



Home Draft, as "Frank Money"

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FRANK MONEY

THEY ROSE UP LIKE MEN. WE SAW THEM. LIKE MEN THEY STOOD.

WE SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ANYWHERE NEAR THAT PLACE. LIKE MOST FARMLAND AROUND LOTUS, GEORGIA, WARNING SIGNS WERE PLENTIFUL. IN ADDITION TO THE THREATENING SIGNS, WIRE MESH FENCES WITH WOODEN STAKES EVERY TEN OR SO FEET ENCLOSED THE PROPERTY. BUT WHEN WE SAW A CRAWL SPACE THAT SOME ANIMAL HAD DUG—A COYOTE MAYBE OR A COON DOG—WE COULDN'T RESIST. JUST KIDS WE WERE. THE GRASS WAS SHOULDER HIGH FOR HER AND WAIST HIGH FOR ME SO, LOOKING OUT FOR SNAKES, WE CRAWLED THROUGH IT ON OUR BELLIES. THE REWARD WAS WORTH THE HARM GRASS JUICE AND CLOUDS OF GNATS DID TO OUR EYES, BECAUSE THERE RIGHT IN FRONT OF US, ABOUT FIFTY YARDS OFF, THEY

STOOD LIKE MEN. THEIR RAISED HOOVES CRASHING AND STRIKING, THEIR MANES TOSSING BACK FROM WILD WHITE EYES. THEY BIT EACH OTHER LIKE DOGS BUT WHEN THEY STOOD, REARED UP ON THEIR HIND LEGS, THEIR FOREARMS AROUND THE WITHERS OF THE OTHER, WE HELD OUR BREATH IN WONDER. ONE WAS RUST-COLORED; THE OTHER DEEP BLACK, BOTH SUNNY WITH SWEAT. THE NEIGHS WERE NOT AS FRIGHTENING AS THE SILENCE FOLLOWING A KICK OF HIND LEGS INTO THE LIFTED LIPS OF THE OPPONENT. NEARBY, COLTS AND MARES STOOD ALOOF, LOOKING AWAY. THEN IT STOPPED. THE RUST-COLORED ONE DROPPED HIS HEAD AND PAWED THE GROUND WHILE THE WINNER LOPED OFF IN AN ARC, NUDGING THE MARES BEFORE HIM.

AS WE ELBOWED BACK THROUGH THE GRASS LOOKING FOR THE DUG OUT PLACE, WE LOST OUR WAY. NEITHER OF US PANICKED UNTIL WE HEARD VOICES, URGENT BUT LOW, ON THE YONDER SIDE OF THE FENCING. I GRABBED HER ARM

AND PUT A FINGER TO MY LIPS. NEVER LIFTING OUR HEADS, JUST PEEPING THROUGH THE GRASS, WE SAW THEM PULL A BODY FROM THE BACK OF A MULE AND THROW IT INTO A HOLE ALREADY WAITING. ONE FOOT STUCK UP OVER THE EDGE AND QUIVERED, AS THOUGH IT COULD GET OUT, AS THOUGH WITH A LITTLE EFFORT IT COULD BREAK THROUGH THE DIRT BEING SHOVELED IN. WE COULD NOT SEE THE FACES OF THE MEN DOING THE BURYING, ONLY THEIR TROUSERS; BUT WE SAW THE EDGE OF A SPADE DRIVE THE JERKING FOOT DOWN TO JOIN THE REST OF ITSELF. WHEN SHE SAW THAT BLACK FOOT WITH ITS CREAM-COLORED, MUD-STREAKED SOLE BEING WHACKED INTO THE GRAVE, HER WHOLE BODY BEGAN TO SHAKE. I HUGGED HER SHOULDERS TIGHT AND TRIED TO PULL HER TREMBLING INTO MY OWN BONES BECAUSE, AS A BROTHER FOUR YEARS OLDER, I THOUGHT I COULD HANDLE IT. THE MEN WERE LONG GONE AND THE SUN WAS A CANTALOE BY THE TIME WE FELT SAFE

ENOUGH TO DISTURB EVEN ONE BLADE OF GRASS AND
MOVE ON OUR STOMACHS SEARCHING FOR THE SCOOPED-
OUT PART UNDER THE FENCE. I THOUGHT I COULD FORGET
ABOUT THE BURIAL AND JUST REMEMBER THE HORSES. THEY
WERE SO BEAUTIFUL. SO BRUTAL. AND THEY STOOD LIKE
MEN.

dead if you tarry." Finally, he settled on the chair in the corner of the room. Wooden. Oak. Lacquered or stained. How many slots in its back. Was the seat flat or curved for a bottom. Hand crafted or machine made. If hand crafted who was the carpenter and where did he get his lumber. Hopeless. The chair was provoking questions not blank indifference. He would have to concentrate on heartbeat and limp hands. At 2:00 a.m. when they checked him to determine if he needed another shot they would see the patient in scenery, just the endless tracks.

room 17, sunk in a morphine sleep. If convinced, they would loosen his wrist cuffs. The trick of imitating semi-coma was to concentrate on a single neutral object. Ice, he thought, a cube of it, an icicle or an ice-crust pond, or a frosted landscape. No. Too much emotion in frozen hills. Fire, then? Never, too active. He would need something that stirred no emotion, encouraged no memory—sweet or shameful. Just searching for such an item was agitating. Everything reminded him of something loaded with pain. Visualizing a blank sheet of paper drove his mind to the letter he had gotten—the one that had closed his throat: "Come fast. She be

dead if you tarry." Finally, he settled on the chair in the corner of the room. Wooden. Oak. Lacquered or stained. How many slats in its back. Was the seat flat or curved for a bottom. Hand crafted or machine made. If hand crafted who was the carpenter and where did he get his lumber. Hopeless. The chair was provoking questions not blank indifference. He would have to concentrate on something else, a night sky, starless or, better, train tracks. No scenery, just the endless tracks.

They had taken his shirt and laced boots but his pants and army jacket (neither an effective suicide instrument) were hanging in the tiny closet. He just had to get down the hall to the exit door that was never locked after a fire broke out on that floor and a nurse and two patients died. That was the story Crane the orderly, rapidly chewing his gum, told, but he believed it was simply convenient for the staff's smoke breaks.

The day before, when he was handcuffed in the back seat of the patrol car, he had swerved his head wildly to see where he was

and where he was going. Nothing in particular stood out except the flashing of an OK Diner display and a huge yard sign for a tiny church: AME Zion. If he succeeded in getting out that's where he would head: to Zion. Still, before escape, he would have to get shoes somehow, someway. Walking anywhere in winter without shoes would guarantee his being arrested and back in the ward until he could be sentenced for vagrancy. Interesting law, vagrancy, meaning standing outside or walking without purpose anywhere. Carrying a book would help, but being barefoot would contradict "purposefulness" and seal a complaint of "loitering." Better than most, he knew that being outside wasn't necessary for legal or illegal disruption. You could be inside, living in your own house for years and still men with badges and guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move—with or without shoes. Not all that long ago, as a four year old, he had a pair though the sole of one flapped with every step. Residents of fifteen houses had been cleansed from the edge of the town. In spite

of threats from lawmen and pleadings from his friends, one elderly man refused. He was beaten to death with rifle butts and tied to the oldest magnolia tree in the county that grew in his own yard.

So shoes were vital. Four a.m., before sun rise, he managed to unshackle himself, dress and creep down the hall. Except for the weeping from the room next to the exit, all was quiet—no squeak of an orderly's shoes, nor giggles and no smell of cigarette smoke. The hinges groaned when he opened the door and the cold hit him like a hammer.

The iced iron of the fire escape steps was so painful he jumped over the railing to sink his feet into the warmer snow on the ground. Holding the collar tight at his throat, preferring curb snow to pavement, he ran the six blocks as quickly as he could to the parsonage of AME Zion, a small two-story clapboard. The steps to the porch were thoroughly cleared of snow, but the house was dark. He knocked, hard, he thought, considering how stiff his hands were, but not threatening like the bam bam of a citizen's

group, or a mob or the police. Insistence paid off; a light came on and the door opened a slit, revealing a man in flannel robe, holding his glasses and frowning at the impudence of a pre-dawn visitor.

Frank wanted to say "Good evening," or his name, but his body shook violently like a victim of St. Vitus Dance and his teeth chattered so uncontrollably he could not make a sound. The man at the door took in the full measure of his shaking visitor, then stepped back to let him in.

"Jean! Jean!" He turned to direct his voice up the stairs before motioning Frank to the sofa.

"My name is Locke, Reverend John Locke. Yours?"

"Frank. Frank Money."

"You from down the street? At that hospital?"

Frank nodded while trying to rub life back into his fingers.

Reverend Locke grunted. "You lucky. They sell a lot of bodies out of there."

"Sell?"

"Uh huh. To the medical college."

"What for?"

"Doctors need to work on the poor dead so they can help the live rich."

"John, stop." Jean Locke came down the stairs tightening the belt of her robe. "That's just foolishness."

"This is my wife," said Locke. "And while she's sweet as honey, she's also wrong."

"Evening, ma'am. I'm sorry to..." Frank stood.

She cut him off. "No need for that. Keep your seat," she said and disappeared into the kitchen.

*

"Where you headed, brother?" asked Locke. He was still standing with his hands behind his back.

"Georgia."

"You don't say. That's quite a ways. Does Brother Money have any?" Locke smiled at his little wit.

"Had some when they picked me up," Frank answered, although he could not remember how much Lily had handed him.

"But it's gone now, right?" Locke squinted. "Police looking for you?"

"No." said Frank. "No, sir. They just hustled me up and put me in the crazy ward. ^{*} I don't think they brought any charges."

"You wouldn't know if they did."

Jean Locke returned with a basin of ~~cold~~ water. "Put your feet in here. It's cold but you don't want them to heat up too fast."

Frank sank his feet into the water, sighing "Thanks."

"What'd they get you for? The police." Locke asked.

What indeed. It was beyond him. He couldn't explain it to himself, let alone someone else. Was he screaming? Hollering at some passerby, some schoolchildren? Was he banging his head on a cement wall or hiding behind trees in somebody's back yard?

"Acting up," he said. "Something like that."

"How long you been back?"

Frank raised his head. "How'd you know? A year, about."

Locke shook his head and was about to speak when Jean came back with a cup and a plate of crackers. "It's just hot water with lots of salt in it," she said.

Frank sipped and then gulped down the rest. When Jean brought him more, her husband said, "Jean, go see what's in the poor box."

"He needs shoes, too, John."

There were none to spare, so they put four pair of socks and some ripped galoshes next to the sofa.

"Get some sleep, brother. You got a rocky journey ahead and I don't just mean Georgia."

Frank fell asleep* and dreamed a terrible dream that ended in fire. He woke to the smell of toast.* Locke showed him where the bathroom was and placed shaving kit and hairbrush on the sink edge. Shod and cleaned up, Frank ate a breakfast of oatmeal and over-buttered toast. On the table lay three one-dollar bills and a wash of coins.

"Seventeen dollars," said Locke. "There is a bus to St Louis where you can get a train to Atlanta, but when you get to St Louis, here's what you do."

He instructed Frank to get in touch with a Reverend Jessie Maynard pastor of a Baptist church on tk street, and that he would call ahead and tell him to look out for another one.

"Another one?"

"Well, you not the first by a long shot. An integrated army is integrated misery. You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better."

Frank stared at him, but didn't say anything. The army hadn't treated him so bad. It wasn't their fault he went ape-shit every now and then. As a matter of fact the discharge doctors had been thoughtful and kind, telling him the craziness would leave in time. They knew all about it, but assured him it would pass. Just stay away from alcohol, they said. Which he didn't. Couldn't. Until he met Lily.

Locke handed Frank the flap of an envelope with Maynard's address and warmed^N him to cross the river into East St. Louis as fast as he could. That Maynard had a big congregation and could offer more help than his own small flock.

Jean had packed six cheese sandwiches and three oranges into a grocery bag, handed it to him along with a watch cap.

Frank put on the cap, thanked her and, peering into the bag, asked, "How long a trip is it?"

"Don't matter," said Locke. "You'll be grateful for every bite since you won't be able to sit down at any bus stop counter. Come on, now. I'll drive you."

At the ticket window, Locke converted the coins into paper money and bought Frank's ticket. Standing in front of the Greyhound's door, Frank turned to Reverend Locke and held out his hand. As the men shook hands they held each other's eyes, saying nothing and everything, as though 'goodbye' meant what it once did: God be with you.

There were very few passengers, yet Frank dutifully sat in the last seat, trying to shrink his 6' 3" body and holding the sandwich bag close. Through the windows the bleak winter landscape became more melancholy as the ~~rising~~⁹ sun brightened the bare

trees, the lonesome houses with little red wagons upside down in the snow-mushed yards. Only the 1952 trucks looked alive. As he mused about what it might be like in those houses, he could imagine nothing at all. Again, as was almost always the case when he was alone and sober, whatever the surroundings, he saw a boy pushing his entrails back in, holding them in his palms like a fortune's teller's globe shattering with bad news; or he heard a boy with only the bottom half of his face intact, the lips calling mama. And he was stepping over them, around them to stay alive, to keep his own face from dissolving, his own guts under that oh so thin cover of flesh. They never went away, these pictures, or others even worse. Except in sleep, sometimes, in a liquored stupor, perhaps. Only with Lily, whom he'd left behind, had the pictures faded, moved behind a screen in his brain, yes, but waiting, waiting and accusing. Why didn't you help him? Pull him along the way you did Mike? And all that killing you did afterwards? Women running, dragging children along? And that old one-legged man on a crutch hobbling

at the edge of the road so as not to slow down the other, swifter ones? You blew a hole in his head because it would make up for the frosted urine on Mike's pants and avenge the lips calling mama. Did it? Did it work? And the girls. What did they ever do to you to deserve what you did to them? All unasked questions multiplying like mould in the shadows of the photographs he saw.

There was no love from Jessie Maynard. Help, yes. But the contempt was glacial. The Reverend was devoted to the needy, apparently, but only if they were properly clothed and not a young hale, 6'3" veteran. He kept Frank on the back porch near the driveway where a green Cadillac lurked, and smiled knowingly as he said, by way of apology, "My daughters are inside the house." It was an insult tax levied on the suppliant for an overcoat, sweater and five ten-dollar bills.

Desperation to get to Georgia increased his anxiety about whether he would have another incident: uncontrollable, suspicious, destructive and illegal. It took a while, but now he could tell when

it was coming. The first time he was quiet, just sitting on a bus next to a brightly dressed woman. Her flowered skirt was a world's worth of color. Her blouse a loud red. Frank watched the flowers at the hem of her skirt blackening and her red blouse draining of color until it was white as milk. Then everybody, everything. Outside the window—trees, sky, a boy on a scooter, grass, hedges. All color gone like a black and white movie screen. He didn't yell then because he thought something bad was happening to his eyes. Bad, but fixable. He wondered if this was how dogs or cats or wolves saw the world. At the next stop he got off and walked toward a Chevron station, its black flames shooting out from the V. He wanted to get into the bathroom, look in the mirror to see if he had an eye infection, but the sign on the door stopped him. The sun hurt him. Its mean light drove him to look for shade. Still he didn't shout, didn't smash anything, didn't accost strangers. That came later when the pain wouldn't stop nor the fury. Now he can tell when it's starting and hurry up and hide.

Sitting on the train, the rocking and singing rails soothed him into sleep so sound he missed the beginning of the riot, but not its end. He woke to the sobbing of a young woman being comforted by white-jacketed waiters. One of them nestled a pillow behind her head; another gave her a stack of linen napkins for her tears and the blood pouring from her nose. Next to her, looking away, was her silent, seething husband—his face a skull of shame and its partner, rigid anger.

When a porter passed by, Frank touched his arm, asking "What happened?"

"You didn't see that?"

"No. What was it?"

"That there is the husband. He got off at the stop to buy some coffee or something back there." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "The owner or customers or both kicked him out.

Actually. Put their feet in his butt and knocked him down, kicked

some more and when his lady came to help, she got a rock thrown in her face. We got them back in the car, but the crowd kept the yelling up till we pulled away. Look," he said. "See that?" He pointed to egg yolks, not sliding now but stuck like phlegm to the window.

"Anybody report to the conductor?" Frank asked him.

"You crazy?"

"Probably."

The porter, whose name tag said Taylor, chuckled. "You want a shot? I got some Johnny Red in my case."

"Yeah. Oh, yeah."

Frank's taste buds, uninterested in cheese sandwiches or fruit, came alive at the mention of whiskey. Just a shot. Just enough to settle and sweeten the world. No more.

The wait seemed long and just when Frank was convinced the porter had forgotten, Taylor returned with a teacup, saucer and napkin. Johnny Red trembled invitingly in the thick white cup.

"Enjoy," said Taylor, then rocked along the aisle to the sway of the train.

The abused couple whispered to each other, she softly, pleadingly; he with urgency. He will beat her when they get home, thought Frank. And who wouldn't? It's one thing to be publically humiliated. A man could move on from that. What was intolerable was the witness of a woman, a wife, who not only saw it, but had dared to try to rescue, rescue! him. He couldn't protect himself and he couldn't protect her either, as the rock in her face proved. She would have to pay for that. Over and over again.

OF THE REDEEMER WAITING FOR A TIN PLATE OF DRY-HARD
BISCUITS ALREADY SHOWING GREEN, AND PICKLED PIGS'
FEET. IT WAS THERE THAT MAMA HEARD THE WOMAN AHEAD
OF HER EXPLAIN TO THE VOLUNTEER HOW TO SPELL AND
PRONOUNCE HER NAME. MAMA SAID IT WAS THE SWEETEST
THING AND THE SOUND OF THE NAME WAS LIKE MUSIC
AMIDST THE ARGUE AND HEAT OF THE CROWD. X WEEKS
LATER WHEN HER BABY, DELIVERED ON A MATTRESS IN
REVEREND BAILEY'S CHURCH BASEMENT, TURNED OUT TO BE,
MAMA WAS PREGNANT WHEN WE WALKED OUT OF TEXAS.
A GIRL MAMA NAMED HER YCIDRA, TAKING CARE TO
SOME FAMILIES HAD TRUCKS OR CARS AND LOADED ALL THEY
PRONOUNCE ALL THREE SYLLABLES. EVERYBODY ELSE CALLS
COULD. OTHERS, LIKE MINE, WALKED FOR MILES UNTIL MR.
TK CAME BACK FOR US HAVING DROPPED HIS PEOPLE AT THE
STATE LINE. MY SHOE SOLE FLAPPED UNTIL PAPA TIED IT UP
WITH HIS OWN SHOE LACE. I HAVE EATEN TRASH IN JAIL,
KOREA, HOSPITALS, AT TABLE AND FROM CERTAIN GARBAGE
CANS. NOTHING, HOWEVER, COMPARES TO THE FOOD
PANTRY IN TK. I REMEMBER STANDING IN LINE AT CHURCH

OF THE REDEEMER WAITING FOR A TIN PLATE OF DRY-HARD
BISCUITS ALREADY SHOWING GREEN, AND PICKLED PIGS'
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A GIRL MAMA NAMED HER YCIDRA, TAKING CARE TO
PRONOUNCE ALL THREE SYLLABLES. EVERYBODY ELSE CALLS
HER 'SEE'. I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT WAS NICE, HOW SHE
THOUGHT ABOUT THE NAME, TREASURED IT. AS FOR ME NO
SUCH MEMORIES. I AM NAMED FRANK AFTER MY FATHER'S
BROTHER. LUTHER IS MY FATHER'S NAME; IDA MY MOTHER'S.
THE ONLY INTERESTING PART IS OUR LAST NAME. MONEY.
OF WHICH WE HAD NONE.

Ycidra

A mean grandmother is one of the worst things a girl could have. Mamas are supposed to spank and rule you so you grow up knowing right from wrong. Grandmothers, even when they've been hard on their own children, are forgiving and generous to the grandchildren.

See got out of the zinc tub and took a few dripping steps to the pot belly stove where a kettle of hot water hissed. She poured it into the cooling tub water and sat back down. She wanted to linger in the tub while a soft afternoon light encouraged thoughts to tumble. Regrets, excuses, righteousness, false memory and future plans mixed together or stood like soldiers in line. Well, that's the way grandmothers should be, she thought, but for little Ycidra Money it wasn't like that at all. Because Mama and Papa worked

from before sunrise til dark they never knew that Miss Noella poured water instead of milk over the shredded wheat See and her brother ate for breakfast. Nor that when they had stripes and welts on their legs they were cautioned to lie, to say they got them by playing out by the stream where brambles and huckleberry vines grew. Even grandfather Salem was silent. Frank said it was because he was scared Miss Noella would leave him the way his first two wives did. *

Noella was the third wife of Salem Money so he never made a sound when the salt pork was halved for the two of them and all the children got was its flavor. Well, yes, the grandparents were doing them a big favor letting some homeless relatives live in their house after the family got run out of Texas. She herself was born on the road, which Noella took as a very bad sign for the new baby's future. Decent women, she said, delivered babies at home, in a bed attended to by ^{Christians} women who knew what to do. Although only whores went to hospitals, at least they ^{had a roof} were

overhead

inside when the baby came. Being born in the street, as she put it, was prelude to a worthless life.

The house was big enough for two, maybe three, but not for grandparents plus Papa, Mama, Uncle Frank, and two children.

For a year See slept with her parents on a pallet on the floor; Uncle Frank in two chairs put together; little Frank slept on the back porch, either in the hammock or the slanty wooden swing, even when it rained. Her parents, Luther and Ida, worked two jobs each—Ida picking cotton in the day and sweeping the lumber shacks in the evening. Luther and Uncle Frank were field workers and very happy to have jobs since most of the young men around there had enlisted in the war and when it was over didn't come back to work cotton or lumber. Then Uncle Frank enlisted too. He got in the navy as a cook and glad about that because he didn't have to handle explosives. But his ship sank anyway and Miss Noella hung the Gold star in the window as though she, and not a Salem ex-wife, was the honorable mother who had lost a son. Ida's job at

the lumber yard gave her the asthma that finally killed her, but it paid off because at the end of that year they were able to rent a place from Old Man Shepherd who drove in from Jeffrey every Saturday morning to collect the rent ~~money~~.

See remembered the relief and the pride they all took to be in their own house. There they could let Mr. Haywood put them on his monthly list of people who needed supplies from the general store in Jeffrey. Sometimes he would bring back chewing gum and mint balls, free, for the children. Jeffrey had the sidewalks, running water, stores and a bank and a school. Lotus was separate, with no sidewalks or indoor plumbing, just houses and two churches, one of which a teacher used for reading and arithmetic. See thought it would have been better if there were more books to read—just Grimm's Fairy Tales, a book of Bible passages for young people.

That, she ^{believed} ~~used~~, was the reason she married a rat. If she hadn't been so ignorant living in a no-count, not-even-a-town, place

with only chores, church, and nothing else to do, she would have known better. Watched, watched, watched by every grown up from sunrise to sunset when she and a few other girls reached fourteen and started talking about boys, See was prevented from any real flirtation because of big brother, Frank. The boys knew she was off limits because of him. That's why when Frank reached eighteen, enlisted and left town, she fell for what Noella called the first thing she saw wearing trousers instead of overalls.

His name was Principal but he called himself Prince. A visitor from Atlanta to his aunt's house, he was a good-looking new face with shiny, thin-sole shoes. All the girls were impressed with his big city accent and what they believed was his knowledge and experience. See most of all.

Splashing water on her shoulders, she wondered why she didn't at least ask the aunt he was visiting why he was sent to the backwoods instead of spending the winter in the big, bad city. But feeling the space where her brother had been, she had no defense.

That's the bad thing, she thought, about having a smart, tough brother close at hand to take care of and protect you—you are slow to develop your own brain muscle. Besides, Prince loved himself so deeply, completely, it was impossible to doubt his conviction. So if Prince said she was pretty, she believed him. If he said at fourteen she was a woman, she believed that too. And if he said I want you for myself, it was Noella who said, Not unless y'all are legal. Whatever legal meant. Ycidra didn't even have a birth certificate and the courthouse was over a hundred miles away. So they had Reverend Pike come over and bless them, write their names in a huge book before walking back to her parents' house. Frank had enlisted so his bed was where they slept and where the great thing people warned about or giggled about took place. It was not so much painful as dull. See thought it would get better later. Better turned out to be ^{simply} ~~just~~ more and while the quantity increased, its pleasure lay in its brevity.

There was no job Prince allowed himself to take so he took her to Atlanta. See looked forward to a shiny life in the city and when, after a few weeks of ogling at water coming from the turn of a spigot, inside toilets free of flies, street lights shining more regularly than the sun and as lovely as fireflies, women in high heels and gorgeous hats trotting to church two, sometimes three times a day—after those weeks of dumbfounded delight, she learned that Principal had married her for an automobile.

Noella had bought a used station wagon from Shepherd the rent man and, since Salem couldn't drive, Noella gave her old 1939 Ford to Luther and Ida—with the caution that they give it back if the station wagon broke down. A few times Luther let Prince use it on errands: trips to the post office in Jeffrey for mail to or from wherever Frank was stationed, first Kentucky, then Korea. Once he drove to town for throat medicine for Ida when her breathing problems got worse. Having easy access to the Ford suited everyone because Prince washed away the eternal road dust that

floured it; changed plugs, oil and never gave lifts to the boys who begged to join him in the car. It was natural for Luther to agree to let the couple drive it to Atlanta, ^{since they} ~~promising~~ ^{ed} to return it in a few weeks.

Never happened. She was all alone now, sitting in a zinc tub defying heat with warm water while Prince was cruising around with his thin-sole shoes pressing the gas pedal in Chicago, for all she knew. When Prince left her to her own devices, See rented a room on a quiet street, a room with kitchen privileges and use of a washing machine. Her friend, Thelma, helped her get a job dishwashing at Bobby's Rib House and fused the friendship with blunt counsel.

"No fool, like a country fool."

"Why don't you go back to your folks?"

"Without the car?" Lord, thought See. Noella might have her arrested.

Mtk

Ycidra agreed with Thelma, but more than anything she wanted desperately to talk to Frank. Her letters to him were about weather and Lotus gossip. Devious. But she knew that if she could see him, tell him, he would not laugh at her, quarrel, or condemn. He would, as always, ~~teach her how to handle~~ ^{protect her from} a bad situation.

* Mtk

But he never warned her about rats.

^{barnyard swallows}
 * Four ~~blackbirds~~ gathered on the lawn below. Politely equidistant from each other they ~~pecked~~ ^() searched through blades of drying grass. Then, as if summoned, all four flew up in a tk tree. The ^{quiet} ~~quiet~~ seemed to slither then boom. Its presence more theatrical than noise. It was the quiet of their ^{f Lotus} house afternoon and evening as she and her brother figured out what to eat, do or talk about. Their parents worked sixteen hours and were hardly there. ^{* k} ~~Salem~~ was mute about everything except his meals; ~~Nolla~~ ^{eye} the wicked witch.

Frank and See, like some forgotten, Hansel and Gretel, locked hands as they navigated the silence and tried to imagine a future.

Standing at the window wrapped in a scratchy towel, See felt her heart breaking. If Frank were there he would ^{one more} touch the back of her neck with four fingers, his thumb stroking her nape. Don't cry, said the fingers; the welts will disappear. Don't cry; Mama is tired; she didn't mean it. Don't cry, don't cry girl; I'm right here. But he wasn't there or anywhere near. In the photograph he'd sent home, a smiling warrior in a uniform holding a rifle, he looked as though he belonged to something else, something beyond and unlike Georgia. And there she stood, her body already throwing off the good the soak had done and beginning to sweat. She toweled the damp under her breasts then wiped perspiration from her forehead. She raised the window. ^{screen + tear} ^{above the} ^{swallows} The ~~blackbirds~~ were back bringing with them a light breeze and an odor of sage growing at the edge of the yard. *