"Donkey Hammer"| A collection of short fiction and nonfiction

Rose M. Bunch
The University of Montana

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"DONKEY HAMMER"
A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION AND NONFICTION

by

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Donkey Hammer

Not like I care, but Teabag doesn't seem like much of a nickname. Sounds kind of queer. He comes back from Grand Isle talking about hammering the big rig donkeys off the Louisiana coast – and me and Duff and Bad-Toe Pat sit there and stare at him like we know what a rig donkey is for a minute. All you hear is the meat sizzling on the grill and Duff stifling a belch in Teabag's back yard, which is littered with outboard motor parts and the houses of long dead dogs. We keep sipping our beer, not letting on, trying not to get too curious about the ocean or anything. Then he asks us if we know what a rig donkey is. I snort foam and shrug like who gives a shit, but Duff jumps right in. Uh-uh, he says, and Teabag does that nodding thing while he's flipping the burgers. I look at Duff and roll my eyes, but he's staring at Teabag's broad back. Then Teabag turns around and starts in to lecturing us, waving his spatula, saying they call them rig donkeys cause they're as big as goddamn donkeys and swim around those oil platforms off the coast. When he gets going his wife Brenda, who's always hanging out with her sister Glenda, the pretty one, walks to the kitchen door and stares out at him for a minute. She just stares, not smiling, picking at the side of her mouth.

Teabag takes a long look at Brenda staring at him and says, "Hey, I'm over it, so why aren't you?"
Brenda cracks the screen enough to flick her cigarette into the yard and grab another beer out of the cooler before she disappears back in the house. Teabag flexes his sunburned arms and talks about strapping on the tank and breathing through a regulator and carrying a big-ass spear gun and hammering the shit out of those snappers down there. Didn’t know what happened to them. Didn’t know I was on their tails he says. He hammers the shit out of all kinds of fish every year, and occasionally he’ll mention hammering the shit out of his wife or one of the women he works with. See that, he’ll say, when he’s pointing at some little split-tail in high heels. I cut that.

“Well, where the fuck are they then?” I say. Everybody nods. We can hear Brenda and Glenda laughing about something inside, kinda grunty and mean. They’ll be moving on to shots of Goldschlager soon. I’ve done a few of them with them once or twice, talking up Glenda while she smoked and smirked at me. And right then Teabag pulls a wad of pictures out of his back pocket and flings them in my lap like gristle to an old dog under the table. Barely even looks at me. I thumb through them and see one after another of big, bright red fish lined up on a boat dock like a string of showgirls, Teabag crouching behind them grinning like he’s fucked every one of them. Duff and Bad-Toe wait their turn a little too eagerly to see the evidence.

“They’re in the freezer,” he said. “We’ll have fresh snapper all year long.”

Damn man, we say. Trying to keep it down. But that’s Teabag for you. He’s always the one hammering the shit out of everything.

On the gutting line at Tyson I’m the assistant foreman. Teabag is the top man, so
he gets to tell who to clean up what when the machine goes haywire and starts spraying chicken blood around like a horror movie. Duff ain't much of anything, but Teabag got him a job keeping the line workers straight, and he doesn't mind us making fun of his teeth. He's only thirty-two and already wearing partials that don't fit too good.

"We got wild chicken blood down there boys!" Teabag says, and laughs, spraying his fingers out and rolling his eyes. And we laugh too, even though we got to stick around and make sure the Mexicans clean it up right. Teabag says you got to stay on top of them, fire one occasionally for looking at you funny, and then find out which one has the most kids and slip them a box of frozen chicken finger miscuts in the parking lot. I get home late and don't have nobody to ask me why, so I can do the wild chicken blood routine, but sometimes I go and have a beer with Duff at the Blue Bonnet. Bad-Toe Pat meets us down there when he gets off at the sawmill. They call him Bad-Toe on account of him having a load of lumber dropped just so it about mashed off his big toe. For some reason it won't heal right and keeps pussing. Gives Pat something to talk about. We spit the peanut shells on the floor and talk about wild chicken blood, going fishing or doing something next weekend.

"Man, we're going to hammer the shit out of those white bass when they start running," Duff says.

"What do you think Teabag is going to do this weekend?" I say.

"Hammer the shit out of Brenda," Duff says.

"Do you think Glenda would be up for some hammering?" I say.

"Jimmy, best you could do is maybe a light spanking," Duff says. "And Glenda'd
be the one smacking your bare butt."

"I'd be spanking her ass with my dick," I say.

"You'd have a wide target then," Duff says.

Bad-Toe laughs at Duff's jokes, drinks, and mutters about his toe.

"They say it might have to come off," Pat says.

We drink until Bad-Toe forgets about his foot, until I'm convinced I've already
hammered Glenda, and then I go home and eat a can of Spaghettios and go to bed. Next
weekend I might call Glenda and see if she wants to go see a movie or something.

Nothing much different has happened since six months ago when Tyson
transferred me here from Siloam Springs. Jimmy, they said, due to your extraordinary
skills as a line operator, we are sending you to Daradanelle, Arkansas, chicken-gutting
capitol of the world, so you can expand your career. Seemed expansive at the time for a
guy with nothing but a high school diploma from Yellville, but I was wondering when I
was going to get a promotion to Teabag's level.

Sometimes me and Duff string up a trot line on the Arkansas River and go down
and see what is hanging on it to fry. When the wind is right you can't smell the chicken
litter too bad and the river is almost pretty, winding away into the hills. There might be
two or three fish and a dead snapping turtle on there. We never ask Bad-Toe Pat, cause
you got to be drunk if you're going to listen to toe-talk for too long. We never tell
Teabag much about it either. He would call us pussies for not going down and wrestling
the fish out of the water ourselves, like he said he did up on the Illinois Bayou, shoving
his arm up underneath ledges and into pipes underwater. I never seen him do it, even though Duff claimed he knew somebody who went to high school with Teabag who said he saw him catch one like that. Reached right in the thing's mouth, like he was fist-fucking its face. Mainly, Teabag would just take a 16-foot rod made for ocean fishing with a reel big as a paint bucket on it and 75-pound test line. Looked like you could drag the world in with it. I'd gone along with him once in his flatbed to the base of the Lake Dardanelle Lock and Dam on the Arkansas River. He'd stayed until three o'clock in the morning, tossing a weighted, baitless, treble hook into that water boiling out from the release valves, yanking it up hard over and over again until he was soaked with sweat. He shone in the dam lights trained at the water. I tried it a time or two, but my shoulders ached so I said I must a pulled something lifting weights. In between grunting with the rod and drinking beer, he philosphized at me while I sat eating Vienna Sausages and getting drunker.

"Why don't you ever get around to asking Glenda out?" he said. "She knows you're sweet on her. Just ask Brenda."

"I'm working up to it," I said. It wasn't any of Teabag's damn business, and I didn't like the idea of speculation going on about it.

Teabag kept jerking on that line, grinning, sending a shudder through the boat with each yank. He let out a slow, growling belch.

"Jimmy, the trick is in feeling the line," he said. "You got to finesse it a bit."

"That why you don't use no bait?"

"What the hell do I need bait for?" he said. "I'm smarter than a catfish. If you
ain't, you might as well quit."

The river smelled like the rotten crotch of the earth itself, all swirling with
bacteria and silt. After we ran out of beer I started to miss my bed. It was empty, but at
least it was soft. I threw the last of the Vienna Sausages far into the rumbling water and
shifted my sweaty ass on the metal bench. Just when I was about to break down and hint
about going home, Teabag's line caught so hard he almost lost his footing. Five minutes
later, a forty pound flathead lay in the bottom of the boat, wheezing and squeaking.

"See there," he said, "bait is all in the mind. If you need bait to catch a catfish,
you don't understand the fish. You don't know shit."

I just nodded and mumbled something about a state record as I stroked the
squirming cat with both hands, but Teabag said the state record on rod and reel was twice
this size. He didn't even take a picture of it when we got back to his house. While I
watched Teabag gut the fish in the carport, Brenda came to the doorway and looked out
at us with a sleepy squint. Her eyes were smaller without makeup, and I could see the
outline of her breasts sagging beneath her nightgown, a pale, thin pink thing with a hole
near the right shoulder.

"Y'all woke me up," she said.

"You gotta look at the size of this fish Brenda," I said.

"I'll be goddamned," Teabag said. He had sliced open the belly and was pulling
the guts out. In his bloody hand he held up two intact Vienna sausages, shining in the
porch light.

"Clean that shit off you before you come to bed," she said, and yawned, turning
back into the darkness of the house.

Two weeks later, me and Duff had a string of river cats, gutted and hanging from the back porch eave. We brought the 1/4 inch nylon trotline back in to soak in a bucket of water with rotten eggs mixed in it. Smelled like a bucket of ass. Nothing drove a catfish crazier. They liked to rub on it. You have to let the blood drain out of them real good or they tasted like muddy ass though. Even then they still need to be soaked over night in milk and salt. My old yellow cat was down underneath, licking the blood up from the dirt that dripped down the white, opened bellies of the fish. Duff started in about Teabag and all of his big adventures.

"Man, nobody gets away with shit the way Teabag does," Duff said. He laughed, shook his head, and flung his empty beer can at my cat.

"Leave that old bastard alone," I said.

"Yeah, Jimmy, just you and this pussy living here," Duff said. "Guess he's mighty special to you."

"Shut up," I said.

"That Teabag though..." Duff started snickering. "He told me he hammered Glenda last weekend after Brenda went to bed. Said he did her right there on the living room rug with Brenda passed out in her own piss in the next room."

"Man," I said. Made me feel kind of sick looking at the pale bellies of those gutted fish. The raw edge of where they had been sliced open gleamed bright red against the whiteness.
"Said she came on to him, wanted to be teabagged," Duff said.

"What?" I said.

"You know," Duff said. He stood up, spread his legs, and hunched down on something imaginary between them. He screwed up his face like a lovesick pig.

"Oh, yeah," I said, "But why would she want that. Isn't that a queer thing?"

"What? Don't you know anything?" Duff said. "All teabagging is is rubbing your balls on somebody's head or something, don't matter who it is. Teabag got his nickname when he did it to Brenda when they were in high school and she was passed out. Took pictures of his big, hairy balls on her forehead and showed them around."

"Why the hell would Glenda want that?" I said.

"Do I look like a woman to you?" Duff said.

I didn't much feel like considering the topic any longer and suggested we drop it. Duff said that was fine with him and why didn't we have another beer and stick to fishing topics if I couldn't handle anything sensitive about Glenda. When he said sensitive he kind of did a little butterfly flutter with his fingers and prissed his head, so I told him we'd have another beer some other night when I felt like listening to a semi-toothless motherfucker talk shit.

I stayed away from the lot of them for at least two weeks. I didn't want to think about Brenda's tired eyes, Pat's Toe, Duff's prissing, Teabag's balls, or especially Glenda doing anything with them on her head. But pickings were slim for drinking buddies in Dardanelle on a Friday night, and I finally broke down and called Duff about heading to
the Blue Bonnet. When I got there I was disappointed to see Teabag laughing that big belly laugh, all his teeth showing, while several of the plant boys gazed on like lovestruck girls.

"I don't like to fish with bait," Teabag said. "Ain't that right Jimmy?"

I nodded and sat down. Teabag gave me a wink and grin that made Duff and Bad-Toe start giggling.

"If you can't catch it with what you got, then there's no point even trolling for it," Teabag said, grabbing between his legs and giving it a yank.

Duff almost spit one of his partials out.

"I guess if you got what a bottom feeder wants, you don't have no problem," I said.

Teabag took a swallow of beer and poured himself another round from the pitcher. Duff quit giggling and went to gnawing on peanuts instead.

"All I know is I know how to fish better than any fucker in here," Teabag said.

"Huh," I said. "Speaking of bait, why don't we see who can catch the most fish with either no bait or the weirdest shit we can find."

"Winner gets what?" Teabag said.

"Winner gets the title, King of the Dipshits or whatever, and two cases of beer from each of the losers," I said. "But we have to do it on the same stretch of river on the same night so it is verifiable."

"Oh, I can do it verifiable," Teabag said. "How about tomorrow?"

Duff and Bad-Toe agreed, but they looked at Teabag like he was already the
prettiest girl at the beauty pageant. We decided to meet at 10 p.m. the next evening at the Dardanelle boat dock. There would be two to a boat so cheating would not be an option, and we would have to fish the same stretch of river for two hours. Me and Teabag in one boat and Duff and Bad-Toe in another.

The next day at Walmart I stocked up on Spam and Vienna Sausages, and the biggest fishing pole and heaviest line they had. On the highway I saw a half-rotted possum. I speared it with a tire iron and flung it in the back of the truck. For myself I purchased a large sack of Cheetos, some string cheese, and a half case of Busch. When I met the boys at the dock it had been dark for two hours.

"Ok," I said. "Let's see what you're going out with."

Duff opened up his tackle box so we could see he didn't have any chicken liver stuck in there, and then he pulled a shoebox out of his truck with a rubber band around it. The box was making cheeping noises. He undid the rubber band to show us seven yellow chicks.

"My grandpa used to swear by this," Duff said. "Called it chick flippin'. The trick is, you either put them on the line alive and weight it, or kill 'em right before you drop the line. Something to do with the heat and freshness."

"I got chicken liver," Bad-Toe said.

We relieved Bad-Toe of his chicken liver and asked him if he had any other ideas.

"I also got some Ivory Soap and I reckon I could try Preparation H," he said. "Its got 3% shark oil in it and I could rub it on the soap. I only have half a tube though."
This was agreeable to all of us, as long as Bad-Toe didn't start in telling us why he was driving around with a tube of ass cream in his truck.

Teabag said he didn't have nothing but a smile and some chewing gum, and I displayed my potted meat products and the rotten possum.

"Better keep that thing downwind from me," Teabag said.

"Keep your mouth shut and it won't smell so bad," I said.

The river was flat as my grandma's ass, the water so still that our engines echoed sharply off the banks. As we sped up, I felt the occasional ping of a bug off my cheek. Teabag cleared the boat dock and aimed the boat around a bend and out toward the center of the channel.

"We don't have to go too far for this," Teabag said.

"Whatever you say," I said.

Duff and Bad-Toe followed about fifty yards off.

With the engines cut, each boat drifted slowly in the current. Mosquitoes hung about three feet off the water. I could hear their low hum if I held my breath.

"Ok," Teabag yelled across the water. "Starting now."

Duff and Bad-Toe whooped something back at us. A full moon peeked through strips of clouds, occasionally lighting up the dark water, and a low rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance.

Teabag shoved a wad of bubble gum in his mouth and started chewing while I pealed open a can of Spam. I molded a golf ball size chunk onto a treble hook and flung it over the side. The Spam slung off in a clump before the hook hit the water.
"See you got a new rod," Teabag said.

I didn't say anything but reeled the line back in and tried a smaller chunk of Spam, cut into a cube. The next cast it stayed on.

Teabag took the bubblegum out of his mouth and molded it around his hook.

"Let's see if they like Double-Bubble," he said.

We sat there quietly, listening to the water lap against the boat and the occasional holler drifting over the water from Duff and Bad-Toe. From the sounds of it, the chicks had gotten loose in the boat.

I got a nibble, but when I gave the rod a jerk to set, the line went slack. I reeled in an empty hook and cut another cube of Spam.

"Maybe you should save some of that for your breakfast," Teabag said.

"Maybe you shouldn't of fucked Glenda," I said.

Teabag giggled and whipped the line out over his head, the silver strand of it floating beautifully out far over the water. A soft plop followed.

"Who said I did?" he said. "And what is it to you?"

"Doesn't matter," I said. "Seems a little close to home, is all."

Teabag's rod dipped hard. He gave it a yank and whistled. The rod bent towards the left and downward as the tip trembled. He played a little line out before cranking on the reel some more, his breath coming harder. The air smelled of bubble gum.

"Somebody likes cherry," Teabag said.

What he pulled in was about a twenty two pound flathead. Teabag yelled this estimate to Duff and Bad-Toe, who whooped their approval back.
"How's Jimmy doing?" Duff yelled. He had gone through three chicks already without a bite, but Pat had caught a six pounder using the Ivory soap and butt cream.

"Slinging Spam," Teabag yelled back.

Within a few minutes Teabag pulled in another flathead, this one only a few pounds. I decided to change my tactics and switched to rotten possum.

Teabag complained about the stench as I cut into one distended leg of the possum, releasing a smell worse than what was originally coming off the carcass. As I gagged up Cheetoh juice in the back of my throat, I realized the possum’s smell was going to make it too difficult to work with. Aside from the one chunk for bait, I dumped the rest of the carcass overboard, which Teabag bitched would probably keep the fish so occupied they wouldn't even consider bubble gum. The stinky clod, bits of fur clinging to it, was fixed onto my hook. For luck, I added a Vienna sausage. My first perfect cast of the evening delivered the weighted line far out into the darkness. It seemed like only seconds before the hook was taken, sending a shudder through the rod and deep into my shoulders. As I started to reel in, the rod flattened to the water and the line zinged out of the reel in a low hiss. I touched it lightly, feeling the burn on my palm. This would take finesse.

"Damn," Teabag said.

I played the line out and toyed it back in, played it out and pulled it back softly towards me, continually working the invisible monster in closer to us. Teabag pulled in his line and laid his rod down so he could peer out into the water. The river got quieter as if all the creatures above and below were waiting to see what was coming. After several minutes of straining, my fingers aching from clenching the rod, a smooth form broke the
water and turned, revealing a white underbelly in a brief flash of moonlight.

"Goddamn!" Teabag yelled, causing Duff to holler questions across the open water.

"Get your ass over here!" Teabag yelled. "Troll over!"

Duff and Bad-Toe arrived just in time to see the fish churn the surface once more. Their yells matched Teabag's then in intensity. Play it out, don't lose it, hold on, easy now, don't be a dumbass - all blended together. I couldn't tell who was bellowing what advice.

"Work it in closer," Teabag said. He had a few feet of nylon rope in his hand and was leaning out over the side. "Easy."

The fish was tiring some, breaking the surface more frequently, closer and closer to the boat. The rod's tip no longer dipped as far down with each weaker dive. I brought it in close enough that I could see the length. It looked to be at least five feet. Teabag reached into the water, groping at the slick sides of the fish. It thrashed, almost jerking the rod out of my hands and sending a wave of water, warm as piss, over us.

"Easy!" I shouted, either to Teabag or the fish.

Teabag reached again for the gaping jaws of the fish, and struggled to get his fist, clutching the nylon rope, into its flat mouth. As he lunged forward to rip the cord through the gills, the burst of fight left in the fish and his own weight caused another surge of water over the side of the boat. Just on the edge of flipping, Teabag fell back against the opposite side of the boat, gripping the two ends of the rope. He quickly tied them to the boat. I released my grip on the rod. Breathing heavily, we peered over the
side at the thrashing thing secured there. The boat rocked with each additional twist of it.

"Gotta be a world record," Teabag said.

"Yeah," I said.

Duff carefully maneuvered to where they could get a better look. Their yells were almost lost in the splashing water.

"What do we do?" I said. The idea of my photograph in the fishing journals, a big picture of myself and the fish sprawled out on the dock like a drunk fat gal, the tales of this night for years ahead at the Blue Bonnet, were filling me with a joy like I hadn't felt since I was a kid.

"We can troll back to the dock and then we call the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission first thing in the morning," Teabag said. "We can load it into your truck and weigh it at the sawmill tonight."

"The Game and Fish Commission," I said. A sudden heat filled my belly as I remembered the expiration date on my fishing license. Nobody gave a shit if you were just fishing for catfish, but hauling in a world record would require some finagling.

"What if my license ain't exactly, uh, current?"

Teabag sat back and stared at me. Duff and Bad-Toe quit bellowing about the fish and stared too.

"Your license isn't current?"

"Not exactly," I said.

"Well then they can just take your tackle and any other equipment used to catch the fish, including the boat and truck. Plus, they can fine the shit out of you," Teabag
said. "What the hell, dumbass!"

My insides turned into a solid hot ball that I knew was going to explode. It choked off anything I could think of except a burning hatred for Teabag. Bile rose in the back of my throat again as I looked at the fish anchored to our shifting boat by the nylon rope. Duff remained silent. I swallowed back Cheetoh juice again.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do?" I said.

"Just a second here," Teabag said. His voice softened. "We can't exactly let a thing like this go. Not after we worked so hard to catch it. Somebody's got to take it in and report it."

I looked at Teabag.

"Like you?" I said.

"Well, it wasn't like you could have brought this in all by yourself," he said. "I did string it to the boat."

"Yeah, but I caught it on my line, with my bait," I said.

"You got the title!" Duff said. He started laughing then.

"Jimmy's King of the Dipshits!" Pat said.

"Yeah, OK," Teabag said. "But I might as well be the one to take this fish in."

Duff and Bad-Toe quit laughing.

"Now wait a minute," Duff said. "That's up to Jimmy."

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity boys," Teabag said, looking to the other boat, his hands open. His voice was pleading in a way none of us had ever heard before. Duff and Bad-Toe stared back at him while I slipped my hand into my pocket. I dropped
my pocketknife to my side and worked the blade open. I took one flick at the line on my pole.

"What the hell else can we do?" Teabag said. "It just makes sense that I bring it in."

I leaned forward and sawed at the taut rope. It didn’t take hardly anything. It severed and slipped from the still squirming fish’s mouth. With a soft whisk of fins the thing disappeared into the dark water. Teabag turned to see the last gleam of moonlight on its back. He jumped up with a wild punch that just got me off the side of my jaw. I jabbed back at him with my right fist, the pocketknife still clutched in it. He fell back with a yelp of pain, grabbing his upper thigh.

"You don't get this one," I said.

Duff and Bad-Toe yelled at us to settle down.

“You cut me you son of a bitch,” Teabag said.

“Yeah,” was all I could say.

I declared the tournament over and started the outboard. I hauled the boat as fast as it would run back to the dock. The bow slapped hard against the water and bounced Teabag enough that I figured he wouldn’t take another swing without maybe going overboard. He clutched his thigh and glared at me. At the dock I offered to take him to the emergency room to get it looked at, trying to be Christian about things, but he just told me to go fuck myself and got in his truck. Duff said he’d see me at work Monday, and Bad-Toe said I still had the title as far as he was concerned.
The next night I called Glenda to see if she wanted to go see a movie or get some barbecue. She said she was seeing some fellow in Altus and it probably wasn’t a good idea right now, or maybe ever. I went back to the gutting line on Monday prepared to get in a fight if I had to, but Teabag limped past me without a hi, bye, or kiss my ass. I noticed him looking at me when I went to lunch, but it wasn’t even like he wanted to beat my ass, more like he was looking at a strange animal he couldn’t quite figure out, and I knew I would be all right then. In the parking lot, Duff was talking to some of the boys and saw me slipping one of the Jose’s a frozen bag of nuggets. Hey Hammer, they yelled, beers on us. Hey back, I hollered, but in a giving way, like a King waving to his subjects.
Sometimes I hear them late at night. Yipping and kicking their heels up, sounding like the cries of strangling children. It always sends delicious chills down my back and made me think of sex. Arliss says they give him the creeps. Arliss says coyotes aren’t anything more than giant killer rats, feeding on the weak, innocent, or rotting. His attempts to rid himself of their taunting involve various poisons and traps. None of which are effective. Meanwhile, they jump and laugh at him from his own back forty. Slinking in and out of the shadows with indifferent precision. I tell him that if he would only get rid of the dead chickens properly and burn them like he is supposed to, they wouldn’t come around so much. He just snorts and says they’ll always be there no matter what he does. Just like cockroaches he says.

Arliss used to howl like a coyote. He did, really. It even sounded true to life. I never knew if it was him picking me up for a date or if one of them had come up near the back porch looking for bits of gristle in the slop pile. Sometimes when we took a six pack out to the Fairview Cemetery to sit on top of the mausoleum and get drunk, he would stand up and let loose an untamed yelp. Then, a sly, wild look would come over him, and we’d make love while the night poured dew on us. Right there underneath the moon and the cast concrete saints with only the distant hiss of highway 23 and the occasional rattle and pop of a passing truck on the dirt road.
"I can't believe he took another day off and left me to work the entire damn load for this weekend," Arliss muttered as he slammed the kitchen door.

Yesterday he was tired. Today he is tired. Tomorrow, our fifth anniversary, he'll probably be tired.

"I know baby. Why don't you tell him you aren't going to cover for him anymore. Tell him you need your time too. Tell him you heard that Eaton boy over in Durham was looking for some extra work," I said in the soothing voice his mother uses.

"Scare him a little."

"And lose what I already got? I can't risk pissing that little asshole off and having him quit permanent. I'd have to learn Spanish to find anybody else."

He scrubbed his hands at the kitchen sink, flinging the water away from his fingertips instead of taking the towel I offered him. Each flick of his strong fingers sprayed water around the room.

"Hey," I said, catching a drop in the eye.

"Hey El Senor, how about you take over my operation for me. I'll pay you in tacos and white women," he said.

"C'mon," I said.

"I've seen the way those chicken catchers look at you," he said.

The chicken catchers arrived in truckloads of brown faces. They went silent every time I walked out to direct their foreman, but then I'd hear low, guttural sounds and clicking, sucking noises when I turned my back. Later, I would see those same faces, now empty of expression from exhaustion, as they drove past the house.
"Probably just wondering if I'm going to give them Cokes and egg salad sandwiches as usual" I said.

"Yeah," Arliss said. "I guess. Wouldn't be a problem if Kyle would show up."

Arliss continued about his seventeen-year-old nephew Kyle who helped with the chickens when time was tight and when a new load was coming in. He was supposed to be working for his uncle to save for college, but didn’t appear too bent on higher learning. My two years at the Baptist Junior College had earned me a full-time position as an executive receptionist for Tyson’s. Arliss was proud of that degree. Anybody can marry a dumbass, he said, but I got something better. He was always pointing out why I was special. After a bad run or two of chickens I started doing some part-time work on the weekends at the B & W Kwikmart just five miles away. Pushing poultry all week and cigarettes and gasoline on the weekends didn’t leave much spare time for me, or for Arliss either.

“What’s it this time?”

“He claims he has to go to Little Rock for some sort of 4-H thing, but I think he’s probably running off camping with Amanda the tramp.

Arliss explained to me how the youth of today were degenerating and the reasons why our country would never survive. His eyebrows took a solemn leap up and stayed there as he described Mexican immigrants taking away chicken gutting jobs from hard working white folks, dope smoking kids in the schools, violent fights between boys sparring like roosters, sexual experimentation at younger and younger ages, and the way he would damned sure raise his kid if he had one. Arliss couldn’t have a boy or girl to
mold of course. After we were married two years we had him tested like he was just some sort of stud bull to see what could be wrong. He never fully got over the results. "We could have thrown some good ones," he said. And after all, the true test of a man is supposed to be the potency of his seed, right? Just like in the Bible right? Go forth and be fruitful or something like that. I don’t remember my Sunday school lessons very well, and that one always made me picture myself with apples hanging all over me. I told him I didn’t want kids anyway. They’d only end up taking away from our quality time together. But, the chickens took care of that. Our children come through this place by the thousands each year. We feed them, water them, and pack them away in crates like meaty fruit. That’s so much easier than watching little versions of yourself fall and break bones on the playground, get pregnant in high school, or end up just like yourself.

“You know I’d help you baby if I could” I said.

The chicken houses weren’t my idea. I said they would tie us down and slowly kill us. The smell. The constant mutter of chicken-speak in the background. The incredible stupidity of the beasts. Nothing clever about a chicken. Once when Arliss needed my help and I had a day off, I lied and said I had to work. Sometimes I really did sign on for extra hours so as not to go home and listen to him complain, but this time I sat in my car for a minute or two trying to think of someplace to go, wondering what he might say if he stopped in at the Kwikmart for a cup of coffee and they said they didn’t know where the hell I was. I spent two hours wandering around the mall until I drove out to the Dew Drop Inn to have a few drinks. I was doing alright until a litter runner with broad shoulders tried to pick me up. He said I had great legs and slither-come-hither
eyes. Really. I looked into his tired eyes, so close I was breathing the cigarette smoke that had just passed his lips, and tried to imagine him as something more than what I saw. Something exotic, wild, and raw. Happy maybe. I allowed his rough hands to grope my chest briefly in the parking lot. His tongue in my mouth tasted ashy and felt cold, a dull, probing little object flicking against my teeth. He said he had enough room in his tractor trailer for both of us if I wanted to get a bottle of kickin' chicken and make it happen. It makes me kind of nauseous every time I remember I actually considered it. Like it really happened, us going at it with bourbon on our breath, a pile of stinking, chicken shit bound for Oklahoma in the truck behind us. On the drive home I had a sickening, thudding ache inside and could only think of Arliss, tan and muscled, whooping and jumping off a bluff into green water. Slipping his strong hands over me, in me, while we tread water. It was only a few years ago. I flung my arms around him when I got home from the Dew Drop before I remembered I smelled like cigarette smoke. You stink, he'd said.

Now I just accepted my flattery (as if it was no more interesting than my paycheck) from the old, old men who would spend hours nursing a single coffee in Styrofoam cups at the Kwikmart. The oldest of them would smell like a cross between a half-rotten potato and horse sweat, and sometimes my eyes would water if they leaned too close over the counter. They called me “Sugar” and everyday made similar comments about how Arliss had better look out or one of them would steal me from him. Then they would snort and laugh for a while as if they had just thought of something new and damn it all if that wouldn’t just be the funniest thing if Pete sitting over there with
three teeth in his head could just walk off with another man's wife. After the conversation had turned from livestock, to gossip about people they knew who didn’t choose to hang out at the Kwikmart, to pacemakers, colon cancer, or the best way to kill a gopher, they would return to stealing me from Arliss and a new round of guffawing would begin. I would just nod my head and sometimes give them a tired smile.

At our anniversary dinner the next night, I decided I would make his favorite dinner of pork chops, macaroni and cheese, and green peas - complete with a bottle of wine hid under the sink I had picked up earlier in the week when I was in town. When I heard the diesel engine growling up the drive, I lit the candles and placed myself in such a way where my ass wouldn't look as big as it actually was. A tight, red, full-length, stretch lace nightgown hugged my growing curves, and my lips and nails were done to match. Drumbeat Red. The color of distant jungle rhythms. He walked in the door and I struck a wobbly pose in front of the table, placing myself at what I thought was a seductive angle.

"I didn't figure you would remember our anniversary, but I decided I would let you make up your mistake to me in bed," I said.

Arliss's eyes widened in mock horror and surprise.

"Wouldn't remember?" he said. He pulled a bottle of champagne from behind his back and produced a small, velvety box from his pocket.

I didn't give him a chance to sit down, but drug him down onto the linoleum right there. Dinner was postponed for at least seven minutes.
Afterwards I cleaned myself up some and arranged the heart-shaped necklace around my neck. The candlelight played softly across the macaroni and cheese, and the warm scent of pork hung in the air.

"I bought some wine," I said. "It's red. I think it's from Australia."

"I think I'll just have a beer or two," he said.

"Or we could have some of that champagne," I said.

Arliss just wiggled his Busch in the air, his pinky extended.

"This'll do fine Ma'am."

"Well, I think I'll have some then."

Arliss had barely started chewing on his first pork chop before he started chewing on the Kyle-the-worthless-shit bone.

"If only I could depend on that little shit, things would be different. Maybe I could relax a little more," Arliss said. He stabbed into his second pork chop.

He eats automatically now, as if he doesn’t take any pleasure in it at all. Stab, chew, swallow. Stab, chew, swallow.

Arliss furiously chewed the remains of his macaroni and cheese and said; "Not everyone can spend their whole weekend screwing in a tent and drinking beer."

He looked up at me, but then quickly back at his plate.

"Un-hunh," I said.

"Do you think we could turn a light on so I could see what I'm eating?" Arliss said.

I got up and flicked the switch on. The bright light made the dirty corners of the
kitchen floor visible, and a burn mark where I had dropped a pot of spaghetti two years
earlier. Arliss's face was smeared with the Drumbeat Red lipstick purchased at the
Kwikmart to go with my seduction get-up. It gave his clean-shaven face a clownish look.
I realized the fluorescence probably didn't make me look any better either, so I went to
get my blue terry robe with chickens on it he had gotten me for a joke last Christmas.

"Ah hell honey," Arliss said. "What'd you go and do that for?"

"Cold," I said.

"Damn that was something," he said. "All of it. Thanks baby. I got to go check
the waterers," he said. He jammed his cap back on his head like a helmet.

I watched him head out the back door and then sat and stared at the dirty plates.
Screwing and drinking beer in the woods. Yeah, I remember that. Two years ago in
1985 he took me along on a deer-hunting trip. I don't think either of us even picked up
our rifles once.

We would pack enough food to last two weeks even though we were only going
out for a few days. After driving out to White Rock Mountain and setting up camp, he
would make me a dinner of steak and baked potatoes roasted slowly over the coals. He
would always cook them up just right. The smoke would curl up and away between us as
we sassed each other. Arliss would say corny lines he had heard on T.V. and use the
most syrupy accent he could muster.

"My, my. You got the keys to the kingdom baby."

"I got your key right here darlin'," I'd say, then get up, dust my behind off, and
head for the tent with a sly look. Within four minutes growling noises would come from
outside and then Arliss would leap in butt naked. His skin would smell deliciously of roast meat and smoke.

After I had done the dishes, I turned on the T.V. for company. A re-run of “Getaways of the Rich and Famous” was on. Arliss made fun of me every time he caught me watching it. He said everyone on it probably had AIDS or was some sort of drug addict at least. This time it was a woman whose name everyone had long forgotten from an old television series. She was smiling and waving some elaborate fruit drink on a yacht off the coast of some tropical island glowing like a green jewel behind her. She was also wearing a pink bikini, but she had a large scarf tied around her waist. Probably to cover a fat ass. The next scene showed her being hand-fed octopus by a well-groomed, muscular man at least ten years younger than herself. She chewed with her mouth open, and after she swallowed, gave him a sloppy French kiss. He had to act like he liked it even though she had octopus breath and the camera was filming everything. The show ended with them running down the beach hand in hand, only her ass was still covered by the scarf. They were probably running to the next palm grove to screw and drink beer. I changed the channels just as Arliss clumped up the back steps.

We sat and watched a variety of evening talk shows for the next two hours while Arliss put away seven or eight more beers. I drank on the bottle of champagne, but after two glasses the sweetness of it made my stomach churn. His critiques of the guests and the hosts grew increasingly loud with each Busch. I said I was tired and going to bed.

Arliss snarled at the T.V., “Madonna would screw her own father if it would
make the news. Look at that old whore. Like a virgin my ass."

"Goodnight."

"Burt Reynolds looks like a fag in that suit."

I left him sitting on the sofa staring at the television, the blue light flickering in his tired eyes.

Two hours later I still couldn't sleep, but there were no more outbursts from Arliss in the living room. He had probably fallen asleep on the couch as usual. His body curled as much as possible on the narrow cushions, arms cradling his head protectively. I got up and went to the bathroom. I wiped any remnants of Drumbeat Red from my face. Before I could get settled again in bed I heard them. There were two or three of them. It was hard to tell. I went to the window and could see a dark patch sliding between the long, silver houses glowing in the moonlight. It gave a sick sounding, squeaky yip that was answered from somewhere off in the back field. Then I heard the rustling of footsteps on the rug and the rattle of the gun cabinet as it was unlocked and opened.

I slipped on my house shoes just as the back door clicked quietly shut. He was going to try and surprise them. Arliss, the mighty hunter/lover/fashion critic, was going to surprise a couple of mangy, wild dogs looking for dead chickens. I wanted to see this.

The chill of the night was already settling in and I felt sorry I hadn't brought a jacket. His determined form moved too quickly for me to go back and grab one though. Watching him heading stealthily towards the chicken houses, for a moment I was reminded of the coyote I had just seen from the window. I slid behind the truck for a second and then softly trotted across the open, bright space to the nearest chicken house.
A piece of gravel, accidentally kicked, rattled across the driveway. I ran to the edge of
the shiny building and pressed myself against the cold, corrugated metal.

Arliss was too intent upon the task ahead of him to notice a distant crackle of
gravel. He carried the rifle in the crook of his arm and walked slow, although unsteady,
as if he were hunting a Siberian tiger. He turned another corner.

I crept along the side of the chicken house. The chill of the evening was settling
in deeper. The dew had soaked through my house shoes and was weighing down the
edges of my nightgown where it had brushed through grass. I could see my breath
drifting up past my eyes. I needed to either turn back and leave him be, or make him
come back inside with me. He was starting to slow down anyway and the coyotes were
nowhere in sight. They had probably heard the two of us stumbling around and run off a
long time ago to watch us from the trees. Then Arliss stopped. He raised the rifle to his
shoulder, aimed for about five seconds, the rifle wandering, and fired. A single yelp rang
out from the edge of the woods. I strained to see what it was he was shooting at, but I
could see nothing but darkness and the blue shapes of trees. The echo of the shot drifted
back from a neighboring mountain, and then the silence found its way. He turned and
saw me.

“Sharon,” he said softly, “aren’t you cold?”

“Yes.”

“Come over here then.” He stretched out his arm.

I paused, remembering the cry from the trees.

“What did you shoot at?”
"The moon. What are you doing out here anyway?"

"Keeping an eye on you," I said as I walked over to him.

His arm reached around me and stroked my shoulder as he bent to kiss my head.

What was I doing here? I had followed Arliss' pursuit of the coyotes because it was so pointless, pathetic, and typical. Shame made me feel suddenly warm.

He studied me, trying to see my eyes in the moonlight. Then he held out the rifle.

"You take a shot. Make it bleed all over these hills."

I took the warm rifle and aimed at the Man-in-the-Moon. I shot him right dead center, and if felt good for a moment. I knew why Arliss was out in the middle of the night with a rifle. Maybe it wasn’t to kill anything that wasn’t really harming him, just to feel like he could.

"There," I said, handing back the gun. "Now lets go to bed."

The warmth crept back into my limbs as I lay next to his sleeping body, his arm flung across my belly. His skin smelled faintly of beer and gun oil.

But the next morning, at least an hour earlier than usual, he slid from between the sheets. Moments later, I heard the truck engine rumble and the gravel pop beneath its wheels. But rather than head towards the highway the sound took a different direction – towards the woods behind the chicken houses, and then further out to a back field where the brush pile was. I just lay there in the warm bed and listened to the engine start and then stop again. Finally, the truck returned to the house. Only after I heard Arliss's boots in the kitchen did I get out of bed, and then I took a long shower.
"See you later sugar beet," he said through the door.

I put on my shoes and walked to our back field, picking slowly through the briars until I reached the brush pile. A limp, scruffy form lay twisted on the pile of tree limbs, ready to be burnt. The coyote's one visible eye was milky, blank, and flies buzzed around it and the tongue poking out of its partially open mouth. I couldn't see the bullet hole anywhere in the patchy fur. It looked frail, somewhat powerless except for the tiny white teeth exposed beneath the tongue and delicate lips. I hadn't seen one this close before and had always associated a cleverness, a wildness in their movements across the fields that was no where to be found from this body at rest. Now it just looked pathetic, skinny, not really equipped for whatever existence it had been handed. I wanted to feel sorry for it, to feel angry at Arliss for shooting it for no good reason, but maybe he had done it a favor.

By now Arliss was probably off to the feed store or down to the Kwikmart to get his own coffee. I knew the old men down at the Kwikmart would be positioned at their table in the back corner of the store. They would be picking their teeth as if they had just eaten a huge meal and not a simple sticky bun. Scratching, and watching other people come in to buy gas or milk on their way to someplace else. Drinking that crappy coffee I had made so much of. Later that day I would be down there refilling the machine myself. But, right now, Arliss could settle in with them without my seeing him. They would study the younger man with pleasure, welcoming him into their fold. He would lean back in his chair cradling his Styrofoam cup, sharing the talk about tomato blight, someone
else's lousy kids, and finally, Arliss could direct the conversation to crafty, dead-chicken-eating coyotes. The biggest rats you'll ever see, Arliss would say with disgust. I got me one of them last night. He won't be gnawing on my castaways anymore. And then the old men would chuckle about the bastards and how they all needed to be shot. Every last goddamn one of them.
Kokoshes

Pee-Paw’s house sat just off a curve. The seafoam green siding was colored by fine, red dust from the road, making the house look like a dirty candy. Great Aunt Lily sat on the front porch shucking peas into a pot. She gave a small wave to Ransom and his mother, sending ripples down the sagging skin of her arm, then went back to the peas. She had moved in after they found Mee-Maw face down in the strawberry patch a year ago. Mee-Maw had still been clutching an axe in one hand she had taken out to kill a raccoon caught in a trap. Pee-Paw took the axe straight out of Mee-Maw’s hand and before they had even lifted her up out of the dirt he had sunk it into the raccoon. He said when he raised the axe the thing put its hands over its head to shield itself, like a human. He liked to tell this story.

An old dog lay beside Great Aunt Lily. It briefly raised its head, but then settled its jowls slowly back down on the floorboards. Other than that, the only movement was the turn of a cow’s head from across the road, and the sly shifting of an orange cat underneath a septic tank.

At sundown in Ransom’s neighborhood, the clean, paved street would be lined with kids riding bicycles and playing with their dogs. It would be boiling with movement unlike this lonely house surrounded by pine woods and fields full of dry, yellowed grass.
and stones. The barbed wire fence line was marked only by the occasional scrub oak, twisting itself upward. His friends would be circling in front of his house about now, wondering where he was. He was glad to see none of his cousins appeared to be visiting here. The last time he had been to the house was several months ago on Easter Sunday. A cluster of them, pale, bony, and freckled, had stared silently at him and the basket of colored eggs he had hand-painted. Once all the adults had disappeared, the largest cousin, Roy, sullen and pimply, had tried to yank the basket away from him. Ransom had yanked the basket back so fiercely that all of his eggs went flying. The moment the eggs smashed into the ground the other cousins set to stomping on them in their fake, patent leather church shoes. Ransom managed to grab a handful of Roy's hair before being punched in the stomach. As he lay in the dust, teary and gasping for air, they hooted and jumped around, occasionally prodding him roughly in the back. "You look like you been rubbed in shit," Roy sang. Then Pee-Paw stuck his head out the kitchen door to spit and the cousins scattered. "Get up outta the dirt," he grunted, and went back inside. When Ransom told his father what happened later, he showed him the strands of orange-red hair pulled from Roy's head. "Throw that away," his father said. "You don't need it." A week later he was gone. Not from the firewater Pee-Paw said we get him, but from two free tickets to Vegas offered by the cute blonde at the Git-N-Split. Before that, the woman would give Ransom free popsicles when he went in with his father to buy gas.

When the car came to a complete stop, Ransom stole a look at his mother Sharon and saw cigarette smoke shooting fiercely from her pink nostrils like a dragon.
“This will only be for a night or two, Honey,” she said. “Just let me get things straightened out with the babysitter.”

After Ransom’s father left, his mother had to take on extra work and was now covering a night shift at Whirlpool. Her family had always predicted that her Potowatomi husband would end up dead in a ditch or in jail. Gone, anyway. “Pretty damned close to colored,” her father had said when she told him she was pregnant eight years ago. “Better a half breed than a bastard though.”

Ransom’s mother placed a hand on his leg and patted it. His body became rigid the moment her slender, freckled fingers reached him, and he tried to focus on a cow in the field. The cow raised its tail and a stream of manure puddled on the ground as it continued grazing.

“Pee-Paw seems kind of ornery, but that’s just his way. Maybe you could help him with the cattle,” she said.

Ransom could not imagine what sort of help he could be to his grandfather, but he briefly entertained a vision of himself as a grim-faced cowboy, somewhere else, drifting across the open plains on his trusty horse behind a slow moving herd, a shiny six-shooter on his hip. Or rather, an Indian covered in war paint and feathers, watching from a stony ridge, waiting for his moment to kill the cowboy with an incredible war whoop. He had asked his father if his ancestors had been like the fierce Indians he saw in movies. “No, the Potowatomi were farmers who traded with the French,” his father had said.

Dust raised by the car followed them on the hot, summer air as they walked up the steps to the kitchen door. Slop bits rejected by both the dog and the cat littered the stone
steps. Ransom sneezed hard three times as they opened the door.

"Cover your mouth, Boy!" Pee-Paw said. "Damn, Sharon, don't you teach him anything?"


"See for yourself."

Ransom trailed slowly behind his mother into the living room. Mee-Maw lay in a bed in the corner, her thin hands gripped and twisted a flowered dish rag. She had been this way since her stroke. The room smelled faintly of talcum powder and urine.

"Look who it is, Mama," Sharon said. Her voice took on a cheery note that he had only heard when she was talking to the very sick or old. "It's Ransom and me. Say hello to Mee-Maw, Ransom."

Ransom placed his hands on the top of the bed railing and looked into his grandmother's face. Her milky eyes rolled in his direction, and as her head shook slightly her toothless mouth seemed to be trying to say something, or chew maybe. There was a piece of cornbread soaked in buttermilk on the corner of her mouth. Sharon reached down and wiped it off with her finger.

"Hello," Ransom said.

Mee-Maw's mouth worked some more. The pale pink gums flashed.

"Tell Mee-Maw what you drew for me yesterday, Ransom."

"Hello," Ransom repeated. He withdrew his hands from the railing and shoved them in his pockets, taking a step back.

"Ransom drew me a picture of a cow that looked just like Irma," Sharon said.
Irma was a one horned cow Pee-Paw owned.

Sharon said a few more things at her mother, all the while stroking the hands that rhythmically gripped the dishrag.

“She’s fine, ain’t she?” Pee-Paw yelled from the kitchen.

“Yes, Daddy,” Sharon said. She went back into the kitchen, Ransom following tightly behind her. “I’ve brought a few of his coloring things and his favorite blanket, so he ought to be fine. I’ll call first thing in the morning to see how he is.” She ran her fingers lightly over Ransom’s hair as he huddled against her. “See to it that he eats good.”

“If he don’t have sense enough to eat I can’t do anything about it,” Pee-Paw said.

“You be good, Kokoshes,” Sharon whispered, and with a quick pat and kiss on the head she was out the door. Ransom listened for the sound of her car rattling down the road until he could only hear the hum of the fan turned on Mee-Maw. A cow set up a low, steady bawl in the distance.

Ransom had been named after his grandfather when he was born because his face was all mashed and red with a full head of hair on it, just like Pee-Paw. He preferred his father’s nickname for him, Kokoshes, even though it meant little pig. Little pigs are smart, his father always said, just like you.

Pee-Paw neither looked at nor spoke to Ransom. He whittled slowly at his blackened thumbnail with a pocket knife and sipped from a plastic coffee mug. Ransom stood still and counted the orange floral patterns blossoming in the cracked linoleum. Finally, Pee-Paw cleared his throat with a long, wet, growl. He stuck his head out the
door to spit, then looked full on at the boy, his mouth twisted as if he wanted to spit again.

"Tell Lily if you're hungry," he said, and went out the door.

Ransom stood in the kitchen and fingered the broken lace on the table cloth. He allowed his hands to work slowly towards the end of the table. Then he walked into the livingroom. He sped up past Mee-Maw's bed, glancing quickly at her hands, now quieted, and went to the front screen door. Opening it slowly he saw his Aunt Lily still in the same position she had been when they first pulled up, her parted knees cupping a yellow, plastic bowl that her quick hands were filling with peas. She didn't look up when the screen door slammed behind him.

"You might as well make yourself useful and help me shuck these peas," she said. She handed him a small handful of the green pods, their skin crisp and slightly rough. He fumbled with four or five of them, breaking open their firm flesh with a satisfyingly juicy snap, managing to get a few peas in the bowl and a few on the porch. The dog reached its head out as far as it could and licked at one. Ransom smelled his fingers, now wet with pea juice. He picked up one pea from the porch and smashed it between his thumb and index finger, then wiped it on his pants. Then he crouched down and flicked another one into the air, hitting the dog in the head. The animal only blinked and gave him a sad, tired look.

"I guess you aren't going to be much help at pea shucking," Aunt Lily said. "Why don't you go on out to the barn and see if you can't help your Pee-Paw with
“He said I should tell you if I was hungry,” Ransom said.

“Are you?”

“No.”

“Well, go on out to the barn then and tell your Pee-Paw supper will be ready in about half an hour,” Aunt Lily said.

Ransom got up from the porch and stepped over the dog. After he got out in the yard he called at the dog, but it stayed firmly in place next to Aunt Lily.

“He’s tired,” she said. “You go on.”

He walked on around the house and saw a hint of orange underneath the silver septic tank. There was nothing long enough to poke at the cat, so he got down on his hands and knees and called for it. The cat’s eyes did not even blink in response.

The barn sat at the opposite end of the empty field behind the house, but rather than walk around and up the dirt road running between the fields, Ransom squirmed underneath the barbed wire fence and accidentally put his hand in an old cow patty. Even though it crumbled, dry as dirt, he wiped his hand on a clump of grass before picking his way through the field, wary of any other piles. It wasn’t until he was halfway across the field that he noticed the massive, red bull in the far corner. The beast saw him at the same time and raised its head sharply. It held itself perfectly still, watchful, almost as frozen as Ransom. When it gave a bubbling snort and began to lumber in his direction, Ransom ran as fast as he could towards the fence line. His feet thumped the thick grass as a low wail escaped his mouth, which quickly rose to a shrill squeal. When he turned
back to look at the bull it had sped up almost to a trot, curious of all the sudden noise and movement. Ransom's head was turned watching the bull when he slipped and tumbled full on to the ground. Something wet and sticky now covered the side of his head and hands where he had tried to break his fall. He screamed even louder and scrambled to his feet. He was almost to the fence and he could see his Pee-Paw coming out of the barn to see what the noise was about. His grandfather would save him, he thought. If he could just get to him in time. With his lungs aching he reached the fence and tried to squirm underneath, but got his pant leg caught and the back of his shirt in the barbed wire. He felt the barbs biting into him. The more he struggled, the more it hurt and the tighter his clothes were held fast.

"Pee-Paw!" Ransom yelled.

Pee-Paw's head was down and his shoulders set into a hard edge as he walked toward the boy.

Ransom looked back to see the bull standing some twenty five feet away, thoughtfully chewing its cud. He could see its huge wet nose was speckled with grass and dirt and it had long, reddish eyelashes on its big brown eyes. Those eyes now regarded him with a sedate interest.

"Goddammit! You've gotten shit all over you!" Pee-Paw said. He yanked at the boy, pushing the barbs in deeper. Ransom howled in pain and wiped at the manure on his face.

"Shut up, Goddammit! Hold still so I can get you out of this."

He yanked the boy a few more directions and tugged at the wire until Ransom's
shirt ripped and he had freed his leg. After he had pulled him up he kept a fierce grip just
above Ransom’s elbow and jerked him along towards the house, cussing continually.
When Ransom stumbled, his grandfather maintained a steady pace and he had to
scramble to find his footing again or be dragged. Ransom’s face was wet with tears and
manure when he was hauled up before Aunt Lilly.

“My word, what happened to you?” Aunt Lily said.

“See that he takes a goddamn bath and keep him out of my way,” Pee-Paw said.

“He was out there in the bull pasture. Doesn’t have the sense that God gave a mule.”

Aunt Lily put her peas down and placed her hands on Ransom’s shoulders,
guiding him towards the bathroom. She removed the soiled and torn clothes from
Ransom’s unresistant body and placed him in a warm tub. As he sniveled her voice
hummed steadily, “Well, well,” and “Bless your heart.” After she washed his hair, she
left him alone to sit in the cooling water, his Batman pajamas waiting on the toilet seat.

Pee-Paw barely glanced at Ransom all through supper. After supper, Ransom sat
on the sofa opposite the hospital bed. Aunt Lily would cover whatever furniture he was
sitting on with an old afghan Mee-Maw had knitted, even if he was just drawing. They
had a television, but it only picked up three channels and they never wanted to watch
anything but preachers or weather men. He doodled on a picture of Irma, drawing more
and more horns on her twisting out in every direction until she looked like a porcupine.
Mee-Maw’s hands were quiet now, and a low, wet snore came from her open mouth.
This would be where he would sleep also, and the thought of the mute old woman not a
few feet from him terrified him. He could hear his grandfather’s low muttering in the
"First time Sharon’s brought him out here since his Daddy run off and she expects us to fool with him," Pee-Paw said.

"He’s no trouble really," Aunt Lily said.

"No trouble? What’s he going to wear in the morning? Them cartoon pajamas? His clothes is all torn up," Pee-Paw said.

"I’ll find him something to wear," Aunt Lily said.

"No sense. None. Just like his daddy," Pee-Paw said. His voice lowered another octave. “All I ever seen him do is draw and cry.”

"Now, now," was all Aunt Lily said.

The next morning, while the windows were still grey, Ransom felt a rough hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake.

"The bull’s out," Pee-Paw said. “Need your help putting him back up.” He went back into the kitchen, leaving Ransom to consider what this meant.

Ransom said nothing, but fumbled with the clothing Aunt Lily had left by the sofa. A too-large pair of old jeans and a t-shirt left by one of the cousins. As his grogginess began to wear off, his terror of the bull came back. It could be waiting just outside the front door, primed to stomp on him. He could not believe his grandfather actually wanted him to go outside with the beast out there. He scooted one of his shoes underneath the sofa and pretended to fumble with the other.

Pee-Paw stuck his head back into the livingroom.
“C’mon,” he said.

“I can’t find my shoe,” Ransom said.

Pee-Paw stared at him.

“I said c’mon goddammit.”

Ransom made a small show of looking under his pillow and blanket. He got down on his knees and discovered the hidden tennis shoe and quickly pulled them both on. In the warm kitchen, still smelling of bacon, Aunt Lily nodded at Ransom over her coffee.

“You be careful and mind your Pee-Paw,” she said.

The air outside was cool and damp. Ransom stood on the porch behind his grandfather, eyeing the yard for any sign of the bull. The dog still lay in close to the same position it had been in the day before, but now it rose slowly, stretching its hind quarters, and reached its nose towards Pee-Paw’s hand. Pee-Paw ignored the dog and set off towards the barn. The hound followed at a sway-backed lope behind him. Ransom was reluctant to leave the porch.

His grandfather turned his head as he continued walking and jerked his hand.

“C’mon.”

Ransom ran to catch up and instinctively clutched at Pee-Paw’s hand. His grandfather appeared surprised by this and the hand remained for a few seconds in Ransom’s possession, then he tugged it back.

“Where is it, Pee-Paw?” Ransom said.

“Not far.”
“What are we going to do?” Ransom said.

“We’re going to go get a feed bucket and you’re going to stand in the corral and shake it while I herd it in.”

“But, won’t it, won’t it...” Ransom’s voice tapered off into an inaudible whisper.

“It’s not going to get you,” Pee-Paw said. “Once it’s in the corral I’ll slam the gate behind it and you just drop the bucket and climb over the fence. All it wants is the feed.”

“But, what if it gets mad, or what if...” Ransom said, but then stopped when he saw the bull.

It stood along a fence line on the road past the barn, its huge red haunches aimed at them indifferently. As they neared the barn its head remained lowered in the grass, quietly grazing. Ransom tiptoed quickly behind his grandfather into the barn, where Pee-Paw scooped out several cups of feed into a small, blue bucket.

“Get on in the corral and shake this,” Pee-Paw said. “Whistle too.”

“I don’t know how to whistle,” Ransom said.

He stopped and regarded the boy. He cleared his throat and spat.

“Well, I’ll have to teach you,” he said.

Ransom stood in the middle of the corral and gripped the bucket fiercely, rattling the feed in it like Pee-Paw had told him too. “Soooo, soooooiceee,” he mouthed, but this was so quiet it was more like a hissing of air being let out of a tire. The pungent, sweet smell of the feed was sickening to him. He heard his grandfather coaxing the bull in a
calm, almost loving voice. “C’mon Goddammit,” his grandfather said softly to the bull while he clapped his hands together. “C’mon, you bastard.”

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Ransom could then see the huge beast lumbering along the fence towards the corral. It was picking up speed as it got closer.

“Keep shaking the bucket!” Pee-Paw yelled.

Ransom rattled the bucket some more, but by now the bull was going at a full trot and closing on the entrance to the corral. Pee-Paw was losing ground on the bull, and he broke into a slow jog to try and catch up. Ransom shook the bucket wildly now without regard to the feed slinging out of it. He began to back up towards the fence, unheedful of anything but the gigantic, red-furred monster bearing down on him, the bait.

“Pee-Paw!” he yelled.

The bull turned the corner of fence line and headed straight into the corral, its eyes locked on Ransom and the feed bucket. Snot dripped from its pink nose, and as it trotted towards Ransom, it shook its horned head slightly and raised its tail in a flag-like salute, letting out a low, rumbling fart. Ransom had never seen anything so horrible in
his life.

"Pee-Paw!" Ransom yelled. But his grandfather was trotting towards the gate.

Ransom turned and ran for the fence, still gripping the blue bucket in one hand. As he reached the fence, he scrabbled against the boards, unable to get his footing. The bull was only a few feet from him when he turned. Ransom squealed as the huge, horned head loomed down at him, pressing in closer, its nostrils flaring at the smell of the remaining feed. When he dodged to the right, the bull’s head immediately blocked his way, pushing close enough now that Ransom could feel its hot breath on his arms. He dropped down and slid quickly underneath the bull. Before him was the open corral and the gate, which his grandfather now stood upon as he pushed it closed.

"Drop...the...bucket...God...dam...mit," Pee-Paw gasped. But Ransom couldn’t hear him as his feet pounded the dirt towards the gate.

The bull turned to follow the bucket with an irritated snort. It trotted after Ransom, who could sense the thud of hooves close behind him. When he looked back and saw the massive horns looming, he knew he wasn’t going to make it. Ransom stopped and turned. The bull abruptly stopped also, merely four feet away, and lowered its head towards the bucket, then stepped in closer.

"Nooooo!" Ransom yelled, swinging his bucket hand back. The bucket caught the animal up the side of head, sending a plume of the remaining feed spurting out. The solid, plastic, thwacking noise startled the bull into blowing a shower of snot onto Ransom, and taking a few, uncertain steps back, shaking its head. Ransom dropped the bucket and sprinted the remaining distance to the gate, which his grandfather closed.
immediately after him. Once outside he turned to see the bull, nosing about in the dry, powdered manure surface of the corral, its huge pink tongue licking up whatever feed it could find mixed with the dirt.

Ransom could not catch his breath for the heaving sobs that now shook him. He turned and gripped Pee-Paw’s overalls, twisted them up into tight handfuls as he stared at the bull. His grandfather stood looking at the bull in wonderment and then back at Ransom.

“Well you showed him, didn’t you,” Pee-Paw said.

Ransom twisted the overalls tighter in his grip.

“Here now,” Pee-Paw said, but gently removed Ransom’s grip from his legs. Then he lifted the boy up to carry him back to the house and to his breakfast. Ransom had never been carried by his grandfather before, and buried his head into his shoulder, whimpering quietly.


So Ransom hushed, and as he looked back over his grandfather’s shoulder, his chin rubbing roughly against it, he saw the bull raise its head from the dirt and watch them go, its nose muddied by snot and manure. Later, Ransom would come back out and throw rocks at it. Then as they sat in the warming kitchen, the morning glow gone from the fields and the full sun drying the remaining dew, Ransom ate his breakfast. Pee-Paw gave him the extra bacon from his own plate.

“Let’s work on that whistle before your mother gets here,” Pee-Paw said.

Later that day his mother would pick him up, and he would return to the paved
streets where kids rode bicycles and pretended. Where all they could do was imagine threats from cartoons and movies. He would tell them about the bull and show them his new whistling skill. And he would remember himself as if he had not been afraid and had not cried, as if his father had witnessed it and known he was alright.
Norman Mailer is Coming to Dinner

One day my husband Graham came in the house yelling my name.

“Virginia! You’re gonna shit!”

“O.K. What’s it this time?” I said. “Are we going to Panama City Beach or something?”

“Alright now, name one of the most famous writers there is!”

“Dead or alive?”

“Alive.”

“Stephen King.”

“Hell no! Try again.”

“Uh...John Grisham.”

“No. No. Somebody good.”

“I don’t know. Quit farting around and just tell me.”

“Norman Mailer!”

“Yeah, he’s big alright.”

“Damn straight he is! And he’s coming to dinner!”

This was a unique proposal, even for Graham. I had heard all about the trips we were going to take – Bora Bora, Grenada, even just Panama City Beach, and all kinds of ways we were going to maybe have a little culture or variety. But this was a hard one
to pull off. Graham claimed his mother, Nana, had told him it was going to happen, including a dinner at her house.

Nana’s house was on the way to the dock. We kept a seventeen year old Chris Craft cabin cruiser at the Lake Dardanelle Boat Club, so we would frequently stop in to say hello. Sometimes she would have something good to eat squirreled in the refrigerator or an extra bottle of whiskey in the garage. Graham’s father George, who had passed away, had been the president of the local college, Arkansas Tech University, which had around 2,000 students gathered from the hills in the tri-county area. Nana claimed she knew everybody from the days she had held court there as Mrs. Tech. “All the finest people,” she’d say. And what’s more, they had all stayed at her house, or gone on vacation with her, or done her yardwork, or saved her from a deadly snake. Apparently Norman Mailer was on her “finest” list. But then her list was always expanding. She had a way of having connections in places beyond where Arkansas Tech could have ever taken her. I wouldn’t have been surprised if I had dropped by one day and she had announced; “Jesus was just here! Too bad you missed it! We drank screwdrivers and ate pecan pie.” “Wow,” I would have said. “That’s something.” But my flat lack of enthusiasm always pissed her off.

“You’ve got to understand mother,” Graham would say. “She gets so bored since dad died and the drama keeps her going.”

Although I sympathized, I knew vodka colored lightly with orange juice probably helped too.

But this Norman Mailer thing might work out somehow. His wife was from Atkins, the pickle capitol of Arkansas, not ten minutes from Russellville. She even
worked in the pickle plant at one time. In 1975 Norman came here once to visit an old army buddy, and as representatives of the community my in-laws had a party for him. His wife managed an invitation to the event just to meet him. She ended up being the last of a long line of wives. Number six. They had been married 29 years so I guess it worked out. Evidently they came back and stayed with Nana and George twice after that as a couple. Now she was coming to Tech to read from a book she had just written. That took some guts, being married to Norman Mailer and just deciding you were going to write your own book about life in Atkins. But the plan was that Mr. Mailer would be joining her on her triumphant return as a published author and we would all sit down together at Nana’s for a big, gourmet dinner.

I thought about phoning my friends, but figured I needed additional confirmation. They were laughing it up in places like Dallas, or at least Little Rock, drinking martinis, eating sushi, and running with the big dogs like I always used to say I would until Graham stole my heart at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville and convinced me to move to his hometown. “I’m just a big ol’ bass and you’re some new kind of lure,” he said on our first date. He was the best looking bass I had ever seen. Who would have thought I would fall for that? But here I was in Russellville, listening to Nuclear One test its alarms every Wednesday at noon, which always started the dogs in town howling. Once I was talking to an old college buddy on the phone when the thing went off. It sounded like an air raid siren. “What the hell is that?” she asked. But I was so used to it by then I wasn’t sure right off what she was asking about.

The howling and the sirens made me realize I had to move cautiously on revealing the Mailer event. My flashier friends already thought I was crazy enough for moving to a
small town with a nuclear plant hovering over the river. And in this sort of social situation you can’t go around telling people Norman Mailer is coming to dinner if there is no way in hell this would ever happen. They would think I was drinking too much of the water. But the only effect the plant had on the town (other than the dogs) was where the cooling water circulated on the Arkansas River. The shad liked to breed there and the extra heat gave them a kind of fish scoliosus. Not even the twisted fish could keep us off the water though. Graham loved going down to the dock and (even though I would never admit it) I did too.

“Get in the truck and we’ll drive to Blackwell and get some beer,” Graham said. “Then we’ll go to the dock.” His truck was a $42,000 piece of comfort with four-wheel drive. He was afraid to haul anything dirty in it.

The nearest liquor store was in another county at an interstate exit suitably named Blackwell. Russellville was dry and comfortless. You would think that with the threat of nuclear meltdown people would at least want to be able to lay their hands easily on a beer. If you had to kiss your ass goodbye and welcome Jesus into your heart before your flesh fell off, you may as well be buzzing too.

“When is Norman Mailer coming for dinner?” I asked.

Graham shifted in his seat.

“It should be next month sometime.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “When will you know for sure?”

“Give me one of those beers,” he said. “I’ll tell you as soon as I find out.”

We drove on in silence to the dock. I wondered if we had bought enough beer.
Beer was never lacking at the boat dock, especially not today on the 4th of July. As we walked on it shifted lazily on its Styrofoam footings. Under a corrugated canopy people gathered around freshly grilled meat, already gathering flies. They paused from eating long enough to raise beers at us. "Woo-hoo!" some of them yelled. A fetid odor arose from the greenish brown lake water, populated by a few ducks and geese who ignored the festivities and continued to root in the mud with their asses up in the air. Down the shoreline glaringly white children splashed in the brown water while people sat in lawn chairs and watched from the shade of pine trees. It was 102 degrees.

"Where you been?" Doug yelled. He waved a Busch welcomingly in one hand while his other was entwined with Lavonna's, his wife. They owned the dock and were always in a good mood.

Before we could answer Leon cut in.

"Hey Cajun, when we gonna kick things off?" Leon asked.

Cajun took a swig on his Busch and squirmed his finger around in his ear. He then regarded his nail, briefly sniffed it, and went back to tuning a beat up guitar.

"Yeah Cajun!" Doug yelled. "When you gonna quit playing with your dick and start playing that guitar?"

"When I'm good and drunk enough," Cajun said. "And not a minute sooner."

Cajun never worried himself much about anything.

Doug rocked in his lawn chair and Leon twisted about, spilling his Busch, as if it were the funniest thing they had ever heard. Lavonna just shook her head and took another swig out of a plastic cup. But Leon kept asking again every ten minutes because
he wanted to accompany Cajun on an electric guitar he hadn’t quite figured out how to play. A five thousand dollar gleaming beauty we would painfully watch him use later in the day as a paddle, either out of resentment for his lack of musical skill, or more likely because his brother, a national golf pro, would toss objects he had won towards his backhoe operating brother as you would leftovers to a stray dog. He was the only gravel man in town wearing a twenty thousand dollar Rolex.

“See baby,” Graham whispered. “I brought you to a social event. Ain’t this every bit as good as dinner with Norman Mailer?”

“Shut up,” I said.

Lavonna waved me over to one of the picnic tables.

“I got something here for you Virginia I know you’re gonna like. My secret recipe,” Lavonna said. “I call it a grinner.”

I grinned and took a careful sip of something that tasted like Diet Coke and rum.

I continued to grin for the rest of the afternoon until I broke down and told Doug and Lavonna that Norman Mailer was coming for dinner. They seemed more in tune with the world than Leon or Cajun.

“Who?” they asked.

“Nevermind,” I said. “He’s just some guy.”

So I kept on drinking grinners until I was joining Leon and Cajun doing Hank Williams Sr. covers.

“Yer just in time to be too late. I hung a sign on my front gate – and nuh, nuh, ummm something, something. Cause I won’t be around no more!”

“Woo-hoo!” Everybody yelled.
I couldn’t do Hank Williams like I used to. But neither could they.

It was time to bone up on my reading before the big event. I needed to research as much Mailer as I could if I was going to sit across from him at dinner. Even if we didn’t talk about anything he had ever written I figured this would give me some sort of insight into his personality. I read the *Executioner’s Song*. Then I made it through *Ancient Evenings* since that was one the bookstore had on the shelf. I bought *Oswald’s Tale*, but the picture on the cover gave me the creeps, so I never read a page. My Mailer research kind of petered out after that, but while digging around at the bookstore I found a book on Arkansas that talked about every single town in it. There was a short entry for Russellville. It had been the first protestant mission west of the Mississippi and there was a quote from a missionary’s letter home. “The isolation here is unbearable,” he had written. I guess the people who wrote the guidebook had been here too. After that missionary wrote that Norman Mailer wouldn’t come around for dinner for almost two hundred years.

There was plenty of time to think about the coming event. Too much time. I phoned my friends.

“You’re gonna shit,” I said. “Guess who’s coming to dinner!”

But of course they couldn’t guess.

“Norman Mailer!” I said.

“Wow,” they said. “No way.”

But I could tell I wasn’t getting through, so I decided I would just mail them a
picture or something – me and Norman Mailer laughing over a glass of wine, or maybe
something more regional, holding up a giant catfish we had caught with the nuclear plant
in the background.

One night on the way to the dock we stopped in at Nana’s for some ice and news
of Norman.

“He’s just the most fascinating man. So sexy, so intense.” Everyone Nana
described she knew was sexy. “And his wife is beautiful. She went after him like stink
on a pig.” She sat back and smiled as she fingered the ice in her drink. If she could purr
she would have.

“Really,” I said. “So when is he coming to dinner?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Nana waved her hand dismissively. “I think next month.
I’m already planning my menu,” she said.

“Do you want me to bring anything? Some wine maybe?” It had to be something
good and there had to be plenty of it if I was going to pull off my photo op.

But Nana just took another drag on a screwdriver.

“You know, I asked him once what his favorite thing he had ever written was, and
you know what he told me?” Knowledge was power to Nana, even if it was something
she had made up.

“I don’t know. The Executioner’s Song?”

“No!” she said. “Ancient Evenings!”

I realized I didn’t care one way or another what his favorite novel was. There had
been so much speculation and teasing blow-offs from everyone I couldn’t stand it
anymore. I needed proof the man was actually coming to dinner so I didn’t embarrass myself after blabbing to my friends, and I also needed to figure out what to wear.

“Wait a minute. Is that the one set in ancient Egypt with all the incest and butt-fucking?” I said.

Nana wasn’t much one for reading, and this bit of information did not fit in with her vision.

“Well I don’t know anything about that,” Nana said. She went to the kitchen to freshen her drink.

On the way to the dock, Graham asked me why I had to talk about butt-fucking to his mother.

“Because the isolation here is unbearable,” I said.

The summer was at its hottest and the carp were pluming in the shallows, their gaping mouths pointing upwards, opening and closing as if they were trying to say something they couldn’t quite get out. They were especially slow and vulnerable at this time of year. Some of the little boys were trying to hit the larger fish with baseball bats. One had gone back to his house for a .22. When nobody was looking, I dropped a line into one of their open mouths to see what they would do, but my husband caught me.

“Quit that.” Graham said.

Later, after all the families and fishermen had cleared out, it was only the real freaks that came down at 2:00 a.m. to listen to the pop and slap of the water against the boats and thoughtfully drink whiskey. We sat in folding chairs and watched the bugs beat themselves to death on the lights. There was some dragging and cussing going on
down on the other end of the dock, so we went down to investigate. We caught Doug rigging a shotgun to some sort of bait dangling in the water. It was tied to an unsecured plastic chair. “Hunting beavers,” he said.

We went back to our boat and played cards, hoping we wouldn’t hear a gunshot. We talked about fools around town (Doug was on the list now), but as always talk kept on coming back to where we would go. There was the night we had met people who were passing through on a sailboat to do just that. It was a deaf man, his elderly father, and a little dog. They had built the boat themselves. It was clunky and had lots of bolts and welded spots on it, but it looked solid. They planned to go all the way to Grenada, just the three of them. When I asked the father what they planned to do after they got there he just shrugged and said, “Turn around.” We just couldn’t get over thinking about all the things they would see and people they would meet.

“Damn, we’re going to do that soon,” Graham said.

“You bet,” I said, and believed it.

The steady sound of the water could lull you into another way of thinking where lots of things were possible.

“Won’t it be something to have dinner with Norman Mailer?” I said.

“Yeah. Sure,” Graham said.

I had to call Nana the next day. After asking her how she was doing, I quickly turned the conversation to Norman.

"So, tell me more about Mailer," I said.

"He really is just the most amazing man," Nana said.
The Mailer talk went nowhere. She did have some gossip about a former Miss America (1987 to be exact) from Russellville that I found briefly intriguing. She had heard it from a friend of hers. A woman who sold dresses to beauty queens and kept a cooler of beer in the back of her store for special customers. Nana said everybody already knew that the girl had spent all her winnings on a boob job and a new car, moved to Hollywood, and starred in a Steven Segall movie. What they didn't know yet Nana was about to reveal. I heard her breathing getting heavy on the phone, but I wasn't sure if this was because she was excited or because it was happy hour.

"She's moved back here and in with her mother because she is addicted to cocaine," Nana said.

I didn't really care one way or the other, but then I started to think about. She got out and saw the bright lights and then had to come back here, giving everybody something to talk about, like Nana, who sometimes had a mean edge to go with her sense of drama. I imagined Miss America sitting on her mother's porch with a plate of fried catfish, watching the steam off the nuclear plant, smelling the hot brown water of the Arkansas River curving away from her around a mountain, wishing she had a whole pile of cocaine to make the day go quicker. Damn, that would be just awful.

"When's Mailer coming to dinner?" I asked.

One morning, while Graham watched a PGA tournament on t.v., I flopped dramatically on the couch and sighed heavily. Graham had taken me to dinner the only place in town the night before, and the thrill of the Catfish Inn had worn off, even it was all the way across the river. "Here's what we're gonna do," he had said over a crusty pile
of fish, generously trying to find something to light my fire with. "We'll rig the boat, go through the lock and dam, and head all the way to the Mississippi. From there we can head down to the gulf." We would fish all day and at night we would play cards and drink with the deep blue sea around us. Sometimes when we were out at night on the river we would already imagine ourselves there, as long as we looked away from the nuclear plant of course. Nothing in the wide world to hold us back from going anywhere in that boat. No crooked shad twisting about beneath us or slow-moving, giant catfish feeding on the bottom. Everytime we were out on the boat, the dark water lapping softly against the sides, I couldn't help but think of those shad. It must have been hard for them to get anywhere.

"Alright," Graham said. "Today we'll go to the Big Piney and spearfish."

This sounded exciting in a kind of exotic, Caribbean sort of way. I got up off the couch and grabbed my swimsuit.

"But we need to take Doug with us," Graham said. "He needs some cheering up."

Doug had taken an unfortunate dare the week before that everybody knew about involving a socket wrench and a Viagra. There had been a trip to the emergency room and they had to use a Dremel and ice water to get the thing off. The ice water was to keep the wrench from overheating while they were cutting. Leon and Cajun, who put him up to it at the end of a drunken night at the dock, were having way too much fun with the whole affair. Doug didn't have much to say to them right now, and his wife kind of wanted him out of the way so she wouldn't have to be reminded by the sight of him what a fool she married. I bet Norman Mailer doesn't have to hang out with people who stick their dicks in socket wrenches I thought.
We drove as far as the road would go in the hills above town and took four-wheelers the rest of the way. Doug had a little trouble sitting on his. There were mud holes full of mosquitoes and cedar branches whacked us. When we got there though a deep, clear, pool stretched out wide and smooth, rocks glowing in pale, gray colors below the water. Graham showed me how to use a spear gun and Doug told me what to do with it if anyone drove up who might be with the Game and Fish Commission. “Just drop it in the water and try and scoot it out of the way,” he said.

After I strapped on my snorkel, I couldn’t remove my face from the cool water or shoot at enough fish. I didn’t hit any, but I watched my husband hover on the top of the water like a Jesus bug, a knife in one hand. After a few minutes, he dove down and stabbed at the bottom. He burst back up with a catfish wriggling and squeaking against the hilt. “Goddamn!” Doug said, laughing. It was good to see him laugh.

I phoned my friends. I couldn’t wait to tell them.

“He stabbed a fucking catfish in the back of the head!”

“Oh!” they said. “That’s disgusting.”

I just couldn’t get over it though. Never seen it before, and probably never will again. Things like that just don’t happen everyday. But then my excitement started to make me feel stupid and simple. So, I told them about Doug and that seemed to please them. “Oh my God!” they said. “I can’t believe people like that live there!” I felt kind of dirty when I got off the phone though for using his misfortune as a prop to amuse my more sophisticated friends.

The night of the reading arrived and it brought bad news. There would be no
dinner. Apparently Mr. Mailer had decided not to return to the River Valley, and his wife would read alone at Arkansas Tech.

"Well hell," Graham said. "I'm sorry." He had been genuinely excited about the idea of delivering on it.

I thought I would be upset about missing out on Mailer, but my disappointment was limited to how foolish I would sound telling my friends about it. "Oh, that whole Mailer thing, well you see he had an emergency at the last minute and sent his regrets." They wouldn't buy it of course. They would sympathize, but my obvious worldly limitations would be naked and exposed. They would think how sad and alone a little creature I was in a cultural wasteland. So pathetic that I would make things up like having dinner with famous writers.

"We'll go see her and mother will introduce you to her anyway."

We picked Nana up because her big, white Lincoln didn't run as good as it used to. Plus, too many screwdrivers tended to make her a threat on the road. I could tell Nana was disappointed too, but she had to salvage whatever drama she could.

"She is simply the most amazing woman," Nana said.

The lights brightened and then were adjusted to better display Mrs. Mailer. As she walked across the stage the auditorium stood and clapped. Nana clapped as if it were her only child on stage. And Graham stood a little straighter and smiled at me as he brought his hands together. Mrs. Mailer was a very attractive lady with red hair that reflected the lights. She wore flowing, expensive looking clothes and seemed to be genuinely pleased to be reading to her hometown audience. She skimmed through her
book and read passages that included things like dead rats ending up in pickle vats. It
didn’t seem to take very long. Maybe she got tired.

Afterwards people lined up to have her book signed, which I didn’t buy so I
really didn’t have any reason to stand there. Nothing against the woman, but pickle plant
novels just weren’t my thing. Neither Graham nor Nana bought one either, but Graham
maneuvered me up to the front of the line with them anyway. He was the same sort of
excited tense he got when he had hooked a big fish, and his mother was smiling right
beside him.

“Mrs. Mailer, I’m Nana Johnson. This is my son Graham, he was 19 when you
were here last, and this is his wife Virginia.”

Graham gave her a big grin and shook her hand. I smiled and did the same.

Mrs Mailer stared blankly at us and smiled.

“You met Norman at a dinner reception I had here at Tech and you stayed with us
a few times.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Mailer said, and nodded. “Yes.”

“You remember, my husband George was president then?” Nana said.

But I could tell by the look on her face that there was no recollection. She
continued to smile as she glanced around behind us to see who was next in line. Nana
said a few more things at her, but she didn’t really respond much, just smiled and nodded
her head.

We retreated from the front of the line and pretended to be interested in the fruit
and cheese tray for a moment. I ate three cubes of smokey cheddar and a grape. Nana
greeted someone she knew a little too loudly, and Graham cursed quietly under his
breath. He slid over to a side wall to get out of the way of people waiting in line for their pickled rat novels to be signed. I used this as an excuse to go get a drink of water, but Graham grabbed my arm on the way to the fountain.

"C'mon," he said. "I'll get mother and let's get out of here."

Nana made a pretense of not wanting to leave because so many people were dying to talk to her, but then she consented because there really was something she needed to attend to elsewhere.

In the car on the way home Nana said, "You know I heard she had cancer recently. That isn't her real hair."

"I saw it up close. It was too," I said.

"No. She was definitely wearing a wig," Graham said.

"Shit! What are you going to tell me next. She had a wooden leg?"

And none of us said anything else about it on the ride home.

When we got back to our house, Graham dropped me off quietly and then said he had an errand. He was only gone thirty minutes before he came back and stuck his head in the door.

"Let's go down to the dam park and watch the overflow release. I've got some beer already just get your ass in the truck," Graham said.

We loved saying that. There's a baseball game today at the dam park. I went for a run at the dam park. That dam park sure is nice when it isn't too hot.

The smell of chili dogs hit me immediately as I slid across the seat. I popped the top on a beer and counted the seconds until we arrived at the Arkansas River Dam, not
wanting to appear too greedy about the Sonic bag sitting between us, grease teasingly staining the sides. Once we were parked it didn’t take long to make the dogs disappear. Then we each grabbed another beer and got out of the truck.

Water roared and jetted, rising upward in churning towers along the bottom of the dam. Recently the rains had been heavy, and logs and brush floated above its rim. I thought of the disappointment of being a stump all the way from up river, starting out on a big journey, only to be stuck in Russellville. There was so much pressure. We stood for a while listening to the thunder of the water that had triumphantly escaped.

“Goddamn,” Graham said. “Just look at it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Shit.”

Which was what we always said when we came to look at the dam, because it was true.

“Can you imagine building something like that?” he said.

“No way. It’s crazy,” I said. And I meant it.

We watched the water churn and talked about pressure, river channels, and the tiny bass boats hovering as close as possible near the tumbling water beneath the dam. “They’re fishing for big cats,” he said. On the far shore where it was sandy and wide, a fire was built in front of the Catfish Inn and occasionally a dark figure would pass in front of the flames, waiting for the fishers to return.

“I wonder if Norman Mailer would have come with us to the dam,” I said, and thought this was funny. Norman Mailer drinking cheap beer and eating chili dogs and all.

“Fuck Norman Mailer,” he said.
I thought about this.

“Yeah, fuck him,” I said.

And as we sat on the rocky bank under the stars, the nuclear plant glowing in the distance, we kept watching the river leap and jump free from the dam as it was released. Like a bucking bull straight out of the shoot. And it road on down away from us carrying silt and bent-back shad, mighty catfish heading all the way to the Mississippi, and then further and further on yet to the ocean, past Panama City Beach, on to Grenada, even to Bora-Bora, on to the big wide world.
The Needy Family

Thanksgiving I had worked the Meals on Wheels run again. It was mostly old women who would come to the door with too many or too little clothes on, smelling of talcum powder or pee. They would trick you into coming inside by acting like they were too feeble to just take the plate from you. Then you'd have to go in and set it up for them on the t.v. tray while they talked. My out was always, "Well God Bless you Mrs. Whatever" and that seemed to satisfy them enough for me to get back out the door. Not once could any of them remember my name, but they always talked about my mother. They couldn't expect everybody else's dinner to get cold just because they wanted to chat. Back home I would sit down with my own plate from the service after heating it up in the microwave and watch replays of highlights from the Macy's Day parade. Then I would sit down with my Bible and open it at random to see what sort of message the Lord might have for me today. Seems like it always fell open on something about a long line of begettings, or things to remember when dealing with cloven-hooved animals, which wasn't always that inspiring. I would be in bed by ten, the single bed I had slept in since I could first remember, with the same faded pink flower curtains over the window, because I had an early shift the next day at Bud Avant's Bug Stompers. But first I would say my prayers and ask God to say goodnight to Mama for me. "The turkey was dry
today Mama. And the dressing looked like cat crap. Martha can’t make it like you did.”

It was getting close to Christmas when I was watching TV and got the idea about the needy family. It was also the beginning of the end of my close personal relationship with our Lord and Savior, but I didn’t know it at the time. All the ads showing happy children with new toys and voice-overs about love, and family, and the birth of the little baby Jesus moved me somehow and I wanted my own piece of the season of giving. Those who give shall receive. But those charities on TV expect you to send in a check to an office up in New York or Los Angeles, no questions asked. Then you get a computer-printed slip saying “thanks” a few months later that you can use to get a discount on your taxes. There are no clean, smiling, children looking to you in gratitude. No one you know is aware of what a giving heart you have unless maybe the charity has bumper stickers that tell what you did. But that would be tacky, like the ones saying your kid is smarter than everyone else’s, which my mother, God rest her soul, never had to stick on her bumper. My mother did have the thankfulness of the community with her good deeds and righteous living, but no matter what I did, people just didn’t see that in me. I wanted some needy child to know who had sent the ten dollars that provided a hot plate of macaroni and cheese or a new pair of socks. I needed to make my hard-earned dollars count. I wanted to see the expression of thankful joy on some faces, and in order for that to happen I needed to make it local.

I could see myself already, handing over the goods with a shy smile, their eyes tearing up out of the unbelievable bounty provided at their time of greatest need. “Thank the dear Lord for you!” they’d say and hug me tight. They’d grip my hands and tug me
into their three-room shack. Maybe four rooms, but they would be tidy and clean.

Noble people in need. After the initial celebration died down I would politely remove
their sweet children's arms from my legs and leave, but always be remembered ever
afterwards as an angel from heaven. That Levita sure is an angel from heaven, they'd
say. Pretty soon other people around town would pick up on it too. It got better each
time I imagined it. I could almost see God himself looking down on me and smiling with
my Mama sitting right beside him. Martha might even appreciate my giving spirit if she
had the hand of God pointing it out to her with a ray of light or voice from heaven saying,
"In Levita, I am well pleased."

Now I knew I couldn't walk up to somebody's house and hand them a sack of
groceries without them thinking I was crazy. Hi, my name's Levita. Here's a sack of
potatoes. God bless! But if I went through my church that bitch Martha would be
bossing me around. She's the type who would stand there and smile in her little
matching outfits from J. C. Penneys while people told her what a good job she did,
cleaning the church, or organizing the Easter egg hunt when my hands were the ones
smelling like Pine Sol and stained orangish-blue from dyeing two hundred Easter eggs
myself because, as Martha put it, the women with children really were too busy. Martha
had kids, but she was really too busy getting her hair done every Saturday in the same jet
black helmet and God forbid she should break a nail. She kept her fingers slightly flexed
and aloft, like a mannequin, to keep them from getting chipped. That's why I was always
stuck scrubbing the toilets. There was no personal glory I had ever found serving the
community needs of the United Baptist Church, and sometimes it was a plain old pain in
the ass. Things needed to change.
Martha was also my supervisor at work, so I couldn’t get too snappy with her. We both worked at Bud Avant’s Bug Stompers of the River Valley. Bud was the one who gave me my first real job right out of high school and I’d been with them two years. I got to drive a white pick-up truck with a gigantic plastic black widow on either door. I didn’t look too bad in my green jumpsuit neither. Kind of fill it out nicer than any of the other exterminators if you ask me. The Bug Stompers also ended up giving me an idea on how I could organize my own charitable contribution free of Martha’s show-stealing ways.

Near the end of our monthly meeting, with all twelve of us packed into Bud’s office, I decided to make my move.

“And one last thing. Dean and Ray, I want y’all picking up your spit cups from now on,” Bud said. “I don’t want to see anymore of that crap laying around on the back of the toilet seats or on anyone’s desk. It looks like somebody took a watery shit in a cup.”

“Ah, we just forget. Sorry Bud,” Dean said. His brown hair hung limply over one eye as he slumped in his chair. I kind of liked watching the way he moved sometimes, like a sloth I had seen on a nature show. It made me feel peaceful, especially when I caught him looking at me. I wondered what it would be like to stroke that hair away so I could see his other eye.

Ray just snorted and shook his head, like he couldn’t understand who wouldn’t just love finding that. Ray wasn’t real inclined to consider other people’s feelings on anything, and I always thought he resembled a ferret a little bit. Twitchy and mean. He had dirty blonde hair and pink-lined blue eyes in a freckled face.
“If there’s nothing else, then we’re done,” Bud said.

“I have a small announcement,” I said. “I would like my name withheld from the Christmas employee drawing this year.” Each year we drew a name from a hat and bought each other a present that we would open the day before we closed for Christmas. The best thing I had ever gotten was some peach-scented bath oil and peach-shaped soap from Bud. I was saving that for a special occasion. Last year I had drawn Martha’s name and given her a Santa Claus made out of Styrofoam balls with felt glued to it. I bought it for 50 cents at the church bazaar to raise money for constructing more Baptist churches in Guatemala after the floods destroyed so much of their crops, homes, and roads. I knew her daughter Belinda made it. “My, it is so cute,” she said. She held it pinched in her hands delicately, like a turd, and as she tilted it the plastic eyeballs rolled around on its cotton ball covered head. The worst thing I had ever gotten at the gift exchange was a card saying a ten-dollar donation had been made in my name to the Guatemalan Church Fund, but there was no way of knowing if Martha really did that, and I couldn’t exactly ask for proof.

“Withheld?” Bud said. “What do you mean?”

“I just think it would be more in the spirit of things, in the real spirit of Christmas, if rather than spend money on each other we found a needy family who we could really help,” I said. I couldn’t help but start to feel it right then, the spirit of giving, right there as everybody was watching me. It felt kind of warm and tingly all at once, starting somewhere in the pit of my stomach and spreading out. I wondered if that was how my mother had felt, and if this was finally God’s spirit descending down into me like it always looked like it did in those velveteen, backlit pictures of Jesus staring all dewy-
eyed up at the sky.

"Wait a minute," Ray said. He was always putting his two cents in. "I like the
gift exchange."

"Yeah," Dean said.

Ray and Dean liked to give unique gifts, especially if they drew a lady's name.
Beef jerky and Skoal were not uncommon. Last year, though, they went too far when
they gave me a box of ribbed rubbers, although I think that was entirely Ray's idea.
Dean couldn't look me in the face until the cockroaches started swarming in the spring
and we had to work double-shifts together. He kept telling Ray to shut up every time Ray
wanted to know if I was putting my Christmas present to good use.

"I just think that at this time of year we should be thinking about all those less
fortunate than ourselves who are in need," I said. The spirit spread right down to my
toes. They felt light enough to walk on water.

Dean was sitting next to me and whispered "church mouse" low enough no one
else could hear it. He knew Bud didn't go for him and Ray making fun of my over-bite.
Ray was less subtle and placed his hands together as if to pray, and then rolled his eyes at
the ceiling and stuck his upper teeth out. He lowered his hands quickly when Bud shot
him a warning look. Martha was trying to stare me down to see what my game plan was,
but I wouldn't meet her eyes. She always put too much eyeliner and mascara on and it
gave her the appearance of an angry raccoon.

"OK," Bud said. "But what about everyone that wants to go ahead with the
exchange?"

"That's fine. But as for me I would prefer that whatever money I would have
spent on someone else, or that they would have spent on me, go to help support a
needy family in the area this Christmas,” I said. “And I think it would be a fine thing if
Bud Avant’s Bug Stompers wanted to help me.” My body was a flaming sword in the
service of the Lord.

The other employees shifted uncomfortably. I heard “church mouse” a little
louder this time, only from Ray who was kicked hard by Dean. Martha cleared her throat
slowly and Bud sighed.

“Why I think that is a fine idea,” Martha said. “But why don’t we go ahead and
do gift exchange too. Kind of combine the two. I have all kinds of ideas of what we
could do for a family or two I have in mind.”

I was prepared for this.

“I still want my name withheld, and Martha I have my needy family already
picked,” I said. “Of course, if you wanted to help me...”

“Fine,” Bud said. “Let me know what you want me to do.” But Bud didn’t seem
exactly pleased with the idea, and Martha was wadding a Kleenex tightly, as if she were
strangling a small animal.

Ray started to poke his front teeth out and say something else, but Dean kicked
him again in the shin. Dean had a tendency to shut down Ray when he sensed he was
about to go too far with me. Sometimes when I caught him looking at me when I was
getting ready for my morning rounds, I got a little tingly feeling, but after that condom
stunt I figured he wasn’t a righteous man. Plus, how could you consider a man anything
more than a fool if he ran around with Ray?
"When you going to tell us who our recipients are?" Martha asked almost every day for a week after my announcement. She had started giving me any assignment that involved crawling under a house. "We could always give to the Springstons you know." The Springstons were a moderately needy family at our church whose main problem, if you ask me, stemmed from just being plain dumb. Maybe if they knew how to use those ribbed rubbers they wouldn't have such a litter of kids. Plus, if they were members of our church Martha would make it all about her once again. People would be coming up to her, patting her on her plump little shoulders, praising her for her spirit.

"I just need to finalize something," I said. "I’ll get back with you on it."

You would think, living in Dardanelle, Arkansas, in the Ouachita hills there would be tons of needy families available come Christmas time. On TV. they were everywhere, clutching their screaming babies and stretching their empty plates out at the camera. All I could find were angel trees at several businesses with tags hanging on them where you could pledge gifts to under-privileged children: Barbie Dolls, Tonka Toys, and My Pretty Ponies. There was all that bell ringing in front of Walmart. But I wasn’t about to blow my money on some anonymous little tag no one would ever read on a fake tree or support a thrift store industry. I worked too hard for that. One time I went to the Salvation Army just to look for an end table for my livingroom and that place was a nightmare. People fighting over just about any kind of crap. I remembered one old woman with floppy tits and no bra gripping a busted inflatable crocodile, trying to tug it away from another woman just like her. Everybody so common and filthy. And it had a smell I couldn’t stand, like old candy corn and sweat. I went to the United Way too, but
they wanted me to donate something to their general fund where it would just go to teaching some retard how to spell their own name, and the only other suggestion they had was to do something for one of the immigrant families that worked on the chicken-gutting lines for Tyson. I don’t speak Mexican, I told them. How would I know if they felt any gratitude if all they did was squawk Mexican at me? Besides, those brown, foreign faces and talk made me uncomfortable whenever I ran into a pack of them at Walmart. What would you get for them anyway? Their strange food and candy was already taking up entire aisles. I wouldn’t know what to pick. There had to be some place I could find a private needy family, one of my very own, American born, that would look a little more like what you would see in a made for TV movie. Then I got the idea to go the elementary school principal.

“I got a family that fits the bill, but be careful,” Mr. Armstrong said. “Two kids, a girl of 10 and a boy of 12. The father is disabled and on welfare. White.”

“They sound perfect,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just watch ‘em, if you know what I mean.”

I knew what he meant. I’d been around that sort my whole life and wasn’t about to take any shit off of them. If those people weren’t happy, weren’t grateful for what they got, then piss on ‘em, as my daddy used to say.

Daddy had left my mama shortly after I turned twelve. She used to follow him around all day preaching the word because she thought it hadn’t taken with him. He kind of liked to have a beer every now and then, raise a little hell, which didn’t seem to cause too much harm, but onetime I heard this horrible whomping noise and came downstairs to find her hitting him in the ass with a bible. He was curled up on the couch, his back to
her, giggling.

“You’re not bringing that stuff into my house,” she had wailed, in between each smack.

“That tickles,” he had said. He always had the sweetest giggle that most times it would get me started too.

When her arm tired out, she had dropped the bible right on top of his ass and gone to their room to cry and pray. He moved out three days later and we never knew nothing more about him until we found out he was dead in Cleveland, Mississippi, shot in a liquor store robbery while he was getting his Pabst Blue Ribbon. There was another mention of a potential woman and child down there, but we didn’t care to know any more about that. Whatever else he had going on down there could stay where it was as far as I was concerned, although whenever I imagined my Daddy after that, I always saw him with a new family, all of them sitting around drinking beer, cussing on a Sunday. I even had dreams where I saw them all gathered on a porch, laughing and talking about what fools me and Mama were, him giggling away. They always seemed so happy in those dreams, having so much fun, I would wake up feeling sick. Mama never quite got over any of the ordeal Daddy put her through.

“Lucky for you, Levita, you’re plain enough you won’t be tormented by men. You devote yourself to serving the Lord and don’t worry none about men,” she said. “God will reward you by your good deeds.”

She threw herself into the church and made me a part of every one of her projects. She had me working there three nights a week, doing everything from cleaning to cooking for the Meals On Wheels. I was such a help to her, she always said. The
reason why the Lord put her on this earth was to raise me in his word.

When she had her first stroke I was sixteen. The distortion of her downward pointing mouth just seemed to make her more holy to other people, kind of a twisted sort of saint, even though we were Baptists and knew that sainthood was nothing but bonafide idolatry. “Your mother is just an angel from heaven,” people would always say to me, their eyes tearing up a little. Two years later, a month before my high school graduation, Mama was in the ground. A series of mini strokes had worn her body down to nothing but one controlled and watery eye, fixed on me whenever I changed her diaper. Her face drooped, shutting the other eye half way, and her haywire brain would not allow her to walk or even speak clearly, but she still made certain noises that I took to be prayers.

People would visit and say, look Levita, she’s praying for us all, but she just chewed on her tongue and made little moaning noises. At her funeral there was a big turn-out from the church which paid the burial expenses. A brick was installed with her name on it in the church’s meditation garden, right next to the jonquils. For my high school graduation, one month later, the church gave me a white, faux leather bound bible with my name in gold letters on the front. Inside someone, I think Martha, had written how my mother was an angel in heaven looking down on me and saw what a good girl I was. I had kind of hoped they would send me on the senior trip to New Orleans, but no money was offered so I had to stay home. Martha said I could look on her as family then, now that my mother was gone, and she recommended me for an extermination job at Bud Avant’s Bug Stompers. I started work there right after to school so I could pay the bills.

“I’ve got the Needy Family,” I announced at the Monday morning meeting. “The
Bud seemed unmoved. He raised his eyes tiredly from the list of termite contracts and said that sounded fine. Ray and Dean were sitting on opposite sides of Bud. Things had chilled between them recently. Yesterday, I had found a brick of Velveeta and a mouse trap sitting on my truck’s hood. Ray just glared at me with his little weasel eyes, and whenever I looked up Dean was looking back at me, but would quickly look at his boots.

“The Hattabaughs are those ones that live out on Highway 23 in what’s left of the old Stokenbury house, aren’t they?” Martha said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Are you sure they are the best candidates?” Martha said. “Those children think nothing of dropping their pants and doing their business in the front yard. Are they even Christians?”

“They are who Mr. Armstrong said were the most needy at the elementary school,” I said. “And whether they are true Christians or not should not affect our spirit of giving. Besides, I’ve already told Mr. Armstrong to tell them they have been selected as our Needy Family this year and to provide us with a list of what they need most. You can help me get things together as soon as we get the list, if you want to.”

I was going to have to watch her.

“Alright then, let’s get on it today,” Bud said.

I was half way through my afternoon rounds, doing a cockroach spray at a duplex when my walkie-talkie went off.

“Uh, Bug One to Bug Two.”
“This is Bug One, come in Bug Two.”

“Uh, Bug Two, I mean, uh Levita, I was just gonna say that I didn’t have nothin’ to do with that mousetrap on your truck or the Velveeta. That was all Ray’s doing.”

“OK Dean.”

The line crackled briefly but Dean was silent.

“I’m in the middle of spraying down a duplex here Dean.”

“Uh, OK, just wanted you to know that.”

“OK. This is Bug Two Out.”

The list the Needy Family provided had several things on it that I crossed off immediately. The kids wanted an Xbox and several violent sounding games with words like smackdown, demon spore, or doomsday in their titles. The father wanted a deluxe barbecue/smoker grill and a giant cooler, and the mother hadn’t put anything down at all. The list did contain their sizes though, and I could tell the children were far larger than I had expected. I called Mr. Armstrong and asked, but he assured me the sizes were right, as well as their age.

“They’re built pretty large,” Martha said. Her daughter was in the same class as the Needy Family girl, and she was no pixie herself.

This wasn’t working with my vision. The children weren’t supposed to be fat. Fat just meant laziness and no missed meals. Fat was not thankful or needy. I didn’t want fat children to be the beneficiaries of my good will, reaching out plump greasy fingers to thank me, but it was too late to back out. Everybody, especially Martha, would talk about how Levita talked all big about the season of giving and then didn’t follow
through. So, I took up a general collection from the Bug Stomper's employees and Bud said he would chip in a hundred-dollar check just for their holiday incidentals. All told we had about $180 dollars from the employees, Martha only contributed $5, with Dean putting in fifty dollars of his own, counting it out slowly in front of me.

"My, Dean!" I said.

He shrugged like he shit $50 bills every morning.

"Uh, Levita, I was thinking you might want to go to a movie or something sometime," Dean said. "With me."

"Why don't you help me buy the things for the Needy Family at Walmart after work?" I said. My heart gave a little flutter and I was getting the same glow I got from the spirit of giving. I wasn't sure if I had time to fool with a man with the Christmas holidays and all to think of, but I kind of wanted to see what Dean acted like outside of his role as a Bug Stomper and former best friend to Ray. I didn't know if Dean was somebody I could trust.

"Yeah, I guess," he said.

He looked at me directly and I saw his revealed eye was greyish green.

Using the size list, plus an extra $100 I threw in of my own money (this couldn't be done half-assed if my name was attached to it), Dean and I purchased winter coats for the children, along with books and one or two toys that looked educational, socks for the father, a scarf and glove set for the mother, and a frozen turkey, sacks of potatoes, frozen pies, canned cranberry sauce, and toilet paper. Dean had blushed when we passed things relating to feminine hygiene. He didn't say much, but he carried every little last thing out to the truck and volunteered to see me home with it.
"No thank you," I said. "I can get these things home myself and then get them wrapped up for our delivery tomorrow."

"Don't forget what I said about the movie," Dean said, his finger traced a line along the truck window.

I couldn't forget all the way home and even had trouble forgetting long enough to get to sleep, but I thought maybe that was just excitement about the big handover the next day.

Martha insisted on being present for the delivery. It's the least I can do, she said, and even brought me a cup of coffee and a donut from Fred's Grocery that morning. She was unusually well-dressed in a matching red sweater set with giant snowflakes on it and bright red lipstick. Bud was irritated two people would be gone and he would have to answer the phone himself. When Dean asked if maybe he could go to help carry stuff, Bud shut him down quick with a silver fish run. We loaded up the Stomper mobile and headed out for the Hattabaugh place, Martha applying powder in the visor mirror. She acted like she was going on a date. Christmas was one week away.

When we pulled into the drive up to the old farmhouse, dogs flowed out from the briars growing in the yard, from behind a rusted, silver septic tank, from under a broken down car on cinder blocks, and one dragged itself awkwardly out of a hole in the front porch. I honked the horn twice to get someone in the house's attention, while they howled and growled around us. Nothing moved. I honked the horn again. A one-eyed bitch slammed her fore paws against the black widow on my side, rattling the door. Finally, a hand pulled back a curtain from the front door, which opened only a crack.
“Hang on a minute,” Martha said. “We’re a few minutes early.”

“They won’t care,” I said, but then a blue van with a Pope County Times sticker on it pulled in directly behind us.

“I thought the publicity would be good for the Bug Stompers,” Martha said.

A hoarse voice cussed something at the dogs and they slunk back.

As if in slow motion, I saw Martha get out of the truck clutching the envelope with the check in it and head for the reporter and photographer. I stared after her until she turned around and yelled for me to get the rest of the stuff. While I was dragging the Walmart bags up to the porch, Martha was telling the reporter all about how much she wanted everybody to know the Bug Stompers cared about the community. Even after the third trip, neither the reporter nor the photographer had looked at me or offered to help.

“Let’s get a picture of them all on this porch, handing over the check and surrounded by the gifts,” the reporter said.

The Hattabaughs did not fully emerge from the house until the door was banged on. The father came out first, a wisp of smoke following him through the screen door.

“What is this again?” the father said. He was barefoot and smoking a cigarette.

Two large children wearing sweats outfits shoved past him onto the porch.

I started to step up and answer him, the frozen turkey in one hand and toilet paper in the other, but Martha cut me off with the check.

“A special Christmas wish for you and your family from Bud Avant’s Bug Stompers. We just wanted to show you how much we cared,” Martha said.

“Yeah,” I said. “This is for you from us at Bud’s.”

“Huh,” the father said. He leaned over and looked into one of the sacks and took
a drag on his cigarette. "Why'd you pick us?"

"Well..." Martha said, waving the smoke away from her hair.

"You were chosen by an anonymous community member," I said.

The children saw the turkey and ripped into one package containing a coat and mittens.

"We didn't ask for this," the boy said, kicking the wrapping paper. "Where's Medal of Honor?" The girl peered into the grocery sacks and asked if there were any cookies or candy. I had left those out on purpose on account of their size.

"There's pies," I said.

"We've supplied you with all the fixings for your Christmas dinner, as well as certain necessities for the children," Martha said.

The man picked up one of the winter coats and held it out in front of him.

"It ain't cold," he said. "Do you still have the receipts?"

"We would also like to give you this check from Bud Avant's for any of your more personal needs this winter," Martha said.

"So you can buy each other presents or pay the bills or something," I said. It was hard to edge myself any closer in without falling in the hole the dog had crawled out of. I leaned in toward the man and the kids, but the frozen turkey threw me off balance.

A woman emerged slightly from the doorway in a pink sweatshirt with a kitten on it and clutching a baby wearing only a diaper to her hip. She looked tired as she glanced down at the grocery sacks and strips of wrapping paper underfoot. She hefted the baby to her other hip and glared at Martha. No one had said anything about a baby to me at the elementary school.
“How much is it?” she said.

“$100,” Martha said. She smiled.

“What we supposed to do with that?” the woman snorted and went back inside.

“Can we get a picture of you handing the check over?” the photographer asked.

Martha suggested they arrange some of the gifts around their feet. She handed the check towards the father who looked at it in her hand like she was presenting him with a weird looking bug.

“Thank you,” he said. “Do you do this every year?”

“This is the first,” I said.

“But I think we should do it every year,” Martha said. She smiled at the reporter while the photographer got another shot. “After all, this is the season to give to those who need it most.”

The photo they published was a close-up of Martha, all smiling teeth and outlined eyes, cropped so close you could only see the top of the head of one of the children, the check in the man’s hand, and an outline of the woman’s face peering through the screen door from within the house. The baby’s eyes glowed through the screen in some sort of trick of the light. My left shoulder is in the picture, but the toilet paper I was holding covered up my name sewn onto my coveralls. Her name was mentioned in the title, as well as Bud’s, and they ran the photo on the front page where they usually run pictures of kids on the playground or the leaves turning pretty colors. There was no mention of me. Martha prissed around the Bug Stompers for two days, even putting a clipping of the newspaper article up on the wall by the coffeepot, until
Dean drew a raccoon tail on her.

I quit praying every night to God, but I still talked to Mama. Told her how much I missed her, but that things were going to have to change around here. I didn’t go to church for a while and quit doing any of the volunteer work such as the cleaning and errand running. There was the Christmas pageant that week, the goody bags under the tree, the pancake breakfast, and the midnight service on Christmas Eve I wanted no part of. If they didn’t like it, piss on ’em. Martha could do it herself. I didn’t pay much attention to the Christmas season-of-giving stuff on the TV either since it didn’t have anything to do with me anymore. I was through with that. Why did people keep having these kids they couldn’t feed anyway? I went to work, went home, and got ready to go see a movie, or eat chicken, or go bowling with Dean every night. I used all my peach scented bath oil up. There wasn’t much to say to Martha except when I was getting my schedule for the day.

“Where you been?” Martha said. “Have you been sick?”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“We sure do miss you down at the church,” Martha said.

“Who do I spray first?” I said.

After Christmas break, when school started in again, the Needy Family girl beat up Martha’s daughter and took her purse at school. That was almost enough to get me believing in the spirit again. Martha had resigned as the church activities leader since she said the workload was a little too much for her when her family needed her more at home. Things had fallen off lately at United Baptist as far as the cleanliness of the men’s
toilets, and the children complained about all that was lacking in their goody bags.

Easter was coming up, and Martha couldn’t handle the pressure. My phone started to ring to see if I wouldn’t mind coming in and helping out a little, maybe even just to mop up. I said I would think about it, but I wasn’t in any rush to take that load back on.

By Easter, Dean and I were fooling around. We started out watching movies together, but now we like to drive up to the Illinois Bayou in a Bug Stomper truck because they have wide front seats. We drink beer and watch the moon ripple across the water and talk about what we’re going to do about things. When he’s laying there with his head in my lap he just looks up at me while I stroke his hair like he can’t get over how lucky he is. Dean got me a bumper sticker for Valentine’s Day that says *Lil Angel* that I put on my truck, and I radio him all the time just to tell him I think he’s cute. Bug Two to Bug One. Bud rolls his eyes whenever he sees that bumper sticker, but he doesn’t make me take it off, so I guess maybe its true. Ray went over to Terminix, which is where people like him belong if you ask me.
When it comes to the potential sale of a haunted property, Arkansas State Law requires the owner to disclose to the prospective buyer the nature of the haunting. This is one of those archaic laws, like those against spitting in front of a lady or riding a horse drunk on a Sunday, which the state has not had time to clean off its books. The existence of such a law was first pointed out to me by Mr. Vance, also known simply as Old Man Vance, of Vance Title Insurance of Pope County. My future ex-husband and I had recently purchased one of the finer old homes of Russellville, Arkansas. We lived in another house my husband had already shared with his first ex-wife, and were well into an extensive remodeling when Old Man Vance called to tell me this. Rumors had reached him from ductwork, plumbing, and general construction people around town. He was giggling. He also wanted a tour of the home he remembered from its first unveiling, when Mr. and Mrs. Walker opened it up for a community viewing.

“They had one day set aside just for the coloreds to see it,” Mr. Vance said. He seemed to think this was incredibly gracious.

The five thousand square foot home was designed by a former student of Frank Lloyd Wright. The original design had been featured in an architectural magazine, and copied meticulously and enhanced by the Walkers. It contained
creamy limestone and chocolate colored marble floors with delicate orange feathering, a custom mahogany kitchen from Germany, floor to ceiling glass that slid on heavy rollers to open to the outside, walnut tongue and groove walls, an indoor swimming pool – it was lovely and rare and no one in Pope County would buy it. Russellville was a land that subscribed to model #809, new, French country home knock-offs in solidly Baptist, caucasian neighborhoods. There was something disturbingly atypical for Pope County about this home. Since the death of Mrs. Walker it had remained empty on the market. Even just a few hours away in Fayetteville, the house would have been snatched up at over a million. We purchased it for $157,000 with a loan my parents insisted on making to us, half of the original construction cost, and began our renovations, stunned at our good luck. We walked through the vacant house several times a day, kissing and hugging one another. Then the ghost, or ghosts, made their displeasure apparent.

"I'm betting it's Mrs. Walker, if I know her," Mr. Vance said. He walked with his son beside him, a man in his late fifties, who occasionally steadied his father with a slight touch to his elbow.

Mrs. Walker had been dead for six years. The house was placed on the market by her surviving children (an airline pilot living in Memphis and a mentally disabled daughter living one block away) one year after her death. When I had viewed the house, a mattress still lay in the master bedroom atop blue shag carpeting, the surrounding walls covered in a delicate, baby-blue fillagree pattern copied from an Italian Villa. The daughter occasionally returned to sleep there in the same room where her mother had died. Several windows were
broken, which the broker told me the son had done immediately following his mother’s death. He also killed all her pets. Despite further questioning, I learned little about the Walkers as a family. Whatever animosity could make a fifty year old man break perfectly good windows, was concentrated into a hard, private place.

“But would she be doing all the hammering and sawing in the basement?” I asked.

“Nope. That was Mr. Walker’s workshop,” he said. “It’s where he had a heart attack not two years after they built this place.”

Ah hell, I thought.

“What do you think they want?” I said.

Mr. Vance just shrugged.

“Maybe your attention.”

I was unsettled by the prospect of ghosts, but not surprised. Since I was seven I had experienced unexpected visits and insistent noises in the home I grew up in. Doors would unlock themselves and open before your eyes. Footsteps placed with deliberate impact on an empty staircase demanded your attention late at night. Stereos and lights switched on without any contact, and often at three o’clock in the morning. Suspended flashes of light balanced directly at eye level in the center of the room, like an invisible person was taking a Polaroid of you. Streaks of light smeared through the core of the house.

People unfamiliar with ghosts, or those who flatly deny their existence,
might attempt to explain away these phenomena. I do not argue with disbelievers. That is as pointless as debating the existence of love. You’ve either experienced it or you haven’t. I’ve heard multiple theories. Perhaps we had seen reflected light from a passing car, there was an electrical surge, or the house was merely settling, as if it were a dog making a customary three turns before laying down to sleep at night. These are all fine theories, but when someone a little on the dead side makes an appearance, they do so in a way that leaves no room for speculation. You are not alone. That was not the TV in another room. It is happening right next to you, and no amount of foundation problems would have made that noise. Disbelievers would have a harder time explaining the disembodied voices, clear utterances from thin air.

The ghost in my parent’s home made more frequent and vocal visits as I grew older. When I was twelve he first announced himself by banging into a dresser, as if he had accidentally stumbled against it. My antique dresser shuddered slightly with the impact. Bottles of Youth Dew and White Shoulders clinked against a pink china box of my grandmother’s displaying a Victorian couple under a spreading willow. Sometimes he did it hard enough he knocked a bottle over. I was usually reading. I would look up at the noise and realize who it was just as the hair on the back of my neck did, a hazy mirror reflected only myself in an empty, iron bed in the lamplight. He liked to sit at the foot of the bed. The presence of him causing the steel springs to creak as a strange weight came over me. He sighed a lot. His sighs heavy and sad as his invisible density. Deep and breathy. However, beyond whatever terror I felt at his presence, there
was one thing I always thought. Asshole.

"I love you," he said to me once. I was sixteen. His voice was clear and calm, almost kind. A man's voice, loud, directly by my right ear. I leapt from bed, ripped my door open, and stood in the hall debating who I should wake up first. Come quick, a ghost is in love with me! This didn't seem like a feasible option, not because no one else would believe me, but because I realized I was embarrassed by what the ghost had said, something no living male had ever said to me. The imposition made me angry, and what's more, I didn't believe in the sincerity of his declaration.

To my sister Sarah he said, "I can see you but you can't see me," as he hovered in a dark lump at the foot of her bed, outlined against the moonlit window. She awoke from a bad nightmare and groped for her glasses. The thing was still there. It repeated itself slowly to make certain she heard him, the mass of it blocking the glow from the moonlight. Twenty-one years later she still has difficulty speaking about it. To my mother he would do the sighing routine as he sat on the bed, or whisper the same word into her ear over and over again. "Prepare," he liked to tell her. My father is completely deaf in one ear and he wears a hearing aid in the other. He has never heard the ghost, but he does see the lights.

"What do you think it wants?" I asked my mother.

Although she didn't have a theory, she liked to associate the ghost with her religious beliefs, thinking maybe it was some kind of angel come to tell her to ready herself for a great undertaking or impending tragedy.
“That’s no angel,” I said. “Look what it did to Sarah.”

I didn’t tell her the ghost made me feel dirty, like an old man was sitting in the corner every night playing with himself while I got undressed. Whatever it wanted from me didn’t feel clean. Plus, its approach with each of us was entirely different, like it had been watching us trying to figure out which routine would have the greatest impact upon whom. Its motivations seemed to be to toy with us individually and throw in an occasional light display for a group show. The ghost really needed, wanted, lots of attention, but what for and why? I imagined him as an aged, living man, alone and dissatisfied, lingering after his death because he mistakenly believed he still had a shot at some earthly happiness, finding nothing but frustration and misunderstanding.

I think I understood what Mr. and Mrs. Walker wanted. They wanted us to go away and not come back, leave their home intact as they originally and lovingly designed it. Perhaps they truly wanted to be together there as they had only shortly been in life. Even the wallpaper in the master bedroom had been custom-made from a fresco in Italy they saw on their honeymoon. I hated most wallpaper, especially baby blue, and immediately set about stripping it. The second night I was in the home working alone, the hammering began in the basement. I had hired a general contractor to redo some of the bathrooms, and mistakenly believed he may have slipped in while I wasn’t looking. It was eleven o’clock at night, an unusual time for anyone to start working on a bathroom.
“Hello!” I called down the stairs.

The hammering stopped at once.

I walked slowly down the stairs, my Tiger Claw wallpaper perforator poised like a weapon. The basement, a 1500 square foot room designed to be a fallout shelter by the forward-thinking Walkers, a foot and half of poured concrete over my head, steel beams every two feet, was totally empty. I quit for the night.

“There’s something going on over there,” I told my husband, Richard.

He laughed and said I was too sensitive, maybe even a little crazy. His work kept him more and more on the road and I was jobless, hence my designated remodeling position. In Russellville the main employer was either the chicken processing or nuclear plant. When we went out with any of his friends or family, he told them about my tendency to hear things. I would pick at the paint on my fingernails as I listened to them laugh at my silliness.

My labor continued, during the day, late at night, as furiously as my desire to move into the home I regarded more and more as a palace. We were living in a small, ordinary house with stenciled, pineapple remnants his first ex-wife had begun on the kitchen walls, a tiny, dark, narrow hallway connecting all the bedrooms. My elbows were constantly bruised carrying laundry baskets down that hall. Dense taupe carpet that absorbed the humidity lay on all the floors, except for torn linoleum in the kitchen. After our marriage, my husband had renegged on his agreement to allow me to remodel (it was his home), and fought bitterly with me over the discard of even an inoperable electric can opener. "Do you know how much these things cost?" he'd yelled when he saw it in the trash.
"Eight dollars at Walmart!" I'd yelled back. "Try and get it rebuilt for that!" He was making more than six figures a year at the time. The low, acoustic ceilings caught all dust and cobwebs, and tiny knick-knacks the first wife hadn't wanted to take with her, such as a heart-shaped wreath over the door, still littered the house despite my protests. A ripped couch his first ex-wife had wanted to get rid of sat in the living room, the tears so large my feet would frequently get caught in them if I tucked them under me. In the Walker's house, the soft glow of the wood when the sunlight hit it, the smooth comfort of the limestone beneath my bare feet, the emptiness of it, were delightful to me. The hallways were eight feet wide, more a thoroughfare than a hall. It was my first real home with my new husband, and I imagined all manner of happiness possible there. Later there would be gardens filled with color outside the glass walls. There were so many perfect spots for a Christmas tree, I would never limit myself to one. The imaginary kids could play in the expansive back yard. I wanted to turn the basement into my personal art studio.

The hammering started up again within days. Each time I yelled down the stairs, each time it stopped, although I did not go down to investigate the emptiness I knew I would find. I'll just focus on the living room, I thought. One evening, very late at night, on a new, lone couch I purchased from my own savings and had delivered, I lay down to rest my eyes. My arms were aching from stripping wallpaper, and I could feel the warm stillness of the house resting around me until the footsteps began. Ah hell, I thought, suddenly chilled, refusing to open my eyes. Maybe he would quit if I ignored him. There was a
pause, and then it seemed almost as if he had backtracked to take the same purposeful steps in what sounded like men’s, leather-soled dress shoes on the limestone floors. I lay very still, trying to keep my breath steadier than my heartbeat. He took the steps again and coughed loudly, clearing his throat like someone making a request for directions.

“I hear you old man,” I said, irritated he had come upstairs.

After that, the Walkers escalated their approach, perhaps due to my rudeness.

I never saw a spectral vision of either one of the Walker’s, but once, when I was seven years old, I had seen the ghost in my parent's house. It had been late a night when I awoke from a deep sleep, instantly and unreasonably terrified. I put on my glasses. In the hallway a man’s face peered through the open door, his expression unhappy, even a little angry, disapproving and bullish. As I recall, he looked something like a severely displeased Perry Mason. His face was gray and semi-transparent, like a ghost from Scooby Doo, and I lay there unblinking, unable to move, until it gradually faded away. I had never seen him before, nor have I seen him since.

By the time I was in my teens, the ghost found newer ways to torment me. Car keys frequently turned up in the freezer. Envelopes of money would disappear completely until I returned from a frustrated trip to the bank to find them propped in the center of the coffee table. I began to regard the ghost as a mannish-boy, prone to turdish behavior, and got into the habit of speaking to him
directly.

“What the hell did you do with my keys?” I’d demand, stomping through the house. “Goddamn you son-of-a-bitch!” But after my outbursts I would leap into bed only when I was completely exhausted, hoping to sleep through any retaliatory shenanigans.

Later, in my own apartment in my early twenties, I was dismayed to find the ghost still plunking his spectral butt down on my bed. He rarely spoke and then it was only to say my name. His tone was vaguely reproachful, as if I had walked past an old friend without recognizing them at the grocery store. He still frequented my mother, sighing around her room, and insistently messing with my sister’s head at her new apartment in Fayetteville. One night, as she and her boyfriend were leaving her home, he opened the door ahead of her and quickly slammed and locked it. When she asked her pale and shaking beau what his problem was, he explained that a column of light was hovering on the doorstep, like it was just about to knock. The sightings and experiences were never limited to the four of us. Anyone who came to stay at the house or spent time with us was fair game. Overnight guests complained about the lights and noises and I learned the one response I shouldn’t give if we didn’t want them fleeing to a hotel; “Oh, that’s just the ghost.” “I can’t imagine what that is,” was the correct response, usually delivered in a soothing, completely imperturbable voice.

More and more workmen came to the house, and as they did, the Walkers became louder and louder. I would arrive midday to find shaken plumbers, men
in their late fifties, refusing to go into the basement alone. Duct cleaners, there for just one day, demanded to know what was going on in the upstairs bedroom. "Goddamn, uh, excuse me ma’am, but I mean, I really need to know." I heard it too. It sounded like someone was repeatedly dragging a heavy chest across the floor, then banging a paint can as hard as they could against the wall. My husband, who initially scoffed at all the reports, had his first experience when we were trying to fool around in one of the empty rooms. A cacophony of noises erupted.

"What the hell is that?" he said, yanking his pants up and immediately searching the empty house, room by room. It was the only time anything had ever stalled his motor.

"I told you," I said.

The Walkers took to slamming doors behind people too, which was especially noticeable given that the doors in the house were of the pocket variety. It would take a strange wind to do that.

"What am I supposed to do?" Curtis, the marble man, demanded of me. "If Mr. Walker come up behind me and say, ‘Boo Curtis’, then what am I supposed to do?" He had already experienced numerous noises and door incidents, and was reluctant to continue driving from Little Rock to install new flooring.

I did not have a reasonable response to this question, but I needed Curtis. So, I offered to hang around the house more whenever any of the men were working, in effect, babysitting them and shaming them into finishing the job.
“Too scared to go in the basement Curtis?” I’d say, stomping down the stairs and turning all the lights on.

Another person began to frequent the place, an off-kilter looking woman with thick glasses and eyes that continually darted about. Her hair was shaggy and uncombed, and she appeared to have dressed randomly, clothes and colors lacking any symmetry on her body. The workmen said they had seen her a few times lingering in the yard. She never looked me once in the eyes when she explained she was Martha, the Walker’s daughter, and it didn’t take me long to see that questioning her about her family or the house was useless. I would find her wandering in the backyard, claiming she was picking pecans. I told her she was welcome to them and invited her inside.

“I don’t like it,” she said, taking one quick look at the absence of any carpet, orange and lime green wallpaper stripped from the kitchen walls, and the newly marbled baths. “I don’t like it,” she repeated with each new room she peered into.

“OK,” I said, understanding completely.

The date was fast approaching when we would be moving in though, and the thought of what the Walkers could do, all that they must not like, worried me more and more. They could come to us as we slept in our bed. I did not want to wake up and see Mr. and Mrs. Walker’s disapproving faces glaring down at me. I phoned Mr. Vance.

“Tell me more about what they were like,” I said. “What did they do?”

“Mrs. Walker was something ornery. Mr. Walker got up early and swam
each morning before walking to work at the pharmacy,” he said. “They made most of their money selling mother’s little helper. It was back when you didn’t necessarily need a prescription for things.”

“Oh,” I said. This wasn’t helping me nail down a way to please the Walkers. All I was learning was that Mrs. Walker was a bit of a bitch, and her husband a fierce exerciser who nevertheless was taken out by a heart attack in his fifties. Mrs. Walker had probably spent those 27 years of widowhood just a bit pissed off before finally succumbing to pneumonia in the bedroom my husband and I would soon call ours. I felt like I needed my own supply of Valium just to move in there. So, I called a friend who was well versed in all things out of the ordinary. She had a doctorate in Cultural Anthropology and never blinked at any weird tales I brought to her.

“Make them dinner,” she said.

“What?”

“Make them something for dinner you think they would like and talk to them about how you feel,” she said.

I made them New York Strips, medium, with baked potatoes and a green salad with ranch dressing. I had tried to imagine what they would have considered fine dining in their day, but settled on meat and potatoes. They each received a glass of cabernet (I figured druggists wouldn’t be teetotalers) and a candle placed in between the plates on the countertop gave them some romantic ambience. Then, I walked all through the house, explaining to them how much I truly loved it, how much I connected with it, and that this was thanks to them
taking all that time and effort many years earlier to construct such a unique home. I told them the changes I was making were not about changing the house, but merely adapting it more to the time period and our needs. The dinner remained out overnight, and in the morning I threw it away. When I told my husband about the dinner I had made, he complained about the wasted steaks. "You just threw it away?" he said. "If you eat it, then it isn't for them," I said. Three days later we moved in. There was nothing, not another noise, and within a few weeks of living in the house I began to relax completely, feeling as if we were finally the only occupiers. I was also pleased that, on some level, maybe the Walkers had accepted us, and this seemed like some sort of blessing.

The ghost I’d grown up with left me sometime in my late twenties, although he visits my mother occasionally with his sighs, and my parent’s home still has infrequent light shows. I think I drove him off. His bedside visits of more than twenty years had made me indifferent and angry, rejecting him both as something I should fear or someone I should welcome. The last time there was a telltale bump and then clinking of objects on my bedroom dresser, I looked up from my book and said, “Fuck you. Don’t even think of sitting down.” He didn’t. And he never came back. Exorcism by insult. I wonder whose bed he sits on now, or if he has found some entirely new pursuit. In a strange way I miss him, although I do not want him back. He was a constant presence that is rare to find in the living.
Three years after the massive restoration of the Walker house, I returned from a Faulkner Fest conference in Oxford, Mississippi to find a note from my husband on the refrigerator. By then I was attending graduate school at the University of Arkansas, commuting two hours either way. My fellow attendees had requested a tour of the home. Before I discovered the note, a missing bedroom set and the absent couch tipped me off. My husband's study I designed for him to relax in was completely empty except for his gun collection. He had worked quickly and had to leave many things behind so as not to cross my path. I would later send these, along with other remaining personal items, to him via movers. They would steal his grandfather's Belgium made Browning .22. In the note he said he needed someone more typical and was filing for divorce. How do you argue with "typical"? Especially if it is a Pope County kind of typical. The mysterious hang up calls I had been receiving for months stopped at once.

Selling the house was my responsibility. There was no question of my remaining in Russellville since the only person tying me to the place had gone in search of something else. It was a profoundly bitter and difficult chore. The eventual buyers were petty, complaining, and incredibly irritating – frequently calling me directly to threaten or whine about something instead of the broker. Their threats were hollow and often pointless. "We can sue you, you know," they said, concerning a malfunctioning toilet. "Why don't you just not buy the house then," I said. But I had moved back to Fayetteville, back to my parent's house, and could not afford the upkeep any longer on a graduate assistantship. The massive utility bills and lawn maintenance were more than my monthly
salary. However, the sale, especially to this particular couple, was more than reluctant. I did not mention the Walkers. After the papers were signed, before the keys were handed over, I made one last pass through the house alone, patiently explaining to the Walkers what assholes the new buyers were. It was petty and malicious, and I understood completely how you could love something so much you couldn’t let it, or any idea you associated with it, go.

“They don’t appreciate what went into this place,” I said. “You wake on up and give them hell.”

I still dream in that house. It is the most unique and beautiful place I have ever lived or probably ever will. I still dream in that life, when I thought I could build a home with someone else that would last. It was a place where I manufactured endless and pleasant ideas about the way things were going to be, and it was the last place I could do this. That was the location, as if a misstep in a dance, where everything went off track and I suspect may never get back on. I wonder if a log truck takes me out on a tight corner if that is where I’ll end up wandering back to. It is a horrible thought, the idea that whatever you desired in life could follow you in death. The Walker’s desire to preserve their home, the immense, needy loneliness expressed in the sighs at the foot of my bed, all haunt me more than any of their ghostly acts. I had always hoped death would mean the absence of desire, a release, peace, but there is the frightful possibility that it is a densely concentrated and hopeless clinging to what has been lost, and nothing is scarier than that.