to do?" Then I turned back to what Roy was watching and spotted Noah crouched in the bushes, his dark mouth hanging open, missing its teeth, and I knew right away he had received another message from the Lord. His dentures were in his back pocket again in honor of it. "Jesus Christ," I said.

"Yeah," Roy said. "Noah's heard from Him again. You don't think he's burying another something over there, do you?"

I was already heading toward Noah. I knelt beside the bushes and lifted some branches so I could see him clearly. "What on earth? Noah?" I threw my hands in the air. "I'm speechless."

Roy was beside me, peering through the bushes also. "Noah? That you? What you doing in there? I'm not helping you dig another eight-foot hole, Noah. Don't even ask it of me."

"The Lord wrote to me again," Noah said. "He shared with me how Jerry Don been sinning. *Cavorting with red devils*, He said. *Addicted to Satan*, He said. I got to save his soul. The Lord says I ought to have him on the ark when

the time come for the rains to start." Noah held a little Bible in his hands, one of those tiny green ones the Gideons pass out after school and in grocery store parking lots. "I want to lend Jerry Don this Good Book."

"Noah, I think Jerry has a Bible." I looked at Roy for help because I was thinking, with the mood I'd left Jerry Don in, it wouldn't be prudent for Noah to go offer him the Lord's Word. He didn't want any of my donuts, and I doubted he'd feel any different about a tiny green Bible. "Doesn't he already have one, Roy? Tell him." I nudged him, prompted him.

But Roy didn't have the opportunity to tell him because we heard a woman screaming and when we looked up, Gracie was running toward Gopher's front door. At least, she was trying to get there. Jerry was waving his arms at her, as if she were a mutt and he was trying to shoo her off. "Go on, now. Git!" Then he grabbed her right arm and she kicked at him, trying to keep her balance while slowly hopping forward on one foot.

"Let go of me! You asshole!" she screamed at Jerry Don, and then turned toward Gopher's front door again. "Gopher, help me! I got to talk to you. Help!"

Noah was a quick disciple. He was already out of the bushes, preaching at Jerry before Roy could stand up and move to help Gracie. "The Lord says you need him, J.D. Don't you want to read the Good Book?" He shoved that green Bible right

under his nose, just like I had those donuts, and I knew it was coming.

Jerry let go of Gracie's arm, and she fell forward, busting her chin open on the sidewalk so that blood ran out of the thin rip in her face. "You asking me if I read any good books lately? Is that what you asking me? Don't it look like I'm too busy to read, you stupid old cuss?" He took a swing at Noah who actually ducked to avoid it. By the time, Jerry righted himself again, Roy was right in his face.

"I warned you once already, Jerry. That's all you get." And he jabbed him in the right eye so that Jerry just slumped forward, falling into Roy's arms.

I went to help Gracie, but Gopher was already moving her into the house. He had his hand over her face, and I couldn't tell if he was trying to keep her from talking or if he was trying to hold the blood in, stop it from flowing. "Do I need to call a doctor?" I asked him, but he closed his front door before I could even finish the question. I looked at Roy. "Guess not," I said.

Roy took Jerry Don home with him. He said he felt obliged to nurse his black eye. "He's just acting strange, Max. I think someone should be with him." I think Roy just wanted a reason to drive Jerry's squad car, sirens blaring, lights flashing, speeding once we were out of town and on the country highway toward the ranch.

Later that evening, Roy called me up at the house and said Jerry Don took off in the squad car before he could stop him. He wanted me to come get him since I had driven Noah home in his truck, and when I got to his house, he asked if I wanted to come with him. "Where we going?" I asked.

"I called up at the station and asked Sally if she could locate a squad car for me. I told her I was looking for Jerry." He paused for a second. "Okay. I guess I lied. I said I had some information for him about the drug thing. She probably thinks I'm about to 'fess up." He waited again, looked down at his feet, acting squirmy.

"So? Did she tell you?"

"It's kind of strange. She giggled and said he hadn't called in, but some of the other boys had seen his car parked outside the Tomahawk Inn. She said it like it was a big joke. Like they all knew what that meant. You don't think he's got Gracie with him, do you?"

The Tomahawk was a four-room motel located just outside Trouper city limits, and considering how few tourists came to town, everyone knew that motel wasn't built for tourism, respectable over-night business, but served more probably guests registered on an hourly basis. It amazed me how many stupid cowboys who parked their trucks out there tried to hide them in the unlit parking spaces, as if no one could recognize whose pick-up was whose. At least Jerry Don wasn't trying to pretend like he was fooling anyone. His squad car was parked smack under the brightest light in the area. That

white car just gleamed, and me and Roy couldn't help but giggle when we saw it. "Shit," Roy said. "He is a brave one."

Roy grabbed a flashlight and the camera we had been hauling around with us. "What's the camera for?" I asked. "I mean, I already feel a little perverted spying on someone in a junky motel. Now you're telling me, we're going to take pictures of it? Isn't there a law against Peeping Toms? Especially ones with cameras?"

"If he's in there with Gracie, I want proof. She might want it later." He raised his eyebrows, asking Get it? I raised one of my hands like a stop sign; I certainly didn't want him deciding to explain anything about the Tomahawk to me.

There were no lights shining in the room near Jerry Don's car, and I was just waiting for some woman to start screaming for help. I couldn't imagine any female letting a guy like Jerry Don put his hands on her body, so when I didn't hear any yelling, I started to get frightened. "You don't think he'd kill someone? Do you, Roy?"

Roy stopped walking toward the room. He thought about it, shook his head no, but waited. "Surely not."

"I mean it, Roy. I don't wish to see a dead body."

But Roy had already started moving forward again and was standing just outside the window, and he motioned for me to hurry up. "He left the curtains open. What a dope."

We both squatted down beneath the window and decided to rise up slowly and together. "On three," Roy said. And he counted by showing me his fingers--one, two, three. We eased our faces up along the wall until we were just peering over the windowsill, but the room was completely empty. Nothing. "We must of got the wrong room," Roy said, and jerked his head to the right, toward the next room.

My hands were already shaking, and I needed to go to the bathroom--desperately, like I used to when I played hide-n-seek as a child, although it was never the seeking part that unnerved me, always the hiding. At least then, I knew what I was going to find. Certainly not any dead bodies.

The door to the next room was standing slightly open, about a quarter-inch. Roy looked at me. "That's creepy," he said. "That's not just dumb, like leaving curtains open. That's just creepy," he said again.

"I don't think we should go in there. Let's just go home." I tugged on his sleeve.

"What if he has Gracie?"

"Well. Let's go call Darlene, tell her it's eleven p.m., and ask her if she knows where her child is?" I was already heading back toward the truck, but Roy grabbed my sleeve this time.

"We may not have time. Now, hold this flashlight, and when I throw open the door, you shine it in there. I'll take the picture."

I took the flashlight. "Fine, but this is sick. We're perverted."

Roy placed me in front of the door because I wasn't moving voluntarily, and then he raised his right hand up like he was raising a flashlight, reminding me what my job was. He took a deep breath and counted one, two, three on his fingers again, but when he reached three, he just stood there.

I glared at him. "Just do it," I whispered.

He shook his hands at me. "Okay, okay," he mouthed. He took another long, slow breath and without counting this time, lunged forward and kicked the door open.

I swung the light into the room and what I saw nearly made me throw up. It wasn't the fact that they were having sex. It wasn't Jerry, naked and sweating, sitting on top of her, one of his fingers in her mouth, his other hand hidden somewhere. It wasn't even how young Honey looked that evening or how I remembered seeing pictures of her, wearing her short cheerleading skirt, in the Scoop after she and the football coach had been caught at the Holiday Inn in Apple Hill. Instead, it was how frightened she looked, how she tried to raise her head up from the pillow to see who'd caught her, how her eyes seemed both round with fear and squinty because of the bright light.

What I saw staring at me was my mother or maybe my own reflection, and I had become Mimi, standing in the bedroom door, spying, letting the light flood in, blinding my victim.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm so sorry." Then the flash of the camera went off, and I felt like I couldn't move. My feet were heavy and my fingers fat, but I slowly stepped backward and then forced myself to move one finger at a time until that flashlight finally dropped to the floor, clattering on the sidewalk.

It seemed as if it took Jerry Don a long time to respond also, so when he finally did, I missed it. "He's going for his gun," Roy screamed just as I saw Jerry fly over the bed and reach his clothing lying on the table near the door. Roy jerked my arm. "Come on, Max!" But when he grabbed me, I wasn't ready for it and tripped. He quickly scooped me up, started running for the truck, and stuffed me inside. "Get down on the floorboard." Then he shoved me down there because I still wasn't moving. He held my head, shook it. "Come on, Max. Pull yourself together."

I heard a gunshot and jumped. "It's just the headlight, Max. Just the headlight. Now hold on."

We sped out of the parking lot and started heading for the highway to the ranch. I don't know why that was the first place Roy thought of, why he didn't head for the police station. But Jerry Don was in his squad car, chasing us, sirens and lights going, and I was surprised it took the rest of the force as long as it did to respond and come to his aid.

And that's when I first noticed, when I first started hearing and seeing things more clearly again, knew all of it

was happening and where I was. Only then did I realize the red warning lights at the railroad tracks were blinking off and on. The bell was dinging and the cross bars were just starting to come down. "For Christ's sake," I screamed. "Don't bust through there! That's a train!"

"Cover your face, Max." And Roy drove straight through the wooden bars. The windshield shattered and glass was all over me. He took a sharp left turn after the tracks and started to drive off down that country road. I whirled around to see if Jerry Don had made it across and saw his car just sitting on the tracks. A dead standstill. I saw Jerry throw open his car door, slam it shut behind him--perhaps automatically, out of habit--and jump off the tracks into the ditch. The train was just passing me and Roy, heading behind us toward the crossing, and when I looked again to make sure Jerry had gotten out, I saw that Honey was in the car. I tugged on Roy's sleeve but couldn't get any speech out.

Her face and palms were pressed against the window. She stared at the oncoming light on the front of the train, and her mouth was a dark, opened cave that looked toothless. I knew the word *help* must have been coming from her mouth, but she couldn't move. The light paralyzed her, stunned her, shone white across her face, and she could not move her hands away from the window, over to the door handle. She simply pushed against the glass as if the only way out of that car was to shove the pane out, crawl through the hole.

I don't remember seeing the train hit the car. I only remember the sound of the brakes squealing, the dead thud of the car pushed into the ditch, and the shattering of glass. I don't remember moving or awakening until I saw Roy leaning over Honey's body, breathing into her mouth, pumping her chest, whispering, "God dammit, Honey, breathe. Breathe."

And afterward, more than anything else, what I remember is the crisp odor of January pine filling the air, as brittle as the crunch of broken glass under my feet, as sharp as the cold tears moving down my face.

CHAPTER VII

FEBRUARY

"This year, *February* came in like a roaring lion, like that train sprinting down the tracks, prepared to hunt down and then devour its prey, our little Honey. May the nightly whistle of that train always be a reminder to us, a warning of the just wrath of our God, the roaring Lion of Judah," Gopher said, closing his speech at Honey's memorial service. His entire eulogy sounded like something written by one of those minor prophets--Hosea, Obadiah, Habakkuk. He couldn't explain the necessity of Honey's death, so he gave us some cryptic speech about the powerful arm of the Lord and how, if we would only look upward more often, we might at least see it coming, spot it as it swooped down from the heavens to pound our disobedient heads in.

Maybe Gopher wouldn't have been quite so dramatic if Darlene hadn't turned Honey's service into a press conference, as if there was more than one newspaper in town, more than one reporter. "Trouper never had one of them before. Isn't it exciting?" she asked me while Honey's immediate family filed into the church, past the coffin. She stood right beside Gopher throughout his eulogy, holding a microphone right under his nose, except for those two times when she put down the mike (which of course created some

painfully shrill feedback), stepped forward, and snapped his picture.

The sheriff told Darlene in an interview after the service that the Police Department finally learned Jerry Don used Honey to get drugs into the High School athletic program, drugs he purchased from a dummy band called The Red Devils--red devils being a type of barbiturate. Picking up Gopher's poetic metaphors, he added that certainly the hunt for Jerry Don was the P.D.'s number one priority. "My own powerful arm is prepared to crack open his skull. I guaran-damn-tee it! February may have come in like a lion, but we'll make up for it next month. March will come and go like a little lamb. We going to catch J.D. We all get some peace and quiet then."

"Right," I told Roy when he read the article to me over breakfast at Dairy Queen the next morning. "That's what I thought after Mimi died this same time last year. But have I seen any peace and quiet yet? Do you know Noah is in the back forty today rebuilding that stupid ark?" It hadn't even occurred to Noah that Jerry Don wrote the messages from the Lord so he could hide his business out there and implicate Noah if the stash was ever uncovered. I couldn't bring myself to tell him. How was I supposed to inform him that penpal God of his was nothing more than a drug lord? "He might turn atheist," I told Roy. "He might have a stroke. I mean it."

Noah may have seemed physically stronger than he had in years, but his vision and mental health were deteriorating daily. When he and Roy were giving a new-born calf its vitamin shot, Noah became confused, maybe momentarily far-sighted, and injected the needle in Roy's butt instead of the calf's. "Shit," Roy said. "It left a hole the size of a quarter in my ass. I won't need any Geritol for the next forty years."

In the same week, Noah actually drove our camper truck under the Dairy Queen's brand new, bright red carport one afternoon, despite the fact Darlene yelled at him to stop over the outdoor speaker and I stood just inside the restaurant's picture windows, jumping up and down, frantically waving my arms. No matter. He was suddenly and simultaneously blind and deaf, because he didn't see us, nor did he hear the camper slide right off the back of the flatbed when the top of it caught on the awning. Only when it slammed onto the pavement did he start, look in his rearview mirror, and then wave back at me, grinning. Darlene and I joined him outside. The three of us stood behind the truck, staring at the detached camper in silence, dumbfounded. "Oops," Noah said, and I started giggling. Darlene simply shook her head and went back inside.

She would have done more than shake her head if she'd heard about his next blunder. Two nights after he knocked the camper off our truck, he swore to me and Roy he had seen Gracie kissing Gopher near the shaded pond located in the

southwest corner of our ranch. It was around four o'clock in the afternoon, he said, and it looked like they'd been picnicking. There was a blanket spread on the ground and a basket hanging from the saddle of the horse Gracie usually rode when she came to the ranch. Then Noah sang a little ditty for us. "Gracie and Gopher, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage. Then comes Gracie with a baby carriage."

Roy nudged Noah and wiggled his eyebrows. "Were they French kissing?" he asked.

"Would you shut up?" I said. "Don't be sick." I thought Noah's story was elaborate enough, and quite frankly, trying to imagine Gopher kissing, not to mention French kissing, with Darlene's teenage daughter, turned my stomach. It was like trying to imagine Noah kissing Honey or even Mimi. I preferred not to think about elderly grandfathers in quite that manner.

And if I couldn't bring myself to picture, in my own mind, Gopher or Noah French kissing, I did not feel comfortable discussing it aloud. I remembered how embarrassed I'd been when Mimi called me on the telephone once, after I left Trouper, to ask me if I ever kissed a boy with my tongue. "Because," she said, "Noah and I want to remind you that is only for marriage." I, of course, lied and said I most definitely did not ever kiss that way, while thinking to myself how they probably should have shared that

rule with me long before I'd turned twenty. Junior high probably wouldn't have been too soon for that one.

I tried to dismiss the whole thing as something he had seen on television, kind of like keeping his letters from the Lord in a Ziploc baggie inside the toilet tank came from his watching too many detective stories. Perhaps he'd seen one too many talk-shows on craddle-robbing lately. His little recitation about love, marriage, and baby strollers certainly did not increase his story's credibility. Roy laughed at me for giving Noah's story enough credence I actually bothered myself with building a list of reasons why it must have been nuts. But after Noah sang--all day--his tune about Gracie, Gopher, and their kissing in a tree, even Roy asked him to please just stop.

I didn't feel any better about Gracie after Darlene and I found her smiling over a large red heart declaring her the prettiest woman in Trouper. Gracie had spread the heart out on one of the tables at the Dairy Queen and was running her hands over the top of it, smoothing its wrinkles, caressing it almost. Her soft-serve cone hadn't been touched, stood near the salt and pepper shakers, neglected, melting. Darlene wanted to know who gave her such a captivating love letter, and I suspected, when Gracie said it was from her Secret Valentine she didn't mean the person was unknown to her. She meant she was keeping it a secret from us.

Gracie's Valentine must have given Darlene her own ideas about February 14th, and four days before that holiday, she

began trying to make up with Roy. She initially tried to apologize to him immediately following the train accident by publishing an article in the Scoop about how Roy had once again proven himself worthy to be named Citizen-of-the-Year by busting open the Trouper drug ring. She made buttons and posters with his picture on them and passed them out to every customer at the Dairy Queen, telling them she was trying to have a day in February officially declared Roy Day.

I admit Roy was softening up, enjoying the attention he was getting. It was like returning to his high school football days with the town declaring him their hero, the one Trouper who might actually get the town put on the county map. But Darlene didn't work on him long enough before she asked if she could have the film he and I took at the Tomahawk. "Those pictures might win me the Pulitzer for my investigative reporting about the drug problem," she told him. Understanding rather quickly what Darlene had been up to all along with her buttons and posters, and having already agreed with me there was no reason to ever tell anyone what those photos caught Honey doing, Roy popped open the camera, yanked the film out, strung it slowly past her face, exposing it frame by frame until the entire roll tumbled onto the floor.

Forgetting the film and preparing instead for Valentine's Day, Darlene tried new tactics. She bombarded Roy with chocolate chip cookies, Rice Krispy treats, cobblers, mincemeat pie, and, finally, divinity. Maybe she

figured by February 14th he'd be on such a sugar high he wouldn't know what the heck he was doing, couldn't help himself but forgive everything she had ever done to him, would take her dancing at the White Doggie, whirl her around, make themselves dizzy, and when the evening reached its tightest spin, the climax of all love stories, would interrupt the band, grab their microphone, and declare his undying love for her over the loud speaker.

She even went so far as to form, three days before Valentine's Day, a new ladies' club she referred to as the Trouper Occupational and Industrial Ladies. "T-O-I-L. Toil," she said proudly when she was trying to recruit my membership. I wasn't particularly stirred by the thought of congregating with a bunch of career women climbing the Trouper corporate ladder, much less by the thought of attending meetings in full uniform, a business suit, but I agreed to attend the first gathering solely because I wanted to know what new trick Darlene was up to. I thought it highly suspicious that, amidst her baking frenzy, she found time to recruit and organize thirty-seven females who were interested in such a club, pen a charter, bone up on enough jargon to declare herself interim president, and call an immediate business meeting at which she made the motion we put on a Valentine's Day Beauty pageant, assuring us she had already sought clothing donations from the two apparel stores in Trouper and found a worthy charity to donate the admission costs to.

"I feel the youngest women ought to participate in this event," Darlene said at the meeting. "Unless we have different age categories. Otherwise it just wouldn't be fair to the older ladies. Having to compete with women my age. So if there aren't any objections, I make a motion that me, Maxine, Velma Mullins, and Trina Mack enter as contestants."

"I strongly object," I said, raising my hand to follow Darlene's club rules. "You can count me out. I'm not much interested in having my beauty or lack thereof judged."

"But, Maxine," she argued. "I've already picked you three outfits. You'd be surprised. A cute outfit can do wonders."

"I'll bet." I knew what she was up to. She wanted to prove to Roy I wasn't worthy of his adoration. That when it came right down to it, everyone knew which of the two of us was the most pretty, and although he was too blind to currently see it, his vision would focus if four or five judges pointed out his error to him. "I'm sorry, Darlene. You'll have to find someone else."

She said she was afraid with such short notice she wouldn't be able to find anyone my size (I was so abnormally tall and lanky) she could initiate and convince to enter the pageant. "Surely you wouldn't want to spoil everyone's fun," she said.

So I helped her find a replacement--although I did so secretly. She gave me my three outfits the next day, and I immediately found someone they would look good on. They

included those kind of short skirts and bikinis which come with an age requirement if you plan on wearing them in Trouper. A requisite that, at twenty-six, I no longer met, because while some nineteen-year old would look hot modeling them, I would only look foolish, or easy, like I didn't remember what my age was, like I found tight black Lycra shorts to be appropriate sportswear and a loosely-crocheted hot pink bikini to be suitable swimwear for a professional woman representing TOIL. Darlene couldn't possibly have found those outfits in any Trouper store, unless there was some adult clothing shop operating its business beyond the city limits, one with a triple-X sign out front and porno videos to mix-n-match with its clothing. Anybody selling this stuff in town wouldn't have one single friend, would have instead a notorious reputation.

Only youth could allow one to get away with wearing clothes like that. It was the same mindset that permitted Honey to wear her cheerleading skirts two, maybe three, inches shorter than all the other girls. She was quite visibly a woman when sporting her uniform, but the older women politely and conveniently assumed she was too innocent to know exactly what she was doing. They spoke about her future coming-of-age, a natural blossoming, and it was, therefore, okay for the men to join in, to look and notice where her body was heading, where it already stood.

For the same reason, Carlene said nothing when Jerry Don or even Roy commented on Gracie's legs, particularly when she

wore those eyelet-trimmed shorts, the skimpy ones she had on the first day I met her. "I means, legs up to here," Jerry Don used to say, holding his hand up to his chin, and Roy would put his hands over his eyes but leave an obvious slit so he could peep between them.

So, for the pageant, I had no choice but to enlist Gracie's help. She actually blushed when I showed her the bikini her mother picked out for me to wear. "In public?" she asked. I was afraid she wouldn't do it, but when she tried that swimsuit on, she stared in the mirror a long time, smiling, turning about, tilting her head, even touching the glass once.

She finally agreed to do it, and that's how I put a stop to the First Annual Valentine's Day Beauty Pageant of the TOILers. I put a raincoat over Gracie and her bikini, hauled her over to the Dairy Queen, and, right when Gracie flung open that slicker, said, "Voila. Gracie can take my place."

Darlene almost dropped her coffee mug trying to reach Gracie fast enough to get that coat up off the floor and back around her daughter's shoulders. "Absolutely not. You look like a hussy," she said. Then she glared at me. "Are you trying to drag my Gracie to hell in a handbasket?"

"If that outfit is alright for me to wear in a public beauty pageant, what's wrong with Gracie wearing it?" I asked. I gently touched Darlene's arm. "What's wrong? You don't think an older woman like yourself should have to

compete with someone Gracie's age? We could open a new category for you."

And then Darlene did something I wasn't expecting. She turned on Gracie instead of me. I admit I purposefully used Gracie, knowing she wasn't aware I was doing so, to make a point to Darlene, to prove I could see her lose her precious pageant if I wanted, but I never wanted or thought Darlene would decide Gracie was in on it, was trying to humble her own mother. "You already had Jerry Don, Gracie. The whole town knows it. But you can't have Roy. He don't go for the floozy types."

Even if I hadn't been staring at Darlene and seen Gracie running out the door, I wasn't quick enough to find the words which might make her stay, might convince her there was no reason to feel embarrassed or ashamed. Nothing I could think of would erase the final meaning behind her mother's words. Darlene couldn't have made them any clearer if she had driven them into Gracie's brain with a blow from her mighty hand or if she'd delivered it to her on formal white stationery, the Dairy Queen letterhead spread across the top, a brisk message crisply typed on the page: *The management wishes to assure their patrons that certain women will not be served here. No shirt. No shoes. No sluts. P.S. Yes, Gracie, that means you!*

And even though it wasn't literally typed in sharp, crystal-clear pica, it was visible on Darlene's face. It was the angry way in which the extra skin on her brow pulled

forward, gathered just above her nose, between her eyes, and the way she set her lip in a harsh, unmistakable flatline. Darlene refused to even look at Gracie, fixed her eyes, instead, in one of those empty stares at the floor, the kind you catch people trapped inside, as if their batteries have run down and they are simply no longer breathing, hearing, or feeling. She was confronted with what she considered to be absolutely nothing. Gracie was trash, and pious Darlene turned her head, would not acknowledge her existence, would simply hold her breath until the Dairy Queen was cleared of her, the air safe again.

Seeing Darlene's face that afternoon, watching her drive Gracie out on to Main Street in the middle of February, wearing nothing but a slicker, a string bikini, and white Keds, I remembered how that expression often showed up at the most ridiculous moments. Like Darlene with Gracie.

Although I hadn't recognized that look at the age of thirteen, watching Darlene with Gracie, I finally understood, saw for the first time, the look Mimi had given Amy Jo when she wiped the chili off Noah's nose during that last supper at Beans, Burritos, and Beer. She forgot her fork lying on the floor, moved her hand in a sweeping motion, gathering the little bits of rice she'd lost off the end of the dropped utensil, continued doing so even after she'd already brushed it all up, and glared at Amy Jo, her popped eyes a little more frightening than Darlene's. But it was that same sideways scowl. Mimi didn't stare straight at my mother; she

kicked her glance at Amy Jo's shoulders, wanting my mother to see it but knowing every other person at the table was liable to miss it or ignore it due to poor aim.

Maybe my mother didn't catch it, but more than likely she did and knew exactly what she was doing to Mimi when she raised her arm to wipe Noah's nose a second time, a little more slowly, smoothly, even though there wasn't any more chili on his face and even though she must have known how absurd Mimi's jealousy was, how Noah's grin meant nothing more than how proud he was his daughter was treating him to dinner, honoring his being named Father-of-the-Year. Unlike Gracie, Amy Jo would never cower or let herself be driven into the streets hiding a string bikini underneath a rain slicker. If she left at all, she would drop that coat at Darlene's feet, skip out the door, and parade her bikini for all to see. Or she'd drive off in a bumble bee yellow Mustang with an Hispanic man named Speedy, leaving nothing more behind than a purple toothbrush and a dead Chihuahua. She understood the only response to that sideways glower, in an obviously underserving situation, was to act like you either didn't see it or didn't care.

She herself would never show that face, stare at someone and not stare at someone, show her cards while pretending she wasn't. That night, when the hostess at the restaurant had the opportunity to flirt back with my mother's boyfriend Speedy, let him pin her flower, Amy Jo didn't shift her eyes to the floor or the women's shoulders. She looked right in

her face, blatantly crossed her arms, showed her straight up she could be a cold bitch if necessary. Even after Speedy offered me his advice about economy condoms, Amy Jo didn't accuse me of being in cahoots with him. If I hadn't blushed when he said it, she still would have been calm, would have patted my hand and winked at me nonetheless.

I tried to explain all this to Roy, even demonstrated the crooked, off-kilter stare of Mimi and Darlene versus the dead accurate one of my mother. I admit it was partially to prove how stupid and shallow Darlene was, to prove I wasn't like her or, at least, that I recognized the difference between her and Amy Jo and was making a conscientious choice to take after the latter. But it was something else also--something Gopher said about the swift accuracy of the Lord's arm, something the sheriff said about his own lawful strength and just precision, something about peace and quiet--peace and quiet I hadn't seen in at least a year.

I wanted to know why people threatened each other, spied on them, kept track of their mistakes, did so while pretending not to, while maintaining an appearance of kindness and concern. Somehow the constant threat of a sudden blow to the head, even if it came from above, didn't match my vision of earthly harmony and accord, and it finally occurred to me that maybe Noah wasn't grinning yet, hadn't recovered his former rowdy self as quickly after Mimi's death as I expected because he lived under the continual fear that any moment another order from the Lord might appear on his

tractor, in his bathroom, in that ark. He was being watched by a God who was prepared, arm raised like mine holding the flashlight outside of Honey and Jerry Don's room at the Tomahawk, a God about whom prophets with names like Obadiah and Habakkuk wrote cryptic messages because the direct truth was too horrifying, wasn't permitted, like the word Yahweh, to be spoken straight up. It didn't matter that Noah wanted desperately to find a God who sang about Little Maggie with him, watched over tiny Chihuahuas and women like Amy Jo and Gracie. That wasn't the Lord he'd been given.

"Roy, do you think Mimi was jealous of me too? Like not wanting my mother to touch Noah? Like me ruining all her work after she was dead and couldn't really oversee any longer?"

Roy looked at me, kind of turned up his hands in a question mark like he was seriously considering how to respond, and then said, "I don't get it."

It didn't surprise me. I figured he missed the whole gist of my conversation, because Darlene and Amy Jo's differences were too subtle, required too much sophistication to notice their existence. But when I led him to the door, told him I had some business to take care of before the next morning, told him basically to go home, he smiled at me and said, "So. That's what it means when Darlene flirts with me, gives me her shit-eating grin," and he mimicked that smile, "and you look down at her feet instead of in her face. You can't fool me."

"Don't be ridiculous. I just find flirting very unbecoming."

"Too late, Max. I done got your number."

And Speedy thought he also held my number later that night when I tiptoed into Noah's room, slowly opened the drawer I knew he currently stored his messages from God in, took the letters out and was just slipping back through the door. Only then, when I would be caught red-handed, holding the evidence, did Speedy start his yapping. He ran around in small circles near Noah's pillow, his little collar with the bell on it tinkling, making Noah snap awake. "Max, that you? What you doing? You ain't leaving, are you?"

"No," I said and then waited. "I--I felt like having a little quiet time. You know, wanted to read my Bible and feel close to the Lord. So, if you don't mind, I thought I'd borrow your notes." I felt terrible for lying, especially after Noah got out of bed, asked me if I was okay, and then gave me a big hug. But I took the letters anyway.

I didn't remember recognizing the handwriting in the first letter I had seen, the one Noah showed me about the cattle that miraculously escaped his cow trailer in August because God thought they'd make good ark passengers. It was the very first letter requesting Noah to build the ark I wanted to see.

I went through the stack of letters, hoping Noah hadn't hidden that one someplace special since it was the first Word. I finally found it and rubbed the letter against the

edge of the table, trying to draw the wrinkles out. Then I spread it in front of me, and there--in Mimi's handwriting--the Lord, her God, suggested Noah build an ark, warned him the rains were coming and the salvation of his and his loved ones' souls depended on a haven from the storm.

I couldn't guess why she'd done it. Maybe she genuinely believed his soul would get lost if she wasn't there to lead it, and so she offered him a good way of keeping busy, moving, fired up and ready to meet his Maker. Maybe she saw it as a big red heart, a secret Valentine, declaring how much she loved him and, therefore, hoped to see Him in the afterlife.

After that, I worried about the ark. I feared Noah would finally wake up, realize it and Mimi's love for him was nothing more than some dark, looming force trying to overshadow everything else. I was afraid Noah would lose his vision of a singing God, find out He wasn't as near as words on paper, find out how much easier it was for humans to simply forge His name.

CHAPTER VIII

MARCH

It seemed as if the sheriff might be able to uphold his promise for a calm, peaceful March after he and one of his deputies tracked down Jerry Don and cornered him in the girl's locker room at Gladewater High just as school was letting out for Spring Break, even though Jerry Don did manage to slip through their fingers when a cheerleader walked him out the door, he wearing the mascot uniform, she showing him how to wave his big steer head and moo at just the right moment during a yell. The sheriff assured the Trouper citizens that, even so, he had the goods on Jerry.

For example, he knew Jerry had started using the alias J.C.--short for Jesus Christ--after bragging to a bunch of Gladewater basketball players how he'd convinced some old fart over in Trouper he was the Good Lord simply by writing him a letter which requested he rescue a particular bull and cow from a great upcoming flood.

Jerry even relied upon his divine reputation to persuade two elderly women who attended the Gladewater Presbyterian Church they ought to donate a thousand dollars each to his ministry. He didn't even have to give them some drugs. That two thousand dollars was sheer profit, and nothing the sheriff told those two women about Jerry would change their

minds. Darlene told me even after he swore on the Good Book Jerry was selling drugs to teenagers, rotting their minds and bodies, they still would not hear it.

"Doubting Thomas," the older one said, and the other nodded her head in agreement. They knew that Jerry Don, as the Lord's direct messenger, wasn't allowed to do such things, was instead raising money for missionary work in South America, and next month, those two women said they might give him another couple of thousand dollars. I could tell from their picture Darlene ran in the Scoop they were adamant about supporting Jerry. One of them guarded her black handbag in her lap, both hands clutching it shut, and the other her face turned slightly to the left, raised it a little and closed her eyes tight.

I wanted to prank call them and say, "Doubting Thomas? What about Jerry Falwell or Jim Baker. Ever hear of them?" But even with the chance of throwing the names of crooked televangelists in their faces, I wouldn't get anywhere. They probably did know Jim Baker and his buddies. Maybe personally. Were more than likely two of their most generous contributors.

I didn't bother telling Noah that Jerry Don was acting as God's representative, had composed at least a couple of those letters from the Lord if not all but the first one. Noah would only react exactly like those two Presbyterian women did--fold his arms across his chest, close his eyes, shake his head, maybe even stick his fingers in his ears and

hum loudly to keep the trash I was saying about the Lord out of his head. He was simply too content to hear anything about Mimi and Jerry Don's assuming the Lord's identity.

Every Trouper, in fact, seemed jubilant that March, as if they were wallowing in a bumper crop of four-leaf clover. They kicked off their school's Spring Break with the most spectacular FunFling ever thrown in Trouper, setting up a jailhouse for photographs, holding a bike tour complete with a Heart Cart for the out-of-shape folks, opening a Fish Pond and Ring Toss game for the littlest children where every player won something, and letting the White Doggie sponsor a street dance for adults. The most popular attractions included the bed of nails, the CPR practice booth run by the nurses from the city clinic, and the daily presentation of the Jaws of Life put on by the Fire Department in which they showed how their new equipment could wrench open a mangled car to salvage the driver or passengers inside.

It wasn't that the town had never seen a FunFling before, that it was a one-time-only thing, something special for the school kids to help them forget Jerry Don and Honey. They believed they--together, as a whole town--had survived the onslaught of the Devil himself and proven how faithful they were and, therefore, how deserving, like Job, of Satan's attention. The consequences of their battle weren't all that staggering either. After the dust settled and Jerry Don vanished, only three teenagers appeared to have developed an

addiction to marijuana, and none of their young souls agreed to try the cocaine he offered them.

"We are sorely blessed," Gopher said in his acceptance speech after being named Father-of-the-Year on the final evening of the FunFling. "With children like those we have here in Trouper, any man could be Father-of-the-Year." His words weren't nearly as poetic as those he delivered at Honey's memorial service, but the crowd cheered wildly. I even heard several say, "Praise the Lord!" and "Ain't he a saint though?" After the ceremony, several men patted him on the shoulder and shook his hand, and women hugged him or kissed him on the cheek.

With her eyes opened wide, trying to stop her tears from falling--the way women always try to hold them back, by enlarging her eyes, making extra room for the small pools of water to gather without running over, Gracie walked right up to Gopher, and he took her hand and held it for at least ten minutes. I decided there was no way anything fishy was going on there because surely Gopher would never sully his reputation by flaunting an affair with a teenage girl while standing on the throne of fatherhood. In the absence of her real father, Gracie was fortunate enough to know Gopher, have an older, paternal type willing to hold her hand, help her stave off men like Jerry Don.

Affected by the town camaraderie, I even made an effort to befriend Darlene, although I confess it started accidentally. Roy had completed one of the practice sessions

at the CPR booth right before the street dance was to begin, and he excitedly told me how he learned about this artery located under the skin of the thigh which displays a person's pulse as clearly as the carotid does in the neck. "So you can check the pulse of someone whose head has been chopped off," he said.

I waited the polite amount of time, trying to verify if he was cracking a joke or was really that stupid. He didn't smile or smirk, or slap me up against the shoulder and say, *Get it? It's a joke the nurses told.* After a few seconds, when he didn't respond in a manner indicating I was supposed to laugh at his humor, I laughed anyway. "That's good, Roy," I said. "Helpful. Because if you get a strong pulse in the thigh, you can always retrieve the head, sew it back on, and save someone's life. But if a decapitated person has no pulse--well then," I was shaking my finger as if to make my point more dramatically, "then you know it's hopeless."

I didn't mean to purposefully hurt Roy's feelings. Recently I'd seen him do some exceptionally decent things. Taking Honey's picture with Jerry wasn't particularly one of them, but refusing to give Darlene the film was. He'd also been kind to Noah, digging that hole exactly eight feet deep so Noah could bury a tire, and protecting Noah in Gopher's front yard the day Jerry finally went beserk. I confess I was even drawn to him slightly the night of the train accident, when I felt so guilty and sorry and saw him bending over Honey, begging her to breathe, pumping her lungs and

heart for her until the sheriff literally dragged him off. And he was capable of making me laugh, especially when he mimicked Darlene's smile. I gave him all of that.

But his comment about my looking away from Darlene whenever she flirted with him and what that meant about my feeling jealous bothered me. No matter how many good things there were about him, he wasn't my type. I was smart enough to realize I would always be compelled to remind Roy how country he was, not because I thought he was book-stupid, although he was, but because I hated Troupers and everything and anyone who stood for it. I did not ever want to get stuck there, and for that reason, did not ever see myself falling for Roar, the volunteer policeman. So it upset me that I did feel jealous when Darlene flirted with him, tossed that melodramatic smile at him, stared at him until he acknowledged her. I wasn't afraid Roy would fall for her over me nearly as much as I simply did not want Darlene winning, beating me.

At the street dance, after I poked fun at his lesson in the CPR booth, Roy asked Darlene to dance every song. I took pleasure in knowing he did so to make me jealous, to see if I would give Darlene that sideways glance, but I purposefully watched myself, made sure I acknowledged her, smiled directly at her when she threw her victorious smirk at me. I would not cause trouble for them, although I could easily have broken in, asked for a dance, and watched Darlene pout. Knowing that was all I wanted though--to see her pout, I

stayed away, hoped they would get their act together that night because I wasn't sure I could control myself much longer.

If I could have told Darlene what I was doing without ruining the effect, without bragging I was letting her win, she would have told me Noah's grin that night was my just reward for being a decent, Christian woman. Trying to find something to occupy myself, I sought Noah out and found him at the jailhouse. He was behind those fake bars, both hands clasping the metal poles, pretending to shake the walls, and grinning his tight smile, all of his features worked into straight lines. I found it ironic he wanted his picture made there after his horrible experience in the real jail, where they frightened him, accused him of unimaginable acts. When he opened his mouth for the cheesy smile the photographer wanted for the picture, I could see his teeth were out. I laughed and told him he'd finally gotten to shove those dentures in his back pocket even while standing behind bars. "If your cellmates could see you now," I said.

He giggled. "I want you should bury this picture with me," he said. "I want Mimi should see it in the wild blue yonder. I want her to know I was throwed in the slammer and she wasn't there to prevent it. She'll squawk and holler. Heaven won't ever be the same once I join her."

It surprised me to find that same smirk on his face, later the same night, when I heard a dull thud shortly after he shut himself in his bedroom for the night and I raced into

his room and discovered Speedy running around on the bed, barking, then sticking his little snout between the bed and the wall, his tail twitching. Noah always insisted his bed be kept up against the wall because he liked to roll at night, roll until he bumped up against the wall, said it made him feel safe with that hard support back there, kind of like Mafia types eating with their backs to the wall in public restaurants. I always moved the bed away from the wall to change the sheets but forgot that day to move it back.

That dull bump scared me. I thought he might have hurt his back or maybe broken his tailbone. I tried to squeeze one foot between Noah and the wall and the bed so I could support myself and pull him up, but I finally had to move the bed further away from the wall to make extra room. When I did, Noah slid a little further and rested completely on his back. He looked up at me, mouth open in shock, and for just a moment, I saw that dark toothless cave and thought he was bleeding in there--thick maroon blood. "You okay?" I asked, gently checking his arms, legs, and collar bone to see if he was hurting.

Then he grinned. "I rolled plum into a hole," he said. "I hope you're happy, Missy." He patted my hand and laughed. "Moving my bed. That was a good one. I can appreciate humor in a woman."

And I guess we all would have laughed at Roy, called it a good one, when he fell out of the dressing room at

Elizabeth's Boutique wearing nothing but his Fruit-of-the-Looms and that pair of Wranglers tangled around his ankles, if Jerry Don hadn't been standing three feet away from him, higher than a kite on some serious narcotic, holding a pistol to the head of the one and only mannequin in the store, swearing he would blow the poor lady's head off if Gracie didn't give him every last cent in the register. After it was all over, we decided Jerry Don chose to knock off Elizabeth's specifically because Gracie recently got a job there and it was only a miracle that put Roy in the dressing room that day.

He said he'd been embarrassed about going in a store named after a woman, but Elizabeth was running a sale on Wranglers even Walmart over in Jackson couldn't beat. She was trying to build up a male clientele. Roy was so ashamed about being in there that he slipped past even Gracie, was only going to let her know he was there if the jeans fit him and he decided to make a purchase.

About the time he was slipping his feet into the legs of those jeans, he heard Jerry Don's voice screaming, "Give me all your money or I'll shoot!" Hopping up and down, trying to get those pants on faster than normal, he jumped on top of one pant leg just as the other was agreeing to go up his leg, and basically tripped himself. He tried to catch his fall on the door but hadn't quite closed it tight enough, so when his weight pushed against it, it flew right open. He tumbled out onto the main floor with those Wranglers still twisted around

his ankles and his white Fruit-of-the-Looms showing for all the world. To make matters worse, he forgot his predicament, forgot he was half-naked, remembered only that Jerry Don said he was going to shoot, shoot Gracie most likely, and he himself was a volunteer police officer, the well-known Citizen-of-the-Year. So when he pitched out of the dressing room, he couldn't stop himself, shouted in spite of the awkward moment, "Stop in the name of the law!"

He admitted losing his concentration would have been pretty easy as soon as he realized his pants weren't on yet and he was lying face down on the hardwood floor of Elizabeth's Boutique, but it was getting a good look at Jerry Don that completely stunned him. Jerry's eyes were bugged, rolling wildly around in their sockets, searching, watching for someone, anyone, to make a false move, come at him from behind. He wore a melon-colored sportscoat as if he were trying to resemble a big-time South American dealer, but it was rumpled and lost its effect. His hair was a little flyaway with one piece sticking straight up at the top of his head, and Roy said he stank to high heaven.

His appearance, however, wasn't nearly as startling as the way he was holding the mannequin. He held it at the neck, one of his arms wrapped around its throat from behind while his other shook the gun at its temple. He actually believed he had a hostage, a real human being, must have decided she was simply stiff with fear. The ruckus Roy caused falling out of the dressing room behind Jerry Don,

frightened him so that he became paralyzed, like Honey facing the train, plastic like that mannequin. But as Roy started yelling for Jerry to stop in the name of the law, Jerry snapped awake, blew the head clean off that mannequin, whirled on Roy, and shot a hole the size of a baseball in Elizabeth's hardwood floor a few inches to the right of Roy's head.

Believing he actually took the head off an innocent woman and recognizing he'd almost done the same to Roy, Jerry Don dropped the gun and ran out the door. Roy jumped up, tugging at his britches, and ran over to see if Gracie was okay. She was kneeling behind the counter, shaking violently, and vomiting. Roy squatted behind her, wrapped his arms around her, and supported her while she continued to throw up, leaning forward against Roy's arms so she wouldn't get any on herself because she was simply too shaken, too tired to stand up, away from the mess on the floor.

By the time Roy thought of coming to get me at the Dairy Queen, the sheriff was already there, warning me he had tailed Jerry Don into Trouper only to lose him again but had since spotted him heading out to the ranch. He wanted to know if I thought he and Noah were rendezvousing and where did I expect them to meet if they were? I told him he ought to know by then Noah wasn't working with Jerry and could he please stop pussyfooting around and get his stupid butt out to the ranch before Jerry found another gun and decided to take Noah's head off too? He warned me to stay out of the

way or he'd arrest me for obstructing justice. "Isn't that interesting?" I asked. "I mean, you've arrested how many people this winter and the real gun-toting, drug-dealing, crooked cop is still out roaming the streets?"

Roy ran inside the Dairy Queen then and grabbed my hand. "Come on. You and I's partners again. We got to move."

He tried to explain exactly what happened in Elizabeth's but was so excited, worried about Noah and trying to speed, frantic to reach the ranch, it was all jumbled up and I only got the story straight several days later. I found it disturbing that we reached the ranch at least fifteen minutes before the sheriff ever did. We drove straight to the ark because I figured that's where Noah would be. There was no sign of Jerry's presence on the ranch, but I was going to get to Noah and make sure he was safe before I bothered hunting Jerry down for the Trouper P.D.

When we reached the ark, I heard loud singing coming from inside, but it wasn't Noah's voice. Roy pulled a crowbar out from behind the seat and raced toward the entrance. It was dark and muggy inside the ark because Noah hadn't felt God wished him to put in windows as it would only rain inside the ark if he did. My eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, and I saw Noah and Jerry Don crouched in a corner, huddled together. Jerry held a huge hammer and there was a large hole in the wall of the ark revealing a small, hidden compartment where a small Ziploc of white powder lay. Noah's arms were wrapped around Jerry, holding him captive it

seemed, but he was rocking Jerry back and forth as if to calm him, put him to sleep.

Jerry sang loudly. "I took a ten home at 2, but woke up at 10 with a two. I've never gone to bed with an ugly woman, but I've sure woke up with a few." Then he started scrambling, desperately trying to get his legs under his body, his feet firmly on the ground, and stand up, but Noah held him down.

"Whoa, buddy," Noah said. "What's your hurry?"

Jerry shook his head violently. "Bugs!" he screamed. "Big bugs! Spiders! Scorpions! Let me up! Let me outta here!"

Noah let go of Jerry Don and yanked his boot off his leg. "Where?" he asked. "Where, son? I'm blind as a bat. Can't see a damn thing. Where are they?"

Jerry Don was squatting behind Noah, keeping him in front to face the insects first. He pointed in several directions. "There. And there. And over there," he said.

I looked at Roy because I couldn't see anything crawling on the ground. I thought maybe Jerry was tricking Noah again, making him work for something that wasn't really there, but Roy grabbed my hand and held me back. "Jerry's flying," he whispered.

I turned back to Noah and watched him slam his boot down on the ground as if he were really killing those bugs Jerry saw, was really protecting him from something. Jerry was crying then, and Noah kept saying over and over. "I know,

son, I know. I'm sorry I'm so blind. You keep pointing though. We'll get them."

Even after Jerry Don passed out, Noah kept pounding his boot down, even put it back on and began dancing around, stomping all the insects that might still be there even though Jerry was no longer able to show him where. Roy stooped over Jerry and for the second time in the last month I saw him work a heart over, try to keep someone's lungs filling and emptying long after they wanted to quit. He was singing softly. *"Rubber Duckie, you're the one. You make bathtime lots of fun. Come on, buddy. Sing with me."*

I finally convinced Noah he'd successfully killed all the scorpions there were and Jerry could feel safe, although he kept searching the floor, jerking his head from side to side, looking for any signs of movement. I tried to tell him Jerry had been hallucinating and there were no bugs. Noah didn't understand, couldn't comprehend that some things which seemed so real were just simply not there. "Boy," he said. "He seen something. Didn't he, though?"

Later that evening, after Jerry had been taken to the hospital in Jackson, I caught Noah and Speedy tearing the bedsheets completely off Noah's mattresses. Speedy thought it was a game, letting himself get caught in a corner and tossed into the air when Noah jerked it loose. He was yapping, but Noah wasn't smiling. "What if they's bugs in here I can't see?" he asked. "How do you know? If you can't see them."

I finished taking the sheets off with him, shook them, put them back on, slowly running my hands over them after placing them back on the bed. I didn't bother trying to tell him there weren't any bugs. "We'll just feel for them," I said. "Surely if neither of us can feel them, we know there aren't any."

Noah started mimicking me. He ran his hands over the sheets, smoothing them against the mattress. He trusted my judgment. And I didn't know why.

I certainly didn't know how come two old women from the Gladewater Presbyterian church saw a South American missionary when they looked at Jerry, when there wasn't one to be looking at, and how come the sheriff couldn't see Jerry at all when he was driving the car right in front of him or was wearing something as noticeable as a steer costume. Roy saw my jealousy as a sign of affection for him, and I knew it was a sign of my animosity for Darlene. Jerry Don swore he saw insects and Noah believed him. Then I assured Noah I didn't, and he believed me.

It was amazing how poor our vision was, how none of us saw the real story behind Noah and that ark until it was shoved in our faces, until Jerry Don overdosed on it and Gracie vomited over it. But it was most amazing to me that the blind fruitloop who saw a faithful wife in a nag, a loving daughter in Amy Jo, and God in a tire and in some hand-written messages, was the only one who shared Jerry's hallucinations, was the only one clear-sighted enough to

stoop beside him, take his boot off, and remove the insects which obstructed Jerry's path on the way out.

CHAPTER IX

APRIL

Early in April, on Easter Sunday, the Trouper P.D. burned the entire stash of marijuana they found inside Noah's ark. The sheriff insisted the time and location of this destruction remain classified because he feared other drug dealers might show up to fight for possession of the confiscated narcotics and he didn't want a bloody drug war on Easter. Choosing, however, to burn the seven and a half pounds of hashish in a field not more than a hundred yards from the public park where the Trouper Egg Hunt had just kicked off, was not a plan which promoted secrecy. Someone spotted the rising smoke and then the police uniforms, and after that everyone quickly gathered along the edge of the park to spectate--even Gopher, dressed up like the Easter Bunny, who was supposed to be heading the search for eggs.

"I smell fumes," Darlene said, inhaling through her nose like she was savoring the aroma of a pot roast. She held her arms up as if to balance herself. "I feel dizzy."

Cued by Darlene, the women standing around her shook their heads in agreement. They felt dizzy and high also, as if Darlene had smoked grass so many times in her life she'd become a reliable authority on the sensations of being high,

was too easy. A lot of Troupers did own dogs with questionable pedigree, did have grandmothers and mothers who dipped snuff, did own one or two automobiles that didn't run, and did keep a couch or an electrical appliance, such as a Frigidaire or a Maytag Washer, sitting on their front porches.

The women of TOIL were especially offended with that quiz and the serious damage its results could have on their professional stature, so they decided to host Tidy Up Trouper Day. They made posters, ran an add in the Scoop, provided the trash bags, and carried homeade lemonade to all the participants. Several men volunteered to pick up litter off Main Street, and Marvin the dump owner even offered free hauling services for anyone who had furniture, an electrical appliance, or a car they wished to remove from their property. I'd never seen so many people working on their yards, cleaning out their garages, repainting their houses, all on the same day. They were stirred up, incensed.

"It's as though they believed putting a new coat of paint on their homes or burning a stash of marijuana will change things," I told Roy and Noah over dinner that night. "It doesn't matter. They still have mutt dogs. Their grandmothers still dip. Honey and Jerry Don are still dead."

"Things looks nicer though," Roy said. He cleaned off a row of kernels from his corncob, nibbling them off quickly and then jerking his head back to the other end of the cob to

start on a new row. Then he waited. "Did you know Clyde Husky had two tattered divans and a recliner sitting in his front yard? And old King Snake had three cars parked outside his house. They don't either one of them live more than a block from Main Street. God damn, it was an eyesore."

"Well I'm so glad we've beautified the city," I said, wiping my brow. "What a relief. I'll sleep much better knowing no decent drug dealer would stop over in a city with clean yards and houses."

"Know what I can't figure?" Roy asked, but didn't wait to see if I was interested. "I can't figure where that acid come from. I mean, alls they found in the ark were marijuana. Where'd J.D. get that hard junk?"

"Gopher gave it him," Noah said. He pointed at the last piece of cornbread lying in the basket. "Anyone want that?" And when Roy and I didn't respond because we were still stunned by his comment about Gopher, he shrugged his shoulders and picked it up. "Okay. If no one wants it--"

"Back up, back up!" Roy said.

Noah threw the cornbread back in the basket. "You can have it. I didn't really want it." Noah nodded his head. "You can have it."

I picked up the bread and put it back on Noah's plate. "Noah, not that. We don't want your bread. We want you to say that thing about Gopher again. Did you say he's the one gave Jerry that stuff?"

"Jerry said so." He split the slice in half and began buttering both sides, like what he was saying about Gopher was old hat, yesterday's news.

Roy looked at me. "When did J.D. tell you that?" he asked Noah.

"In the ark. Right before he saw all them bugs. Right before I started trying to fight them off." He stomped on the floor with his boots, showing us how he'd done it. "Did you see them?" he asked Roy. "I admit I myself didn't, but Jerry Don sure did. Boy howdy. Seen something scared him."

I grabbed Noah's hand. "What exactly did Jerry tell you?" I asked. Noah's eyes got big. He thought he was in trouble. "It's okay. We just need to know. You didn't do anything wrong."

"He said he loved Gracie, but Gopher had her. Told Jerry he needed money to get a honey like Gracie. Said he'd help Jerry make some money. Make him feel good too. Even introduced him to a girlie, Jerry said. But Jerry done told me he loved only Gracie cause she didn't know about Gopher's business, wasn't interested in the glamour or the money. And waking up with Honey come mornings kind of made his skin crawl, started the whole day off sour."

"You sure about this, Noah? Sure you understood right?" Roy asked him.

"I don't believe it. We elected a drug dealer Father-of-the-Year." I stood up and started clearing off the table. It didn't matter Noah and Roy were both still eating; I was

too excited to continue sitting there. "And he gave that oh-so saintly speech about how any man could be Father-of-the-Year if he had good kids like Trouper's to work with." I paused and threw my hands up in the air. "Well, I guess so. If a drug dealer can get elected, I guess any man can."

"I been confused about that myself," Noah said. "Did we elect him cause he's been a good father to Darla's children or cause we expect he'll be a good one to Gracie's?"

Roy looked at me, and I sat right down in the middle of the kitchen floor. "I'm not telling her," I said. "You people are crazy. I'll tell Darlene that, if you want." I looked back at Roy, shook my head and held up one hand like I was trying to stop traffic. "I mean it. I'm not telling her. You can."

When I arrived at the Dairy Queen the next morning for work, Darlene was dusting off every bottle of ketchup, salt, and pepper sitting on the tables, and scrubbing the booths, both tables and seats, with Lysol. A mop and a bucket stood near the juke box, and a jug of glass cleaner and a rag sat on top. She worked furiously, her bracelets jiggling at her wrists as she swept her arms across the tabletops, except when she found a stubborn spot of dried food, and then she would lean into the table and rub even more frantically, even scrape it with her fingernail.

Singing hymns, she was making joyful noises unto the Lord like Mimi used to when frustrated with someone. The

tunes came from her mouth in loud spurts, and she sang with a heavy vibrato as if she were about to start crying but was trying to disguise it as something musical, natural. "Are you ever burdened with a load of care?" she sang and then picked up and wiped off a napkin dispenser. "Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?" She cleaned a bottle of ketchup and some salt and pepper shakers. "Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly, and you will be singing as the days go by." When Mimi sang like that, Mr. Buttons used to run tight circles around her feet and bark.

At first, I thought I'd just stand there until she noticed me, acted interested to hear anything I might have to say, even *How are you today?* because Roy had convinced me to tell Darlene about Gopher, but I didn't care to just blurt it out. I still feared she would mistake me for a vengeful female anxious to revel in her sorrows, but Roy certainly could not broach the subject of sex with Darlene. She might assume he was propositioning her, however awkwardly, and either be offended or, worse yet, excited. And if Noah tried to tell her, she might have him thrown in jail for sexual harassment.

So I was prepared to stand there until she acknowledged me, but then I saw her working those tables over, busying herself, and decided she was already perturbed by something and I should just wait and bring the subject up casually, when it followed the natural flow of the conversation, after, for example, I brought up some article in Redbook, some

article I obviously would have to make up, about the benefits of sex with older men or the common and certainly understandable occurrence of teenage pregnancies.

Stalling for the right moment, I moved right into the kitchen and fired up the grill, but Darlene followed me. She stood there holding her rag in one hand and placing the other on her hip. "Okay," she said. "I see how you're going to be. You believe those vicious and nasty rumors about Gracie being pregnant. You decided to disfellowship me. Go ahead. Don't speak to me. See if I try to warn you about the consequences of being judgmental."

"Who said anything about Gracie being pregnant? I didn't say anything."

"It's all over your face. Stamped on your forehead." She moved her hand back and forth in front of her forehead, showing me where the writing was. "*Gracie is a slut and Darlene is her mother.* But I'm telling you, she is not pregnant." She leaned over the counter, placed her wet rag on the back of her neck, and started crying. "I think I may faint," she said between sobs.

I walked over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Darlene, I'm not going to stop speaking to you. Don't be silly. I'm worried about Gracie, not ashamed of her."

"She isn't pregnant."

I could barely hear what she said over her crying, especially with her head down. "Okay. She's not pregnant. But do you know who the father is?" I didn't enjoy pressing

Darlene for information or an admission of the truth, but there were laws against married men impregnating minors. I didn't know who told Darlene what, but for the sake of other Trouper girls and the influence Gopher might have over them, I genuinely believed Darlene needed the whole story this time.

Darlene jerked her head up and the damp rag fell to the floor. "Please tell me it isn't Roy. Please tell me she at least hasn't done that."

"It's Gopher," I said, simple and direct because there wasn't any means of beating around the bush, no gentle way of telling her the fifty-year-old mayor of Trouper, Texas, who'd recently been elected Father-of-the-Year when quite clearly he should have been voted Most-Likely-to-Become-a-Father, was the older man Darlene had been looking out for--as far back as August when she'd hinted at Gracie's affair with one of Noah's hired hands, namely Jerry Don, and later officially charged Noah himself with statutory rape.

I could tell from the way Darlene's face turned chalky she hadn't heard about Gopher's role. She looked directly at my eyes, trying to read if I was being honest, actually knew something or was just fishing for information. She must have decided I was trying to trap her. "It doesn't matter what people saying. Gracie's not pregnant."

As I didn't see Gracie for a while after our conversation, I assumed Darlene drove her to some home for expectant teenage girls, some place like the Wilma McKray

Home for Unwed Mothers, a dark boarding house where they read you your options on a daily basis, read them with a chilled voice, over and over--*adoption, abortion, motherhood*--until finally you understood you deserved only those three choices, none of them all that attractive. And on the long drive there (and it would be someplace remote and far away from Darlene's role as a PTA officer and revival coordinator), she would instruct Gracie repeatedly how she must not make the mistake of believing she really was pregnant. She would brainwash Gracie into ignoring the growth inside her body, into calling it something other than the truth. She was to deny it for nine months until she could rid herself of it and then return to Trouper as if nothing had happened.

I imagined Gracie's eyes opened wide, gazing out the car window, more and more afraid of what would come around the next corner, with each mile marker on that long trip. Once there, she would sleep alone every night, watching her stomach swell, pretending she didn't notice, even after she grew so large, so weighted, she, like Honey, wouldn't be able to lift her head from the pillow even if she heard a noise, saw a bright light shining in her face, wanted to stop what was coming from happening.

It was the same fear I saw in the eyes of Noah's profit cattle after his cow trailer unhitched from the truck, slammed into a tree, and we discovered those five cows and three calves piled on top of one another, suffocating, so afraid they were too weak to move. Noah had decided to clean

up his herd a little that spring, and Roy and I offered to help him take some of the less productive cows and the three weakest calves to the sale. We separated and drove the selected cattle into the trailer, while Noah secured the hitch.

On the way to the sale, Noah told stories about Mimi and Amy Jo when Amy Jo was a teenager just starting to learn how to get under Mimi's skin. Roy and I laughed, especially when Noah described Mimi's investigative methods of obtaining the lowdown about Amy Jo's latest sins. But in the middle of one story, he ducked his head, tried to look squarely into the rearview mirror and said, "Uh-oh."

I turned around to look out the back window of the cab, but didn't need to turn all the way, because by the time I was facing Roy's window, I saw the cow trailer roll past our truck. I was momentarily confused, couldn't figure how that trailer was passing us when it was supposedly hitched to our back end. It unhooked on a downhill curve, so it was no wonder it was picking up speed, gaining on us. There was nothing we could do. It struck a pine tree, the front end of the trailer crumpling and those cattle piling forward, one on top of the other, until all but one calf gathered in a big heap, suffocating, literally dying under each other's weight and the stench of urine and manure.

I couldn't stand it. Their enormous eyes rolled around wildly. They were looking for comfort, but Roy and Noah both said there was no way they were letting me in that trailer.

Those cows were frightened to the point of madness, and it would take special equipment to get them off one another. I just wanted to touch them, pat their heads, tell them to hold on, breath slowly, calmly.

It took two hours for Roy to get to the sale and back with the necessary tools and men to help. By the time they untangled the cattle, only that one calf survived, didn't need to be shot. All of the ranchers at the sale were extremely helpful, even respectful of Noah's loss, and the owner assured him he had insurance that covered accidents occurring to and from his sale barn. I was amazed at how solemn the bidding room was that day. There wasn't a whole lot of laughing, not even much smiling. Those cattlemen called Noah *sir* all day, and not one cursed in front of him. They drank their beer and smoked their cigarettes, but did so quietly, and the caller's rattling voice sounded out of place, almost irreverent.

When Noah's one and only calf came through the chute, he still looked confused. He bumped into the pen wall twice before running into the center where everyone could get a good look at him, and even then his eyes were still rolling wildly, trying to see if anything like that pine tree was headed his way again.

Noah's friends bid extravagantly on that calf, raising their fingers and hands way past the normal amount a healthy calf would bring. I noticed how Noah's hands shook like they had the day I picked him up from jail, and I reached out and

took one of them. His lip was curling and he was trying desperately not to cry. Later, the price that calf brought was laughed about. It was the ranchers' way of lightening the mood. Profit cattle, they called Noah's trailer of spring cows, because, with the insurance money and the fantastic price that one calf brought, those dead cows returned more cash than Noah would have made off them alive.

But Noah didn't take comfort in the money, from the fact that he did more than break even. He felt responsible for their deaths. Around eight o'clock that evening, I found him in the ark, searching every corner and cubby hole, looking for a message from God, because he felt certain God had written to tell him he should spare those cattle, save them for the flood, and since Noah had missed the message, God took them as a way of reminding him he should always be on call, always be ready to heed the Lord's words.

And so it made me sick when Gopher also said he understood the Lord was punishing him, was touching his life personally, as if he deserved such attention, because I knew he didn't believe it like Noah, was just continuing his saintly routine, trying to save his neck. I finally took Noah down to the police station a couple of days after his profit cattle died. He told the sheriff all Jerry Don had told him, and once the sheriff started investigating, the whole story came together.

Gopher sold marijuana to the high school athletes about six months before he officially met Gracie. After he started

his affair with her, Jerry Don also decided he'd fallen for her. Gopher convinced him he just needed money to get and keep a girl of Gracie's caliber, and Jerry agreed to push Gopher's marijuana for him, for a price. Later, when Darlene convinced the parents of the Trouper P.T.A. and the sheriff that a drug problem did exist, Gopher panicked and demanded Honey, his teenage lover before Gracie, set up the football coach to divert attention while he moved his supplies to a safer place. Gracie was afraid of Jerry Don because she didn't know about Gopher's business, couldn't tell if Jerry was planning on setting up Noah or Gopher next. Jerry tried to tell her the truth, but Gracie wouldn't listen. Eventually, after Jerry settled for Honey because Gracie hated him and Gopher convinced him he'd never do better, the whole thing drove Jerry to take more and more drugs; he simply couldn't handle being the bad guy.

Gopher was a smooth one. He insisted he be given an interview with the Scoop in order to publically confess and repent of his sins, and since Darlene refused to do it, his own daughter was hired as assistant reporter and was sent to interview Gopher, write up his version. A vision from the Lord had come to him, her article said, and he'd received the wisdom of Solomon. It was God's justice coming down upon him, afflicting him like Job. He'd lost his family and his position in government, and his mental health was rapidly deteriorating under such stress. He felt a strong urge to take his own life, or at least take to drugs or liquor to

help forget his sorrows. But his promise to never ever commit similar sins of the flesh was a solemn one, and he wanted to assure all Trouper citizens he intended to keep it.

Seeing as Darlene tried to persecute so many other people that year, and since Noah was the only genuine witness to the whole sordid affair, the majority of Troupers decided, if they could believe Darlene and Noah's stories, they also wished to believe in Gopher's revelation and began passing a petition to have his sentence probated, although they admitted he probably shouldn't be allowed to remain mayor, and maybe they ought to revoke his election to Father-of-the-Year.

Darlene wouldn't stand for it. She secretly tried to run an anonymous editorial past the Scoop editor-in-chief, and that's how Gopher's daughter became the new lead reporter. The editor-in-chief said it was time to clean up the staff, tighten it a little, so he let Darlene go, telling her he couldn't afford to keep two lead reporters and wanted some new blood working the paper.

Shortly after her dismissal at the Scoop, Darlene quit her job at the Dairy Queen also. Work became boring, even though I was promoted to Darlene's position. The Dairy Queen just wasn't the same after that. It was quieter, less crowded even. Certainly no town activities were planned there any longer, and the Trouper women stopped coming in to give me the gossip. I guessed I wasn't as good or as enthusiastic a listener. It was so lonely without Darlene

that when she stopped taking even Roy's calls at home, I suggested the two of us go visit her. I thought she might enjoy hearing how horrible the Dairy Queen was without her, how I actually missed her.

We arrived at her house on Friday afternoon just after she'd learned Gracie had mysteriously disappeared from the home for unwed mothers, had cut out to find a doctor who'd give her an inexpensive abortion. Darlene knew she'd given Gracie only fifty dollars, and any doctor who would perform an abortion for so little wasn't a clean or careful one, if he was one at all.

She shoved a handful of wire coat hangers in my face. "See these?" she asked. "He's taking fifty bucks to prod one of these inside her. Scrape her clean. Can you imagine?" She grabbed my hand, jerked me into her house, down the hallway, into a bedroom, past another bedroom where clothing was already piled knee-deep on the floor. She stood me in front of the closet. "All of them," she said, waving her arms before the opened door. "All of them wire hangers. Out of the house! You got to help me. We don't want Gracie to be reminded of anything."

She began grabbing handfuls of hangers, yanking the clothing off them, letting it drop at her feet, and flinging the hangers into a pile near Roy. He couldn't move, just stood watching those wire hangers gathering. And I, not knowing what else to do, began helping her, working as

quickly as possible and saying, "No, I can't imagine. I'm so sorry. We'll get them. We'll get them all."

And even though I knew hiding the wire hangers wouldn't help Gracie forget, wouldn't erase anything, yet I still worked furiously, helped Darlene clean out her closet, tidy up her life.

CHAPTER X

MAY

When Gracie returned to Trouper in May, an entire week after she'd disappeared from the Wilma McKray Home for Unwed Mothers, Darlene tried to set a good example. She stopped chasing Roy because, as she told everyone in town, he was the kind of man who expected things from his women and she wanted Gracie to see such men could be told no. "I know exactly where our relationship is headed," she said. "I'm flattered. And surely it is a sore temptation. But, you know, for Gracie's sake--"

Only twenty-four hours after Gracie returned, she also put her smile back on and showed up out at the ranch wanting to borrow Noah's pickup so she and Gracie could go shopping. "Mother and daughter time," she said when I handed her the keys. Then she looked over her shoulder to make certain Gracie wasn't standing near enough to hear our conversation. "We're going to buy some new dressers," she whispered. "We're not using our closets much these days. The hangers and all."

I pictured the two of them cramming their bedrooms with so many chests-of-drawer they had no room to walk. Surely Gracie wondered why her closet was suddenly void of hangers, why her wardrobe lay on the floor, why her mother had an urge

to buy new furniture. Looking at Gracie though, I could tell she was pretty much going along with anything Darlene suggested. She stared straight ahead, her eyes opened but not looking at anything as if she was blind or had died and was just waiting for someone to kindly close her eyes for her because she'd forgotten to do so.

But Darlene insisted everything was fine. She even waltzed into the Dairy Queen one day during the lunch crowd to let everyone see she was holding up well, wasn't ashamed of anything. Never mind she lugged Gracie in there also, literally pulling her by her shirt sleeve, sitting her down in a booth, and patting her hands.

"Looky here," Roy said, staring at Darlene and whistling. "I tell you. You got some nerve coming in here after spreading those rumors about me. I won't ever get a date again. You know, you got little old women crossing to the other side of the road just so's they don't got to share the sidewalk with me. I actually seen one of them clutch her purse to her chest like I might could decide to try purse snatching too. Just what you think you're doing telling everyone I'm a lecher?"

"I'm moving to Abilene." Darlene smiled, all her teeth showing like she'd put Roy in his place. "I's thinking I might try to get a job back here at the DQ, but old Floyd said he already promised the manager's job to Maxine and I don't want to be lorded over." She turned to me. "You can be kind of bossy. So we moving to Abilene. Aren't we,

Gracie honey?" She changed the tone in her voice for that last question, asked it like she was speaking to a six-year-old.

Gracie didn't move or give any indication she heard what her mother said, so Roy answered for her. "What you want moving to Abilene for? There ain't nothing to do in West Texas but watch the paint dry."

"I got a job, Mr. Smarty. A good one. Better than slinging hamburgers in a greasy Dairy Queen for the rest of my life."

"Who said I'd be here forever?" I asked.

"Just what kind of job is it?" Roy knew Darlene better than I did. Remembering her habit of exaggerating every story, he didn't let her get under his skin quite as easily as I did.

"I got a job at Sam's Wholesale Warehouse. A new one. They just built it. It's huge." She held her arms out, showing us how big it was, and then looked over at Gracie. "Ain't it, Gracie honey?" Darlene was still trying to stir Gracie, prove she was okay, was actually excited by Darlene having found a job in another town, not because she felt ashamed and wanted to leave, but because it was a good offer, one the two of them couldn't pass up.

"Doing what exactly?" Roy wouldn't let Darlene off the hook.

"Passing out Frosted Mini-Wheats samples," she said, again pitching her voice as if she'd proven her point, made Roy look stupid for doubting her.

"You joking?" But he didn't wait for her to answer before he started laughing, and when he stood up and offered me a french fry saying, in a most official manner, "Care to try a DQ fry? Ma'am?" I got tickled too even though I didn't think Abilene was all that horrible a place and was actually pretty impressed Darlene had the guts to move, get out of Troupers.

"Go ahead." She shook her finger at us. "Laugh now. It may be Frosted Mini-Wheats today. But tomorrow--tomorrow it could be Jimmy Dean Sausage. I'm a mover." She grabbed Gracie by the shirt again and pulled her out the door, turning around at the last minute to add, "One day, I be first lady. Any man marries me could be president."

Darlene refused to leave town, though, before she reestablished her spotless, do-good reputation. She simply would not have people asking one another, several years after she'd gone, if they remembered that Darlene woman and how she flew the coop after her daughter got caught red-handed seducing the town mayor, undermining his election to Father-of-the-Year, wrecking a decent Christian home for no good reason but pure sinful whim.

So she planned her final community project and even managed to wangle a Scoop interview with Gopher's daughter so she could publicize it. The article said Darlene felt there

was an urgent need at the Trouper Fire Department for a pumper truck. After all, more than half the buildings in town were wooden, so without the latest and most advanced equipment the whole city could burn to the ground if even one small home caught fire. "Poof. Just like that." She snapped her fingers as she stood on my porch on the designated evening, having driven out to the ranch to collect my and Noah's contribution.

It was a good idea--her method of gathering donations. Her grandmother once told her how they used to have Porch Light Calls once a month to collect money for the poor. So Darlene's plan adopted the old-fashioned signal, and any Trouper anxious to protect his home should leave his porch light burning, ward off robbers and simultaneously show his willingness to give money to the Fire Department's cause.

Initially though, the Trouper community wasn't very cooperative. They acted as if they were barely listening to Darlene when she spoke about the upcoming evening. Some of the women walked right past Darlene, even as she was talking, and others interrupted her or continually looked at their watches as if they were in a hurry, wanted her to know they had better things to do. Of course, the men followed the women's example.

They knew better than to cross a female picket line. And I believe if Gopher hadn't been granted bail at his preliminary hearing for drug-dealing just two days before the Porch Light Call, there would have been a black-out in

Trouper that evening. It didn't matter the drug charges had nothing to do with Darlene or Gracie. Not only would those women have kept their porches dark, they would have shut every light in their homes off, made their families spend the night in the pitch-black.

I don't know why I let Noah talk me into leaving our light on. I could have given the money to Darlene when I got off work that afternoon, before I drove to the ranch, instead of making her come all the way out and get it. But Noah insisted we participate. Said he liked town events, remembered how his first date with Mimi to a dance held after a Porch Light Call one summer. He was so excited he started singing a Conway Twitty song and began whirling me around the room until I made him stop after he started puffing between words because he couldn't breathe. Then he pulled a dining room chair out to the porch and waited two and a half hours before Darlene finally showed, even though he kept complaining how that burning light bulb tempted all the biting insects to swarm the porch and frightened away all the fireflies he liked so much.

Darlene didn't stay but two minutes, probably because she still felt uncomfortable around Noah, but he was disappointed by how quickly the whole event passed. He believed Darlene would stay and chat, so after she left so quickly, he went to bed kind of grumpy. I remember how badly I felt that he'd been let down. It was nice watching him wring his hands, listening to him gab excitedly about any old

thing while we waited for her, and so I was bitter too after he tried so hard to draw Darlene into a conversation, asked her about everything he could think of, even patted the chair beside his, the one he'd drawn out there especially for her company, inviting her to sit, and still failed. Although we normally left the porch light on while we slept, I turned it out after that because Noah said it gave him a headache. He even asked me to shut Speedy inside the bathroom; his yapping was making his ears ring too.

And if I'd only kept the light on it might have lit up the hallway leading to the front bathroom, and maybe Noah wouldn't have run into the closed door, would have seen it and remembered how it was shut because of Speedy. The hard thud sounded like the one I heard the night he fell between the bed and the wall, and I was trying to think if I'd changed the sheets that day and forgotten to move the bed back again, which was difficult because I was still half-asleep, having a hard time getting out from under the covers and down the hall as fast as I could to check on him.

I found him huddled outside the bathroom, leaning against the small telephone stand sitting in the hall, and I could see Speedy poking his nose under the bathroom door, yapping, wanting to know what in heaven's name just tried to bust down his door, making a noisy fuss to let whatever it was know he was ready to fight.

I touched Noah's face, turned it from side to side to see if he really was looking at me and wasn't just dead with

his eyes still open. He glanced wildly about him, trying to decide what just happened, and then he saw the door. "I think I blacked my eye," he said. "Slammed face first into the door." Then he grabbed my hand, squeezed, and grinned, pulling his face, every feature, into tight crinkles. "Did I ever sing you about Little Gracie?" he asked.

"Noah, wait a minute. Let me get some ice for your eye." I tried to stand up, but he held my hand, wouldn't let go.

"You want to know what the Lord said to me that day?" he asked. "Do you?"

I could tell by the way he bent forward slightly, moved close to my face, he felt what he had to share was important, pressing. "What did he say, Noah?"

"He was sad," he said. "He could barely talk." Noah pulled my hand, made me put my ear right against his mouth, and the words he spoke tickled, chilled my arms. "'Noah,' he whispered. 'Tell them it's going to start raining, Noah.'"

I moved away from him, wanted to back up so I could see his face again because he was spooking me, and I thought if I could check his eyes I'd see what he was remembering. But when I turned to face him, his eyes were already closed. His head fell slightly back against the table, his mouth opened, and a thick line of blood slid slowly over his lips, fell from the dark of his toothless mouth.

The coroner in Jackson said Noah hit the back of his head on the table when he fell, that it wasn't the closed door he banged into because of the dark that killed him, but I felt guilty for having turned the light off, for not keeping Speedy in my bedroom for a change instead of locking him up in Noah's bathroom.

I could tell the way Gracie stared at my feet, after Noah's funeral, rather than staring at some empty space directly in front of her own face like she had been lately, that she was feeling guilty about Noah too. When she did finally raise her eyes to look at me, they were swollen with tears, wide open, overflowing. "I loved Noah," she said, then shook her head. "Not like that. Not like Gopher"--as if I thought she meant she'd been having an affair with Noah also.

And then she began confessing everything she felt guilty for, rattling it off like she did that day at the Dairy Queen when she tried to warn me about Jerry Don and Honey. "I really didn't mean to involve him, I mean, I only wanted to warn him about Jerry using his ranch to store those narcotics, and I just thought you should know that, know I sent him the note about going to Devil's Backbone on Halloween because it wasn't really the Lord, though I never would have written it and sent him out there that night if I thought Gopher would set him up for thinking he knew too much." She stopped and breathed slowly. "I just didn't know who Gopher was. I thought it was Jerry Don."

I wasn't angry with Gracie for having sent that message. I wasn't really even mad at Mimi for starting the whole thing, or Jerry Don for playing along with the game. What bothered me was whatever Noah saw as he sat in the dark hallway before he died. He wasn't talking about a written message. He thought he'd heard something, and I for one did not believe a bit of it, assumed he imagined the whole thing, just as I knew the written messages were bogus, and felt guilty for concluding he was simply looney-tunes, for not giving sincere attention to his letters, to what he believed he saw in them.

Thinking maybe Darlene would understand how I felt, since she could have prevented Gracie's affair if she'd only paid closer attention, I tried to talk with her about it. I wanted comfort and sought it in a camaraderie with the only female I knew. I should have known it wouldn't work, just as I never, for one moment, believed we were good friends that first morning when I sat in her house, eating pie, listening to her tell me how she'd help me get a job, paint my nails, save Noah. A good friendship sounded enticing, but we were operating with conflicting drives. She liked me only when she felt she was helping me, assured her superiority was showing. And I liked her only because I felt she needed my friendship, had nothing else but that, was certain I was doing her the favor.

Even that afternoon, when I wanted to share how guilty I felt for Noah, I originally agreed to drive with Darlene to

Jackson, to visit the Sam's Wholesale there, only because I knew she wanted to brag a little about her new job in Abilene and I thought I was being nice to let her. I'm ashamed to admit maybe my feeling gracious explained why I felt compelled to discuss Noah--more so than thinking Darlene had similar feelings about Gracie, really had something in common with me.

The day we went to Jackson together was the day the heavy spring rains started, and on the way home, Darlene took the low road out to the ranch. Coming to the bridge over Mud Creek, you couldn't actually see the bridge because the water had risen over the top of it. The road just disappeared under the water and showed back up again about thirty feet on the other side of where the bridge should be. Darlene didn't slow down, acted like she was going to drive right through it anyway. "Darlene," I said. "The bridge is washed out. Back up and try the other road."

She waved one of her hands at me. "Don't be silly. It ain't been raining that long. It can't be that deep."

"Seriously, Darlene." I pointed out the window, tapped on the glass to show how serious I thought it was. "Look at that water swirling over there. People die like this. Turn the car around."

"If we drive fast enough, we'll speed right through it. No problem. You'll see." She hit the gas pedal, and we lurched forward, literally throwing our heads against the backs of our seats, she'd sped up so quickly. I felt the car

wobble when we first hit the water, but we kept moving forward. "See?" Darlene asked. "Just got to remember always to keep your foot on the gas. You'll flood the engine if you take it off. I had a boyfriend once taught me that." I thought maybe she was right, because even though I couldn't see the bridge, it looked like we were halfway over and I figured the water would start to become shallow again.

Then, about the time I relaxed and shook my head, loosening the muscles in my neck again, the car shifted, stopped moving forward, seemed to actually roll backwards a little, and I could tell we were floating. Roy said later we were lucky she was driving Gracie's Mustang that day because Darlene's little Subaru would have floated away, got caught completely in the current. But the Mustang was so heavy, it started to sink after a few seconds, and Roy figured the wheels caught on the rail of the bridge and kept us from moving on down the creek.

My hands started shaking when I felt the road move out from under us. Darlene lifted her hands from the wheel and shifted her eyes from side to side, waiting to see what would happen next. Water began seeping through the bottom of the car doors, and I rolled down my window. "Let's get on top of the car!" I screamed.

"No, no," she said. "I got to keep my foot on the gas."

"It's too late for that. Get out of the car." I shook her arm. "Come on!"

"But if you open the window the water's going to come in."

I looked down at my ankles, gestured with my hand that she should look down there also. "I believe the water is already coming in the car." I leaned over and rolled down her window. "I mean it. Get out of the car."

We sat on the roof of the car anxiously watching the water rise anxiously. It began creeping over the top, and Darlene bent her legs, pulled them closer to her chest, and wrapped her arms around them. She was making a face at the water. "That's nasty looking water. Dirty."

"Maybe that's why they call it Mud Creek," I said. "Try to swim for that tree over there if we have to. Okay?" I pointed to a tall Cottonwood that was closest to us, but the car hit bottom right about then and stopped moving completely. I put my hand over my eyes and exhaled. "Maybe we're safe now."

Darlene was still huddled in a tight ball, trying to keep her feet from getting wet. She looked over at me and tried to smile. "Sorry," she said.

I started laughing. "It's no big deal. Things were getting kind of boring around here."

We sat silently for about five minutes. I didn't know what Darlene was thinking, but I was trying to guess how long it would take for help to arrive, for some other person to decide trying the low road in these heavy rains, if anybody

else was that stupid, if I actually wanted someone that stupid to come to my rescue.

"I asked the Lord to take my life today," Darlene said all of the sudden.

"What?" I asked. "You did what?"

"This morning, when I prayed over my pancakes at breakfast, I asked the Lord to please take my life today." She stared straight in front of her.

I jerked my head from side to side, watching the water curl around the car, bubbling up where it hit the edge of the roof. I felt water hitting my arms as it started raining again. "Maybe you'll have a heart attack," I offered. "But I don't plan on drowning today. And thanks so much for dragging me with you on the day you decided to check out."

She rested her chin on her knees. "I'm ready to go now. Everything is horrible." She raised her head and turned toward me. "I mean, look at my hair."

"Look at your hair? It's raining on your hair, Darlene. What do you expect it to look like?"

"Well, I don't want it ratty like this when I show up at Heaven's door." She ran her fingers through her bangs, trying to smooth them a little, but the water made them clump together, form a sagging cowlick above her forehead.

"Besides, if I stay around here much longer, they won't let me in heaven. With Gracie as a daughter, I'm bound to look bad. Who could look like a good mother with her for a daughter?"

That's when I felt the need to tell her about what Noah said, about what I thought it meant. God didn't sit up in heaven logging in all our mistakes in a big book. He wasn't anxious, like Mimi, to shine a spotlight on them, or excited like Darlene to run them in the Scoop. I refused to believe he was more concerned about Darlene's screw-ups than he was about that dead, empty look in Gracie's eyes.

And I was going to tell her not to worry, but Roy showed up right about then. He'd seen Darlene pull down the low road right before he turned down the high one, and when we didn't show up at the ranch pretty quick after he did, he got worried and came back for us. He'd joined the Volunteer Fire Department a couple of days before, mostly because he couldn't wait to get his hands on that new pumper truck, but I teased him and said he did it because Roar was a much more appropriate nickname for a volunteer fireman. He could tell everyone he was Roar, here to stop the rip-roaring flames. But when he jumped out of his truck, his new fire extinguisher in hand, aiming it at us like he had his pretend gun when he was a volunteer police officer, I couldn't believe it.

I waved my hand over the water, like it was a showcase on The Price is Right. "Quite clearly we are not on fire, Roar. I don't think you need that thing." I wasn't ungrateful or angry. I wanted his help. And it wasn't like he interrupted a deep conversation between Darlene and me--a come-to-Jesus meeting. I wasn't going to confess I'd been

jealous of her affections for Roy, had wanted for some reason to prove I could have him first. And she wasn't going to confess she'd thought I was Max the electrical engineer before I showed up on her doorstep that first morning. Even if I had told her what Noah said, she wouldn't have listened, would have thought I was nutty also. Smoking some wacky weed like Jerry Don.

So I don't know why I felt disappointed, like what I wanted to say was pressing and it was then or never. But after we got off that car and Jerry took me home first before driving Darlene back in to town, I felt quiet, sad even. I watched Jerry's pickup driving back down the ranch's main road to the highway, and I decided right then I didn't want to say goodbye to Darlene.

I didn't want to watch her drive off, heading west for Abilene, nor was I particularly interested in going back to the Dairy Queen. With Noah gone, everything seemed lonely. Even Speedy's yapping lost its energy, seemed to be drowning under the noise of the heavy rain's continual clatter on the roof.

So I left first. I packed my brown Samsonite, sat Speedy in the car, and Roy laughed when the little Chihuahua scampered immediately to the driver's seat, stood on his hind legs and peered over the wheel like he thought he was driving. We were acting like I was just headed out for groceries, would be back and have supper ready by five o'clock if I didn't waste too much time at the Piggly Wiggly.

I told Roy I was trusting him with the ranch until I decided to sell or keep it. I wasn't sure I'd come back, was afraid if I did I might risk getting stuck here permanently. He said he'd keep a close eye on things.

He made a gun with his finger and thumb and cocked it at me. "You can count on me. Old Roar will be here."

Before I drove off, I reminded him one last time not to touch the ark until I decided what I would do. If I did come back to Trouper, I wanted that bulky ship there, wanted it to always remind me what Noah saw, what he heard. It contained the voice of the Lord, and unlike Mimi, it wasn't a rumbling one. It didn't come as a victorious trumpet blast declaring vengeance against all the sinful. His hands had shook, and His voice quavered.

It was a whisper that barely made it past the lump in His throat because more than anything else, He felt like crying. Noah, He whispered, *tell them it's going to start raining.*

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APPENDIX A

THE SERIAL PUBLICATION OF THE AMBASSADORS

The following chart gives the installment information for The Ambassadors, including the volume and page numbers of the North American Review as well as the corresponding installment and chapter numbers. In order to clearly explain James's omissions in the serial publication, the chart also lists the parallel chapter numbers found in the complete Norton-New York Edition which is used as the authoritative text in this paper. The data is taken from these two publications--the North American Review serial (January 1903 to December 1903) and the Norton-New York Edition.

NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW				NORTON-NY EDITION
Vol.	Pages	Installment	Chapters	Parallel Chapters
CLXXVI	138-60	1	1-3	1-3
	297-320	2	4-5	4-5#
	459-80	3	6-7	6-7
	634-56	4	8-9	8-9

NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

NORTON-NY EDITION

Vol.	Pages	Installment	Chapters	Parallel Chapters
CLXXVI	792-816	5	10-12	10-12
	945-68	6	13-15	13-15
CLXXVII	138-60	7	16-18	16-18**
	297-320	8	19-21	18++, 20-21
	457-80	9	22-24	22-24
	615-40	10	25-27	25-27
	779-800	11	28-30	29-31‡
	947-68	12	31-34	32-34, 36&

#The serial version omits the passage which begins with "This suggested the question" and ends with the paragraph beginning "'But the very next thing" (pages 64-67 in the NNY Edition).

**Installment number 7 ends with the paragraph beginning "'Well,' he answered after a pause" (page 194 in the NNY Edition).

++Installment number 8 begins with the paragraph beginning "Two days later he had news" (page 194 in the NNY Edition). This installment also omits chapter 19 of the NNY Edition.

‡Installment number 11 omits chapter 28 of the NNY Edition.

&Installment number 12 omits chapter 35 of the NNY Edition.

APPENDIX B

THE SERIAL STRUCTURE FOR DO COUNTRY

The following chart gives the installment information for DO Country I chose when writing the novel. There is one chapter per installment, and the chapters\installments correspond, even thematically, to the particular month in which I would like to see them appear. The page numbers are those for this text.

Installment	Chapter	Pages	Month
I	1	1-20	August
II	2	21-44	September
III	3	45-67	October
IV	4	68-84	November
V	5	85-105	December
VI	6	106-124	January
VII	7	125-141	February
VIII	8	142-157	March

IX	9	158-173	April
X	10	174-190	May

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VITA

Leslie Jill Patterson
Candidate for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: DQ COUNTRY: A SERIAL NOVEL

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Fort Worth, Texas, August 8,
1965, the daughter of Charles and Patricia
Patterson.

Education: Graduated from Lawrence D. Bell High School,
Hurst, Texas, in May 1983; received Bachelor of
Arts Degree in English from Abilene Christian
University in May, 1987; received Master of Arts
Degree in English from Texas A&M University in
August, 1989; completed requirements for the Doctor
of Philosophy Degree at Oklahoma State University
in July, 1993.

Professional Experience: Teaching Assistant, Department
of English, Texas A&M University, August, 1988, to
August, 1989; Teaching Assistant, Department of
English, Oklahoma State University, August, 1991,
to May, 1993. Member of Texas Association of
Creative Writing Teachers, College Teachers of
English, and Modern Language Association.