



Home Draft, as "Frank Money"

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

Princeton University Library Disclaimer

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

Home Draft, as "Frank Money"

1 folder

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:21:11 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/5138jk46g>

Jan. 22/Feb 9/Mar 20/Mar 22/May 4/May 16/May 21/June
1/June 8/June 13/June 15/June 16/July 3/July 7/July 8/July 11
July 17/

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 OUTSIDE LOTUS, GEORGIA,
THIS HERE ONE HAD PLENTY SCAREY WARNING SIGNS. THE
THREATS HUNG FROM WIRE MESH FENCES WITH WOODEN
STAKES EVERY FIFTY OR SO FEET. 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, INDIFFERENT, NIBBLED GRASS OR LOOKED 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, AVOIDING THE LINE OF PARKED TRUCKS BEYOND, WE LOST OUR WAY. ALTHOUGH IT TOOK FOREVER

TO RE-SIGHT THE FENCE, NEITHER OF US PANICKED UNTIL WE
HEARD VOICES, URGENT BUT LOW. 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 A WHEELBARROW 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 CREAMY PINK AND 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 MOON WAS A
CANTALOUPE 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.
WHEN WE GOT HOME WE EXPECTED TO BE WHIPPED OR AT
LEAST SCOLDED FOR STAYING OUT SO LATE, BUT THE GROWN
UPS DID NOT NOTICE US. SOME DISTURBANCE HAD THEIR
ATTENTION.

WHATEVER YOU THINK AND WHATEVER YOU WRITE DOWN,
KNOW THIS: I REALLY FORGOT ABOUT THE BURIAL. I ONLY
REMEMBERED THE HORSES. THEY WERE SO BEAUTIFUL. SO
BRUTAL. AND THEY STOOD LIKE MEN.

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 on the second floor in room 17, sunk in a morphine sleep. If convinced, they might skip the shot and 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, an ice-crust 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. What about the ocean on a cloudy day seen from the deck of a troop ship—no horizon or hope of one? No. Not that, because among the bodies kept cool below some, maybe, were his home boys. 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 locker. He only 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 a simple cover story for the staff's smoke breaks. His first escape plan was to knock Crane out when next he came to clean up his soiling. That required loosening the cuffs, but it was too ad hoc, so he chose another strategy.

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. He had never been in this neighborhood. Central City was his territory. Nothing in particular stood out except the violent neon of a diner sign and a huge yard sign for a tiny church: AME Zion. If he succeeded in getting through the fire exit

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 clear purpose anywhere. Carrying a book would help, but being barefoot would contradict "purposefulness" and standing still could prompt 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 or without badges but always with 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 ordered to leave their little neighborhood on the edge of town. Twenty-four hours, they were told, or else. "Else" meaning "die". It was early-morning when the warnings came, so the

balance of the day was confusion, anger, and packing. By nightfall most were pulling out—on wheels if available, on foot if not. Yet, in spite of the threats from men, both hooded and not, and pleadings from neighbors, one elderly man named Crawford sat on his porch steps and refused to vacate. Elbows on knees, hands clasped, chewing tobacco, he waited the whole night. Just after dawn at the twenty-fourth hour he was beaten to death with pipes, 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 used to brag, 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. One of the gravediggers told everyone who would listen that Mr. Crawford's eyes had been carved out.

Although shoes were vital for this escape, the patient had none. Four a.m., before sunrise, he managed to loosen the canvas cuffs, unshackle himself and rip off the hospital gown. He put on his

army pants, jacket, and crept shoeless down the hall. Except for the weeping from the room next to the fire 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 footprints left in the snow. He had his service medal in his pocket but no change so it never occurred to him to look for a phone booth to call Lily. He wouldn't have, anyway, not only because of their chilly parting, but also because it would shame him to need her now—a barefoot escapee from the nuthouse. Holding his collar tight at his throat, avoiding shoveled pavement for curb-snow, he ran the six blocks as quickly as hospital drug residue would 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, then wider 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 morning," or "Excuse me", 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. "Good Lord," he mumbled, pushing the door closed. "You a mess."

He tried to smile and failed.

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

"Frank, sir. 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."

"Bodies?" Frank sank down on the sofa only vaguely caring or wondering what the man was talking about.

"Uh huh. To the medical school."

"They sell dead bodies? What for?"

"Well, you know, 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 often wrong."

"Hello ma'am. I'm sorry to..." Still shivering, 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.

"Sorry if the house is too cold for you." Locke noticed Frank's trembling lips. "We accustomed to rain around here, not snow. Where you from, anyway?"

"Central city."

Locke groaned as though that explained everything. "You looking to get back there?"

"No sir. I'm on my way south."

"Well how'd you end up in the hospital 'stead of jail? That's where most barefoot, half-dressed folks go."

"The blood, I guess. A lot of it running down my face."

"How'd it get there?"

"I don't know."

"You don't remember?"

"No. Just the noise. Loud. Real loud." Frank rubbed his forehead. "Maybe I was in a fight?" He put the question as though the reverend might know why he had been bound and sedated for two days.

Reverend Locke gave him a worried glance. Not nervous; just worried. "They must have thought you was dangerous. If you was just sick they'd never let you in. Where exactly you headed, brother?" He was still standing with his hands behind his back.

"Georgia, sir. If I can make it."

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

"Had some when they picked me up," Frank answered, although he could not remember how much Lily had handed him. Just her turned down lips and unforgiving eyes.

"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 cupped his hands before his mouth and breathed on them. "I don't think they brought any charges."

"You wouldn't know it if they did."

Jean Locke returned with a basin of cold water. "Put your feet in here son. 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 pull him in for? The police, I mean." Jean put the question to her husband who shrugged.

What indeed. Other than that B 52 roar, exactly what he was doing to attract police attention was long gone. He couldn't explain it to himself, let alone a gentle couple offering help. If he wasn't in a fight was he peeing on the sidewalk? ? Hollering curses

at some passerby, some schoolchildren? Was he banging his head on a wall or hiding behind bushes in somebody's back yard?

"I must have been acting up," he said. "Something like that." He truly could not remember. Had he thrown himself on the ground at the sudden sound of backfire? Perhaps he started a fight with a stranger or started weeping before trees—apologizing to them for acts he had never committed. What he did remember was that as soon as Lily shut the door behind him, in spite of the seriousness of his mission, his anxiety became unmanageable. He bought a few shots to steady himself for the long trip. When he left the bar anxiety did leave but so did sanity. Back was the free floating rage, the self-loathing disguised as somebody else's fault. And the memories that had ripened at Fort Lawton where, no sooner than discharged he had begun to wander. When he disembarked, he thought to send a telegram home, since no one in Lotus owned a telephone. But along with the telephone operators' strike the telegraph people were striking too. On a two-cent post card, he

wrote, "I am back safe. See you all soon." 'Soon' never arrived because he didn't want to go home without his 'home boys'. He was far too alive to stand before Mike's folks or Stuff's. His easy breath and unscathed self would be an insult to them. And whatever lie he cooked up about how bravely they died, he could not blame their resentment. Besides he hated Lotus. Its unforgiving population, its isolation and especially its indifference to the future were tolerable only if his buddies were there with him.

"How long you been back?" Reverend Locke was still standing. His face softened.

Frank raised his head. "A year about."

Locke scratched his chin and was about to speak when Jean came back with a cup and a plate of soda crackers. "It's just hot water with lots of salt in it," she said. "Drink it up, but slowly. I'll get you a blanket."

Frank sipped twice and then gulped down the rest. When Jean brought more, she said "Son, dip the crackers in the liquid. They'll go down better."

"Jean," said Locke, "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 dream dappled with body parts. He woke in militant sunlight to the smell of toast. It took a while, longer than it should have, to register where he was. The residue of two days' hospital drugging was leaving but slowly. Wherever he was, he was grateful the sun's dazzle did not hurt his head. He sat up and noticed socks folded neatly on the rug like broken feet. Then he heard murmurs from another room. Staring at the socks, the

immediate past came into focus: the hospital escape, the freezing run, finally Reverend Locke and his wife. So he was back in the real world when Locke came in and asked how three hours of sleep felt.

"Good. I feel fine," said Frank.

Locke showed him to the bathroom and placed 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 four one-dollar bills and a wash of coins. It could have been a poker pot, except it was surely 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.

"Seven dollars," said Locke. "That's more than enough for a bus ticket to Portland and maybe to Chicago too. It won't get you to Georgia but when you get to Portland, here's what you do."

He instructed Frank to get in touch with a Reverend Jessie Maynard pastor of a Baptist church, 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 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 a flap torn from an envelope with Maynard's address and told him that Maynard had a big congregation and could offer more help than his own small flock.

Jean had packed six sandwiches, some cheese, some baloney and three oranges into a grocery bag. She 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."

Frank stood at the door, while the Reverend retrieved his coat and car keys.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Locke. I do thank you."

"Stay safe, son" she answered, patting his shoulder.

At the ticket window, Locke converted the coins into paper money and bought Frank's ticket. Before joining the line at the Greyhound's door, Frank noticed a police car cruising by. He knelt as though buckling his galoshes. When the danger passed he stood, then 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. From the windows, through the fur of snow, the landscape became more melancholy when the sun successfully brightened the quiet trees, unable to speak without their leaves. The lonesome-looking houses re-shaped the snow while a child's wagon here and there held mounds of it. Only the 1950 trucks stuck in driveways looked alive. As he mused about what it might be like in those houses, he could imagine nothing at all. So, as was often 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

colorful guts under that oh so thin sheet of flesh. Against the black and white of that winter landscape, blood red took center stage. They never went away, these pictures. Except with Lily. He chose not to think of this trip as a breakup. A pause, he hoped. Yet it was hard to ignore what living with her had become: a tired cruelty laced her voice and the buzz of her disappointment defined the silence. Sometimes Lily's face seemed to morph into the front of a jeep—relentless headlight eyes, a bright, scouring above a grill-like smile. Strange, how she had changed. Remembering what he loved about her: the slight paunch, the backs of her knees and her knockout beautiful face, it was as though someone had re-drawn her as a cartoon. It couldn't all be his fault, could it? Didn't he smoke outside the apartment building? Put more than half his pay on the dresser for her to spend any way she wanted? Do her the courtesy of raising the toilet seat—which she took as an insult. And although he was amazed and amused by the female paraphernalia that hung from the bathroom door or cluttered cabinets, sink edges,

and every available space: douche bags, enema attachment, bottles of Messingill, Lydia Pinkham, Kotex, Neet hair removal, facial creams, mud packs, curlers, lotions, deodorants; he never touched or questioned them. Yes, he sat on occasion for hours in the quiet—numb, unwilling to talk. Yes, he regularly lost the few odd jobs he'd managed to secure. And while sometimes being near her made it hard to breathe, he was not at all sure he could live without her. It wasn't just the lovemaking, entering what he called the kingdom between her legs. Lying with the girl-weight of her arm on his chest, the nightmares folded away and he could sleep. Waking up with her his first thought was not the welcome sting of whiskey. Most important, he was no longer attracted to other women—whether they were openly flirting, or on display for their own private pleasure. He didn't rank them against Lily; he simply saw them as people. Only with Lily, did the pictures fade, move behind a screen in his brain, pale but waiting, waiting and accusing. Why didn't you help him? Pull him along the way you

did Mike? And all of 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 you believed 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 girl. What did she ever do to deserve what happened to her? All unasked questions multiplying like mould in the shadows of the photographs he saw. Before Lily. Before seeing her stand on a chair, stretch, reach up to a high shelf in her cupboard to get the can of Calumet she needed for the meal she was preparing for him. Their first. He should have jumped up, pulled the tin from the shelf. But he did not. He could not take his eyes away from the backs of her knees. As she stretched, her dress of a soft cotton-y flowered fabric, rose up exposing that seldom noticed, ooo so vulnerable flesh. And for a reason he still did not understand, he began to cry. Love plain, simple and so fast it shattered him.

There was no love from Jessie Maynard in Portland. 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 hulk, and very tall veteran. He kept Frank on the back porch near the driveway where a Rocket 98 Oldsmobile 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 two five-dollar bills. Enough to get to Chicago and maybe half way to Georgia. Still, hostile as he was, Reverend Maynard gave him helpful information for his journey. From Green's Traveler's book he copied out some addresses and names of rooming houses, hotels where he would not be turned away.

Frank shoved the list in the pocket of the coat the Reverend gave him and, beyond Maynard's view, stuffed the bills inside his socks. Walking to the train station his nervousness about whether he would have another incident: uncontrollable, suspicious,

destructive and illegal, was shrinking. Besides, sometimes he could tell when a break was coming. The first time it happened when he boarded a bus near Fort Lawton—discharge papers intact—he was quiet, just sitting 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 disappeared and the world became 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. Or was he becoming color-blind? 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, pee and look in the mirror to see if he had an eye infection, but the sign on the door stopped him. He relieved himself in the shrubbery

behind the station, annoyed and a little frightened by the colorless landscape. The bus was about to pull away, but stopped to let him re-board. He had gotten off at the last stop—the bus station in the same city where he had disembarked to the sight of singing high school girls welcoming the war weary vets. Out in the street in front of the bus station the sun hurt him. Its mean light drove him to look for shade. And there, under a Northern oak, the grass turned green. Relieved, he knew he wouldn't shout, smash anything or accost strangers. That came later when, whatever the world's palette, his shame and its fury exploded. Now, if the signs of draining color gave notice, he would have time to hurry up and hide. Thus, when a smattering of color returned, he was pleased to know he wasn't going colorblind and the horrible pictures might fade. Confidence restored, he could abide a day and a half on a train to Chicago without incident.

Signaled by a red cap, he entered a passenger car, pushed through the green separation curtain and found a window seat.

The train's rocking and singing rails soothed him into a rare sleep that was 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 waiter passed by, Frank touched his arm, asking "What happened?" He pointed to the couple.

"You didn't see that?"

"No. What was it?"

"That there is the husband. He got off at Elko 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. Say, you know a good place to eat and get some sleep in Chicago? I got a list here. You know anything about these places?"

The porter took off his cap, replaced it and scanned the list Reverend Maynard had given Frank.

The porter pursed his lips. "To eat go to Booker's diner," he said. "It's close to the station. For sleeping the YMCA is always a good idea. It's on Wabash. These hotels and what they call tourist homes can cost you a pretty penny and they might not let you in with those raggedy galoshes on your feet"

"Thanks," said Frank. "Glad to hear they got high standards."

The waiter chuckled. "You want a shot? I got some Johnny Red in my case." C. Taylor was printed on his name tag.

"Yeah. Oh, yeah."

Frank's taste buds, uninterested in cheese sandwiches or oranges, 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 man had forgotten, Taylor returned with a teacup, saucer and napkin. An inch of Black Label trembled invitingly in the thick white cup.

"Enjoy," said Taylor, then he 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 broken nose. Over and over again.

With his head back on the window frame he napped a bit following the cup of scotch and woke when he heard someone taking the seat next to him. Odd. There were several empty seats throughout the car. He turned and, more amused, than startled, examined his seat partner—a small man wearing a wide-brimmed hat. His pale blue suit sported a long jacket and balloon trousers. His shoes were white with unnaturally pointed toes. The man stared ahead. Ignored, Frank leaned back to the window to pick up his nap. As soon as he did, the zoot suited man got up and disappeared down the aisle. No indentation was left in the leather seat.

Passing through freezing, poorly washed scenery, Frank re-decorated it, mind-painting giant slashes of purple and X's of gold on hills, dripping yellow and green on barren wheat fields. Hours

of re-coloring the western landscape quieted him so 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.

An hour later he was scooping up navy beans and buttering corn bread. Taylor, the waiter, had been right. Booker's was not only a good and cheap place to eat, but its company—diners, counter help, waitresses and a loud argumentative cook—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 who volunteered his name.

"Watson. Billy Watson." He held out his hand.

"Frank Money."

"Where you from, Frank?"

"Aw, man. Korea, Kentucky, San Diego, Seattle, Georgia.

Name it I'm from it."

"You looking to be from here, too?"

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

"Georgia?" The waitress shouted. "I got people in Macon.

No good memories about that place. We hid in an abandoned house for half a year."

"Hid from what? White sheets?"

"Naw. The rent man."

"Same thing."

"Why him?"

"Oh, please. It was 1938."

Up and down the counter there was laughter, loud and knowing. Some began to compete with stories of their own deprived life in the thirties.

Me and my brother slept in a freight car for a month.

Where was it headed?

Away, was all we knew.

You ever sleep in a coop the chickens wouldn't enter?

Aw, man, shut up. We lived in a ice house.

Where was the ice?

We ate it.

Get out!

I slept on so many floors, first time I saw a bed I thought it
was a coffin.

You ever eat dandelions?

In soup, they good.

Hog guts. They call it something fancy now, but butchers used
to throw them out or give them to us.

Feet, too. Necks. All offal.

Hush. You ruining my business.

When the boasts and laughter died down Frank retrieved
Maynard's list.

"You know any of these places? I was told the Y was best."

Billy scanned the addresses and frowned. "Forget that," he said. "Come on home with me. Stay over. Meet my family. You can't leave tonight anyway."

"True," said Frank.

"I'll get you back to the station on time tomorrow. You taking a bus south or the train? Bus is cheaper."

"Train, Billy. Long as there're porters, that's the way I want to travel."

"They sure make good money. Four hundred, five a month. Plus tips."

They walked all the way to Billy's house.

"We'll buy you some decent shoes in the morning," said Billy.

"And maybe a stop at the Goodwill, OK?"

Frank laughed. He had forgotten how raggedy he looked. Chicago, braced by wind and a smug twilight sky, was full of strutting, well-dressed pedestrians moving quickly—as though meeting a deadline somewhere down sidewalks wider than any

Lotus road. By the time they left downtown and entered Billy's neighborhood, night was on its way.

"Say hello to my wife, Arlene, and this is our little man, Thomas."

Frank thought Arlene pretty enough for the stage. Her pompadour crowned a high, smooth forehead over fierce brown eyes.

"You all want supper?" Arlene asked.

"No," Billy said. "We ate already."

"Good." Arlene was getting ready for her night shift at the metal factory. She kissed Thomas on the top of his head as he sat at the kitchen table reading a book.

Billy and Frank leaned over the coffee table re-arranging its do-dads for space to play tonk, talk and nurse beer.

"What work you do?" asked Frank.

"Steel," said Billy. "But we on strike now, so I join the line at the Agency and take any day work I can get."

Earlier when Billy introduced his son to Frank the boy had lifted his left arm to shake hands, Frank noticed the right one sagging at his side. Now, shuffling the deck, he asked what happened to his son's arm. Billy arranged his hands in rifle position. "Drive by cop," he said. "He had a cap pistol. Eight years old, running up and down the sidewalk pointing it. Some red neck rookie thought his dick was under appreciated by his brother cops."

"You can't just shoot a kid," said Frank.

"Cops shoot anything they want. This here's a mob city. Arlene went a little crazy in the emergency room. They threw her out twice. But it turned out all right in the end. The bad arm kept him off the streets and in the classroom. He's a math wiz. Wins competitions all over. Scholarships pouring in."

"So the boy cop did him a favor."

"No. No, no, no. Jesus stepped in and did that. He said, 'Hold on there Mr. Police Guy. Don't hurt the least of mine. He who harms the least of mine disturbs the tranquility of my mind.'"

Beautiful, thought Frank. Bible stuff works every time every place—except the fire zone. "Jesus. Jesus!" That's what Mike said. Stuff yelled it too. "Jesus, God Almighty, I'm fucked, Frank, Jesus, help me."

The math wiz had no objection to sleeping on the sofa and letting his father's new friend have his bed. Frank approached him in the boy's bedroom, saying "Thanks, Buddy."

"My name is Thomas," said the boy.

"Oh, ok, Thomas. I hear you good at math."

"I'm good at everything."

"Like what?"

"Civics, geography, English." His voice trailed off as though he could have cited many more subjects he was good at.

"You'll go far, son."

"And I'll go deep."

Frank laughed at the impudence of the eleven year old.

"What sport you play?" he asked, thinking maybe the boy needed a little humility. But Thomas gave him a look so cold Frank was embarrassed. "I mean..."

"I know what you mean," he said and, as a counterpoint or afterthought, he looked Fran up and down and said "You shouldn't drink."

"Got that right."

A short silence followed while Thomas placed a folded blanket on top of a pillow tucking both under his dead arm. At the bedroom door he turned to Frank. "Were you in the war?"

"I was."

"Did you kill anybody?"

"Had to."

"How did it feel?"

"Bad. Real bad."

"That's good. That it made you feel bad. I'm glad."

"How come?"

"It means you're not a liar."

"You are deep, Thomas." Frank smiled. "What you want to be when you grow up?"

Thomas turned the knob with his left hand and opened the door. "A man," he said and left.

Settling down into darkness shaped by the moonlit edges of the window shades, Frank hoped this fragile sobriety, maintained so far without Lily, would not subject him to those same dreams. But the mare always showed up at night, never beating her hooves in daylight. The taste of scotch on the train, two beers hours later—he'd had no problem limiting himself. Sleep came fairly soon with only one image of fingered feet or was it toe-tipped hands. But after a few hours of dreamlessness, he woke to the sound of a click like the squeeze of a trigger from a gun minus ammo. Frank sat up.

Nothing stirred. Then he saw the outline of the small man, the one from the train, his wide-brimmed hat unmistakable in the frame of light at the window. Frank reached for the bedside lamp. Its glow revealed the same little man in the pale blue zoot suit.

"Hey! Who the hell are you? What you want?" Frank rose from the bed and moved toward the figure. After three steps the zoot suit man disappeared.

Frank went back to bed, thinking that particular living dream was not all that bad, compared to others he'd had. No dogs or birds eating the remains of his comrades like the hallucination he'd had once while sitting on a bench in the city park's rose garden. This one was comic, in a way. He had heard about those suits, but never saw anybody wearing one. If cartoon was the medium and manhood was the message he would have preferred a loincloth and some white paint artfully smeared on forehead and cheeks. Holding a spear, of course. But the zoot suiters chose another costume: wide shoulders, wide brimmed hats, watch chains, pants

ballooned up from narrow cuffs beyond the waist to the chest. It had been enough of a fashion statement to interest riot cops on each coast.

Damn! He didn't want some new dream ghost for company. Unless it was a sign trying to tell him something. Was it about his sister? The letter said "She be dead." Meaning she's alive but sick, very sick and obviously there was no one to help her. If the letter writer, Sarah, couldn't help nor her boss either, well, she must be withering away far from home. Parents dead, one of lung disease, another of a stroke. Strike the grandparents, Salem and Noella. Neither one was capable or willing to travel, assuming they'd even be interested. Maybe that was the reason no Russian made bullet had blown his head off while everybody else he was close to died over there. Maybe his life was preserved for Cee, which was only fair since she had been his original caring for, a selflessness without gain or emotional profit. Even before she could walk he'd taken care of her. The first word she spoke was "Fwank." Two of her

baby teeth were hidden in the kitchen matchbox along with his lucky marbles and the broken watch they had found on the riverbank. Cee suffered no bruise or cut he had not tended. The only thing he could not do for her was wipe the sorrow, or was it panic? from her eyes when he enlisted. He tried to tell her the army was the only solution. Lotus was suffocating, killing him and his two best friends. They all agreed. Frank assured himself Cee would be okay.

She wasn't.

Arlene was still asleep, so Billy cooked breakfast for the three of them.

"What time is her shift over?"

Billy poured pancake batter into a hot frying pan. "She is on the 7 to 11. She'll be up soon, but I won't see her until evening."

"How come?" Frank was curious. The rules and accommodations normal families made was a fascination that did not rise to the level of envy.

"After I walk Thomas to school, I'll be late in line at the Agency because you and me going shopping. By that time all the best day jobs will be taken already. I'll see what leavings I can get. But shopping first. You look like...."

"Don't say it."

He didn't have to. And the woman at the Goodwill store didn't either. She led them to a table of folded clothes and nodded toward a rack of hanging coats and jackets. Choosing was quick. Every item was clean, pressed and organized for size. Even the body odor of the previous owner was mild. The store had a dressing room where a bum or a respectable family man could change clothes and toss the worn in a bin. Suitably dressed, Frank felt proud enough to take his medal from his army pants pocket and pin it to his lapel.

"Okay," said Billy. "Now for some grown man's shoes. Thom McAn or do you want Florsheim?"

"Neither. I ain't going to a dance. Work shoes."

"Got it. You got enough money?"

"Yep."

The police would have thought so too, but during the random search outside the shoe store they just patted pockets, not the inside of work boots. Of the two other men facing the wall, one had his switchblade confiscated, the other a dollar bill. All four lay their hands on the hood of the patrol car parked at the curb. The younger officer noticed Frank's medal.

"Korea?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hey, Dick. They're vets."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Look." The officer pointed to Frank's service medal.

"Go on. Get lost, pal."

The police incident was hardly worth comment. Frank and Billy walked off in silence then stopped at a street vendor's tray to buy a wallet.

"You wearing a suit now. You can't be reaching in your shoe like a kid every time you want a pack of gum." Billy punched Frank's arm.

"How much?" Billy examined the wallets on display.

"A quarter."

"What? A loaf of bread ain't but fifteen cents."

"So?" the vendor stared at his customer. "Wallets last longer. You in or you out?"

Following the purchase Billy accompanied Frank all the way to Booker's diner where they leaned against the plate glass, shook hands, promised to visit each other and parted.

Frank had coffee and flirted with the counter woman from Macon until it was time to board the south bound rails that would take him to Georgia and Cee and who knew what else.

3.

MAMA WAS PREGNANT WHEN WE WALKED OUT OF BANDERA COUNTY, TEXAS. THREE OR MAYBE FOUR FAMILIES HAD TRUCKS OR CARS AND LOADED ALL THEY COULD. BUT NOBODY COULD LOAD THEIR LAND, THEIR CROPS, THEIR STOCK. IS SOMEBODY GOING TO FEED THE HOGS OR LET THEM GO WILD? WHAT ABOUT THAT PATCH BEHIND THE SHED? IT NEEDS TILLING IN CASE IT RAINS. MOST FAMILIES, LIKE MINE, WALKED FOR MILES UNTIL MR. GARDENER CAME BACK FOR A FEW MORE OF US AFTER DROPPING HIS OWN PEOPLE AT THE STATE

LINE. WE HAD TO LEAVE OUR WHEELBARROW FULL OF
STUFF IN ORDER TO PILE INTO HIS CAR, TRADING
GOODS FOR SPEED. MAMA CRIED BUT THE BABY SHE
CARRIED WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN KETTLES,
CANNING JARS AND BEDDING. SHE CONTENTED
HERSELF WITH A BASKET OF CLOTHES HELD ON HER
KNEES. PAPA CARRIED A FEW TOOLS IN A SACK AND
THE REINS OF STELLA, OUR HORSE THAT WE WOULD
NEVER SEE AGAIN. AFTER MR. GARDENER TOOK US AS
FAR AS HE COULD WE WALKED SOME MORE. MY SHOE
SOLE FLAPPED UNTIL PAPA TIED IT UP WITH HIS OWN
SHOE LACE. TWICE DRAYMEN LET US RIDE IN THEIR
WAGON BED. TALK ABOUT TIRED. TALK ABOUT HUNGRY.
I HAVE EATEN TRASH IN JAIL, KOREA, HOSPITALS, AT
TABLE AND FROM CERTAIN GARBAGE CANS. NOTHING,
HOWEVER, COMPARES TO THE LEFT OVERS AT FOOD
PANTRIES. WRITE ABOUT THAT, WHY DON'T YOU? 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 BISCUITS.

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. 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. OF COURSE, SHE WAITED THE NINE
DAYS BEFORE NAMING, LEST DEATH NOTICE FRESH LIFE AND
EAT IT. EVERYBODY BUT MAMA 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 CRAZY PART IS
OUR LAST NAME. MONEY. OF WHICH WE HAD NONE.
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT HEAT IS UNTIL YOU CROSS THE
BORDER FROM TEXAS TO LOUISIANA IN THE SUMMER. YOU
CANT COME UP WITH WORDS THAT CATCH IT.
TREES GIVE UP. TURTLES COOK IN THEIR SHELLS. DESCRIBE
THAT IF YOU KNOW HOW.

4.

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 sink. She filled a bucket from the faucet, poured it into the warming tub water and sat back down in it. She wanted to linger in cool water while a softly suffering 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^g 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 ^{their} grandfather ^{Pappy} Salem was silent. Frank said it was because he was scared Miss Noella would leave him the way his first two wives did. Noella, who had collected a five hundred dollar life insurance payment upon her first husband's death, was a serious catch for an old, unemployable man. Besides, she had a 1939 Ford and owned her house. She was so valuable to Salem 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 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 street women, prostitutes, went to hospitals when they got pregnant, at least they had a roof overhead when their baby came. Being born in the street, or the gutter, as she usually put it, was prelude to a sinful, worthless life.

Noella's house was big enough for two, maybe three, but not for grandparents plus Papa, Mama, Uncle Frank, and two children—one a howling baby. Over the years, the discomfort of the crowded house increased, and Noella, who believed herself superior to everybody else in Lotus, chose to focus her resentment on the little girl born 'in the street.' A frown ^{Creased her} ~~in~~ every glance when the girl entered, ^{her} ~~the~~ lips turned down at every drop of a spoon, trip on the door saddle, a loosening braid. Most of all was the murmur

of "gutter child," as she walked away from a failing that was always on display from her step granddaughter. During those years Cee slept with her parents on the floor, ^{ON} a thin pallet hardly better than the pine slats underneath. Uncle Frank used two chairs put together; young Frank slept on the back porch, on the slant-y wooden swing, even when it rained. Her parents, Luther and Ida, worked two jobs each—Ida picking cotton or working other crops in the day and sweeping lumber shacks in the evening. Luther and Uncle Frank were field workers for ^{two} Jeffery planters and very happy to have the jobs other men had abandoned. Most of the young ones had enlisted in the war and when it was over didn't come back to work cotton, peanuts 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, patriotic mother who had lost a son. Ida's job at the lumber yard gave her a lethal

stet

asthma but it paid off because at the end of those three years with Noella 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 in having their own garden and their own laying hens. The Money's had enough of it to feel at home in this place where neighbors could finally offer friendship instead of pity. Everybody in the neighborhood, except Noella, was stern but quickly open-handed. If someone had an abundance of peppers or collards, they insisted Ida take them. There was okra, fish fresh from the creek, a bushel of corn, all kinds of food that should not go to waste. One woman sent her husband over to shore up their slanted porch steps. They were generous to strangers. An outsider passing through was welcomed even, or especially, if he was running from the law. Like that man, bloody and scared, that they washed up, fed and led away on a mule. It was nice having their own house where 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 comic books, ^{bubble} chewing gum and peppermint balls free, for the children. Jeffrey had the sidewalks, running water, stores, post office, a bank and the school. Lotus was separate, with no sidewalks or indoor plumbing, just ^{fifty} ~~twenty~~ or so houses and two churches, one of which churchwomen used for teaching reading and arithmetic. Cee thought it would have been better if there were more books to read—not just Aesop's Fables and a book of Bible passages for young people—and much much better if she had been permitted to attend the school in Jeffrey.

That, she believed, was the reason she ~~ran off with the rat~~ married a rat. If she hadn't been so ignorant living in a no-count, not-even-a-town, place with only chores, church, ^{school} and nothing else to do, she would have known better. Watched, watched, watched by every grown up from sunrise to sunset and ordered about by not only Noella, but every adult in town. Come here, girl, didn't nobody teach you how

to sew? Yes ma'am. Then why is your hem hanging like that? Yes, ma'am. I mean no Ma'am. Is that lipstick on your mouth? No ma'am. What then? Cherries, ma'am, I mean blackberries. 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 stand up straight 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 and his two best friends enlisted and left town, she fell for what Noella called the first thing she saw wearing belted 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-soled shoes. All the girls were impressed with his

big city accent and what they believed was his knowledge and wide 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 adrift in the space where her brother had been, she had no defense. That's the other side, she thought, of 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 ^{Alsop} ~~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. 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—after a few weeks of ogling 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, and 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 on a Sunday defying the heat of Georgia's version of spring with cool water while Prince was cruising around with his thin-soled shoes pressing the gas pedal in California 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 washtub.

Thelma, who lived upstairs^{in three rooms}, 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 had already threatened to have her arrested. When Ida died, Cee traveled by car to the funeral. Bobby let his fry-cook drive her. As pitiful as the funeral was—homemade pine coffin, no flowers except the two branches of honeysuckle she had snatched—nothing was more hurtful than Noella's name calling accusations. Thief, fool, hussy; she ought to call the sheriff. When Cee got back to the city, she swore never to go back there. A promise kept, even when Papa died of a stroke a month later.

Ycidra agreed with Thelma about her foolishness, but more than anything she wanted desperately to talk to her brother. Her

OCEAN LAPPED CITY, WHO COULD TELL? SOBER AS
SUNLIGHT, I HANDED HER MY ARMY ISSUE AND COULDN'T
TAKE MY EYES AWAY FROM HERS. I MUST HAVE LOOKED THE
FOOL, BUT I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE ONE. I FELT LIKE I'D COME
HOME. FINALLY. I'D BEEN WANDERING. NOT TOTALLY
HOMELESS, BUT CLOSE. DRINKING AND HANGING OUT IN
MUSIC BARS ON JACKSON STREET, SLEEPING ON THE SOFAS
OF DRINKING BUDDIES OR OUTDOORS, BETTING MY FORTY-
THREE DOLLARS OF ARMY PAY IN CRAP GAMES AND POOL
HALLS. AND WHEN THAT WAS GONE, I TOOK QUICK DAY
JOBS UNTIL THE NEXT CHECK CAME. I KNEW I NEEDED HELP
BUT THERE WASN'T ANY. WITH NO ARMY ORDERS TO
FOLLOW OR COMPLAIN ABOUT I ENDED UP IN THE STREETS
WITH NONE.

I REMEMBER EXACTLY WHY I HADN'T HAD A DRINK IN FOUR
DAYS AND NEEDED TO DRY CLEAN MY CLOTHES. IT WAS
BECAUSE OF THAT MORNING WHEN I WALKED OVER BY THE

BRIDGE. A CROWD WAS MILLING THERE ALONG WITH AN
AMBULANCE. WHEN I GOT CLOSE ENOUGH I SAW A MEDIC'S
ARMS HOLDING A LITTLE GIRL VOMITING WATER. BLOOD
RAN FROM HER NOSE. A SADNESS HIT ME LIKE A PILE DRIVER.
MY STOMACH FELL AND JUST THE THOUGHT OF WHISKEY
MADE ME WANT TO HEAVE. I RUSHED OFF FEELING SHAKEY
THEN I SPENT A FEW NIGHTS ON BENCHES IN THE PARK UNTIL
THE COPS RAN ME OFF. WHEN ON THE FOURTH DAY I
CAUGHT MY REFLECTION IN A STORE WINDOW I THOUGHT IT
WAS SOMEBODY ELSE. SOME DIRTY, PITIFUL LOOKING GUY.
HE LOOKED LIKE THE ME IN A DREAM I KEPT HAVING WHERE
I'M ON A BATTLEFIELD ALONE. NOBODY ANYWHERE. SILENCE
EVERYWHERE. I KEEP WALKING BUT I DON'T FIND ANYBODY
AT ALL. RIGHT THEN I DECIDED TO CLEAN UP. TO HELL WITH
THE DREAMS. I NEEDED TO MAKE MY HOME BOYS PROUD.
BE SOMETHING OTHER THAN A HAUNTED, HALF CRAZY
DRUNK. SO WHEN I SAW THIS WOMAN AT THE CLEANERS, I

WAS WIDE OPEN FOR HER. IF IT WASN'T FOR THAT LETTER, I'D STILL BE HANGING FROM HER APRON STRINGS. SHE HAD NO COMPETITION IN MY MIND EXCEPT FOR THE HORSES, A MAN'S FOOT AND YCIDRA TREMBLING UNDER MY ARM.

YOU ARE DEAD WRONG IF YOU THINK I WAS JUST SCOUTING FOR A HOME WITH A BOWL OF SEX IN IT. I WASN'T. SOMETHING ABOUT HER FLOORED ME; MADE ME WANT TO BE GOOD ENOUGH FOR HER. IS THAT TOO HARD FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND? EARLIER YOU WROTE ABOUT HOW SURE I WAS THAT THE BEAT UP MAN ON THE TRAIN TO CHICAGO WOULD TURN AROUND WHEN THEY GOT HOME AND WHIP THE WIFE WHO TRIED TO HELP HIM. NOT TRUE. I DIDN'T THINK ANY SUCH THING. WHAT I THOUGHT WAS THAT HE WAS PROUD OF HER BUT DIDN'T WANT TO SHOW HOW PROUD HE WAS TO THE OTHER MEN ON THE TRAIN. I DON'T THINK YOU KNOW MUCH ABOUT LOVE.
OR ME.

6.

The actors were much nicer than the actresses. At least they called her by her name and didn't mind if their costume didn't quite fit or was stained from old makeup. The women called her 'girl', as in "Where's the girl?" "Say girl, where's my jar of Pond's?" And they raged when their hair or wigs didn't obey.

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 then they were 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 down, 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. The play, from her point of view, wasn't very good. Lots of talking, very little action, but not so bad it had to be closed. Certainly not as bad as the one they rehearsed but couldn't get permission to perform. "The Morrison Case" it was called if her memory was right.

The pay was less at Wang's Heavenly Palace Dry Cleaners and there were no tips from actors. Yet working in daylight was an improvement over walking in darkness to get to and from the tiny

rented room to the theater. Lily stood in the pressing room, recalling a recent irritation that had blossomed into anger. The response she had recently gotten from the real estate agent had her seething. Frugal and minding her own business, she had added enough to what her parents left her to leave the rooming house and put a down payment on a house of her own. She had circled an advertisement for a lovely one for five thousand dollars and, although it was far from her work at the cleaners, she would happily commute from so nice a neighborhood. The stares she had gotten as she strolled the neighborhood did not trouble her, since she knew how neatly dressed she was and how perfect her straightened hair. Finally, after a few afternoon strolls, she consulted a realtor. When she described her purpose and the couple of houses on sale she had found, the agent smiled and said, "I'm really sorry."

"They're sold already?" asked Lily.

The agent dropped her eyes then decided not to lie. "Well, no, but there are restrictions."

"On what?"

The agent sighed. Obviously not wanting to have this conversation, she lifted her desk blotter and pulled out some stapled papers. Turning a page, she showed Lily an underlined passage. Lily traced the lines of print with her forefinger:

NO PART OF SAID PROPERTY HEREBY CONVEYED SHALL EVER BE USED OR OCCUPIED BY ANY HEBREW OR BY ANY PERSON OF THE ETHIOPIAN, MALAY, OR ASIATIC RACE EXCEPTING ONLY EMPLOYEES IN DOMESTIC SERVICE.

"I've got rentals and apartments in other parts of the city. Would you like...."

"Thank you," said Lily. She raised her chin and left the office as quickly as pride let her. Nevertheless, when her anger cooled and after some mulling, she returned to the agency and rented a second floor, one bedroom apartment near Jackson Street.

Although her employers were far more considerate than the actresses at Skylight Studio, after six months of pressing and steaming for the Wangs, and even after they gave her a seventy-five cents raise, she was feeling stifled. She still wanted to buy that house or one like it. Into that restlessness stepped a tall man with a bundle of army issue clothes for 'same day' service. The Wang couple, at lunch in the back room, had left her to attend the counter. She told the customer the 'same day' service applied only if requests were made before noon. He could pick his things up the next day. She smiled when she spoke. He did not return the smile, but his eyes had such a quiet, far away look—like people who made their living staring at ocean waves—she relented.

"Well, I'll see what I can do. Come back at 5:30."

He did and, holding the clothes hangers over his shoulder, waited on the sidewalk for half an hour until she came out. Then he offered to walk her home.

"Do you want to come up?" Lily asked him

"I'll do anything you say."

She laughed.

They slid into each other, becoming a couple of sorts within a week. But months later, when he said he had to leave her for family reasons, Lily felt one abnormal pulse beat. That was all. Living with Frank had been glorious at first. Its break down was more of a stutter than a single eruption. She had begun to feel annoyance, rather than alarm, when she came home from work and saw him sitting on the sofa staring at the floor. One sock on, the other in his hand. Neither calling his name nor leaning toward his face moved him. So Lily learned to let him be and trounce off to the kitchen to clean up whatever mess he'd left. The times when it was as good as at the beginning, when the sweetness she felt waking up with him next to her, his dog tags under her cheek had become memories she was less and less inclined to dredge up. She regretted the loss of ecstasy, but assumed its heights would at some point return.

Meantime the small mechanics of life needed attention: unpaid bills, frequent gas leaks, mice, runs in her last pair of hose, hostile quarrelling neighbors, dripping faucets, frivolous heating, street dogs and the insane price of hamburger. None of these irritations did Frank take seriously and in all honesty she could not blame him. She knew that buried underneath the pile of complaints lay her yearning for her own house. It infuriated Lily that he shared none of her enthusiasm for achieving that goal. In fact he seemed to have no goals at all. When she questioned him about the future, what he wanted to do, he said, "Stay alive." Oh, she thought. The war still haunted him. So, whether annoyed or alarmed, she forgave him much: like that time in February when they went to a church convention held in a high school football field. Known more for table after table of delicious free food than for proselytizing, the church welcomed everybody. And everybody came—not only members of the congregation. The non-believers, crowding the entrance and lining up for food, outnumbered the Believers.

Literature passed out by serious-looking young people and sweet faced elders was stuffed into purses and side pockets. When the morning rain stopped and sunlight sashayed through the clouds, Lily and Frank exchanged their slickers for sweaters and strolled hand in hand to the stadium. Lily held her chin a bit higher and wished Frank had had a haircut. People gave him more than a passing glance, probably because he was so tall, or so she hoped.

Anyway, they were in high spirits all afternoon—chatting with people and helping children load their plates. Then smack in the middle of all that cold sunlight and warm gaiety, Frank bolted. They had been standing at a table, piling seconds of fried chicken on their plates, when a little girl with slant-y eyes reached up over the opposite edge of the table to grab a cupcake. Frank leaned over to push the platter closer to her. When she gave him a broad smile of thanks, he dropped his food and ran through the crowd. People, those he bumped into and others, parted before him—some with frowns, others simply agape. Alarmed and embarrassed, Lily

put down her paper plate. Trying hard to pretend he was a stranger to her, she walked slowly, her chin up, making no eye contact, past the bleachers and away from the exit Frank had taken.

When she returned to the apartment, she found it, thankfully, empty. How could he change so quickly? Laughing one second, terrified the next? Is there some violence in him that could be directed toward her? He had moods, of course, but was never argumentative or the least threatening. Lily drew up her knees and, with her elbows leaning on them, pondered her confusion and his; the future she wanted and the question of whether he could share it. Dawn light seeped through the curtains before he returned. Lily's heart jumped when she heard the key turn in the lock, but he was calm and, as he put it, "beat up with shame."

"Did it have something to do with your time in Korea that spooked you?" Lily never asked about the war and he never brought it up. Good, she thought. Better to move on.

Frank smiled. "My time?"

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know. It won't happen again. Promise." Frank enclosed her in his arms.

Things went back to normal. He worked at a car wash in the afternoons, she at Wang's weekdays and doing alterations on Saturdays. They did less and less socializing, but Lily didn't miss it. The occasional movie was enough until they sat through "He Ran All the Way." Afterwards Frank spent part of the night clenching his fist in silence. There were no more movies.

Lily's sights were set elsewhere. Little by little she was being singled out for her sewing skills. Twice she had made lace for a bridal veil and, after embroidering a linen tablecloth at the request of a well-to-do customer, her reputation grew. Receiving multiple special orders, she made up her mind to have her own place no matter what and open a dressmaking shop in it, perhaps becoming

a costume designer some day. After all, she had professional experience in the theater.

As Frank promised, there was no other public explosion. Still. The multiple times when she came home to find him idle again just sitting on the sofa staring at the rug were unnerving. She tried; she really tried. But every bit of housework—however minor—was hers: his clothes scattered on the floor; food encrusted dishes in the sink, catsup bottles left open, beard hair in the drain, water logged towels bunched on bathroom tiles. Lily could go on and on. And did. Complaints grew into one-sided arguments, since he wouldn't engage.

"Where were you?"

"Just out."

"Out where?"

"Down the Street."

Bar? Barbershop? Pool hall. He certainly wasn't sitting in the park.

"Frank, could you rinse the milk bottles before you put them on the stoop?"

"Sorry. I'll do it now."

"Too late. I've done it already. You know, I can't do everything."

"Nobody can."

"But you can do something, can't you?"

"Lily, please. I'll do anything you want."

"What I want? This place is ours."

The fog of displeasure surrounding Lily thickened. Her resentment was justified by his clear indifference along with his combination of need and irresponsibility. Their bed work, once so downright good to a young woman who had known no other, became a duty. On that snowy day when he asked to borrow all that money to take care of his sick sister in Georgia, Lily's disgust fought with relief and lost. She picked up the dog tags he'd left on the bathroom sink and hid them away in a drawer next to her

bankbook. Now the apartment was all hers she could clean properly, put things where they belonged and wake up knowing they had not been moved or smashed to pieces. The loneliness she felt before Frank walked her home from Wang's Cleaners began to dissolve and in its place a shiver of freedom, of earned solitude, of choosing the wall she wanted to break through, minus the burden of shouldering a tilted man. Unobstructed and undistracted, she could get serious and develop a plan to match her ambition and succeed. That was what her parents had taught her and what she had promised them. To choose, they insisted, and not ever be moved. Let no insult or slight knock her off her ground. Or, as her father was fond of misquoting, "Gather up your loins, daughter. You named Lillian Florence Jones after my mother. A tougher lady never lived. Find your talent and drive it."

The afternoon Frank left, Lily moved to the front window, startled to see heavy snowflakes powdering the street. She decided to shop right away in case the weather became an impediment.

Once outside she spotted a leather change purse on the sidewalk. Opening it she saw it was full of coins—mostly quarters and fifty-cent pieces. Immediately she wondered if anybody was watching her. Did the curtains across the street shift a little? The passengers in the car rolling by—did they see? Lily closed the purse and placed it on the porch post. When she returned with a shopping bag full of emergency food and supplies the purse was still there although covered in a fluff of snow. Lily didn't look around. Casually she scooped it up and dropped it into the groceries. Later, spread out on the side of the bed where Frank slept, the coins, cold and bright, seemed a perfectly fair trade. In Frank Money's empty space real money glittered. Who could mistake a sign that clear? Not Lillian Florence Jones.

LOTUS, GEORGIA IS THE WORST PLACE IN THE WORLD,
 WORSE THAN ^{ANY} ~~THE~~ BATTLEFIELD. AT LEAST ON THE FIELD THERE
 IS PURPOSE, EXCITEMENT, DARING AND SOME CHANCE OF
 WINNING ALONG WITH MANY CHANCES OF LOSING. DEATH
 IS A SURE THING BUT LIFE IS JUST AS CERTAIN. PROBLEM IS
 YOU CAN'T KNOW IN ADVANCE.

IN LOTUS YOU DID KNOW IN ADVANCE SINCE THERE WAS
 NO FUTURE JUST ~~MORE UNBEARABLE~~ ^{stretches of Killing} TIME. THERE WAS NO
 PURPOSE, NOTHING TO WIN AND, SAVE FOR ^{somebody else's} ~~A~~ QUIET DEATH,
 NOTHING TO SURVIVE ^{OR} WORTH SURVIVING FOR. IF NOT FOR
 MY TWO FRIENDS I WOULD HAVE SUFFOCATED BY THE TIME I
 WAS TWELVE. ^{*} NOBODY IN LOTUS KNEW ANYTHING OR
 WANTED TO LEARN ANYTHING. ^{sure} IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE
 ANYPLACE YOU'D WANT TO BE. SEVENTY-FIVE OR SO PEOPLE
 LIVING IN SOME FIFTY RICKITY HOUSES. NOTHING TO DO BUT

* They
 Along with kept
 a little sister ~~watered down~~
 the ~~my~~ ^{my} ~~difference~~ ^{difference}
 of ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~hatefulness~~ ^{hatefulness}
 of Grandparents
 an afterthought.

MINDLESS WORK IN FIELDS YOU DIDN'T OWN, COULDN'T
OWN, AND WOULDN'T OWN IF YOU HAD ANY OTHER
CHOICE. MY FAMILY WAS CONTENT OR MAYBE JUST
HOPELESS LIVING THAT WAY. I UNDERSTAND. HAVING BEEN
RUN OUT OF ONE TOWN, ANY OTHER THAT OFFERED SAFETY
AND THE PEACE OF SLEEPING THROUGH THE NIGHT AND NOT
WAKING UP WITH A RIFLE IN YOUR FACE WAS MORE THAN
ENOUGH. BUT ^{it was} MUCH LESS THAN ENOUGH FOR ME. WAS I
SUPPOSED TO BE HAPPY WITH A LITTLE ^{quick} SEX WITHOUT LOVE
EVERY NOW AND THEN? MAYBE SOME ACCIDENTAL OR
PLANNED MISCHIEF? COULD MARBLES, BASEBALL AND
SHOOTING RABBITS BE REASONS TO GET OUT OF BED IN THE
MORNING? MIKE, STUFF AND ME COULDN'T WAIT TO GET
OUT AND AWAY, FAR AWAY.

THANK THE LORD FOR THE ARMY.

ONLY MY SISTER IN TROUBLE COULD FORCE ME TO GO IN
EVEN THAT DIRECTION.

I HAD to but I dreaded it.

[new 7.

Jackie's ironing was flawless. Her floor scrubbing was not as good, but Noella kept her on because her skill with plackets, shirt cuffs, collars and yokes could not be surpassed. It was a delight to see those small hands lift effortlessly the heavy iron, a pleasure to note how easily she manipulated the wood stove's flame. How adept she was at sensing how hot the metal, the difference between its scorch and its perfect temperature. She was twelve with that combination of raucous child's play and adult execution of chores. You could

see her in the road blowing bubble gum and handling a paddleball at the same time. ^{Or hanging upside down from a tree branch} Ten minutes later she might be scaling fish or plucking hens like a professional. Noella blamed herself for the poor quality of Jackie's mopping. The head of the mop was made up of a bundle of rags, not the absorbent rope of better ones. She pondered telling her to scrub on her knees but chose not to observe that thin little girl body bent down on all fours. Salem had been asked repeatedly to get a new mop, to hitch a ride with Haywood to Jeffrey and buy the supplies they needed. His excuse, "You know how drive. Go yourself," was one of many.

Noella sighed and tried not to compare Salem with her first husband. My, my what a sweet man, she thought. Not just caring, energetic and a good Christian man, but a moneymaker too. He owned a gasoline station right where the main road split off into a country road, the ideal spot to need a tank refill. Sweet man. Awful, awful that he was shot to death by someone who wanted or envied his gas station. The note left on his chest said 'Get the hell

out.' It happened during the deepest part of the Depression and the sheriff had more important things on his mind. Searching the county for a common shooting was not one of them. He took the note and said he'd look into it. If he did, he didn't say what he ^{threatening} found. Fortunately, her husband had savings, insurance and a piece of abandoned property belonging to his cousin in Lotus, Georgia. Frightened and certain that whoever killed her husband might come after her, she sold the house, packed the Ford with all it could hold and moved from Heartsville, Alabama to Lotus. Her fear dwindled over time, but not enough to be comfortable living alone. So marrying a Lotus widower named Salem Money solved that problem for a while anyway. Looking for someone to help her fix the house Noella spoke to the pastor at God's Congregation church. He gave her one or two names, but hinted that Salem Money would have the time and the skill. It was true, and since Salem was one of the few unmarried men around it seemed natural that they would join forces. They drove all the way to Mt. Haven,

Noella at the wheel, for a marriage license that the clerk refused to issue because they did not have birth certificates. Or so she said. The arbitrariness of that denial, however, did not stop them. They took vows at God's Congregation.

Just as Noella began to feel safe and comfortable in this haven far from Alabama, a passel of Salem's relatives—ragged and run out of their home—arrived: his son Luther, the wife Ida, a nephew Frank, a grandson Frank and a howling newborn baby girl.

It was impossible. All she and Salem had done to fix up the house was for nothing.

She had to plan ahead to use the outhouse; there was no privacy at all. Waking up early, as was her habit, for a leisurely breakfast she had to step over the sleeping or nursing or snoring bodies scattered through her house. She adjusted and had her breakfast when the men left and Ida took the baby to the fields with her. But it was the infant's night crying that infuriated her most.

When Ida asked Noella if she would care for the baby because she could no longer see to her in the field, Noella thought she would lose her mind. She could hardly refuse but agreed simply because the four-year old brother was clearly the real mother to the infant.

Those three years were a trial even though the homeless family was grateful, doing whatever she wished and never complaining. They were allowed to keep all of their wages because when they had enough they could rent their own place and leave hers. Tight quarters, inconvenience, extra chores, an increasingly indifferent husband, her haven was destroyed. The cloud of her displeasure at being so put upon found a place to float: around the heads of the boy and girl. It was they who paid although Noella believed she was merely a strict step grandmother, not a cruel one.

The girl was hopeless and had to be corrected every minute. The circumstances of her birth did not bode well. There was probably a medical word for her awkwardness, for a memory so short even a

switching could not help her remember to close the chicken coop at night, or not to spill food on her clothes every single day. "You got two dresses. Two! You expect me to wash one of them up after every meal?" Only the hatred in the eyes of her brother kept Noella from slapping her. He was always protecting her, soothing her as though she were his pet kitten.

Finally the family moved into their own house. Peace and order reigned. Years passed, children grew and left, parents sickened and died, crops failed, storms knocked down homes and churches, but Lotus held on. Noella too until she began to feel dizzy too often. That's when she persuaded Jackie's mother to let the girl do ⁰ certain chores for her. The only problem was Jackie's dog, the girl's constant minder. A black and brown Doberman, she never left Jackie's side. Even when the girl was asleep or inside any house in the neighborhood the Doberman ^{lay its head between} folded its paws just ^{the door} outside. Never mind thought Noella, as long as the dog remained outside in the yard or on her porch. She needed someone to do

the chores that required sustained standing. Also from Jackie she could glean bits of news about what was going on in the village.

She learned that the city boy Cee had run off with had stolen Noella's car and left her within the month. That she was too ashamed to come back home. Figures, thought Noella. Everything she ever surmised about that girl was true. Even getting married legitimately was beyond her. Noella had had to insist on some formality, some record. Otherwise the couple would have just another lax 'living together' arrangement. Having no obligations left one of them free to steal a Ford and the other to deny responsibility.

Jackie also described the condition of two families that had lost sons in Korea. One was the Durham's, Michael's folks. Noella remembered him as a nasty piece of work and close friends with Frank. Him and another boy named Abraham, son of Maylene and Howard Stone, the one they called 'Stuff', was also killed. Frank alone of the trio survived. He, so the chatter went, was never

coming back to Lotus. The reaction of the Durhams and the Stones to the deaths of their sons was appropriate, but you would have thought they were waiting for the bodies of saints to be sent home. Didn't they know or remember how all three of those boys angled for invitations to that hairdresser's house? Talk about loose. Talk about disgrace. Mrs. K, they called her. Uppity didn't do her justice. When Reverend Alsop went to see her and cautioned her not to entertain local teenagers, she threw a cup of hot coffee on his shirt. A few grandmothers had encouraged the reverend to speak to her, but the fathers didn't care about Mrs. K's services nor did the mothers. Teenagers had to learn somewhere and a local widow who did not want their husbands was more of a boon than a sin. Mrs. K did not solicit or charge. Apparently she simply satisfied herself (and teenaged boys) whenever her appetite sharpened. Besides nobody styled hair better. Noella would not go across the road to say 'good morning' let alone sit in the abomination of her kitchen.

All this she told Jackie and although the girl's eyes glazed over, she did not argue or contradict Noella as Salem consistently did.

She was a profoundly unhappy woman. And in spite of marrying to avoid being by herself, disdain^{of others} kept her solitary if not completely alone. What soothed her was a fairly fat savings account, owning property and having one, actually two, of the few automobiles in the neighborhood. Jackie was as much company as she wanted. A good listener, great worker she knew the girl was worth much more than the quarter Noella paid her each day.

And then it stopped.

Mr. Haywood said somebody had thrown two puppies out of a truck right before his eyes. He braked, picked up the one that had not had its neck broken, a female, and brought her to Lotus for the children he gave comic books and candy to. Although a few were delighted and took care of the puppy, others teased it. Jackie, however, adored the dog, feeding, protecting and teaching her

tricks. No wonder she immediately latched on to Jackie who loved her most. She named her Bobby.

Bobby didn't normally eat chickens. She preferred pigeons; their bones were sweeter. And she did not hunt for food; she merely ate whatever meal given her or that she came across. So the hen that pecked for worms around Noella's porch steps was a clear invitation. The stick that Noella used to beat Bobby off the hen's carcass was the same one she used to keep herself upright.

Jackie heard the yelps and let the iron burn its shape on a pillowcase to dash out of the house and rescue Bobby. Neither one returned to Noella's house.

Without help or a supportive husband she was as alone as she had been after her first husband died, as she had been before marrying Salem. It was too late to curry friendship with neighboring women whom she had made sure knew their level and hers. Pleading with Jackie's mother was humiliating enough as well as fruitless since the answer was "Sorry." Now she had to be

content with the company of ^{whom} ~~what~~ she prized most of all—herself. Perhaps it was that partnership between Noella and Noella that caused the minor stroke she suffered on a hot night in July. Mr. Haywood was summoned to drive her to the hospital in Mt. Haven. There after a long wait in the corridor she received treatment that curtailed further damage. Her speech was slurred but she was ambulatory—if carefully so. Salem saw to her basic needs, but was relieved to learn he could not understand a word she ^{spoke} ~~said~~. Or so he said.

It was a testimony to the good will of church going and God fearing neighboring women that they brought her ^{plates} ~~dishes~~ of food, swept the floors, washed her linen and would have bathed her too, except her pride and their sensitivity forbade it. They did not even mention to each other the mysterious ways of the Lord or His wonders to perceive.

7.

COLD. MORE THAN FREEZING. KOREA COLD HURTS,
CLINGS LIKE A GLUE YOU CAN'T PEEL OFF.
BATTLE IS SCAREY, YEAH, BUT IT'S ALIVE. ORDERS, GUT
QUICKENING, COVERING BUDDIES, KILLING—CLEAR, NO ^{DEEP}
THINKING NEEDED. WAITING IS THE HARD PART. ^{Hours} ~~DAYS~~ AND
^{Hours} ~~DAYS~~ PASS DOING WHATEVER YOU COULD TO CUT THROUGH
THE FLAT, FLAT DAYS. WORST OF ALL IS SOLITARY GUARD
DUTY. HOW MANY TIMES CAN YOU TAKE OFF YOUR GLOVES
TO SEE IF YOUR FINGERNAILS ARE GOING BLACK OR CHECK
YOUR BROWNING. YOUR EYES ARE TRAINED TO SEE OR HEAR
MOVEMENT. IS THAT SOUND THE MONGOLIANS? THEY ARE
WAY WORSE THAN THE NORTH KOREANS. THE MONGOLS
NEVER QUIT; NEVER STOP. WHEN YOU THINK THEY ARE DEAD

THEY TURN OVER AND SHOOT YOU IN THE GROIN. EVEN IF YOU'RE WRONG AND THEY'RE AS DEAD AS A DOPE HEAD'S EYES IT'S WORTH THE WASTE OF AMMO TO MAKE SURE.

THERE I WAS, HOUR AFTER HOUR LEANING ON A MAKESHIFT WALL. NOTHING TO SEE BUT A QUIET VILLAGE FAR BELOW, ITS THATCHED ROOFS MIMICKING THE NAKED HILLS BEYOND, A TIGHT CLUSTER OF FROZEN BAMBOO STICKING UP THROUGH SNOW AT MY LEFT. ^{That's} ~~IT WAS~~ WHERE WE DUMPED OUR GARBAGE. I STAYED ALERT AS BEST I COULD, LISTENING, WATCHING FOR ANY SIGN OF SLOE EYES OR PADDED HATS. MOST OF THE TIME NOTHING MOVED. BUT ONE AFTERNOON I HEARD A THIN CRACKLING IN THE BAMBOO STANDS. A SINGLE SOMETHING WAS MOVING. I KNEW IT WASN'T THE ENEMY—THEY NEVER CAME IN ONES—SO I FIGURED IT WAS A TIGER. WORD WAS THEY ROAMED UP IN THE HILLS BUT NO BODY HAD SEEN ONE. THEN I SAW THE ^{Bamboo} ~~BAMBOO~~ PART, LOW TO THE GROUND. A DOG MAYBE? NO.

IT WAS A CHILD'S HAND STICKING OUT AND PATTING THE GROUND. I REMEMBER SMILING. REMINDED ME OF CEE AND ME TRYING TO STEAL PEACHES OFF THE GROUND UNDER MISS ROBINSON'S TREE, SNEAKING, CRAWLING BEING AS QUIET AS WE COULD SO SHE WOULDN'T SEE US AND GRAB A BELT. I DIDN'T EVEN TRY TO RUN HER OFF THAT FIRST TIME, SO SHE CAME BACK ALMOST EVERY DAY, PUSHING THROUGH BAMBOO TO SCAVENGE OUR TRASH. I SAW HER FACE ONLY ONCE. MOSTLY I JUST WATCHED HER HAND MOVING BETWEEN THE STALKS TO PAW GARBAGE. EACH TIME SHE CAME IT WAS AS WELCOME AS WATCHING A BIRD FEED HER YOUNG OR A HEN SCRATCHING, SCRATCHING DIRT FOR THE WORM SHE KNEW FOR SURE WAS BURIED THERE. SOMETIMES HER HAND WAS SUCCESSFUL RIGHT AWAY, AND SNATCHED A PIECE OF GARBAGE IN A BLINK. OTHER TIMES THE FINGERS JUST STRETCHED, PATTING, SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING, ANYTHING, TO EAT. LIKE A TINY STARFISH—LEFT

HANDED, LIKE ME. I'VE WATCHED RACOONS MORE

CHOOSEY ^{RAIDING} ~~WITH~~ TRASH CANS. SHE WASN'T PICKY.

ANYTHING NOT METAL, GLASS OR PAPER WAS FOOD TO HER.

SHE RELIED NOT ON HER EYES, BUT HER FINGERTIPS ALONE TO

FIND NOURISHMENT. K RATION REFUSE, SCRAPS FROM

PACKAGES SENT WITH LOVE FROM MOM FULL OF CRUMBLING

BROWNIES, COOKIES, FRUIT. AN ORANGE, SOFT NOW AND

BLACKENED WITH ROT LIES JUST BEYOND HER FINGERS. SHE

FUMBLES FOR IT. MY RELIEF GUARD COMES OVER, SEES HER

HAND AND SHAKES HIS HEAD SMILING. AS HE APPROACHES

HER SHE RAISES UP AND IN WHAT LOOKS LIKE A HURRIED,

EVEN AUTOMATIC, GESTURE SHE SAYS SOMETHING IN

KOREAN. SOUNDS LIKE 'YUM YUM'.

SHE SMILES, REACHES FOR THE SOLDIER'S CROTCH,

TOUCHES IT. IT SURPRISES HIM. YUM YUM? AS SOON AS I

LOOK AWAY FROM HER HAND TO HER FACE, SEE THE TWO

MISSING TEETH, THE FALL OF BLACK HAIR ABOVE EAGER EYES,
HE BLOWS HER AWAY. ONLY THE HAND REMAINS IN THE
TRASH, CLUTCHING ITS TREASURE, A SPOTTED, ROTTING
ORANGE.

EVERY CIVILIAN I EVER MET IN THAT COUNTRY WOULD (AND
DID) DIE TO DEFEND THEIR CHILDREN. STILL I KNEW THERE
WERE A FEW WHO MARKETED THEM. THINKING BACK ON IT
NOW, I THINK THE GUARD FELT MORE THAN DISGUST. I
THINK HE FELT TEMPTED AND THAT IS WHAT HE HAD TO KILL.
YUM YUM.

TK

The Georgian ~~was its name.~~ It boasted a country ham and ~~grits~~ ^{red gravy}

breakfast. ~~mtk~~ ^{see over}

~~He held~~ Mike in his arms ^{ing} while he thrashed ^{ing} and jerked, ^{while Frank} whispering ^{yelled}

^{at} to him. "Stay here, man. Come on. Stay with me." When Mike

opened his mouth to speak, Frank leaned in close and heard his

friend say "Smart, Smart. Don't tell Mama." Later when Stuff asked

what he said, Frank lied. "He said 'Kill the fuckers'." By the time

medics got there, the urine on Mike's pants had frozen and Frank ^{had}

had to beat away pairs of black birds, aggressive as bombers, from

his friend's body. It changed him. What died in his arms gave a

grotesque life to ^{his childhood.} memory. ^{Shared} The sharing of Lucky Strikes and girls;

they were Lotus boys who had known each other before they were

toilet trained, fled Texas the same way, disbelieving the

unbelievable malignance of strangers. As children they had chased

after straying cows, made themselves a ball park in the woods,

fumbled and giggled their way into sex. As teens they made use of

Miss K, the ^{hairdresser} ~~solitary~~ widow, who, depending on her mood, helped them hone their sexual skills. They argued, fought, laughed, mocked and loved one another without ever having to say so.

Frank had not been brave before. He had simply done what he was told and what was necessary. He even felt nervous after a kill. Now he was reckless, lunatic, firing, dodging the scattered parts of men. The begging, the howling for help he could not hear clearly until a C 51 dropped its load on the enemies' nest. In the post blast silence the pleas wafted like the sound of a cheap cello coming from a chute of cattle smelling their blood-soaked future. Now, with Mike gone he was brave, whatever that meant. There were not enough dead gooks or chinks in the world to satisfy him. The copper smell of blood no longer sickened him; it gave him appetite. Weeks later Red was pulverized and ~~all~~ of Stuff's blood ^{seeped} ~~emptied~~ out from his blasted arm. ^{*} Those two, Stuff and Red, were especially close. "Neck" was dropped from Red's nickname

because, hating northerners more than them, he preferred to

** while he ~~lay~~ ^{coolly} ~~stuffed~~ it. He searched ~~for~~ ^{the} ~~absent~~ ^{arm} around. Frank ~~helped~~ ^{helped} him to locate the limb ~~half~~ ²⁰ feet away in the snow.*

associate with the three Georgia boys—Stuff most of all. Now they were meat.

Frank^{had} waited, oblivious of receding gunfire, until the medics left and the grave crew arrived. There was too little left of Red to warrant the space of a whole stretcher, so he shared his remains with another's. Stuff had gotten a whole stretcher to himself, *and holding ~~onto~~ his severed arm in the connected one* he though, lay on *it* and died on it before the agony got to his brain.

Afterwards, for months on end, all ^{Frank}he could think was "But I know them. I know them and they know me." If he heard a joke Mike would love, he would turn his head to tell it to him—then a nanosecond of embarrassment before realizing he wasn't there. And never again would he hear that loud laugh, or watch him entertain whole barracks with imitations of movie stars and raunchy jokes. Sometimes, long after he'd been discharged he ~~saw~~ Stuff's *would see* profile in a car stopped in traffic until the heart jump of sorrow announced his mistake. Abrupt, unregulated memories put a

For months on end
 watery shine in his eyes. Only alcohol dispersed his best friends,
 the hovering dead he could no longer hear, talk to or laugh with.

But before that, before the deaths of his homeys, he had
 witnessed the other one. The scavenging child clutching an orange,
 smiling, then saying "yum yum" before the guard blew her head off.

Sitting on the train to Atlanta, Frank ~~discovered~~ ^{realized} that those
 memories, powerful as they were, did not crush him or throw him
 into ~~black~~ ^{paralyzing} despair. He could recall every detail, every sorrow,
 without needing alcohol to steady him. Was this the fruit of
 sobriety?

~~Just outside~~ ^{after dawn} Chattanooga the train slowed then stopped for no
 apparent reason. It soon became clear that something needed
 repair and it might take an hour maybe more. A few coach
 passengers moaned, others took advantage and against the
 instructions of the conductor stepped outside to stretch their legs.

~~Club and sleeping car passengers called for food and more drinks.~~
^{troubled} ^{those} ^{Club cars} ^{called orders} ^{coffee}
 The part of the track where the train had halted ran alongside a

peanut farm but one could see a feed store sign two or three hundred yards beyond. Frank, restless but not ^{impatient} irritable strolled toward the feed store. It was closed, but ^{at that hour} next to it ^{was open} ~~was~~ a small shop selling soda pop, Wonder bread ^{cigarettes,} and other products local country folk wanted. Bing Crosby's 'Don't Fence me In' crackled through a radio ^{with} weak reception. The woman behind the counter was in a wheelchair but quick as a humming bird gliding to the freezer and extracting the can of Dr. Pepper Frank asked for. He paid, winked at her, got a glare in return then went outside to drink. ^{*} On the other side of the road stood a shambling broke down house with a shiny new Cadillac parked in front. Frank crossed the road to admire the car. Its taillights were slivers like shark fins. As he got closer he heard voices—women's voices—cursing and grunting coming from behind the house. He ~~went to look,~~ ^{walked forward the squeals} expecting to see some male aggressor showing off. But there on the ground were two women fighting. Rolling around, punching, kicking the air they beat one another in the dirt. Their hair and

stretch wide
front windows generally
wrapped around above the hood,

The sun
rose
quickly over very
little
to cast a
shadow: only
the feed store
the shop
and one
shambly
broke
house
on the
other side of the road

clothes were in disarray. The surprise to Frank was a man standing ^{them ~~tooth~~ picking his teeth} near ~~simply~~ watching. He turned when Frank approached. He was a big man with flat bored eyes.

"What the fuck you lookin' at?" *He did not remove the toothpick.*

Frank froze. The big man came right up to him and shoved Frank's chest. Twice. Frank dropped his Dr. Pepper and swung hard at the man who, minus agility like so many really big men, fell immediately. Frank leaped on the prone body and began to punch his face, eager to ^{ram that toothpick into his throat.} ~~turn it into~~ mush. The thrill that came with each hit was wonderfully familiar. Unable to stop and unwilling to, Frank kept going even though the big man was unconscious. The women stopped clawing each other and pulled at Frank's collar.

"Stop!" they screamed. "You're killing him! You bastard, get off him!"

Frank paused and turned to look ^{at} ~~as~~ the big man's rescuers. One bent down to cradle the man's head. The other wiped blood from her nose and called the big man's name. "Sonny. Sonny. Oh

9.

HER EYES. FLAT, WAITING, ALWAYS WAITING. NOT PATIENT,
NOT HOPELESS, BUT SUSPENDED. CEE. YCIDRA. MY SISTER.
NOW MY ONLY FAMILY. WHEN YOU WRITE THIS DOWN,
KNOW THIS: SHE WAS A SHADOW FOR MOST OF MY LIFE, A
PRESENCE MARKING ITS OWN ABSENCE, OR MAYBE MINE.
WHO AM I WITHOUT HER—THAT UNDERFED GIRL WITH THE

SAD WAITING EYES? HOW SHE TREMBLED WHEN WE HID FROM THE SHOVELS. I COVERED HER FACE, HER EYES, HOPING SHE HAD NOT SEEN THE FOOT POKING OUT OF THE GRAVE.

THE NOTE SAID 'SHE BE DEAD.' I DRAGGED MIKE TO SHELTER, AND FOUGHT OFF THE BIRDS BUT HE DIED ANYWAY. I HELD ON TO HIM, TALKED TO HIM FOR AN HOUR BUT HE DIED ANYWAY. I STAUNCHED THE BLOOD ^{slowly seeping} ~~RUNNING~~ FROM THE PLACE STUFF'S ARM SHOULD HAVE BEEN. I FOUND IT A FEW FEET AWAY AND ^{gave it to him} ~~PUT IT ON THE STRETCHER NEXT TO HIM IN~~ CASE THEY COULD SEW IT BACK ON. HE DIED ANYWAY. NO MORE PEOPLE I DIDN'T SAVE. NO MORE.

AND NOT MY SISTER. NO WAY.

SHE WAS THE FIRST PERSON I EVER TOOK RESPONSIBILITY FOR. DOWN DEEP INSIDE HER LIVED MY SECRET PICTURE OF MYSELF—A STRONG GOOD ME TIED TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE HORSES AND THE BURIAL OF A STRANGER. GUARDING

HER, FINDING A WAY THROUGH TALL GRASS AND OUT OF
THAT ^{for bidden} PLACE, NOT BEING AFRAID OF ANYTHING—SNAKES OR
WILD OLD MEN. I WONDER IF SUCCEEDING AT THAT WAS THE
SEED OF ALL THE REST. IN MY LITTLE BOY HEART I KNEW THAT
IF THEY FOUND US OR TOUCHED HER I WOULD KILL.

29 LISTEN HERE. I STOPPED WORRYING ABOUT MY EYES A
LONG TIME AGO. I DON'T GIVE A DAMN WHAT COLOR THE
WORLD IS OR IF IT HAS NONE AT ALL. IF SEEING IT OR NOT
SEEING IT IS THE LEAST AND THE LAST OF MY CRAZY, I'M
HAPPY TO LIVE THAT WAY. ~~SO STOP, OKAY?~~

10.

Frank walked down Auburn Street across from the station on Walnut. A hairdresser, a short order cook, a woman called

Thelma—finally he got the make of car and the name of an unlicensed cab driver who might take him to Cee's ^{Suburban} workplace.

Arriving late because of the delay near Chattanooga he spent half the day up and down Auburn Street collecting information. Now it

was too late. The cab driver wouldn't be at his post until early ^{the} next

morning. Frank decided to get something to eat, walk around a while then look for a place to sleep.

He ambled along till twilight and was on his way to the Royal Hotel when some young thugs jumped him.

He liked Atlanta. Unlike Chicago the pace of everyday life was human here. Apparently there was time in this city. Time to roll a cigarette just so; time to examine produce with the eye of a diamond cutter. And time for old men to gather outside a storefront and do nothing but watch their dreams go by: the gorgeous cars of criminals and the hip-sway of women. Time, too, to instruct one another, pray for one another and chastise children in the pews of a hundred churches. It was that amused affection that led him to drop his guard. He'd had lots of sad memories, but no ghosts or nightmares for two days, and he was desperate for black coffee in the mornings, not the wake-up jolt whiskey once gave him. So, the night before the gypsy cab would be available, he ambled down the streets taking in the sights on his way to the hotel. Had he been alert instead of day dreaming, he would have recognized that cigarette and gasoline smell, the rapid sneaker tread as well as the

gang breath—the odor of scared children depending on group bravery. Not military but playground. At the mouth of an alley.

But he missed it all and two of the five sneaks grabbed his arms from behind. He used his foot to stomp one of theirs and in the space left by the boy's howling fall, Frank swung around and broke the jaw of the other one with his elbow. That was when one of the final three brought a pipe down on his head. Frank fell and in the blur of pain felt the body search followed by limping and running feet. He crawled toward the street and sat in darkness against a wall until his eyesight cleared.

"Need help?" The silhouette of a man framed by a streetlight stood before him.

"What? Oh."

"Here." The man held out his hand to help Frank up.

Patting his pockets while still wobbly, Frank cursed. "Damn." They'd stolen his wallet. Grimacing, he rubbed the back of his head.

"Want me to call the cops, or not?"

"Hell, no. I mean, no, but thanks."

"Well, take this." The man stuffed a few dollar bills in Frank's jacket pocket.

"Oh, thanks. But I don't need any...."

"Forget it, brother. Stay in the light."

Later, sitting in an all night diner, Frank remembered the Samaritan's long ponytail catching the light of a street lamp. He gave up hope of a good night's sleep at the hotel. His nerves were taut and pinging so he chose to stay as long as he could there playing with cups of black coffee and a plate of eggs. It wasn't going well. If only he had a car but Lily wouldn't hear of it. She had other plans. Poking the eggs his thoughts turned to what Lily must be doing, thinking. She seemed relieved at his departure. And, truth be told, so was he. He was now convinced his ~~fierce~~ *like Moltown* attachment to her was medicinal. Effectively, whether she knew it

or not, Lily displaced his disorder, his rage and his shame. The displacements convinced him the emotional wreckage no longer existed. In fact, it was biding its time.

Tired and uneasy Frank left the diner and ~~strolled~~^{moved} aimlessly down the street, pausing suddenly when he heard a trumpet screech. The sound came from down a short flight of steps ending at a half open door. Appreciative voices underscored the trumpet's squeal and if anything could match his mood it was that sound. Frank went inside. He preferred be bop to blues and happy-making love songs. After Hiroshima, the musicians understood as early as anyone that Truman's bomb changed everything and only scat and bebop could say how. Inside the room, small and thick with smoke, a dozen or so very intense people faced a trio: trumpet, piano and drums. The piece went on and on and, except for a few nodding heads, no one moved. Smoke hovered; minutes ticked by. The pianist's face was slick with sweat as was the trumpeter's. The drummer, however, was dry. Clearly, there would

be no musical end; the piece would stop only when a player was exhausted at last, when the trumpet player took the horn out of his mouth and the pianist tickled the keys before executing a final run. But when it happened, when the pianist and the trumpeter were through the drummer was not. He kept on and on. After a while his fellow musicians turned to look at him and recognized what they must have seen before. The drummer had lost control. The rhythm was in charge. After long minutes, the pianist stood and the trumpet player put down his horn. Both lifted the drummer from his seat and took him away, his sticks moving to a beat both intricate and silent. The audience clapped their respect and their sympathy. Following the applause a woman and another piano player took the stage. She sang a few bars of 'Starlight' then broke into a scat that cheered everybody up.

Frank left when the place emptied. It was 4:00 a.m., two hours until Mr. gypsy cab was due. His headache less active, he sat on the curb to wait. It never arrived.

No car, no cab, no friends, no information, no plan—finding transportation from city to suburb in these parts was rougher than a battlefield. It was 7:30 a.m. when he boarded a bus filled with silent day workers, housekeepers, maids and grown lawn boys. Once beyond the business part of the city, they dropped off the bus like reluctant divers into inviting, blue water high above the pollution below. Down there they would search out the debris, the waste, re-supply the reefs and duck the predators swimming through lacey fronds. They would clean, cook, serve, mind, launder, weed and mow.

Thoughts of violence alternating with those of caution rushed through Frank as he watched for the right street sign. He had no idea of what he would do once he got to where Cee was. Maybe, as with the drummer, rhythm would take charge. Maybe he too would be escorted away flailing helplessly, imprisoned in his own strivings. Suppose no one was home. He would have to break in. No. He couldn't let things get so out of control that it would

endanger Cee. Suppose—but there was no point in supposing on unfamiliar ground. By the time he saw the correct street sign, it was too late to pull the cord. He calmed down while walking back several blocks before arriving at the M.D. sign on the lawn of Dr. Beauregard Scott's house. Near the steps bloomed a dogwood tree. He considered whether to knock on the front door or the back. Caution suggested the back.

"Where is she?"

The woman who opened the kitchen door did not question him. "Downstairs," she said.

"You Sarah?"

"I am. Be as quiet as you can." She nodded toward the stairs that led to the doctor's office and Cee's room.

When Frank got to the bottom of the stairs he saw through an open door a small white-haired man sitting at a large desk. The man looked up.

"What? Who are you?" The doctor's eyes widened then narrowed at the insult of being invaded by a stranger. "Get out of here! Sarah! Sarah?"

Frank moved closer to the desk.

"There's nothing to steal here! Sarah!" The doctor reached for the telephone. "I'm calling the police. Now!" His forefinger was in the dial's zero when Frank knocked the telephone out of his hand.

Knowing completely now the nature of the threat, the doctor opened his desk drawer and pulled out a gun.

A .38, thought Frank. Clean and light. But the hand that held it shook.

The doctor raised the gun and pointed it at what in his fear ought to have been flaring nostrils, foaming lips and the red-rimmed eyes of a wild man. Instead he saw a quiet, even serene, face of a not to be fooled with man.

He pulled the trigger.

The click from the empty chamber was both tiny and thunderous. The doctor dropped the gun and ran around the desk, past the intruder and up the stairs. "Sarah!" he shouted. "Call the police, woman! Did you let him in here?"

Dr. Beau ran down the hallway where another telephone sat on a small table. Standing next to it was Sarah, her hand pressed firmly on the cradle. There was no mistaking her purpose.

Meanwhile Frank walked into the room where his sister lay. Asleep? He felt her pulse. Light or none? He leaned in to hear breath or no breath. She was cool to the touch, none of the early warmth of death. Frank knew death and this was not it—so far. He picked her up in his arms, carried her up the stairs.

Sarah and the doctor stood locked in an undecipherable stare. As Frank passed around them with his motionless burden, Dr. Beau cast him a look of anger-shaded relief. No theft. No violence. No harm. Just the kidnapping of an employee he could

easily replace, although, knowing his wife, he dare not replace Sarah—not yet anyway.

"Don't overplay your hand," he told her.

"No, sir," answered Sarah, but her hand remained pressed down on the telephone until the doctor descended the stairs to his office.

Once Frank had fumbled and eased his way through the front door and reached the sidewalk, he turned to glance back at the house and saw Sarah ^{at} in the doorframe. She waved. Goodbye—to him and Cee or perhaps to her job. Outside he raised Cee to her feet, draped her right arm around his neck. Her head on his shoulder, her feet not even mimicking steps, Frank got to the bus stop and waited for what seemed like an eternity. He was amazed at the number of fruit trees in so many yards—pear, cherry, apple, fig.

There were very few passengers on the bus back to town, and he was relieved to be relegated to the back where bench seats

allowed the two of them space and protected passengers from the sight of a man carrying, dragging, an obviously beat up, drunken woman. Heads turned to register their revulsion at the unredeemed couple inserting their filthy life into their midst.

When they left the bus, it took a while to locate a gypsy cab parked away from the licensed line of taxis in waiting, and more time to persuade the driver to accept the probable ruin of his back seats.

"She dead?"

"Drive."

"I am driving, brother, but I need to know if I'm going to jail or not."

"I said, drive."

"Where we going?"

"Lotus. Twenty miles down 95."

"That'll cost you."

"Don't worry 'bout it."

→ over)

"She don't look too good to me."

"Look where you going, man. The road ahead ain't in your mirror."

"I'm doing it, ain't I? I just don't want no trouble with cops."

"You don't shut your mouth, police will be the best thing happen to you." Frank's voice was stern but his ears were pricked for the cry of a siren.

"She bleedin' on my seat? You have to pay me extra if she mess up my back seat."

"Say another word, just one, and you won't get a fucking dime."

The driver turned on his radio. Fats, full of joy and happiness already achieved, sang out his thrill on Blueberry Hill.

her skin hot to his touch
Cee, unconscious, ~~but~~ occasionally moaning, was dead weight, so Frank had trouble fumbling in his pockets for the fare. Barely had the taxi door shut when dust kicked up behind the tires

as the driver got as fast and as far away as he could from Lotus and its dangerous half-crazy country folk.

Cee's feet had stopped working completely. Her toes scooted the gravel as the tops of her feet were dragged down the narrow road to Miss Ethel Fordham's house. Frank picked her up again and carrying his sister tightly in his arms, mounted the porch steps. A group of children stood in the road fronting the yard watching a girl bat a paddleball like a pro. A beautiful black dog ^{lying} next to her ^{rose up and} seemed as awestruck as the ^{children} others. When the ^{children} noticed the man and woman on Miss Ethel's porch, their mouths opened wide. One boy pointed at the blood-stained dress and sniggered. The girl hit him on the head with her paddle, saying, "Shut it!"

A peck basket of green beans lay by a chair. On a small table were a bowl and paring knife. Through the screen door Frank heard singing. "Nearer my God to Thee..."

"Miss Ethel? You in there?" Frank hollered, "It's me, Smart Money. Miss Ethel?"

The singing stopped and Ethel Fordham looked through the screen door, not at him, but at the slight form in his arms. She frowned. "Ycidra? Oh, girl."

Frank couldn't explain and didn't try to. He helped Miss Ethel get Cee on the bed after which she told Smart Money to wait outside. She lifted up Cee's dress and parted her legs.

"Have mercy," she whispered. ^{She's on fire} Then, to the lingering brother,
^
"Go snap those beans. I got work to do."

11

It was so bright, brighter than he remembered. The sun, having sucked away the blue from the sky, loitered there in a white heaven, menacing Lotus, torturing its landscape, but failing, failing, constantly failing to silence it: children still laughed, ran, shouted their games; women sang in their back yards while pinning wet sheets on clothes lines; occasionally a soprano was joined by a neighboring alto or a tenor just passing by. "Take me to the waters. Take me to the waters. Take me to the waters. To be baptized." Frank had not been on this dirt road since 1950⁴⁹, nor had he stepped on the wooden planks covering the rain's washed-out places. There were no sidewalks, but every front and back yard sported flowers protecting vegetables from disease and predators—marigolds, nasturtiums, dahlias. Orange, purple, pink and China blue. Had these trees always been this deep, deep green? The sun did its best to burn away the blessed peace found

under the wide, old trees; did her best to ruin the pleasure of being among those who do not want to degrade or destroy you. Try as she might, she could not scorch the yellow butterflies away from scarlet rose bushes, nor choke the songs of birds. Her punishing heat did not interfere with Mr. Fuller and his nephew sitting in the bed of a truck—the boy on a mouth organ, the man on a six-string banjo. The nephew's bare feet sway; the uncle's left boot taps out the beat. Colors, silence and music enveloped him.

This feeling of safety and good will, he knew, was exaggerated, but savoring it was real. He convinced himself that somewhere nearby pork ribs sizzled on a yard grill and inside the house there was potato salad and coleslaw and early sweet peas too. A pound cake cooled on top of an icebox. And he was certain that on the bank of a stream they called Wretched, a woman in a man's straw hat fished. For shade and comfort she would be sitting under the sweet bay tree, the one with branches spread like arms.

When he reached the cotton fields beyond Lotus, he saw acres of pink blossoms spread under the malevolent sun. They would turn red and drop to the ground in a few days to let the young bolls through. The planter would need help for the laying by and Frank would be in line then and again for the picking when it was time. Like all hard labor, picking cotton broke the body but freed the mind for dreams of vengeance, images of illegal pleasure—even ambitious schemes of escape. Cutting into these big thoughts were the little ones. Another kind of medicine for the baby? What to do about an uncle's foot swollen so large he can't put it in a shoe. Will the landlord be satisfied with half the rent this time?

While Frank waited for the hiring all he thought about was whether Cee was getting better or worse. Her boss back in Atlanta had done something—what he didn't know—to her body and she was fighting a fever that wouldn't go down. The calamus root Miss Ethel depended on wasn't working, that he did know. But that was

all he knew because he was blocked from visiting the sick room by every woman in the neighborhood. Apparently they believed his maleness would worsen her condition. The women took turns nursing Cee and each had a recipe for her cure. What they all agreed upon was his absence from her bedside. Miss Ethel didn't even want him on her porch.

"Go on off somewhere," she told him, "and stay gone till I call for you."

Frank thought the woman looked seriously scared. "Don't you let her die," he said. "You hear me?"

"Get out," she waved him away. "You not helping, Mr. Smart Money, not with that evil mind-set. Go 'way I said."

So he busied himself cleaning and repairing his parents' house that had been empty since his father died. With what was left of his shoe money, he had just enough to re-rent it for a few months. He rummaged a hole next to the cook stove and found the matchbox. Cee's two baby teeth were so small next to his winning marbles: a

bright blue one, an orange, and his favorite one, a rainbow mix.

The Bulova watch was still there. No stem, no hands—the way time functioned in Lotus, pure and subject to anybody's interpretation.

Soon as the blossoms began to fall, Frank headed down the rows of cotton to the shed that the farm manager called his office. He hated this place once. The dust blizzards it created when fallow, the thrips wars and blinding heat. As a boy assigned to trash work while his parents were far away in the productive fields his mouth was dry with fury. He messed up as much as he could so they would fire him. They did. His father's scolding didn't matter because he and Cee were free to invent ways to occupy that timeless time when the world was fresh.

If she died because some arrogant, evil doctor sliced her up, war memories would pale beside what he would do to him. Even if it took the rest of his life, even he spent the balance of it in prison. Imagining the death of his sister, he joined the other pickers who planned sweet vengeance under the sun.

In spite of the satisfaction of
defeating an enemy without
blood letting,

It was late June by the time Miss Ethel sent ~~a little girl~~ named Jackie to tell him he could stop by and July when Cee was well enough to move into their parents' home.

Cee was different. Two months surrounded by countrywomen who loved mean, had changed her. The women handled sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal, invading, braggart who needing whipping. They didn't waste their time or the patient's with sympathy and they met the tears of the suffering with resigned contempt.

First the bleeding: "Spread your knees. This is going to hurt. Hush up. Hush, I said."

Next the infection: "Drink this. You puke, you got to drink more, so don't."

Then the repair: "Stop that. The burning is the healing. Be quiet."

Later, when the fever died and whatever it was they packed into her vagina was douched out, Cee described to them the little

she knew about what had happened to her. None of them had asked. Once they knew she was working for a doctor, the eye rolling and tooth sucking was enough to make clear their scorn. And nothing Cee remembered—how pleasant she felt upon awakening after Dr. Beau had stuck her with a needle to put her to sleep; how passionate he was about the value of the examinations; how she believed the blood and pain that followed was a menstrual problem—nothing made them change their minds about the medical industry.

"Men know a slop jar when they see one."

"You ain't a mule to be pulling some evil doctor's wagon."

"You a privy or a woman"?

"Who told you you was trash?"

"How was I supposed to know what he was up to?" Cee tried to defend herself.

"Misery don't call ahead. That's why you have to stay awake, otherwise it just walks on in your door."

"But—"

"But nothing. You good enough for Jesus. That's all you need to know."

As she healed, the women changed tactic and stopped their berating. Now they brought their embroidery, crocheting, and finally they used Ethel Fordham's house as their quilting center. Ignoring those who preferred new, soft blankets, they practiced what they had been taught by their mothers during the period that rich people called the depression and they called life. Surrounded by their comings and goings, listening to their talk, their songs, following their instructions Cee had nothing to do but pay them the attention she had never given them before. They were nothing like Noella who drove Salem hard and now, suffering a minor stroke, did nothing at all. Although each of her nurses was markedly different from the others: in looks, dress, manner of speech, food and medical preferences, their similarities were glaring. There was

no excess in their gardens because they shared everything. There was no trash or garbage in their homes because they had a use for everything. They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else that needed them. The absence of common sense irritated but did not surprise them. Laziness was more than intolerable to them; it was inhuman. Whether you were in the field, the house, your own back yard you had to be busy. Sleep was not for dreaming; it was for gathering strength for the coming day. Conversation was accompanied by tasks: ironing, peeling, shucking, sorting, sewing, mending, washing or nursing. You couldn't learn age, but adulthood was there for all. Mourning was helpful but God was better and they did not want to meet their Maker and have to explain a wasteful life. They knew He would ask each of them one question: 'What have you done?'

Cee remembered that one of Ethel Fordham's sons had been murdered up north in Detroit. Maylene Woods had one working eye, the other having been pierced at the sawmill by a wood chip.

No doctor was available or summoned. Both Hanna Rayburn and Clover Reid, lame from polio, had joined their brothers and husbands hauling lumber to their storm damaged church. Some evil, they believed, was incorrigible. So its demise was best left to the Lord. Other kinds could be mitigated. The point was to know the difference.

The final stage of Cee's healing had been, for her, the worst. She was to be sun-smacked which meant spending at least one hour a day with her legs spread open to the blazing sun. Each woman agreed that that embrace would rid her of any remaining womb sickness. Cee, shocked and embarrassed, refused. Suppose someone, a child, a man, saw her all splayed out like that?

"Nobody going to be looking at you," they said. "And if they do? So what?"

"You think your twat is news?"

"Stop worrying your head," Ethel Fordham advised her. "I'll be out there with you. The important thing is to get a permanent cure. The kind beyond human power."

So Cee, bristling with embarrassment, lay propped on pillows at the edge of Ethel's tiny back porch soon as the sun's violent rays angled in that direction. Each time anger and humiliation curled her toes and stiffened her legs.

"Please, Miss Ethel. I can't do this no more."

"Be quiet, girl." Ethel was losing patience. "So far as I can tell every other time you opened your legs you was tricked. You think sunlight going to betray you too?"

The fourth time she did relax since an hour of lying rigid was so tiring. She forgot about whether anybody was peeping through the Bantam corn stalks in Ethel's garden or hiding behind the sycamores beyond it. Whether ten days of that surrender to the sun helped her female parts or not, she would never know. What followed the final sun-smacking hour, when she was allowed to sit

modestly in a rocking chair, was the demanding love of Ethel Fordham that soothed and strengthened her the most.

The woman pulled a chair next to Cee's on the porch. She placed on the table between them a plate of oven hot biscuits and a jar of blackberry jam. It was the first non-medicinal food Cee was allowed to eat and the first taste of sugar. Eyes fixed on her garden Ethel spoke quietly.

"I knew you before you could walk. You had those big, pretty eyes. They was full of sadness, though. I seen how you tagged along with your brother. When he left you ran off with that waste of the Lord's space and time. Now you back home. Mended finally but you might just run off again. Don't tell me you going to let Noella decide again who you are? If you thinking about it, let me tell you something first. Remember that story about the goose and the golden eggs? How the farmer took the eggs and how greed made him stupid enough to kill the goose? I always thought a dead goose could make at least one good meal. But gold?

Shoot. That was always the only thing on Noella's mind. She had it, loved it and thought it put her above everybody else. Just like the farmer. Why didn't he plow his land, seed it and grow something to eat? "

Cee laughed and spread jam on another biscuit.

"See what I mean? Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's some limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Noella or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world."

Cee put her finger in the blackberry jar. She licked it.

"I ain't going nowhere Miss Ethel. This is where I belong. Home."

Weeks later Cee stood at the stove pressing young cabbage leaves into a pot of simmering water seasoned with two ham hocks. When Frank got off work and opened the door, he noticed again how healthy she looked—glowing skin, back straight not hunched in discomfort.

"Hey," he said. "Look at you."

"Bad?"

"No, you looking good. Feeling better?"

"I'll say. Much, much better. Hungry? This is just a no count meal. Want me to catch a hen?"

"No. Whatever you cooking is fine."

"I know you used to like Mama's fry-pan bread. I'll make some."

"Want me to slice up these tomatoes?"

"Uh huh."

"What's all that stuff on the sofa?" A pile of cloth scraps had been there for days.

"Pieces for quilting."

"You ever need a quilt down here in your whole life?"

"No"

"Then why you making one?"

"Visitors buy them."

"What visitors?"

"People over in Jeffrey, Mount Haven. Miss Johnson from Good Shepherd buys them from us and markets them to tourists down in Mount Haven. If mine is turns out to be any good, Miss Ethel might show it to her."

"Nice."

"More than nice. We scheduled for electricity soon and running water. Both cost money. An electric fan alone is worth it."

" Then when I get paid you could get yourself a Philco refrigerator."

"What we need with a cold box? I know how to can and anything else I need I go outside and pick, gather or kill it. Besides who cooks up in here, me or you?"

Frank laughed. This Cee was not the girl who trembled at the slightest touch of the real and vicious world. Nor was she the not even fifteen year-old who would run off with the first boy who asked her. And she was not the household help who believed whatever happened to her while drugged was a good idea, good because a white coat said so. Frank didn't know what took place during those weeks at Miss Ethel's house surrounded by those women with seen-it-all eyes. Their low expectation of the world was always on display. Their devotion to Jesus and each other centered them and placed them high above their lot in life. They delivered unto him a Cee who would never again need his hand over her eyes or his arms to stop her murmuring bones.

"Your womb can't never bear fruit."

Miss Ethel Fordham told her that. Without sorrow or alarm, she had passed along the news as though she'd examined a Burpee seedling overcome by marauding rabbits. Cee didn't know then what to feel about that news, no more than what she felt about Dr. Beau. Anger wasn't available to her—she had been so stupid, so eager to please. As usual she blamed being dumb on her lack of schooling, but that excuse fell apart the second she thought about the skilled women who had cared for her, healed her. Some of them had to have Bible verses read to them because they could not decipher print themselves. Yet they knew how to repair what a bandit doctor had plundered. If not schooling, then what? Branded early as an unlovable, barely tolerated "gutter child" by Noella, the only one whose opinion mattered to her parents. Exactly like what Miss Ethel said, she had agreed with the label and believed herself worthless. Ida never said "You my child. I dote on you. You wasn't born in no gutter. You born into my arms. Come on over here and let me give you a hug." If not her mother,

somebody, somewhere should have said those words and meant them.

Frank alone valued her. While his devotion shielded her, it did not strengthen her. Should it have? Why was that his job and not her own? Cee didn't know any soft, silly women. Not Thelma, or Sarah, or Ida and certainly not the women who healed her. Even Mrs. K, who let the boys play nasty with her, did hair and slapped anybody who messed with her, in or outside her hairdressing kitchen.

So it was just herself. In this world with these people she wanted to be the person who would never again need rescue. Not from Noella through the lies of the Rat, not from Dr. Beau through the courage of Sarah and her brother. Sun-smacked or not, she wanted to be the one who rescued her own self. Did she have a mind, or not? Wishing would not make it so, nor would blame, but thinking might. If she did not respect herself, why should anybody else?

Okay. She would never have children to care about and give her the status of motherhood.

Okay. She didn't have and probably would never have a mate. Why should that matter? Love? Please. Protection? Yeah, sure. Golden eggs? Don't make me laugh.

Okay. She was penniless. But not for long. She would have to invent a way to earn a living.

What else?

After Miss Ethel gave her the bad news she went into the back yard and stirred coffee grounds and eggshells into the soil around her tomato plants. Blank and unable to respond to Ethel's diagnosis, Cee watched her. A small bag of garlic cloves hung from her apron strings. For the aphids, she said. An aggressive gardener, Miss Ethel blocked or destroyed enemies and nurtured plants. Slugs curled and died under vinegar-seasoned water. Bold, confident raccoons cried and ran away when their tender feet touched crushed newspaper or chicken wire. Corn stalks safe from

skunks slept in peace under paper bags. Under her care pole beans curved then straightened to advertize their readiness. Strawberry tendrils wandered, their scarlet berries shining in morning rain. Honeybees gathered to salute illisium and drink the juice. Her garden was not Eden; it was so much more than that. For her the whole predatory world threatened her garden, competing with its nourishment, its beauty, its benefits and its demands. And she loved it.

What in this world did Cee love? She would have to think about that.

Meantime her brother was there with her, which was very comforting but she didn't need him as she had before. He had literally saved her life, but she neither missed nor wanted his fingers at the nape of her neck telling her not to cry, that everything would be all right. Some things, perhaps, but not everything.

"I can't have children," Cee told him. "Never." She lowered the flame under the pot of cabbage.

"The doctor?"

"The doctor."

"I'm sorry, Cee. Really sorry." Frank moved toward her.

"Don't," she said, pushing his hand away. "I didn't feel anything at first when Miss Ethel told me but now I think about it all the time. It's like there's a baby girl somewhere waiting to be born. She's somewhere close by in the air, in this house and she picked me to be born to. And now she has to find some other mother." Cee began to sob.

"Come on, girl. Don't cry," whispered Frank.

"Why not? I can be miserable if I want to. You don't need to try and make it go away. It shouldn't go away. It's just as sad as it ought to be and I'm not going to hide from what is true just because it hurts." Cee wasn't sobbing anymore, but the tears were still running down her cheeks.

Frank sat down, clasped his hands and leaned his forehead on them.

"You know that toothless smile babies have?" she said. "I keep seeing it. I saw it in a green pepper once. Another time a cloud curved in such a way it looked like.... " Cee didn't finish the list. She simply went to the sofa, sat and began sorting and resorting quilt pieces. Every now and then she wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hand.

Frank stepped outside. Walking back and forth in the front yard, he felt a fluttering in his chest. Who would do that to a girl? What for? His eyes burned and he blinked rapidly to forestall what could have become the crying he had not done since he was a toddler. Not even with Mike in his arms or whispering to Stuff had his eyes burned that way. True his vision was occasionally deceitful, but he had not cried. Not once.

Distraught and confused, he decided to walk it off. When he found himself on the bank of the sometimes stream, sometimes creek, other times a bed of mud he squatted beneath the sweet bay tree to sort out what he was feeling, why and what to do about it.

I HAVE TO SAY SOMETHING RIGHT NOW. I HAVE TO
TELL THE TRUTH. I LIED TO YOU AND I LIED TO ME. I HID IT
FROM YOU BECAUSE I HID IT FROM ME. WHEN CEE TOLD ME
ABOUT SEEING A BABY GIRL SMILE, WELL IT WAS TIME TO
STOP HIDING. MAYBE THAT LITTLE GIRL WASN'T WAITING

AROUND TO BE BORN TO HER. MAYBE IT WAS ALREADY DEAD
WAITING FOR ME TO SAY HOW.

I SHOT THE KOREAN GIRL IN HER FACE.

I AM THE ONE SHE TOUCHED.

I AM THE ONE WHO SAW HER SMILE.

I AM THE ONE SHE SAID YUM YUM TO.

I AM THE ONE SHE AROUSED.

A CHILD. A CHILD.

I DIDN'T THINK. I DIDN'T HAVE TO.

BETTER SHE SHOULD DIE.

HOW COULD I LET HER LIVE AFTER SHE TOOK ME DOWN
TO A PLACE I DIDN'T KNOW WAS IN ME?

HOW COULD I LIKE MYSELF EVEN BE MYSELF IF I
SURRENDERED TO THAT PLACE WHERE I UNZIP MY FLY AND LET
HER TASTE ME RIGHT THEN AND THERE?

AND AGAIN THE NEXT DAY AND THE NEXT AS LONG AS
SHE CAME SCAVENGING.

WHAT TYPE OF MAN IS THAT?
AND WHAT TYPE OF MAN THINKS HE CAN EVER IN LIFE
PAY THE PRICE OF THAT ORANGE?
THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW.

The next morning at breakfast Cee appeared to have returned to her newly steady self—confident, cheerful and occupied. Spooning fried onions and potatoes into Frank's plate she inquired whether or not he wanted eggs too.

He declined, but asked for more coffee.

"Cee?" Frank, glancing at her face was pleased to see that her eyes were dry and calm.

"What happened to that place we used to sneak off to? Remember? They had some horses over there."

"I remember. I heard some folks bought it for a place to play cards. Gambling, I reckon. And they had women in there, too, then dog fights I heard."

"What did they do with the horses? Anybody know?"

"I don't. Ask Salem. He don't say nothing but he knows everything going on."

Except for Salem, the other men on Anderson's porch were veterans. The two oldest fought in the First World War, the rest battled in the Second. They knew about Korea but not understanding what it was about didn't give it the respect—the seriousness—Frank thought it deserved. The veterans ranked battles and wars according to loss numbers: three thousand at this place; twenty thousand in the trenches; twelve thousand at another. The more killed the braver the warriors, not the stupider the commanders. Salem Money was a regular and an avid player. Now that his wife was forced to spend most of her time in bed or in

a lounge chair he was as close to freedom as he'd ever been. Of course he had to listen to her complaints but her speech difficulty helped him pretend not understanding what she was on about.

Another benefit was he handled the money. Each month he caught a ride to Jeffrey and took what was needed from their bank account. If Noella asked to see the bankbook he ignored her or said, "Don't worry none. Every dime is fine."

After church, after supper Salem and his friends gathered to play checkers, chess and once in a while whist. Two tables were permanent fixtures on Anderson's porch. While two pairs of players moved pieces around the others leaned on the railing to chuckle, give advice and tease the losers. Frank eased himself into the group of onlookers. As soon as the game of whist was over he moved to the chess players where Salem and Anderson pondered long minutes between moves. Into one of these pauses he spoke.

"Cee tells me that place yonder—with the horses—the one that used to be a stud farm. She says it has dogfights now. That so?"

"Dog fights." Salem covered his mouth to funnel the laugh coming out.

"Why you laughing?"

"Dog fights. Pray that was all they done. No. That whole place burned down a while back, thank the sweet Lord." Salem waved his hand urging Frank not to dislodge his concentration.

"You want to know about them dog fights?" asked Anderson. He seemed relieved by the interruption. "More like men-treated-like dog fights."

Another man spoke up. "You didn't see that boy come through here crying? What did he call himself? Andrew, you member his name?"

"Jerome," said Andrew. "Same as my brother's. That's how come I remember."

"That's him. Jerome." Anderson slapped his knee. "He told us they brought him and his daddy from Alabama. Roped up. Made them fight each other. With knives."

"No sir. Switchblades. Yep, switchblades." Salem spat over the railing. "Said they had to fight each other to the death."

"What?" Frank was shocked.

"That's right. One of them had to die or they both would. They took bets on which one."

"Boy said they slashed one another a bit—just enough to draw a line of blood. The game was set up so only the one left alive could leave. So one of them had to kill the other." Salem shook his head.

"They graduated from dog fights. Turned men into dogs."

"Can you beat that? Pitting father against son?"

"Said he told his daddy, 'No, Pa. No.'"

"His daddy told him, 'You got to.'"

"Then, when he said no again, his daddy told him 'Obey me, son this one last time. Do it.' Said he told his daddy, 'I cant take your life.' And his daddy said, 'This ain't life.' Meantime the

crowd, drunk and all fired up, was going crazier and crazier, shouting 'Stop yapping. Fight! Damn it! Fight!'"

"And?" Frank was breathing hard.

"And what you think? He did it." Anderson sounded furious.

"Come over here crying and told us all about it. Everything. Poor thing. Rose Ellen and Ethel Fordham collected some change for him so he could go on off somewhere. Maylene too. We all pulled together some clothes for him. He was soaked in blood. Then we led him out on a mule. All he won was his life which I doubt was worth much to him after that."

"I don't believe they stopped that mess 'til Pearl Harbor," Salem said,

"When was this?" Frank clamped his jaw.

"When was what?"

"When the son, Jerome, came here."

"Long time. Ten years, eleven, I reckon. Say how's your sister?" Salem faked genuine interest.

"Mended. She'll be alright."

"She say what happened to my Ford?"

"That would be the last thing on her mind. And it should be the last thing on yours."

"Yeah, well." Salem moved his queen.

Cee refused to give up the quilt. Frank wanted it for something, something that was bothering him. The quilt was the first one she had made by herself. As soon as she could sit up without pain or bleeding, neighbor women took over the sick room and started sorting pieces while they discussed her medications and the most useful prayers Jesus would take notice of. They sang, too, while they stitched together the palette they had agreed upon. She knew hers wasn't very good but Frank said it was perfect. Perfect for what? He wouldn't say.

"Come on, Cee. I need it. And you have to come with me. Both of us have to be there."

"Be where?"

"Trust me".

He was late for dinner and when he came through the door he was perspiring and out of breath, as though he had been running. A piece of sanded wood the size of a ruler stuck out of his back pocket. And he held a shovel.

Cee refused. Sloppy as it was she treasured its unimpressive pattern and haphazard palette. Frank insisted. By his perspiration and the steel in his eyes Cee understood that whatever he was up to was important. Reluctantly she slid on her sandals and followed him embarrassed again by the mediocrity of the quilt he carried over his shoulder. Perhaps anyone who saw them would think they were going on a picnic. At five o'clock? With a shovel? Hardly.

They walked toward the edge of town then turned into a wagon road—the same one they had followed as children. When Cee handicapped by her thin sandals kept stumbling on the stones Frank slowed his pace and took her hand in his. There was no point in questioning him. Just as long ago when they ventured into unknown territory, Cee accompanied her big brother silently. As annoyed as she was now at her relapse into doing what others wanted, she nevertheless cooperated. This one time, she told herself. I don't want Frank making decisions for me.

Perceptions alter: fields shrink as age increases; a half hour wait for a child is as long as a day. The five miles they traveled took the same twenty minutes it did when they were children, yet then it seemed forever and far, far from home. The fencing that had been so sturdy had fallen down in most places—its duplicate threatening signs, some sporting the outline of a pistol were gone or mere shadow warnings lying in the grass. As soon as Cee recognized the place, she said, "It's burned down. I didn't know that, did you?"

"Salem told me, but we're not going there." Frank shielded his eyes for a moment before moving off, tracking what was left of the fencing. Suddenly he stopped and tested the earth, trampling grass, tamping it until he found what he was looking for.

"Yeah," he said. "Right here." He exchanged the quilt for the shovel and began digging.

Such small bones. So few pieces of clothing. The skull, however, was clean and smiling.

Cee bit her lip forcing herself not to look away. Carefully, carefully Frank placed the remains on Cee's quilt doing his level best to arrange the bones the way they were meant to be. The quilt became a shroud of lilac, crimson, yellow and navy blue. Together they folded the fabric and knotted its ends. Frank handed Cee the shovel and carried the gentleman in his arms. Back down the wagon road they went then turned away from the edge of Lotus toward the stream. Quickly they found the sweet bay tree—split down the middle, beheaded, undead—spreading its arms one to the right, one to the left. There at its base Frank placed the bone-filled quilt first a shroud, now a coffin. Cee handed him the shovel. While he dug she watched the rippling stream and its opposite bank.

"Who's that?" Cee pointed across the water.

"Where?" Frank turned to see. "I don't see anybody."

"He's gone now I guess." But she was not sure. It looked to her like a small man in a funny suit swinging a watch chain. And grinning.

Frank dug a four or five feet hole some thirty inches wide. It took some maneuvering because the roots resisted disturbance. The sun had reddened and was about to set. Mosquitoes trembled above the water. Honeybees had gone home. Fireflies waited for night. And a light smell of muscadine grapes pierced by hummingbirds soothed the gravedigger. When finally it was done a welcome breeze rose. Brother and sister slid the crayon colored coffin into the perpendicular grave. Once it was heaped over with soil, Frank took two nails and the sanded piece of wood from his pocket. With a rock he pounded it into the tree trunk. One nail bent uselessly, but the other held well enough to expose what he had carved on the wooden marker.

Here Stands A Man.

Wishful thinking, perhaps, but he could have sworn the sweet bay was pleased to agree. Its fat green leaves went wild in the glow of a tomato red sun.

THANKS. I DON'T KNOW HOW BUT YOU HELPED ME PUT
TOGETHER AN ORANGE, SEEPING BLOOD AND THE PINK SOLE
OF A FOOT.

THANKS TO YOU, WE LEARNED THAT WE MATTER AND WE
COUNT IN THIS LIFE.

INNOCENTS, WE GOT LOST IN THE WILD.

LATER, WISER, WE FOUND OUR WAY HOME.

BUT THIS IS NOT YOUR STORY. IT'S OURS, YCIDRA'S AND
MINE.

AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE.

NEITHER OF US CAN SEE THE FUTURE. BUT IF THE WEATHER
ON THE HORIZON TAKES ITS CUE FROM THE PAST THERE WILL
BE STORMS.

IN ANY CASE, WE'LL BE HERE. WAITING AND ABLE.

*