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POEMS

Soul Food

Boo grins as I gulp it all down:
Barbecue ribs,
Skillet of cornbread,
Mountain of greens,
Washed down with Co-Cola.
Whenever I burp,
Those black girls laugh at me.
I laugh at me, too.
I'm not from the 'hood
I'm not Eastside or Westside
But I know these lavender walls,
Gold chunky chains,
All the jukebox songs
From Too Short to Tupac.
Bob Evans and Cracker Barrel
Can't fix food like this
To save their corporate souls.
Boo knows this and one other thing:
I'll be back next week for more.
Look at that white girl eat.

Salvatore

Salvatore, who stands as tall as I do,
Whose black straight hair twinkles auburn in the sunlight,
Whose forehead is the white sands of the Sahara,
Whose eyebrows are strips of black silk and velvet,
Whose eyelashes are long and curved as the rainbow,
Whose eyes are stars that collapsed long ago,
Whose nose was stolen off a Greek statue,
Whose flat lips beg for the stain of warmth,
Whose neck carries a apple of gold in a burlap pouch,
Whose biceps almost break the threads of his suit,
Whose fingers are carved strips of opal,
Whose chest caresses the silk of his shirt,
Whose ass is two peaches wrapped in black cotton,
Whose thighs and calves rub up against his pants and make them moan,
Whose knees are calloused baby coconuts,
Whose feet struggle against their black leather prison,
Salvatore, whose touch scorches more than the Sicilian sun.

The Curse

"Mama, Mama, I'm bleeding!"
My grandmother's vein-cluttered feet
Thumped the floor.
She was running to get the Bible,
There was a verse in Ezekiel
That clotted scraped knees and other boo-boos.

When she opened the bathroom door,
She dropped her Bible,
Stared at the stream of blood
Running down my leg.
"Mama, make it stop!"
She did not pick up the Bible,
But closed her eyes and said, "Mercy!"

The next day I found my family's big Bible,
Decorated with my childhood's blue-ink scribbles.
Was it 3:16, 6:13, 3:31, 31:3?
I read the whole book of Ezekiel aloud.
My voice would find the incantation
That had saved people on their hospital beds,
Saved me from staining saddle shoes or the carpet.
I read Ezekiel again, maybe I'd skipped over a word.

My stomach cramped from bleeding.
Only Mama could make the magic verse work.
Ten years old, and I was cursed by God.

The Captain Pauses

The *Queen Lilith* glides on a Monet painting
the blue green lavender dabs of paint bounce together
threatening to become strokes.
I fill my pipe with tobacco
dark, sweet fruit of the land I come from.
Both land and fruit are harsh
both comfort in small doses.
A sailor stares at me from the upper deck.
Not only is the captain a woman,
but she smokes tobacco! I wink at him
he scurries away like a rat caught by the light.
They must learn that I am in charge,
This is My Ship.
The sun sinks down like a
Peach in melting ice cream.
Since morning I have waited for this sunset.
My ship is only a tiny dab of paint on the sea,
but I am the sole creator of this masterpiece.

Some Stains Don't Wash Out

As the stranger dumped my panties, jeans, and socks into my purple plastic basket, I wondered if I should retreat in secret or charge forward. Did this stranger read the labels in my clothes like "large," "DD," and "size 14"? Did he glimpse blood stains and other faded genital paintmarks in Hanes Her Way, this stranger who had never used tampons, Vagisil, or the antibiotic that stains drops of urine bright orange?

When I stayed at Mama's house in the summer, I helped her fold all the clothes except Papa's underwear. She hung all the undies in the middle line, buffered from sight by sheets and shirts. My grandparents' neighbor Tim waved at me as I helped my grandmother.

One day Mama and I walked out back to take down laundry. Sheets and shirts had not guarded my panties. All four pairs were missing. We went to Hammer's that afternoon.

My grandfather came home. I took off my shirt to show him my new Underoos. "You're Wonder Woman, alright." After dinner, he told us he was going to talk to Tim, but he would not let me come along. After that night, Tim never sat on his back porch anymore. I waved to him whenever he walked to his car, but he never saw me.

The slam of the clothesdryer made me jump. The stranger dropped quarters in the slot, then walked back down the road. He didn't see me waving at him.

Studio 54 (I Was A Disco Queen In My Past Life)

Cherry lipstick, pachouli, skates
I'm dressed to dazzle, ready to swing
With anybody, everybody, sister or bro,
I pop in a Certs and lock the door.

September summer, perfect for skating,
Heat of the city keeps my juices alive,
"I want some action, got so much to give,"
I sing through the crowds on Sixty-fifth.

The "Oz of Discos" is where it's at,
I roll through the door into the arms
Of Andy Warhol, my best friend,
His fifteen minutes look good on me.

We sneak through dancers, skaters
To the corner, to sniff white lines
With Bianca Jagger and Debbie Harry
I skate from the bar, mimosa in hand.

A man with a mustache asks me to dance,
I say, "Let's go to your place instead,"
He lights up a cigar and grabs my hand
I float through Oz on coke and skates.

Swimming Among The Masks

Good Goddess raised me safe from the outside. She let me play as long as I stayed in her castle, for it was the only place that she knew. The castle shrank more and more each year as I watched Bad Goddess disappear, then come back with presents and stories. Good Goddess said that though Bad Goddess enjoyed herself, she neglected everyone but herself. Bad Goddess did not really love us, after all.

When I turned eighteen, Good Goddess took out all the little fish in the pond and released them in the man-made waterfall that runs under glass, near the castle door.

Bad Goddess dropped in a dozen masks and let them sink between the rocks and the blue plastic seaweed. Masks of iron, paper, wood. Masks from Bali and Singapore, Mazatlan and Cozumel, Frankfurt and Warsaw.

Good Goddess slaps my hand when I dip it into the water. Bad Goddess whispers, "Tap the glass, see what faces do."

Tap. Bali opens its eyes, shuts its mouth, floats to the top.

Tap. Tokyo spins on its nose.

Tap. Mazatlan somersaults in the water and laughs.

Good Goddess snatches my hand and drags me away from the tank. Bad Goddess dives in, she swims among the faces.

Good Goddess wears a mask herself, and I catch a glimpse of the shriveled skin underneath. It peels and hangs like paper mache.

I bite the hand of Good Goddess. She gasps, lets go. I run to the tank and dive in.

Like Bad Goddess, I swim among the masks of the world. Like Bad Goddess, I can only wear my own face.

Autumn 1980

Wind shook the bronze hoops
On Mrs. Morgan's ears
She danced in circles like the leaves
And sighed "Ahhh ... England!"

Out of Place

We walked into the wrong place --
blue neon,
marijuana clouds,
pool tables,
Skynyrd on the jukebox.
Their eyes hollered "Now, Git!"
He shielded me in the crook of his arm
and led me next door to
basil vinaigrette dressing,
Chateau d'Yquem,
mahogany that barely reflected
the lantern lamps.
Now this was the right place.

Once I walked into the right place --
blue neon,
marijuana clouds,
pool tables,
Skynyrd on the jukebox.
His baby brother on my hip,
his firewood-scented jacket on my shoulders,
his silver cross around my neck.
"Hey, babe, are you ready to go?"
He made me wait through one more round
Then handed his pool stick to Junior Cummins.

After I put the baby to bed
We sat on the porch he had added to the trailer,
Our breath smoking like his wood-burning stove,
Watching the stars twinkle over Culleoka
'Til my curfew.

I shove the salad away, take a sip of water.
"What's wrong?" asks Mr. Right,
Mr. Cigar-smoker,
Mr. Chess-player.
I shake my head.
I don't tell him we're in the wrong place.

Road Poetry

I drive down I-40 away from the world.
I wanted other people to disappear inside their cars,
Merge into one huge hum.
I tried to lose myself in witty lyrics and acoustic guitar,
But the other people sang out loud,
Their songs blasting above the FM radio:

I eat Skeeter's "Big" Biscuits
but Ron's Tires is the best place to take a leak
I'd rather be sky-diving, and
My other car is a Harley, but
Get in, Sit down, Shut up, Hang on!
Al Greenwood, BEDSPREAD KING, says to his left,
The road to hell is paved with Republicans,
Asks to his right, If you can't trust me with a choice,
How can you trust me with a child?
The woman beside me brakes for Amazons
She is the proud parent of an honor student
  at Bearden Elementary
My kid beat your honor student up
Practice random acts of kindness,
Senseless acts of beauty,
Peace through music
Dole/Kemp Clinton/Gore
Darwin Jesus Darwin Jesus

The Tale of the Woman Who Turned Into a Pearl

Once there was a woman who longed for silence. Voices and calendars meant to fill up time, but they only took up space. Soon she found herself taking up space, like the Egyptian blue bottle in her bathroom, a bottle that once held pearl-colored bubble bath.

She began to hide in that bathroom with dark blue carpets and light blue walls. She immersed herself in the bathtub for thirty minutes, then an hour, then two hours. She gathered up her knees and arms, closed her eyes tight, floated on her side.

A person knocked on the bathroom door. She made herself round up into a tight ball.

As more people knocked on the bathroom door, her skin glistened paler. The ocean of the bath-water beat against her features and smoothed them out. The oyster of the bathtub cradled her in darkness. There was no woman now, only a pearl.

The pearl's imagination filled up the silence completely. The pearl saturated the silence, began to rise through that silence. The more the pearl dreamt, the faster it rose. The pearl broke through the oyster, rose through the ocean. It bobbed on the waves for three seconds, then floated up into the sky.

When the pearl broke through the atmosphere, the outer universe embraced the pearl and gave it a place of its own. The outer universe crowned the pearl with its Gift of Light.

The star peered down where the woman in the bathtub had curled up. A man broke down the door of the bathroom. He picked up an Egyptian blue bottle that lay on its side in the bathtub. When he tipped the bottle, hundreds of pearls spilled out.

In Favor of Saturation

I

My taste buds burst from St. Marten Chardonnay, King Solomon chicken, steamed garlic turnips.
I stare at the textures and colors of the original Renoirs,
Writhe away from skin and tongue that pleasure too intense,
Weep and hide under the covers of Penderecki's "Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima,"
Smell all the scented candles until my nose traps them in a medley.

If I saturate my senses so that my body-cup runneth over,
I will spill continually on the page,
Break through four dimensions,
Become the fifth.

II

Grapes are like that.
Tiny globes of solid juice connected by leaf and vine.

On a world called Polipea,
The natives worship grapes over ten feet tall.

On Syltran
Creatures made of leaf and prism
Plant grapes in the corners of their roofless caves for good luck.

Grapes dangle from the wrists of Jhirdireans.

The clouds of Midofano are grapes that burst forth in a sugar shower, and these drops make the steases and zharas grow.

Only on Earth does the sun sap the creative juices of a grape and turn it old, dry, shriveled.

III

The Chinese Emperor wore the yellow that surrounded itself a thousand times over.
The Egyptians preferred blue folded color layer over color layer.

Polipean green turns their elders away while children run to it.

Pink so pink it washes the Syltran night.

Jhirdirean red pierces human pupils, burns their eyeballs.

Midofanos see our butterflies' wings as we see those of our houseflies.

Creatures of other worlds cannot see our winter pastels, our summer neons, tints of spring, shades of autumn.
Only on earth beings squint at their own sun.

IV

Mucus filled my lungs.
My head smashed itself in two.
My stomach doubled over, my throat swelled. The doctors' whispers stabbed my eardrums.
A needle fed me for days and days as I gasped under a plastic tent.
One night the pain saturated my whole body.
My spirit left for another dimension.
I hovered over my sleeping mother and my snoring Dad in a beige plastic chair.
I floated over a seven year-old girl with skin so grey that her freckles looked bright purple.
Recognition horrified me.
I dived back into her unbreathing body.
Many years later, I tried to ascend again, but the cord of my fright yanked me back into my flesh.

Joe Shows the Meaning of Life

Flaxen double DNA helixes
spring out of his scalp
fall on his shoulders
Neurotransmitters
spark in his brain
Thoughts of
polypeptides
viruses
cell mutations
energize his body
pump life into his nuclei
and conversation.
I ask him to define long words
with long vowels
define quickly so my brain
can process the stimuli.
Joe extends the lessons of physical reaction
into my deeper understanding.
The beauty of evolution
radiates through his organism.
As Joe teaches me the wonders of biochemistry
the love for his subject shines
in his eyes like a sun that grows
googlplex
each second.

To Truman Capote

Paleys, Kennedys, and Andy Warhol,
swans and peacocks at the Black and White Ball,
In Cold Blood at La Cote Basque,
the diamond iceberg of New York.

My Alabama lived in your face:
That state of hot dusty towns,
Fried okra and boiled ham and cornbread,
Games of Rook on the front porch,
Monroeville and Claysville shared the same world.

A world away on that diamond iceberg,
You hid your Alabama until you grew old,
Then revealed it in your eyes, hair, chin,
To my grandfather and his brothers,
Down to my mother,
Then me.

Your Alabama lives in my face.

Barbie Dolls

"Ladies don't pump gas," my mother says as she sends me
out to fill the tank.

Whenever I come back for the holidays,
I have to sign in to enter what was my bedroom.
What was my bedroom is now the doll room,
legions of Barbies staring back at me.
Blonde hair, blue eyes, perfect teeth,
all smile at a pimply brunette who grimaces back.

When Mother isn't looking,
I knock Barbies off a table.
If I dent their coppertone skin with my toe,
I shrink their worth from thousands to hundreds.
I scratch my pale skin with my nails
My blood matches Holiday Barbie's dress.

I was born with black hair and a big butt.
I hate Mattel Inc.'s hot pink.
I never bring home dickless wonders like Ken.
My mother tried to play "dress-up" with me,
But I despised white gloves and pillbox hats.

Mother wears a Barbie smile,
Sighs in secret behind her teeth.
A trapped tiger, a wild woman, beats against the cage,
But Mother holds her animal captive.
I don't know how to set that animal free to run, to roam,
To go where she wants.

On the day after Christmas, I go where I want.
On the way back home, I stop to fill 'er up.
When I reach for the pump, I break a nail.
I always loved the smell of gasoline.

Summer When I Was Jen-Jen

Stars and moonlight greeted us
When we took a study break
And drove to Waffle House.

We all ordered coffee and sandwiches.
Charlotte dropped a quarter in the jukebox,
"A Hard Day's Night" popped and crackled.

I had not eaten a grilled cheese in fifteen years,
It tasted like more than cheese and bread,
Tasted like more than warm and simple.

Mom fixed me Fritos and a grilled cheese sandwich,
She turned around from "The Price Is Right" and
Laughed at my orange Hi-C mustache.

Downstairs, Dad sanded the fender of the Model A.
The pops and crackles on the Beatles album
Punctuated the whisper of the sandpaper.

Outside, I blew the fluff off dandelions,
Waiting for the sun to sink behind Brent's house,
Waiting to swing by stars and moonlight.

I'm Supposed To Write A Nature Poem

How can I write about the beauty of Nature
When Nature destroyed the beauty of Granddaddy?
Cancer invaded his body, stomped into foreign territory, killed and tortured cells
Granddaddy never complained while the cancer ravaged
Glutton feasted on his pain
Black hair faded white
Eyes stolen of life
Legs paralyzed
Once-proud head and hands quaking
No voice, just throat moans

How can I write about gentle Mother Nature
When Nature tortured Granddaddy so slowly
He craved death NOW?
In the casket, he looked like old Granddaddy
Almost smiling, pain deserted his face
Dressed in suit instead of pajamas
Like he would step out, brush himself off, and go pick up
Another award, being covered with praise
Instead of dirt

The sun made everything worse
Stupid birds chirped
I want to gather stones, pelt every bird until death steals their noises
They cannot whistle anything like Granddaddy

Monster

I am six, three feet tall, blue-eyed and blonde-haired, sprinkled with freckles.

I skip in a dark hallway, my Miss Piggy sneakers hit the ground in six-eights time, staccato.

I hear another pair of feet behind me, thuds with no time.

I skip faster, almost running. The thuds turn into something else, deafening heartbeats punctuate a metallic slither.

A zipper unzips. A kick in the shin. I stumble but I don't fall.

My recovery to balance erases fear. I turn around, jump two feet high. My hands clasp around the man's neck. I squeeze as hard as I can.

His eyebrows arch up. He smiles at me. I press as hard as I can. I try to make my hands meet through the neck of this man, this monster.

His smile grows wider. His hands grab my neck. A knife slices my breath. Michelle's and Dana's faces appear as blue and pink dots, dots that eat up his fading face.

My hands fall from his neck. I fall, hit the ground. I have pale skin, brown hair, green eyes, five feet and six inches. I an twenty-one.

Afternoon Naps

When I come home
two breaths echo slow, each belongs
to a hibernating bear in its
own grey cave --

and I read a story
before I turn into a hibernating bear
in a cave of knit sunflowers,
sheets and cushions.

The joy of hibernation --
feeling like you and not
a plastic face and an ink-arch smile,
not a bobbing head.

Retreats in the caves
give stars their beauty,
bears their strength
until they succumb to the next slumber.

STORIES

When Jesus Calls

"Mama, why am I taller than everyone else in kindergarten?" I asked long ago.

"Because your father was seven feet tall. You got his long black hair and his pretty eyes that twinkle like sapphires."

"Could he feel what other people thought, too?"

"Yes, baby, he sure could. Couldn't hide nothing from y'all, no matter how hard I tried."

"How come he hides from us?"

"He ain't hiding. He's bringing salvation to the world. He's a very special being, an entity unto himself."

"Mama, who is my daddy?"

"You know damn good and well who your daddy is."

"Tell me again."

"Your daddy is Jesus Christ."

Mama met Jesus Christ at a Starland Vocal Band concert in Nashville. Personally, I think the Starland Vocal Band was an instrument of Satan. I can imagine "Afternoon Delight" on the E12 slot of Hell's jukebox.

At the concert, Mama offered Jesus a big fat joint, but he refused it. "Do you not know who I am, sister?"

Mama always told it the same way. "A circle of light appeared around his head. It grew bigger, and bigger, and bigger, until it filled up my eyes. I knew right then and there that he was the answer to my prayer, the one and only Jesus Christ. I knelt down and kissed his feet."

My less than immaculate conception occurred in Jesus Christ's apartment on West End in Nashville. When my mother told Jesus that she was with child, he told her, "Go to the most remote area of Maury County that you know. You will bear a baby girl with amazing powers. You will bear a daughter that will help me bring salvation to the world one day. My father

Jehovah God in Heaven insists that I make an instant pilgrimage to Jakarta. My work in Nashville is done. Later, babe."

Mama's family had owned the same thirty acres in Sheepneck for a century. My great-grandfather had built and rented out cabins to phosphate miners in the twenties and thirties. Mama immediately moved into one of those old cabins. It had no electricity, no running water, but it did have a privy on the back porch. When I was born on July 7, 1977, Mama lost her grip on me. She almost dropped into that privy.

Instead, she cut the umbilical cord with pinking shears, washed me in the stream behind the cabin, and wrapped me up in a smelly blanket. She drove twenty miles away to Maury County Hospital with me screaming in her lap. She collapsed in the emergency room with me in her arms.

The hospital called my grandfather. He lived in Columbia, a few blocks behind the hospital. He arrived five minutes later, still wearing his pajamas.

My grandfather had not seen my mother in two years. He asked her what she wanted to name the baby. She answered weakly, "Jacqueline Christ." He laughed his ass off. Then Dr. Reynolds took him aside and asked, "Who's the father?"

The smile fell off my grandfather's face. "I don't know."

When I was six, I asked, "Mama, how could Jesus allow his child to be born in such a nasty place?"

"Jesus himself was born in a stable. If you want to talk about nasty places, let me tell you about the time I slept in the barn with Eric Vick on Halloween night, and got that terrible infection. I had sores that crusted over -- "

"Grody! I don't want to hear it. But Mama, how could Jesus abandon the mother of his child?"

"I don't know. The Lord works in mysterious ways, Jackie."

I have to agree with that. You would think God would handle the mother of his grandchild like a Faberge egg. Instead, he cracked my mother open, fried her in a skillet, scrambled her up.

My grandfather wanted us to move in with him, but my mother refused. "Jesus told me to go to the most remote area I could find to raise the baby, " she said. "I must do his bidding. She's his child."

My grandfather said, "I don't care whose child she is. She's *my* granddaughter. She will grow up in a clean, solid building with heat in the winter, air conditioning in the summer, and water fit to drink. She will live with me."

Both held their ground until my grandfather's sister Betty suggested a compromise. The next day, my grandfather hauled a used trailer over to Sheepneck. Aunt Betty and Uncle Emory followed him in their pick-up truck. Aunt Betty was the choir director at the First Methodist Church. The congregation had filled the cab of the pick-up with diapers, baby clothes, baby furniture, even a washer and dryer.

Uncle Emory was a lawyer at the Maury County Courthouse. He refused to give Mama even one diaper unless Mama signed a contract. The contract stipulated that my mother keep me clean, fed, and warm. My mother also must let me attend public school all the way through. The new baby would not drop out in tenth grade as my mother did. My mother must keep a clean criminal record, sober up, and get off drugs. My mother must let me go to church with Aunt Betty on a regular basis. (My grandfather did not like the church requirement, but Aunt Betty and Uncle Emory said, "It's all or nothing.") If my mother failed to follow the terms of this contract, my uncle would declare her an unfit mother and I would wind up in my grandfather's custody.

"I won't sign this," Mama said.

"Fine. We'll take the trailer back to Columbia and donate everything in the truck to Goodwill."

Mama signed. The first thing she carried into our new home was my birth certificate. A few days later, she covered up the "father: unknown" part with White-Out, then wrote "father: Jesus Christ" in her own blood.

Mama obeyed all the terms of the contract except one. When I was two, I sat on her lap as she smoked her joint. She blew marijuana smoke up my nose. I sneezed several times in a row.

I must have made a funny face, because Mama said, "I think you're stoned, Jackie." She snorted.

That's when my memory begins. My second memory is more general. I remember that everywhere we went, Mama told people that I was the daughter of Jesus Christ.

"Mama, the kids at church don't believe me when I tell them I'm the child of Jesus Christ. They ask why I don't wear a white robe and have a halo over my head."

"He had a halo, but I never saw him in a robe. He always wore blue jeans and moccasins up to his knees. He usually didn't wear a shirt, except for that two-week stint at Libby's Truckstop."

"Is Libby's Truckstop in heaven?"

"Hell no. It's outside of Elkton. Libby's is the 'home of the Big Chicken.'" Mama laughed so hard, she almost fell off the couch. I laughed at my silly Mama. "Our giggleboxes done turned over," she said.

After we had calmed down and snuggled up on the couch, I said, "The kids at church say I'm supposed to have dark eyes like Jesus. They say I'm supposed to be Jewish, not Methodist."

"Who ever said Jesus was a Jew?" Mama said.

"The Bible says it. No one believes that I'm Jesus's daughter. When I say it in church, Aunt Betty elbows me. She tells me to stop being blasphemous. She says if I keep saying it, no one will like me."

"It's not easy being the daughter of Jesus Christ. Jackie, you've got some crosses to bear."

Sheepneck is a tiny town smack dab in the middle of Tennessee. The only new things that Sheepneck people ever bring home are babies. The cars, trailers, and satellite dishes have been there since the early eighties. Mama could grow her marijuana plants in the backyard without getting arrested.

Our trailer was especially hard to find, but somehow they found it. Sometimes at night, a truck would drive by several times. Its passengers screamed stuff like, "You'll burn in hell, Lora Blaylock!" and "You're the devil's whore!" Six times we woke up to find crosses burning in

our yard.

I heard some people think, "Poor child, with a crazy mother. How pitiful." At first I refused the food and clothes they pushed on me. I did not want their tainted sympathy. Most of them, especially the older ones, talked to me like I was crippled or retarded.

When Aunt Betty and Uncle Emory died in that terrible car wreck on Highway 31, gifts and flowers poured in from people all over Maury County. There were several hundred people at their funeral. Uncle Emory and Aunt Betty had been popular, or at least respected, members of the community. Many were at the funeral just to catch a glimpse of me and my crazy mother. "You're all fake!" I hollered as I pointed at them. "All fake!"

After the funeral, people drove to my grandfather's house. "Ya'll just want free food!" I said to almost everyone that walked through the door until my grandfather made me go get a switch. I tried to pick the stiffer twigs off the tree because they didn't hurt as much. My grandfather kept sending me back outside until I had a long flexible, green whip. He tore my bottom up with it then said, "Now go back out in the living room and behave like a lady. These people are trying to help us."

"They're not doing it because they care about us. They're doing it because they're trying to look good. Some of them hate me and my Mama so hard!" I cried.

"That may be true. But you'll have to learn to put it aside," said my grandfather.

"Your father did," Mama added.

It was easy to put it aside in Sheepneck. Only ninety-six kids attended Sheepneck Elementary, and they were too scared to mess with me. "That Jackie will squish you like a June bug," they said. "Better watch out, or she'll step on you." I made perfect scores on every test, but the rest of the kids didn't care. Sheepneck girls dropped out at sixteen, sometimes earlier if they got pregnant. If they weren't pregnant, the girls along with the Sheepneck boys got jobs in Mount Pleasant or worked on their families' farms. Maury County produces much of Tennessee's number one cash crop. If you don't know what the number one cash crop is, I'll give you a hint: it ain't tobacco.

Most Sheepneck adults liked and looked after me. They thought Mama was crazy, but that didn't stop them from taking hits off her bong and drinking her Jack Daniels.

When I turned eight, Mama told me, "I'm throwing you a birthday party." We blew up balloons and decorated out trailer with Christmas lights. Mama replaced the regular light bulbs with what she called "black lights." I thought they looked more purple than black. There were three black velvet posters on our wall: a crying woman holding a rose, a Harley-riding skeleton wearing a Confederate flag bandanna, and a group of naked blonde children climbing a rocky mountain towards "Led Zeppelin." The posters glowed in the black lights. They scared me a little. Mama also "borrowed" some Jack Daniels, Southern Comfort, and Tanqueray from the Rebel Bar & Grill. Mama worked there as a waitress while I was at school and on the weekends when my grandfather took me to his house in Columbia.

Mama decided to throw the party at seven o' clock. Some of her friends arrived much earlier. I waited and waited for my friends to show up, but they never did. "How come you didn't bring Bridget and Jody?" I asked Pete and Rosie Doyle. "Where's Wayne?" I asked Wayne's skinny mother. The grown-ups sort of laughed at me and went inside. They all carried tall brown paper bags instead of gift-wrapped boxes. My grandfather had a ship in a bottle at his house, but sloshing sounds came from the paper bags. No one would give a ship in a bottle to a girl for her birthday, anyway.

I sat down on the concrete steps in front of our trailer. Cicadas screeched. Crickets chirped. Rock music blared from inside the trailer. I wondered what my grandfather had bought me for my birthday. He had to work tonight, but he had promised that he would come over tomorrow night with a special surprise. I couldn't wait.

I fell asleep outside. Someone picked me up and carried me to my bed.

When I woke up, I found three people asleep on the floor. I found a dozen more people in our living room. I went to Mama's room. Pete was sleeping in her bed with her. I woke him up. "What are you doing in my Mama's bed? You should be in the living room with Rosie."

He mumbled, "Go away."

"This is my party, and I don't want you in my Mama's bed," I said. I knew that Pete did not really like my Mama. "My daddy will be angry with you."

The man laughed. "So Jesus will strike me down, huh? Go back to bed, you little bastard bitch."

My face grew hot, and I clenched my hands into fists. It was bad enough that none of my friends came over. No one had brought me a birthday present. I didn't even get a birthday cake with candles on it. I hated all these adults, including my mother. I wished that Jesus would strike them down, every last one of them.

I went to the living room and woke up Rosie. "What is it, sweetheart?" she asked.

"Go look in my Mama's room," I said.

She sat up, groaned, and fell back.

The front door swung open. My grandfather stood there. He turned red. He screamed, "Lora!"

My grandfather and I had one thing in common: no one ever messed with us. I had never seen him so angry. I ran outside.

I watched the cars take off from our yard. I went to the creek so I wouldn't have to hear Mama and my grandfather screaming at each other. I returned, then went back to the creek. I threw stones into the creek until my arm was give out.

"Where are you, Jesus?" I asked. "If you really are my father, give me a sign. Part the water like Moses. Make it start thundering and lightning. Do *something*."

Nothing happened.

My grandfather found me sitting by the creek. "Come on, Jackie. We're going to my house."

My anger had drained me. I wanted to say "good-bye" to Mama, but my grandfather would not let me. When we got inside his car, I noticed my clothes, scattered all over the backseat.

Later that night, my grandfather gave me a chocolate cake with eight candles on it. I closed my eyes, made my wish, and blew them all out. We each had a piece of cake, then he said, "A surprise awaits you in the garage."

He followed me to the garage and snapped a Polaroid when I gasped in delight. A huge green ribbon sat on the seat of my brand-new, twelve-speed purple bicycle. My grandfather taught me how to ride it the next day.

"Grandfather, why can't I stay here with you?"

"The courts make mistakes sometimes, Jackie."

"Will I ever be able to live with you again?"

"I don't know. I will come out to see you, though."

"Can we go fishing again? Can we go horseback-riding again? Can we go to --"

Of course we will, of course we can. Stop asking me such dumb questions. You're smart enough to know these things." He turned away. I resisted the urge to wipe the tear off his cheek. I didn't want to embarrass him.

Mama did not work at the Rebel Bar & Grill anymore. She was on disability. "I can't work because of my back," she said. "And my asthma."

Smoking marijuana and crack cocaine did not help her asthma problem, either. Sometimes she coughed up bloody phlegm. Sometimes she could not move from the sofa. She kept losing weight. She spent most of her government-issued check on drugs and alcohol. I began riding my bike to the bank in Mt. Pleasant. I would cash the check, then go buy some groceries. Buying groceries was a tricky business, because if I spent too much, she would yell at me. I learned to stretch dollars and pinch pennies. I learned how to bargain with the old farmers that sold fruit out of the backs of their trucks. I learned how to charm Mennonites into giving me butter and honey almost for free. I learned how to get cloth and other materials at a great discount. I taught myself how to sew. I could not afford new clothes. Besides, my height made it difficult to find clothes in my size.

Several times I considered having Mama committed to a mental hospital or a drug clinic. When I suggested it to her, she said, "Jackie, please don't put me away. You're all I got."

She completely believed whatever came out of her mouth, then promptly forgot it.

"Mama, I don't think Jesus is really my daddy," I said when I was eleven. "If he was, he'd have helped you out more."

"I can prove he's your daddy."

"How?"

"Lemme think about it." She sat on the couch all afternoon, immersed in her thoughts.

That night she said, "Jackie, if I go without marijuana or drinking for three days, would you believe me?"

"What about your crack pipe?"

"Okay, if I go without marijuana, drinking, or my pipe for three days, would you believe me about your father?"

"If you go without those things for three days, I'd believe anything."

"Okay. Consider it done."

I watched my mother in sheer disbelief as she drank coffee and smoked Marlboros. Sometimes she'd shake. Sometimes she couldn't sit still or shut up. Sometimes she'd cuss at me. I knew her hatred was a temporary condition, but it got to me just the same. She devoured boxes of Little Debbie cakes, gulped down Mountain Dews. She did not touch any of the peanut butter and apple sandwiches I fixed for her. She scared the hell out of me when she cried on the couch. I thought she was dying.

But she did not touch any illegal substances for those three days. She converted this non-believer. I almost wish that she hadn't.

When I was twelve, I started attending Whitthorne Junior High School along with the other graduates of Sheepneck Elementary. Columbia Central was foreign territory. No one forgot to remind me that I was the tall redneck freak with the crazy mother. In my art class, a boy said, "Look, it's Miss Jesus Christ. Wonder what miracles she'll perform today."

I turned and looked at the boy. He was a prep, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a tan. His parents would buy him a Ford Explorer on his sixteenth birthday. He would attend law school at Vanderbilt. I decided to ignore him. Life would eventually kick his ass when his future wife filed for divorce.

"Shut up," I told the stranger, "or I'll whup your ass."

"I'd like to see you try it, you damn bitch."

The boy was wide, but he was light. I picked him up, threw him to the ground. I kicked him in his Duck Head crotch. I brought my foot down on his Hard Rock Cafe shirt. I punched him in his freckled nose.

"Hey, cut that out!" screamed the art teacher, Mr. Waters. Like the blubbering boy on the ground, he was more than a foot shorter than me. I let Mr. Waters grab my arm and lead me out to the hallway. A red-haired boy led prep boy to the bathroom. Prep boy was trying hard not to cry. I felt guilty. I didn't mean to whup him all that hard, just shake him up a little bit.

I leaned against the wall. Mr. Waters said, "Now since this is your first day, Miss uh --"

"Jacqueline Blaylock."

"Since this is your first day, Miss Blaylock, I won't send you to the principal's office today. But you better watch out. I'll be watching you."

I bet he would. His desire for me was so strong that I couldn't look him in the eye. I didn't have to peek into his thoughts. His lust shouted so loud that I was afraid other students or teachers would hear.

A mustache of sweat formed on his upper lip. He leaned closer to me, looking up at me with squinty blue eyes. He took the toothpick out of his mouth. He stood on his tip-toes. His hot coffee breath hit my lip.

I smiled and patted him on the head.

His heels fell flat on the floor. He stepped back. "I think I'll send you to the principal after all, Miss Blaylock."

Later that week, I studied capitals for my geography class. I recited them aloud so my mother might learn something. When I said, "Jakarta, Indonesia," she said "Wait! What did you say was the capital of Indonesia?"

"Jakarta."

Mama laughed so hard I was scared she might throw up again. It had happened twice already that week. "I understood him, after all," she said. "Oh, Jakarta!"

"What are you talking about?"

"When Jesus left me, he said he was going on a pilgrimage to Jakarta. I thought I had misunderstood him. I had never heard of Jakarta before. I figured he must have said 'Jacqueline.'"

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"That's so stupid, Mama."

"The big J.C. passed down all his brains to the little J.C. Show me Jakarta on the map."

I pointed Jakarta out to her. "Oh my God," she said. "That's half the world over from Tennessee. I never thought he would wander so far." She started crying. "I'll never see him again."

"Baby, how come you don't have a boyfriend?"

"I don't like guys."

"You're not funny, are you?"

"No, Mama, I don't like girls either. I don't want to date anyone."

"You're pulling my leg. A young, beautiful, developing girl like you, not interested in anyone? I don't believe it."

But it was true. Whenever Bobby Thackeray imagined himself between my legs, whenever Zach Everett fantasized about me sucking him off, whenever Mr. Waters dreamed about spanking me, I wanted to throw up. Whenever Derek Crenshaw tried to look up my skirt, whenever Clay Rogers stared at my ass, whenever Pat Dover dreamed about

eating me out, I shuddered. Their fantasies varied, but their basic urge was the same. They all wanted to fuck the tall freak's brains out. They all wanted to possess me, to control me, to prove to me their manhood while proving to themselves how wild I could be in bed. Or in the car. Or in the swimming pool. There were a few who wanted to know more about the tall straight-A student who made her own clothes and had a psycho for a mother. Most did not care about me personally. Some of them even hated me. But they all wanted to show me, just show me someday how they could -- how they would -- they didn't know, exactly, but dammit, they sure would show me!

Sometimes a girl's hatred of me shouted louder than even a boy's lust. One of the cheerleaders in my freshman English class hated me real hard. "That Jackie Blaylock thinks she's so smart, so big and bad. She's just a tall redneck bastard freak with a drugged out mother."

I said out loud, "Did ya'll know that Brittney Jackson's mother makes her strip down naked, then marks all the places she thinks are too fat with an 'x'?" There was silence for a brief second, then the whole class exploded. Some guffawed. Some said, "oh my god." Some of the sleepers said, "Huh? What did she say?" Brittney burst into tears. Mrs. Logan sent me straight to the principal's office.

The summer before my sophomore year, my grandfather dropped dead from a heart attack. I did not cry, but a lump remained in my throat for days. My eyes stung with the tears trapped behind them. We scattered his ashes over the Sheepneck hills the Blaylock family had owned for so long. My mother mourned the loss of her father by drinking Jack Daniels from sunrise to sunset.

I, not my mother, inherited my grandfather's estate. Suddenly I owned the land in Sheepneck, a hill over in Culleoka, a strip-mined plain in Spring Hill. I owned an investment portfolio and a valuable 401k plan that I decided to hang on to. I got the small, tidy house in Columbia, complete with furniture, appliances, a computer, a Honda Accord, and a Harley Davidson motorcycle. He also left a large checking account and savings account that were switched over

under my name. My mother wanted me to sell everything. "We can live like millionaires the rest of our lives," said my mother. I refused. I was not going to squander any of Grandfather's money on her crack habit. She cursed at me, hit me, and said things like, "Your grandfather spoiled you so rotten. He caught all your food without teaching you how to fish." After a few weeks, I couldn't take her bullshit anymore. I moved into my grandfather's house a few days before I started my sophomore year at Columbia Central High.

After I completed my Driver's Ed. course, I went and got a hardship driver's license, class "M" for motorcyclists. I drove my grandfather's Harley all over town, whenever I could. I carried an extra helmet for people that asked me for a ride home. Many did, just so they could ride on a motorcycle and have an excuse to grab my sides and, if they felt lucky, my breasts. None of the boys in high school ever got lucky with me.

One weekend I drove to Sheepneck. Mama lay on the couch, smoking her pipe. Her dark hair had turned white. The lines on her face had deepened. She looked like a skeleton wearing skin a size too big for her.

"Mama, I've come home. I've missed you. I didn't think you'd be in such bad shape."

"I thought you hated me for all the nasty things I said when your grandfather died."

"You sure pissed me off, but I could never hate you. I love you. I want to take care of you. Come back with me to Columbia."

She shook her head. "No more chance of getting me out of Sheepneck than a gasoline man surviving in hell, Jackie."

"Please? I'm worried about you."

"I said 'no.' But you know what?Jesus is coming."

"You always remind me."

"No, he called me on the phone this morning. I tried to call you, but you weren't home. I gave him your number."

I stared at her. "You're lying."

"No, baby. He called me and told me to come to Nashville and bring you. He says that he wants to help me. He has great plans for you."

A million questions scorched my tongue, but I couldn't sputter them out.

Mama said that Jesus had been traveled all over the world, spreading the news to people. He had saved thousands in all over Europe, in Russia, in Egypt, in China, and in Indonesia. "Jakarta?" I asked. Mom nodded. He performed miracles anywhere, anytime, for a small "love donation." He healed the sick, gave to the poor, and played his guitar. He had a compact disc coming out titled "Heed The Call." He had his own newsletter, his own web site, his own TV channel in Chile. He had wanted to return earlier, but saving souls could not wait. He had returned to Nashville because he needed his daughter's divine help. He was staying at the Vanderbilt Days Inn on West End. Jesus did not have star billing at the Nashville "Festival of Faith," but he would be passing out brochures and selling CDs at his own stand.

"Mama, if you're lying to me, I will never forgive you."

"I swear to God, I'm telling the truth."

"Do you know what room he's in?"

"I can't remember. But we'll find him. He'll have a halo and be the tallest man there."

"I want to call him."

"Baby, you can't. My phone was disconnected this afternoon. I didn't pay my bill."

"Why didn't you tell me you couldn't pay your bill? Oh, I would give anything to be able to use that phone right now! Why didn't you let me know?"

Mama coughed up bloody and black phlegm. She fell back on the couch. She wheezed.

"Mama, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. But I want to sleep here. I don't want to go find Jesus right now."

"Of course not, Mama. Relax. Go to sleep."

I grabbed one of the kitchen table chairs and put it in the living room. I sat up watching Mama's chest. I was scared that her chest would stop moving, that her wheezing would fade.

After I was sure she was asleep, I picked up the phone. A quick busy signal pulsed in my ear. I couldn't get rid of it.

I must have dozed off. When I woke up, Mama was painting a cinder block.

"Mama, what are you doing?"

She tilted the block towards me. She had painted in black letters, "Lora Blaylock Feb. 8, 1960." "I'm painting my gravestone," she said. "Jesus said that he would give me blessed rest as soon as I touched his blue jeans."

"Jesus couldn't give you blessed rest if he was a mattress salesman. Stop being so morbid. Let's get ready to go."

Mama sang as I washed her in the tub. I helped her put on the same beaded shirt and bell-bottoms she had been wearing when she met Jesus. The size 4 clothes hung off her bones. I brushed her long hair. I spent thirty minutes on her makeup. I put on my black leather pants, a white silk shirt, and the black leather jacket with fringe on the back. Jesus had given the jacket to my mother. It fit me perfectly.

We went outside to my Harley. The sun was rising over the Sheepneck hills. Birds chirped. A rooster crowed. I strapped the motorcycle helmet onto Mama's head. "Mama, you've got to hold onto me tight," I said.

"Hang on to you?" she said. "I can't even hold onto me." But she tightened her grip on me as I sped up the highway, up I-65. I swallowed, trying to dislodge the knot in my throat.We were going to meet my father, Mama's savior.There was no turning back.

Nelly

Nelly Tomlinson finally found a dress in a dark, rich green. She stroked the velvet with her thumb and middle finger. Would the dress make her look washed out? Was it too young on her? Nelly didn't keep up with fashion like she used to, but on *Regis & Kathie Lee* they'd said dresses that "made a statement" would be in style this winter. Nelly wondered what sort of statement she should make.

"Ma'am, may I help you?"

Nelly turned toward the voice. A woman with long black curls and china-doll skin smiled at her. The woman appeared to be in her thirties. She wore dark red lipstick around her white even teeth.

"Yes," Nelly said. She cleared her throat. "I'm thinking about trying on this dress." She took it off the rack.

"Oh, that's beautiful. Hunter green is one of my favorite colors. Would you like to try it on now, or do you want to look around a little longer?"

The woman spoke in sighs. Nelly tried to recall the last time she had heard such a sweet voice.

Nelly's eyes searched the woman for a nametag. "Miss -- I mean, Tabitha -- Yes, I'll go ahead and try it on now. Where are your dressing rooms?"

"I'll show you. Follow me." Tabitha wore black seamed stockings. Were seams coming back into style, after all these years? Seams flattered legs, especially when one wore black stockings with black heels, like Tabitha.

Tabitha unlocked the first dressing room. "Thank you," said Nelly, and she was left alone.

Nelly Tomlinson had not shopped for new clothes since her sister Gertrude had died two years ago, and she had forgotten about the ugly fluorescent light and the three-sided mirrors that curse all dressing rooms. The light darkened her age spots and yellowed her skin. Her stomach poked out. She shrank back from her reflection, and her eyes stung. She always thought she looked good for her age until she walked into this dressing room. Never mind, it was best not to dwell upon such things.

The sooner she got into her dress, the quicker she would not have to look at herself.

Nelly slid into her dress. It was a little loose. She surely hadn't lost weight? Oh, there was a zipper in the back. She reached her right arm behind her, but she could zip it up only half-way.

She peeked out of the dressing room. Tabitha stood behind the sales counter.

"Tabitha?" The woman looked up. "I don't mean to bother you, but I can't get this thing zipped up."

Tabitha came into the dressing room and stepped behind Nelly. A small warm pressure travelled up Nelly's spine. "Whenever you have problems trying on a dress, pants, whatever, just let someone know."

"That's what I did."

"That's what I'm here for. That dress brings out the green in your eyes. Why don't you look at yourself in the mirror out there? The view is much better."

Nelly marveled at her reflection. The light was softer out here, and the dress made her appear young and slim.

"Is the dress for a special occasion?" Tabitha asked.

"You might say that." Nelly turned around. The bottom of the dress flared out. Nelly admired herself for a minute more, then returned it to the dressing room. It seemed a shame to take off the dress, it was so beautiful. She would look even more beautiful in the warm candlelight tonight.

Nelly returned to the dressing room. She reached behind her neck and began to unzip the dress. The zipper got stuck halfway down. She tugged the cold metal tab, but it would not budge.

"Tabitha?"

"Coming."

Tabitha yanked the zipper. The small warm pressure travelled down Nelly's spine to the small of her back. When Alfred took her to the Valentine's Day Dance over forty years ago, he touched her in the exact same spot. His warm, dry hand supported her back as they danced.

"There you go, ma'am."

"Thank you, Tabitha."

When Nelly came out of the dressing room, Tabitha was ringing up a pair of slacks for a young lady. Nelly walked over to the pantyhose stand nearby and found some black seamed stockings in her size. When she returned, the young lady was gone.

A magazine lay on the left side of the cash register. "What magazine is that?" asked Nelly.

"*Rolling Stone.* I bought it because it has an article on Tori Amos. Have you ever heard of her?"

"No, I haven't."

"She's incredible. She writes the greatest songs. Maybe you'd like her. If you get a chance, listen to her." Tabitha's hands folded the velvet dress. Her manicured nails matched her lipstick.

"Your nails are pretty," Nelly said. "I love that color."

"It's called 'vixen.' I usually buy 'blackberry,' but the store was all sold out. It's Revlon." Tabitha ran Nelly's American Express card through the terminal. Almost immediately, it spat out a receipt.

"I hope you have a wonderful time in that dress," Tabitha said. "Come back and see us soon."

"Thank you so much, Tabitha. I'm sure I will."

That night, Nelly set the dining room table with cotton napkins and a white lace tablecloth. She placed a silver candelabra in the center of the table. She filled two crystal bowls with water. She had gathered roses,daisies, and asters from her garden, and she cut the flowers from their stems. She floated the cut flowers in the crystal bowls.

Nelly managed to zip up the velvet green dress all by herself. She slid into the black seamed stockings and black heels. She put on the pearls that her late husband Alfred had given her.

Thirty minutes later, Nelly heaped generous portions of roast beef and mashed potatoes onto his plate. It was not the fanciest dinner in the world, but it was Alfred's favorite. When he was alive, he always ate about twice as much as she did. "You're a big eater, Alfred," Nelly said. "A big talker, a big thinker, a big spender, a big *everything."* She placed the plate on the table, right in front of his chair. He never minded sitting with his back to the window. When Nelly spotted a pretty bird or a squirrel, she always made him turn around and look. But little things never distracted Alfred as they did Nelly. Alfred always focused solely on her. She sat down.

"Oh, Alfred, I miss you terribly. I hope you can hear me. Not much has happened since the last time I talked to you. Burt Cartwell died two weeks ago of a heart attack but I think I've told you about that. Your sister Catherine calls me almost everyday to make sure I'm alright. She's doing well.

"I've been gardening and watching television. I don't read as much anymore, though I still do the Sunday crossword. Even with my bifocals, I strain my eyes to make the simplest words out." She ate a few bites of her green beans. "I don't know what to do with myself these days." She took a sip of wine.

"The rump roast turned out right, don't you think so?" Nelly asked. "And what do you think of this dress? I bought it at Bloomingdale's today, and I met the nicest sales lady. Her name is Tabitha, and she said this

dress brought out my eyes. Don't you agree?"

Nelly could almost see his wafts of cigar smoke hovering over the table. "I wish you would eat instead of smoke." She placed her fork, tines down, on her dinner plate, and clasped her hands together. She stared at the empty seat in front of her.

"Alfred, I want you to hear something. This sales clerk I was telling you about, Tabitha, recommended a new singer to me. After I bought this dress, I went to a music store in the mall. The young man there told me that this was the singer's most famous tape. I've already listened to it once today, and I don't understand all the lyrics. But I do enjoy it. Her names is Tori Amos, and she plays the piano. Remember when I used to play 'Somewhere My Love' and 'Love is Blue' for you on the piano?" Nelly popped the *Little Earthquakes* tape into the portable stereo she usually kept in the bedroom.

"What do you think of this lipstick I bought? It's called 'vixen.' Tabitha wears it. I like the color, but this shade of red looks better on her than it does me.

"Isn't this roast beef delicious?" she said, but her jaw grew stiff. She wasn't hungry anymore. Maybe Alfred wasn't hungry, either.

She got up and stopped the tape. "I don't like her as much as Frank Sinatra or Tony Bennett, but I do like this tape. I'll have to tell her how much I like it tomorrow. Tomorrow, when I return this dress. It's lovely, but I'm too old to wear such things. I'll clear off this table later. Good-night, Alfred."

She took the candelabra into her bedroom and undressed in the candlelight. In this light her body looked almost like it did when she and Alfred were married. She lay in bed, wide awake, stroking her face with the edge of the comforter.

Nelly returned to Bloomingdale's the next day. "Tabitha?"

Tabitha gave Nelly a small smile. "Hi. How did your date go last night?"

"Date? Oh, it was nice, it was nice. I need to return this dress."

"Is there something wrong with it?"

"Yes. Well, not exactly." Tabitha looked so lovely in her blue satin dress. She wore silver earrings with blue stones in them.

"Are those sapphires?"

Tabitha nodded. "Sapphire is my birthstone."

"What day were you born in September?"

"The thirtieth."

"My husband's birthday was on the twenty-second of September. He died a year ago of a stroke."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Miz --"

"Tomlinson. You can call me Nelly."

"Okay, Nelly." Tabitha smiled, revealing her small white teeth, each one as shiny and precious as a pearl. For Nelly's fortieth birthday, Alfred took her on a cruise to Barbados. While they were on the island, Alfred gave her a narrow jewelry box. Inside lay a string of pearls, each one reflecting the light of the full moon overhead. Her hands trembled, and she dropped the box. "Surprised you, didn't I?" he said. He grinned, exposing his big white teeth.

" -- your receipt?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, do you still have your receipt?"

"Yes, I do."

"In that case, you need to go to customer service downstairs. Just take the escalator and go right. It's a shame that you have to return the dress. It looked beautiful on you."

Beautiful on you! Nelly's neck, face, and ears got hot all of a sudden. "Thank you," she said, lowering her eyes.

"If there's something wrong with the dress, like if it's torn or stained, you can exchange it instead."

There were not hunter green dresses left in Nelly's size, but Tabitha helped Nelly find the same size in sapphire blue.

"I bought a Tori Amos tape last night. *Little Earthquakes."*

"Really?" Tabitha's left eyebrow shot up.

"Yes, I enjoyed it very much. I wasn't sure what to expect. I thought that she might be a female version of that piano player who used to wear big glasses and dress so flamboyantly."

"Elton John?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"My boyfriend has every single album Elton John released between 1969 and 1984. He doesn't like Elton's recent stuff, though."

Boyfriend. Of course she has a boyfriend, she's too beautiful not to have one. Nelly felt a lump in her throat. She took a deep breath, then another, but the lump remained.

"I'm glad that you like Tori Amos," said Tabitha. "When you tell most people to listen to a singer or a band, they just forget about it."

"I could never forget anything that you like," Nelly said. "I'm serious. I bought that shade of lipstick that you wear, 'vixen.' I've got it on right now."

"So you do. Wow! That's pretty neat." She handed Nelly the shopping bag. "Thank you so much for shopping with us, Nelly."

"Thank you, Tabitha." Tabitha's ebony hair and eyes, her white skin, her red lips. She was Snow White.

Tabitha cleared her throat and said, "Well, I'm going to the office to get my paycheck. Bye now."

It was time to go. She could have admired Tabitha forever. Oh, well, she could come back tomorrow and buy a belt or something. "Bye, Tabitha. I'll see you real soon."

In the parking lot, a tear slid down Nelly's cheek. "Stop it," she whispered to herself. She shivered. Winter was on its way. She wondered if it would frost over tonight. Should she cover her flowers up this afternoon?

She unlocked the door of the Lincoln Continental. Black and shiny on the outside, leather seats, all the extras. Alfred bought it the day before he died, and a trace of a new car scent remained. She dabbed her face with a Kleenex and started the car.

Nelly and Albert had grown up in the same neighborhood. Nelly was a shy, quiet child with auburn hair and freckles. Alfred, or "Alfie" as he was called back then, was everyone's friend and the marble champion of the neighborhood. One day he offered to teach Nelly how to play marbles. Alfie soon lost his title, and Nelly won so many of the other kids' marbles that no one would play her anymore. Except Alfie.

When she was thirteen and he was sixteen, they began to "go steady." Nelly's father wouldn't let Alfie step into their house. "You're too young to date," Daddy said. "Plus that Alfie is a sissy britches. He's too pretty, too delicate." It was true that Alfie was a beautiful boy, with curly black hair and pale skin. Nelly thought he looked like a Cupid or a cherub. He wasn't a heathen like the other boys, who made stupid jokes and insulted each other all the time. Alfie never cursed, never dipped chewing tobacco, never spat. Alfie and Nelly memorized Browning, Shelley, and Keats. They stargazed together. They even went shopping together. Alfie always knew what dress Nelly should try on, what eye shadow would look good on her, what perfume smelled best on her. He was a fashion consultant and confidant to many of the other high school girls, but Nelly was never jealous. The gawky, freckled tomboy eloped with the sensitive “sissy britches” right after she graduated.

A car honked. Nelly looked up. The light had turned green, and cars passed her by. She shook her head to clear her thoughts. She pushed her right foot down slowly, like Alfred had taught her.

The day after the ceremony, the Tomlinsons packed their bags and drove down to Pensacola. Nelly had never seen the ocean before. Alfred took her hand and guided her into the waves. They stayed in the water for hours. By suppertime, Nelly's skin matched the highlights in her hair. Alfred had been to Pensacola with his parents several times when he was younger, and he knew a good oceanside restaurant. Nelly had caught catfish when she was a little girl. She used to take tuna sandwiches with her to school. But she had never tried any seafood as delicious as the lobster and shrimp Alfred ordered for her. He had ordered a twenty-dollar bottle of white wine. He held Nelly by the arm to make sure she wouldn't stumble on their way back to the Surfside Hotel, where Alfred had rented the honeymoon suite.

Nelly went into the bathroom and changed into the pink nightie Mother gave her as a wedding present. The night before, her mother had told her, "Let Alfred touch you anywhere he wants to tonight and hold your breath. The first few years he will touch you all the time, then he'll taper off when he gets a good job. Then you'll have children. He'll leave you alone after that." And that's all her mother would say.

Nelly used all the evening make-up tricks that Alfie had taught her. Her hand trembled, and she messed up her eyeliner four times before she got it right.

When she came out of the bathroom an hour later, Alfred was fast asleep. He was snoring. Nelly supposed that she should be angry. Instead, she was relieved. She fell on the huge round bed next to him. She woke up with his head in the crook of her arm, his soft body pressed against hers.

The next morning they had breakfast in bed. "You're not mad at me for falling asleep last night, are you?" Alfred asked.

"Not at all."

Alfred smiled. "I knew you'd understand. You are the only person that really knows me. We are two of a kind."

A million questions lay on the tip of Nelly's tongue, questions that Nelly could not bring herself to ask nor answer. Sometimes she felt the urge to voice those questions and answers, to draw them from her throat like sword or a torch.

Once in a while Alfie came home smelling like musk that he usually didn't wear. Sometimes when they went out, Nelly saw a woman and exclaimed, "Isn't she gorgeous, Alfie?"

"Mmmm-hmmmm, that little black dress flatters her," he said as his eyes lingered over someone or

something else.

But Alfred always sent her roses from work on Valentine's Day. He surprised her with jewelry on their anniversaries and gave her anything she demanded on her birthdays. He took her on cruises to the Caribbean. They rang in the New Year in London in 1968, in Berlin in 1971, in Tokyo in 1980.Unlike her friend Betty's husband, Alfred never surprised her with a vacuum or washing machine. He never hid behind the morning paper. He was her best friend.

The trees and houses had shrunk. Unfamiliar children biked up the hill. "Dammit, I've missed my turn!"

When Nelly got home, she went straight to the bedroom. She took off her sweater and slacks, slipped into the blue velvet dress. The dress caressed her skin like soft, warm hands. She almost wore the seamed stockings, but changed her mind. She wanted to be comfortable. She wasn't dressing for anyone but herself. She lay down on the king size bed. Together Alfred and Nelly chose to do the bedroom in blue. Their carpet was Egyptian blue, and the wallpaper was light blue with tiny clusters of Queen Anne's lace. A matching set of blue lamps topped a matching set of mahogany nightstands. The dresser and chest of drawers were mahogany, too. Alfred had picked out furniture, carpet, and wallpaper of most of the rooms in the house. In fact, the house still belonged to Albert, even though she was the only one living in it. Nelly owned the bathroom, kitchen, and her flower garden.

The flowers! She got up and opened the closet doors, turned on the television that Alfred bought for her. She turned on the television, turned it to the Weather Channel.

"The first cold front of the season comes tonight, Arctic air sweeping across the Northwest, through the Great Plains, into the Southeast." She lay down on the bed again and hit the remote control's "mute" button. *Relax,* she told herself. She stroked the velvet on her right arm. A few minutes later, she raised her arm up and slowly ran her fingertips between her armpit and her waist, up and down. It tickled.

The phone on the nightstand rang, startling her. She picked it up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, Nell!"

"Hello, Catherine." It was Alfred's sister. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. I meant to call you yesterday and check up on you. I put some daisies on Alfie's grave. Were those asters yours?"

"Yes, they're from the garden."

"They were gorgeous, Nell, just gorgeous. Anyway, I don't have much time to talk. Lisa's bringing the

kids over. She and Rob want a night out to themselves. If you want, you can drop by and see Taylor and McKenzie. They're both getting so big."

Nelly grabbed the remote control. On channels 2,4, and 5, soap operas were on. On channel 8, a huge purple dinosaur and some young children sang. On channel 11, Sheriff Andy Taylor watched Otis lock himself up. "Nelly?"

"What?"

"I asked if you wanted to go with me to church tomorrow night. I know you still love Alfred, God rest his soul, but there's a wonderful man I want you to meet. His name is Joe Mencer, and he's retired from Merrill Lynch. He's a widow with three grown children."

"Catherine, I don't want to date any men. I can't see myself with any man besides Alfred."

"Honey, I know. I don't want to rush you into anything, but I just thought you'd like to get out of the house and see some real live people. I worry about you spending so much time alone."

"I'm fine. I can keep my own company quite well. I've got my garden, and I go to the mall sometimes. I don't mean that I don't want to see you. You're my closest friend, you're my sister- in-law. But I'm not a religious person, Catherine, and I don't feel comfortable in church."

"Nell, we're not getting any younger. Going to church has helped me so much. I don't consider myself very religious, but I do believe there's a God, a heaven, a hell. I used to be scared of dying and leaving James and the kids and my grandbabies. I don't agree with everything the minister says. I don't have to. Neither do you."

Channel 24 showed a man with a beard and cowboy hat singing in a bar. A pair of manicured hands hovered over cubic zirconia earrings on channel 25. A young black woman spoke into Jerry Springer's microphone on channel 26.

"Nell, I gotta go. Lisa's car just pulled up. Will you promise to at least think about what I've said?"

"I promise."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

We're not getting any younger. All those questions that had burned inside her for so long, so long ago. She had gathered up her courage like she had collected marbles as a little girl, one at a time. Right when she had mustered up the courage to ask Alfie her biggest question, he had a stroke. At the funeral, there was only one person that cried more than Nelly. That person was their old friend Hutch. "Nelly, you just don't know

how good a friend Alfie was to me," he said to her several times after the funeral.

Nelly pulled the blankets around her. She watched television the rest of the day. Her hands rested on top of the comforter.

Nelly found herself in the Bloomingdale's dressing room. She wore a flimsy pink nightie. There was no fluorescent light, only a soft light glowing below her. A silver candelabra with seven pink candles stood on a mahogany stand.

She looked up to see Alfred. He was young, so radiant, a radiant boy. He kissed her slowly, and with the her hand she pressed his head to hers. She stroked his hair with her fingers. Her fingers fell through a cascade of hair to the middle of his back, and his lips and tongue softened. He smelled different, a bit sweeter, like the roses in her garden. She opened her eyes.

Tabitha's breath burned Nelly's cheek. She looked over Tabitha's shoulder into the mirror. Her hair was red instead of white, the lines in her face had vanished.

Nelly woke up. Her hand glided over her breasts and belly, down to a patch of hair. The warm wetness welcomed her finger.

"How about a belt with silver links?" asked Tabitha. Today she wore a cherry red cashmere sweater and black skirt. Her lips and nails matched her sweater. In her hair was a barrette with a tiny silk rose.

"That was just what I had in mind," said Nelly.

"Before I ring this up, is there anything else you might need but forgot? Any other accessories?"

"No, I believe that's it." Nelly opened her pocketbook and dug out her wallet.

"I'm sorry that you've had to come back twice since Monday." Tabitha looked down at the belt. "That must have been an inconvenience for you."

"No, not at all. I live close by." Nelly smiled, but Tabitha stared down at the cash register. "I love to shop. Bloomingdale's is my favorite store."

"I see. Here's your change." Tabitha's hand touched Nelly's for a split second. "Seventy-five cents. Thank you for shopping with us, Mrs. --"

"Please call me Nelly."

Tabitha nodded. She bit her lip. "Have a good day."

"You too, Tabitha."

Nelly walked into the mall. She didn't need anything. She felt inclined to window shop, that's all. She looked at diamond rings and a bookstore display. She watched seven golden retriever puppies play with each other on shredded newspaper. She walked to the middle of the mall. She sat on a park bench and listened to the rushing water of the fountain. After a few minutes or an hour, she opened her pocketbook. Several pennies jingled at the bottom. She closed her eyes and threw her penny toward the water's roar.

After Nelly made her wish, she walked back to Bloomingdale's. Tabitha and a very tall woman stood behind the cash register. The tall woman had short, dark blond hair. She wore a name tag on her grey jacket. She and Tabitha were talking, but Nelly couldn't understand all their words. She picked up "silver belt," "blue," and "exchange."

Tabitha was taking about her! Blood rushed up Nelly's throat to her face and ears. Her heart beat against the wall of her skin. She sped up her pace.

"Hi, Tabitha," she said. Her voice resonated in her ears.

"Hi, Nelly!" Tabitha said. Two rows of white pearls appeared between her lips.

Nelly continued to walk down the aisle. She looked back over her shoulder. She couldn't hear what Tabitha and the tall woman said. The tall woman smiled at her, but Tabitha didn't look at her.

When Nelly got home, she took off her clothes. Five minutes later, she relaxed in her pink bathtub. An inflatable pillow supported her neck, and the rose bath beads melted quickly. She felt her nipples. A diamond topped each breast. All Nelly could think about was Tabitha in her cashmere sweater, seamed hose, black heels. Tabitha, with the voice like wind chimes and sighs. Tabitha had told another person about her. What did she say to that tall woman? Did Tabitha have the same feelings, too? *That dress brings out the green in your eyes. It looked beautiful on you.* From their honeymoon night to the last day of his life, Alfred complimented her appearance.

"So what if he complimented me? He was a queer," she said aloud. "A queer," she said again. She splashed in the water. "Hello, sailor!" She laughed at how easy it was to say. "Queer." It was just a word. "Queer. Queer as a three-dollar bill. Gay." She kicked in the water, made a splash. "Gay, gay, gay. Gay as a tangerine. Homosexual." The only difference between "homosexual" and "heterosexual" was the prefix. The prefix was not the definition itself, it only clarified things, made a distinction between the two very similar words.

She could not bring herself to say "lesbian," however. "Lesbian" sounded disgusting somehow. "Lesbian"

was a woman who wore her hair short, wore no make-up whatsover, and spoke in a gruff voice. She looked, walked, and talked like a man, and she hung out with other women like her. A lesbian was not the soft, feminine, sensual goddess that Tabitha was. Lesbians wore plaid shirts, blue jeans, and work boots. They drove trucks plastered with rainbow and pink triangle stickers that told the whole world they were lesbians. Nelly knew because Alfie had told her. He had called them "dykes", but not in a mean-spirited way. Once after Nelly and Alfie had seen a group of "dykes" in a coffee shop, she asked him, "If they are attracted to women, why do they dress and talk like men?"

"Not all of them do. It's just that the bull dykes are the most noticeable. Also, I think the 'fem' look died out in the eighties. I think it's a shame. Women don't know how lucky they are to be so beautiful."

Nelly looked down at her body in the bathtub. She was pudgier around the middle. The skin on her knees and elbows was less elastic, less supple. Age spots dotted her hands. A few varicose veins were on her legs. There were even some around her feet and ankles. Still, she looked pretty good for fifty-four. She took care of her face. There were some wrinkles on her face, but not that many. She could squeeze into size six pants. She was still agile. She often walked, and she could still bend down and pick things up. Her back was still straight. She looked better than Catherine, who was eight years her junior.

Speak of the devil. The phone rang. Catherine must want to know if Nelly was going to church. Twelve rings, a minute of silence, then eight rings more. "Go away," said Nelly.

She stayed in the bathtub for an hour, adding hot water every now and then. She let her hands explore her body. Never in her life had she experienced such pleasure. She almost forgot who she was.

The next day Nelly returned to the mall.

Where was Tabitha? Only the tall woman stood behind the register. She smiled at Nelly. Her teeth were large and yellow. She probably drank a pot of coffee a day and smoked Marlboros.

"May I help you?" The tall woman walked towards her. There was a run in her stocking, near her knee. She wore scuffed white heels. It was almost two months after Labor Day. Something sharp poked Nelly's back. She turned around to find a nearly empty rack. She didn't know she had retreated that far.

The tall woman smelled like several ashtrays. Her brass nametag said, "Pauline - Department Manager."

"That's okay, Pauline."

"Are you looking for Tabitha? She has the day off. I'd be glad to help you."

"That's okay.Thank you." Nelly turned around and walked as fast as she could. Her face and ears were on

fire. How did that tall woman know? Tabitha must have told her.

How embarrassing. But if Tabitha told her, wasn't that a good sign? Didn't it mean that Tabitha had been expecting her all along? That Tabitha had been looking forward to her visit?

When Nelly walked outside, the wind bit her face and ears.Goosebumps popped up on her arms. Her teeth chattered. In the warm haven of the Lincoln, she gasped.

"Oh no! My flowers!"

That afternoon, the kitchen phone rang as Nelly walked through the back door. "Hello?"

"Hi, Nell. Where have you been?"

"Catherine, I forgot to cover my flowers up. The frost killed them."

"Nelly!"

"I tried to save them, but it was too late. All that's left are six roses on one bush and a dozen asters. Maybe I can make a dried flower arrangement with the remains."

"I'm so sorry. I don't remember you ever forgetting to tend those flowers. That's so unlike you."

"I've had a lot of things on my mind. I haven't been myself lately." She sat down at the kitchen table and pulled off her shoes.

"What's wrong, hon?"

"I miss Alfred. My flowers are gone. I can already feel Winter gnawing at my bones."

"Isn't that the truth? Nelly, you must remember this. 'Seek, and ye shall find. Asketh, and you shall be answered.' Or something like that. Reverend Xavier preached on those verses. I can't even remember if they're from Matthew or Mark. I can't remember anything anymore."

"I remember everything. Everything seems like it happened yesterday." Nelly took off her dirty jeans and massaged her knees.

"Why don't you come over and eat supper with me and James tonight? It's too much trouble to cook for one."

"Maybe another time, Catherine. I'm exhausted."

"I worry about you spending so much time by yourself. I wish you had kids."

"Alfred and I didn't want kids. I don't think we would have made good parents."

"Nonsense!"

"Besides, we had too much fun by ourselves. We enjoyed a world that was all our own. Some things

you don't want to share with anyone. I'm going to take a nap now. Bye."

Nelly woke up crying. She could not remember the contents of her nightmare, but it had something to do with Alfred, Tabitha, and that nasty Pauline. She scrambled out of the bed and into the bathroom. She turned on the bathtub faucets and crumbled the salvaged roses over the water. She hugged her inflatable pillow. She sat in the bathtub a long time after the water lost its heat.

It was nine o'clock in the morning. She put on the blue dress and the black stockings. She hadn't slept all night, not after that nightmare. Two hours ago, she brought a bottle of White Zinfandel back to the bedroom. The bottle was empty now, and she was still wide awake.

She watched the early morning national news, the early morning local news, *Good Morning America,* and flipped through channels. She was exhausted and maybe a wee bit tipsy, but she was okay. She had a bad dream, but it was alright now. She was making important discoveries about herself. She had unearthed some things that had been buried deep inside her. It was a scary process. "Change is scary," Alfred used to say, "but it's necessary." All was not lost, all had been found. She could start her flower garden again the spring.

Nelly went over to the liquor cabinet. It was empty except for a few wine bottles and some Smirnoff. She poured some orange juice into a glass and added just a smidgin of vodka. She was not much of a drinker, and she had forgotten how much fun it was.

She picked up the phone book. She looked up Bloomingdale's number.

"May I speak to Tabitha?"

"Tabitha Ullman? Sure, I'll transfer you. May I ask who's calling?"

"Nelly Tomlinson." Now why did she tell that woman her name? She had only called to hear Tabitha sigh "hello." Nelly hung up.

"Ullman Tabitha" was listed in the phone book. Nelly dialed the number. After four rings, the answering machine picked up. "Hi!" said Tabitha. "I can't make it to the phone right now, but if you'll leave your name and number, I will return your call. Thank you." *Beep.* Nelly hung up, then dialed the number again. And again. And again.

Nelly woke up after dreaming of the ocean. The clock on the nightstand said "5:00." It was already dark outside. She thought about fixing dinner, but wasn't all that hungry. She did not have a smidgin of a hangover. In fact, she felt good enough to go shopping.

She added 'vixen' color to her lips and put on her pearls. She looked like she had spent a restful weekend on the beach. She looked like she had risen from the ocean in a clam-shell.

"Does Tabitha work today?" Nelly asked the girl behind the counter.

"Is Tabitha the woman with the black hair and pale skin?"

"Yes, that's her."

The brunette girl gnawed on her pencil. "I know I saw her today," she mumbled. "I think she was transferred to the lingerie department downstairs. You might want to check down there."

"Thank you so much!" Nelly felt like doing cartwheels. Perhaps Tabitha had moved to the lingerie department to wait for Nelly, to seize the moment, to *carpe diem.* Tabitha awaited her among satin and silk and lace. No, that was ridiculous.

"Oomph." She bumped into a man in a khaki uniform. A security guard! She hoped the Altoids hid the alcohol on her breath. *Get a hold of yourself, Nell.*

"Pardon me." The security guard looked sleepy. He smiled at her. "I didn't mean to bump into you, ma'am." He was in his thirties, like Tabitha, but with brown hair and glasses. His glasses were tinted, but Nelly could see him wink at her. "Are you looking for something or someone? Maybe I could help you out."

"No, young man, I think I know what I'm after. Thank you." She swallowed and walked by. Was it just her imagination? Was he crazy? Was she crazy?

She looked back at him. He stood there with his arms crossed, rocking back and forth on his feet. He winked at her again. What gall! What nerve! She had to admire him for it. She nodded in his direction, then hurried to the escalator. Men still wanted her. How funny.

She felt slightly woozy on the escalator. She closed her eyes. As soon as she got off, she saw the lingerie department.

Lo and behold, the sweet creature was there. She wore a forest green sweater with her black, crushed velvet skirt. She wore the stockings and heels. Her hair was up in a French twist.

"Tabitha! Hello!"

Tabitha turned toward her. "Oh. Hi."

"It's funny that you were transferred to the lingerie department. I need some new bras."

"Do you need to be fitted?"

Nelly's heart leaped in her chest. "As a matter of fact, I do." She smiled.

Tabitha was silent for a minute. Finally, she said, "I tell you what. The first dressing room is unlocked. Go on in. I'll be in there in a minute."

"Alright, Tabitha."

When she closed the dressing room behind her, Nelly felt her knees tremble. Her heart was about to pop out of her chest. She peeled off her stockings. They were damp with sweat. As she took off the dress, she noticed wet spots under each arm. "Damn." She hoped she hadn't ruined her dress. She would have to take it to the cleaners.

There was no reason to be nervous, really. Nelly took off her bra, but kept her panties and half-slip on in accordance with store policy. She laughed. Store policy! One day, she and Tabitha would violate policies they hadn't come up with yet.

There was a knock on the door. "Hello, it's me," Tabitha said.

Nelly caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. An old lady stared back at her. She was bathed in sweat. There were bags under her bloodshoot eyes.Tabitha couldn't see her like this! And what the hell was she supposed to do when Tabitha came in, anyway? Ask her if she was a lesbian?

"Hello? Ma'am? Are you alright in there?"

"No. I mean, yes. I'm not feeling so well."

"Do you need a doctor?"

"No, I'm okay."

"Are you sure? I'll get someone to escort you out the door."

"No, that's fine."

"Alright. If you need anything, let me know." The whisper of Tabitha's shoes against the carpet grew softer and softer.

Nelly collapsed onto the chair. She stuffed her wet pantyhose in her purse. She slipped her arms through the straps of the bra. Only a few minutes ago, her nipples had been diamonds embedded in roses. Now they sunk into her floppy breasts.

Tabitha was talking in a low voice. Nelly stopped dressing and strained to hear.

"I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about that woman that's not quite right," Tabitha said.

"Maybe she's just lonely," said a voice, interrupted by a smoker's cough. "Maybe she just needs a hand to hold onto or a shoulder to cry on."

"She mentioned something about her husband dying."

"Yeah, I used to see them come in here when her husband was alive. Her husband was a classic closet fag. He had that prissy 'look at my ass' walk going on." Tabitha laughed. "He spoke with a lisp. He had a gay man's impeccable taste. He always helped her find the perfect outfit. I assumed that since he was a closet fag, she might be a closet case herself. She sure stares at you a lot."

"You can have her. I prefer young, sane people with penises. Unlike you and that horny security guard, I'm not attracted to the lonely and decrepit."

"Well, I'm going to check up on her. Poor thing."

Tabitha giggled. "Is Pauline going to make her feel all better?"

"Shut up."

There was a knock at the door. The doorknob turned. Pauline stared down at Nelly. "Honey, you look terrible! Let me help you into your dress. I'll take you to the doctor."

Pauline leaned over Nelly to fasten her bra.

Nelly swallowed and gazed at the floor. Tears rolled down her face.

"Your hair smells nice," she whispered.

Lunacy

The moon was a huge ripe orange hanging in the sky. I could read "hukt on foniks werkt fer me" on Dave's shirt. We started walking down the hill to a store called the Pantry, open twenty-four hours. Several wine coolers had made me hungry for peanuts and Dave thirsty for Lemon Ice Gatorade.

"It's bright as daylight out here," I said.

"All the crazies come out during a full moon, Willa," Dave said.

"Including us." I stumbled. He caught my arm. "Willa wobbles but she won't fall down." I hicoughed.

"You can't possibly be drunk after four wine coolers," said Dave.

"I'm not drunk, just a little tipsy. I don't drink all that much."

We walked past a dozen brick apartment houses. "I hate delivering pizzas here," Dave said. "When you walk in, the stench of vomit attacks your nose." He pointed to the left. "There's a woman who lives there who thinks she's a witch. She wears long black dresses, even when it's ninety degrees out. She's got eight or nine cats. Once in a while she'll order a vegetarian pizza, and of course they send me out there. I always step in some cat shit."

"I hate cats. Except for Zachary. He's just like a dog. When I come home, he rubs up against my leg and purrs. He jumps into my lap when I sit down -- " I trailed off. Someone was crying. "Do you hear that?"

"Yeah. It's coming from the store." Now we were across the street from the store. A woman stood at the payphone. She wore a black skirt and a pink sweater.

"I wonder what's happening," I said.

"I don't. Let's get what we need and go."

We walked across the street. The woman's sobs got louder. She kicked the base of the telephone with her black Western boots. She pulled her bleached hair. She screamed, "Oh God, please help me!" She dropped the phone and fell to her knees.

Dave and I looked at each other. He started running, and I followed, two feet behind him.

Dave picked up the dangling black phone receiver. “Hello? Something’s wrong with your friend here. Hello?”

I asked, “What’s wrong, honey?” Another Dave, an ambulance driver, once told me that calling people “honey,” “baby,” or “sweetie” soothes people in an emergency. I squatted next to her.

She looked up at me. Her wide hazel eyes were bloodshot. Liquid eyeliner, mascara, and taupe eyeshadow smeared together with her tears. It looked like someone had punched her in both eyes. Her mascara traced her crow’s feet and the bags under her eyes. Some dried blood stained her lower lip. She wore a huge gold hoop in her left ear. Her right ear was bare.

“Did someone hurt you?” I asked.

She grabbed my hand. “You’ve got to help me. I shouldn’t be here. I should be at Lake Shore -- “

“Did you escape from Lake Shore?” I asked. I sat down. Dave hung up the phone and ran inside.

“No. I was released six months ago. I’m such a sinner. I’ve been so bad.” She rambled incoherently. The only words I could understand were “parole officer,” “theft,” “son,” and “foster home.” She tightened her grip on my hand and pulled me toward her. She smelled like cheap perfume, Aqua Net, and menthols.“Do you think God will forgive me?” Her eyes pleaded with mine.

“Honey, if there’s a God, he or she or whatever it is, will forgive you.”

“You don’t believe in God?” She asked incredulously. She wailed. She shook. Dave came back outside.

I took both of her hands. “Do you need to pray?” I asked. She nodded. Dave picked up the phone. “Let’s pray.”

Dave said, “Yeah, I’m at the Pantry on Sutherland Avenue, and there’s a woman here who needs emergency aid.”

“What’s your name, hon?” I asked.

“Darla.”

"Darla, pray with me." She closed her eyes. Her trembling subsided.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," I said for the first time in six years.

Dave said, "I don't know exactly what's wrong with her. She's very distraught and unstable. I think she's from Lake Shore."

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

"I don't know. She may be on drugs or something. All I know is that she needs some sort of help right away."

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses. As we forgive those who trespass against us."

"She was screaming and crying and shaking. She's calmed down, but she's white as a corpse."

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen."

"Amen," she said. I opened my eyes and released her hands. Her smile took years off her face. I saw what she looked like as a little girl.

"We're right out in front of the store. They're on their way? Thanks. Bye." He hung up. "I got you some water." He handed Darla an Evian bottle. Sirens screamed in the distance.

"Thank you. Will they tow my car?" There was only one car in the lot, a tan Chevette with a rainbow air freshener on the rear-view mirror.

"No, I don't think so," I said. Red and white lights sparkled down the street. "Help is on the way, Darla. See those lights?"

She started to cry. "Oh, God, I don't want to go to jail again. Please don't let them take me." She clung to me. "I don't want to go!"

The ambulance swerved into the parking lot. Two emergency medical technicians jumped out. They wore white uniforms with several badges. The man said to his female partner in a low voice, "Oh, Lord. I've seen this one before." He cleared his throat. "Hello, honey," he said to Darla. "Remember me? I'm Pat. I was in the ambulance with you the last two times."

"Yeah, I remember! I'm glad they sent someone I know." Pat helped Darla off her knees.

Dave had moved from the phone to Darla's car. He was talking to the female EMT. "She'll be fine," she said. "We'll send someone to pick her car up."

"Hey!" shouted Darla. "I didn't get your names."

"I'm Willa, and that's Dave." Dave and the EMT were still talking.

"Thank you, Willa and Dave. I appreciate it. I'll pray for you both."

Two seconds later, Darla was in the back of the ambulance. We could see each other through the porthole windows. She mouthed "thank you" and smiled. The ambulance drove away. Its lights flashed, its sirens sounded, but it didn't speed this time.

"Did you get that EMT's number?" I kidded Dave.

"She's married, dammit." He shook his head. "Everytime I go out, something like this happens. All the lunatics know exactly when I go out, where I'm going, and at least one of them, if not more, will meet me there. They must tell all the single women to stay home. 'We can't leave Dave alone, can't let him meet any girls!'" He described several wacky encounters from the door to the snack aisle to the magazine rack. A magazine on the top rack distracted him from his rant.

I walked to the end of the snack aisle. There was a display of cheap plastic plaques. "God Bless This Mess." "Our House is Homespun with Love." "Southern by the Grace of God." Sure enough, there was "Footprints," that poem about the man and God walking on the sand together. From time to time the man sees one set of footprints instead of two. He asks God why he deserted him in his time of need, and God says, "I didn't desert you, I carried you."

I paid four twenty-six for that plaque, including tax. I asked the clerk for a paper bag. "I'll be waiting outside," I told Dave.

I went to the phone booth. I leaned against the wall. I stared at the sky. The moon had grown bigger, rounder, like it had fattened itself on the stars. The moon's reflection gleamed in the plastic. It filled the words of "Footprints" with its orange glow. It lit up the buttons on the telephone.

Laying on the chrome counter next to the phone was one huge gold hoop earring. I smelled it. It had no trace of cheap perfume, no trace of hairspray. I put it in my ear anyway.

"Willa?" Dave said. "Willa?"

I leaned "Footprints" against the back plate of the phone booth. The next person who used this phone would be able to read it in the the glow of the blinking flourescent light, or perhaps in the light of a full orange moon, on a night like this.

Miracle at Christmas

There aren't any girls at the Franklin Academy. Sometimes I wish I attended public school, but I can't complain too much. I see girls all the time. Girls live in my neighborhood, girls shop at stores in the malls, girls watch movies in theaters. This summer, girls laid on lawn chairs beside the Graymere Country Club Pool. Those girls soaked up sun and flirted with muscular twenty year-old lifeguards as I lingered in the pool to hide my erection. I see two dozen girls every night when I stare at the *Penthouse* I stole a few months ago. Every face and every ass, every breast and every pussy, every strand of hair have committed themselves to my memory. I've gazed at it so many times, it makes my orgasm feel flat.

Other guys tower above me, talk in deep voices, and grow fuzz above their lip. They kick my ass in soccer and football, and my dick is probably half the size of theirs. Some of these guys lost their virginity long ago. After soccer practice, guys only a year or two older than me talk of Candices, Heathers, Britneys who give head and fuck. I try to ignore those guys, but I feel their eyes on my back until one of them asks me, "Hey, Nicky, gotta girlfriend?" I tell them about Elizabeth, the gorgeous red-head who goes to a boarding school in Virginia, and what an incredible fuck she is. But I know they know I'm lying, and they know that I know that they know.

A gorgeous red-headed Elizabeth really exists. I've never fucked her, but we write to each other. She goes to my mother's old church, the Pocusville Pentecostal in Alabama.

My mother, father, and I go to visit my mother's parents in Pocusville several times a year. My parents picked me up from the Academy last Christmas, and about an hour after we were on I-59. I-59 scenery consists of trees, a few junkyards, trees, dead possums, trees. I fell asleep.

Four hours later, I stumbled out of the van onto the dirt driveway, and Grandma and Gramps ran out of the house to meet us.

Grandma almost swept me off the ground with her hug.

"Oh, Nicky, you're growing up so fast! Aunt Bobbie and Uncle Ray are coming, and Uncle Herb and Aunt Ruby, and Uncle J.B. I got a roast beef in the oven, mashed potatoes and gravy, cornbread -- "

"Sounds good," I said.

"After dinner, Reverend Truman and June are coming over to play Rook with me and your Gramps. And they're bringing over Elizabeth." Grandma winked at me. "That Elizabeth's turning out to be a mighty pretty girl."

"Oh, Grandma," I groaned, trying to conceal any excitement in my voice.

I hugged aunts and uncles, played with my little cousins Julie and Clay. I drummed my fingers on the table. I answered questions like "How's school?" and "Are you still making good grades?" I gulped down my dinner, washed it down with three glasses of milk, and ate blueberry pie for dessert. I glanced at the clock again and again. I sat on the front porch swing, "reading" *Stranger in a Strange Land.* I peered over the edge of my book as the Reverend's blue Plymouth crawled up the driveway. All my relatives appeared on the front porch to say hello to the Reverend Truman and his wife June, my grandparents' best friends.

Their daughter, Elizabeth, wore her tomato-red hair down behind her shoulders. Her skin, which had been dotted by pimples last summer, was now sprinkled with faint freckles. Her breasts were bigger, and as she walked up the steps I caught a split-second glimpse of cleavage under her button-down sweater. She wore a wool skirt that was not tight, but her perfect thighs swelled against the wool. She saw me and smiled, revealing her chipped front tooth. Still, she did not look real, she looked shimmery, like a *Penthouse* centerfold. She said, "Oh, Nick, it's so good to see you!" and hugged me. If she felt my hard-on when she hugged me, she did not show any signs of disgust. As she hugged my aunts and my mother, they all smiled at her. Some smiles were real, some fake. As she shook the hands of my uncles and my father, they let their eyes follow the shape of her face and body briefly, then looked away.

Before my grandparents and their friends went into the kitchen to play Rook, Grandma reached into the hall closet and took out a dusty checkerboard. She gave the checkerboard to Elizabeth and me. My parents, aunts, and uncles talked and laughed on the porch. They were enjoying the mild Alabama December.

Elizabeth and I didn't finish our checker game. As we talked over the checkerboard, I concentrated on her chipped tooth to remind myself that she was real, and that this goddess was actually talking to me. Her voice soothed me. Her eyes fascinated me, they were almost as big and inviting as her breasts. She told me that she had never left Powell County in her entire life. The farthest she had ever traveled was about twenty miles from her house, to downtown Fayette. Her parents disapproved of her desire to travel and her preference for popular songs over Christian gospel hymns. She asked me a hundred questions about the Franklin Academy, and I watched her pupils dilate as I told her about Atlanta and New York, Boston, Seattle, Houston, and other cities I had visited. I scooted a little closer to her on the couch, and I was about to reach for her hand when the Rook-players barged into the living room. Elizabeth and I jumped to our feet.

When she hugged me good-bye, I was too concerned about my boner against her leg to enjoy the feel of her breasts pressed against me, her hot breath on my neck.

A few minutes later, after saying perfunctory good-nights, I raced up to the bathroom, touched

my teeth with my toothbrush, jumped into my pajamas and into bed. I reached under the covers and into my pajamas, about to jerk off, when I heard a little voice whisper,
"Nicky, I think there's a monster under my bed."

I looked at Julie, clutching Boo-Boo, her bear. "Will you check and see if there are monsters under my bed?"

Dammit. Why was she still awake? Clay lay on a fold-out bed next to her empty twin bed. His breathing was slow and heavy.

I got on the floor and peeked under her bed. Though it was dark and I couldn't see anything, I knew it wouldn't matter to my little cousin. "No monsters," I whispered. Julie smiled, reached out to me for a hug, then crawled back up into her bed. I lay in my bed long after she fell asleep, but there was no use. My erection could not be saved. I was as soft as Boo-Boo bear.

Elizabeth wore a long, emerald, silken green gown. It was transparent. I saw her nipples, her breasts, her navel, her pubic hair, everything. She smiled and purred, "Nicholas, come fuck me."

Right when she said "fuck," I knew I was dreaming. I walked slowly over to her, slow because my dream wouldn't let me sprint. I wrapped my arms around her, and her gown fell off. We were both naked, and I began to kiss her neck.

My dream vanished. Instead of feeling Elizabeth, I felt a strange earthquake, centralized in my bed. I opened my eyes to see Julie and Ray, Jr., jumping on my bed.

"Hey," I grumbled. "Stop it."

"It's cartoon time!" shouted little Ray.

"Saturday morning cartoons, cartoons, cartoons!" sang Julie.

I covered my eyes with my arm. They begged me to watch cartoons with them, and I gave in to the little brats.

All that Saturday I babysat those kids as the women in the family went shopping. The men of the household invited me to fishing with them, but I refused. Even though I knew Elizabeth couldn't drive, I still hoped that she would drop by. Maybe she had a bike or an older girlfriend who would drop her off.

I colored, played hide-and-seek, made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Being a wellspring of fun was both tiring and lonely. I missed Elizabeth, and at one point I gave her my silent apology for all the false things I ever said about her to my classmates in the locker room, for all my lewd dreams and fantasies that would shock and repulse her if she knew about them. I even gave her my sincere promise that if she came over, I would never do in church what I had done this past summer.

I groaned inwardly at the thought of sitting in church, watching old people and a few younger fall to the floor and claim to "get the spirit." In Atlanta, we attended the First Episcopalian Church, which maintained an admirable degree of dignity. The First Episcopalian Church also contained many of my parents' friends. The Pocusville Pentecostal Church was not about dignity, but about showmanship and showing your true faith in Jesus Christ. All on my mother's side of the family acted the part of true believers, "channels of the spirit," as the Reverend said.

I usually sat in the back pew, where I could avoid getting the spirit . Sometimes I sneaked in a good book, sometimes dozed. But the most remarkable thing had happened just this past summer, when I first insisted on sitting in the back pew. "He's at that difficult age, when he's too ashamed of his parents to sit with them," I overheard my mother say.

Yes, I was at "that difficult age," but I had discovered something that made life worth living. This past summer I had first noticed Elizabeth. She had been wearing a sundress that made her breasts look huge and showed off her legs, which would have been enough. But there was more. She had gotten caught in the rain, and I could see through the top on her dress! She sat a few pews up with her arms crossed and her cheeks red. I began to feel myself up beneath my raincoat. I'm not sure how or why, but I knew I was onto something when I began to stroke my dick up and down, my fist curled in a pleasant degree of pressure. When I achieved my first orgasm right there in the Pocusville Pentecostal Church, I went through the ceiling and my surroundings disappeared. A scream sent me crashing back down to earth. I looked around in terror. I just knew that someone, probably that old Miss Aggie, would be staring at me with wide eyes and an open mouth.

Miss Aggie's eyes were wide, her mouth was open, but she was looking up at the stained glass window. The old, mentally disturbed woman was pitching a screaming and crying fit. "Praise the Lord, praise the Lord," said Reverend Truman. Then he started speaking in tongues: "babalooshka baballa rodenko myo hoben fagen nieven levin." Other members of the congregation "got the spirit" too.

No one noticed the fourteen year-old with beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. I sneaked to the bathroom to examine and clean off the sticky liquid that had flowed out. I had found a channel for my own spirit, all right.

I waited all day for Elizabeth to show up, but of course she didn't come. I went to bed early that night before I could relieve any tensions.

The next day, I was awakened once more, this time by Grandma for Sunday Christmas Eve services. I thought about jerking off in the back pew during the ride to the church. I sure could do could use it today. I hadn't jerked off since Thursday night, and I was dying.

But this was Christmas Eve, I kept telling myself.

As we pulled into the church driveway, I was still arguing with myself. If an orgasm is not an intense spiritual experience, then what is? If an orgasm cannot make you thank and praise God, what can?

But this is church. And what if I got caught? I would never live it down. People throughout Alabama, perhaps throughout the South, would refer to me as "that boy who got caught playing with himself in church on Christmas Eve." If I didn't make the local newspaper, I would certainly make *The Weekly World News.* I would have to move to Indonesia or Africa, far away from the Western world, and change my name.

I entered the country church. I almost sensed God and Jesus Christ glaring down at me. I was going to hell, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The Reverend thanked everybody for coming. Elizabeth turned and flashed me her smile. She sat in the front with all the other righteous, upright people, away from gross sinners like me. For once, I was glad she was not close. I was eternally damned. Please forgive me God, I thought. Will You please forgive me?

After five minutes of intense begging, I tried to reason with God. (Not like that's ever been proven to work, but I tried anyway.) I dropped a five-dollar bill in the collection plate. See? I'm not a bad person, really, I don't think. And I'm fourteen years old. I'm supposed to be horny, Lord. You made me that way.

"We've got a lot of praising and singing to do," said the Reverend.

The farther away from the front of the church you are, the closer to the front of the church you need to be. The back pews seat church-goers with something to hide. On the row in front of me sits Lulu, a butterball who eats a dozen Snickers during the service. She carries the candybars in her handbag, and when she thinks no one else is looking, she eats those Snickers in one bite each. There's also Mr. Malfried, who sits on the same row as Lulu but on the opposite pew. Mr. Malfried stares at the young girls in pretty dresses, and he looks at Elizabeth more than any other girl. He might do the same thing I have done in these back rows. I try not to think about it. Miss Aggie sits in the back with her sister, Miss Polly. Sometimes when Miss Polly thinks no one else is looking, she pinches Miss Aggie on the back of the neck. One time she whacked Miss Aggie with the songbook pretty hard, left a long red welt on her neck. No wonder Miss Aggie has problems. I never say anything about it. What goes around comes around. I won't give anyone a chance to tattle on me.

The Reverend Truman announced that his daughter Elizabeth would lead the choir and the congregation of the Pocusville Pentecostal Church in "singing the hymns that commemorate the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ." I got a little paranoid when Elizabeth smiled at me, but I couldn't control it. I had my dick out under my coat and I started.

It didn't help that the first song she sang was "O Come, All Ye Faithful." I mouthed the words

the best I could while I jerked off.

My coat irritated my balls. I knew I was about to come, so I pulled my coat back a little. Right after everybody sang, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come," I came. Paranoia set in when I realized my dick and coat are dry. Terror shortly arrived thereafter, when old Miss Aggie clamped her hand on the back of her head, where my wad landed, and screamed.

I grabbed my zipper and yanked it up, but my dick got caught in my zipper. I yelped, and I almost stood up to fix the problem. Realizing what I almost did, I fell onto the floor, but not before I saw Lulu squeeze her Snickers bar so hard it flew out of her hand and knocked off Mr. Flannigan's toupee.

As I writhed in pain and tried to fix my zipper, I heard screams, laughter, and crying. I fixed my zipper, and I crawled up on the pew. Elizabeth was crying. Her shining moment as choir and congregation songleader had been ruined, and I wanted to hug and kiss her, tell her it doesn't matter.

A woman in the choir fainted. The Reverend began to "talk in tongues." A dozen others, including my aunts Ruby and Bobbie, followed his example. Gramps stared at everybody around him, as did my father. Tears rolled down faces, and Aggie slowed her screaming.

After the pandemonium finally ceased, the Reverend stopped babbling and stepped up to the pulpit. "Brothers and sisters of the Pocusville Pentecostal Church, I want to declare a Christmas Eve miracle. Every single one of us in this congregation today, from Miss Aggie to Nick Thurman, from Ruby Kindergard to our beloved choir singer Lucretia Hamilton -- every single one of us found the spirit of Jesus Christ. Every single one of us got spirit simultaneously, on Christmas Eve."

Most of the congregation cheered. Mr. Flanigan crawled around on his hands and knees, searching for his toupee. My mother turned around, gazing at me with a newfound respect for her previously unreligious son. I felt a soft hand grab mine.I turned to see Elizabeth sitting next to me.

A hundred or more people showed up for Christmas Day services. I suspected the Reverend had been advertising the "miracle" that occurred the day before. Sure enough, there was another coming of the spirit of the Lord. Miss Aggie started screaming once again, but I didn't follow this time.

Elizabeth and her parents came over for Christmas dinner, and after dinner Elizabeth and I went walking. I asked her, "What do you think about those miracles?"

She surprised me. "If Daddy starts talking tongues, he's ready to call anything a miracle."

"Are you saying that you Dad fakes knowing tongues?

"Not really." Elizabeth sighed. "I don't know what to believe anymore. I think if somebody could translate that language or whatever it is Dad babbles when something exciting happens, I

might have less doubt."

At the end of our walk, Elizabeth hugged me. As I felt her breasts press into my chest, her breath against my neck, I turned her cheek towards me. The Reverend's daughter surprised me again by kissing me on the lips, then again, then again, until I felt her tongue melt in my mouth.

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