



Home Draft, as "Frank Money"

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FRANK MONEY

1. 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 FORELEGS 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
avoiding the line of trucks parked
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 ^{truck}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 CANTALOPE 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.

^ We expected to be whipped or at
least scolded for staying out so late.
~~attention of the~~ but the grown people did not notice.
^ Some stranger had their attention
So we ran unseen home.

drove his mind to the letter he had gotten—the one that had closed

2. Breathing. How to do it so no one would know he was awake. Fake a deep rhythmic snore, drop the bottom lip. Most important the eyelids should not move and there must be a regular heartbeat and limp hands. At 2:00 a.m. when they checked to determine if he needed another immobilizing shot they would see the patient in room 17, sunk in a morphine sleep. If convinced, they might loosen his cuffs. So his hands could enjoy some blood. The trick of imitating semi-coma, like playing dead face down in a muddy kill zone, was to concentrate on a single neutral object. Something that would smother any random hint of life. Ice, he thought, a cube of it, an icicle or an ice-crusted pond, or a frosted landscape. No. Too much emotion attached to frozen hills. Fire, then? Never. Too active. He would need something that stirred no feelings, 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 as his neutral object. Wood. 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, no trains, just endless, 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 chatterbox orderly, rapidly chewing gum while washing the

patient's armpits, had told him, but he believed it was simply convenient for the staff's smoke breaks.

Two days earlier, 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. Twenty years 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 tk town. In spite of threats from lawmen and pleadings from neighbors, one elderly man named Crawford, refused to vacate. He was beaten to death with rifle butts and tied to the oldest magnolia tree in the county—the one that grew in his own yard. Maybe it was loving that tree, which he said his great grandmother planted, that made him so stubborn. In the dark of night, some of the fleeing neighbors snuck back to untie him and bury him beneath his beloved magnolia.

So shoes were vital. Four a.m., before sunrise, he managed to loosen the canvas cuffs and unshackle himself. He put on his pants and jacket, crept down the hall. Except for the weeping from the room next to the exit, all was quiet—no squeak of an orderly's shoes, or smothered 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. Maniac moonlight doing the work of absent stars, matched his desperate frenzy. Lighting his hunched shoulders and footsteps left in the snow. Holding his collar tight at his throat, avoiding shoveled pavement for curb-snow, he ran the six blocks as quickly as hospital drug residue let him 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 gray-haired man in flannel robe, holding his glasses and frowning at the impudence of a pre-dawn visitor.

He 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 the visitor inside.

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

"Frank. Frank Money."

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

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

Reverend Locke grunted. "Have a seat," he said, then shaking his head, added "You lucky, Mr. Money. They sell a lot of bodies out of there."

"Sell?"

"Uh huh. To the medical school."

"What for?"

"Doctors need to work on the dead poor 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.

Frank did as told. Except for the absence of wind, the house was hardly less chilly than outside, and the plastic slip covers stretched taught over the sofa did not help.

"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." He folded his hands before his mouth and blew warm air on them. "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, look and 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 between a wool blanket and plastic slipcovers and dreamed a terrible dream that ended in fire. He woke to the smell of toast and biting sunlight. It took a while, longer than it should have, to register where he was. The residue of two days' drugging was leaving but slowly. Wherever he was, he was grateful the dazzling sunlight did not hurt his head. He sat up and noticed socks folded neatly on the rug. Then he heard murmurs from another room. Staring at the socks, it all came into focus: the hospital escape, the snow run, finally Reverend Locke. So he was ready, back in the real world when Locke came in and asked how four hours of sleep felt.

"Like heaven," said Frank.

Locke showed him where the bathroom was and placed my is shaving kit and hairbrush on the sink edge. Shod and cleaned up, Frank sat down at the enamel-topped table and ate a breakfast of oatmeal and over-buttered toast. In the center of the table lay three one-dollar bills and a wash of coins. It could have been a poker pot, except it seemed far more hard-won: dimes slipped from small coin purses; nickels reluctantly given up by children who had other (sweeter) plans for them; the dollar bills representing the generosity of a whole family.

"Seventeen dollars," said Locke. "That's more than enough for a bus ticket to St Louis. It won't get you on the train to Georgia 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 torn from an envelope with Maynard's address and warned 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, he 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 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 they 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 in it. 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 supplicant 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 it happened in San Diego—just off the ship—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, if the signs gave notice, he could tell when it started 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 nametag ^{read} 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.

By the time he stepped off the train he was calm enough, but the station noise was so abrasive, he reached for his side arm. It wasn't there, of course, so he leaned against a steel support until the panic died down.

Two hours later he was scooping up navy beans and buttering corn bread. Taylor, the porter, had been right. TK was not only a good and cheap place to eat, its company—diners, counter help, waitresses, loud cooks—was welcoming and high-spirited. Laborers and the idle, mothers and street women, all ate and drank with the ease of family in their own kitchens. It was that quick, down home friendliness that led Frank to talk freely to the man on the stool next to his.

"Billy Watson."

"Frank Money."

"Where you from, Frank?"

"Aw, man. Seattle, Georgia. Name it I'm from there."

"You looking to be from here, too?"

"No. I'm headed on back to Georgia."

tk

CHEESE ALREADY SHOWING GREEN, PICKLED PIGS' FEET—ITS
VINEGAR SOAKING STALE WHITE BREAD. 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,

3.

MAMA WAS PREGNANT WHEN WE WALKED OUT OF TEXAS.
SOME FAMILIES HAD TRUCKS OR CARS AND LOADED ALL THEY
COULD. OTHERS, LIKE MINE, WALKED FOR MILES UNTIL MR.
TK CAME BACK FOR US AFTER DROPPING 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

CHEESE ALREADY SHOWING GREEN, PICKLED PIGS' FEET—ITS VINEGAR SOAKING STALE WHITE BREAD. 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 A GIRL MAMA NAMED HER YCIDRA, TAKING CARE TO PRONOUNCE ALL THREE SYLLABLES. EVERYBODY ELSE CALLS HER 'CEE'. 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.

4
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. Ain't that so?

Cee stood up in the zinc tub and took a few dripping steps to the stove where a kettle of hot water hissed. She poured it into the cooling tub water and sat back down in it. She wanted to linger in the tub while a soft afternoon light encouraged her 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 until dark, they never knew that Miss Noella poured water instead of milk over the shredded wheat Cee 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 thorns grew. Even grandfather Salem was silent. Frank said it was because he was scared Miss Noella would leave him the way his grandparents plus Papa, Mama, Uncle Frank, and two children, for a year Cee slept with her parents on a floor porch, Uncle Frank in two chairs put together, little Frank slept on the back porch, Money 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 good Christian women who knew what to do. Although only whores went to hospitals, at least they had a roof overhead when their 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.

*one a howling infant.
insert done*

~~For a year~~ Cee slept with her parents on a floor pallet; 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

*planters
for ~~Mark~~ in Jeffrey*

happy to have jobs since most of the young men ^{over} 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 one of Salem's ex-wives, 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.

Cee remembered the relief and the pride they all took to ^{having} ~~be in~~ ~~their own house~~ with their own garden and their own laying hens. (over)

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

She remembers everybody except Noella
as open handed but stern. A
stranger coming through was welcomed
even or especially if he was running
from the law. She remembers a man
bloody and scared, they ^{all} washed up, fed
and led him away on a mule.
It was nice having their own house.

been better if there were more books to read—not just Grimm's Fairy Tales, and a book of Bible passages for young people.

That, she believed, 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 ^{not only by Noella but} from sunrise to sunset and ordered about by every adult. Come here, girl, don't you know how to sew? Yes mam. Then why is your hem hanging like that? Yes, mam. I mean no Mam. Is that lipstick on your mouth? No mam. What then? Cherries, mam, I ate some....Cherries, my foot. Wipe your mouth. Come down from that tree, you hear me? Tie your shoes, put down that rag doll and pick up a broom, uncross your legs go weed that garden don't you talk back to me. When Cee and a few other girls reached fourteen and started talking about boys, she was prevented from any real flirtation because of her 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^d shoes. All the girls were impressed with his big city accent and what they believed was his knowledge and experience. Cee most of all.

Now, splashing water on her shoulders, she wondered for the umpteenth time 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 ^{other side} ~~bad thing~~, she thought, ^{of} ~~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, so 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~~ ^{the back of a big Bible} 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. Cee thought it would get better later. Better turned out to be simply more and while the quantity increased, its pleasure lay in its brevity.

There was no job in ^{or around} Lotus Prince allowed himself to take so he took her to Atlanta. Cee 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—following the grateful joy of the pretty dress Prince bought her and 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 the Ford 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 promised 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-soled shoes pressing the gas pedal in Chicago or New York, for all she knew. When Prince left her to her own devices, Cee rented a cheaper room on a quiet street, a room with kitchen privileges and use of a washing machine. Thelma, who lived upstairs, became a friend and helped her get a job dishwashing at Bobby's Rib House fusing 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 Cee. Noella might have her arrested.

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, protect her from a bad situation. Like the

time he, Mike and some other boys were playing softball in a field. See sat nearby, leaning on a butternut tree. The boys' game bored her. She glanced at the players intermittently, focused intently on the nail polish she was picking from her nails, hoping to remove it all before Noella could berate her for 'flaunting' her little hussy self. She looked up and saw Frank leaving the mound with his bat only because others were yelling. "Where you going, man?" "Hey, hey. You out?" He walked slowly away from the field and disappeared into the surrounding trees. Circling, she later learned. Suddenly he was behind the tree she leaned against swinging his bat twice into the legs of a man she had not even noticed standing behind the tree. Mike and the others ran to see what she had not. Then they all ran, Frank dragging her by the arm—not even looking back. She had questions: "What happened? Who was that?" The boys didn't answer. They simply muttered curses. Hours later, Frank explained. The man wasn't from Lotus, he told her, and had been hiding behind the tree flashing her.

When she pressed her brother to define "flashing", and he did so, Cee began to tremble. Frank put one hand on top of her head, the other at her nape. His fingers, like balm, stopped the trembling and the chill that accompanied it. She followed Frank's advice always: recognized poisonous berries, learned to shout when in snake territory, the medicinal uses of spider webs. His instructions were specific, his cautions clear.

But he never warned her about rats.

Four barnyard swallows gathered on the lawn below. Politely equidistant from each other they peck-searched through blades of drying grass. Then, as if summoned, all four flew up in a tk tree. The quiet seemed to slither, then boom. Its weight more theatrical than noise. It was like the quiet of the 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. So they invented escapades, or investigated surrounding territory. Even when Frank was with friends, Mike and tk, ^{stuff} he let her tag

along. Cee, towel-wrapped, went to the window and raised it to just below the place where the screen was torn. ^{She} Remembering ^{ed} how unwelcome drop-in visits to her grandparents' house were, unless Noella needed them for chores. Salem was uninspiring since he was mute about everything except his meals. ^{*} Noella the wicked witch. Frank and Cee, 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, Cee felt her heart breaking. If Frank were there he would once more touch the back of her neck with four fingers, or stroke her nape with his thumb. 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,

^{real enthusiasm} ^{playing}
^{*} His ~~major activity~~ was Checkers with
 some like-minded old men.

alone, her body already throwing off the good the tub soak had done and beginning to sweat. She towed the damp under her breasts then wiped perspiration from her forehead. She raised the window above the screen tear. The swallows were back bringing with them a light breeze and an odor of sage growing at the edge of the yard.

Cooled, she unhooked the dress Principal had bought her the ^{ir} second day in Atlanta. Its rayon-silky touch still pleased her as did its riot of blue dahlias on a white background. Once dressed, she dragged the tub through the kitchen and out the back door. Slowly, carefully she rationed the bath water onto the wilted grass; a half bucketful here, a little more there, taking care to let her feet but not her dress get wet.

Gnats buzzed over a bowl of black grapes on the kitchen table. Cee waved them away, rinsed the fruit and sat down to munch them while she thought about her situation: today was Monday; she had six dollars; rent due at month's end was twice

that. Next Friday she was be paid eight dollars. So, fifteen dollars total, minus twelve, left her three dollars for everything else: shoe repair, bus fare, sanitary napkins, a fifteen cent movie in a [colored only] balcony seat. Fortunately on her job she could eat for free. Solution: more work—a second job or another one.

For that, she needed to see Thelma, her upstairs neighbor. Without knocking Cee opened the door and found her friend rinsing dishes at the sink.

"I saw you out there. You think sloshing dirty water is going to green up that yard?"

"Can't hurt."

"Yes, it can." Thelma wiped her hands. "Mosquitoes be doing their blood dance the whole night long. All they need is a smell of water."

"Sorry."

"I don't doubt that." Thelma patted her apron pocket for a pack of Camels. Lighting one, she eyed her friend. "That's a pretty dress. Where'd you get it?" They both moved to the living room and plopped down on the sofa.

"Prince bought it for me when we first moved here."

"Prince." Thelma snorted. "You mean Frog. I've seen no-
counts by the truckload. Never saw anybody more useless than
him. Do you even know where he is?"

"No."

"You want to?"

"No."

"Well thank the Lord for that."

"I need a job, Thelma."

"You got one. ^{Don't tell me} ~~Did~~ you quit Bobby's?"

"No. But I need something better. Better paying. After I pay the rent I have to eat at the restaurant, whether I want to or not."

"Bobby's food is the best. You can't eat anywhere better."

"I know, but I need a real job where I can save. And no, I'm not going back to Lotus."

"Can't fault you for that. Your family is crazy."

"Mean, maybe. Not crazy."

"Yeah? Named you Ycidra. That is mean."

"Thelma?"

"Ok. Ok. Well, you just might be in luck. Just so happens I heard about something couple weeks ago when I was in the beauty shop."

"What?"

"A couple in tk—just outside the city—they need a second."

"A what?"

"They got a cook-housekeeper, but they want a maid-type person to help the husband. He's a doctor. Nice people."

"You mean like a nurse?"

"No. A helper. I don't know. Bandages and iodine I guess. His office is in the house, the woman said. So you'd live in. She said the pay was good as any, but since it was rent free, that made all the difference."

Sarah Williams, the housekeeper opened the door. Reaching for Cee's shopping bag, she smiled. "Step on in. The doctor's wife will see you shortly. My name is Sarah."

"Thank you. Can I take off these shoes for a second?"

Sarah laughed. "Who ever invented high heels was trying to hurt us."

Tk

"Can you tell me what-all I have to do?"

"Mrs. Scott will tell you some, but the doctor himself is the only one who really knows."

After a glass of cold water, and a bathroom freshening, Cee put her shoes back on and followed Sarah into a living room that seemed to her more beautiful than a movie house. Cool air, plum colored velvet furniture, filtered light through heavy laced curtains. Mrs. Scott, her hands resting on a tiny pillow, her ankles crossed, nodded and invited Cee to sit.

"Cee, is it?" Her voice was like music.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Born here? Atlanta?"

"No. Ma'am. I'm from a little place south of here, called Lotus."

"Any children?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Married?"

"No, Ma'am."

"What church affiliation? Any?"

"Assembly of God in Lotus but, I..."

"They jump around?"

"Ma'am?"

"Never mind. You will be assisting the doctor, you know. Did you graduate from high school?"

"No, ma'am."

"Can you read?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Count?"

"Oh, yes. I worked a cash register."

"That's not what I asked you."

"I can count ma'am."

"You may not need to. I don't really understand or care to my husband's work. He is more than a doctor; he is a scientist and conducts very important experiments. Sarah will show you to your room."

5.

WOMEN ARE EAGER TO TALK TO ME WHEN THEY HEAR MY LAST NAME. MONEY? THEY CHUCKLE AND ASK THE SAME QUESTION: WHO NAMED ME THAT OR IF ANYBODY DID. IF I MADE IT UP TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL IMPORTANT OR WAS I A GAMBLER OR THIEF OR SOME OTHER KIND OF CROOK THEY SHOULD WATCH OUT FOR? WHEN I TELL THEM MY WHOLE

NAME, FIRST AND LAST, THEY SCREAM WITH LAUGHTER AND SAY: THERE AIN'T NO SUCH THING. ALL MONEY IS FAKE. NO END OF PLEASANT TALK AFTER THAT AND IT'S ENOUGH TO KEEP OUR FRIENDSHIP GOING WAY AFTER IT'S DRIED UP JUST SO THEY CAN MAKE LAME JOKES: HEY, MONEY, HOW YOU MAKING IT? HEY, MONEY! GOT SOME? MONEY, COME ON OVER HERE. YOU OWE ME.

TRUTHFULLY, OTHER THAN A FEW QUICK OPPORTUNITIES, I'VE KNOWN ONLY FOUR WOMEN. THREE OF THEM WERE SERIOUS RELATIONSHIPS AND I LIKED THE SMALL BREAKABLE THING INSIDE EACH ONE. WHATEVER THEIR PERSONALITY,

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Lily IT WAS THE FOURTH WOMAN WHO CHANGED
EVERYTHING. IN HER COMPANY THE LITTLE WISHBONE V
TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN MY OWN CHEST AND MADE ITSELF AT
HOME. IT WAS HER FOREFINGER THAT SCARED ME AND IF IT
WASN'T FOR THAT LETTER, I'D STILL BE HANGING FROM HER
APRON STRINGS. SHE HAD NO COMPETITION EXCEPT FOR THE
HORSES, A MAN'S FOOT AND YCIDRA TREMBLING UNDER MY
ARM.

Lily

le.

The actors were nicer than the actresses. At least they called her by her name and didn't mind if their costume was off or a bit stained. The women called her 'girl', as in "Where's the girl?" "Girl, where's my Pond's cleanser?" Plus they had fits if their costumes weren't perfect.

Lily's resentment was mild because seamstress/wardrobe was a financial promotion from cleaning woman and she got to show off the sewing skills her mother had taught her: slip stitch, blanket stitch, chain, back, yo-yo, shank button and flat. In addition, Ray Stone, the director, was polite to her. He produced two sometimes three plays a season at the Skylight Studio and taught acting classes the rest of the time. So, small and poor as it was, the theater was as busy as a hive all year. In between productions and after classes, the place hummed with intense argument and sweat misted the foreheads of Mr. Stone and his students. Lily thought they were

more animated than on stage. She couldn't help overhearing these quarrels, but she didn't understand anger that wasn't about a scene or how to say some lines. Now that the Skylight was shut, Mr. Stone arrested, and she out of a job it was clear she should have listened closely.

It must have been the play. The one that caused the problem, the picketing, then the visit from two government men in snap brim hats.