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Zephyrus was electronically typeset in Times-Roman by Eric Hall on a Commodore Amiga computer using Professional Page software.
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"What color is your Easter dress, Lisa?"

"Uh . . . yellow."

Well, it wasn’t really that yellow. It was more of a clear color. So clear that it didn’t exist. Not in my world anyway.

You see, my world is filled with nine-pronged candle holders, beanies designed for men’s heads, porkless dinners, books that read backwards, Crosses that are pens, grooms who smash glasses, calendars that never end, noses requiring prolonged blowing, words complimented with gagging sounds, and presents given for eight continuous days at a time. I am a "nice Jewish girl." At least that’s what my mom tells me.

My parents didn’t raise my sister and me in an orthodox Jewish environment. Originally they hail from New York, but when they moved down South, they left their Jewish handbook in the cold. Sadly to say, my sister and I wouldn’t know the Star of David for the star on a Chrysler. This really isn’t my parents’ fault. My mother calls me and reminds me what holidays are coming up, tells me their significance, and insists I take a few minutes to think about them. I follow her instructions and hope God knows I’m trying to fit in with the religion he assigned me. However, living in Louisville for five short years, I attended a temple for nursery school and kindergarten. He would be proud to know that while most of the children were singing "Jesus Loves Me," I was vocalizing with "The Dradle Song."

A lot of people simply don’t understand the concept of being Jewish. I have been confronted with many curiosities and accusations such as "Do you pray?"; "Being Jewish
isn't a religion, but a culture"; "Are you allowed to have a Christmas tree?"; "You're going to Hell"; "You can spell Hanukkah two ways?"; "Your mom just looks Jewish"; and "Are you from Israel?" I guess I'm equally guilty when it comes to the void in my mind about Christians. I've wondered before about such things as "What's a good Christian?"; "How do you personally know Jesus?"; "When do you get off Lent?"; "If you give something up (on Lent), do you get it back?"; and "Church clothes? Where do you buy those?"

Many people may not know this, but being a Jew in the South isn't as easy as one might think. Take holidays, for example. It's not that easy to find Hanukkah cards. The selection looks like the Christmas-card aisle after Christmas is over. There is just not a lot to choose from--that is if the store even carries them. Also, try telling a friend of yours that you had gefilta fish, blintzes, and matzo for dinner. Sometimes people try to help you out in your condition. One time, I ate dinner with a friend and her family. We were all sitting at the table getting ready to eat pork chops when my friend yelled, "Wait. Lisa's Jewish." And when you try to fit into the predominantly Christian society, you just can't win. My mom wished one of her customers a merry Christmas, and he snarled back at her with a "Try Happy Hanukkah."

All in all, my family and I are pleased with our religion. We have proved this in several ways: my sister married a Presbyterian; my grandfather dropped the "witz" from Meyer; my dad loves pork, and my sister and I both got nose jobs. As for my mother, she still calls and reminds us of the holidays.

Neglect

Columns raise the heavy roof unveiling painted windows, delicate stone carvings of a southern Church. Its newborn shadow stretches far enough to hide whistling cracks in the golden dome where Baptist pigeons keep company with the rusty crucifix.
Sunday School

I’m sitting thinking once again that I have nothing to hold onto when the image of the girl who grasped enters my mind.

It’s a faceless image—nothing to collect the random memories of features. I can’t tell you what color eyes she had, if I ever even saw them open. There were eyelashes, dark, exaggerated quill-strokes. Made out of some Shaker design for beauty out of purpose, they were there to sweep the matter from her eyes. I suspect she had more matter than any of us who stood around her, or at least hers was just more visible because it congregated in the expanses of time between her mother’s or the nurse’s next wiping of those closed eyes when the lashes were too tired or scared to perform their duty.

We were told we were going on a Sunday School field trip: I and my mother (the old dependables), my three fellow future confirmands, girls who did not talk to me nor themselves, and others who were there and may or may not have been there. It was arranged by the stranger-less woman-pastor who had only one good year at Christ Evangelical United Church of Christ, one year before her outreach was questioned, two years before it was recalled, two more before arms were tied.

Yet she was at full wingspan when we visited the Home of the Innocents most likely after church one Sunday, after an hour of me questioning Ms. Wilma on the senility of those figures over age 200, after another hour of having to take it all back in silence, drawing pictures of a round, smiling god on the attendance pads at the end of the pews where I always hurried to sit during church. The god’s arms and legs were always diminutive sticks with fingerless and footless circles on the ends.

One time I drew nakedness. It might have been Eve or even Aphrodite (my d’Aularies’ illustrated book of Greek mythology took its rightful place alongside my Bible), but I was quite pleased with the two ovals I had drawn on the woman’s chest with pencil-nicks in the middle for nipples. I showed it to Mother, pointing out the oyster-shell beneath Eve. Mother kept singing “Bless’d Be The Tie,” though her normally wavering voice lost all tonality. I’m sure I was spoken to later (Beckford’s mother burns all the skin she sees), but I still have some papers with “Check here if you’d like a pastoral visit” on one side and some tribal women copied by memory from a National Geographic article on Kenya circa 1977 on the other. I can tell they’re post-Botticelli because my ovals have improved.

The girl’s parents may have checked that box on the pad. But if they had ever set foot into the old Deustch-marked, emaciated Byzantine sanctuary circa 1874, it was on a Sunday when I wasn’t there. Or the Sunday when I wasn’t there, for I only remember missing one until it started becoming too painful to go. I had thrown-up on that particular Sunday, lost it all at Grandma’s house. I was worried that Jeremiah would go on without me; he did.

The porcine pastor at the Baptist church where my father cleans toilets would call the parents “backsliders.” Yet they slid back into religion at the right time. I don’t remember the mother, but the father wore thick glasses, was bald, looked like my Uncle Melvin who never goes. The father hadn’t been out of the muted yellow room, away from his daughter’s normal-looking crib which was not designed for a girl of her age, which was also mine.

I remember yellow hair, not muted like the room, but brighter, undaunted by the stunting. It was more yellow
than my cousin April’s, hers with brown strings appearing amidst spilled spaghetti that were absent in the girl’s, who instead had streaks of white. April stayed around longer than the girl, long enough to record soap opera farce on my portable tape player and be included in the Mexican marionette shows I’d once thought were only funny solo. I saw April once after her mother died after having her fourth child with as many husbands. April had grown taller than me and filled out. She was into photography, talking about getting her G.E.D.; I remembered strings.

The parents may or may not have been there when we gathered around the bed; I remember a voice besides Pastor Jan’s, it wavered like my mother’s. The three girls in my Sunday School who could have been slumber-party partners with the girl said nothing; Cindy may have laughed nervously, Kelly most likely walked out crying, actions they would repeat years later with a new, sudden wisdom for their own dead teen-age brothers. Michelle sniffed the air.

The nightgown the girl wore wouldn’t have been suitable for the others’ wizened gatherings, however, with its baby theme. It barely covered her skin-draped legs drawn up, touching a hollow chest inside the thin fabric. I saw a diaper and was embarrassed.

Jan kept talking, and I talked, too. I had been taught well from the Easter and Christmas visitations to the Altenheim, the nursing home that smelled of oranges instead of age across the parking lot from church. I never had to be coerced into a room, I was the lead. I saw elder ladies dozing in front of a service on a screaming box; I was cautioned when they weren’t dressed. I talked because their wrinkles and stillness seemed right. I could hug, be touched and expect it, old age wanting my youth. My youth was perpetual, hers was extreme.

But there was an age in her, and it bellowed out with every strained breath supported by tubes coming out of her nostrils. Saliva was all she offered as Jan and I babbled on. Yet I noticed a hand waving, perhaps a wild nerve out of the cement, and I stopped.

I touched it. The voice that was perhaps my mother’s swallowed, Jan awed and was almost speechless. They should not have been surprised. I was well-trained, this was my duty, that was all there was to it.

The hand was briefly recalled when it made contact with mine. Then there was familiarity, the hand tightened, caught mine, kept it in place. She shuddered, shivered, kicked a leg with a sudden wave of energy that jumped skin and was received. I grabbed for the bed post, feeling weakness in the midsection. She held on.

My mother swallowed again less than a week later when Jan called before school to tell us the girl had died quietly the night before. I at first felt deceived, seeing as I was the only one there not told how bad things were, that everyone except me knew she wouldn’t last; even Cindy and Kelly and Michelle knew. Perhaps that’s why all the other hands (except for Jan’s, which were never closed) were kept by sides, in pockets, out of view.

The anger subsided in time, and was replaced by the usual, awkward sorrow—sorrow that she had never known what being nine years old was like or what ten would be. Mine was the first boy’s hand she’d ever held. Compare it to the first kiss (which I think I recollect sharing with her forehead before I left the room, but she was tired, the shudder less severe, and I was stabilized.) Compare it to the first lover’s embrace, compare it to a half-remembered, dangerous tap in the Ladies’ Sewing Circle room where I taught and was taught.

I shuddered, too, at the other, official first kiss years later, and was left feeling wrong and as trapped as the girl in the crib. I have touched very little since then,
always thought three times before my hand is captured. Yet not everything changes: I still take pen and paper to church when I go, and the arms and legs of that circular god, placed randomly among pencil nicks and other errant lines, have not grown. I don’t know if anything has.
Eve

Appetite hung itself over my home,
winding its way through the garden
a neon boa.
The fruit glittered like glass
along the gravel rim of an asphalt road,
and I woke to it.
I broke the fast and my body
rose like a parade float,
carried me open-mouthed to God.

A Letter

This morning I painted myself
a shade paler,
pitted words against paper
to cramp your plans of forgetting.
I held you inside
dry as a tea-bag,
brought you close to breathing
under my hand,
delivered you folded
in three parts.
Evelyn Sleeping

In sleep Evelyn's throat is a polished column. Her body is elongated, white as a Chinese bird. I examine her, angle after angle, sketching in heavy black charcoal. The light, distorted by shutters, illuminates part of her face, and in spite of the dimness she glows with fever. Evelyn sleeping is a study in passivity. She is the perfect subject. My hand flies over the paper, and the porous scratch of my drawing is the only sound in the room. I have been working at this pace for several days, completing three finished pieces. Through the constant interruption of doctors and visitors, I try to make sense of her mouth and chin, of the shadows creating depth on an otherwise marble surface.

This is the way I divide my sister's death into parts, like cutting a pill in half, making it easier to swallow. Her whole figure is pushing through my fingertips and spreading under my hand, her arms, long and transparent, her eyelids patterned with small veins.

When her breathing changes I watch, hand suspended over the paper. I imagine her waking, what she might say. I no longer remember her voice, but I am aware of its absence. She lies in stillness, bitter as a fairy tale. I sit with my work in the sour heat of her room. This is our reunion: she sinking into herself; I dragging her up to the surface of paper.

Evelyn's room is small. This surprises me as she was always the one to grab the biggest and best for herself. I imagine her living in this cramped space, surrounded by the rest of our father's house. Her walls are papered in rose and cream stripes with matching pink carpet. The paper is old, peeling back from the doorway and corners. Against one wall a table is overflowing with dry, dead plants. These small indications of neglect and decay seem arranged, a stage set. I have a sense that I am meant to feel guilty, that I am supposed to reach back into the bitterness we shared. It would be Evelyn's style to prompt such memories, but I reject them, reminding myself that we are no longer children. I am here to care for her, an opportunity she never offered in the past.

When I first arrived I inspected the house. It was clean, sterile as any hotel room, and I suspected the interference of some well-meaning neighbor. I discovered that much of the furniture was gone, sold or given away, probably after our father died. The clean spaces left under and behind these missing pieces had not been replaced. They stared at me, reminding me that I myself was a removed object.

I could not bring myself to explore the back of the house. Bedrooms, I know, have the ability to freeze moments and personalities, sealing them off from change, absorbing their color and energy into the walls. I did not want to confront myself or Evelyn as children, nor did I want to encounter the sadness collected from us. So I was choosing what to remember, very much like Evelyn, who used the past selectively to manipulate. I had the uneasy feeling that she had won or at least proved something. I was back, at her bidding. For that reason I decided to work, using the trip to my benefit.

It was not my intention to use Evelyn as a subject. I began drawing the outside of the house, its sagging porch and shutters strangled by ivy, painfully familiar. At night I drew the fireplace with my father's books arranged on the mantle. Those books had their own memories--my small, chubby fingers rubbing the gold-dusted pages, and the pulpy scent of their insides. I also worked with some of the
flower arrangements, delivered with cool detachment by the local florist.

The flowers were filling the house. I put them in Evelyn's room at first, but they began to seem too harsh, sullen with aggressive color. I remembered how, as children, we scratched our hands picking thistles. For some reason we were drawn to their bad-tempered s talk and purple heads. They seem tame in comparison to Evelyn's "get well" flowers with their artificial coloring and refrigerated wilt.

I was removing a pot of carnations when it occurred to me that I should draw Evelyn. I noticed suddenly the angle of her neck, the sharp lines of her collarbone. I began sketching her with the impartial interest I give to any subject and found that I couldn't stop. It seemed a valuable opportunity to sit and study her in peace. The sketches were good, long clean lines in exact proportion. I had never been so focused. This is my sister, I kept telling myself, this is Evelyn. I wondered what thick dreams she was having, suspended in her body.

It is late afternoon and I am changing her sheets and nightgown. Her body is soft, feeling slightly rotten against my fingers. Again I have the impression that she is dissolving into herself, drowning in cotton sheets. Her skin is cool, and I stand for a moment with my hand touching her cheek. The visitors have stopped coming, impatient that she is taking her time with death. Now there is only myself and the doctor, whose visits are brief. I cannot say how long I have been here. At times I forget that I have ever been anywhere else. I am surrounded by sketches, Evelyn mirrored in black and white from every direction.

It is her silence that reaches me finally, the distance of her death. I have been watching the subtle changes; recording as her face softens and her body grows brittle. I am aware of myself as an isolated figure, a spectator in this dry room. I have been avoiding memories, with their fixed emotions. Now the idea of forgetting has lost its polish and I want those memories. All at once, I want their feeling.

My recollections of home have always been guarded, as though I must remove myself from them and watch at a safe distance. Otherwise they are flashes, pleasant sensations of smell or touch that have an immediate and passing sweetness. Once, when we were little, Evelyn taught me to rub my hands in dish soap and blow bubbles through my cupped palms. We spent hours watching those fat, swirling blobs float through the kitchen, and break against the windows or floor. Later I was no match for her anger. As the youngest, I managed to avoid the housework and responsibilities heaped on Evelyn by our father. She grew stiff with resentment and, out of jealousy, found ways to hurt me almost daily. Sometimes her rage was direct, a shout or slap, always unexpected. Other times she would lay on the floor and "play dead" until I would cry and beg her to wake up. I withdrew into myself, found hiding places in the house as well as in my mind. As we grew older, I was confronted with her criticism and constant humiliation. Evelyn seemed tremendous in her anger. It took over and eventually drove me from the house.

The day I left home was blunt with rain. I was standing in the kitchen, waiting for my taxi. My escape had been carefully planned; I had savings and a scholarship. In spite of these preparations, I was nervous. I glanced through the kitchen door and saw Evelyn walking toward the hose. Around her the trees were damp, stuck like rubber plugs into the ground. I was afraid, knowing that she was coming with words she had planned for me. I saw it in her walk, her determined steps and straight shoulders. We had been fighting for weeks, brutal fights that I kept within myself, grinding against my throat and chest.

She was, I suppose, angry that I was leaving, perhaps
hurt by it. We had shared our dreams of escape as we had those thistles and soap bubbles. Whatever her reason, she paced around me, attacking at every fear I had about going. I was accustomed to this scene and offered no response. She worked at it until I began to cry and then leaned over to kiss my cheek, her procedure for winning an argument. I had the sensation that she was somehow plastic. I left, dragging pain and confusion behind me like an injured leg. The further I went from the house, the more unreal she seemed.

Evelyn sleeping is defenseless and beautiful. I flourish in her silence, my drawings take over her room. This is my triumph. I wonder if she might be aware of my presence. I have finished sketching, and I sit looking at her shoulders and hair. She is elegant, long and pale against the sheets. Dust hangs over her, twisting its way through the sunlight. Like magic, I have divided her up and made her whole again, yet she does not move. Again I try to imagine her waking, and I know that she would not hold me, or talk, or laugh. She is my sister; nothing has changed.

In a moment of restlessness, I open the window. I am surprised by the motion and energy, as though I had expected that the world had stopped with Evelyn and me. Birds sit on electrical strings, huddled together. A woman in grey slacks and a blue sweater passes by on the sidewalk. She sees me watching and nods. I want to reach out to her, to extend my hand through the window as though she might pull me through. Here in this cramped room, among the smell of stale flowers, I am waiting for Evelyn to die.

Deborah Brown

Feather Rise

Winter vacation in the Ozarks with Mom and Dad...My little sister, DeDe, and I felt the quiet of a tourist town out of season, hating the empty arcades and run-down fudge shops--always the wax people behind weathered railings of mock saloons, cowboy hats and red feathers each side of snow-edged streets.

But somehow we pinned our braids with feather clips, grabbed the beaded leather purses we'd bought at "Authentic Indian Souvenirs" and ran for the smoothest white under trees.

DeDe always found the Indians first--"There they are! Pretend!" She'd run into some slight lift of snow dust, kicking her small boots up and down, scattering solid cold in ridges around her dance. I joined the movement, scarf flapping against my numb cheeks, my toes hardly hitting the ground with feeling in wet shoes.

We danced that way--our steam breaths rising around laughter to scatter in leaf-naked branches--until the feathers slipped from our hair...
They were dry after DeDe brushed them with her mittens, and we'd place them back in our silly blonde braids.
He Waits

Somewhere in an old house he waits, limps through dim hallways, waves his arms to shoo the flies, his heavy work boots clunking against floorboards toward a small room. . an empty bed with rose-print blankets--red faded to pink--and still he waits, embracing a ghost, reading fairy tales to a memory with blond curls and love-daddy smiles.

A mailman delivers the daughter’s affections in white envelopes but the old man finds the little girl in the dented mailbox, her baby arms reaching out from the darkness and passing through him.
Windows

It was a misty, moisty morning. A cold, miserable day, with the air so full of water it couldn’t fall, wouldn’t make a puddle bounce. If you stuck your head outside, it would feel dry, but if you had to be outside for an hour, you’d be soaked to the skin.

The dawn air was blue with the hickory-sweet smoke from the cabin’s wattle-and-daub flue. It was little different from any of the others in this holler: two-roomed, squared log, with a dog-run connecting the two rooms. But this cabin had windows, real glass windows, all the way around, all the way from Nashville. The windows seemed to reflect the old man that lived there: brittle, lucid, with just a touch of dirt in the corners that bespoke more of a futile attempt at sinlessness than an abject lack of Godliness.

The house yard showed the effect of a man that takes pride in what he has. A well-kept split-rail fence surrounded the acre of grass, flower beds, and rhododendron. And off to the west side of the cabin stood an orchard with regimental rows of Arkansas Red apple trees.

Directly behind the cabin, at a comfortable distance, stood the outhouse and parallel rows of split hickory wood. The outhouse was just comfortably far enough away not to offend, and the wood rick was just comfortably close enough for the old man to gather his wood without becoming chilled.

The plowed-under remnant of a house garden was visible and a homemade swing hung from the stoutest branch of a withered, gnarled hedgewood tree. Below, and in the seat of the swing, lay the neon-green hedge apples that were the only sign of disorder on the homestead. The old man would gather up an armful and scatter them in the dark corners of his cabin, fervent in the belief that hedge apples repelled spiders.

The barnyard and out-buildings were testament to a time when a man knew where to put his money. With stone foundations and walls boxed with mill sawn oak, the smallest of the out-buildings would have swallowed the cabin. The feed barn contained a horse stable, milk parlor, hen house and brooder, and one long side was a tool shed with one end boxed off into a small carpentry shop. The other buildings were corncribs, a tobacco barn, a smokehouse, a springhouse, and a washhouse with stone wash troughs. At one time this was a self-sufficient enterprise. Now the old man felt he was more of a caretaker to a memory than a husbandman of a working farm.

Inside the cabin, in the room that served as kitchen, dining room, and living room, the light of a coal oil lamp was about to win out over the light and heat of the fireplace. The old man sat in a chair at one end of a plank-and-trestle table, staring at the chair at the far end. These were the only chairs in the room; benches stood at the two long sides of the table.

The man stirred himself and got up one joint at a time, in the manner of old men, and walked to the wood box beside the fireplace.

"Damn this miser weather," he thought, as he gazed out a window, watching the smoke hang on the mist. "It’s too cheap to rain, and too tight to snow."

Picking up three pieces of thin-split hickory, he teased the fire back to life and, with his joints singing the song of the aged, walked to the door. Taking a heavy woolen sweater off one of the pegs beside the door, he opened the
door and stepped down onto the dog-run.

The man was long, not as much tall as long, with long legs that seemed to start at his armpits and arms that nearly brushed his knees. He slipped his sweater over a blue chambray work shirt, buttoned at both the collar and wrists and neatly tucked into a pair of heavy corded gray trousers—one size too large—and these were held in place by a wide pair of galoshes. The only jewelry the man wore (and he would have argued that this was jewelry) was a pocket watch secured to a belt loop by a woven brown hair fob.

The old man reached into a shirt pocket and brought out the makings for a smoke. With a dexterity that belied the arthritic condition of his hands, he soon had a cigarette rolled. Taking a kitchen match from the bowels of a pocket, he flicked a hard, horn-like, yellowed thumbnail across the head, exploding it into life, and when the sulfur burned away, applied it to the cigarette.

Flicking the match away and expelling the tobacco smoke into the air to mingle with the wood smoke, he made a noise that was given birth in his throat but died at the backside of his teeth. His few friends would have called it a chuckle, but to the stranger it would sound like a grunt.

"She's been dead thirty years," he thought, "and I still won't smoke in the house. Damned funny business when you think of it."

"She" was his wife, and she neither allowed tobacco of any sort, nor alcohol of any nature, in her house.

"I'm not fool enough to think that it'll change you," she explained, "nor will I forbid you to have an occasional drink, or the pleasure of your smoke. But you will never have neither in any house where I lay my head."

Raising a fine, almost delicately shaped head to the ridge, he gazed at the contrast of leaden sky and the wet-black, leafless branches of the trees on the hills. This starkness so many people found depressing he appreciated and admired. He saw as much beauty in the monochromatic bareness as other people saw in the October splendor of the woods.

Feeling something brush his pantsleg, he looked down at a very old, very pregnant, Redbone coonhound.

"You hussy," he growled. "I figured you were over that nonsense. Any idea as to who the proud papa is? I didn't figure they was another dog in smellin' distance. Maybe it was that ol' boar coon you been a chasin'. If it was I'll have me some real honest-to-God coon-hounds then."

Reaching down to scratch the dog's ear was more painful to the man than it was pleasing to the hound, so he took the toe of his shoe and gently rubbed it back and forth along the dog's back.

"I guess we're the only two left in this holler," he thought. "Didn't used to be that way, though. Eight, maybe ten families used to share this end of the holler. Just about used up all the flat land that wasn't more rock than dirt. And some set up hillside farmin'. And some said to hell with farmin' and just hunted and trapped. What corn they needed to feed their families on they traded deer meat or swapped out work for. And back then they wasn't too big a stink raised if some filled out an empty purse or their children's bellies with a little whisky makin'... a feller would advance a right smart corn to an enterprisin' man that kept a good still, and besides making a good return on his corn, he was guaranteed a good sip of likker when the need was nigh. Wouldn't be nothin' shameful or sinful about it neither. Them as had land, farmed. Them as didn't, 'stilled. It was all honest work."

Reaching back inside the cabin, he took a worn felt hat off of the peg, placed it squarely upon his head and gently pulled the door closed behind him.

"C'mon, Jupe, let's go," he said to the hound. With the
hound at his heels he headed down toward the gate.

One quarter of a mile from the house was the cemetery. He stopped and stood at the arched entry constructed out of field stone from the far. He knew what was on the other side of the lattice-work gate; it was like looking through a window to the little future he had left. Things don't change much in a cemetery, especially a small family plot such as this one, and he would never see the last change this one would undergo.

Much in the way the winter woods gave him a sense of beauty, the cemetery, especially on a raw day as this one, gave him a sense of peace. The old man, being alone, had no one to talk to except the hound, so he would visit the cemetery for company. He was not one to talk to graves. Some would say he was not one to talk to people that much. But when he came here, the memories were like tacit conversation.

His great-grand and grandparents were buried here, along with his brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. All of his children—all five of them, three boys and two girls, the victims of illness, accident, and one murder—were laid to rest beside his wife. Sometimes he felt he was a victim of the unnatural and the unreasonable; the most unnatural act in creation is for a man to outlive his children, and he felt that it was unreasonable for him to be alive and her to be dead all these years. For the last fifty years, as the cemetery became more inhabited with each passing, his life had become more empty.

After carrying away some downed tree branches, his knees were reminding him that he still had a quarter-of-a-mile walk back to his house and his dinner. He whistled up the hound, and when she was standing beside him, he looked down at her and said, "Ya' know, Jupe, the hard part of gettin' old, at least gettin' to be as old as I am, ain't the aches and pains, though they are considerable. It's the lonely. Anyone that ever loved me, or anyone that I ever loved in this whole wide world, is buried here. I don't have anyone to love or to be loved by. That's the hard part. C'mon, let's us go fix a little dinner."

As he neared the homeplace, he stopped at the gate and thought of her. "She wanted an iron gate, but I told her that iron gates were for prisons and graveyards, and a wooden one would do just fine. She'd pouted, but soon she was carryin' the firstborn and forgot about the gate."

After closing the gate, he turned toward the cabin and noticed the windows. Most of the cabins in the holler had isinglass and some just had wooden shutters that closed over square holes in the walls, but his great-grandmother had made windows a stipulation of matrimony: "I won't marry you in the dark, and I won't live in the dark, and I won't raise chilidren that squinch up their eyes from cradle to grave. If you want the toil of my hands and your pleasure in my bed, you'll put at least one window in every side of that dog-run cabin."

"Ol' Pap said it seemed a good bargain," he remembered aloud. "Must have been. The cemetery's crowded with his eleven children."

The glass in the windows, at least what was left of the original "Nashville" glass, was wavy. On sunny days the windows seemed to be not so much windows but frames for Impressionist paintings. The willow tree outside the bedroom took on a soft, wavy appearance: clear, but distorted enough to lead the viewer to believe that he might be seeing a willow tree. This view always amused him, even though he'd seen it all his life.

She'd loved the windows and she kept them spotless. She'd kept him busy making window boxes, whitewashing them, and then, every spring, going to get a small wagon load of wood's dirt so she could plant all of the colorful summer flowers she'd loved so much. It had always
tickled him because every winter she'd take the seed
catalogue and make out her order, and then talk about how
pretty the flowers would be. He told her that she was
talking them flowers to death, but she said that was all right
because flowers that were talked about were almost as
pretty as real flowers, and this way she could have flowers
in her window boxes all year long.

He'd seen a lot of pain and joy through these windows.
Through the window in the kitchen he'd seen the snake
strike the firstborn. Poor thing lived two hours, and those
two hours were an agony. He'd watched the oldest girl
discover her shadow from the back window of the
bedroom. She'd stop, turn around, put her little hands on
her hips, just like her momma did, seeming to dare the
thing to follow her again. And when she saw that it
appeared to be attached to her, she bent her leg up in back
of her and tried to peel it from the sole of her bare foot.
The old man made that noise in his throat at the memory.

Stepping into the shelter of the dog-run, he removed his
hat, beat the water off it against his leg, and looking down
at the hound, thought that the pups would be born soon.
"I'll go in and fix us some dinner now," he explained. "It'll
be mush and bacon grease for you again, but the weather'll
be cold enough for a hog killin' fore long and then you can
eat cracklin's till you founder."
The kitchen had grown cold, but it was the pervasive
dampness that most bothered him. It seemed to filter in
through his clothes, into his skin, and then, much in the
way water will swell dry wood, cause his joints to become
tight and ache. Taking off the damp sweater helped, but it
was only when he had the cook stove blazing, and the
unrelenting dry heat it exuded had chased away the chill
and damp, and he'd poured himself a cup of fresh brewed
coffee, that the old man felt well.

Taking down a blackened cast iron pot, he walked over
to the water bucket and ladled out enough water to make
the hound's mush. "Hell," he thought while adding more
water, "I may as well have mush myself."

In the thirty years since she died, he had barely learned
to cook anymore than it took to keep himself alive. Fried
meat--mostly pork--fried eggs, and potatoes--boiled, baked,
or fried--made up his diet. As he had gotten older, the
appetite of the hard working man had been replaced by the
small, portioned, occasional meal of the elderly. In the
early spring he would literally gorge himself on kale and
poké greens, but once his body's craving for them was
abated, he would rarely touch them the rest of the summer.
In the root cellar he'd store cabbage, carrots, and turnips
from the garden and apples from his orchard, but every year
he'd throw away more than he had eaten.

When the mush was done he spooned out a small
portion into the bowl, and he opened a fresh can of
condensed milk, poured some on the mush, and some more
into a second cup of coffee. He put the pot on the table so
it would cool, and he sat down to eat. "There's no grace
said anymore," he thought. "Used to be a meal couldn't
start at this table until somebody said blessing over it.
She'd always taken care of the blessings; said the man of
the house should say 'em, but I was a heathen, and the food
would turn to ash. I swole up and said it sure as hell didn't
turn to ash while I was breaking my back to see that there
was something to put on the damned table. Then she
puffed up and asked me to leave my own table until I could
at least act like a gentleman, if not a Christian. Spent that
night and the next in the barn. Never spent another night
away from her again. Never said grace either." The old
man made that noise in his throat.

With his legs and back telling him that he'd walked a
half-a-mile, he got up from the table in stages. Half
walking, and half hopping, he took the tea kettle to the
water bucket and ladled out enough water to wash the dishes he’d dirtied. After he set the kettle on to heat, he took down a skillet, scooped into it a goodly portion of bacon grease from a coffee tin, and set it on a warm lid of the cook stove. Taking down his hat from the peg, he stepped out into the dog-run to hunt up the speckled dish pan that he used to feed the hound. The light was failing now. It darkened early this time of year, especially in the holler. Staring wistfully toward the ridge, the old man knew the deer would be gathering at the edge of the woods, waiting for a little less light, so they could come down and eat the last of the windfall apples in his orchard. Many was the night he was serenaded by the hound as she would take scent of the deer and then run all night long, baying at the deer she had spooked from the orchard. “She tries that tonight, she’ll strew puppies from one end of the holler to the other,” he growled.

She’d never understood his love of his hounds or, for that matter, his love of the game they run. Fox, coon, squirrel when the leaves had fallen—all had given him enjoyment. Most times the fox hounds never saw the fox, and the men he hunted with would only shake out enough coons to keep the hounds anxious, and he only let his hounds tree squirrels because he liked a mess of squirrel and dumplings. No, it wasn’t the blood; it was the hunt and the fellowship. Hard working, decent men, they had little spare time at all, and none in the planting or harvest season. But after the crops were in, and the land was at rest, they would gather at one another’s houses at late afternoon and gathering all of their hounds, they would head for the hills and streams.

The big fun was in the bragging on the hounds and laughing at one or the other’s embarrassment when what had previously been the finest hound, fox, or coon in the country was suddenly transformed into a lying, no good son-of-a-bitch by an animal a little bit smarter, or more scared. No mercy was shown when this happened, and none was expected. Sometimes they would hunt all night and get home at down to the smell of bacon frying. I can almost smell it now, he thought, bacon frying . . . bacon frying? “Oh hell,” he spat. “The damned bacon grease.”

He set the pan of mush in front of the hound, who looked as if food was the least of her concerns. “You’ll drop that litter sometimes for mornin’,” he assured her, and then he went back into the darkness of the cabin.

"Ought to wash and polish the globes on these lamps, maybe let a little more light through," he thought. "She’d have a fit if she was here, what with me livin’ this way. Funny, but I don’t even think her name anymore. I just think of her or she. She had a beautiful name; gave the same name to the second girl. Buried them the same day, in the same grave, with the same name. She would have appreciated that."

As darkness fell, the old man heard the hound whimper. Taking one of the lamps, he stepped out on the dog-run. Holding the lamp up high to spread the light, he saw the dog lying on her side and gasping for breath. As he put out a hand to calm the old dog, she jerked spasmodically, and the life-force left her. "She was just too old to carry and whelp those pups," he said. "I’m sorry, old girl. You were as good a friend as you were a hound. I’ll lay you to rest at the edge of the orchard where the deer gather. You’ll like that."

He took down a skillet and, opening the fire-box of the cookstove, scooped out enough coals to fill it. He opened the door, walked across the dog-run, and opened the door to the bedroom, stepped in, and went to a small, almost miniature cookstove. Raising the lid, he poured in the coals and, reaching behind the stove to a small box, took out a handful of kindling and dropped it onto the coals. After the
kindling took, he fed the fire three or four sticks of cordwood, closed the stove door, and opened the damper, solidly closing the cabin’s door behind him. One night he didn’t take that precaution, and a possum, drawn by the heat, crawled into the room. The old man had a hell of a time evicting it, especially when the hound, drawn by the cursing, tried to help in the eviction. He went back to the other room of the cabin.

As a young, single man, he always shaved once a week, but once he married, she’d asked him to shave before coming to bed. As the water heated for his nightly ritual, he was struck by the thought that no one had seen his face in over six months, but, still, he shaved every night.

Taking out his razor, strop, brush, and a china cup she had given him to hold his soap, he hung the strop on a nail next to the square mirror and stropped the razor evenly—six times on each side of the blade, on each side of the strop. He then took off the blue shirt and unbuttoned his long underwear to the waist, slipped out of the arms, and let them hang down from the waist of his trousers.

When he had scraped away the last remaining stubble, he wiped the soap residue from his ears, looked in the mirror, and saw his face. No man really sees his face while he shaves, so the reflection caught him unawares. His ears had gotten long. His entire face seemed to be drawn, pinched. The loose skin at his throat reminded him of the wattles on a gobbler turkey. He was gray, ancient. His entire countenance seemed unappealing to him. "I don’t believe I’ll ever look into a mirror again," he said, adamantly.

When he set the lamp on the round table in his bedroom, it cast its glow on the window. As he glanced up he was startled by his reflection, stark against the black of the night. "It seems as if I’m doomed to bump into myself tonight," he mumbled. "The rest of me doesn’t look a blessed bit better than that face in my shaving glass."

Looking at the table, really seeing it for the first time in years, he was surprised to see her glasses and a bit of unfinished needlework. "Like the hound, she was too old to carry a young’un. Wasn’t no need, but mine, for it happening," he said aloud.

Walking slowly to the mantle to get his glasses, he noticed some dried flowers arranged in a little gray vase. "How is it that flowers can still look so pretty long after they’re dead, and me, who’s supposedly still alive, looks like a spectre," he wondered.

He took his glasses off the mantel, wrapped the wire earpieces around his ears, went to his rocking chair, sat down, and picked up a dog-eared copy of Cooper’s The Deerslayer. There were three other books in the cabin: Gibbon’s The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Scott’s Ivanhoe, and her Bible. The first three were obtained by his mother, who thought that her children should be educated, but the Bible was hers, from her people. He was the only one to read the first three. Four of the five children had died before they were old enough to read, and oddly enough, the one son that did read only read his mother’s Bible. "He may have read it, but it must not have took," he thought. "Not with his gamblin’ and whorin’ and getting shot to pieces by that woman’s husband for being where he had no cause nor right."

He felt himself nodding, so he took off his glasses and laid them and the book on the square table by the chair. As he stood up, the old chair creaked, causing him to recall the nights he had heard that chair when she was nursing the children or soothing them through the colic or the final fevers that took two of them from her. "Until she died I never sat in that chair, never," he recalled. "I don’t recollect sittin’ anywhere except in the chair at my end of the table. Even in the summer, if we were outside of an
eveninn', I'd sit on the ground while she was in her swing. It seemed as if my clothes always had somethin' or other on'em. I just never felt comfortable no place except in my chair."

The old man went to the table, bent down, cupped his hand at the top of the lamp's flue, and blew forcefully into the flue, extinguishing the flame. Standing at the window, looking outside, he saw, in a shaft of moonlight, the smoke from the chimney drifting to the ground. "Smoke's goin' to the ground," he observed. "Be a snow in three days."

It had cleared off and the temperature had fallen until the water in the air had turned to ice crystals covering the world of the holler. As the old man stared toward the starlit ridge and the emptiness beyond, he whispered what he whispered every night: "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe, tomorrow."

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Rebecca Adams

Winter

Daddy wore thick leather gloves to chop that giant walnut outside my bedroom window. I used to climb its brawny branches to pick green nuts that stained my small hands black. He cut it into pieces. I carried its body broken in small arms to the woodshed. And later, by the stove I watched flames dance on black remains while mother plucked splinters from my fingers.
At Thirteen

Branches bend in long arcs
beneath fat black birds squawking.
   I take aim.
   Click.
A sound like a ball in a glove
lightens the limb
and one falls with a
dead thump.
In the bushes feathers writhe
in circles.
   I watch.
Then load another pellet
and finish it.
I lite a stolen cigarette,
wish I had whiskey
and a shotgun.
Cheerleaders

On the crowded high-school floor, a teenage girl stands to the right of center court beside the studio piano, wheeled from the choir room for the occasion. Before her, stand twenty-or-so other students she will direct. Their somber faces, white shirts, dark skirts, and pants, blur with the worn blue paperback hymnals they clutch. She blinks to with the unfamiliar shaped notes, erase the floral-against-metal backdrop, shove aside the awful burden of orchestrating this choral farewell. The piano plays the introductory chords of "Farther Along," and the girl raises her arm for the down beat.

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Sue Mills and I were not close friends. For one thing, when I was a senior, Sue was only a sophomore. We were just a year apart, age-wise, but, where school was concerned, I'd been an early starter and she, a late bloomer. My name appeared regularly on the honor roll, without the company of hers. She attracted boys; I accepted responsibilities. When we competed for the same babysitting job one summer, neither of us was surprised when I won.

Sue's family didn't attend either of the two churches in our small town, which assured our placement in different social circles. Her father ran a service station; mine pastored the Baptist church. On Halloween, I bobbed for apples in the church basement, while Sue, no doubt, snuggled at the drive-in with a boy my mother considered much too old for her. That her parents allowed their only daughter to date a boy four years older--the same age as her brother--was a frequent topic of conversation among her peers and their parents. But no one described Sue as "fast"; no one doubted her innocence. In fact, she and I shared many of the same friends. And our love of cheerleading.

These bonds drew Sue and me together the August before my senior year when, for hours at a time, we joined four friends to exercise and choreograph and synchronize our bodies into a single, jumping, cheering unit. Sue and three others were veterans. Only Donna Johnson and I faced the scrutiny and vote of the student body for the first time. Donna was a freshman and I, a converted optimist. "You've always wanted to be a cheerleader," my confidants encouraged, "and this is your last chance. You're popular and everybody knows you. Go for it!"

What they said was true. In our small high school, I'd led clubs, edited the newspaper and, as student council vice-president, often presided at school assemblies. Yet, recognition for those activities was precisely the reason I had never tried out for cheerleader. I feared type-casting. Most of the cheerleaders were described as cute, rather than responsible--or athletic. I was neither. But my friends offered assistance, expertise and influence, a beguiling combination. I signed on for a month of training.

In the muggy August twilight, we struggled and sweated and shouted together, until the grass, slippery with dew, threatened injury. We rotated from backyard to backyard and sometimes spent the night together. Sue and one other girl had steady boyfriends, but those relationships yielded ground to our immediate goal: becoming winning cheerleaders. After dark, as we lunged on someone's back porch or huddled in Phyllis Stacy's storm cellar, we gossiped, swapped secrets and spun golden futures of romance, marriage, motherhood. Sue's desire to marry
Miller Gilliland seemed no more fervent or urgent than my goal to date the captain of the basketball team. As night faded to morning, all fantasies seemed equally unattainable.

In the September cheerleader election, four of our six candidates won. Donna Johnson and I were also-rans. Probably because she realized that I would have no future opportunities to make cheerleader and might be crushed by the results, Miss Clayton, the cheerleading sponsor, broke the news of my non-win privately. "You only lost by a few votes," she consoled, "If one of the girls decides not to cheer, or becomes ineligible, you're next on the list." Resenting the proffered crumbs, I spurned false hope.

After that, I seldom saw Sue Mills—without a common goal, we had little need for each other's companionship—so I was surprised when, one mid-October morning, her voice summoned me from the crowded hallway. Sue stood in the doorway to the principal's office, balancing a heavy stack of books on one hip. She wore shorts, appropriate for the mild weather but unacceptable at our school, and a jack-o-lantern grin. "I won," she gloated. "My parents caved in. I'm quitting school to get married." Miller's class ring rode the chain between her breasts. "You and Irene are the only people I've told," she confided, as though we shared more than a one-month friendship.

If she told me the specifics of her plans, I was too flabbergasted to recall them. I remember thinking that she was barely sixteen years old, wondering how she sold that scheme to her parents when mine wouldn't even agree to a puppy. We may have hugged but, with that load of books probably not. The tardy bell was ringing when Miller joined us, and I must have said goodbye or good luck, something, before I hurried to English. Later I wished I'd asked lots of questions, probed for details, delayed Sue a full twenty minutes. But I didn't.

Irene and I may have been the first people Sue told about her victory, but as the day sped by, we didn't appear to be the last. Maybe someone from Miller's family spilled the news. At any rate, talk of the young lover's ping-ponged from one lunch table to another. At my table, the topic coupled with speculation about who would fill the cheerleading vacancy. I thought I'd abandoned that dream, but Miss Clayton's promise gave life to the illusion. "If one of the girls decides not to cheer...you're next..." Pride fought hope. Had the sponsor revealed the vote tally to anyone but me? I had told no one. Would she remember our conversation? Had she spoken truth, or merely grabbed up words of comfort close at hand?

Sixth period, Irene and I were in office practice when Miss Clayton came to the door. Her face was colorless as she crooked a beckoning finger. I forced back the wave of yearning that surged to my face and only thought the words Irene spoke. "Me?" she asked? "You want me?" Miss Clayton nodded and Irene, the cheerleading captain, crossed the room and stepped into the hall. Afraid to hope, I bent to copy brief forms into my steno notebook, forcing would-be squiggles into uniform characters. Then the keening—a shrill, unearthly glissando—stilled my pencil, caught the air in my lungs and, finally, propelled me into the corridor. There, curious teenagers spilled from the library and the math class two doors down. The office practice girls huddled behind me in the doorway. Wary, apprehensive, they peered around the door where, in its shadow, Irene crouched against the wall. She was bent nearly double her arms clenched tightly around her waist. Tears dripped from her chin.

I never thought of Sue when I saw Irene's face. Pure instinct put my arm around her shoulders as she rocked back and forth, wailing relentlessly. I tried to sort through Miss Clayton's litany for the grieving, make a sentence of Irene's fractured speech, "train... Sue Miller... smashed
to pieces . . . no, no . . ." But anticipation would not give way to reality. Not for a while.

Some of us went together to the funeral home in Sikeston. We stood in line all the way up the steps, then filed by the families, and the caskets, in adjoining rooms. Sue’s picture was on her coffin. She wore her cheerleading uniform and that gummy grin.

Later, after the funeral, when the folding chairs that stretched across the gym in rows had been stacked on carts and trundled away. After the framed photographs had been removed to TV-top shrines. After the gladioli and carnations and roses blanketed what someone’s minister called a "final resting place." After I’d led the choir and followed the caskets and stood by the graves. After all that, I became a cheerleader.

Reunion

I’ve been a waitress down at Charlie’s Steak House for going on five years now. It’s a pretty good place to eat, considering there isn’t much else besides Druthers and the Tastee Freez. My best friend, Shirlene, told me that she heard McDonald’s was coming to town in a few months. Boy, will that set everybody to talking. I just can’t imagine our hick town with a McDonald’s of its own. Next thing you know old Ronald himself just might be paying us a visit. My kid, Joey, sure would love that.

Anyway, I’ve been working night shift Tuesday through Saturday down at Charlie’s since I graduated from Monroe County High School five years ago. I still remember the night I graduated. I was pregnant with Joey, but my belly hadn’t started to pop yet, so I wore shorts and a T-shirt under my royal blue gown, with my white high-heeled pumps and no hose. My legs looked pretty good because I’d been skipping school to go to the lake for two weeks before graduation, and my hair was even starting to bleach out a little. I knew that Jimmy just couldn’t wait to get me out of that cap and gown and in the back seat of his car—he had already told me to meet him in the parking lot right after the ceremony.

That night was hot; isn’t it always hot on graduation? There were thunderclouds coming down over the hills and the air was so sticky you could barely breathe. I remember standing in line with the rest of the H’s and listening to the school band warming up with a few bad notes and a lot of talking. Jenna Hickman was behind me in line and I could hear her snuffling and blowing her nose. Jenna always was
a sissy nerd, and stuff like graduation could really make her cry. I didn’t feel a tear anywhere in sight—I never cry except at a really sad movie like The Champ. I never will forget how that little boy looked when his daddy was dying—I used up a whole stack of napkins from the concession stand on that one.

Anyway, I stood in line while everybody else was stirring around in a tizzy because this was the night they had been waiting for all these years and because their parents were out there in the crowd in their Sunday clothes with their cameras from K-Mart ready to "capture the moment." But I knew that my father was lying down in the Oddfellows Cemetery and that Mom was lying on the couch watching Knots Landing with her ceramic coffee mug shaped like a cat with a tail for the handle half full of Sparkling Blush Wine Cooler. I almost hadn’t even come to the ceremony, but then I thought, "Why not? I deserve it after all these years with Mr. Baldwin for home room."

Besides, Jimmy and I, and everybody else, were going to Pete Shelton’s father’s trailer at the lake for the weekend and I wanted to be there when the line of cars started off in the dark with coolers of beer in the trunk and every girl’s version of a bathing suit scrunched up in her suitcase along with her tampons, deodorant spray, and tooth brush.

Finally the band had started in playing that song they always play at graduation that usually makes the parents cry and the kids nervous. I remember walking into the gym in my pumps. I didn’t look at the audience or at the stage, or anywhere except at Brian Henry’s tassel swinging along in front of me because I suddenly realized just how slick the floor of the gym was and I suddenly remembered that my white pumps had never been worn since I ended up wearing the pink ones to Prom. Somehow I made it to my seat without falling down, but then all I could do was sit there and worry about how I was ever going to get up on stage, back down those rickety steps, and all the way back to my seat without making a total fool of myself. Jenna just kept blowing her nose and finally I leaned over and growled, "Would you please keep your snot to yourself?"

She just started to cry harder and I looked down at my shoes. Scrunched down in those little points my toes had started to swell, and I could feel that sweat sticking my thighs together. I uncrossed my legs and waved the program in front of my face.

I don’t remember too much about the ceremony. The Glee Club sang a couple of corny songs about the past and the future, or memories, or something like that. Some old guy from Kiwanis barked and coughed through a speech about responsibility and civic duty, and then the valedictorians gave their speeches. Missy Hendrickson, who had been in my home room, was the first. She said something about thanking her parents, her Mamaw and Papaw, her brothers and sister, and her church. Then she started choking up when she thanked her "special friend," Cynthia, for all her love and support. I hated Missy and Cynthia--always had since we were in the fifth grade and they came to school dressed alike with the same color ribbons in their hair--and I didn’t listen too much. The other valedictorian was James Thomas Scott and when he stood up to talk I listened.

I had known James Thomas since first grade. His father was president of the bank and James Thomas was the oldest of four kids. He was beautiful even then, with big brown eyes and thick black hair. Mama always said he looked like a little gypsy, but I thought he was perfect. I had a crush on him until the day in the fourth grade when he started liking Missy and gave her his I.D. bracelet.

From that day on I decided to forget James Thomas Scott and move on to better things. We never had much to say to each other anyway—really, we never had even said one
word to each other. But I decided to throw him over, and so began my long and energetic career with the boys of my town.

But the night of graduation I was leaning forward in my seat to hear what James Thomas had to say about the members of the Class of 1979.

"Fellow students, friends, and colleagues, why are we here tonight? Yes, we have completed twelve long years of school together, but has any one of us truly contemplated what this accomplishment means? Most of us can read and write, do a little math, perhaps make a Plaster of Paris sculpture or build a bird feeder. We’ve played ball together, sung songs together, and ridden around in cars together. But are we really ready for life and what it has in store for us? Are we really prepared for the pitfalls that await us, for the decisions that must be made? Finally, can we see through and around the lies that we have believed all these years to the truth, to the blank and gaping truth that life is merely a blink of time through which we pass and that too many of us will do too little with our one, solitary little blink? I leave you tonight with the words of a song that we have shared:

'Don’t hang on.
Nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky.
It slips away.
All your money won’t another minute buy.
Dust in the wind.
All we are is dust in the wind.'

And then I started to cry, I mean really cry, and I didn’t think I would ever stop crying until every drop of water in my whole entire body had run out and I would still be crying with my eyes squeezed shut and my hand wrapped around a Kleenex I had grabbed from Jenna Hickman.

That was the last time I had seen James Thomas Scott. I had heard through the grapevine that he had gone off to some really good private school somewhere in the south and that he was going to be a doctor or lawyer, or something like that. But you know when you don’t leave home after high school all those people just sort of fade together into one blurry memory, one fuzzy lump of bodies and melted together smiles that you can’t really figure out, voices that you can’t forget but whose names you can’t remember. Until one day when somebody comes in and sits down at Station #16, which just happens to be your station, and when you go to take their order they look up and say, "Well, hello Joanne. I haven’t seen you in ages--I guess the last time was graduation. God, that must have been five years ago by now!" And I looked across my order pad into the murky black eyes of a James Thomas Scott who had somehow become a movie star.

You know how some people just seem to wear their lives better than others? Well, James Thomas was doing a pretty damn good job wearing his. He looked like that guy that used to play on Falcon Crest, only not so sissified pretty. I mean, those eyes of his that I had noticed all the way back in first grade had only gotten bigger, and the had a new look. I couldn’t figure it out at first, but later on I realized that it was experience and a little sadness mixed up together with a touch of something funny to lighten it all up. His shoulders looked like they were about ten miles wide, and when he smiled I really thought my heart would stop. He always had one of those smiles you can see from one end of a football field to the other, and it looked like he meant it. I was so flabbergasted I just about had to take a chair.

Finally I opened up my mouth and tried to talk. "Well, James Thomas, I sure never thought I’d see you in Charlie’s. How’s everything going?"
And so we started talking about all that crap people always talk about when they haven’t seen each other in ages and never really talked much anyway, but suddenly they feel like they’re supposed to act like old friends. I kept moving back and forth on my feet, mainly because the backs of my legs were hurting, but also because I was all of a sudden so jiggly nervous inside. I couldn’t believe he could still get to me after all those years, but he sure did.

Well, we spent about five minutes catching up—James Thomas had graduated from some little private school with a degree in History or Political Science or something like that and he was going to law school at Vanderbilt. He had been working since he graduated in some big, ritzy law office in downtown Nashville, but he really wanted to move to Atlanta after he finished school. And he was engaged to a girl named Michelle Swanson, somebody he had met at college who had moved to Nashville to be with him. She worked for a big store, buying clothes and jewelry. I had never thought about people getting paid to buy stuff for stores, but I guess somebody has to do it. I just figured a little common sense would be enough to get paid to go shopping for shirts and jeans. I think I could do a better job than whoever’s doing it for K-Mart.

"So, Joanne, what have you been doing with yourself?" I knew he would ask and I just shrugged my shoulders. "Well, I’ve got a kid now—his name’s Joey and he’s a real little stinker. It takes everything I’ve got just trying to keep him in line. And I’ve been working here at Charlie’s ever since that summer after we graduated. Charlie’s pretty good to me and I make good tips. Besides, he always lets me off whenever I ask, if there’s something else I want to do."

"That’s good." He nodded and glanced back down at the menu.

"Oh--I guess you’d probably like to order something to eat, wouldn’t you?" I got my order pad up and ready.

"Yeah. What’s good tonight?" He was reading up and down the menu like there was really a lot to see. Charlie has had the same food for as long as I can remember: steaks, chicken, pork chops, with baked potato or fries, a little lettuce with a slice or two of radish in a fake wood bowl with bottled dressing, and a couple of soggy rolls.

"Well, I always get the T-bone myself, but some people really like the sirloin better. Of course, the New York Strip is pretty good, too." I really do like all the steaks at Charlie’s, no matter how many times I eat there. I guess I’m just a steak kind of girl. Mama always did say I was too big for my britches when it came to eating--I usually turned up my nose at her suppers and said I wanted something better, not just different but better.

James Thomas mulled it over for a few seconds and then decided on the T-bone, medium rare, with Blue Cheese dressing on his salad, and iced tea to drink. I ran back to the kitchen with the order and fell into the chair Charlie keeps just inside the door.

"What the hell’s wrong with you? You look like you’ve been running a race or something."

Charlie’s face was its usual shiny red and his right hand was flopping steaks around on the grill while his left shook out a basket of fries. He was old enough to be my dad, but he always made a point of trying to flirt with me every night. It was sort of our rule--he would flirt and I would push him off. I don’t think he ever expected to get anywhere. It was just something to pass the time.

"Oh, there’s a guy I went to high school with out there. Remember James Thomas Scott? His dad’s president over at Farmer’s National."

"Hell yeah, I remember him. I remember watching him play basketball back when we almost made it to State. Yeah, he was good with the ball. Too bad he quit playing.
I always did think he might put Monroe county on the map."

"Well, he's at Station #16 and I don't think I can walk back out there. I've known him since first grade and I used to have kind of a thing for him. And now he's out there and he wants a T-bone."

"Aw, Joanne, you just sashay your cute little fanny right back out there and slap down this big glass of iced tea right in front of him. He's nobody special, even if he did win District for us. You just remember that. And here's his salad. You just march right back out here." Charlie always was good at telling it like it is. I picked up the iced tea glass, the fake wood salad bowl and the basket of crackers, and pushed through the kitchen doors with my chin up.

Did you ever see Love, American Style? Well, when I was a kid I always watched that show at 9:00 on Friday nights. Mama never cared what time I went to bed, especially on Friday when she played bingo, and it was my favorite TV night. Anyway, what happened next could have come straight out that show. I marched right over to James Thomas and was just about to set his stuff sown when something happened to my feet and next thing you know my ankles got all tangled up and I started to fall right into the table. James Thomas jumped up and grabbed my arm just in time to keep me from banging into the furniture, but all that iced tea and chopped up lettuce and little packages of crackers went flying up into the air and came down on his beautiful black head. I thought I would die.

All I could say was "Oh, shit." Then I wished I hadn't said it because I never had heard James Thomas say a dirty word his whole entire life. But he just looked at me and started laughing, the most beautiful, the most real, the most terrific laugh I think I've ever heard and before I knew it I was laughing too, and pretty soon we were just sitting at the table laughing while the lettuce floated in puddles of tea.

What happened next is just that Charlie came out of the kitchen when he heard all the ruckus and he cleaned up all the mess. Then James Thomas and I sat and at T-bones together because Charlie told me to go ahead and take the rest of the night off. I know that was about the best T-bone old Charlie ever cooked me, and my fries weren't bad either. I cleaned my plate right up and drank down every last drop of my iced tea while James Thomas told me about college and all those classes he had taken. Then he told me about law school and why he wanted to be a lawyer--but I couldn't really concentrate for looking at his face and watching his mouth.

When I did finally decide to say something I just opened up my big mouth and put my foot right in, nice and comfortable. "Why in the world did you ever like Missy Hendrickson? I always thought she was the biggest fake I'd ever seen."

I just blurted it out and then I wished I could take it back, because James Thomas gave me the funniest look. I knew he wondered why in the world I was talking about something that had happened about fourteen years ago and that he probably never even knew I knew. But just as I was going to say something, try to cover up what I'd already started, James Thomas cleared his throat and looked down into his coffee cup.

"Well, Joanne, that's a fair assessment. I really am not sure what I saw in her, unless it was her blonde ponytail and the way she always giggled whenever I was around. I can't believe you even remember that--it's such ancient history I'd almost forgotten it myself. One thing's for sure, I never thought too much about her after elementary school. But I always thought you were too busy with your personal harem to notice."

"I was just thinking about the other day. I saw her
downtown at the courthouse when I went to get new tags for my car and I remembered the way she and Cynthia always were like jointed at the hip or something. Remember that? And you and Chad Wilson were usually pretty close behind."

"Yeah, I guess we did hang pretty close to them back in those days. But hell give a guy a break, okay? I was just a kid myself--all I knew was that all the other guys thought she was great so I thought I was supposed to think so, too. We were just kids, so I guess you can hardly fault me for following the pack just a little. You know how kids that age are--always afraid somebody might notice they're a little different or something."

"Yeah, I guess so. But I never did like her, even back then. I guess maybe it was just woman's intuition or something. I guess I just thought you deserved better than her."

"Well, I appreciate that Joanne. But that was so long ago I really don't remember too much about those years. What I remember is the way you had every guy in town panting after you all through high school. I guess you went out with about everybody in the county, didn't you? I know it seemed like you always had about 15 or 20 hanging around you locker in the morning before school started, and I don't guess you ever had to walk anywhere either. Seems to me you were pretty well stocked with your selection of dates. Am I right?"

"Yeah, well, let's just say I learned pretty early what guys like and how to make them curious. I guess you thought I was some kind of slut or something." I looked right at him to see the expression in his eyes. He looked right back at me and didn't even flinch when he heard the word.

"No Joanne, I figured you were doing the best you could, just like the rest of us. I always thought high school was a pretty shitty time of life and that we all just get through it so we can grow up and find out who we've turned out to be."

I sat there for a minute and then I said, "So, who have you turned out to be?"

James Thomas grinned to himself, sort of a half grinning that was more sad than happy. "You tell me. I thought four years of college and living away from this town and my father's total eclipse of a shadow might make a difference, but I've found out that it really hasn't. I'm still the Scott boy who always did what was right, who never quite fit in but who everybody thought was somebody. And now I'm going to be a lawyer, maybe even a judge some day. But if I was really honest I couldn't even tell you why. Sound pretty pitiful, don't I? I don't really feel sorry for myself. I figure if I haven't gotten a handle on life by now, it's my own fault and nobody else's." He paused for a long time, and then he said, "And who have you turned out to be, Miss Popularity of 1979? Still got'em lining up after all these years?"

I started to crack a joke about just hitting my stride, but all of a sudden I was afraid I was going to cry. James Thomas was looking at me and I could feel his eyes burning into me, and all I could do was swallow real hard and sort of smile at him. Then I screwed my stomach up into a know and said, "No, I don't. I'm sure I could if I wanted to make the effort but I just don't care any more. Besides I got sick of the same old lines, the same old shit, time after time. I guess I finally decided I deserve better than that."

Then we just sat there and nobody said a word for what seemed like a really long time. I could hear Charlie banging around in the kitchen, straightening up his grill and throwing a couple of skillets into a drawer. The only other people left in the whole place was Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins, a
little old couple who come in every Saturday night and who are always the last to leave because they like to drink about three cups of coffee with their apple pie. The table felt sticky under my arm, so I wet my napkin in my water glass and swiped at the iced tea that had dried on my skin. I was just about to get up to leave and head on home when James Thomas sort of grunted to himself and he said, "Are you doing anything tonight? I mean, do you have any plans or do you need to get home for Joey? I thought maybe we could ride around, or drive over to Hartford and see what's on at the movie or something."

All I could think was "So, after all these years one of us is going to get his chance." But I just nodded at James Thomas and said "Okay. That would be nice. My mom will watch Joey until I get home. He's probably in bed by now anyway."

So that's how I came to be riding down Main Street in James Thomas Scott's graduation present, a shiny black sports car with the softest butter-colored seats I'd ever sat on. All the kids in the county were out cruising around the square and mainly we just sat looking at the bumper on the pick-up in front of us. Finally James Thomas said, "Let's get out of this mess, okay? I'm not exactly in the mood to watch all these kids running around like hamsters on a wheel."

"Fine with me." I never had cared much for cruising, even in high school--it seemed like such a big waste of time. All those people in all those cars, never going anywhere, just breathing in exhaust and checking themselves out in the rear view mirror. The ones that made me laugh were the three girls who always crammed themselves into the front seat, even if one of them had to straddle the gear shift. You could always see them singing real loud with the radio and the girl on the outside propped one arm up on the edge of the window so you could see her cigarette. And you could smell their three different kinds of cheap perfume that laid on top of each other until the air in that car was enough to choke a mule. So I was kind of relieved when James Thomas headed his car, which drove like a newly broken horse on a tight rein, out towards the little league ball park.

I was a great night---one of those night in early spring before the heat gets so bad you want to die and before you feel like you're driving in smog even though you live in the country because there's so much water hanging in the air. The honeysuckle was out and I could smell it. That smell makes my stomach tight and I get all sad inside, I guess the way people who get homesick feel when they see or smell something they haven't been around in a long time and it makes them hurt because they miss it so much. When I was a kid I used to burrow my way into a big thicket of it and stay in there until Mama made me come in, and even then I could smell it because I wouldn't wash my face before I went to bed so it would stick to the edges of my nostrils.

The night games were long since over, and the ball park was dark and quiet. There were a couple of cars sitting out on the edge of the gravel, close up to the corn field, which had row after row of new 6-inch plants springing up in the night air. I knew what was going on in those cars--I'd been here enough myself to know that if the car held two couples and no bench seat in front, the driver and his girl had to take one of the dugouts, which really weren't so bad. At least then you almost felt like you were in a room instead of bouncing around in a car that had bad shocks and bald tires. I wondered why James Thomas had driven out here--this had never seemed his type of thing--and then I just figured he thought I'd be more comfortable on my home turf.

"Let's get out and sit on the bleachers for a while. It's too nice to stay in the car." James Thomas opened his door
and headed around to my side of the car. He opened the door and then bowed real low, like something Jimmy Stuart would do in one of those old movies, and I almost reached out to touch his hair before he straightened up and grinned at me. I held my hand close to my side and just grinned back, but I knew just how his hair would have felt under my fingers.

We crunched across the gravel and climbed onto the bleachers. James Thomas wanted to sit on the very top one, so I followed him up. The metal was slick with dew and I thought I might fall again, but I managed to stay balanced and I sat down beside him. We sat looking out at the field as if there really was a game going on. James Thomas scrutinized each base and he held his hand over his eyes as he gazed into the outfield. Then he looked towards the pitcher's mound, put his hands around his mouth and hollered, "Strike him out! Three up, three down! This guy's a loser--he hits like his mama!"

I played along with him, banging my feet on the bleachers and yelling, "Hey, batter batter batter batter batter! You can't hit--your mama hits the ball better than you, you big sissy! You don't even deserve to wear the uniform. Get off the field." It had been a long time since I had been to a baseball game, but I could almost taste the grit of dust between my teeth as it blew off the dry field, and I could feel my eyes squinting through the late afternoon haze when the sun is a big, orange blob in the sky and the whole earth feels like some dry planet from another solar system. But the night air was cool and the dew was wet and the honeysuckle was sweet, and James Thomas reached out and took my hand.

"Joanne, I'm glad I ran into you tonight. You're exactly what I needed. Lately it seems I don't have any drive or direction, or even any zeal in my life, and you're like a jolt of electricity."

I just looked straight out at the ball field. I could almost see the shadowy shapes of boys slapping their fists into their gloves, their jaws working around a big chew of tobacco and their lips pursed as they spat brown streams into the dust at their feet. I could almost see the catcher squatting behind home plate, his mask pushed back on his sweaty forehead and tufts of hair sticking through the face grid as he threw back the pitcher's practice balls. And I could feel the grinning energy of all those young male bodies as they ran from base to base or crouched to scoop up a grounder. It was a good team, the best team, and I wanted them to win.

Finally I turned my face toward James Thomas. He still held my hand and I looked down at his fingers, then back up toward his eyes. "Well, you might not be able to afford your electric bill if you're not careful. I guess you probably thought I was the same as you high school, but I don't do dug outs anymore, and even the back seat in your fancy car just won't cut it." Then I took my hand away and looked back out towards the game.

"I didn't mean that. God knows, I didn't mean that, of all things. I guess I can understand why you thought that's all I wanted, but you're wrong. I'm not doing a very good job of saying what I mean."

I really wasn't listening too good to James Thomas--the game was taking all my attention. It was two outs, two balls, and two strikes at the bottom of the fifth and my team was at bat. My favorite, the short stop, was up, and I just stared at him as hard a I could, trying to force him into hitting one out. And wouldn't you know it, he did, and the team went wild. This was my team--they were all young and strong and stronghearted and I knew they would win. They were the way boys were supposed to be and I wanted to run onto the field and kiss them all.

"James Thomas, I know what you're trying to say."

"I didn't mean..."
Let's drop it okay? Like I told you, I've heard all the lines before and nothing you can say will sound any better or get you any further. To tell you the truth, if you'd taken me somewhere besides here you might have had a chance, but for some reason I just don't want to any more. So, if you want to leave, it's all right with me."

He just sat there and stared at me--I'd seen the look a thousand times before--like he couldn't believe he was getting the shaft by me, the girl who'd been had by every guy in Monroe County. I stood up and climbed down off the bleachers and waited for him to follow me. But he just sat there and looked down at me. Then he said, "You're wrong you know. But I guess you're too blind, or too stubborn, or too damn scared to know it. I wanted to talk more, I like the way you put things together and the way ideas come out of your mouth. Can't you understand that? I mean, I wanted to ask you what you thought about things. I'm sorry if you thought I was just being a horny jerk."

"Yeah, well, I like talking to you, too, James Thomas. But I guess you just better head on back to Nashville." I walked across the parking lot and got in the car. When I slammed the door it made a quiet thud and the inside of the car was muffled and quiet. I felt like I'd climbed into a padded cell and I rolled the window down to let in some of the night.

James Thomas came to the car and got in. He started the engine and threw gravel behind the back tires as he gunned it out of the parking lot. We didn't talk all the way back to town, and even the sight of all those brainless cruisers still at it left us speechless. Finally we got to Mama's house and I put my fingers on the slick, metallic door handle.

"Joanne . . . " James Thomas started to say something but I interrupted him.

"James Thomas, if there's one thing I've learned it's
Dream of Stephen

he came to my dream like a nightmare:
battle-bruised,
courage-clobbered, but
painstakingly real
in the back seat of that old heap
that he ran from. . . .
ran over and over in my mind.
when his face was just a blur and his chest caved in and I thought
I could see the thoughts in his mind
as they ran in no particular order--it's the drug,
I thought, it'll do that to you sometimes.
it will make him cry,
cry like a baby to go home,
and I cried,
cried oh baby come back.
but the last shot was fired,
and
it
hit
its
mark--
the heart.
so he ran; even wounded he
stuck his thumb out,
with high hopes,
high, high hopes,
waiting for the car that would
take him home to Father, home to my dreams, my nightmares, my ghost-gripping, tear-trafficked sleep that we live in. . . .
It's only a dream, it's only a dream and I remember him saying it could be.

You, through a liplick, smile, and your breath sticks long in the frigid air. Snowcrunch and icesmack hard under footsteps of peril, in boots made to tread Up to the hillslides, down on anything plastic or metal or smooth. If only your warm eyes could defrost my fingers where smokestack smoke lingers in effort, but too cold to move. And days and days later when the air is no longer reminder of your inner warmth, and the snowman's fat shape has wittled,
they say.

"he sweat off a couple of pounds,"

I remember life as suspended
by vast and white-winded
snow
that knew no bounds.

John Broyles

YAK

The yak has gone behind the mountain.
Even the monkeys have been struck dumb.
The only sound is the heavy black hiss
Of an emptying icy river
And the steady moan of stars
As they gather and mourn and collapse.

In city rooms
People laugh about nothing much
And read books without reading the same line
over and over.
In time you'll nestle in my constellations
and i will be like them.

In the rapids
The current rolled a tomboy on its tongue
Like a small and curious fruit.
You jumped from that boat
Into my imagination.

Well, i left you on those babbling streets
To hawkers of hash and cheap violins,
And staggered sick across the world
With you inside my coat.
Lost and lonely in familiar land once more
You slip into my night sky . . .

I navigate by your memory.
Parking Lot Trees

The wind that could bear your seeds across a graveyard of synthetic debris, has long since caught and strangled in chain link fences and tinted windows.

The Rendering

Maydeene lifted the stick of beech wood with her right hand and laid it atop the piece of oak already in the cradle of her left arm. She carried the wood to the wheelbarrow and placed it with the other. Surveying the load, she returned to the woodpile to search for two pieces of hickory large enough to hold the fire through the night. The wind whipped her blonde hair around her face and into her gray eyes. She impatiently brushed back her hair and continued to rummage through the wood. There was no hickory, and she settled for two pieces of ash not as large as she needed, but if she stoked the fire well tonight, it would hold until early morning.

Elaine held the back door open for her mother as she carried an arm load of wood into the kitchen. Maydeene dropped the wood onto the linoleum rug beside the black iron stove. She grabbed a drying rag from the counter and covered the large hole in her right glove, then reached for the handle on the stove. The fire was low but there were still plenty of hot coals that would easily ignite smaller pieces of wood. She chose sticks of oak. They were seasoned and would catch more quickly. She lined them horizontally on the grate, making sure each piece fit tightly against the next. She closed the heavy, black door and opened the draft. The fire would catch quickly now.

"Is Billy asleep?"

"Uh huh. I took my blanket and put it on him so he'd stay warm." Elaine was five. Her words were much older. Her soft, blonde hair was unbrushed today. She wore a red and navy plaid jumper, which had looked nice on her
eight-year-old cousin, but dwarfed her small frame. She carried a tablet given to her by her grandmother on which she had been printing her name and those of her family.

"How do you spell grandmother? I want Mamaw to see how I can write her name when she comes over tonight."

"Do you want to spell grandmother or Mamaw?"

"They're the same aren't they?"

"Well, Mamaw is your grandmother's name--not really her name, but what you call her."

"I know. Dorthy May is her real name. That's where your name comes from--May-deene."

"That's right. Now, which one do you want to spell, grandmother or Mamaw?"

"Dorthy. I want to spell Dorthy."

Maydeene hesitated, then decided it wasn't worth the argument. "D-o-r-t-h-y," she spelled.

As Elaine carefully printed each letter, Maydeene scanned the cluttered kitchen. Billy's diapers and tee shirts hung from a make-shift clothes line strung from the handle of a cabinet to a nail at the top of the door frame.

Maydeene felt the diapers. They were dry. She pulled them from the line. she decided to leave the tee shirts for a few more minutes by the fire. That would take most of the dampness out of them.

"Here. Fold these," Maydeene said, holding out the armful of diapers to Elaine.

"Just a minute, Momma. I've got one more letter."

Elaine printed the y then took the diapers and spread them on the kitchen table.

"No, not there," Maydeene said. "I've got to get this mess cleaned up before your grandmother gets here. Take them into my bedroom."

"But Billy's asleep in there."

"Then be very quiet."

Reluctantly, Elaine gathered the diapers and headed into the adjoining room. Maydeene filled a large kettle with water and put it on the iron stove to heat. The water heater had gone out the month before and there hadn't been money enough to repair it. Maydeene's husband, Joe, had helped Sam Young in his corn and tobacco crops this past summer and early fall. That work, along with most of what they had put back to live on, had played out. Today, Joe was helping their landlord, Tom Justice.

Tom always had plenty of odd jobs around his farm that needed doing, but Joe had become a little reluctant to take any of them since Tom never paid by the hour, but rather by what he thought the job was worth. Last spring, Joe had painted Tom's old tobacco barn. The weathered lumber had soaked up the black paint, so it took Joe a couple more days to finish the job than expected. Tom was more than a little put out at the whole ordeal, so he had decided to split the cost of the job between Joe and Sherwin Williams. Joe got forty-five dollars for his near week's work.

The weather had turned colder this week and Tom had decided that today was the day to render that hog he'd been fattening all winter. Joe had left before daylight this morning to help him.

"How much do you think Tom's going to pay you?"

Maydeene had asked hesitantly.

"I don't know if he'll pay me anything, Deenie. We're behind on the rent you know. I kind of feel obligated to help him."

"I know. I just thought maybe he'd give you something...some sausage or something."

"Maybe. We'll see." Joe had hurriedly filled his coffee thermos, grabbed his cheese sandwich and was out the door and in the pickup before Maydeene could say more.

Steam rising from the big kettle on the stove caught Maydeene's eye. She filled the dish pan in the sink with hot water and added just enough water from the faucet to
keep from scalding her hands. She raked scraps of food from the plates into a small pan and placed the dirty dishes in the dish pan.

"Ela...," she started, then hesitated and picked up the pan of scraps herself and went out the back door and into the yard. "Penny! Blackie!" she called. A brown and white collie and a part setter, part labrador, part anybody's guess came bounding around the corner of the house. Maydeene dropped the scraps of egg and toast onto small plastic lids lying on the ground. She knelt and stroked Blackie's thick, black fur as he and Penny gulped down their food.

"I know it's not much, guys, but maybe Joe will bring some meat home for supper. If he does, I promise I'll share it with you."

Penny nudged at Maydeene's free hand for her share of the affection. Maydeene ran her fingers through the silky hair under Penny's jaw, patted her head, then gathered her pan and went back into the house.

"Billy's awake!" Elaine shouted over the baby's cries.

"Alright. I'll fix a bottle and you can feed him while I cook supper." Maydeene took what was left of the formula from the refrigerator. She poured the three ounces into the bottle and finished filling it with whole milk. She dipped water from the steaming kettle into a smaller pan and partially submerged the bottle, turning it with her hand just long enough to knock off the chill. She lifted the bottle from the water, reached into a drawer for a clean rag and dried the water from the bottle as she walked into the bedroom.

"How's my Billy?" Maydeene asked as she lifted the six-month-old from his crib. "You're soaked, that's how you are," she answered herself. "Elaine, hand me two diapers, please, and run and get me a wet wash rag."

Maydeene removed the wet diapers from Billy's bottom and dropped them on the floor by the crib. Elaine returned with the wash rag and two diapers, then held her hands over her ears as she watched her mother clean and re-diaper her still-crying younger brother. Maydeene wrapped the baby in Elaine's blanket and placed the rubber nipple into his mouth. Silence was instantaneous.

"Let's go into the kitchen where it's warm. You can feed him in there," Maydeene said.

Elaine sat down in a wooden chair near the stove. Maydeene carefully placed Billy in her arms. "Now hold him up a little so he won't get too much air, she cautioned.

"I know. I know," Elaine assured her.

Maydeene returned to the dish pan. Most of the dried egg had loosened itself from the plates, which sped the washing process. She decided to let the dishes drain instead of drying them so she could get started on supper.

"What's for supper?" Elaine asked.

"Fried potatoes, pinto beans and cornbread," Maydeene answered while peeling potatoes.

"That's what we had last night."

"Well, that's what we're having again tonight. Fried potatoes, pinto beans and cornbread--the sequel."

Maydeene smiled and waited for the question.

"What's a sequel?"

"Something that follows something. It's like the first thing, but it comes after the first thing. It's like something that happens again and sometimes again and again. Understand?"

"I guess so, but I'm tired of the sequel."

"Yeah, so am I, little girl. So am I." Maydeene dropped the potatoes into the hot grease. "Daddy's helping Mr. Justice render a hog today. Maybe we'll have some sausage to go with our sequel. If he gets home before..."

"He's done," Elaine broke in. "Finished every drop."

She held up the bottle triumphantly. "That's a good boy,
Bill y. Now you can watch me write your name. Would you like that?" Elaine asked, rubbing her nose from side to side against the baby's nose. Billy smiled a yes, and Elaine started from her chair.

"Just a minute, Elaine. I'll get a quilt and make a pallet on the floor. You two can play in here where it's warm," Maydeen removed the quilt from her bed, rubbed her hand across the points of the large Star of Bethlehem pattern that her grandmother had pieced for her, and returned to the kitchen. She spread the quilt in front of the cabinets, away from the iron stove. She laid the baby on the quilt, but stopped Elaine before she could curl up beside him.

"Change your clothes and brush your hair before you get too involved with Billy. I want you to look nice when your Mamaw gets here."

"But this is my only clean dress," Elaine protested.

"I know, but it's two sizes too big for you. You have a pair of jeans and that pink sweat shirt that's clean. Put that on."

"But I want to look pretty."

"OK. OK. Just brush your hair."

Elaine pranced into the bedroom and returned a few minutes later, hair brushed and pulled off center into a barrette. A large, red stick-on bow, that somehow missed being stored with the other Christmas trimmings, adorned the barrette.

"Nice bow," Maydeen said.

"It matches my dress," Elaine responded proudly, and crawled onto the quilt beside Billy with tablet and pencil in hand.

Maydeen stirred the potatoes and lifted the lid on the pot of beans. She moved a few to one side and ran a fork through them. "OK, those are done. Now, let's see about the cornbread." She opened the oven door and peered in. The cornbread was ready to come out. She placed it on the hotpad beside the stove and pinched off a piece of the crust while she stirred the potatoes. Outside, the two dogs ran from behind the house and began barking in the direction of the main road.

"Maybe it's your Daddy," Maydeen said, pulling back the curtain over the sink and straining to see down the driveway. "No. It's your grandmother. She's early."

Maydeen nervously pulled Billy's tee shirts off the clothes line and quickly untied it from the cabinet. She let the loose end fall beside the door frame. She carried the shirts to her bedroom, tossed them onto the bed, and returned to the kitchen.

The white Buick pulled up beside the house and parked. A heavy-set woman wearing a black wool coat, black pumps and carrying a matching handbag emerged. She carefully picked her way around patches of mud to the front door. Elaine had opened it before she could knock.

"Mamaw!" Elaine cried.

"How's my girl?" Maydeen's mother bent low enough for Elaine to hug her neck.

"Look, Mamaw. I wrote your name." Elaine was holding the list she had made earlier. Mrs. Hudson looked at the line marked by her granddaughter's finger.

"Maydeen, do you realize how smart your daughter is? She spelled my name. Most children Elaine's age wouldn't even know their grandmothers' names, let alone how to spell them."

"Yes, I realize how smart she is. Now, come on in, we're heating the whole outdoors."

Mrs. Hudson walked through the tiny living room and into the kitchen where she deposited her handbag on the table. "I can't believe you put that baby on the floor as cold as it is," she said, shifting Billy from his place of repose into her arms.

"Here, Mom, let me hold him while you take off your
coat," Maydeene offered. "No, it’s a little nippy in here. I think I’ll keep it on." Mrs. Hudson sat down in the wooden chair near the iron stove, with Billy becoming partially swallowed up in billows of black wool, bosom and grandmotherly eagerness.

"Mamaw will keep you warm, my little man," she cooed into Billy’s disconcerted face. Mrs. Hudson unwrapped the snug, little blanket and re-wrapped the baby tight enough to stave off any sudden shiver or any other reflexive movement. Satisfied that the job at hand had been well taken care of, she turned her attention to Maydeene.

"How’s everybody been? We haven’t seen you in a month."

"We’ve been fine. The kids are fine, I’m fine, Joe’s fine. We’re all just fine."

Maydeene’s mother cut to the chase. "Has Joe found a job yet?"

Maydeene fidgeted with the cloth ring on the hotpad she was holding. "He’s helping Tom Justice render a hog today."

"I mean a real job, Maydeene. I mean a ‘put food in my grandchildren’s mouths’ job."

Maydeene turned around to the skillet of potatoes she had turned off fifteen minutes before and began stirring them again. "No, Mom. He hasn’t found a job, but he’s still looking."

"Maydeene, when are you going to wake up? He might not find a job. Your dad and I have tried to tell you. God knows we’ve tried, but you . . ."

"Joe’s a good man, Mom!" Maydeene turned suddenly to face her mother. Her voice shook under the weight of anger and despair. Her mother, unaccustomed to this tone in her daughter’s voice, softened her approach.

"Maydeene, honey, I know he’s a good man, but good doesn’t pay the rent or put food on the table. I mean, it’s fine for you to want to stand by Joe, but what about Elaine and Billy? They deserve better than to have to play on a cold kitchen floor or run around in clothes that swallow them whole." She tugged at the waist of Elaine’s jumper for emphasis. "Don’t you want better for them than this?"

"Of course I do, Mom. You know I do. It’s just that we’re a family. I just want us to keep being a family."

"Maydeene, it’s like I told you before. You and the kids wouldn’t have to stay with us forever--just long enough for Joe to get back on his feet. You’d have a warm place to stay, plenty to eat and you wouldn’t have to worry about whether you’re going to have a roof over your heads tomorrow or not."

Elaine, taking her cue from her grandmother, turned to Maydeene, "Oh Momma, could we all go live with Mamaw? It’d be so much fun. Could we, please," she begged.

"Not now!" Maydeene’s tone with Elaine was sharper than usual. "I mean, I just don’t think it would be a good idea right now," she added, more softly. Elaine turned and slowly walked to the bedroom. Maydeene’s eyes followed her as she crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Mrs. Hudson rose from her chair and handed her bundled grandson to his mother. "There’s nothing else I can say. You know where we live. You know you’re welcome there. I don’t know what else I can do.

"I don’t expect you to do anything, Mom. I really don’t."

"I know, I know," she said, brushing back a strand of hair that had freed itself from Maydeene’s blue headband. She kissed her daughter on the cheek, picked up her handbag, and walked into the bedroom where Elaine sat
staring out the window.
"Mamaw's got to go now."
"Bye," Elaine said, not turning to look at her grandmother.

Mrs. Hudson hesitated, then turned and made her way to the front door. She stepped into the cold air. Darkness had come early this evening. She walked through the mud she had been able to avoid at dusk, slid into the seat of her white Buick, and pointed her headlights in the direction of home.

Maydeene placed Billy in his crib. He had succumbed to the cotton cocoon and was sleeping peacefully. She walked over to where Elaine was sitting by the window.

"Do you want to eat now?"
"I'm not hungry," Elaine replied, still not turning around.

Maydeene touched the red bow in Elaine's hair. She could see the reflection of her daughter's unresponsive face in the darkened window pane. She stroked her soft hair and walked back into the kitchen. She stared at her own unresponsive face in the window pane over the sink, sat down in the wooden chair by the fire, and cried.

Blackie barked first, then Penny joined him. The familiar sound of Joe's pickup pulling into their back yard soon quieted them both. Maydeene stood up, quickly dried her tears with her fingers, and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her tee shirt. She turned on the two front burners under the potatoes and beans, then decided to move the pot of beans to a smaller back burner. She set a large, black iron skillet on the front burner where the beans had been. She reached into the dish drainer for two plates, and set them on the table. She returned for cups, measured two teaspoons of instant coffee into each, and filled them with steaming water from the kettle.

She opened the back door and peered into the darkness. The light from the kitchen was enough for her to see Joe, still sitting in his truck, his elbows propped on the steering wheel, his face in his hands. Maydeene closed the door, turned off the burners under the food, picked up her coffee, and waited by the kitchen sink.

Fifteen minutes later, the back door opened and Joe entered, wearing blood-spattered coveralls and carrying a large paper bag. Joe didn't look at her. He didn't look at the bag. He just set it down, stared at the floor, then slowly pulled the contents out and onto the table.

Maydeene saw the eyes first--the glassy, dead eyes which stared in no particular direction. Then the ears--the pink, hairless ears. She stared in disbelief at the hog's head on her kitchen table. She looked up at Joe. He still wouldn't meet her gaze. The coffee cup shattered when it hit the metal sink. Maydeene held tight to the counter to steady her exhausted frame. She heard Joe sit down. She turned from the counter and met his eyes. She looked into a glassy deadness, then looked away.

Maydeene felt Elaine's hand on her arm as she rummaged through her bedroom closet.

"What are you looking for, Momma?"
"A suitcase, Elaine."
"Why?"
"We're going to your grandmother's for awhile,"
"Is Daddy going too?"
"Daddy will be taking us, but he won't be staying."
"Why not?"
"I'll explain it to you later. Just trust me and help me get your clothes together without waking Billy."

Joe lifted Elaine into the pickup. Maydeene handed him the baby. "I want to check one more time to make sure we got everything." She went back into the kitchen. A piece of the broken cup had landed on the wood beside the stove. She threw it into the trash can. She picked up the
two pieces of ash, opened the black iron door, and fit them snugly against one another in the fire. She closed the stove door and reached for the light switch. The glassy eyes stared in her direction. She picked up the hog’s head and went out the back door.

"Penny! Blackie!"

Both dogs rounded the house together. Maydeene flung the head by its hairless, pink ears and watched it drop to the frozen ground. The dogs were upon it immediately. She waited for them to rend the flesh around the swine’s eyes, then she stepped up into the pickup and closed her door.

Notes on Contributors

Rebecca Adams is a twenty-one year old senior writing major who has had other works published in Xposure magazine. She recently read a selection of her poetry at the 1995 Sigma Tau Delta national convention in St. Louis.

Deborah Brown is a senior from Morgantown, Kentucky. Her work has previously appeared in Zephyrus. She has also recently read a selection of her poetry at the 1995 Sigma Tau Delta national convention in St. Louis.

Mark L. Brown is a Louisville junior majoring in English and elementary education. He also served as literary editor of Talisman Xposure for 1995.

Patrick Broyles is finishing his degree in English at Western Kentucky University after spending the last two years in Southeast Asia. Currently busy structuring his new America circumstances, he is resisting the urge to flee.

Nicholas Church is a senior broadcast major. He is a member of Phi Delta Theta and Spirit Masters. He hopes to find a job that will allow him to work and eventually retire in Monterey, California.

Doug Fisher graduated from Spalding University with a B.A. in English and is currently enrolled in the M.A. English program at Western Kentucky University. His fiction has also appeared in a recent issue of the 1995 Xposure.

Meghan Leigh Hobbs is a junior from Woodstock, Georgia. She is presently majoring in English/writing, with a journalism education minor. Meghan writes when inspiration hits her in the face.
Cheryl Hughes is in her senior year at Western Kentucky University. Her major is music with emphasis in guitar. She currently resides in Morgantown, Kentucky with her husband and two children.

Susan Lawrence is a senior majoring in writing and Spanish. She lives in Cecilia, Kentucky on her family farm.

Lisa Meyer, a senior advertising major from Nashville, Tennessee, plans to find an enticing position at a well-established ad agency working in the creative department.

Keith Payne is a junior psychology major, with a writing minor, from Owensboro, Kentucky. He also studies art and intends to paint and write while pursuing his doctorate in clinical psychology and beyond.

Portia Pennington is a native of Madisonville, Kentucky. A wife and mother of four children, she is heretofore unpublished; her dream is to have her own book (in hardback) and to win the Academy Award for best original screenplay, but she will settle for getting the laundry done.

Stephanie Pippin is a junior majoring in psychology and is from Old Hickory, Tennessee. Her poetry has been previously published in Zephyrus.

Kathryn M. Spalding is a graduate student and dike-plugger for a husband, three children and a badly-behaved cat. She graduated from Georgetown College, taught high-school English, edited weekly newspapers and has been published by Louisville Magazine.