

EVENTS

Thursday, April 6

4:00 p.m.

Reading
Elizabeth Bartlett
McKinney Room, Main

8:15 p.m.

Reading
James Dickey
Winter Theatre, Dana

Friday, April 7

10:25 a.m.

Reading
Memye Curtis Tucker
Winter Theatre, Dana

12:00 p.m.

Lunch for Participants
Latetia B. Evans Dining Room

2:00 p.m.

Student Reading and Panel Discussion
Chapel Lounge, Alston Center

We wish to thank President Ruth Schmidt and Eleanor Hutchens for their support of the Festival.

MEME SCOTT WRITERS' FESTIVAL 1989



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writers' festival 1989

1989 Festival

Spring, 1989

Editors
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the birdwatcher

the falcon has flown
 in cherry tree close.
 his reptile scaled toes
 recoil
 each with sharpened claws
 that tip the slender branch
 as it sways no good
 over
 and
 over
 in the stale air.

my eyes tremble like targeted prey
 to his poised claws
 that protrude like jet wheels
 waiting anxiously
 against the taut skin
 of the tarmac.

rising like browned air
 I break onto his blazing beak
 that burns the very bones
 of my terror
 as it comes undone.

his eyes coil like pinwheels
 turning blood red
 with the fire of
 heat seeking missiles
 and in one swift movement
 as simple as a toothpick
 spearing
 old meat
 i hang
 in the cut
 glass
 gleam
 of his beak.

— anjail ahmad

Wondering

i.

"Do you ever wonder?"
Paige said, twisting her forehead
into a warp and woof
and only God knows
what she is weaving up there.
Something though.

A crow steps
right between her eyes,
three lines,
three cracks
in what was smooth,
untroubled, making gingham
or paisley
out of fine
pressed linen.

Weaving,
Twisting thoughts into thin
threads, Paige wonders. Is that
a piece of cloth from her ear?

ii.

The left side of Paige's mouth
catches in the shuffle
of the loom, making some
sort of pattern.
That corner
curls lightly up,
lifting
her upper lip
over her bottom and wrinkling
her chin.
Is that a red thread?

iii.

Paige wonders through your
questions, comments, problems —
Pulling swatches from her life
into reply, relating
threads of her life to yours,
comparing color,
flexibility.

It can annoy you.
She dwells on her threads
Examining
their quality,
Never answering, responding, advising
really. But she's listening
And Wondering — weaving.

She's humming "Can You Read My Mind?"
and I wish I could.

— Leah M. Hughes

Yaiya

The popcorn mattress
 that August in Lynchburg
 supported a feather
 unable to inject
 and digest
 even through a plastic straw
 too heavy to hold
 for a trembling
 emaciated
 hand
 reaching for the Maalox
 or the bell,
 a tiny brass call
 that weighed everyone down,
 but especially Yaiya
 who sat up
 in her strawberry patch nightgown
 and tried to comb back
 her few strands of hair.

Papou spoke of the old country
 and read the encyclopedias
 whatever he found
 to disagree with.
 At the same corner of his bed
 he hunched over naturally,
 with a swollen
 calloused
 hand
 searching his mane
 parting the thicket
 as he read on,
 angry as hell at the Turks
 and Jews.

He was too far
 to hear Yaiya moan
 but still made rounds
 to yell his philosophies.
 Where he was
 when mom held Yaiya's hand
 "Come on now"
 "Stay here, we're all here"
 A mother's child
 A child's baby
 three women trying to hold on
 to each other,
 burning holes and blisters
 in the grasping palms
 around a man's world
 relighting trick flames.

— Melanie Mortimer

Realizing

When we pick a low-hanging dogwood leaf,
or sweep our hand over a chest-high
concrete wall and absentmindedly pick up an acorn,
just happen to sweep up an acorn in our hand,

we don't realize when we continue walking
and we gimp our arms into an ever so slight
sway and swagger walk, that our
limpness is that of the dogwood.

We don't realize that each rock
in the pebbly concrete plaza ahead
gains a sharper edge because of the
hull's notched grooves rolling against our palm.

We don't know it and yet we do,
if the day allows, stop for some
small reason, maybe we're indulgent
this day — we'd call it lazy if asked —
and maybe we stop to notice a
groundsquirrel busy with leaves.

He stops for our unlikely attention,
then bristles noisily back under shrubs.
But we didn't stop to watch the squirrel
and soon we stare up and off into the horizon,
unsure now just what to look at
or which direction to stare off into.

We stand consciously quiet and aware
of ourselves strangely vulnerable in this place,
and we take our hand from our pocket
and inspect the acorn we've kept all the while,
all the while rubbing its smooth endcurl
and lingering to fingertick its grooves.

We sift it, bounce it in our palm,
then clutch it and throw it into
a high arc and follow its tiny
knuckle ball ascent until it
disappears into a background of limbs
then emerges, descending before a great
white wall, stark against the wall
and caught slipping through its grid of mortar lines
until it falls, a few feet from the ground,
out from the building's corner
into a patch of low horizon sky.

The acorn's arc ends in a small splash of leaves,
much as it fell when it first fell
from the big oak's limb in a wind
that shook it loose and swayed it down,
softly down to the ground below.

We amble on our way now,
reaching out with a tentative forefinger,
half expecting the thick oaks to be
spongy to our touch, but when we find
them still brittle, at best flakey with loose bark,
we continue on and strum our finger
across the bark and trunk's curve,
it seems barely lifting off one tree
with our right hand before reaching out
for another with our left.

And we continue on this way, tree to tree,
until the next one's a bit too far and we stop,
and reorient to the buildings all round
and find in ourselves a way to see
amongst walls and corners and pressing trees.

— Tim Richardson

People, outside these stained glass windows
 the moon ignites our nakedness.
 Last night I walked out in that fire
 and tramped the bluffs along the Alabama River,
 Where the high bank dipped to woods
 I saw the pale, discarded sacs
 like limp worms in the moon-wet grass.
 Beneath the oaks the river curled a silver worm through Alabama.
 People, in the lewd beauty of moonlight,
 pale worms grow wings and seek to consummate the stars.
 I tell you, under its white and secret sheet,
 the naked earth circles and writhes.

— John Warwick

Ulysses' Lament

It is 4:00 on a chill January afternoon in Atlanta and Ulysses Buckram is maneuvering his cab down the rippled, bumpy pavement of Auburn Avenue. Ulysses can feel the hurting beginning in his chest. It has been that way ever since Donnie got killed. Most of the time he is all right, but then it starts, a pain just beneath his sternum as if someone had just hit him, hard. But it doesn't stay there. It begins to expand until Ulysses can barely get his breath. He wants to cry out, but he can't, and so he just rides.

The photo on the taxi operator's license strapped to his visor shows a much younger Ulysses. He was once a vigorous man standing around 5'6" and weighing almost 180. He sat up high in the seat then. But that was long ago.

The years and the losses he has suffered have shrunk him. What is left is the central core of himself. Today when you see him, all you see is that head, always wearing a Texaco cap, sometimes with a cigar in his mouth, peering just over the dash with two outsized hands emerging from scrawny arms to grip the wheel. Yet the core of him is still vital. He stands only about 5'4" now, but his stomach is flat, his arms, though thin, are hard and strong, and beneath his skin, the muscles of his shoulders still ripple. The ravages that have taken him show most on his face. His eyelids are baggy folds. His cheeks are sunken. Between fights in honky-tonks and gum disease he doesn't have a tooth left in his head. He was fitted with dentures, but they hurt him. He took them out the day he got home, and they have sat in the glove compartment of the cab, untouched, ever since.

Beneath his right leg, the handle of a .38-caliber revolver protrudes from beneath the seat. There are two small nicks in the handle. He has been robbed many times, but only twice in 22 years has anyone tried to kill him. He shot them both. One was a man with a razor. Ulysses saw just the glint of steel in the mirror as the man raised his hand. As the man reached around to grab Ulysses' head, Ulysses' hand had gone automatically for the pistol. His arm sprang back and up pointing the gun over his right shoulder as he fired. The concussion of the shell was so close to his own right ear that he could not hear out of it for a week. Half the man's head was blown off. There was blood all over Ulysses' bald head, but none of it was his.

The second time, the robber had put a sawed off shotgun to his neck, taken his money, and told him to pull over and get out of the car. He knew the man was going to kill him; he could hear it in his voice. With his right hand he had slipped the pistol from beneath the seat and held it in front of him as he wheeled left and got out so that the man with the sawed off shotgun never saw pistol until Ulysses turned and fired. He hit the man between the eyes.

He had wanted his son Donnie to carry a pistol, but Donnie never would. "It ain't that you're tryin' to kill people," said Ulysses. "It's people tryin' to kill you." But Donnie didn't want a gun. "Preachers," Ulysses said, disgusted.

Donnie would have graduated this year from Morehouse Divinity School, if he had lived. It was less than a month ago. Donnie was driving a cab, trying to make a little extra money.

"I told him I'd stake him, but, no, he wouldn't take no money from his Daddy," Ulysses says aloud. "Just like his Ma's folks; gonna do what they gonna do, ain't no reasoning with 'em."

Donnie had said, "You're not going to be able to drive that cab forever, Pop. You gonna need your money. You better hang onto it."

And so Donnie had kept driving, and one night someone — the police thought it must have been somebody crazy on drugs — shot him in the back of his head and took his money, less than \$50.

The dispatcher has barked his number a couple of times, but Ulysses has ignored him. Now his breath gets short again, he feels the welling in his chest. "I can't stand this much longer," he thinks. He needs to talk but there is no one he can talk to. He picks up the mike of his two way radio where it lies on the seat, pushes the transmit button and says, "Twenty-one."

Almost immediately the dispatcher responds, "Twenty-one, 419 Jackson St. Lady going to Kroger."

Ulysses responds with a "10-4" and speeds the big Biscayne up Auburn toward Jackson. Ulysses has tried to talk to the dispatcher about Donnie, but it didn't work. "Dispatcher can't be a cab driver; cab driver can't be a dispatcher," he would say. "They two kinds of people. Now a cab driver, he likes to talk, pass the time of day. Ain't so with a dispatcher. It's like sittin' in them little glass booths with all that dirt and paper and styrofoam cups and cigarette butts done took all the words out of 'em. They know they ain't got but so many left and when they say 'em up, they done, so they won't talk with you."

Ulysses pulls up to a housing project and gives a short toot with his horn. He waits but nothing happens. He toots again. Two short blasts this time. Finally, an elderly woman emerges from the building. Ulysses gets out of the car and opens the back door for her.

"How you doin' this afternoon," he asks. "Mighty cold ain't it?" The woman smiles and gets in but doesn't say anything. When she is settled she says — a little too loud — "Kroger, Ponce de Leon."

Ulysses pushes down the flag on the meter and starts down the street. He looks into the rearview mirror. The old woman is rifling through the purse on her lap. Her lower lip has dropped so that her mouth makes the shape of an elongated O. Finally she finds a tissue and wipes at her nose while holding the purse against her chest with her left arm.

"Lady like that has probably had several children; maybe even lost a couple of 'em," he thinks to himself. He hears his own voice before he realizes he's talking. It just comes out of him. "You ever lost a child?" he asks, and then without waiting for an answer, "My son was killed two weeks ago, driving a cab just like this one."

The old woman can see Ulysses' lips moving in the rearview mirror. "What

you say?" she asks, cupping a gnarled hand to one ear.

Ulysses takes a deep breath and begins again, speaking louder now, but it doesn't do any good. "You gonna have to speak up," says the woman. "I'm about deaf but I can't abide to wear my hearing aids, they hurt me so."

"That's okay," says Ulysses. "It wasn't nothing."

"What'd you say?" asks the woman.

"I says," says Ulysses, bellowing now, "if it don't rain tomorrow it'll be a pretty day."

"That's the truth," says the woman, looking out at the street. "That's the truth."

Ulysses drops the woman off at the Kroger and barks, "Twenty-one," again into the microphone. This time the dispatcher says, "Twenty-one, 979 St. Charles Avenue. Going to the airport."

He wheels up Ponce de Leon and turns on Frederica just beyond the Bank South sign. A man is standing on the corner of St. Charles with a briefcase and a folding garment bag. He is wearing an overcoat, gloves and a hat. Ulysses can see the man's breath shooting from his lips in misty streaks.

Ulysses pulls over and the man gets in, muscling his garment bag onto the empty space on the seat beside him.

"It's cold as hell out there," says the man.

"Sure is," says Ulysses, flipping down the flap. "What airline you on?"

The man tells him Delta as they start down the street. "You in a big hurry?" asks Ulysses.

"Nope," says the man. "Got plenty of time this trip."

Ulysses heads for the downtown connector. The feeling is welling up once more and he is about to speak, not really knowing how to begin, when he hears the man talking to someone. He looks in the rearview mirror. The man has pulled a cellular telephone from his briefcase and is making calls. The rush hour traffic is heavy and it takes about 45 minutes to reach the airport, but the man is occupied with his calls, talking all the way as Ulysses sits silent in the front seat.

The man who killed Donnie had said he wanted to go to the airport. Donnie was driving down this same stretch of expressway just two weeks ago. Ulysses takes a deep breath, trying to shake off the feeling in his chest, but the air hurts as he tries to draw it deep into his lungs and his chest contracts with a hoarse rasp.

At the airport, Ulysses gets in the cab line and waits. He has to wait about half an hour and in that time his grief subsides a bit. His fare is a young couple, perhaps newlyweds. He helps put their bags in the trunk.

"Ritz Carlton, downtown," says the man and Ulysses starts off.

The couple seems amused by something. They are giggling and kissing each other. Ulysses watches them in the rearview mirror. "Young people," he thinks, "how happy they are."

"Hey, look out!" shouts the man.

Ulysses slams on the brakes as a red Datsun 380-Z pulls in front of him. The driver is a young blonde woman. She waves to Ulysses and streaks off down the expressway. She has a prestige license plate on her car. It says "BareB."

"You okay?" asks the man.

"Yeah," says Ulysses. "How about you?"

"We're okay," says the man, now looking at the woman and smiling, "just be careful. I've got some valuable cargo back here."

The woman smiles and giggles.

"I hear you," says Ulysses, smiling his toothless smile.

"Young people," he thinks, "got so much to live for. Donnie was so young. Why didn't the angel of death take me? I've got no one left now. I don't care." He merges into the down connector traffic thinking, "They got the wrong Buckram."

Ulysses drops the couple at the Ritz. He can go home, but there is no reason to. When his wife died last year he gave up his apartment in the projects and moved into a boarding house. There is no one there to talk to. The landlord is an alcoholic who stays drunk all the time. Most of the tenants are mental patients who have been turned out with no where to go. They know he carries a gun and they leave him alone.

He circles into the drive-through at Burger King and buys a cup of coffee. He thinks about trying to talk to the girl in the window, but a car comes up behind him and he leaves.

In front of the Hyatt Regency, a man flags him down. He is a tall, black man wearing a white overcoat and carrying a briefcase. Above the throat of the overcoat, Ulysses can see that the man is wearing a dark suit and a bow tie.

"How are you, my man?" says the man as he gets into the cab.

"I'm feeling pretty low," Ulysses says straight away. "My son just died."

"I know what you mean," says the man, looking off down the sidewalk. "My wife died just last week."

"Maybe at last," thinks Ulysses, "somebody who is like me; somebody who might understand."

"Listen," says the man, "I want you to drive down and pick up a dude in front of the Hilton. Then I want you to drive around the block a couple of times. Me and him are going to do a little business. You just keep your eyes open and your ears shut and there will be a little something in it for you. Okay?"

Ulysses knows the man is going to pull off a drug deal. Ordinarily, he would pull his pistol and tell the man to get out of the cab, but tonight he doesn't. "The man's just lost his wife," he thinks to himself.

He drives down Henry to Piedmont and circles back in front of the Hilton. The second man, also carrying a briefcase, is waiting by the curb. As he circles the block, Ulysses can see the two men swap cases. Each checks the contents of his briefcase. They do not speak.

"Let me out here," says the second man, who has the door open before Ulysses can brake to a stop.

The first man smiles and says, "Back to the Regency, pop."

"Let me tell you about my son," says Ulysses.

"Oh yeah," says the man. "What happened?"

"He wasn't as old as you," says Ulysses. "He was driving a cab just like me. Somebody shot him two weeks ago. Murdered him."

"Gee, that's terrible," says the man. "Police catch anybody?"

"Nope, not yet." Ulysses pulls into the Regency driveway. He thinks the man might be willing to sit with him a while, listen to his story. Then he will offer to listen to the man's story, how he lost his own wife. Maybe he will put up the flag and they will ride around downtown Atlanta for a while, just talking, sharing what it's like. But the man isn't willing.

"I gotta run," he says throwing a \$10 bill over the seat for a \$5.50 ride. "That's for the cab fare." Now he hands a \$50 bill to Ulysses. "Go get yourself a good meal and a drink of whiskey, my man," he says. "You'll feel better. I know."

Ulysses watches the man disappear into the hotel. "Ain't nobody gonna listen to me, lest maybe I pay 'em," says Ulysses, holding the \$50 bill in his hand.

He wheels out of the Regency driveway and down Peachtree toward the St. Francis Hotel. About midway the block he sees a hooker and pulls over to the curb.

It is freezing outside but she has on white net stockings and a white mini skirt. She wears a fox stole and below it a vest made of red leather. She comes around to his side of the car and he rolls down the window. She reaches in and grabs his crotch. "What can Snookums do for you, baby?" she asks.

"How much is talk?" he asks.

"Talk, what's the matter, baby? You done got too old for a little nooky?" She laughs.

"I don't need none of that," says Ulysses. "I've had enough of that in my time. Ain't never bought it neither. I need to talk to somebody." He holds up the \$50 bill. "How much talk will that buy?"

"Fifty dollars," she says, her breath steaming through the window. "'Bout 15 minutes."

"That ain't long enough," says Ulysses.

"Listen," says the woman, "a trick takes about 15 minutes, maybe 20. Fifteen minutes, \$50. But I'll cut you a deal, babycakes. For \$150 you can get performed on you an hour's worth of any kind of sex act you know and about a half dozen you ain't never even heard of."

She smiles, tossing her long hair back over her shoulders. "If you want to just talk, that's all right too, but it's \$150 an hour. Take it or leave it."

"I ain't got that kind of money," says Ulysses.

"You sure you don't want that 15 minutes," she asks.

"No I don't," said Ulysses. "I want to tell you about my son. He's dead." He pauses, just looking at her.

"Look," she says, leaning over now extending a hand to stroke Ulysses' cheek. He moves his head back slightly and breathes in, folding his lips over the gums where his rotted teeth had been. "I know you need to talk, old man, but I gotta make a livin'. See." She stands erect again. "What you need is a preacher. Go find yourself a preacher."

Ulysses rolls up the window and moves off down the street. He has already tried preachers. He is sick of them. The mortuary had a nice looking young preacher preach Donnie's funeral, but he didn't even take time to find

out anything about Donnie. He didn't know Donnie was studying to be a preacher. He didn't even talk about Donnie. It could have been anybody in that casket. It made Ulysses sick. "He didn't say five words to me," said Ulysses. "He didn't give a damn. Preachers."

Ulysses drives the old Biscayne cab out Ponce de Leon Avenue again and pulls into a liquor store at Barnett Street. By the side of the building three bums are huddled together on the pavement, trying to keep warm. Another bum is just leaning against the building, his hair down in his face. He is hugging himself, shaking.

Ulysses goes in and buys a quart of cheap wine from the bald man behind the counter. On his way out he stops by the bum leaning against the building.

"You cold," he asks.

The man seems to wake. He looks down at the little man holding the quart of wine.

"Damn right, I'm cold," he says.

"I hate to drink alone," says Ulysses, lifting the bottle where the man can see it clearer. "Let's go for a ride and you can get some anti-freeze."

The man does not need convincing. He gets into the front seat of the cab and Ulysses drives off up Barnett to Virginia Avenue and then turns and goes up a hill on Cleburne Terrace where you can look down between the houses and see the city. He parks. Nobody will bother them there.

He has been holding the quart of wine in one hand, driving with the other. Now he hands the bottle to the bum. The man is still shaking, probably as much from the DT's as from the cold, thinks Ulysses. He fumbles with the metal cap but can't open it.

Ulysses takes the bottle, spins off the cap and hands it back to the man. The man could be white, thinks Ulysses. It is hard to tell because he is covered with grime and dirt. He keeps trying to push long black hair out of his face with a grimy hand. He, too, is missing most of his teeth. Even in the pale light of the streetlight, Ulysses can see that his eyes are drooped and rimmed with red.

The man grabs the bottle and turns it up, but when the raw wine hits his throat he gags and coughs, spewing wine over his arms and the seat of the cab. The man's body shakes in a paroxysm of coughing.

Ulysses grabs the bottle. "Let me have it again," says the man between coughs. "That first swallow just went down wrong."

"In a minute," says Ulysses, reaching under the seat and pulling out the pistol. "Look here," he says.

The man is wiping his chin on his coat sleeve. He looks at Ulysses through the greasy strands of his hair, but Ulysses can see there is not fear in his eyes.

"I reckon he's done too far gone for fear," Ulysses thinks. "It's like he ain't even surprised; like he knew when he got in the car there's was gonna be trouble, and now here it is."

The man folds his arms across his face. "Don't shoot me, Daddy," he says. "I ain't done nothing."

"That's right," says Ulysses. "You ain't done nothin', but here's what you gonna do. You gonna sit there and listen and I'm gonna talk to you. And," he

pauses now holding up his left hand with the jug in it, "if you listen real good I might let you have a pull off this jug now and again. You got that?"

The man slowly lowers his arms and shakes his head. "I got it, Daddy, I got it."

And so Ulysses begins to tell it, tell it for the first time, hear it all put into words. He goes back to the beginning, speaking slowly, listening to the sound of his own voice — telling how Donnie had been born and how he wanted more children but his wife had female problems and there weren't any more. But that was all right because Donnie was real smart and such a good kid, good to his Momma and good to him.

If you had been walking by on Cleburne Terrace that night you could have seen Ulysses, holding the pistol low in his lap, gesturing with it occasionally, not really pointing at anybody, his mouth moving and him listening to his own voice, trying to comprehend it, trying to make sense out of what had happened to his son and to him. From time to time you would have seen him hand over the jug to the bum and the bum take a long pull on the jug and hand it back. And you would see the bum listening too, trying, too, to make out the importance what the other man was telling, shaking his head and once in a while saying, "Don't you know that's the truth, Daddy. Don't you know that's the truth."

— Randall H. Harber

Housewarming

September 30

Dearest,

The house is wonderful! I can't wait until we get the roof fixed and all the painting done. . . Hardwood floors, fifteen-foot ceilings, claw-foot bathtubs! I never thought we'd be this lucky.

At first I wasn't so sure I'd like it. It must have been about midnight when I got here — anyway it was terribly dark — night in the country is so much darker than in the city. I'd been driving for almost eight hours, longer than I'd expected, and I was feeling tired and cranky and lonely — guess who for! So when I finally wrestled the Honda over the last mile of dirt road and saw this big lump of brick and boards, almost covered with weeds and vines, I thought of an abandoned training school for witches and. . . well, darling, for a minute, I must admit, I loved you a little less.

Great, I thought. Jeremy's gone and spent a small fortune on this hunk of junk in the middle of the howling wilderness, and I get the task of making it fit for human habitation.

The inside looked almost as bad — I'm glad you reminded me to take a lantern and candles, or I wouldn't have seen it at all. I got a depressing glimpse of inch-thick dust, shredded wallpaper, dangling shutters and sagging ceilings. I wanted nothing more than a hot bath and bed, but easier said than done. There wasn't any hot water. I was too tired to even consider heating any on the stove so I went straight to bed. I was too cold to sleep much, but when I woke up this morning I felt better.

So much better that I, in my pajamas, had to stop myself from running out to dance in the weeds. (Do the guys at school know you're engaged to a mad pagan woman?) But I settled for leaning out the window, courting pneumonia as you'd probably say, and just enjoyed everything. The weeds didn't look so ferocious in the daylight. I could hear crows. . . and see them! The forest is just beginning to change, and in the sunshine the trees were tipped with gold and copper. For a minute I was tempted to drag out my paints and try to put the scene on canvas. But there was too much to do.

I took a cold bath — still no hot water, but somehow cold baths aren't so daunting in daylight — and went to work cleaning. I'd like to get the place swept out and scrubbed down before I start painting the rooms. Tomorrow I'm going to drive into town and arrange for somebody to cut the lawn and chop some firewood — I know we shouldn't need any so early in the year, but the house is pretty chilly, especially at night.

I can't wait until you graduate! The house should be beautiful by then — a perfect honeymoon mansion. Don't work too hard. I love you.

Sara

October 6

Dear Sara,

I'm glad to hear that you've settled into the house without trouble. I hope you took the extra blankets and the propane stove with you. Sounds like you'll need them. If you get a chance you should talk to a Mr. Thompson in Jasper. He does roof repair. Perhaps he can give you an estimate.

I'm keeping very busy with school, and I made an A on my last World Politics assignment. Be careful and take care of yourself.

Love you,
Jeremy

October 14

Dearest Jeremy,

Things are going pretty well, I guess. The house is already looking better; I got the old wallpaper stripped off at last — those high ceilings are a killer. I haven't tracked down your Mr. Thompson yet, but I hired a man from town to drive out once a week and mow the lawn, trim back the trees (There's an oak trying to fight its way through the kitchen window.) and cut firewood.

"But you better learn to use an axe yourself, Miss," he told me yesterday. He's a dear old fellow with no hair and precious few teeth. He always wears the same overalls — at least they look like the same ones — and the pockets are stuffed with everything from mousetraps to drill bits to peppermints. He told me to call him Bubba. These Southerners! Anyway, he said that if the town got snowed in he might not be able to make it out to the house — and in any case it would be a good idea for me to know how to chop wood in case I ran out and couldn't catch him. I said I'd try and this morning I actually went out and split kindling — me, Jeremy! I'm sure I made a most amusing picture: my Evan Picone blouse sleeves rolled up as I struggled to lift the axe without spoiling my manicure. Whacking desperately at a completely unimpressed log. I wish you could have been here. I wish you could be here now.

I took down all those horrible shutters and painted the front door and the rest of the woodwork. I've begun to paint the dining room, but every morning before I start I have to get a good fire going. I don't know what it is about this house, but I'm cold all the time. I can't sleep at night without a huge blaze roaring in the fireplace — How I miss my electric blanket and my space heater! — and in the morning I hate to face the house. I have to sprint from my still-smoldering bedroom fire to fetch wood for the stove and the dining room fireplace. It sounds silly, but it really is freezing.

So far that's my only complaint, besides its being so lonely out here. I can just see the nearest neighbor's house, about a mile away, and Jasper is a good half hour by car. But once we're married I know I won't lack company. I'm so glad school's going all right — congratulations on the A! Keep up the good work, angel, and don't forget how much I love you.

Sara

P.S. Did I tell you I've started to paint again? On canvas, I mean, not walls. Last night I was standing outside looking at the moon, and for the first time it struck me how cold it looked, and very detached and somehow sinister. I can see how all those legends got built up around the moon... it struck me so strongly that I tried to paint it. It's not turning out half bad.

— S

October 20

Dear Sara,

This won't be a very long letter since my studying is occupying most of my time now. I've gotten really involved in the defense I'm writing; it's fascinating work. I'm sorry the house is a little drafty, but when I had it assessed the inspector didn't find any faults in the structure. All I can suggest is to make sure any cracks are blocked up and to remember to take your vitamins. Are you running a temperature? I don't want my Sara coming down with anything.

Try to contact Mr. Thompson about the roof.

Love,
Jeremy

October 26

Jeremy Darling,

I've finished the dining room and now I'm about a third of the way through the living room. I'm glad we chose the yellow paint; it helps warm the place up. It's been so cold lately I've had to wear three or four sweaters, as well as gloves, just to paint! But without gloves my hands get so cold I can't hold a brush. I tried taking my temperature, as you suggested, but there must be something wrong with the thermometer; it read something impossible like 80°.

Bubba seems to be worrying about me too, the old dear; a few days ago he brought me a huge pot of chicken soup. "From the missus," he informed me solemnly around his tobacco. "I told her you were lookin' a mite sickly." It was sweet of them, and the soup was wonderful, but I don't feel any different.

I had a little scare about a week ago. It was just after sundown, and I'd stepped outside to dump the garbage — potato peelings, that sort of stuff, that I put outside for the animals. Funny how it doesn't seem nearly as cold outside as inside. I'm not sure I shut the door all the way; after all, I don't exactly have to worry about crime out here! Anyway, I opened the door and there was a man standing inside.

I was terribly startled at first. I don't think I said anything. Just stared at him.

"You are Miss Sara Jennings?" he said.

That calmed me down a little. He sounded far too educated to be a vagrant, and he wasn't dressed like one either. He was — oh, I don't know, in his forties maybe — you know, distinguished, just starting to gray at the temples; all he needed was a pipe and a tweed blazer to be the stereotypical college professor.

So I gulped and said, "Yes, I am. Can I help you?"

"I'm just a neighbor. I thought I'd welcome you. How do you like the house?"

Strange, eh? He didn't seem the type to go bounding over to greet the new neighbor with a plate of oatmeal cookies and an invitation to a bridge game. He wasn't dressed like a farmer, but in some sort of antiquated hunting costume. He didn't look dangerous. I know what you're saying, Jeremy, that you can't go by a person's looks. But — well — anyway, I invited him to have a cup of tea, which he refused, and pretty soon, after talking a little (I can't remember anything he said.), he nodded goodbye and walked off into the woods.

After thinking about it I locked the door. But I still believe he's harmless. In fact, you might almost call him simple, the way he speaks, when he speaks at all. And he doesn't seem to listen to you. But his eyes are very intelligent, almost piercing. He's dropped by twice since then, just for a few minutes at a time, and I have no idea where he lives — he always just appears out of the blue and leaves via the woods. He startles me sometimes. I'll walk into a room I just left five minutes ago, and there he is, looking as if he's always been there.

Now, angel, don't even think of being jealous. He's nothing like you at all, and I'm not even sure I like him. He's so quiet and somber. But somehow it's nice to know there's someone nearby.

Must run and put more wood on the fire — it's getting too cold to write.

Maybe one of these weekends you could drive down and see the house! I'm very proud of it.

All my love,
Sara

October 29

Dear Sara,

I'm very busy right now, with exams just two weeks away, so I won't be able to write to you as often as I have been. I wish there was a telephone in the house; I feel uneasy that you're so isolated, with no way to contact me if you needed help. I'm thinking particularly of that odd character who broke in. Just because you're out of the city doesn't mean there aren't lunatics walking around. Lock the doors and don't answer the door at night. By all means contact the police if he bothers you again.

How does the paint look? I was a little worried that the quality might be poor, since I bought it in bulk. I still don't like your doing all that work by yourself, but if you insist, I suppose it's all right.

My brother wants me to spend the holidays with him this year. I wish you could come, but you'll probably still be busy with the house. Maybe in the spring I can come spend a week or two with you. Are you sure you want to married in the spring? It might be hard to work around my schedule. We can talk about that another time, though.

Love,
Jeremy

November 5

Jeremy dear,

Work's going slower now. I finished the living room but haven't started the kitchen. I think it's because it's so cold — I can't seem to stir myself to do anything active. It's a good thing I learned to chop wood; I'm going through it at a terrific rate. Even if I'm only going to be in a room for five minutes I have to build a fire there.

I haven't seen my mysterious visitor in almost a week. The last time he was here we were sitting at the kitchen table with some coffee — he doesn't drink his, but seems to enjoy warming his hands on the mug — and I heard Bubba at the back door.

"Come on in, Bubba," I shouted.

"Door's locked," he shouted back.

Well, there is no way it could have been, since my friend had just come in that way; at least, I didn't see him, but it's the only way he could have. I told you how he just appears when I'm not looking. Anyway I excused myself and went to let Bubba in. The screen was latched after all. He must have closed it after himself.

"Come have cup of coffee with us," I said to Bubba. "I was just having a chat with — uh" — remembering suddenly I didn't know my friend's name. "I'm sure you two know each other," I was babbling as I led Bubba into the kitchen — and he was gone.

I was mystified. There was no way he could have slipped past us, and we hadn't heard the front door. I'd only been out of the room for ten seconds, for heaven's sake. His cup of coffee was still there, and this is the oddest thing, Jeremy — it had been steaming hot two minutes ago when I gave it to him, and now ice crystals were forming on the top!

I had to sit down. Bubba looked at me as if I'd turned green and sprouted antennae. I haven't seen my visitor since. I'm almost relieved.

I went into town with Bubba to get groceries and was amazed. It must have been 70° — a real Indian summer! Yet when I came back and opened the front door it was like walking into a deep freeze. Maybe we should have hired someone to put in some insulation.

Try to come down for a weekend. I want to be sure I'm not imagining all this. Take it easy on the studying.

Love,
Sara

Dear Jeremy,

It's freezing in here. I can hardly hold the pen, and I'm right in front of the fireplace. I don't even go to my room to sleep any more, I just doze on the living room rug. I've given up trying to paint the living room. Once I get a few feet away from the fire I can't bear the cold.

So I sit in front of the fire and paint, or read. I tried painting my former visitor, but I can't seem to get the eyes right. He had eyes of a peculiar, very pale, icy shade of green that I can't duplicate.

I've been reading some old books from the attic. Some old almanacs and maps of this region. They're very interesting. Apparently there used to be forest where this house is now — almost all the way through Banks County. They must have had some really bad years because I've read of a number of people freezing to death in this area. Maybe I'll be the next, ha ha.

I'm really beginning to worry a little — about myself. Yesterday night when I turned to get another log to put on the fire, I saw three people sitting on the floor: a man and woman and a small boy. They were shabbily dressed and the child's feet were muddy and blue. All three had those ice-green eyes. They didn't look at me. I shut my eyes and they were gone when I looked again.

Please take some time off and come visit, Jeremy. I need to see you. I love you.

Sara

November

Jeremy,

It's very cold. I don't even bother with fires anymore. They don't help. At one point I thought of torching the whole place, just to get a little heat. I think I must have been a little crazy. Now I just stay very still, feeling the cold seep into my bones. I don't move around much. I can't.

My guest is back, although I haven't seen him. I only sense him, and the others as well. To think I imagined this place to be lonely.

It doesn't help to leave the doors open. I can see the sunshine falling on the trees, see the blue sky, see the warmth somehow — but no exchange takes place. There is a kind of invisible wall that keeps any heat from stealing inside. The house stays cold as a tomb.

It's taken me a very long time to write this much. I have little sense of time any more. My hand is numb.

— Amanda R. DeWees

The Key

Since the affair, Carlene had felt a vague sense of guilt where Fannie Mae was concerned. There was no reason; Fannie Mae never knew about her and Charles, never even suspected. Still, there it was, this small tight place of anxiety in her heart.

The affair started innocently enough. Carlene was newly widowed; James was dead less than a year, and she had sunk into depression so deep it seemed bottomless. To get out of bed and get dressed was an exercise in will power. Finally, the day came when Carlene could not summon the strength to rise, or bathe, or dress. She lay in bed and did not answer the telephone, although it rang incessantly.

The morning of her third day in bed, she heard her name spoken. The voice was familiar. Carlene fought to put a name to the voice. Charles. Fannie Mae's husband. Charles was family. Well, almost. Fannie Mae and Carlene were cousins, and Charles knew where the spare key was kept.

Carlene struggled to raise herself in bed. Through sleep-gummed eyes she tried to bring Charles into focus. Her vision blurred. Charles faded in and out, the image of him clouded in soft shadowy outline.

"Carlene, what in the world is the matter with you?" Charles asked. "Should I call the doctor? What can I do?"

Carlene fluttered her fingers at Charles in a weak wave of dismissal. "So tired," she whispered.

"When's the last time you ate anything?"

Carlene slid her tongue over teeth that were rimmed with a glue-like substance, and through lips that were parched and cracked replied hoarsely, "Can't remember."

"Stay right here," Charles commanded, as if she could have done otherwise.

The aroma of coffee wafted through the air. Carlene drifted off, safe and secure in the familiar and homey essence that seemed to envelop her.

"Here, Carlene. Let me help you sit up." Charles placed pillows behind Carlene's back, and steadied her.

Carlene felt the touch of china against her lips. The coffee smell teased her nose and made her mouth water. Charles tipped the cup slightly. "Here, sip this," he said.

Charles stayed with Carlene that day and night, and the next day too. He fed her beef bouillon, a spoonful at a time. The second day she was able to eat most of the soft scrambled eggs he made for her. He took her to the shower and waited nearby. He held a large towel for her as she stepped from the shower, his head averted in deference to her newly returned dignity.

Mostly, Charles listened. The outpouring was torrential. She had so much anger bottled up inside; anger that James would die and leave her to face life alone. She railed against God, against James, against the unfairness of life. She cried and she talked. Through it all, Charles listened.

Two days later, Carlene and Charles sat on the patio. The sun had some warmth to it for this early in March, and birds chirped in the pine trees. A breeze blew softly from the south; daffodils that Carlene had planted by the side of the house years before pushed green shoots through the earth.

"Charles, how were you able to stay with me?" Carlene asked.

"Don't you remember? Fannie Mae's in Birmingham, at the Camelia Convention. She won't be back until tomorrow. I thought she told you she was going," Charles said.

"I remember now. She told me last week she'd be going. But what did you do about work?"

"Called in sick. Told them I had the flu, and I'd be sleeping a lot. There's been a lot of flu this spring, so nobody thought anything about it."

"Thank you for staying with me," Carlene told him. "If you hadn't come in when you did, I think I would have laid in that bed and died. My life just seemed so empty and pointless, and the thought of all those days and most especially the nights, stretching ahead of me, just seemed like more than I could bear. And even though I'm still alone, somehow it's all right. I really feel that you saved my life, Charles."

Charles patted her arm. "Just glad I remembered where the key was," he said.

Slowly, Carlene grew strong. Charles called every day to check on her. With each call, the bond that had formed between them during Carlene's illness deepened. It was an easy transition from phone calls to meeting for coffee. And from there to a motel.

The affair lasted almost a year, with twice a week couplings at the Holiday Inn, in Henry County, Room 144. Charles always reserved the same room.

Near the end of that year, Carlene, no longer able to live with the betrayal of Fannie Mae and fearful that their duplicity would be exposed, told Charles it was over.

"But you can't do this, Carlene," Charles had pleaded. "Until you, I never even looked at another woman. I saved your life, Carlene. Remember that? You can't break it off. You just can't."

The last time they met in Room 144, they had each kept a key. Charles, in the hope that Carlene would relent and continue their affair; Carlene, as a tangible reminder of their love, in maroon and gold colored plastic. For reasons she could not explain, Carlene placed the key in her safety deposit box.

Carlene's route home from the hospital where she worked as a volunteer once a week went by the cemetery where James, and now Charles, were buried. As she drove the familiar streets, her eyes sought the large oak that

the ground hollering 'Whatcha doing James, sawing limbs?' Scared me so damn bad I dropped the saw and nearly fell out the tree. Know what she's doing now? She's out there picking up pine cones! Damned scatterbrained woman!"

"Carlene . . . Carlene! You ain't heard a word I'm saying."

"I'm sorry, Fannie. What were you saying?"

"I was telling you about the time we had the big snowstorm. You remember? In '82 it was, and how I was stuck at the house, snowed in. And Charles laying up there in the hospital with a stroke, just dead to the world, and I couldn't get out to go and set with him. It was three days before I chanced driving my car, and him dying not two hours after I got there. I always will believe that he waited for me to come before he let go his hold on life. Don't you think that's so, Carlene?"

"Probably," Carlene told her. Memories of Charles crowded to the forefront of her mind, and she relived the afternoons she and Charles spent in their special room. Thank God Fannie Mae had never known.

"Carlene? Carlene! Are you there?"

Carlene snapped out of her reverie.

"Yes, Fannie Mae."

"I was telling you about this new recipe I want to try. It's one I saw on t.v. on that Frugal Gourmet's show. What you do is take you some cherry tomatoes and blanch them so's the skins'll slide off. Then what you do is put them on a plate and pour a cup of vodka over them. Then you stick you some toothpicks in each one, roll the tomato around in some kosher salt, and there you got your Bloody-Mary-On-A-Stick. I tell you what, Carlene, it looked so good it made my mouth water. You got any kosher salt, Carlene?"

"No, Fannie, I —"

"Well, don't worry about it. I'll just run by the store on my way over and get what we need. See you in a little while."

Fannie Mae, dressed in a pale yellow jogging suit, her champagne blond hair piled high in an upsweep of curls and lacquered in place, bustled through the kitchen door an hour later. She reminded Carlene of a well fed canary. Fannie Mae went past Carlene into the den, set her suitcase on the floor, and shrugged her large shoulder bag off her arm onto the coffee table.

"Let's get them groceries in, Carlene. I got just about one of everything at the store. And I got two Sara Lees, one poundcake and one chocolate fudge. Whoa, girl, we're gonna have us a time. Ain't this exciting?" Fannie Mae's blue eyes danced.

Carlene could not summon up any enthusiasm. All she felt was the ever present knot of guilt coupled with resentment at the unwanted company.

After the supplies were put away, Fannie Mae set to work on the tomatoes.

"Let's not wait for them to chill, Carlene. That all right with you?" Fannie Mae offered the plate of tomatoes to Carlene.

"Fine," Carlene replied, as she stabbed a vodka soaked tomato.

They moved to the den, and Carlene struck a match and touched it to the logs and kindling that lay ready in the fireplace.

Fannie Mae placed the plate of tomatoes on the coffee table; she shoved

her purse to one side to make room.

The two women sat on the couch, facing the patio doors. The wrought iron furniture wore a protective winter shroud. Happier times, Carlene thought. Charles carried her out there the second morning he stayed with her.

"You eat lunch today, Carlene?"

Carlene swallowed hard, reluctant to let the memory go.

"I did, but it was around 11:00. How about you?"

"Yep. Had a piece of lettuce with some cottage cheese on it. And a diet Coke. These tomatoes sure hit the spot, don't they, Carlene?"

"They are good," Carlene admitted as she reached for another one.

"Would you look at that, Carlene!"

Carlene, absorbed in selecting a tomato, looked in the direction Fannie Mae pointed. Large fat snowflakes fell in a gentle shower, like feathers loosed from a pillow. A blanket of white covered the red wood of the deck.

"Well, they called that one right, didn't they?" Fannie Mae asked brightly. "We're gonna have one helluva snowstorm, Carlene. Now where did I put my weather radio?"

Fannie Mae dug in her shoulder bag and found what she was searching for. She placed her bag on the sofa, between her and Carlene, and snapped the radio on.

The toneless voice of the radio announcer droned on as if from a great distance. "Accumulation of snow and sleet expected to reach ten inches in the Metro Atlanta area . . ."

"Well, looks like it's you and me for awhile now, Carlene. And I'll tell you what, at our age it's just as well that we're here together. Why one of us could break a hip, and then where'd we be?"

Carlene started to reply, but her tongue was thick. She focused on the plate that had held cherry tomatoes.

"Fannie, we ate all the Bloody Marys," she slurred.

Fannie Mae leaned forward and peered nearsightedly at the plate.

"I do believe you're right, Carlene. They sure was good. Here, I'll make us some more."

Fannie Mae reached for the plate. Her elbow jostled her purse; it landed upside down on the floor. Carlene leaned over and picked up the bag. The contents spewed forth. Lipstick, compact, comb, tissues, loose change, all hit the floor. Carlene got down on her hands and knees to retrieve the items, and was instantly sobered. In the middle of the pile, like a finger pointing at her, lay a Holiday Inn key.

Room 144.

Carlene sat back on her heels, and turned a horror-stricken face to Fannie Mae.

"Oh, Lord, Carlene, I never meant for you to know I had that key. Or that I knew anything about it. But see, I always knew about Charles and his women. All those trips he used to take out of town, and not coming home for the weekend. One of his women even called me up one time, wanted me to let 'Charlie' go so he could marry her. Charles said he was so sorry every time it happened, but he just kept on. Seemed like it was almost something

stood sentinel over both graves. With so much that had been shared in life it seemed fitting to Carlene that the two men shared an adjoining grave site. The massive oak loomed on the horizon, a landmark of uplifted branches, each bare limb outlined against the dull and leaden January sky. Carlene slowed the car for a stop sign. Through the windshield, to the west, dark gray clouds scudded across the treetops. Carlene pulled her coat closer around her and turned the heater up a notch.

Carlene parked her car in the garage, and walked to the front of the house. She stood there for several minutes, a tall, slim woman etched in sharp relief against the red brick of the house, and studied the sky. A sudden gust of chill wind tossed her salt-and-pepper hair about her face. The pine trees in the corner of the yard bent and swayed; the upper boughs of the tallest one sighed a cold caress as it touched the tree next to it.

Carlene shivered, then turned to go inside. As she put her key in the lock of the door she could hear the insistent burr of the telephone. She left the door swinging wide, barked her shin on the coffee table in her haste, and reached out for the clamor. The ringing stopped.

Well, damn. She nearly killed herself and for what? She limped to the front door, closed it, and even though dark was two hours away, she switched on lamps as she made her way back through the house.

When Carlene reached the kitchen, the phone came to life again, the sound unnaturally loud in the still house.

"Well, *there* you are!" The voice in Carlene's ear stabbed like a dagger.

"Fannie Mae, did you call a few minutes ago?"

"Why, yes, I did. And I let it ring and ring. I couldn't think where in the world you'd got to. Then I thought, well, maybe she's in the bathroom, so I let it ring extra long so that'd give you time to finish up. Then I thought, well, my God, what if she was in the bathroom and she fell and she's laying there on the floor. You know, at our age anything can happen, and my God, wouldn't it be just awful if one of us was to die and not be found for a week or two? You remember old Miz Watkins and how she died? Couldn't even open her casket for her daughters to see their poor old mother one last time. They said she was washing dishes at the sink, said she had cooked herself some pork chops and had made biscuits and all, and was washing up her dishes when the Angel of Death overtook her. Just fell over the sink, and that was the way they found her a week later, her hands still in the dishwasher. Said it was so bad that Mr. Dunahoo down at the funeral home —"

"Fannie Mae!" Carlene's stomach lurched and wobbled.

"Well, I was just telling you how worried I was and all, no need to go yelling and scaring a body half to death. You know, at our age . . ."

"For God's sake, Fannie! I'm barely 60, and I don't know about you, but I can tell you right now I'm nowhere near ready for Tim Dunahoo to take my measurements. And you're a year younger than I am!"

"Well, that's as may be, Carlene, but this is what I called you about. Where were you?"

"You called to find where I was?" Carlene tried to keep the sharpness out of her voice. Fannie Mae meant well, she really did, but a little of Fannie Mae went a long way.

"Well, no, not exactly, but I did wonder. At our — was you out to the store?"

Carlene sighed. "This is my afternoon at the hospital."

"Oh. I thought you did your volunteer work on Tuesdays."

"I changed it to Wednesday. Breaks the week up better."

"If you'd come on and go to Florida with me for a month or two you wouldn't feel like you had to break your week up with something. You'd be so tired from all that fun and sun you wouldn't feel like you had to make work passing out magazines at the hospital. We could take us some long walks on the beach, and then later, we could sit around outside the pool at the motel and have them good-looking waiters bring us some fancy drinks. We could go to the dog races, and then we could . . ."

An image of herself and Fannie Mae on the beach floated in front of Carlene. Light from the setting sun dappled the water with bright diamonds; a soft tropical breeze blew, and beside her Fannie Mae would be giving her non-stop commentary on everything. Carlene shuddered.

" . . . but anyhow, we're gonna both wish we was in Florida when I tell you why it was I called in the first place."

"Why did you call, Fannie?"

"Well, I had my weather radio on — you know the sky has looked threatening all day — and the way they're talking, why we're gonna have to shit in the shotgun and shoot it out the chimney."

Fannie Mae often said outrageous things just to see if Carlene was paying attention.

"They're saying we could get as much as eight inches of snow if all the highs and lows and cold fronts come together just right. So, what I thought, me being in this all-electric house and the power subject to go off at the drop of a hat, well, I though maybe it'd be best — Carlene. You still got plenty of firewood?"

Carlene gritted her teeth. "Of course,"

"Well, the power could go off at your place too, you know. What I was going to say was I thought it'd be best if I come over so you won't be by yourself. You know, at our age . . ."

Carlene's grip on the phone tightened. Fannie Mae would go on and on, and when she finally made her point, she'd make it sound like she was doing you a favor. The guilt of years crept forward and washed over Carlene in icy waves.

"Whatever you think," Carlene said, each word weighted with resignation.

"Well, if you're sure it's no bother. You know, don't neither one of us need to be by ourselves in bad weather. It ain't like we got anybody else in this world to depend on."

Carlene sighed deeply. Fannie Mae had a lifelong habit of pointing out the obvious. Like the time James had stormed into the kitchen, rivulets of sweat mixed with wood chips all over his face, the skin beneath a dark angry red.

"You know what Fannie Mae asked me?" he had roared.

Carlene had shook her head no.

"I'm up in the pine tree, right? The thirty foot one. I'm sawing off dead limbs with the Poulan, right? Next thing I know there's Fannie Mae down on

he couldn't help, like a sickness, you know? I will say this though, after you, he settled down, and as far as I know, you were the last."

"The last?" Charlene whispered. Waves of emotions washed over her — guilt, shame, and finally anger.

"That son-of-a-bitch!"

"Yeah, he was, wasn't he?" Fannie Mae said.

Charlene stared at the dancing flames of the fire. She thought about all the times that Fannie Mae had gotten on her nerves, all the resentment she'd felt toward her over the years, and it evaporated like fine ash thrown into the wind. It was then that she realized that something was missing; that small tight place of anxiety that had lived in her heart for so long had vanished.

Charlene gazed at the long tongues of flame in the fireplace. The flames seemed to become the rays of a tropical sunset, the blues, the reds, the golds, all reflected. She envisioned white sandy beaches, tall icy drinks served with fruit and tiny umbrellas, and Fannie Mae beside her, pointing out things she might otherwise have missed. She got to her feet, and reached for the empty plate.

"Where in Florida did you want to go?" she asked softly.

— Rebecca G. Hagar

The Private Lives of Stars

That year Rebecca Williams got a head start on summer when her mother, Pearl, wrote a note to the fourth-grade teacher asking wouldn't it be all right if Rebecca finished up school a week early since the family needed to leave town on business. Truth was Rebecca's mother's boyfriend, Roy Lee, was in route from Atlanta to his farm in middle Tennessee and said, why, shucks, sure he could swing by Ft. Payne, Alabama, and drop the younguns off at their grandma's if that's what Pearl had her heart set on. Pearl had her heart set on just that: packing off Rebecca and her six-year-old sister, Amanda, for a two-week visit with their grandparents. Mary Frances, their seventeen-year-old sister, had to stay home and take exams and find a summer job and practice looking like Elizabeth Taylor. She told Rebecca and Amanda that, yes, of course, she would miss them, and Mama Carnes and Popa, too, but shouldn't somebody stay home with Pearl? Rebecca reluctantly agreed. This meant she'd be stuck with Amanda for company, who was a stubborn, independent child. She liked to spend her hours alone, preferably in a tree. And Mama Carnes had a peach tree right off the back porch, too. But all in all, Rebecca thought everyone was getting a pretty swell deal. No doubt about their being welcome. Mama Carnes kept boarders on the second floor of her huge old house with double porches, and she lost no time putting little girls to work peeling potatoes, making beds, and sweeping floors. Even if they were on summer vacation.

On Saturday morning they made the 125-mile strip to Alabama in Roy Lee's Rambler station wagon. It was 10:30 when Roy Lee pulled up onto the hard-packed dirt that surrounded the back porch at Mama Carnes's and Popa's. Pulled right over the spot where last year Rebecca had scratched out her hopscotch pattern with a stick. He then did a most uncouth thing — beeped the car horn twice — before Pearl slapped him on the shoulder. "You cut that out," she said. "My daddy'll skin you alive for making that racket." Mama Carnes had already come through the back screen door and was drying her hands on her apron in preparation for hugging each and every occupant of the car, even Roy Lee.

Counting heads, she asked, "Well, where's Mary Frances?"

"Big kids have to stay in school the whole time," Amanda explained.

"Don't worry, Mama," Pearl said, planting a Raspberry Red imprint on Mama Carnes's cheek. "She'll be with me when I come to get the girls in a couple of weeks."

"Well, I declare, I was especially counting on her help these two weeks. She's such a sweet, willing girl."

Rebecca was pulling the canvas suitcases from the back of the station

wagon. "You got me, Mama Carnes. I'm a big help. Aren't I, Mama?"

"Why sure, you're all kinds of help. All my girls are good girls. Where's Amanda?"

Amanda was by this time four feet off the ground into the peach tree. Roy Lee pulled her down, smacked her on the rear, and sent her back for her bag. He caught Pearl's eye and winked. She blushed, but ignored him. Mama Carnes, seeing all this nonsense, asked flatly, her hug notwithstanding, "And who's your driver?"

"Well, gracious, where's my manners? I forgot you don't know Roy Lee. Mama, this is Roy Lee Flynn, part owner of Flynn and Bishop Truck Lines — a very big outfit in Atlanta — and my very dear friend."

Roy Lee chuckled, then clapped his hands out in front of his belly like he was squashing a mosquito or punctuating Pearl's pronouncement.

"That so?" Mama Carnes help open the screen door for Rebecca and Amanda to enter the kitchen. "I'll get the girls settled. There's tea in the jug if you're thirsty."

Rebecca hurried into the kitchen, exited through a door on her left, and skipped down the long hall to the front of the house. She dropped her bags there and bounded up the stairs to choose which room to occupy this visit.

"You girls'll be sleeping downstairs this time, Honey," Mama Carnes called up to her. "The men's got all the rooms up there."

"All of them?" Rebecca stood disbelieving at the top landing, her arms akimbo and her left hip thrust sideways in misalignment.

"Well, most all of them. You come on down now and have a look at your pretty room. I put fresh sheets on the beds just this morning and arranged a big vase of dahlias and zinnias. Come see."

Rebecca would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that the first room on the left was not occupied by any man, but she relented to Mama Carnes's instructions. She slinked down the stairs like a limp rag doll, letting each foot thump heavily on alternate steps. Amanda had already dropped off her bag and run outdoors.

"How's this?" Mama Carnes asked, drawing the venetian blinds to reveal the south side of the house next door. From a room upstairs Rebecca would have looked down on the roof of this uninteresting house, could have spied on the activities of the neighbors in their fenced back yard. Instead she was stuck with a view of peeling yellow paint and faded green curtains. She rolled her eyes upward, but smiled brightly. She hugged Mama Carnes. "Okay. But upstairs is better."

"Why don't you and Mandy see if you can catch any of the new kittens. They play under the camellia bush by the front porch. Scoot!"

Pearl and Roy Lee stayed for lunch, then sipped Co-Colas seated in the glider. They finally left and vacation began. Two weeks of long, lazy days stretched before Rebecca like a delicious dream. Besides kittens, a swingset, a peach tree, and a hopscotch site, there was a sidewalk for roller skating, a garden growing strawberries, and grape vines trellised just high enough that a ten-year-old girl could creep underneath the leafy canopy and pluck fruit while enjoying the shade. Downtown was an easy walk away, though Mama Carnes wouldn't let her go alone just yet. Rebecca knew that people con-

sidered Atlanta an exciting place to live — she dropped the name of her hometown at every opportunity to impress — but for all the world Ft. Payne seemed to her a paradise.

That first evening she sat in a swing, not swinging, but turning around and around, twisting the swing's chains above her head until the steel braid touched her bent neck, all the while tracing a circular pattern in the dust beneath her feet, immensely content and sure. She sat in the swing until dusk softened the distinctions between the house and the yard, between the trees and the hammocks. Stayed until a light came on in the living room window and Mama Carnes called her inside from the kitchen door.

Sunday was Mama Carnes's easy day, when she rested up for the return of the weekday boarders. They were no trouble, she liked to say — just lots of work. Mama Carnes was strict about who she took in and what she allowed. As a rule, all were married, nonsmoking, nondrinking, and noncursing men. Just because a man traveled with a labor crew building the state's new super highways was no excuse for him to take up foolishness in her book. She provided a clean room and home cooking five days a week, but each Friday afternoon, after paying a week's rent in advance, the men were expected to go home to their families for the weekend.

Rebecca met Tom on Sunday evening when he was the first to return. She had been upstairs at the end of the long hall, standing behind the locked screen door and looking out onto the upstairs porch that Mama Carnes claimed was unsafe for little girls. For as long as Rebecca could remember she'd wanted to observe the neighborhood from the upper porch — more than ever now that she was done out of a room upstairs. Like the lower porch that it covered, it was shaped in a semi-circle. It was edged by a three-foot high fancy railing, which was missing at several spots. It bothered Rebecca that no one was mindful of this obvious neglect. The porch was a sunporch, with no cover, and for this Rebecca fancied it to be like the deck of a ship. She was most eager to take her position as lookout, if not captain.

"I won't get near the edge," she promised dozens of times.

"Sugar, there's rotten boards up there that Popa needs to fix. We wouldn't want a little girl falling through the top porch and landing like a pancake on the one below, would we?" But Popa never got around to fixing the rotten boards.

Rebecca stood with her face and fingers pressed against the old and yielding screen. She breathed in the metallic odor as she searched for rotten boards as far away as twenty feet. She heard footsteps and swung around.

"Well, well, what have we here? A new boarder?" Tom was enormously tall, she thought. Muscular and tanned. He had all the physical characteristics you'd expect in a highway construction worker who labored eight hours each day in the Alabama sun. But his blond hair fell in bangs over his forehead, and the corners of his grin caught up with the crinkles around his blue eyes, so he couldn't look scary if he tried. Rebecca had seen pictures of Tab Hunter in Mary France's *Movie Screen* magazines. She wondered if this man tried to look like him. He bore, as Mary Francis said of herself and Liz, a natural resemblance

"I'm not a boarder." She pondered this further. "Not a real boarder, that

is. I'm Rebecca Williams, and I'm visiting my grandmother, Mrs. Elmer Carnes." This official title she knew from addressing letters to her.

"Is that so?" Tom had entered one of the rooms on the right and put his suitcase on the bed. Rebecca followed and stood in the doorway. "Well, Becky, I'm glad to meet you. Tom Jenkins is my name." He extended his hand, which Rebecca ignored.

"Not on the bed," she said.

"Pardon me?"

"Mama Carnes doesn't like you to put things on the bed." Rebecca nodded toward the suitcase and then indicated with her gaze a chair beside the dresser.

"Oh, right," he said, snatching up the suitcase and moving it to the chair. "A very good policy, that one."

Rebecca arched an eyebrow and studied if he were making fun of her. From below she heard Mama Carnes calling her.

"Gotta go," she said. She turned and walked quickly down the hallway, running her hand along the banister that corralled the stairwell. "And I said my name's Rebecca," she called over her shoulder.

The next time Rebecca saw Tom was at supper Monday night. He was younger than the other boarders, whose many years of laboring in the sun had creased their brows and turned the skin on their faces into a soft, smooth, polished leather, drawn taut on most of them across set jaw bones, high foreheads, and crooked noses. Also unlike the others, Tom was not married, and Rebecca learned that Mama Carnes had made an exception and taken him in only because he was a college boy, working for next year's tuition. Rebecca wished Mary Frances were there because college was one of her favorite topics. "Rebecca," she'd say, "there's just no reason why we shouldn't be college graduates. Just because no one else in the family has an education shouldn't stop us." Rebecca figured, watching Tom, that you must learn to be very polite in college since Tom was always hopping out of his chair or help Mama Carnes. He'd make space on the table for a hot dish she carried, or offer to get the tea pitcher from the kitchen for refills. Though all of the men praised Mama Carnes's cooking, they looked at one another and smirked every time Tom made himself useful. Even Popa, who helped cook breakfast each morning, seemed skeptical about this young man who wasn't content to be served his dinner after a good day's work.

After dinner the men left to walk to town. "Care to join us, Tom?" the oldest one asked.

"Or maybe you'd rather stay and do dishes," another one added. Everyone laughed.

"You know, that's not a bad idea," Tom said. "Miz Carnes, mind if I help?"

If any boarder had ever before done a hand's turn at the sink, Rebecca had never seen it. It was generally expected that Rebecca and Amanda made up for their late starts in the morning by helping cook supper and clean up afterwards. But Mama Carnes allowed that Tom could help if he had a mind to, and so he did.

Up to his elbows in soapy water, Tom asked Rebecca and Amanda if they ever went to summer camp. Amanda said nobody was sending her away to

any camp, and Rebecca said she didn't think her mother believed in summer camp, least ways, she never mentioned it. Tom said he'd been a counselor at summer camps before and that kids learned all kinds of things there. He offered to teach them how to tie knots and how to use a compass, and what to take along on a hike. Amanda said she didn't have time to be learning dumb things like that, and as soon as she'd dried the last silverware she took off out the back door to catch lightning bugs. Tom got a ball of twine from his room and, sitting on the front porch, he began to teach Rebecca how to tie square knots and slipknots, how to hitch two sticks together. These sessions continued each evening that week, and Rebecca thrilled to the competency she gained. Now she'd have something to teach Mary Frances, who knew a great deal about movie stars and books but nothing so practical as this.

After much pleading on successive nights, Mama Carnes allowed Tom, assisted by Rebecca, to build a small campfire in the hard dirt beyond the back porch.

"You girls stay back and don't get burned," Mama Carnes said over and over.

"Don't worry, Miz Carnes. I'm watching them," Tom said.

This was Thursday, and the next night after supper Tom helped with the dishes, paid his rent in advance, and left to spend the weekend with his mother and younger brother. Rebecca was sorry to see him go, but once the men cleared out, it was okay for her to go upstairs, which she did right away. She sat in the doorway overlooking the porch and decided that Tom was just the person to challenge the prohibition against walking on the upstairs porch.

Saturday was grocery shopping day, which Mama Carnes executed with precision on account of a detailed list she kept and added to all week long. At home, Pearl never shopped from a list. She was consequently more open to suggestions from Rebecca and Amanda, which Mama Carnes definitely was not. The mailman brought Rebecca and Amanda a letter from Mary Frances, who said she missed them terribly and couldn't wait to see them the next weekend. Rebecca read with some satisfaction this sentence:

I had the misfortune to babysit with three children who were brats, and I realized that not all children are as smart and charming as you two. This makes me more determined than ever to prepare for the future, to go to college.

Mary Frances believed in being a good influence on Rebecca and Amanda. Rebecca thought it a shame that Tom would not be there the next weekend when Mary Frances arrived so that he could tell her firsthand what college was like.

When Tom did return on Sunday evening, Rebecca ventured forth with a bold suggestion: "May Tom walk me and Amanda uptown to the park so we can go down the big slide?"

"I'm not walking all that way!" Amanda declared. Rebecca stuck out her tongue at her.

Mama Carnes looked up from reviewing next week's menus and for a split second wavered toward liberalism. Tom shrugged as if to say he didn't mind one way or the other, and Mama Carnes returned to dead center.

"That's not such a good idea on Sunday," she said, but Rebecca felt sure there was something other than the day of the week that made her say no. What was it? She was consistently prone to cast doubt over every fun thing.

"Let me show you how good I can hitch my baton to the front porch column," Rebecca said to Tom. She wanted to get him alone so she could lay out her plan for exploring the upper porch. First she explained to him the years of longing and denial. Tom said he didn't see any reason why he couldn't check it out and if it were safe enough offer to accompany Rebecca onto the porch and steer her away from any rotten boards.

"No! You can't tell her. Just do it. She'll never know, and if I ask permission she'll think up some reason why it's 'not such a good idea.'" In her passion Rebecca mimicked her grandmother. Tom frowned at her for that, and she hung her head. "Well, you know she will."

"I'll see what I can do," was all Tom would promise.

Monday evening Tom said he thought he had a plan, but wouldn't tell Rebecca what it was.

On Tuesday morning when Rebecca came stretching and yawning into the kitchen, sunshine was not streaming in through the window as it usually did. Mama Carnes, bending over into the freezer and looking at the dates on plastic containers of frozen corn and green beans said, "Well, girls, looks like a cloud's come up. Make sure none of your toys are in the yard."

By lunch the cloud produced a steady downpour that, according to the scratchy voice of the radio announcer, was due to set a spell over northeast Alabama. "I know our farming neighbors appreciate this good rain," he added and then went on to list the local obituaries. Mama Carnes was ironing and didn't seem to mind the rain one bit.

They baked tea cakes. Rebecca took care to lay them out to cool in neat rows on linen towels spread across the kitchen table. At midafternoon they ate their fill of these with mugs of hot chocolate. The rest were carefully placed in a huge Tupperware canister.

Wednesday afternoon Rebecca sat on the padded bench under the big picture window that overlooked the side yard a curtain of rain the foreground of all she saw. There was the swingset, forlorn now after two days of rain and no swingers, no acrobats. Three days ago she'd hung by her legs upside down from the cross bar of the swingset frame. Her hair had tumbled downward, the ends almost sweeping the ground, her fingers had stretched forth to do so, a breeze had gently brushed the back of her neck. She remembered how her cotton shirt had crept down her up-ended torso, bringing her dangerously close to indecency, and how at the last minute she'd yanked the shirt-tail back up to her waist and propelled herself upwards as well, grabbing hold of the cross bar and letting herself down in a showoff flip because, anyway, all the blood had run to her head and was about to cause it to explode.

The glider and the lawn chairs looked melancholy as well, covered in plastic for protection and having no prospects of hosting a party. Popa had taken the hammocks down and stored them in the shed, leaving their frames stripped, now bare as autumn limbs.

Where the rain hit the ground individual droplets, or several in unison,

bounced off the earth and leapt back skyward. Looking over Rebecca's shoulder, Mama Carnes said, "Those are little school children walking home from school. See how neat their line is. See their umbrellas." Rebecca saw that, indeed, as the droplets danced upward they spread out in a circular pattern resembling umbrellas. She felt a smile. She mused that she was the mother of these happy school children who marched single file as pretty as you pleased. She imagined how she'd dry them off with a warm terry towel when they got to the door and serve them tea cakes and hot chocolate and say to the smallest one, "I saw how careful you were crossing the street. I was watching you all, each and every one."

The boarders went to work each morning it rained, but generally returned just after lunch. Some stayed in their rooms, and some watched t.v. in the large den. Rebecca was allowed to watch t.v. with them in the afternoon but at night only as long as Popa was in the dimly lit room. But she learned that men who were jovial at supper were awfully cranky during episodes of *Gunsmoke* or *Beverly Hillbillies*. They hissed at her for the slightest little noise.

Tom spent most of his time in his room, working on his plan, he said, or reading, or catching up on sleep.

On Thursday the rain stopped, but the ground was too soggy, even where there was grass, to play outdoors. Rebecca, by then, hated checkers, I Spy, and hearing Bible stories. Thank goodness that Tom didn't retire to his room early that night but motioned for Rebecca to meet him on the front porch as soon as she'd dried the last plate.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked. "Ready for an adventure?" Was she ever! Given the chance, she'd shove off for China.

"Your grandparents go to bed at 8:00. Think you can stay awake till 9:00? You'll have to listen for the hall clock to chime."

"Sure. I hear it every night."

"Good. Will Amanda be sleeping then?"

"Like a log."

"Okay, at 9:00, if all's quiet, you sneak upstairs real silent, like a little mouse. Think you can do that?"

"Easy," she said.

"I'll be waiting for you at the top. I've got a surprise for you."

Rebecca was certain she was going to go out on the upstairs porch, and this restored her good humor. She took her bath and went to bed early, hoping to set an example. By 9:00, Amanda was asleep, even snoring. Several of the men were watching *Dr. Kildare*, but she easily stole past the doorway to the den. The noise from the t.v. set masked her steps on tip-toes down the hall and up the stairs.

Tom waited at the top where he put a finger to his lips, scooped her up and toted her down the hallway. At the end, both the porch door and its screen were propped open as though to admit a royal procession.

"I've checked the porch out," he whispered, "and there are some bad boards. Listen carefully. I've run a rope from the door out to where it's safe for you to walk. There's a chair at the end of the rope. Then the rope turns and runs crosswise where it's safe. It's very dark out, so it's important to hold

onto the rope and walk next to it. Got it?"

"Got it," Rebecca said, teeth chattering in excitement.

"Oh, I almost forgot." He set her down just over the threshold and onto the porch. "When we get to the chair, use these and look to where I point." He took a pair of binoculars on a strap from around his neck and placed the strap over Rebecca's head. "Ever seen the Big Dipper?" he asked.

Rebecca shook her head. The strap was warm against her neck, the damp wood of the porch floor cold against her feet. "Better get you a shirt," Tom said. "Wait here."

As she waited, she could faintly see the heavy cotton rope, knotted ever so many feet as though measuring off distance. Overhead stairs twinkled in tandem with Tom's and her adventure.

Tom returned with a flannel workshirt that he wore each morning over the muscle shirt he came home in each afternoon. Rebecca slipped into the garment, which came down to her knees, and stood patiently while Tom rolled up the sleeves. "And now, my dear, shall we go?"

Tom led the way, making absolutely sure, once again, their footing was sound. Rebecca thrilled to the nerve of it all. She half wanted to shout with joy, rouse everyone to come join in this magical moment. She half wanted time to stop, encapsule her and Tom, the dark sky overhead, and the dainty stars, brilliantly asparkle this night following the cleansing showers.

They found the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, and the North Star. They whispered "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" and made wishes, some private and kept secret.

When Rebecca begged Tom to leave the chair and ropes so that she could return the next night and then bring Mary Frances on Saturday, he said he had a better idea. He scooped her up again and whisked her down the hallway. At the landing he reclaimed his shirt and the binoculars and motioned again for silence.

Rebecca, in imitation, put a finger to her lips and crept down the stairs into her bed and fitful sleep. The next morning she saw a note on the kitchen table:

Mr. and Mrs. Carnes,

I notice that the porch upstairs could use some repairs. With your permission, I would be willing to make these repairs. I believe everyone would enjoy the use of this porch, and I could complete the work this Saturday instead of going home.

Tom

A good part of the day passed before Rebecca could determine Mama Carnes's response to Tom's offer. Eventually she overheard her reviewing her decision in the pantry as she inventoried potatoes, bags of flour, and cartons of Co-Cola. "Not a bad idea. . . he could eat lunch with us. . . just this one weekend. . . course, Pearl and Mary Frances are coming. . . all that racket. . . Pearl and. . . and Mary Frances. Oh dear, did I do right in saying yes?"

Rebecca hugged herself and went to find Amanda.

That afternoon Tom brought all of his tools and the replacement lumber upstairs. He began cutting out the bad wood while Rebecca stood behind

the screen door — this purely at the insistence of Mama Carnes — and talked nonstop.

"Now you'll get to meet Mary Frances and tell her all about college." She cocked her head thoughtfully. "She might like to use your binoculars, too."

"You reckon so?" Tom asked. "This Mary Frances must be pretty special. You sure talk about her a lot."

"Oh, she's *real* nice. Not stubborn like Amanda. And she's smart like me."

"I see," said Tom, positioning a wood chisel and tapping it with his hammer.

Pearl and Mary Frances arrived just before lunchtime the next day. By then Tom had removed all the rotten boards and replaced them with new lumber in about half the places.

Rebecca brought Mary Frances upstairs to meet him as soon as she'd been minimally welcomed by Mama Carnes. "He's already been to college for a year, he helps wash dishes, and he knows an awful lot 'bout most everything," Rebecca said, skipping backwards down the long hallway.

"Rebecca, slow down. Tell me what *you've* been doing."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you! Mary Frances, weren't you listening?"

They found Tom measuring distances along a new board and marking off appropriate lengths. As the door opened and creaked on its hinges, Tom said, without looking up, "Hey, Rebecca, 'bout time you came to help. You could at least keep me company." When he looked up and saw Mary Frances, she smiled shyly, and Tom's easygoing bravado dipped a degree or two.

"Here's Mary Frances," Rebecca squealed. "Betcha think she's pretty, don't ya?"

"Hush, Rebecca." Mary Frances covered Rebecca's mouth with her hand. "I've heard a lot about you. You're all Rebecca talks about."

"Yeah, you, too."

From the lower porch they heard Pearl call out. "Re-be-e-ca. Ma-ry Fran-ces. Come and ea-a-t. You hear? And Tom, too."

"Coming," Mary Frances called and turned with a rush into the cool, dark hall.

Neither Tom nor Mary Frances had much to say at lunch. They both picked at their food and responded to Rebecca's comments far too politely. Rebecca was confounded. Maybe they didn't like each other. She had been so sure they would.

When Tom joined Mary Frances in the kitchen to help with the dishes, Pearl shooed him out and said it looked to her like he had his hands full with the porch.

"No, ma'am, not really," he was saying, holding onto a soapy plate with both hands.

"Really, Tom, we've got more than enough help with these few dishes," Mama Carnes said.

The plate slipped from his hands and shattered. Mary Frances covered a giggle with her hand. Rebecca knit her brow and wondered what had come over him.

Later, when he came downstairs and said he was running low on nails, Mary Frances volunteered to go to the hardware store for him.

"Me, too. I'm coming with you," Rebecca said.

As they walked to town, Mary Frances seemed unreasonably interested in what Rebecca knew about Tom. When she admitted that she didn't know exactly where he went to college, or even in what state, Mary Frances got all huffy like it made any difference.

They took a shortcut across the park and Mary Frances waited impatiently for Rebecca to go down the slide several times. Then, making their way to the hardware store at the corner, they passed a group of old, unshaven men, most of them chewing tobacco and taking turns spitting.

"Um-umh!" muttered one as he reached a gnarled hand up to wipe spittle from his chin. Others echoed his grunt and a few whistled softly or mumbled under their breaths. Mary Frances took Rebecca's hand and pulled her along briskly.

"Mary Frances, you're hurting me," she said.

They bought the nails and stepped back into the bright sunlight. Rebecca automatically turned to retrace their shortcut through the park. Again Mary Frances took her hand and this time spoke sharply. "No, Rebecca. Let's walk around the park."

"But why, Mary Frances? It's shady through the park, and I wanted to slide again. Besides, it's closer."

"Never mind, Rebecca. Just do as I say. And don't whine."

The rest of the way home Rebecca thought Mary Frances was being high strung, as she'd heard Pearl say of their grouchy Aunt Judith. She walked too fast and hardly said three sentences. Rebecca left her as soon as they reached Mama Carnes's yard. She ducked under her favorite grapevine hideout and tried to figure out Mary Frances's behavior. It was important to Rebecca that she and Tom and Mary Frances were all best friends.

Pearl talked Mama Carnes into making homemade ice cream even though the freezer held six half gallons of Sealtest. Rebecca watched this procedure on the back porch from her hideout, waiting until the ice cream was in the bowls and the can of Hershey syrup was being passed around before she would make an appearance. Thirty minutes later, she saw Pearl remove the dasher. Mary Frances had brought out bowls and spoons on a large tray, and Mama Carnes sent Popa to get a carton of Co-Cola from the pantry in case anyone wanted an ice cream float. Amanda held the can of chocolate syrup and waited impatiently for the first bowl.

Just as Rebecca started for the party, she saw the back door open. Tom appeared, freshly showered and wearing a brand new shirt. At least he was trying to make a good impression. Now if Mary Frances would stop being so stuck up . . .

Lining up for her bowl of ice cream, Rebecca realized that Mary Frances had changed clothes, too. They both looked dressed up. All this just to eat ice cream!

Tom had finished the porch and Mama Carnes was telling everybody what a big help he'd been that summer. Mary Frances said, to no one in particular, that she'd noticed *A Summer Place* was showing downtown. Pearl told

Amanda to save some chocolate syrup for everyone else. And Tom asked Mary Frances to the movies. No one said one word to Rebecca during any of this. She just got her dish of ice cream and went and sat Indian-style in a hammock to eat it.

The discussion around the kitchen sink when Rebecca brought her bowl in centered on permission for Mary Frances to go out on a date. A date! Who said anything about a date?

Pearl said Tom seemed like a perfectly nice young man.

Mama Carnes said, yes, but to have Mary Frances go out with a boarder?

Pearl said he was only a boarder temporarily, till school started back, and then he'd be a student.

Mama Carnes said she'd read that college men were the worst ones.

Mary Frances up and said she was seventeen years old and it really wasn't anyone's business if she wanted to accept the invitation.

Mama Carnes and Pearl both turned eyes on her that shot daggers.

"We don't know his family," Mama Carnes said.

"Or how safe he drives," Pearl added.

Before Pearl got too like-minded with Mama Carnes, Mary Frances proposed this: suppose they walked, real safe like, uptown, saw the 7:40 movie, and walked straight home?

Pearl voted yes and Mama Carnes gave up the fight.

Rebecca was alternately pleased and vexed by this turn of events. They said sugary sweet good-byes to her as they left for the movies, and that made her sick. She went up to inspect the porch without telling a soul. Though it was still a very fine elevation, the initial joy was gone. The element of danger was gone. It was better by starlight and with Tom and his binoculars. These were in his room now, which was probably locked, but anyhow private.

Mama Carnes and Popa stayed up that night till 9:00 in honor of Pearl, but then everyone went to bed. It was ten o'clock, Atlanta time, anyway, so Pearl was ready to retire. They left the porch light on for Tom and Mary Frances and all said good night.

Rebecca lay awake for the longest, dozing off and on as she listened for Mary Frances to return. Long after the clock struck 10:00, she found herself awake. She decided to go out on the porch alone since this was her last night in Ft. Payne. She couldn't wait forever for Tom and Mary Frances to accompany her. Besides, what harm was there now in going there anytime she chose.

The upstairs hall was spooky when no one met you at the top step. Moonlight flooded in where the door was left open to conduct a breeze. This gave half-illuminated shape to items in the hall: a small table, a side chair, Tom's tool box left just inside the door. Rebecca shivered and remembered the workshirt she'd worn before, the binoculars that had been heavy around her neck. She heard voices, believed briefly that Pearl and Mama Carnes were debating some issue below — in the hall, on the front porch, out in the yard. She strained to determine the direction of sound. It came again, and she recognized Tom's voice, very low, very soothing, like the night he'd explained to her how important it was to follow the ropes along the porch. It

was Mary Frances he was speaking to now, though, pointing out constellations for her to find through the binoculars. She heard Mary Frances's breathless "Oh's," as wonder upon wonder was revealed.

Rebecca felt trapped: unable, or unwilling, to go back to bed having come thus far; but pretty certain that Tom and Mary Frances weren't looking for company out on the porch. She decided to creep on all fours to the door and listen. Listen like she had to Mama Carnes thinking aloud in the pantry; or the way she listened to the funny tug-of-war dialogue between Pearl and Mama Carnes while they did the dishes; or listen like she did when Mary Frances talked of college or Tom talked of camping. No harm in listening, she'd heard often enough. She chose a spot in the shadow of the open door, but one that gave her clear view. She lay on her belly on the cool wood, resting her chin on one hand, her other hand cupped to suppress a giggle. This was going to be fun. Probably lots better than any old movie.

"I guess you have lots of boyfriends back in Atlanta," Tom was saying.

Mary Frances, embarrassed, said, "Not so many. I have to study a lot, you know." She paused. "And take care of the girls."

Rebecca nodded her head in the darkness. Just like she'd told Tom about Mary Frances. A good influence.

"Of course, I don't study all the time. I guess Rebecca's told you I collect movie magazines. I like to read about the private lives of stars." She paused. "Do you like Elizabeth Taylor?"

Rebecca held her breath.

"Why, sure, I guess so. Why wouldn't I?"

"Do you think I look like her? Some of my girlfriends think so."

Tom, sounding as sure of himself as when he taught Rebecca to tie knots, said, "No."

Rebecca frowned.

Tom continued. "I think you're much more beautiful."

Rebecca heard Mary Frances breathe in deeply. "Oh," she said. Rebecca saw that they were standing very close. She bet Mary Frances's face was red even if you couldn't tell it in the night. Mary Frances turned red real easy.

"I suppose you might be a model, or even an actress," Tom was saying, his right arm reaching across Mary Frances's back, his right hand tracing imaginary patterns along her shoulder, bare in her sleeveless summer frock.

Mary Frances, her voice distant, dreamy, small: "Me?" She laughed softly. "I don't think so. I-I'm considering college."

"That's good," Tom said, turning Mary Frances around to face him. "A smart girl like you should go to college." He lifted her chin with his right hand. "At least for a year or two," he said, bending down with his kiss.

Rebecca scrambled to a sitting position. With flushed cheeks and cold feet, she hugged her knees close to her body and stretched her summer gown to cover her as far as it would go. Listening now to the gallop of her own heartbeat, she closed her eyes to the scene on the porch. She wondered what in the world Mary Frances had seen at the movies to cause her to "consider" college and forget that Tom was her friend first.

That year Rebecca Williams got a head start. . .

PARTICIPANTS

Elizabeth Bartlett, poet, story writer, editor. She has published sixteen books of poetry. Her seventeenth — *Around the Clock* — will be published soon by St. Andrews Press. She has served as poetry editor for *Crosscurrents* (1983-88) and as co-editor for an international anthology for the Olympics (1988). She has won two PEN Syndicated Awards and an NEA/COMBO Award.

James Dickey, poet, novelist, critic, professor of English and poet-in-residence (University of South Carolina). He has been consultant in poetry, Library of Congress (1966-68), and poet-in-residence at Reed College, San Fernando Valley State, and at the University of Wisconsin. Among his many prizes for literature are the National Book Award, the Vachel Lindsay Prize, and the Melville Cane Award. His works include *Into the Stone* . . . (1960); *Drowning With Others* (1962); *Buckdancer's Choice* (1965); *Poems, 1957-1967* (1967); *Deliverance* (1970); *Madness, Buckhead and Mercy* (1970); *Falling, May Day Sermon and Other Poems* (1982); and *Wayfarer* (1988).

Memye Curtis Tucker, poet, teacher. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Poems*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Confrontation*. She is the recipient of *The Chattahoochee Review's* Prize for Poetry and of a 1988 Artist-Initiated Grant from the Georgia Council for the Arts. Her chapbook of poems — *Holding Patterns* — appeared in 1988.