EVENTS

Thursday, April 26

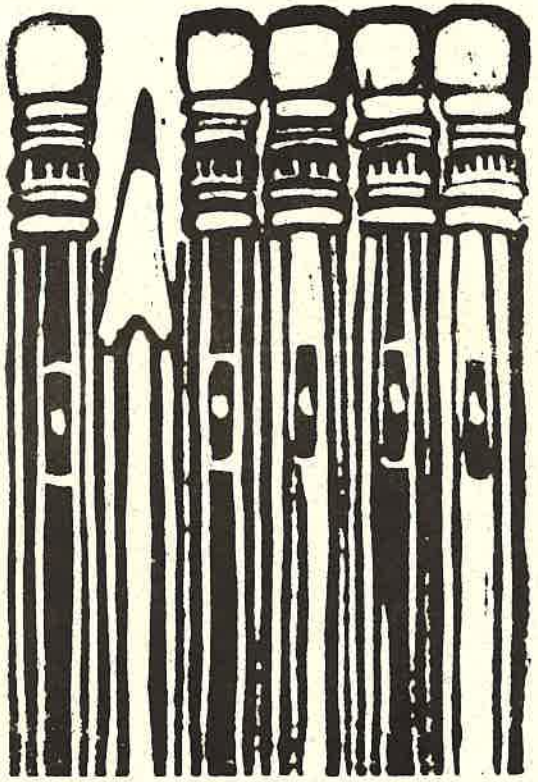
3:30 p.m.	Reading Memye Curtis Tucker Jane Zanca Dorothy Sussman Chapel Lounge, Alston Center
8:15 p.m.	Reading Josephine Jacobsen Winter Theatre, Dana

Friday, April 27

10:25 a.m.	Lecture Alfred Uhry Gaines Auditorium Presser
12:00 noon	Lunch for Participants Terrace Dining Room
2:00 p.m.	Student Reading and Panel Discussion Winter Theatre, Dana

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

Agnes Scott Writers' Festival 1990



writers' festival
1990

Spring, 1990

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sunday

we raise the borrowed ladder
clipping the unturned lip
of the gutters
stuffed like gluttons
with pine straw
and the dried remnants of leaves.

being the oldest
i press the splintered wood
between my fingers
as if to guide
the ascending rungs
into the grey mouth
of the sky.

the yellow
leaves twitter
in the moth eaten air
scattering the blades of grass like
willing bones.
our jackets lift like
an anxious bird's tail to flight.

i cannot fly
i am anchored to the
earth's brown moss
but you ascend
the paint stained rungs
in your lithe body
like one born
again.
to the roof your feet light
like tentative wings
i hear them beat
against that uneven ground.

like a proud roof ornament
seeking the proper direction
you strut the full measure
of the gables
end to end
turning, barely kneeling
to counter the slant edge.

i marvel at your ascension
the nimble way you
hang between heaven
and
earth
as though you belonged
to neither.

but then at fifteen
there is no fear of life
or death
only a need
to soar.

— Anjail Ahmad

GROWTH

She noticed the ivy,
green fingers pushing
through the windowframe, rooting
into the bricks of the fireplace.
That night ferns sprouted in the shadows
of the bedroom; family photos vanished
under clumps of kudzu.

When the leaves turned, falling,
she saw him through the branches,
winter-pale skin sculpted against the moss
which crept along his chair.
He was reading the paper.
Newsprint snapped in the bare silence.

A path appeared, twisting through the maples
in the guest room and fading into weeds.
He had a secret life
tracing the old geography
of the house to the vine-covered landmarks
of their early years. He found the stove
and cooked breakfast.

She is breaking sticks, the sound
of him moving in the undergrowth.
Fragments fall like kindling.
Beneath the white faces of moon flowers
her eyes glow, a pale grey waiting,
opening to night.

— Deborah Browning

Bear Dance

Picture postcard painting
like the New Mexican Christmas cards
my uncle sends
full of shawls, beads
and luminarios
and angels with black hair.
All is peace and precision —
dancers' movement frozen in snow,
a moment of their stately ceremony
stopped still on the canvas.
Pin-point stars and green needles
are held timeless in the night
of the Apache's pristine world —
The clean colors and shapes
haunt my progress-weary eyes.
In the cool, clear night
the pine branches beckon:
come, Bear Dance in the snow.

— Sandee McGlaun

CARTESIAN DUALISM
for Gene Ruyle

Saint Martin's Eve, 1619. René Descartes, not yet twenty-four,
seclued in a well-heated room in Nueberg, dreams
in geometrical ultimates—point, plane, circle, straight.
Refreshed, he wakes to the certainty
that he can decipher the natural world with geometry
if only he can stop doubting the existence of things—
like those cannons of which the Prince of Orange is so fond.
Whether cannons exist or not, René turns his attention
to the mathematical problems of projectiles,
since the Prince, whom René finds dubious too, pays him well
in uncertain silver for the calculations he may
or may not be making, if, indeed, he himself really is.
All René knows for sure is *de omnibus dubitandum*.

The war finally over, and he temporarily unemployed,
René retires to an inn somewhere in Bavaria.
Not content with the solitude afforded him,
he crawls into the unlit stove in the middle of his room
and waits for night. In the dark silence of this refuge
he concludes that even if the ordinary objects of his room—
bed, wardrobe, washstand, the gratuitous pot of hyacinths—don't exist,
even if this stove in which he crouches is a lie,
even if this leg, which is developing a terrible cramp, isn't real,
consciousness has to exist in order to be deceived!
At daybreak René climbs out of the stove, having thought
himself into being. He washes off what seems to be soot
and goes down to his possibly delicious breakfast,
whistling *cogito ergo sum*.

For twenty years, René deconstructs the universe.
In Stockholm, young Queen Christina, needing a diversion,
decides to study philosophy. René doesn't want to go
to live with bears among rocks and ice;
even if it isn't real, Sweden is deceptively cold.
But the pay is good, and Christina insistent.
Unfortunately, the capricious queen wants her lessons at five a.m.
One bitter morning, as he returns to his little room
clear across Stockholm from the palace,
René's teeth start to chatter. His landlady
can tell he's really sick, although René has his doubts.
There's no mathematical proof of illness, he says,
but she thinks he's delirious.

St. Lazarus Day, 1650.
Less than four months after arriving in Sweden,
six weeks short of his fifty-fourth birthday,
René is shut up in an oak coffin and put on a wagon for Paris.
He's rather chilly but supposes that's all right,
considering the rate at which he is decomposing anyway.
From time to time light flickers through the cracks in the box
and he amuses himself trying to find shapes in the shadows.
He's sorry to get to the end of the funeral at Ste. Geneviève du Mont.
The music was quite beautiful, and the eulogies eloquent.
As the slab slides into place, René realizes his error:
I saw, I tasted, I touched, I heard; therefore, the world was.
Alone in the dark, he would trade his soul for a pot of hyacinths.

— Mariane Schaum

The Meaning of Bones

Twins of grief—
the mothers of the disappeared
march two by two
on the Plaza de Mayo.
They wear placard-size photos
of Luis, Claudio and Lila
as necklaces
to remind the world
of their invisible children.

With their trowels
students dig down
in dumps and back lots
for cracked skulls,
the isolated pelvis,
a molar.

While the mothers pray
for the finality of forensics,
one mother begs the scientists
to display her daughter's skeleton
pieced together on a table.

Standing before them she weeps,
touching every bone,
dusting earth from the white china.

— Megan Sexton

Reservoir

In the fields of memory,
Old enough to make me a boy
With a man's sense of place,
Wise enough to bear the pain of losing,
There's a group of boys moving
Toward the reservoir. It's not dark,
Not yet, but still the light is sifted,
Half-broken through trees without names
And a trail of boys tracing water.
One of them will not make it, I know,
But at this moment in the full fields
The only thing they must cull is wild fruit.
They still have time before the sounding,
An eternity to get used to the hollow
Splash the drowned make; and in this snatch
Of memory, pure as untouched water,
The skein of boys is unbroken.
The life that unravels their sleep for years
Hasn't been offered, not yet. They
Know nothing of explosives fired across
Water to make the dead rise.

There's still time for them, the memory
Allows that and more, and if a dream
Corrupts any part of the day behind the fences,
Makes any man cringe nightly years after,
Then the memory divines the fields, the moments
Before, gives another hour to them all.
The dead can rise, and whatever thing it is
That goes awry, bartering off someone's son,
Hasn't yet roughed the reservoir.
There's time for them all—the fields
Teeming with boys, the half-light through
Nameless trees, the wanderers of the joy
Of not-knowing—the unlearned, the doomed.
No pitch of flat stones across water,
Not yet, only the pale vision of boys
In a forbidden place, for one long moment
No chance a thing ever changing from this
Sunken day: the walking on water,
The stones, untouched, the awakening.

— Jack Williams

Horses

You said you'd never touched a horse before,
and I laughed and never took you seriously,
because I couldn't imagine twenty years on Earth,
with deep meadows and stretched fields,
without once feeling the heavy breath
of the horse on your face,
never waking to the wetness of morning
and mounting the horse in only your underwear,
each strand of mane against your body,
or never feeling that power in your hands,
the reins as tight as skin.

So when you came out to the farm that day,
I brought you over to the barn,
your lean body standing gently,
each foot timid on the hay,
like a newborn colt
struggling to stand alone,
and as I watched your dark hair fixed
against the shafts of sunlight
I realized that I should mount you
and take the reins,
and feel the power of the beast once again.

— Samantha Wood

The Creation Of Adam
(from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel)

He was to be the perfect man,
our forefather of love,
but instead, he was a man of flesh-tones,
poor color and subdued hues.

It must be hard for him always to have his back to the wall,
to crack and blemish, only to fade and never grow—
as the years go by.

I don't know how Adam does it—
his life in front of our eyes,
all of his sins before the world,
but he still lies,
his body pressed into the wall,
and life still goes on,
with the fall of man over our heads.

— Samantha Wood

Announcement of A Camera For Sale

During Noah's New Year's Eve party, I mounted my camera and set a strobe in the corner of the living room, to immortalize a frameful of us every two minutes, the time the strobe battery took to recharge. In black and white, for art's, and for economy's sake. But see, it was a joke. With no guiding vision, no moral position behind the camera, the pictures should have held only the most basic configurations of partiers. An essential part of the equation should have been missing.

Music videos are striated against the black background of the contact sheets, the back of David Bowie's hand wiping his mouth in the instant of changing from a woman to a man, over and over again.

Depending on who's defining, photographs are either art or ephemera. Some people take pictures of everything; some take out their cameras maybe once a year. Everything I've ever read about photography implies that some conjunction of equipment, photographer, and subject affects what the resulting image reveals; that the reality a camera records is not, cannot be, the complete picture of events. This isn't always true. Other forces are at work.

Indeed, it's surprising how little we can predict of what will show up in a photograph, even a well-planned one. Through the lens, the sky may burn like a Corot painting that Maxine showed me in a book in the Pickwich Bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard, but in the end, power company wires and poles obscure the color of the sky.

"Look," she said, "the pink in this cloud overtaking this woman. It's so ominous, so erotic. It's Zeus."

There is risk every time the shutter is tripped. Remember Edward Steichen's portrait of J.P. Morgan, in which Morgan seems to be holding a dagger? But Morgan's hand is gripping the arm of a chair. The revelation may be incidental, a trick of light, but it's real enough when it's your own life revealed.

I dream of a knife in my hand and wake to smell of blood in the sheets. My eyes are puffy, hurt and white; I sit in bed in the dark, beating a rhythm against the wall until I make my knuckles bleed. It takes a long time to break skin against a smooth surface. I press my open knuckles to paint that sucks the oozing wound, which leaves a mark. It's not easy. But some things should. Something like this should. Leave a mark somewhere, or it's not worth anything. If it doesn't leave a mark. Even if it's only on a wall that no one else will see, no one except Maxine's cat, stretched lean and hard with his feet against the wall. J.D. gave me the cat after Maxine died.

"You have to take him," he said to me, "she only got him because you said she should." And she wouldn't be dead but for me. But J.D. didn't know that. I hadn't thought anybody would. The cat sniffs the blood mark, and leaves the room with twitching whiskers.

There was a time when the pebbled black body of my Minolta was as erotic to me as J.D.'s thigh, as my friend's lover. I tried always to recognize that moment when a subject was provoked in such a way that the camera could capture a personality, something more than a mug shot or a driver's license picture. When that happened on film, I thought I had recognized a genuine response, that I was responsible. I was intrigued by the angular physics of artist, time, and technology. I waited tables at the Lighthouse and arranged my life around that hour before sunset when the natural light diffuses and the atmosphere glows.

Then I moved back to town to work days and lit portraits with candles. These were considered my best work, but the eyes of my friends filled with reflected flames just out of reach of the lens. All that was left of them were the habitual poses and the relief maps of their faces, but art demanded a sacrifice of truth. I do understand why most shooters are gun-shy about having their pictures taken.

Archaeologists talk about encountering primitive peoples who believe the camera steals the soul of the person photographed. The primitive peoples are right, except about whose soul the camera takes. Photographers can control, alter the images. But actual psychic truth has nothing to do with technical skill, or artistic instinct. It's just chance, or a curse. I continued to emphasize close-up portraits, but I searched as well for the context in which those images stood.

Maxine and I stood behind the half-closed door of Noah's bedroom, timing the interval between strobes as we located J.D. in a circle of women, their mascara-heavy eyes anticipating a new start, the new decade. J.D. was tripping. Max was wearing a transparent chiffon blouse, anger and embarrassment exposing her more after J.D. ripped off his tie because the strobe flashed as she tied it for him early in the evening. She couldn't have know I'd given him the acid. He waited for the strobe before he ripped it open. In the photographs her humiliation shines in the only plain human face in that gorgeous fauve crowd. She did not know, never knew, my part in her humiliation.

"J.D.," Maxine said when we reached him.

"Don't get off the boat," I said. With the backs of our hands, we wiped red stains of lipstick across our cheeks.

What he saw in the flash of the strobe was our mouths cracking open across our faces.

In the tiny rectangle on the contact sheet, his face, enlarged in the circle of the loupe, is stretched as he screams, as Maxine and I bend over laughing with our arms around each other, turning away from each other. Other people are looking at us with permanent disinterest.

That isn't the kind of truth I'm talking about. I'm talking about predicting the future in photographs.

Just before the sun came up, Noah took the camera down while those of

us who stayed watched a ragged river of lights from other houses on the walls of the canyon disappear in the dark. The bartender emptied sticky orange juice over paper plates, half-eaten hors d'oeuvres, and broken green bottles in the sink.

Maxine lobbed glowing cigarette end over the rail.

Noah screamed. He ran to the rented bar and, struggling to hoist a dishpan of watery ice to the deck rail, dumped the cold wash in the same arc that Maxine had flipped her cigarette.

"I want to set it on fire," Maxine said.

On the second contact sheet, the roll I shot on the balcony, only Maxine is leaning out, over the canyon. Everyone else, J.D., Harve, even Cal, is holding onto the rail, leaning into the deck. J.D. is looking directly at the camera. I wanted to believe he was looking at me, but the gaze is too direct; he was making love to the lens of the camera. He is making something to last. And in every frame, Max's face is turned away from the camera.

"There are no shortcuts," we decided. "There are no shortcuts." We thought we understood all the secrets. Maybe we did.

With modern processing techniques, the importance of photography as an art form, something to give man visions of god, dimishes. Video and xeroxing, even faxing, are too universally available. Technology has modified our perspective. We weren't expecting messages from beyond on New Year's Eve. I hadn't learned to read them yet. But psychics have always searched photographs for guides, and still do. The most recent psychological research shows the extraordinary significance of images of human life. Some of us don't need statistical proof of that.

J.D. took a polaroid of Maxine on their vacation in New York City. They were in front of the Dakota, looking for John Lennon, and Rosemary's baby. Maxine is squinting into the sun. Her hair blows across her face, into her mouth. She is not looking at the viewer of the picture, which means she was looking at J.D., not at the camera lens when he took the picture. I've seen him use that camera, never holding the viewfinder to his eye, pointing the camera from chest level, as though if it got too close, it would affect him more than he wanted to be affected; it would show him more than he wanted to see.

Without these fragmented images of reality preserved on film, I might still believe in nothing beyond material reality and rational consciousness. Most people don't acknowledge anything else. Computer-enhanced images make it possible to predict the future of children's faces from their baby pictures. But this is seen as forensic, not divinatory.

I wonder what would happen if they put my photographs from that night into their computer. Would it show Maxine's skull, her hair flaming, J.D.'s face wrenched, my hand holding the frayed wires of her brake cable, the others covering their eyes to avoid the knowledge revealed?

As the sun came up that New Year's Day, we thought we could see Tibet from the balacony. When the contact sheet came back from the lab I didn't show it to anyone.

I have come to the realization that even the blurriest, most haphazardly framed snapshot offers contact with a common spiritual realm that has un-

common power in the lives of people. In spite of this, people are replacing SLR's with camcorders. Video makes the transition easier. What it shows is just about as far as you can get from the actual truth of our lives.

During the Santa Ana winds, Mulholland Drive was lined twenty-four hours a day with photographers who had been planning shots for a year, waiting for the smog to blow into the ocean. I rolled down the car windows to dry the sweat on my chest before the starch crunching in the cotton of my shirt softened. The air, especially at night, glittered like dry glass. Water from my eyes rimmed my face with salt.

It was fire season. The faint daylight moon was sharp as a double-edged razor. Bodies burst into flames at a single touch. The canyon burned, not where Noah and Cal lived, but up at the top of the hill and down the other side towards Hollywood.

I was cautious. I never took pictures during the winds. I was afraid of what the veil of smog had hidden. I am sure now that any photograph I had taken would have shown the burned-out shell of Maxine's car in the chaparral on the canyon slope, even before she hit outside of the curve that night.

I don't soup my own film anymore. I don't even shoot black and white anymore. It makes the context too clear, watching the image wavering in the pan, those hours in the dark with a stainless steel spiral.

Sometimes I shoot two or three rolls at a time and sit outside the one-hour photo place in the mall waiting for the prints. Sometimes I look at them and say to whoever's around, "I didn't take this picture." But the negatives are there embedded in pictures I remember, and no one else touches my camera. Ever. These pictures reveal things I can't remember seeing.

I seem to be runing into a room where my friends were, with my camera. When I look through the lens, I know all of them are dead. They will not help me. Even J.D. isn't looking at me. These are only photographs, and my friends have not deserted me. Even Maxine didn't desert me in life. In the photographs she is the only one reaching out to me, but my hands are raised against her, holding my camera. In the dream I thought she was trying to hurt me, but when I saw the pictures, I knew that I was raising the camera against her. The images in the photographs are so horrible and so real, I can't have seen this.

Right after Maxine's funeral, I traded my Minolta for a point-and-shoot camera that takes away many choices I made with the Minolta. It seemed that I was making the wrong choices somewhere along the line. But something is trying to warn me. I can't control the photographs. Whatever I photograph, I keep it to myself. Many things we're better off not knowing.

I remember the photograph I took in the burn ward before Maxine died. Harve, Noah, and Cal were standing over her. She was supposed to go home in a few days. The light seemed to be striking her face, the street light glancing off the aluminum window frames. The next morning at the mall when I saw the print, I knew she was gone and I asked no questions at all. Oddly enough, in the print her face seemed unfocused, like the depth of field was insufficient. But when I checked it with the loupe, the image itself is perfect.

The experience I have with photography is too much to talk about. When I look at my prints, I feel tired and upset.

I set my camera on the railing of J.D.'s balcony the night the fires started on the hills that rimmed the valley beyond the studio. The fire Maxine's car started. The light from the noctilucent clouds was orange, the reflected light of fire on the ground, not the white light of the moon coming down. On my way home, a coyote sneaked out of the dry weeds and ran in front of my car with some kind of animal bleeding in its teeth. When I woke up the next morning my face was streaked with blood, the spurt from my nose mapped on the front of my shirt. There were three messages from Maxine on the machine from the night before. The last one said she was going down the hill to look for J.D. in Hollywood. I took the film in anyway.

When I see an ad offering camera equipment for sale, I know someone has the same experience I have and can't stand it anymore. So they sell their cameras. They say they get bored, don't have the time, but after I rewind a roll of film I have strong pains in my heart and I can't stop crying. I think that I am strong enough to take the pain. Some aren't. This is why I have not sold my camera.

The metaphors of photography are too accurate, and I'm tired of metaphors, aphorisms, and all of it. Even though frozen together in those terrible photographs, and in those moments when everything seemed to be starting over, we were all the most beautiful people in the world.

Photography is a terrible experience.

I could have been warned about things in photographs. I couldn't have stopped them from happening. I can stop knowing about them.

— Leigh Kirkland

Some Can Take It With Them

It was my Aunt Rubilyn's funeral, and she was laid out in the middle of all the commotion in a wood box set up on two sawhorses, and though I had been warned by my mother what to expect when I saw her, it was still shocking to see my Aunt, who was what most people would call a 'handsome' woman—even if she was in her fifties and dark brown from years of farming in the sun—dressed in a see-through red negligee with her stubby, cracked fingers covered with diamond rings, thumbs and all.

It seemed to me to be something like a scene out of a low budget B-movie about hillbillies—like that movie *White Trash* that I saw in the drive-in the night it was raining so bad with my cousin Donna Gayle when my momma thought I was at the skating rink—the way the one-room wooden church squatted in the clearing surrounded by huge moss-covered live oaks, all jam-packed with farmers and women and bawling babies that nobody paid any attention to.

I didn't know anyone there except my mama's relatives who were sitting around me on rough homemade benches and Uncle Clark, Aunt Rubilyn's husband, who wasn't sitting with us, but sat across the aisle with the others and kept glaring over at my momma.

The preacher, who looked like a cross between an Elvis Presley look-a-like and a used car salesman, kept slicking back his black lacquered hair with big white hands. He had a guitar hanging down his back from an embroidered strap and was yelling while he waved his hands and sweated big brown rings under his arms. I don't know what he was saying. It was as if he had a mouthful of grits and couldn't swallow, so he had to talk through them, and the words all spewed out in congealed clumps, but I guess it didn't really matter what he said anyway because every few minutes he would stop spewing, sling the guitar around, give it a sharp strum, and start singing, "When we all get to Heaven," with an awful twang that sliced through the sweaty summer air. And to top it off, whenever this happened, the whole congregation would leap up and join in.

And as if that wasn't enough, then someone, usually one of the women, would spring up like a released coil and start babbling away, and the babbling would get louder and louder as the others egged her on with 'Praise the Lord' and hand-clapping, and then, in a frenzy, she would throw herself to the floor and twitch like the black man I saw one time having an epileptic fit in the parking lot of the A&P.

The second time a woman hit the floor, sprawled out like a runover cat, my father nudged me in the side. "See what I said, Carol Jean. 'The women fall down, and the skirts fly up.' It makes the whole service worthwhile."

Momma, who was sitting next to me on the other side, leaned over and glared over at him. "Buddy, hush!"

"There's a snake pit out back, too," he whispered as soon as she had turned her head.

The red negligee and diamonds had been Aunt Rubilyn's deathbed wish, my momma said. Aunt Rubilyn had called momma over to the oxygen tent and told her to dig up the money she had buried in the pigpen.

"What money, Rubilyn?" my momma had asked, thinking she was probably delirious.

"My money," Rubilyn had croaked, "in two coffee cans, one for Wayne, one to take with me," and my momma said Aunt Rubilyn's eyes were glowing like red-hot coals, and her usually tan face was drained as white as a dead fish's belly.

"Probably the fever," my father said.

Momma ignored him and went on to say that apparently Rubilyn had hoarded away quite a stash. It was all buried in two Maxwell House coffee cans in the pigpen, and Uncle Clark, who knew nothing about the money almost died of a stroke when he found out. He was practically foaming at the mouth and tried everything to get the money, saying it was rightfully his. He looked like he was going to kill Wayne on the spot, she said, and was shaking so bad you would've thought he had the palsy.

When momma had finished her story and left the room, my father looked at me over his cigarette. "Jesus, I love your momma's family. What a clan."

My father was Southern too, just like my momma, but he wasn't what he called 'country.' In fact, he only met her because, being on a short-lived health kick in college, he had gone to the open-air Farmer's Market to buy some fresh vegetables. On row 12A where the greens were, he was browsing through the leafy bundles set up behind the flatbed trucks backed into the stalls when he saw her perched up on the top of a huge stack on unloaded turnip greens.

He said it was the prettiest sight he had ever seen, her hair the color of sweet corn, and her dressed in rolled-up dungarees with a blue flour sack shirt that couldn't begin to compete with her summer-sky eyes, so on impulse, he went over and asked her to a fraternity dance that very night.

She didn't even blink an eye.

"Ma, can I go?" she called to the back of a large woman arranging clusters of greens on a wooden stand.

"Who's going to help me? Friday's our busiest night," my grandmomma-to-be answered and turned and gave my father a look that he said 'curled his hair.'

"I'll get Alene to do it." Mama answered and turned back to my father. "Okay," she said and, despite my grandma's disapproval that has never slackened throughout the years, momma smiled at him like she had known him all her life.

"What's your name?" he asked, trying to ignore my grandma's eyes burn-

ing small holes in his back.

"Maggie." She was still smiling.

He reached out and touched his finger to the tip of her turned-up nose. "Maggie, you're the prettiest turnip green princess I've ever seen," he said.

Just like a fairy tale, "The Cityboy meets the Turnip Green Princess," he would always say when he told the story. It was later he found out that she came with an illiterate holy-roller father, a consistently complaining mother, seven large brothers, five inseparable sisters and uncountable other relatives strung out through the north Florida woods.

Before the sermon had started, when I was standing in the 'body-viewing' line behind Uncle Clark, I couldn't help wondering if Aunt Rubilyn's eyes had glowed as crazily when she sent my momma for her money as Uncle Clark's did as he stared down at her in the casket. He looked practically fevered himself, and he stood for a long time just glaring at Aunt Rubilyn's fingers, spread out like two fans on her chest and covered with clusters of diamonds that looked like colored ice as they reflected the dark blood-red of her negligee. He even put his old, claw-like hand out one time, and I thought he was going to touch her hand, but then he snapped back like he had been bitten by a snake, and his little yellow rat-eyes darted around the room. He looked like a man with a bad case of D.T.'s and I wondered if he would make it through the service.

I looked back at my momma who was behind me in the line. She was watching Clark with a disgusted look, her mouth drawn in and her eyes screwed up. Everyone in the family knew Clark was a stingy man, a man who wasted nothing, and my momma who knew *all* about Clark and about his quirks and who never tired of talking about what she knew, said that Clark was stingy because of his upbringing. He was raised dirt-poor, she said, so when he finally made a little money in truck farming, he hung on to every dollar and wrung it until it was dry.

Why Aunt Rubilyn had married him was a mystery to the whole family. She was in her forties and had gone through three no-good husbands and a pretty hard life when she came up with him. He was old, crusty, and tobacco-stained, but she married him on a Friday in front of a justice-of-the-peace and moved into his four-room farm house the next day. The house didn't have any electricity, running water or bathroom, and Clark had no intention of putting any in, but the house was his 'free and clear' as he liked to brag.

My momma was close to Aunt Rubilyn, being next to her in age, so even though she didn't care a smidgen for Clark we used to visit a lot, that is, until the day Uncle Clark castrated the cat in his barn. That was about five years ago when I was fourteen. He told me it wouldn't hurt the cat much, and besides, the vet charged twenty-five dollars for two minutes of work. He knew it only took two minutes because in his lifetime he had castrated, it must have been, hundreds of piglets, and he wasn't going to pay that kind of money for two minutes of work.

So he put the cat on its back between his knees and had me hold its paws, spreading the back legs wide apart. When the cat was clamped tight, he made two small cuts, one in each testicle, and then slipping in his finger and

thumb, he grabbed the small nodules, one at a time, and pulled until the cords holding them snapped. He threw a pinch of salt into each cut and told me to let go of the cat when he counted three. I did and the cat did a complete flip in the air and took off out of the open door. The cat had yowled the whole time, but at least, it was, as Uncle Clark had said, over quickly.

When momma found out, she exploded. "That man is too stingy to live!" she kept saying over and over as she grabbed her pocketbook and pushed me towards the car.

Clark came out of the barn. "What's the matter with her?" he asked. Aunt Rubilyn told him, and he shook his head, bewildered.

Backing out of the driveway, my momma stuck her head out of the car window and yelled to her sister, "Rubilyn, if you want to ever see me again, you know where I live!"

Since though, although Aunt Rubilyn would come to our house to visit, I only saw Uncle Clark at family reunions and 'hatchings, matchings and dispatchings' as my father liked to call them.

But the mystery of why my Aunt Rubilyn had hooked up with a man like Uncle Clark soon paled beside the surprise she popped on the family just two years after the marriage.

His name was Wayne, and Aunt Rubilyn brought him to a family reunion and introduced him around as her "adopted son." Well, this "son" looked about nineteen years old, and my Aunt Alene, the youngest sister summed up the general feeling of the sisters when she said, "I'd rather look at that boy than eat grits."

Yet there was something not quite right about Wayne. It was his eyes. They were a clear ice-blue and had a cold vacant hole in them that was scary, but attractive too, and added to that was the way he didn't talk to anybody but Aunt Rubilyn. He wasn't unfriendly, but a forced smile and a nod was all you got out of him. My momma held forth the opinion that he was probably somewhat retarded, to which Aunt Alene, whose husband might've been well-off but didn't have much in the looks department, and who was always on the prowl to remedy what she suspected she was missing physically with a vocal appreciation of the male sex, said "Maybe so. But his body sure ain't retarded."

Whether he was or not, the four sisters almost turned themselves inside out trying to figure out what was really going on, and, to me, whose twelve-year-old knowledge of sex was based entirely on conjecture, rumor, and what I'd read on bathroom walls, it was all pretty mysterious and exciting. But none of them, not even my unflappable Aunt Alene, had the nerve to say anything to Rubilyn, so after a while, speculation sort of died down, from a frenzied pitch any way, and Wayne came to be accepted, kind of like a shadow to Aunt Rubilyn.

The irony of it is, though, that while they all gossiped and guessed about Rubilyn and Wayne, I found out. I've known since that day at the farm, but I'd never told.

I was staying the weekend with Aunt Rubilyn while my parents were on a

fishing trip, and after lunch, I had been in the bedroom for about an hour trying to read a *Silver Screen* magazine, but I couldn't get my mind off the basket of just-picked pears in the pantry. I had to have one even though Aunt Rubilyn had said they were too green and would give me a stomach ache, so I snuck over to the pantry and was hunting through the basket for the softest one I could find when Aunt Rubilyn came in the kitchen.

I pushed the pantry door almost closed, leaving just a crack, waiting for her to leave, but she went to the stove and stirred the pot roast cooking on the back burner for supper, and then a noise came through the back door from the porch.

"Clark, is that you?" she called.

"No, the old man's still in the field. It's me."

His voice made a lump gather in my throat. It was deadpan and expressionless, like his eyes. He came through the door with the last words. His shirt was in his hand, and his hair and face dripped water onto his chest where he had washed off at the pump on the porch, and I couldn't help noticing that his chest was wide and deep and covered with curly blonde hair.

"I came in to get some water. I forgot it when we left." It was the most I'd ever heard him say at one time.

Aunt Rubilyn smiled like that was some kind of joke. "Here, try this."

She held out the spoon from the stew, and he took it and was blowing on it to cool it when she took the dishtowel from the counter and started wiping the water off him. Then she put the towel down and ran her fingers over his chest where she had just dried, kind of tracing them around, slow-like, watching her hand while she did it.

Wayne smiled at her while he licked the spoon. "I got a little while before he needs that water."

Then he put the spoon down and drew his hands down the front of her plaid shirt, running them over her breasts before he slid them around her waist, and kissed her full on the mouth. I remember how my aunt was all tucked up underneath him as he bent over her, and, most of all, how strange I thought her hard-worked hands, all rough and cracked, looked against his smooth, tanned back.

When they finally came apart, Aunt Rubilyn put her finger to her lips and pointed to the bedroom door where I was supposed to be. Then she took his hand and led him to the other bedroom.

I was knocked flatter than a flitter, afraid to move, but afraid to stay, and it was a while before I finally got enough nerve to tiptoe back to the bedroom and crawl on the bed, unable to read anymore, unable to do anything but feel guilty for what I had seen, like it was me that had done something wrong. And no matter how I tried not to keep thinking about it, no matter how tight I closed my eyes, I saw it again and again, and each time in more detail. I saw how Wayne's hair curled where it touched his neck right above his shoulders, and then I saw the raised white scar, jagged like a knife cut, on his left shoulder blade, and I saw how the skin darkened in the narrow valley running down the center of his back and ending in shadows in a diamond-shaped spot right above his jeans.

I might as well have eaten the pears because I had a horrible stomachache that lasted the rest of the weekend. All I wanted to do was to stay in bed. I just knew that somehow my Aunt Rubilyn would know what I had seen, and when, trying to figure out what was wrong with me, she asked me if I had gotten into the green pears, I held my breath trying to make my heart be still.

The last night I was there, at Aunt Rubilyn's insistence, I went to the supper table—it was go or castor oil, but I couldn't hold much of a conversation with Aunt Rubilyn, and every time she would hand me a bowl or platter and I saw her hands, I would see them again spread out on Wayne's back, and although I tried not to, I kept stealing glances at Wayne, and once he caught me and winked at me, and my stomach knotted up all over again. Uncle Clark, as usual, just sat there stuffing his face, not saying anything.

After that weekend, it was a long time before I could be around them without feeling strange, but they didn't act any different, and after a while, after I got a little older, I came to even enjoy knowing about it. I couldn't really blame her. Wayne seemed devoted to Aunt Rubilyn, kind of like a pet dog, and Uncle Clark was so repulsive, all dried-up, always trying to hold on to his money.

My momma said that Uncle Clark had finally showed his true feelings and kicked him off the farm after the buried money incident. As soon as we got to the church that evening, I looked for Wayne. But I didn't see him anywhere, and when I asked momma, she said nobody knew where he was. He had packed up and disappeared just as sudden as he had appeared almost eight years ago.

The service seemed to be winding down. At least, everybody was sitting quiet in their seats, and the preacher was whining out "Just As I Am," and looking kind of whipped out.

"It's almost over. It's getting late," my momma whispered. "They'll want to get finished before dark."

My father leaned over my head that I had ducked down since everyone else seemed to be praying silently. "Are they burying her in the cemetery out back?" he asked momma.

She hesitated. "Kind of." she finally said.

"Kind of...what does that mean?"

"Shhh! People are praying."

The preacher yelled, "Amen!" They all yelled back, "Praise the Lord!" and everybody stood up. The pall bearers, Aunt Rubilyn's brothers, moved towards the casket.

My father took me by the arm and changed places with me. "Maggie, what does 'kind of' mean?" He sounded suspicious, and his voice rose on the last words.

"Not so loud!" she whispered to him while keeping her eyes on Aunt Rubilyn's casket being carried down the aisle on the shoulders of her brothers.

"They're going to cremate her," she said real low, still not looking at him.

"Cremate her!" Now it was my father who sprung back like he had been bitten by a snake. "Maggie...!"

"Hush, please...hush!" My momma flipped her head from side to side to see if anyone was noticing, but they were all intent on getting out the big double door of the church, following the casket. Uncle Clark was so close behind the casket, he was almost under it. I figured he didn't want to get too far from those diamonds.

My momma started out the aisle after them. "It's what she wanted. I promised I would..." she said over her shoulder to my father, who was hot on her heels.

My father grabbed her. "You can't just cremate somebody! Maggie, there are laws!"

She turned on him, her small face as hard as flint. "Not here, there's not. Now you stay or go, but whatever you do, you be quiet and show some respect for my dead sister."

She only came up to his shoulder, but I swear he wilted like a salted slug. Finally, he looked away and slowly shook out a Camel from the pack he kept in his pocket.

"Wait until we get outside to smoke," she said, her voice was real controlled and steady.

My father looked her full in the face and said, "I can't wait," and lit the cigarette, and he was right, he needed something to steady his nerves, and I sure wish that I'd had something to steady mine because when we got to the door of the church, where everyone had already cleared away, us being the last ones through, I noticed first of all that it was almost dark and that a breeze had sprung up, blowing through the gray-curled moss, and then I saw, on the edge of the clearing, leaning against a large pine and sipping from a bottle, Wayne, just leaning there calmly watching us come out of the church door.

I don't think anyone else had noticed him. He was off to the side and under the shadow of a large cypress. I know Uncle Clark must have missed him or there would've been trouble. I glanced at my parents, but momma was already turning the corner of the church, intent on getting to the cemetery out back, and my dad was right behind her.

I stopped short when I saw Wayne, and to cover up I bent down and took my shoe off, like there was a rock or something in it. My father looked back once, and I held the shoe up. He went on around, leaving no one but me in the front clearing.

Wayne didn't move, and I could see how they had missed him. It didn't look like he was particularly trying to hide, but if it hadn't been for the failing light catching his yellow hair, I wouldn't have seen him either.

I put my shoe back on and clutched my purse for support. He watched me come over without saying anything, and I saw that he had a *Jack Daniels* bottle, and next to him, and a little behind the tree, leaning on it, was a shotgun. I began to think that maybe I should've told my father. But I was committed now. Anyway, I wasn't afraid of Wayne anymore, like I had been when I was a kid. I still found him strange and a little upsetting, but I didn't think he was dangerous.

I tried to make my voice sound normal by pitching it real low. "Hi, did you come for the funeral?" I winched when I realized I sounded like I was twelve years old again. I mean, Jesus, why else would he be here.

He stared over his cigarette. "You sure have grown up," he said and then looked away, at nothing in particular, just into the darkness gathering under the trees.

I laughed, but it sounded small and forced to me. "Well, it's been a while. You know, after the cat...uh...when Uncle Clark did the cat..."

"Yeah, I know." He turned back towards me and was openly looking me up and down and drinking from the bottle. "You remember that time you ate those green pears and made yourself sick?"

It made my skin crawl. Why did he ask that? I felt like he was teasing me. He might've been the best-looking man, except for my daddy, that I'd ever seen, but his eyes still had that empty blue hole in them, and, I tell you the truth, I was scared and excited all at the same time.

"You're a good-looking woman," he said, still staring at me "just like your aunt was."

I wanted to get away. He had this funny smile on his face like he was trying not to laugh at me.

"I've got to go...my aunt died, you know...the service," I mumbled as I backed away.

He nodded, still smiling. "Yeh, it's going to be quite a show. I wouldn't want to miss it myself."

I almost ran, the best I could in high-heeled shoes, around to the back of the church.

Everyone was gathered in a circle around a wooden platform that had kindling and moss stuffed all around it. On the top of the pile was my Aunt Rubilyn, out of the box now and laid out flat with her long hair loose and hanging over the edge of the pyre, and behind the pyre the moon had come out, like a big yellow hole in the dark sky, and was lighting up the tombstones in the cemetery, and the tree branches had started swaying as the wind picked up even more, and I smelled dampness on the air and wondered what they would do if it rained. I remembered my dad had said the snake pit was somewhere back here, but I wasn't inclined to look for it.

I stood next to my father who was on the outside of the circle of mourners. He was lighting a cigarette with the butt of another. My momma was with the rest of her family, up by the pyre, all except Uncle Clark. I didn't see him anywhere.

"What do they have in their hands," I asked. Daylight was completely gone now and the only light came from the sky.

My father smiled, but it wasn't really a smile, more like a nervous twitch. "Torches. They're going to light the fire under Rubilyn. Kind of a symbolic thing, I guess."

As he talked one of the farmers went up to the pyre with a can and began dumping kerosene on the wood. The smell was awful. It laced the cool night air with stinging streaks that burnt my eyes and throat.

The congregation seemed to respond to the smell and people began to shift and murmur. Then the preacher held up his hand and everything went

dead quiet.

Going to each member of the family, he lit each torch while he intoned, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

With a chorus of 'amens' the congregation pushed closer as my momma and her brothers and sisters circled the pyre and held their torches against the wood. The flames leapt at the kerosene, hissing and licking it up with a loud *whoosh* before settling down into small snake-tongues of fire climbing the wood.

There wasn't a sound, not even from the kids and babies, just the hum of crickets and katydids and an occasional owl's hoot. Everyone was staring, all their faces florid and shiny with sweat, at the orange-blue tongues that flared and leapt out sizzling, each time a piece of the moss would catch and then curl in on itself like a dying spider. Even my father was caught up in the spell of the fire, and his cigarette hung unnoticed from his hand as he watched wide-eyed, his mouth hanging open a little.

I started to tell him about Wayne, but before I could, I felt a tremor go through the crowd, and there was a soft 'ahhh' as Rubilyn's hair, hanging almost halfway down the pyre caught. One tendril of fire caught the longest strand and ran up it in a bright streak, all the way to the top of her head before it spread, consuming all her hair in a loud crackling.

Everyone was so fascinated by the spreading flames, their faces almost joyful as they watched the thick smoke disappear into the black sky, that no one thought to look down at the ground, and the only reason I did is that I saw Uncle Clark scurrying along the back of the church, under the eaves, and, in the same instant saw something shiny catch the firelight on the ground. I looked down and there was a long snake with brown, yellow, and black diamonds laced down his back sliding between my father's spread feet.

I screamed and shoved him. Caught off guard, he stumbled and fell. Then everyone was yelling, and as I tried to help him up, I saw there were snakes everywhere, all in between the feet of the scampering men and women who were shouting and lifting crying children as more snakes crawled out from the shadows under the eaves.

My father jumped up, shouting, "Maggie!" He had me by one arm and was trying to push through the crowd that was running in the opposite direction, away from the pyre.

I couldn't run for watching my feet, and with my head down I kept stumbling and then leaping whenever I saw, or thought I saw, anything move on the ground.

We finally got to momma. She was all alone, caught in a halo of light from the flames, with the snake reared, its heart-shaped head high, and the flames dancing off the glossy diamonds on its back. And even over the crowd yelling and the fire making a sound now like rushing wind, I could hear the warning rattles.

"Jesus!" My father drew up, pushing me back. "Don't move, honey, don't move!" he yelled at her. He searched for something to hit the snake with, finally trying to pull a burning branch from the fire.

Then, all at once, like those blurred scenes you see sometimes in the

movies, where all the colors run together and smear across the screen, I saw Clark come running. He had on high rubber boots and carried something in his hand, and at the same time, I saw Wayne come from the other side, the shotgun in his hands. I heard the click-click of the pump pushing the shell in the chamber as I hit the ground where Wayne pushed me. The blast was right above my head and I remember seeing nothing but Wayne's black boots.

I jumped up. My momma was crumbled, with her hands over her mouth, on the ground, and the snake was sprawled flat next to her. Before I could even think to move, I saw Wayne turn towards the pyre and there was Clark, in the middle of the flames, hacking at my Aunt's fingers that had swollen like sausages in the heat of the flames. He seemed to be almost swallowed by the fire himself and was turning black from the greasy smoke as he frantically sawed.

Wayne pumped and shot, and Clark grabbed his leg with one hand but kept cutting with the other. Another pump and shot, and he dropped to the ground in a sitting position, just like a puppet you had cut the strings on, and when he hit he must have landed on some of the snakes that were in a frenzy from the fire and mayhem because two of them came out from under him, hissing and rattling, and before we could do anything, they reared and one struck him in the face, again and again.

Then it was all quiet. Everyone had run off except us. My father knelt on the ground, holding my momma up against him. Clark had passed out, still clutching one of the fingers he had managed to saw off, and his face was already turning blue.

Even the fire that had been blazing as parts of Aunt Rubilyn's body swelled, popped, and then shriveled black, began to die as a light rain started falling. Over behind the treeline I could see the sky lighting up and thunder was rolling towards us. Wayne reached over and pulled me next to him, and I was glad he did because I felt like I couldn't stand up any longer.

I leaned against him, and my father, still holding my momma looked up at me, rain washing the black soot and dirt down off his face, and smiled. "Christ, I love your momma's family. What a clan!"

I nodded and smiled up at Wayne.

— Linda Chandler Munson

The Good Example

People are watching me, I just know it: people here in the train station are wondering, a little anxiously, what a grown man in a good blue business suit is doing crouched behind a cement girder, hiding from the train platform, at six in the morning. If they saw me earlier as I ducked down below the handrailing on the escalator, and then watched me dash to this corner hidden between the tile walls and the girder, they probably stood a bit straighter and held on tighter to their valuables. If I could, I'd tell them: Don't worry about me, I'd say; I'm not the one who's dangerous. Across the tracks on the other side of the station are three men who are pretending not to notice me — two in brown workmen's jumpsuits and one in a green hospital scrub suit and an operating room shower cap. He must work at Grady Hospital; he probably wonders if he'll be seeing me some time soon on the eighth floor, the psych ward. I wish I had a chalkboard to write on and hold up, or even a piece of paper so I could write them a note and sail it paper-airplane style across the rails. When they opened the note, it would explain my predicament:

> I am Paul Gregory. I am 25, a respectable person, the youngest manager of a downtown store in the Doubleday bookstore chain. There's even talk of making me district manager. I've never had a traffic ticket. I've never even parked in a handicapped space. I'm a credit to the company.
>
> But look out for that guy over there, the one with the beard and the loose, tweed coat, the one holding the briefcase, with the overcoat over his arm. He's standing down there by the stone benches, swinging that briefcase around, banging it against his legs. I know him, he's my roommate. His name is William Virgil, and he isn't what he seems. What do you think is in that bag? It isn't papers, I'll tell you that. It isn't books. It could be anything — a broken-down rifle, plastic bags of cocaine, bundles and bundles of illegal money. See how calm he looks, relaxed, always smiling — is that the face of a man with no acknowledged ambition, no goals, a man satisfied with minimum wage, wide awake at 6 am? What does this tell you? He's a fake, it's a mask, all his cards aren't on the table. He could be anything, do anything — open that case and spray the place with bullets, shots ricocheting off the tiles; he could distract you and derail the train by throwing packets of money onto the tracks just as the engineer pulls in, and the green bills would fly everywhere, people would jump for them, and what then? Look out!

They'd understand that I have to find out where he goes in the morning and what he's up to. This is a fact-finding mission, for myself, because if you don't know what the people around you are involved in, they can pull you into whatever it is with them, something you never intended.

I'm not the type to hide myself or my actions. I never have been; it was obvious even when I was small that I was going to be a success in life. Mrs. Perry, the elementary school librarian, used to point me out to the other kids during library hour. She'd stand behind my chair at the library table, pat my shoulder, and say, "Now class, I want you to look at Paul. I never worry about him, he reads all the time. He should be an example to you." Being pointed out that way didn't make me popular, but I've always known what was really important, and I learned early not to waste time. At recess, I'd take a book out on to the playground. I didn't waste my time trying to join in a group, asking to play; I didn't care about running in circles, playing kickball and tag. I sat against the fence on the far side of the yard under the trees and read. I loved biographies, especially the series of orange-bound books about the lives of famous men, like Abraham Lincoln, Eli Whitney, and Andrew Carnegie, men who, like me, started out poor but with dedication to purpose and hard work made something of themselves. The biography of Abraham Lincoln taught me that you shouldn't be satisfied with less, and I learned how to think big from Andrew Carnegie, who left Scotland penniless at ten and came back sixty years later a billionaire. I would often study the biography shelf in the library and imagine my own life up there in an orange binding, for some future child to read about. That's not such a bad goal, is it? Like the good and faithful servant in the Bible, I plan to invest my talents.

As a matter of fact, more children should be taught to read at recess. It's safer as well as instructive. Those seesaws, for instance, can knock out teeth. And I remember someone always falls down at recess. There was always someone, running full tilt who would stumble on the uneven ground or the sidewalk around the yard and would pitch forward, skidding on elbows, knees, and the palms of the hands. Someone was always running to the teacher crying. I even remember a boy in my class who swung himself so hard that the wooden seat of the swing looped over the top bar of the set, sending him crashing down on his back and knocking the air out of him. And yet he didn't learn anything by it; the next day he was back out swinging again. What I learned at recess was concentration. Eventually, I could concentrate so well that I didn't even hear the others — not the girls screaming and chasing each other or chanting jump rope songs nor the other boys shouting and laughing. Once someone sent a red-brown kickball over toward where I was reading, and I didn't even notice until it hit the fence beside me, jangling the chain lengths and raising dry dust. Napoleon Hill in *Think and Grow Rich* points out that great men are often solitary.

My roommate, Virgil, is too friendly with strangers, if you ask me, especially at work. Of course, he is very popular. Everyone likes him. I like him; I hired him, even though he walked into my office in the back of the store with a hand-written resume that listed only menial jobs — a stacker at the university library, a file clerk here, a janitorial assistant there. But the job he applied for, shelver-cashier, wasn't much different from those he'd done. It didn't fit: he looked too intelligent. But in the interview, I found it hard to say no to someone with such a trusting face, someone who smiled as if he didn't have a worry in the world. It's that smile people like, I think. There's been an increase in unproductive traffic since he came, just-lookers, hangers-around, magazine rack readers. And Virgil just talks to them. He's a good listener, but he never has any advice to give, really. I've overheard him in the store. Only last week, a customer with only a copy of the Sunday paper was standing at the cash register telling Virgil that she was out of work, hadn't paid her bills in two months, and might get evicted. Here, at least, was a sales opportunity: he could have directed her to the right books — Albert Ellis' *Find A Job and Keep It* or *Form Your Own Small Business,* for instance. But he didn't suggest any useful course of action, just handed her a Kleenex from under the counter and sympathized. Meanwhile, other customers had lined up behind her five deep and were getting nervous, leaning against the counter, having second thoughts. I had to step in. "Virg," I called to him, "move the line. We're in business here." One thing to his credit, though — if I have to hurry him on the register or ask him to do something extra in the store, he doesn't mumble about me to the customers behind my back or ring things up wrong and pilfer the money, like others have done, although I never could prove it. He just smiles. I'm convinced he must be constantly stoned.

My watch says it's almost time for the train, so I peek around the pillar to be sure that Virgil is still standing with his back to me. The dozens of spotlights in the ceiling of the station make it unnaturally bright in here. There is a glare around everyone and it's hard to see their faces. My own face is reflected in the glazed white tiles of the station walls. A dozen of me, slightly distorted with a huge nose, bug eyes, and a receding head. The reflected faces stare back suspiciously; if I move my head, they follow. Once again, I'm my own company. Across the track, above the people who sit ignoring me, is a huge painted mural, which makes the station look like Mexico City in a Len Deighton spy novel. I could be British Intelligence, M5, and Virgil's KGB. Meek, mild-mannered, unassuming — what a cover! No one suspects him, but me! What's in the briefcase, Bub? What's that in your left hand under the loose jacket? Is it...

Bam! The train is coming in. It whirs past me on rubber wheels and stops with a long screech of brakes. The doors slide open. Now comes some careful maneuvering: I must get on the train in a way that Virgil won't see me but that I can always see him. From behind the post, I watch Virgil in a small group of people entering the third car from the end. I run to the fourth car and position myself riding backwards so I can just make out the top of his head in the front car. He begins to talk to the person sitting next to him. How typical.

Success is what interests people. I see it all the time: look at what people buy to read — books written by or about successes — David Niven's autobiography, Johnny Bench's baseball strategy, Lee Iaccoca's business advice. There's always the chance of learning the secrets, picking up the right tips. I think the promise of the future is what my ex-wife, Suzanne, liked in me, even though she always said she married me because I promised to take her to Myrtle Beach on a honeymoon.

In a way, this situation I'm in now, living with William Virgil, is something I have Suzanne to thank for. She found my apartment, and although it's too expensive for my salary alone and too big for one person, I like it. It's impressive. Even the elevators are decorated, with polished brass elevator doors, engraved with art deco lilies and peacocks, plush rust-colored carpet. My apartment is on the top floor. From my living room window, I can watch traffic leaving work every night, red lines of tail-lights and the silver street lamps blinking, airplanes in the distance, and silent, blue police sirens. On a usual morning, going to work, I can get in the express elevator, pressed in with other residents just like me, our black leather brief cases bumping together, our wingtip shoes side by side — I can smell success here. I need someone to help me pay the bills, though, because Suzanne and I signed a three-year lease and our marriage only lasted twelve months.

I tried. I read everything in the store on marriage. I studied Driekers' *Marriage: The Challenge* like a text, but I couldn't get her into a Dialogue of Alternatives. I thought if we studied the counseling books together that she would understand, for instance, why wasting money on restaurants and rock concerts was not consistent with our plans for the future, with my becoming district manager and eventually regional manager. It was different when we met: she was working at the School of Fashion and Design, and I was still in Business School and could get student discounts on tickets. I did bring her home books and the magazines she liked to read, *Spin, Vogue, Cosmo,* and *Rolling Stone.* I tried reading out loud to her at breakfast, passages I'd highlighted in yellow the night before. If she flew into a rage and left the table, I didn't give up. I followed her around the apartment while she got dressed for work and continued to read. One morning, she ran into the bedroom and slammed and locked the door. I could hear her throwing things around, but I didn't give up. I continued to read to her, more loudly so she could hear me through the hollow-core door, Chapter Eight, "Make Requests Reasonable and Sparse." When she finally came out, she began throwing books, end over end, aiming them at my head—some of my favorites, too: the hardback copy of *How to Raise Your I.Q. Twenty Points in Just Two Months* and *We Work While the Light Lasts.* She left with two overnight bags, telling me on her way out that the best self-help she could get was a divorce. When I picked up all the books she'd thrown around, I noticed that she hadn't taken a one with her.

Since then I've lived with roommates, and when it works, it's fine. Roommates don't ask anything more of you than half the bathroom, half the refrigerator, and hello in the morning. And I don't have to expect anything more from them than half the rent. Still, there's someone around occasionally. It's like leaving the hall light on in case you need it — in case of fire, or if a thief should break in, I wouldn't be alone facing a stranger in the dark.

I feel the train gliding to its first stop. People around me are changing seats with new people, all anonymous. I stand up in place to watch Virgil in the car ahead. He's still seated. The train starts again with a powerful tug, and I am forcibly sat back down in my plastic seat. This is a wonderful way to travel — efficient, fast, up above the streetlights, the houses, in the trees. This is exactly the behavior a person needs to have to succeed and get ahead. Quick, straight-minded progress, each short stop along the way is to the point, part of the plan. Destination mapped out. No milk stops. This was true in business school and it's truer in business — you can't just fool around, there isn't time in life. I've tried to show Virgil, point him in some direction. But he has no ambition, no drive. My girlfriend, Diane, says he's 'centered,' but I say he's just standing still. I'm surprised he takes the train. It seems too goal-oriented for him. He should walk.

I've tried to tell Diane not to judge Virgil by what he appears to be because everyone lies. I'm not the only one who's ever noticed this — it's a basic principle — it's marketing. Naturally, people want you to see only their best side; they tell you only what they want you to hear, but if you live with a person, it's hard to hide the truth for very long. All my roommates have been good examples of this. My first roommate, Robert, lost his job within a week of moving in with me. Not a word of it before hand, and after only, "It's OK, Paul. I've got interviews lined up next week." Robert said this for the next two months while I footed the whole rent and he slept all morning and half the afternoon. When he did wake up, he only sat on the floor in front of the sofa and ate using the coffee table as a dinner cart. Although he never bought any of the food, he ate and ate and watched tv — any tv — from afternoon on through the night until about three a.m. I would lie in my room at night hearing voices from B-movies of the past filtering through the hollow-core door. Anne Baxter, Bette Davis, Richard Widmark, Glenn Ford, Andy Devine — oldies that I had to strain to identify, like a livingroom full of long-last relatives. I fell asleep nervous from the effort and dreamed in black and white, odd little scenario dreams that all reminded me of when Bette Davis went blind in the garden in *Dark Victory,* the movie where a rich woman's husband and friends lie to her about her having brain cancer; they tell her there's nothing wrong until it's too late. Finally I threw Robert and Bette out on their collective ears.

The next guy, Steven, was there only two months. He told me he was a hard worker, a car salesman at Dupree Chevrolet. "I can sell anyone," he said. What he didn't mention was his fanatical religious bent and his thirty odd friends who met in my livingroom three times a week for group prayer. They were always there; I used to come home late from the bookstore and

have to step carefully through them, all sitting around on the floor thick as beached elephant seals on a bare rock island. One evening as I high-stepped over the bodies on the way to my room, someone grabbed the cuff of my pants. "Paul," he cried, "you have a good Christian name. Don't sit alone in your room when we're all out here. Join us in Fellowship!" They all turned and looked at me expectantly. Someone else grabbed the other pant leg. I was trapped, knee-deep in worshipers calling for me to join them, reaching for me. I panicked. I thought of voodoo zombies, *Night of the Living Dead,* and I felt if I were pulled down into that mass of arms and hands, I'd disappear. So yanking each leg away as I went, I struggled across the room yelling, "Let me through! Let me by!" Steven moved out to live with another believer that week, and I was stuck paying the whole rent again.

When I made a point of asking my third prospective roommate, Chuck, about his religious ties, he just laughed. "That's the last thing I'd do," he said. In fact I saw almost nothing of him for a long while. There were only evidences of his occasional occupation. I'd find wet cigarette butts in empty drink glasses, sour, wet towels on the bathroom floor, dirty plates on the counter, notes and checks stuck to the frig. He was there and gone before I came home in the evening, and he was still asleep when I left in the morning. I liked the solitude, but it irritated me to never see the owner of the dirty socks I had to kick out of my way in the hall and in the bathroom and to have to empty ashtrays when I don't smoke. I'd leave him notes about it but there never was any answer. Then after work one evening I saw him walking ahead of me in a crowd on a downtown street corner. He didn't see me at all, and for some reason I just followed him. I saw him enter a windowless place with a single sign reading 'Adult Entertainment' over the door and a poster tacked up that told me the cover charge and that Tuesdays were 'Amateur Night.' I'd been in topless places before and didn't much like them, places where everybody loses their dignity and acts stupid. And I hated to lose five dollars, but I was curious about Chuck. I stood outside for a while and finally my curiosity won out. After my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I realized that the customers were mostly all women, not men, like the places I'd seen. I'd read about these places, clubs for women, but I couldn't have imagined it. The chaos was unbelievable. The room was suffocating with people, laughing, yelling, and screaming. All the women sitting around the stage area shoved and pushed, doing a kind of wave cheer like spectators do at baseball games. I put my hands over my ears and was starting to give up on Chuck and leave just as a group standing in front of me sat down offering me a view of the stage. A man's button-down shirt floated off to the right of the stage where dozens of women grabbed for it in the air, and when I traced the shirt's trajectory back to the stage, I found Chuck, on stage, coatless, tieless, shirtless, bathed in red and blue spotlights. He was in the process of throwing his socks out into the crowd — probably the same socks I'd been kicking around the apartment all week. I felt such shame for him. I sneaked out, hiding my face, grateful for the dark. When he left two weeks later, I had a nightmare vision of him moving permanently into that place, with the noise and the screaming, always on stage throwing an endless supply of haberdashery out into the void.

Living in a city is uncertain; I know that. I look around even this train car, for instance, and see one or two people who possibly aren't right, don't have a grip on what's real, where they are: for one, the man with the knitted hat pulled down close to his face who is mumbling into his lap, talking to his hands held out empty in front of him; or, the woman in front of me who is so asleep that her head bounces against the side window every time the train takes a corner but who doesn't move or notice. You just have to be careful. Even then nothing's sure. You can watch what you eat, where you shop, control who knows where you work, and unlist your phone — and still the very moon at night is like a yellow crime light and the shadows are full of movement.

When I found out Virgil needed a place to live, I flipped to the list in the back of *How to Live With a Stranger* and worked up ten questions. Considering my past record, I wanted some assurance this time, although I found it hard to ask personal questions like:

4) When do you sleep?
5) Do you have habits that are out of the ordinary?
6) What are your ten favorite things to do?

So I was careful. I knew I wouldn't be stuck with the rent because Virgil worked for me. And I couldn't detect any bad habits. At first just his absence of bad habits made me happy, and I liked having someone to talk to, someone who read. Reading had been Virgil's first five favorite things. The next several were training his parakeet, Juliette, but I figured who's perfect? It was like waiting for the other shoe to fall, though, and eventually, I began to notice oddities about him. For instance, I never saw him at home during the week. He wasn't gone like Chuck, he was asleep. He was in bed asleep before I got home in the evening, even his bird's cage was covered by 7:30 p.m. And he woke at 5:30 a.m. and quietly left, every day, although we didn't open the bookstore until 8:30. Where was he going? He never had a telephone call, never received any mail. All those friends and no one ever came over?

Everyone liked him at work, but unlike anyone else, he never complained about carrying heavy boxes, working after hours, missing lunch. He was perfectly happy every day and would probably have swept the floor if someone had asked him. It was unnatural. It worried me to see a full-witted person, an intelligent person, content in these circumstances. So one day I took him to lunch with me at Wendy's.

"Virg," I said, "do you have any family anywhere?" I'd begun to suspect that he was an eccentric millionaire or a lost heir.

He told me no, he was all alone.

"Look Virg," I said, "have you thought about where you're going in life? Career-wise, that is?"

He looked at me strangely over the top of his hamburger.

"You don't want to shelf books all your life," I said. "Have you thought about management or night school? We could work something out about your hours."

"I like what I do," he said. "It's pleasant and I have time to read."

I told him he had to think past today if he wanted to make something of himself. "You want to be somebody someday, don't you," I said. I told him to use me as an example. I worked hard, but I was going to be somebody. "Someday, I might own a chain of bookstores," I said.

Virgil drank a long sip of iced tea and began to give me a lot of old cliches. He told me that everyone was always someone.

"I know that," I said, exasperated with him already.

And then he began to tell me about St. Lawrence, of all things, — the man not the city or the river. Virg said St. Lawrence achieved sainthood while washing dishes because he realized the worthiness of the occupation. I couldn't believe it; yet on one hand, I could see Virgil doing this: I could see him up to his elbows in a dishpan with soap bubbles in his beard, happy like he was shelving books at work. Great, I thought, another religious nut.

"Oh, Virgil, for God's sake," I said. "This is the 1980s. Maybe I ought to tell you about St. Andrew Carnegie. A man needs a Purpose. 'The Secret to Success Is Constancy to Purpose.' "

He just cocked his head to the left and smiled at me. It was that long, sincere, wholly disarming smile that he has, the one I guess that made me hire him. I gave up arguing and pulled out two books that I'd brought along: *A Guide to Personal Happiness* and *What Color Is Your Parachute?: A Guide to Career Change in Mid-Life.*

Days later sitting with Virgil in the stockroom, he said he enjoyed *What Color Is Your Parachute?* because the cover reminded him of hot-air balloons and of riding in them up above the treetops and roofs in the flypath of the birds.

"Have you ever seen hot-air balloons going over at night?" he asked. "You hear the rush of released air just over your head, but all you can see of it is the little fire below the basket, like a star fallen just so close and no more."

Right then I decided he was hopeless. Hot-air balloons! Fine, I thought, go ahead and be a simpleton. Look up into the clouds while stepping off the cliff, like the Fool Card in the Tarot deck. I don't have patience for someone who won't improve himself. Pearls before swine.

I can feel the train shaking from side to side here, rattling as it climbs up the highest section of the railway tracks. The tracks here curve through the air like a cantilevered bridge, rising over whole blocks of houses, the old railyard, fire-blackened factories, and far off to the right, the old brick and stone cemetery with weather-teared monuments of guardian angels. That's where they used to bury people who had made something of themselves. I think about what my own monument might say one day. People say behind my back that I couldn't enjoy myself if my life depended on it, but they're wrong. I'm working to ensure my future, for if I don't do it, who will. Virgil, probably, would tell me to look at the lilies of the field, or something like that, but I've noticed that lilies of the field don't live very long. Remembering Virgil, I stand up to see if he's getting ready for the next stop or the last one after this. He's still sitting at rest, directly across from the advertising poster for the rail line that reads, "It's Smarta to Ride MARTA."

I finally realized that shelving books might be just a good cover for some other line of work, something not so legitimate, if better-paying. I've heard about mobsters who work as restaurant cooks and waiters until the heat is off, and government witnesses who are given new, obscure lives. Maybe he was a bigamist or a jewel thief or a drug dealer needing a front. In which case, what would happen to me? Who would I wake up facing one morning? I needed to know.

I can't understand why Diane can't see the inconsistencies in his character. She's a high school music teacher who claims to have seen it all. She's very serious and high-minded. The first time I took her out, we went to the symphony, and she explained the entire program to me in advance, historically and musically. Her brown hair is fixed in beads and bangles and braids, and during the music she kept beat with her chin, causing all the braids to sway back and forth like a beaded curtain. At the door of her apartment when I tried to kiss her goodnight, she put her right palm against my chest and held me at arms length. "Go home now," she told me; she's very direct. But she went out with me again. The only book I've worked up the courage to give her was *Understanding Opera* by Beverly Sills, and I held my breath until I was sure she liked it.

Our third date was on a Sunday afternoon and Virgil was at home. I'd told her about Virgil and I wanted her to meet him so I would have someone to talk over my suspicions with. I introduced them and Diane offered him her hand to shake and said she'd heard a lot about him. Looking at her and holding her hand, any normal guy would have made a joke or said something like 'the truth is better than the rumors,' but not Virgil. He introduced her to his parakeet. He lifted the wire door of the cage and put in his hand, and the little yellow and green bird came out calmly and walked up Virgil's shirtsleeve to his shoulder. Virgil then showed Diane how to put her finger under the bird's belly just above the feet. When she did, the little thing hopped onto Diane's finger and she held it out in front of her, giggling. Virgil then stroked its back feathers with his thumb and chirped to it. He looked ridiculous to me, bending over this little bird and chirping. Then he took it from Diane's finger and showed her how he'd trained it to climb up and down the outside of the cage like a ladder, and he made it repeat sounds after him that he claimed were words. Diane meanwhile laughed and clapped her hands like a six year old. Later, all she would say to me about it was, "He's a nice man. Leave him alone."

In *Your Anger, How to Live With and Without It,* Albert Ellis suggests that a person get the true facts of a situation before making any emotional decisions. This is so you won't do anything rash for the wrong reason, and I believe in that. So a couple of days ago during that odd, two-hour period between Virgil's leaving the apartment and his coming to work, I checked through his room. There were no guns or bags of white powder or suitcases of money, but that really doesn't mean anything. It made me especially suspicious of that briefcase of his. In fact besides his few clothes and a number of books, the only thing there was bags and bags of birdseed. How much can one parakeet eat, I wondered?

The next day I got up early enough to watch him leave. I followed him just far enough to see that he and his briefcase take the subway every morning at 6 a.m., and are not, as I thought perhaps they were, picked up around the corner by a purple-windowed black limo or a silver Mercedes with spiked hubcaps.

He is standing up at last. He must be getting off at the next stop. I feel a grim satisfaction knowing that in a few minutes, if I'm careful, I'll know what he does, what his secret is. As the train pulls in, Virgil puts on his overcoat over his clothes and picks up his briefcase. Watching that he doesn't see me, I blend into a crowd of people, keeping them between us but always keeping him in sight. So far, so good.

Outside the station the morning city is as fresh as if it had been newly washed overnight. The sky in the squares between the tall buildings is gray and the mother-of-pearl color of right before sunrise. Even the streets look trim this time of day because they are not crowded yet, and I can see empty sidewalk and curb for blocks. The newness of this familiar place makes me slow my pace just a little so that I have to jog to keep up with Virgil. At one turn I think he's going to see me and I stay behind the corner of the building he's passed, but he doesn't turn around. He is walking in the direction of Central City Park. As I see Virgil round the street corner nearest the park, I hear a loud shirring and humming sound above me. I stop and look up, shading my eyes with my hand from the sunshine slanting through the open spaces between buildings to the east.

From the flat roofs and window ledges of the buildings all around me, the birds of the city, the pigeons and the sparrows and grackles, are leaving their perches and sailing down towards the park in flocks. I watch them a second, dozens of them above me, like the sky was breaking apart into dark, living bits, and I lose track of Virgil. Realizing this, I run around the last corner, and there he is ahead of me, standing in the center of the park on a grassy knoll, with his briefcase open at his feet. It is full of brown paper bags.

All around him birds descend, gliding in from all directions, circling down around him in wide arcs. He is throwing out handfuls of seed from one of the bags. He is in the center of a cyclone of birds that expands and expands until it seems there will be more birds than grains of seed in the bags. The sound their wings are making is amplified now, an incessant, eerie sound like steel brushes on a row of drums. I stare and stare. Birdseed, Virgil, only birdseed! Pigeons, and landing all around his feet. They sit on his outstretched arms, on his shoulders, his head. I can almost feel all of those wings, like reaching hands touching his face, brushing his hair. A hard, cold shiver begins in my scalp and spreads down my back, imagining him being at the center, the focus of all that need, all that hunger, those beaks and claws. Why would anyone?

— Katherine W. Teel

BIDING TIME

Lucas leaned forward, touched his Reeboked feet to the floor, and stopped rocking. He unhooked his cane from the arm of the chair and rose, straightening up gradually with a groan. "I'm going to check the thermostat. The doctor said you *had* to stay warm," he said. "Can I get you anything?"

"I could use a new heart," Lily replied, pretending she was giving it due consideration. Her wheel chair faced the picture window.

"Anything else?" The expression in Lucas' ancient face never changed. The corners of his mouth were permanently tucked in, in mock exasperation, when he dealt with his wife.

"One miracle at a time," Lily said, continuing to stare out the window. "It'd probably kill me having it transplanted." She sighed. "Forget the heart, hear?"

Their picture window faced true north. The view out that window was always in light. Never silhouetted, never illusory. During the day it changed in color as the sun moved across the sky. Today's sun was hidden behind ashen snow clouds that skirted the earth.

Lucas picked his way through the crowded living-dining room, choked with oversized furniture left over from their old house on another part of the farm. He stopped at the fireplace to give the mantel clock its daily winding, another care of his. They had been in this place, a brick all-electric ranch, for thirty years next March. Next, he walked down the hall past the spare bedroom used mostly nowadays to store cast-off wheel chairs, intravenous thing-a-mabobs, bedpans and such. The kids hardly every stayed overnight, choosing to drive the ten miles back to town. He squinted at the thermostat and moved it up from 73 degrees to 74 degrees. The furnace clicked on. "Now then!" he said, an uncharacteristic tone of satisfaction in his voice. He returned to the vigil at the picture window.

Lucas found Lily staring straight ahead. At nothing, as far as Lucas could tell. This happened more and more lately. She raised a bony finger to her lips. "Shhh!" she said. She was listening to something again. One of these days, he thought, she isn't going to snap out of it, either.

Lucas took out a cigarette and a kithen match from the pocket of his sweater. He smoothed out the towel on the seat of the rocking chair and sat. He had a Mason jar lid for an ashtry which he rested on the padded arm of his chair. The touch of one Reebok set the chair to rocking. He allowed himself one smoke in the morning and another after their lunch and nap. He

struck the match, touched it to the end of the cigarette and released smoke in slow surreptitious puffs. Lily, suddenly called back to the present, looked at him, sniffed and frowned. But she said nothing. He smiled sheepishly at her. She can still register disapproval, chuckled Lucas, like *she* was kind of a paragon. The mantel clock ticked away. He fanned the air.

The pond outside the window was frozen over. Icicles had formed along the lower part of the TV satellite dish. The sky was the color of cement and lowering in the distance. Ice sparkled on the trees and the briers in the bleak light. There was sparse traffic on the road. The two ducks which lived on the pond were backed into a corner of the water by the ice, hemmed in their habitat by an unyielding and still encroaching storm. They had managed to maintain a shrinking territory by swimming about and flapping their wings in the wintry water. Their complaints carried through the cold plate glass to Lily and Lucas.

Every day now they sat before the plate glass together, the ticking clock to their backs, watching the traffic come and go. About three miles to the east the pavement gave out and the road became gravel. To the west was town, a good ten miles. Mostly there were pickup trucks, an occasional car and the postman's red, white and blue vehicle. Lucas recognized just about all of them and he figured Lily did too for she would stir uneasily when an unfamiliar car appeared. Like the time the monument salesman drove up the lane leading from the road to their house. He and Lucas had done their business in the kitchen, out of hearing. From the catalogue, Lucas had ordered a double headstone that had a lily carved at the top. On the right hand side it would say Lily Hunter Hancock, born 1905, died 19–, and on his side, Lucas Edward Hancock, born 1904, died 19–.

Lucas didn't much like making such arrangements. He felt sneaky. But she was beyond making decisions of any kind now. She seemed to have moved ahead of him this last fateful year; further along, the doctor had said, musing over her x-ray. That disturbing shadow he saw lived within Lily. He compared her to a powder-keg, in his inured way. Her time was near. But he didn't say *when*. So they sat and watched and waited together. And Lucas worked things out, on his own.

Lucas turned his head and looked closely at the meditating Lily, raising his head to engage the middle parts of his trifocals. She wore glasses too, over her watery eyes that seemed deeper set, more blurred today than he remembered. Probably it was the medicine. Her skin was paper thin and sallow, drawn tightly across her nose. While the rest of her features had altered her nose remained the way it had been, long and thin, sharply honed and gracefully flared. Its sprinkling of freckles was still there. Lucas smiled. There was a time when he thought she kept her nose in his business a mite too much. He reached over and patted her bone thin hand. She jerked, startled.

As a bridegroom, Lucas had found it hard sharing. He had been an only child and accustomed to keeping his own counsel. But Lily was the youngest of seven. The runt, Lucas called her. She didn't know what privacy was. The joy of her cured his loneliness and his business became her business. Soon, she would go into the sweet hereafter, leaving him again to loneliness. He

turned his head away, bewildered. He did not want to contend with such thoughts.

"What do you want for lunch? We've got some of that Gerber's banana stuff you like, and there's applesauce." He pulled out his pocket watch and held it close to his eyes. "It's going on eleven thirty," he said.

She looked around at him. Her eyes behind her glasses were sharply focused. "I *know* it!" she said mimicking impatience.

"What are you so het up about?" They both enjoyed a little set-to, Lucas especially, because it meant Lily had worked her way back through to the here and now.

"You're about to forget the medicine!" Lily said.

"Yours?"

"No, fool. Yours!"

"Who you calling a fool?"

Lily started to cough and rattle. "There's no one in here but you."

"See! You made yourself sick, taking on."

"Little you care."

"That's all the thanks I get?" He pulled a long face.

"You can't wait to get me in the ground...you and your tombstone. You think I don't know what goes on."

"That's monument's for me. I just threw you in there 'cause it's cheaper."

"You'll be heading for town, too...soon's as I'm laid down. I saw you looking at your one good suit, shining your shoes."

"You're a sly one. 'Spose to be napping, not prying."

"I know you only too well. How's that florist woman?"

"Lily, that was years ago."

"I'll bet I'll have more flowers at my funeral. It'll be embarrassing. The tackiest funeral in the history of Trigg County."

"Mean as you are, won't a soul be there to see."

Lily coughed again and Lucas fetched her a glass of water. "You're scrappy today."

"I like a good fight. I just wish I were up to more." She drank the water and subsided into the wheel chair. "Banana," she said.

"Huh?" Lucas frowned. "Oh!"

Lucas warmed two jars in a sauce pan on the electric stove. He got out a TV tray and hobbled over to set it in front of Lily. Then he balanced the bananas, spoons, napkins, and both sets of medicine on a tray and eased over to the picture window, pulling his chair around to face his wife. He poured a tablespoon of Lily's medicine and raised it to her lips. She made a face. "Close your eyes and open your mouth," Lucas recited.

"Say please," said Lily and batted her eyes.

"Please — god-damn it!"

Lily stuck out her tongue and then withdrew it just as Lucas ladled the medicine. The brown sticky liquid drooled down her chin. "For crying out loud!" she exclaimed.

Lucas grabbed a paper napkin and started to wipe. "I've seen better acting three year olds. What's gotten into you?"

"I'm still mad about that florist hussy. You never did tell me what happened."

"Of course, I told you. Your mind's a thing of the past."

"That's possible," Lily said and pondered a minute. "Well tell me again."

"Will you eat?" Lucas bargained.

"Uhmmmm," agreed Lily.

Lucas started to spoon, first medicine, then bananas, taking a lick for himself now and then.

"Well, I was only thinking of you, Lily, so to speak. You do understand that, now don't you? I went in there that Saturday to order some flowers for you after Eddie was born. The sign said they delivered anywhere within a ten mile range."

"I'll bet," Lily said between spoonfuls.

"So she said she knew who I was, that she came from down at Calednia and she remembered what a handful I was growing up."

Lily licked her lips. "You are *making* it up!" she said, encouraging Lucas.

"Anyway she said since you had been out of commission for so long that maybe there was something she could do other than sell flowers."

"Have you ever!"

"I could have played dumb, you know, but that wouldn't have been very cool, so I said to her, 'You just show me, little lady, what you got in mind.' No sooner had I said that than she locked the front door on that little flower shop, smack in the middle of the day, and she led me upstairs to where she lived...over her shop, and she took off her clothes carefully and laid down on that iron bed of hers and she says, 'Farmer Hancock, it is time to till your garden.' "

She said that, huh? Imagine!"

"You wanted to know."

"Homely as you are! Poor woman! What'd you say?"

" 'Don't mind if I do!' " Lucas' eyes twinkled.

"So obliging!"

"But, the problem was, she didn't know all the right moves. She kept leaping around, and scratching with those fingernails and biting. Altogether unsatisfactory. I was lucky to get away with my life. I couldn't wait to get back home to you."

"Awwww! You poor thing."

"Here! Finish eating this stuff."

"And you swear on a stack of Bibles you have never seen her since?"

"She calls *all the time*. But shoot, what do I need with her? I got you!"

"Farmer Hancock!" Lily let out a hoot. "In all my born days!"

"Don't talk with your mouth full! Honestly!"

After lunch, Lucas rolled Lilly into the bedroom and pulled down the shades. She napped sitting up in the chair and he stretched out on their bed with his clothes on. Lily made him turn back the counterpane first. Lucas felt kind of dizzy. He had tasted some of Lily's medicine off her spoon. He

pondered a minute. Maybe it didn't mix with the stuff he was taking for high blood pressure. The mantel clock sounded like it was ticking inside his brain.

Lucas chuckled. Funny how that story always pleased Lily. Even after fifty years. Lucas scratched his bald head. He couldn't remember if the story was true...or not.

Lily made a sound. It startled Lucas awake. His head ached. He slipped his legs over the side of the bed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He looked over at Lily. She was rigid with attention. Her finger tips agitated the blanket Lucas had thrown over her legs, her face straining at a sound he could not hear. "A car," she whispered, breathlessly, "in the lane."

"I'll have a look," Lucas said and picked up his cane.

He moved as quickly as his hip would allow. The lane was in full view from the picture window. No one was there. In fact, no one was on the county road that passed the property. The view was of nothing but deserted fields full of winter stubble and the high ground lined with leafless hardwoods and cedars. The dark clouds lay in long strips that hovered overhead. More snow, and soon.

Lucas returned to the bedroom for Lily. "Nothing but one of your fancies," he said. She didn't respond, just stared off to the corner of the room. He brushed her white hair back from her face and stuffed several kleenex up her sleeve where she liked them. Even as he set the wheel chair in motion, she didn't move, only tightened her grip on the arms, her eyes fixed on the corner. This was another of the low moments Lucas experienced now. It frightened him when she seemed beyond his reach. He felt left alone...with his fear. He looked about him at the living room as they passed through to the picture window. The ceiling seemed so low and oppressive, the furniture hulking, crowding. He couldn't imagine getting through the long hours of the day in that room by himself. Maybe he'd sell this place and get out.

They took up their watch again. He felt heat behind his eyes and he wiped them on his sleeve.

Lucas smoked and Lily revived, grimacing at the tobacco smells, but offering no conversation. That was all right with Lucas as long as he could stay in touch with her. There was little coming and going on the road. Their neighbor, Althea Wilson, carried her little girl to a piano lesson and went back for her in an hour. That meant it was Tuesday. A pickup truck with a load of firewood from the crossroads general store went down toward the Wilsons and returned, in twenty minutes, empty. The yellow school bus passed at three forty-five loaded with county children but there were none to offload within sight of Lucas and Lily. After that there was no traffic. The snow had begun and visibility diminished. The road was soon lost from sight. Lily dozed fitfully and Lucas turned his attention to her, watching the regularity of her breathing and a pulse that fluttered in her neck. She moved her mouth like she was tasting something and then, suddenly, she began to breathe at an alarming rate and her hands gripped tightly the chair's arms. Her eyes popped open and she stared straight out the window. There was

nothing on the road.

"What're you carrying on about?" Lucas asked, frightened.

"There's a car in the lane."

"No, there isn't...Wait!" Lucas stopped rocking. Along the road, coming out of the west, strong headlights lit up the snowfall. They slowed at the entrance, turning their blinding glare on the small ranch house, and a large unfamiliar black car with snow tires fishtailed up the icy lane to the front of the house.

Lily's hands were all aflutter. Lucas took them in his and shushed her. "I'll see who that is." He rose. His hip hurt after sitting so long. He made his way to the front door, arriving just as the kitchen door bell rang. Lily whimpered. "I'm coming," called Lucas and caned his way from the front of the house through the kitchen.

Mr. Fowler, the monument salesman, stood in the light from the open door. "I was bringing you your signed contract, Mr. Hancock. And a drawing with the wording so you can flyspeck it for mistakes. Ya'll take care, okay?"

At five thirty by the ticking clock, Lucas fixed their supper, more Gerbers, and dosed out the medicine for each of them. He rolled Lily in front of the TV, picked up the remote control and dragged a chair over beside her. They watched the local news first, mostly for the crop reports and crop prices, and the weather, which was due to worsen.

"Don't see how it can," said Lucas, looking out the window at the driving snow reflected in the flood lights. Lily didn't answer.

Then they watched Peter Jennings all the way through. "Do you want to see Wheel of Fortune or Entertainment Tonight?" Lucas spoke louder so as to be heard above the frantic advertising.

"Entertainment Tonight," said Lily, and snorted.

"What's so funny?" asked Lucas.

"Oh nothing."

"Come on."

"We're going to watch Vanna White and you know it."

Lucas switched the TV with the remote. Vanna was wearing low cut black. Lucas' headache seemed worse after supper. His medicine must not agree with him, he figured. There appeared to be two Vannas on the screen.

"What do you suppose heaven's going to be like, anyhow?" asked Lily, continuing to gaze at the TV set.

"You're sure that's where we're headed?"

"I'm sure. You see, I forgive you for all your transgressions."

"It's not *you* I'm worried about."

"Oh, He forgives you too."

"You've been in touch?"

"Who do you think I'm talking to all the time?"

"I thought you were cat napping."

"About heaven..."

"How can it be any better than this?"

"This? This isn't living!"

"Sure it is. It's being together pure and simple. You and me. In heaven we might get separated somehow." Lucas gulped. "Let's talk about something else entirely."

A laugh track on the TV roared...

Lucas got Lily into bed. He fixed her pillow the way she liked it and pulled the cover up around her shoulders but she wanted her hands out tonight. "Do you want the blanket on 3 or 4?" he asked. "It's in the teens out there."

"3's fine," she said.

He gave her the bedtime dose of medicine without accident. I think she's getting better, he encouraged himself. He found and took a couple of extra-strength Tylenols for his headache. It was strange. With everything else he withstood he almost never had a headache. Then he took his medicine. While he was swallowing the capsules, he had the feeling that he had absentmindedly taken a dose and forgotten it. Oh well, who cares, he thought.

He had to sit on the toilet lid to take his pants off and slip into his pajamas. His pale white legs didn't look like the legs he remembered in the years gone by. Varicose veins stood out against the crinkly ivory skin. He pulled the pajamas on, took his cane and stood. His flannel robe hung from the hook on the back of the door. He donned that and pulled the cord tight, looping it once. He squinted at his reflection in the mirror over the basin as he reached for the light chain. The pupils of his eyes were small. It must be the headache, he decided.

He pulled the chain and the bathroom was dark. The kids are going to want to uproot me when she's gone, Lucas predicted. They're going to want me to move to town. He held on to the basin. What would I do in town? Be in the way, is what. I haven't got many choices left, have I? Must study how to get out of that. His head hurt worse with the thoughts. Lucas tapped the side of the toilet and then the tub to locate himself in the dark. He turned the knob of the door and walked out into the dimly lit bedroom.

The thermostat was set on 74. The arctic air outside seeped through the windows and the floors and added an edge to the temperature in the room. The furnace kept coming on. The room smelled of clean sheets and Lysol and heavy, dark, sticky tonics. The telephone sat on the bedside table, its list of emergency numbers handy.

Lily raised a hand. "I want you to sing to me," she said.

"Not tonight, Lily. I don't feel like it."

"Please, pretty please."

"Imagine! A coy eighty-four!"

"I'll let you kiss me if you'll sing." For a minute, she was young again.

Lucas sat on the edge of the bed, scotching himself with his cane. He took Lily's hand in his free one, and cleared his throat. Without any embarrassment, he began to sing, quietly and trembly at first.

"They asked me how I kneeeew,
My true love was trueeee.
I, of course, replied

Something here inside
Cannot beee deni..i..i..ied."

Lily looked away. She seemed attentive but peaceful. Lucas continued, gathering heart:

"Theeey said someday you'll find
All who love are bliiind.
When your heart's on fire
You must realize
Smoke gets in your eyes."

The last line caught in Lucas' throat. He squeezed Lily's hand. "How 'bout that kiss."

'Finish the song," she said and continued to stare off into the corner of the room. Squeaky with emotion, Lucas sang:

"So I chaffed and then I gaily laughed,
Lucas wondered if the future held any laughs.
To think they could douuuu..bt my love.
Yet today, my love has flown awaaay,
I am with-ouuut my love.
Lucas' voice lost resonance.
Now, laughing friends deride,
Tears I can-not hiiide,
So I smile and say,
When a lovely flame dies,
Smoke gets in your eyes."

The last line was but a wet whisper.

Lily slept. A tear ran down her freckled nose. Lucas kissed her hand and returned it to lay atop the other. He walked around to the other side of their bed and got under the cover. The digital clock said 08:45 PM. His throat felt tight with emotion. The dizziness had returned.

He slept for an hour. The clock now said 09:45 PM. Either his dream or his headache woke him up, he couldn't decide. As cold as it was he was damp with sweat under his chin and yet his hands were freezing. He didn't dare take more medicine. Maybe Lily would need him and she wouldn't be able to wake him. She seemed quiet enough though, no murmuring like sometimes. He felt for his cane and got out of bed. He hated to turn on the light and disturb Lily. In the bathroom, he closed the door and pulled the chain for the light. He fumbled in the medicine cabinet and found what he was looking for. A sip of water and back to bed. How cold his feet felt. It must be the floor.

The electricity went out at 10:23 PM. The electric blanket soon became only a light covering. Lucas and Lily's breath came thinly into the chilling air. Lucas dreamed on vividly, his body loaded with drugs. He felt they were out in the cold, he and Lily, standing barefoot on freshly dug ground. There were lights turned on them, the kind hunters use to blind trapped animals. Lily began to cry out with a strangled sound. He reached over and touched her in his dream and found they were no longer standing on dirt but lying on a cold

bed. She whispered, "Shhh! There's a car in the lane."

Lucas rose and walked around the bed, unaided. He threw the covers off Lily and held her chair for her. She sat up. She touched her hand to her hair, then tightened the neck of her bed jacket. "Is it time? How do I look?" she asked.

"Pretty," he said, and held out his arm for her.

She didn't need it. She turned and sat lightly in the wheel chair.

Lucas rolled her without upset through the dark house to the picture window. She reached up and took his hand. His heart thrilled with anticipation.

In the distance you could barely make out shimmering headlights poking their way into the driving snow. There was no horizon. The car, no more than a mirage, moved slowly, hampered by the weather. It was too far away and the visibility too poor to be recognizable. As it neared the turn into Lucas and Lily's lane it slowed and adjusted the headlights to a considerate dim. Making the turn, the car moved at a gradual and stately pace toward the house. It was not a car Lucas nor Lily knew. Lily gasped and held tightly to Lucas' cold hand, pressing it to her cheek. Lucas tried hard to swallow and the dizziness returned. The car stopped in front of the window. It was like no car they had ever seen in these parts, a stretch limousine, pristine white, with smoky impenetrable windows, a TV aerial, and tiny flags fluttering on the fenders. There were many doors down the length of the car. The windshield wipers moved rhythmically in a mesmerizing motion. The driver's door opened and out stepped a tall, grey haired man, clean shaven, dressed in navy blue. From this distance he looked like Jimmy Stewart, Lily's favorite actor, a man she felt great confidence in. Jimmy had no overcoat against the snow storm. He looked up into the picture window, grinned winsomely, and made a small gesture of greeting.

Lucas' heart pounded in his chest and in his head. Here it was! This was what the doctor had tried to prepare him for. Yet he wasn't ready. What was he to do? His shoulders shook.

Jimmy Stewart went to the door on the passenger side of the car. He opened the big white door and looked up at the window, gesturing welcome. He looked the soul of patience. There was no hurry. Lily put her hands on the arms of the chair and started to rise. She was laughing and crying at the same time. She turned to Lucas. They kissed and hugged, his fearful tears wetting her cheeks, his bravery deserting him in gurgling sobs. He could not let go.

And Jimmy looked the second time at the window. He smiled knowingly. He read the situation with his actorly intuition, and improvised.

He stepped back and with his right hand, he opened a second door. A light came on inside the car.

Again, Jimmy gestured.

You could see that there was plenty room within.

- John Newton Wall

PARTICIPANTS

Josephine Jacobsen, poet and fiction writer. She has published nine volumes of poetry and two collections of short stories, has edited an anthology of American women poets, served as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, collaborated on two studies of modern drama, and acted with a theatrical group in Baltimore. Her book, *The Sisters: New and Selected Poems,* won the Lenore Marshall/*Nation* Prize in 1988. This is her seventh Writers' Festival appearance.

Alfred Uhry, playwright and screenwriter, Atlanta native. He has composed lyrics for several stage musicals and has been nominated for Tony and Drama Desk awards (for the book and lyrics to *The Robber Bridegroom*). His play, *Driving Miss Daisy,* won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and his screenplay is the vehicle for the current cinematic performances of Morgan Freeman and Jessica Tandy.

Memye Curtis Tucker, poet and teacher. Her work has appeared in *Poem, Southern Poetry Review, Confrontation,* and other journals, and her chapbook, *Holding Patterns,* appeared in 1988. She has won the *Chattahoochee Review* Prize for poetry, and she is joint winner of the 1989 Georgia Poetry Circuit Prize.

Jane Zanca, fiction writer, essayist, teacher. Her short stories and essays have been published in *The Chattahoochee Review, Crescent Review, Allegheny Review,* and *Georgia State University Review,* and she has written for many national magazines on consumer and medical topics.

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