

Mayberry Days

by

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Abstract

This memoir consists of a series of short vignettes, each of which is a stand-alone story. These vignettes tell about the writer's childhood: the experience of growing up in the Deep South in the 1960s and 70s.

Introduction

In the South, perhaps more than any other region,
We go back to our home in dreams and memories,
hoping it remains what it was on a lazy, still summer's day,
twenty years ago (1).

Willie Morris

When I was in the fifth grade, a young man on a grant from the state of South Carolina came to our school to give creative writing seminars. He was interested in visiting poor and rural schools and giving these children the opportunity to learn how to write creatively. He could only work with a few students, so usually the kids who were at the top of the class were selected, not those who may have had any affinity for writing. I, along with five others, was chosen to spend one class period per week for five weeks with the young man, and we started meeting in the early spring. He would find any available spot for our meetings: an empty classroom, the gym, or the cafeteria. When it became warmer outside we would sit in the sun on the playground, huddled in a small, tight circle, and listen to him talk to us about writing. He was strange to us, as he was a tall, rangy hippie with a full beard and a voice so low and mellifluous he could easily have been mistaken for a young seminary student. He was, in fact, a graduate student at Harvard. He had taken a year off and, having won

this grant from his home state, was spending it backpacking through South Carolina from school to school.

On his next-to-last visit, he tried a writing exercise with us. Instead of starting out with a full mind, he'd said, we're going to empty our heads and let the stories fill them up again. He had us put our heads down on the desks, taking deep, relaxing breaths, and told us to just "let your mind go." I did as he asked, feeling a little silly, until the deep breathing really did clear my head and a story filled it up again.

The story was almost complete; I could barely write fast enough to get it on the paper. It was like having one of those experiences where a writer says he has "channeled" something. It was an extremely amazing and fulfilling experience. I thought I might like to be a writer when I grew up.

The young man was amazed as well. I could tell by the way he looked at me with his mouth hanging open a little.

"This is fantastic," he said.

All of our the stories were gathered together in a book. We each got a copy, as did the school. I never forgot the look in the young man's eyes as he read my story.

From then on I have tried to write from a state of peace, with an empty head. I try to let the story fill itself in. But of course it has never happened quite the same way again. I have tried many times to re-capture that intense focus but have never been able to, to that extent. In junior high I once sat down at the typewriter and wrote a short story in about an hour. I can still remember my friend's reaction when she read it.

and crumbs of soils cast sudden pencil-long shadows, and the rearing lodgepole pines below them massed in slabs of somber malachite (74).

In my vignettes, I strive to incorporate the beauty of the region where I grew up so that the landscape itself becomes almost a de facto character in the work.

The strong associations of time and place are what intrigue me as a writer. Harper Lee in To Kill a Mockingbird, for example, is extremely adept at re-creating Maycomb, Alabama through childish eyes. She writes, “Summer was our best season: it was sleeping on the back screened porch on cots, or trying to sleep in the tree house; summer was everything good to eat; it was a thousand colors in a parched landscape” (38). It is no accident that the strong sense of nostalgia here is directly tied to the senses, and I have echoed this in “Mayberry Days” where even the title is reminiscent of walking down a country lane in the summertime, fishing pole slung over one’s shoulder while whistling. The concrete elements in that vignette, “the long, frayed rope dangled over the water-moccasin infested waters of Horton’s Creek,” gorging oneself on watermelon, and the simple overabundance of fruits and other food available to us at the time, are certainly in competition with the other point of that story, the deep resentment the people in the area felt towards my father.

For me, not only the farm but the waterways and inlets are inextricably tied to childhood. In the vignette “The Bailer,” the reality of the father/brother relationship, though important, is almost secondary to the moment in the back of the boat. It was not the interaction between the two men that taught me lessons about life; it was watching the world as one would watch a drama unfolding on a stage. And it was,

the blisteringly hot pavement, checking our baskets and unbeknownst to our mother, playing dodge-that-car.

It was a different world under the bridges. The salt tang of the water was so sharp that its smell would permeate one's clothes. It was wet and muddy and cool under the bridges, and utterly intriguing. Who knew what lurked between the damp, slippery rocks that sloped down to the water's edge? So, when my father decided he was going down under the bridges to check the oyster beds, I immediately decided to tag along. He was often bored with crabbing; the sedentary activity did not engage him the way that shrimping did, for shrimping required not only physical stamina but precision with the net. There was no gabbing with shrimping, and I knew that although he brought us often to the bridges, it was more for our entertainment than his. Bored, he climbed down the rocky embankment, stepped over the low metal guardrail, and strolled off without a backward glance. His knee-high waders barely displaced the inch or so of standing water that covered the mud. I hurried to catch up, as always wanting to be with him, ignoring my mother's admonishments to stay where I was.

I reached the bottom of the rock incline and hurriedly took a few steps across the wet sand--and sank. Hidden beneath the thin layer of sand and standing water was a deep quagmire of mud. Black and sticky, it oozed between my toes, swiftly engulfed my ankles, paused at my calves, then sucked me in to just below my knees. It seemed a living thing, that mud, cold and antagonistic. I pulled and yanked at my legs, trying to free myself from its relentless pull, but I was as stuck as a dead fly on

long swirl of flypaper. I called out to my father, who had just rounded the tip of a small bend, but he kept walking. I cupped my hands around my mouth and called again, but he either hadn't heard me, or pretended he hadn't, and was gone.

Someone on the bridge above spotted me and let out a hoot of laughter. I felt my face begin to flush and the tips of my ears felt hot and tingly. Suddenly there were a thousand people up on that bridge, looking down at me, all pointing and laughing uproariously: my brother, my sister, even my mother, who, I'm sure, was thinking, I told you not to go down there. I stood alone under the hot sun, sweating yet feeling alternately hot and cold with embarrassment, hating my father for leaving me behind and hating myself for wanting to be with him. Sharp tears stung my eyes, and I snuffled as my nose began to run. I angrily fisted my eyes, refusing to give my audience the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Their rolling laughter washed over me. I wondered how long it would be before the tide came in. Perhaps I would drown and then they'd be sorry. My legs began to quiver from standing so long in one position. Soon, the people above lost interest and resumed their crabbing and conversation and that was almost as bad as their mocking attention. Gnats began to fly around my head, attracted to the smell of my sweat and unable to resist such stationary prey. My mother returned to her spot on an upturned bucket, presumably waiting for my father to pluck me out of the mud when he returned, which he did forty five minutes later. By that time my legs were shrieking in pain, the effort of standing still for so long giving me charley horses. He tossed me over his shoulder, carrying me up the steep embankment and placing me unceremoniously on the ground, where I immediately

Fire

Our journey from Los Angeles to South Carolina had been a difficult one. In the space of a few days we had acquired grandparents we'd never met, and a new way of life, far from the safe, cozy neighborhood we'd always known. Our parents did not tell us we were moving, or for what reason. They did not prepare us for the dramatic change that was coming in our lives, just put us in the car and started driving, as if we were only going to Long Beach for the day.

Over the years our grandfather had been embroiled in property disputes with the owner of the neighboring farm. Every year there seemed to be a new fence sprouting where none had been, first a little over the property line and then more boldly, encompassing acres. As he had gotten older, the constant bickering and legal wrangling had worn him down, and now, in his seventies, he was finding it difficult to keep up with the demands of the farm. It was only this, his fear of losing a large portion of his property, that had prompted him to call his oldest son, whom he had not spoken to in many years, and ask him to come home.

And he had come. My father packed us up-- two adults, three children and a large German Sheperd, and drove three thousand miles in a wood- paneled station wagon with all of our earthly possessions strapped to the luggage rack. He had come, despite the rift that had been created when he had announced to his parents his intention to marry a Black woman. They had been incensed, had disowned him, had told him he was making the biggest mistake of his life. He had not listened, of course, and so had remained in California after his discharge from the Navy, he and my mother moving down to Los Angeles from San Diego. Eventually Joe, my father's younger brother, had moved out from South Carolina to be near them, followed by his sister Kate, and they had all set about starting families and thriving in suburban domesticity.

Mark, Dakin and I had slept in the rear compartment of our station wagon while Como, our dog, paced nervously back and forth, stepping on us, whining, and barking at every eighteen- wheeler that passed, making us all cringe and cover our ears with our hands. We stopped often to eat, for bathroom breaks, to shake off nervous energy; we did not stop to sleep over night, as trying to get lodging in strange hotels could be tricky.

My mother was extremely quiet throughout the trip, perhaps wondering how her life could change so drastically in such a short period of time. It was not what she had signed up for, this exile to a country backwater, much like the one she had escaped from when she married. She had been raised by her father; shunted off to live with him when her parents divorced. He had owned a small farm near Myrtle Beach,

and she had spent most of her young teenage years doing the backbreaking labor of a farm hand. She had hated it and loathed her father, who was a strict disciplinarian. Desperate, she had run away at 15 with a boy from a neighboring farm, staying away long enough to conceive a child, whom she had lost when she was returned, hungry and careworn, to the farm. She had been shipped off to her brother John, who had joined the Navy and was now stationed in San Diego. Here she found the kind of life she wanted, in a city, with bright lights and possibilities. She had finished high school and was enrolled in Junior College when she met my father on the base, a dashing young seaman, copper-skinned and dark eyed, different from anyone she had ever known. They had lived happily together, first in San Diego, then in L.A., her husband angrily defying his parents, neither of whom could be bothered to say hello to their new daughter-in-law over the telephone. What a bitter irony that she should end up almost where she'd started, on a farm, a mere 120 miles from where she had run.

We arrived at my father's mother's house in Summerville, South Carolina four days later, on December 21,st 1966, the day before my fourth birthday.

She lived alone, in the house her father had built for her when she left our grandfather. They had not lived together for over twenty years, even though they remained married, and conceived five children together after they had separated. They had met when she moved to the tiny village of Coosawhatchie to teach English in the tiny village school. She was a mixture of Black and White, but so fair skinned that she could "pass," and she possessed the ingrained sense of superiority that some light-skinned Blacks felt for those with darker complexions. As well, she taught the

children of the indigent farm workers who made up the major portion of the workforce in the area, and this contributed to her prejudice. In this she and my grandfather were well matched. Our grandfather was the only Indian in an area where the Indian population had long ago been decimated by Whites. He hated everyone equally and he, and his father before him, with their sharp tongues and penchant for calling a spade a spade, had alienated almost everyone in the tiny hamlets of Gillisonville to the east and Coosawhatchie to the west.

Grandmother had left him and returned to her hometown 80 miles from my grandfather's farm. She had hated the farm. Fastidious by nature, she had loathed the lack of indoor plumbing, the animals that roamed around everywhere, and the absence of anyone to talk to. Our grandfather had spent most of his days outside tending the farm, and she had been expected to run the house with his maiden sister, Sissy. But grandfather and Sissy never talked. They were Cherokee and possessed that deep stillness, that inner quiet that excluded others, both having the knack of being able to sit in a room with another person for minutes, for hours, without ever feeling the need to speak. It was as if their internal lives were so intense that they found interaction with other people not just unwanted but unnecessary. Grandmother had stayed long enough to conceive a child, my father, and he had been born on the farm, but had only lived there until he was two. By then she had had enough and had moved him to Summerville.

Our grandfather would hitch up the buggy and drive the three and half hours to spend a couple of days at a time with her and the children before returning to the

farm. They did this for most of their married lives, raising the three children who had survived infancy, the boys spending at least a part of every summer with their father, Aunt Kate hardly ever going at all.

We spent five uncomfortable days with her, celebrating a quiet Christmas in which we were afraid of making too much noise, of getting anything dirty. She made us feel that everything we did was wrong, correcting our grammar, our clothes and our table manners, disapproval plain with every word she spoke to us. She spoke as little as possible to our mother, unable to contain her animosity. Our mother was dark—beautiful, yes, but she was dark-skinned and as well, relatively uneducated. She had had only a year of “Jr. College.” This was an even greater insult to our grandmother, was not what she had wanted for her oldest son. Joe had married a dark-skinned woman as well, Lavinia, but he had been forgiven because she was at least educated—an English teacher just like our grandmother. It was with relief that we packed up and drove on to the farm, which was to become our permanent home.

Grandfather installed us in the broken-down house across the field. It had been empty for many years, and he had cleared out years-old spider’s webs, bird feathers, and mouse droppings before we had arrived. It had two bedrooms, but no bathroom or other indoor plumbing, and a ramshackle kitchen stood at the back, seemingly tacked on by a drunken carpenter. The entire house leaned alarmingly to the right. It sat in the middle of a field, to the right of the main house where our grandfather lived with Sissy, and the back yard was filled with fruit trees. The winter lawn consisted of dead but still knee high grass, weeds, and the spent stems of

millions of cockleburs. In our first December, after California, it was almost as cold as sleeping outside. The wind seeped in through the cracks in the walls and made the tin roof bang against the rafters. There was no insulation, and the only source of heat was the wood stove that stood glowering and belching smoke and sparks in the living room.

We were shell- shocked. Gone was our tidy little row house, smooth white porcelain and deep pile carpeting. We couldn't use our tricycles, our pogo sticks or our metal roller skates here, and we were in awe of the large expanse of woods as far as the eye could see. Until now we had never seen a cow up close or believed in the reality of horses or chickens. We shied away from the many mongrel dogs our grandfather kept on the place. We stayed close to our mother for comfort, not yet brave enough to venture out on our own in this alien world. For his part, our grandfather seemed to forget us. He had only grunted a brief hello to each of us on our arrival two weeks ago, looked us over, then never visited the house again. He was not used to people, let alone young children, and our high-pitched voices and shrill laughter put him constantly on edge. He'd said almost nothing to our mother, as if she simply did not exist for him.

Gradually we became braver. Shooed out of the house by our mother, who could get nothing done with the three of us constantly underfoot, we ventured to the clothesline in the back of the house where stiff, half-frozen clothes were battered by the cold wind. We took Como, on his leash, to look at the well and then to watch Daisy the mule, munch resignedly on her bale of hay. We watched Sissy feed the

chickens, then scattered some of the feed ourselves, delighted at the way they clucked and fluttered about. We listened closely as she warned us about Strut, the stud rooster who would chase you and try to sink his spurs into you if you got too close. We became more adventurous, standing on the split rail fence of the corral as the cows came in from their winter grazing, they knowing instinctively when it was time to come in, then following Mamie, the lead cow, home in an orderly line. We became accustomed to using the outhouse, to drinking sweet well water, to rising from a warm, toasty bed into frigid cold.

“Get up, the house is on fire!” our mother screamed at us. She threw back our covers, casting wildly about for any garments she could find, throwing around my shoulders the pants Mark had worn that day, shoving my feet into Dakin’s shoes. I turned and looked out of our window. The black night outside had been replaced by acid orange and red, as the flames from the roof lit up the night and made a fiery perimeter around the house. Our mother grabbed our bedspread and blankets, giving one to each of us to cover ourselves with, then lifted Mark and myself in her arms and jerked her head for Dakin to follow. Thick smoke made our eyes water, and the heat was immense as we shuffled hurriedly out through the front door.

Outside the bitter wind whipped through our hair and stung our cheeks. My mother carried and pushed us forward, away from the house, as quickly as Dakin could move, dressed as she was in a thin nightgown with an inadequate blanket draped over her shoulders and no shoes. Even so, our mother paused several hundred feet from the house and turned to stare, transfixed. I could see the leaping flames

reflected in the tears on her face. It had taken only moments for the desiccated timber to become completely engulfed. Men were beginning to arrive now, running up our dark driveway, alerted by the smell of smoke and the brilliant glow in the night sky. We could hear glass breaking, high pitched and shrill above the dull roaring sound of the fire, and from a side window we could see our father and grandfather hurling out anything they could reach, trying to save those oh so few things we'd brought with us; our pogo sticks, our roller skates.

“Como, where’s Como!” Dakin was screaming. She tried to run back towards the house, but our mother grabbed her arm.

“He’s okay, look,” she said.

Como stood barking and howling, Sissy holding onto his collar, on the steps of our grandfather’s house, the two of them watching the burning house crumble and fall, watching the men finally retreat from the onslaught of the smoke and heat. In a few minutes it was gone, a few charred frame posts still standing drunkenly, the tin from the roof warped and blackened, and bits of burned paper swirling madly in the cold wind.

The ruin would smoke and steam for many days and the acrid smell of smoke would remain for months, almost as if it had been absorbed by the ground and surrounding trees.

We stood on the steps of our grandfather’s house for long minutes, not knowing what to do or where to go, then realizing that we were left with no choices at all. We entered his house, where we had never before been invited to visit.

Grandpa

After the fire, my father moved us into our grandfather's house. There was no place else for us to go. Freezing cold and smelling of smoke, we let Sissy lead us indoors, and she helped our mother settle us into bed. The house was plenty big enough, with large, rambling rooms, far too large for just the two of them. There was no indoor plumbing, however, and it was cold and uninsulated, heated by fireplaces throughout. Indeed, after watching our little house burn to the ground, we shrank back at the sight of a fire burning merrily in the living room.

During the day my grandfather and father worked the farm, my grandfather teaching my father all that he had not learned during his summer visits about running such a large piece of property. The farm was my father's favorite place on earth, and he seemed completely happy and content. Our grandfather, taciturn and inscrutable, kept to himself. He had hardly spoken a word to us kids since we'd arrived, choosing

instead to relay his requests through our mother, to whom he spoke without moving his lips. If he did have to speak to us, to warn us of dangers in the farmyard, for instance, he kept his statements as brief and to-the-point as possible. He left the house before sunrise and finished with work for the day, he would sit quietly on the screened in front porch until dark, transfixed by the deepening shadows, and watch the day wrap itself up. Sissy had died shortly after we moved into his house and he found us raucous, noisy, ill fitting replacements. While we all lived there together, I never saw him smile. So, we trod carefully around him, uncomfortable and nervous when he was in the house, and his silence and aloofness were to make me fearful of unknown adults for years to come.

One Sunday, while our father did the evening milking and our mother was in the kitchen making dinner, Mark and I had been engaging in one of our favorite activities, banging on the keys of the old antique organ. We loved its upright, polished mahogany exterior. Our small, still babyish fingers banged with joyful abandon on the keys. Our feet hanging down from the piano bench were too short to move the old-fashioned foot pedals, so one of us would bang the keys while the other crouched and wildly pushed the pedals up and down. For half an hour we banged and giggled and sang at the top of our voices, for once forgetting that our grandfather was at home, was indeed sitting out on the front porch. After half an hour, he couldn't take it any more. He got up from his rocking chair, stepped in from the porch, and in two swift strides crossed the room flicked open his switchblade and slashed the canvas straps that connected the foot pedals to the organ. He glared at us menacingly,

slammed the doors shut over the keys, then returned without speaking to his rocking chair on the porch.

We were horrified. Not only had the sight of the open knife scared us out of our wits, but even at four and two, we were able to discern the intense dislike in his eyes. As well, he had desecrated this lovely antique, his mother's favorite possession, rather than ask us to stop making noise. We had sat for a moment, stunned, then burst into tears. Our mother came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishtowel, alerted by the sudden cessation of the racket and our hysterical crying. She listened to us for a moment, trying to piece the story together through our garbled crying. Incensed, she marched out to the front porch and we could hear her loudly berating my grandfather for terrifying two small children. Her raised voice went on and on. He said nothing at all.

It was decided, for the best of all concerned, that our grandfather would move to Summerville, with his wife, whom he had not lived with in twenty-five years. The farm would be ours.

Lizzy

There was a lot of livestock on my grandfather's farm: chickens, pigs, cows by the hundreds, and an old mule named Daisy who was infinitely old and decrepit. We had loved the cows most of all when we'd first arrived from Los Angeles, so taken with the novelty of real live animals that we had named all 400 of them, as if they were house pets. This had quickly worn off as we became used to them, and our familiarity bred all kinds of contempt. Only a few retained their individuality: Mamie, her white face and creamy tan hide making her instantly recognizable among the predominately russet colored herd. Lizzy also stood out, as she was the only black cow, and what's more, she possessed the only set of horns. These gave her a fierce look, but we knew her to be extremely placid, even timid. Among our herd, Susan was legendary. As the story went, children had teased her unmercifully, had thrown rocks at her, hit her and taunted her. And because of this torture, she had become mean. She would run at, and attempt to stampede, any child she happened to encounter. She had once given my brother and me a fright, charging the fence we were standing on as we watched our father and grandfather inspect the new calves.

Spotting us standing there, she had put her head down and charged, her big body thundering down on us like a locomotive. It was only my grandfather's loud shout that stopped her from hurling her body at the fence to get at us. So we were always on our guards, and tread cautiously when she was about, making sure that when we heard Mamie's bell signaling the cow's evening return, we were well out of the way until the last cow entered the corral and the gate was shut.

We had been city kids, used to bicycles and sidewalks, hopscotch grids and big wheels, none of which could be used in the dirt and grass of the farm. We improvised, though, at times using unconventional objects for recreational purposes—a long board propped on top of a sturdy object for a “jump-board,” a catapult of sorts with two people on opposing ends, launching each other into the air by jumping as hard as possible on the end of the board until someone fell off. I was extremely skinny and it did not take much effort to launch me into the stratosphere, to the gleeful delight of my siblings. I did not play jump-board often. We would construct climbing walls from the hay bale stacked from ground to ceiling in the open-air barn. But our favorite game by far was barrel rolling. Grain would be delivered to the farm in steel fifty-gallon drums and my sister and brother I would keep ourselves occupied for hours having barrel races across the yard. We would stand on top of the heavy drums and move them by walking as quickly as possible on top—much like log rolling, but without the water. It required quite a bit of leg strength as well as balance, as the barrels were heavy and ungainly. Now we had perfected our technique from long practice and could go quite a distance before falling off.

One late afternoon during the summer, Dakin and I were playing in the back yard. This was becoming more and more unusual as Dakin, who was so much older than I, seldom condescended to participate in this childish activity anymore. As well, Dakin was fast becoming an inside girl, not caring much for farm life. But this day, with nothing better to do, she said yes when I asked her to come out and play with me. We rolled one way across the yard, then back the way we had come, enjoying the last few minutes of fading daylight. After an hour of sociable competition our legs were growing tired, and we decided on one last race across the yard. But time had gotten away from us a little, as we, unmindful of the lengthening shadows, had completely forgotten about the cows.

The cows spent their nights in a fenced in area at the rear of the yard. Every morning early, my father would open the gate to their enclosure and Mamie would take them in an orderly and patient line out into the fields where they would spend their day grazing. At the end of the day Mamie would strike out for home, the large bell she wore on her collar hollowly sounding their return.

“The cows! The cows!” Dakin shouted. She took off across the yard, ducking around the side of the house. I turned in a panic to come face to face with Mamie who looked at me without curiosity and turned into the open corral, three feet to my right. I looked past her, trying to spot Susan in the crowd. I was not able to see her, for she blended in with the rest of the herd. But I did see Lizzy, who dropped her head and gave several loud snorts. I was frozen. I watched as several more cows plodded past me and knew that my time would soon run out. Susan would appear at any moment.

This thought broke my paralysis and I turned to run. Halfway between the house and corral stood a grain barrel, mercifully standing upright. I took hold of the sides and jumped in, ducking down and out of sight.

I held my breath. Outside I could here the clip clopping of hundreds of hooves treading through the yard. It seemed to go on forever, and I was acutely aware that I had to pee. As well, it was desperately hot inside the barrel, and I could feel rivulets of nervous sweat running down my sides. But I dared not stand up until I knew that all of the cows were safely inside the fence.

At last the hoof sounds stopped, and I waited another moment, crouching down in the barrel, waiting to be absolutely sure. I looked up. I could see sky above, tinged with red and orange from the approaching evening. Suddenly, up near the barrel's rim, something knocked loudly and insistently, echoing two-fold inside the steel drum, as if something hard was banging against it. *Susan*. Susan must have seen me jump inside the barrel. She now had the perfect opportunity to get me. The knocking sounded again, not a dull thump as a naked head would make if knocked against the barrel, but a sharper, more high-pitched sound. I suddenly pictured Lizzy's aggravated snort when she had seen me standing in the yard.

Oh my god it was horns! Lizzy was knocking against the barrel trying to overturn it! I clamped down on a scream, sure that if I made any noise it would only enrage her. Bang, bang, bang... the knocking had become more insistent and this was followed by several hard shakes. I put my hands out, using the sides of the barrel to steady myself. She was going to turn me over!

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I cried silently, in more terror than I had ever been. I was going to die, trampled to death and gored by Lizzy. How silly we had been to be afraid of Susan all these years. My heart beat madly in my chest and I was pretty sure that I had wet my pants a little. Up top the knocking continued. It seemed she was never going to go away but just stand there forever, mindlessly hitting the side of the barrel at frequent intervals.

I couldn't just stay in this barrel and die, I decided. I had to get out of here. But as suddenly as it started, the knocking stopped. Had my father finally come in from the field and seen the cow knocking against the barrel? Had Lizzy decided to fake me out, to stop knocking to see if I would stand up, then plow me and the barrel over once I did? I didn't know. What I did know was that I was about to lose control over my bladder and I had to get out of this barrel *now*. I gathered all my inner resources and took a deep breath to steady my nerves. I reached up, grabbed the rim of the barrel, and with eyes tightly closed against what I might come face to face with, I stood up.

Dakin stood there, laughing gleefully, her raised hand in a fist with which to knock loudly and insistently against the side of my barrel.

Have Your Pets Spayed or Neutered

My father was the smartest man I never knew. He read voraciously, anything he could get his hands on: the newspaper, Time magazine, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. He spent every dinnertime hidden behind some piece of reading material, the printed words creating an impossible standard to live up to. I was quite certain the words on those pages gave him more joy than he had ever gotten from a human. I was almost afraid of finding myself alone in the same room with him because sometimes a heavy, awkward silence would fall, threatening to crush me under the weight of my own insignificance.

Besides his intellectual leanings, he was mechanically savvy. He had once repaired our 1965 Chevy pick-up truck, an ancient, rusting hulk, when it had broken down in the middle of the road. I had looked back through the rear window hopefully, but no overflowing toolbox had appeared. The rusty bed contained only a twisted coat-hanger and an empty Old Milwaukee can and I had had the sinking feeling that I

would not make it home in time to see *Laredo* at 4:00. But MacGyver-like, he had twisted the rusty hanger into something resembling an aquarium fishing net, and I had been watching Joe, Reese and Chad beat the bad guys in a gunfight at the regular time. I had spent hours one summer, watching him build a chimney for the elderly couple down the road. He'd never built a chimney before, but instinctively he knew how to do it. He did it for free as well, never asking anything in return for the hours of labor he put into repairing this gravest of necessities.

I had only seen his machinations fail once, when he had tried to create an incubator for chicken eggs using a 1-gallon kerosene can and a 100-watt light-bulb. He attached the bulb to an electric cord and placed it inside the can. Then, after surreptitiously watching the mating habits of our chickens, he had robbed the nest of fertilized eggs and placed them inside the heated can.

We had all been in the living room, watching the Flip Wilson comedy hour, when we heard a tiny, muted "pop." Then another. The air was suddenly rich with the succulent smell of roasting chicken as the too-hot light bulb had cooked them inside their shells.

Sometimes, if he was in the mood, if you sat quietly without asking any questions, he would take things apart and tell you how they worked. At other times he moved in silence, as if engaging in conversation was more than he could bear. I spent a lot of time trying to judge his mood, trying to discern when it was safe to approach, or when to keep my distance. If he was not in a good mood, all you could do was to sit quietly, or watch from a distance. Even I, his favorite, was so in awe of him that

any opportunity for one on one attention was tempered with the fear of his silent withdrawal. Much of the time he seemed to exist in his own world, sharing little with us, silent and remote.

He tried many different schemes to get ahead. Although we owned hundreds of acres of farmland, we were amazingly cash-poor. He worked as a longshoreman because of the flexible hours and because he could turn down work without getting fired during planting and harvesting time. Summers he would take out our old boat, the Bailer, and shrimp the many salt-water inlets of Beaufort and Jasper Counties. He would shrimp far into the night and my sister and I, hearing his truck approaching from the road, would run and jump into bed, pulling the covers up over our heads and pretending to be asleep. But he would get us up anyway, even if it was a school night and we had to be up the next day, and we had to take the heads off the shrimp so that they could be sold. In the fall, though, he needed something to tide us over, something to bridge the gap between seasons. His latest venture was to raise baby chicks. He had seen an ad in the back of a farm implements catalog, and thought it would be a not quite so work- intensive way to make some money. Thus, he ordered several dozen chicks through a mail order company, and they resided indoors, in two cardboard boxes beside the wood stove.

My sister and brother and I had at first *oohed* and *aaahed* at their fluffy cuteness. We'd let them perch on our outstretched fingers, their tiny, long- nailed feet scratching our ashy skin as they tried to hold on. We'd hold tiny pieces of cracked corn between our lips and giggle at the tickly feeling they made as they tried to pry it

out with their tiny beaks. In general, we'd made much of them. But the novelty had quickly worn away as they kept us up at night with their incessant cheeping, and most importantly, made it impossible to hear the television. As well, they were now big enough so that they could jump over the side of their boxes, and I, for one, was sick and tired of cleaning up chicken droppings. Our cat's latest litter, now ten weeks old, had become a real menace to them, using them for stalking and hunting practice, and we were charged with keeping our pets away from our father's profits. It was just as well that the chicks were almost ready to go outdoors with the other farm animals, and we would be glad to see them go. They had not, despite their initial cuteness, transcended the animal divide, that space between the indoor animals--our pets--and the outdoor animals that belonged to the farm. The farm animals were implements, somewhat akin to farm machinery, only slightly more animated. They did not move us. They were not part of the family. There were so many of them that they failed to touch us as individuals, with individual personalities.

We were unsentimental about our farm animals, yet our pets were in another category. We lavished them with love and attention, shared our house with them and loved them and all their progeny as much as any city dweller might love a pampered Pekingese. We usually had several dogs and two or three cats who took turns having litters of puppies and kittens. And even though they were pets, were loved as pets, they served a function as far as the farm was concerned—the dogs helped in the management of the herd animals, and the cats kept the barns free of rodents. An animal with no purpose, such as a parakeet or hamster, would have been unheard of.

There were a few instances where a farm animal had “crossed over,” but I had quickly learned how dangerous it could be to invest emotion in these pseudo-pets. Love them as one might, they never completely shed their utilitarian purpose, at least not in the eyes of all involved. I had once had a pet pig, Arnold Ziffle, who had been the runt of his litter. I had loved him and petted him and treated him as though he were a dog in pig’s clothing. He had lived in the house for several months, until we were unable to hide the fact that he would indeed grow up to be a hog, and my mother insisted he be put outdoors. Still, I had trained him to come when I called, and he followed me companionably around the farm. Summer came, however, and the siblings and I were shipped off to spend three weeks with our grandparents. The evening of our return my mother served us a platter of deliciously fragrant pork chops, fried up Southern style, with crackling.

“Guess who you’re eating?” she’d asked with a smirk. I’d decided then and there that pets were defined as animals inedible to the American eating public, namely dogs and cats.

This morning, my sister Dakin and I stood out in the side yard, hanging out the wash. The chicken coop stood behind us, an acrid smelly place, its inhabitants scratching busily in the sand and creating a raucous symphony of clucking and crowing. The coop backed up to an open field, a grazing ground for our two hundred or so cows, and every now and then, curious, one would amble up, listen to our girlish conversation for a few minutes, then bored, amble off. The coop was surrounded by a

Our father stood in the back door of the house, his eyebrows drawn together in thunderous rage as he looked at Dakin and me. He stared at us for several seconds, making sure that we were aware that we had failed him. He said nothing, just turned back into the house, letting the screen door slam.

Dakin and I turned slowly around and looked at the mess at our feet. There lay one of our kittens, Daisy, our favorite, her orange fur matted with wet blood, her head spun three quarters of the way around on her broken neck. In her mouth, still, were bunches of tiny, yellow chicken feathers.

Things Fall Apart

It was several years after we moved to South Carolina that things began to fall apart. The land didn't change of course; we loved the abundance of life, the dense forests and wide-open fields, just as much as we always had. The vistas were just as green as they had always been. Our animals thrived from season to season, lived and multiplied, and were our companions or possessions.

But money was scarce. Our mother was forced to go out to work, by necessity having to leave us with Dakin, who from the age of eight, became our primary caretaker.

Our father worked the farm, worked as a longshoreman, and more and more found other ways of occupying his time. Grandfather's house fell into disrepair; the hundred-year-old structure, already in the midst of quiet decay, became even more decrepit. Our father had knocked off the back third of the house, the part beyond the kitchen, as it served no real purpose and as well, was too much to heat. He had run electric and water lines inside so there was no longer any need to pump well water, but still we had no central heating. He promised us, year after year, to start construction on a new house. He would measure the small field that sat next to the farmhouse, talk about dimensions and square footage, and once even marked of the

area with string. But the new house never came to pass, for in truth, he loved the farmhouse. He didn't seem to notice the shabbiness or inconvenience and this, his place of birth, was where he felt he belonged.

As we grew older, he ceased to pay much attention to us, preferring the farm and his books. Always aloof, he seemed to become a younger version of his father. Gone were the family outings we used to take in Los Angeles, to the movies, to the park. We were isolated here in the country, the closest movie theater or other recreational activity 50 miles away in Savannah. For us, life consisted of school and farmyard chores, and we were a family that had ceased to even eat our meals together.

In the winter of 1972 our mother had become unexpectedly pregnant, this late child an unhappy "accident." We had heard them arguing about it through their closed bedroom door, and it was Blake's birth that seemed to signal that the fabric of our family was beginning to wear exceedingly thin.

We had fallen asleep, having missed our father's return home from work. When he worked the docks it was often eleven o'clock at night before he returned home. We were sometimes able to stay awake until we heard his car pull into the driveway, not feeling complete until we knew he was home. But this night, we were unable to stay awake.

From the living room it echoed through the silent house: a sharp slap, a thump and then a piercing cry.

They made up eventually. Got over it, got on with living and working and running the farm, never referring to what had happened, perhaps fooling themselves into believing that we had not seen, had not heard. And we learned to mimic happy children, safe and secure, until the next time we were awoken by a shrill slap in the middle of the night.

Richard Johnson Won't Be Comin' Round No More

Entertainment was scarce in our part of rural South Carolina. My mother, with three young children and mountains of house and farm work, rarely had the opportunity to engage in leisure activities alone, without at least one child in tow. She wasn't particularly devout, but going to church on Sundays did give her the chance to mingle with the community. Even though we'd moved to Gillisonville from Los Angeles two years ago, she was still treated as something of an outsider.

This August Sunday a fairly famous gospel troupe was performing at one of the local churches, and my mother had been excited about it for weeks. Six different acts were coming, and landing them had been a boon for the tiny church in Coosawhatchie, ten miles down the road from where we lived. My father, who loathed religion on principle and rarely let my mother take us to church, agreed to watch us kids so that she could attend, unhampered by three disinterested children. Mark and I lit out early that morning for Horton's Creek, our favorite summertime

hangout, ecstatic about not having to sit through an interminable church event, and Dakin, the oldest, disappeared into her room with a book.

At the last minute, though, my father decided he didn't want to watch us after all. Richard Johnson had called with the news that the Spots were running hard and it would be a great day for fishing. Livid, but not quite daring to argue, my mother hauled us in from the creek, scrubbed us until we shrieked, then threw us into the back of the Batmobile, our new-to-us 1969 Buick.

Immediately on meeting, Richard Johnson and my father had become best friends in that surprising, intense way that rarely happens after one has reached adulthood, and making real friends becomes so much more difficult. My father, who was standoffish at the best of times, had recently moved us from Los Angeles to this sprawling farm where he had been born. His fifteen-year absence did not endear him to the local folk who already resented his "stuck up ways" and the ownership of such a large piece of property. But he and Richard had hit it off immediately, which seemed strange in that they were polar opposites in almost every way. Richard spoke in a slow Southern drawl, his big voice booming out in every direction, so loud that for the first six months I jumped every time he spoke inside our house. It had taken us a long time to get used to his Southern speech patterns, but because of him we learned not to judge negatively on the basis of a down-home drawl. His was in perfect contrast to my father's precise, "citified" speech. My grandmother had been an English teacher, and although her children had lived in South Carolina for most of their lives, no Southern inflection had been allowed to invade their speech patterns.

Richard, who was well over 6 feet tall, made my small father look even smaller. He was a happy man, open and joyous, with a light that seemed to ooze out of his pores, touching you with its brilliance and making you hope that it was catching. He had moved away from Jasper County, become a chef in the Navy, and worked in several large cities before deciding that he missed life in rural South Carolina too much. He'd missed walking barefoot down country roads, he'd said, and "there ain't nothing like cookin' up some fish you just caught yo'self." So he had returned home, moving in to care for his ailing mother, and becoming a regular visitor at our house. He took the time to talk to us kids and even though he could never pronounce my name correctly, he always asked me what I was reading, or brought us some small treat he had whipped up at home. Most importantly, he had easily gotten to know a man who seemed to defend his heart against the onslaught of intimacy. My father smiled when he was around, even laughed out loud at times, and at last seemed to find someone he could feel comfortable with. If not working, they were always together: fishing, drinking beer, telling endless stories, or playing poker. Many times Richard would come over and help my father finish some of the farm's endless chores, the sooner they could go off together and carouse.

Even though Richard cut into some of my father's free time, my mother almost never begrudged the time they spent together. It was much more comfortable with my father out of the house; the tense aura he created whenever he walked in the door was held at bay while the two men were off doing other things. Richard's

presence in his life seemed to quiet the darker side of my father's personality: his silences, his fists.

So, left with no other choice, my mother carted us off to church with her, making it clear to us that we were expected to be on our best behavior. She let us know that we were impinging on her fun, as if going to hear endless gospel singers on a cloudless summer day was our idea of a good time. This did not apply to Dakin, the angel, who sat primly in the passenger seat, the only child in the car happy to be going to church.

Now we sat upright in our pew, on our best behavior, Mark and I only occasionally giving in to our more immature urges to pinch each other or fidget. The sagging clapboard church was hot, packed as it was by people from at least three counties. As the bench underneath me grew harder, I looked back and up to the balcony, where there was standing room only. A score of ornate Sunday hats swayed to the rhythm of the music and kept time with hundreds of cardboard fans that pushed around the swampy air and clashing perfumes. On the stage, a slight man of middle age was singing an old Negro spiritual, and for a moment I was drawn to the song, its sweet sadness transcending the rich baritone through which it was delivered. I liked the use of the vernacular, the way the old fashioned words seem to drag us back in time. "I'm goin' to shout all ovah God's Heab'n..."

As his song ended, the back door of the church was pulled open so roughly and unexpectedly that several people jumped. A wild-eyed man I had never seen before rushed up to my mother and whispered something in her ear. He was dressed

in jeans and a grass-stained T-shirt and in this venue of three-piece suits and impeccable Sunday dresses, he looked totally disreputable. My mother stood up abruptly, took my brother and myself by the hands and yanked us from the pew.

“Come on,” she said, dragging us behind her, and in the silence that followed the end of the song her voice was a screech. People stared at us, mouths open, craning their necks over the balcony, peeping from behind the makeshift curtain they had set up on the stage and pointing at this madwoman who was making such a spectacle of herself in church. My mother paid no notice though, just pulled us down the aisle screeching “Get my purse,” over her shoulder at my sister, who was still standing in the pew, looking after us in surprise and fear. My mother let go of my hand and pushed open the rear door of the church, blinking for an instant in the white-hot sunlight.

“Get in the car!” she screamed at us. She wrenched open her door and shoved the key into the ignition, barely waiting for us all to pile in before she peeled out of the unpaved parking lot, the long fins of the Buick pointing back at the dust trail following us.

“What happened, what is it?” Dakin was asking, but my mother only grunted, gripping the steering wheel tighter in her sweating hands.

Mark reached over and grabbed my hand. I could tell he was afraid, and I didn't shake him off as I normally would have done. Without seatbelts, he and I bumped around the huge backseat of the old Buick as our mother tore up the landscape at upwards of 100 miles per hour. She passed slow-moving Sunday drivers

and laid on the horn to warn a group of children playing too close to the road. In minutes we'd reached and passed the road to our house, then came to a screeching halt at the sharp curve that lay a quarter of a mile from our turn. Here, the trees were so dense they made a canopy that covered the road completely, and cooled the temperature down at least 10 degrees. She wrenched the car door open, then just stood staring, seemingly unable to move.

In the ditch, at the sharpest point in the curve, Richard Johnson's old station wagon had come to rest, the windshield splintered into a thousand pieces where his body had been launched through it. So recent had the crash been that the car still steamed and smoked, and something inside it ticked quietly in the quiet woods. The roof was caved in where it had rolled over and over and the force of the crash had spun it around 180 degrees from the direction it had begun.

Around the wreckage, following the ditch for several hundred yards and across the road, groups of people were carefully beating down the tall vegetation, calling to each other in muted tones. I looked out of the Buick's side window, my face splashed by a sudden shaft of sunlight. I watched the men for long minutes, curiously at first, before I came slowly to the realization that what they were looking for was my father's body. My sister got out and with my mother, leaned against the front of our car which still sat, engine idling, in the middle of the road. I turned my head to stare at the men who were on the opposite side of the road, who were searching those woods and bushes with equal care. They weaved in and out of the

trees, disturbed deep carpets of pine needles and parted shrubs and bushes that seemed as if they had not been disturbed for centuries.

Time passed. Eventually a vehicle approached, my father's truck, and he pulled slowly in behind the Buick and just sat for several minutes, staring at the wreckage. No one wanted to look at him. He finally got out and joined my mother and several of the men in front of the Buick.

He and Richard had been together, he said. But, as they stopped at our house to pick up a piece of fishing tackle, he had been obliged to stay home, alerted to a broken fence by the appearance of several of our cows munching grass in the front yard. Richard, like always, had volunteered to help him fix it, the sooner they could go carousing, and had hurried home to get an extra set of post-hole diggers.

My father lowered himself to the hood of the car, growing smaller, shaking, staring at the road, at the smoking wreckage that still ticked quietly in the quiet woods, then finally at the blood stained sheet that covered the body lying at the side of the road.

looked forward to meeting new people with about as much enthusiasm as we might show for taking out the garbage.

We reached the end of our driveway and looked across the road, into the yard. There were a lot of kids, six or seven, from a toddler, who sat in the doorway, spooning sand into his mouth, to a young man of 17 or 18 who looked decidedly mentally impaired. There were boys and girls, all running around in various states of dress. The hot midsummer sun was relentless, and some of the younger girls, as well as the boys, were shirtless and without shoes. We were California kids, and we had cringed when our bellbottoms made tracks in the dusty driveway.

My siblings and I reluctantly crossed the road, hoping against hope that our mother would call us back at the last moment.

The little house sat several feet off the ground, lifted up onto pillars so that one could see its undersides. It much resembled the little shack my grandfather had installed us in when we'd first moved to the area. If possible, it was even sadder.

As we reached their mailbox, the screen door of the house opened and the woman of the house stepped out onto the porch. She was large and buxom, dressed in a tattered gingham housedress with large perspiration patches under the arms. Her large feet were shoved into a pair of unlaced men's boots. She smiled a little, and I noticed she was missing several teeth, and of the few she had, the front two were decidedly bucked. Coarse curly black hairs dotted her chin. The front of her kinky black hair was braided into a pigtail, and the rest was covered by a pair of girl's panties. I looked again. Yes, pink and yellow panties, with ducks on them.

“Hey y’all, she said. I’m Miss Dixie, what’s y’all’s names?” We walked up to the porch and politely introduced ourselves. She gave us each a not unfriendly look, then excused herself to continue what she was doing, washing clothes in the old wringer model Maytag washer that shimmied and groaned on the end of the porch.

“You talk White,” one of the younger girls said to me as soon as Miss Dixie turned her back. She was almost my age, and she danced around me in bare feet and a threadbare dress.

“What?” I asked, unsure of how one should respond to such a pronouncement.

“**I say, you talk white!**” she yelled, as if my failure to comprehend was due to some deficit in my hearing and not the exotic vernacular she was using.

I took a second to digest this, not entirely sure what she was talking about, and finally deciding she meant it as an insult. I shrugged.

She turned to the other children.

“Don’t they talk White?” she asked mockingly.

I didn’t know what talking white meant. I talked the way my parents talked. My mother was not White. And neither was my father. But the others laughingly agreed. Emboldened by their support, she grabbed one of my hands. It was at least 10 shades lighter than her own.

“Oooh, look-it her hands. Look how white they is.” She held my hand out, palms up, for the others to inspect. I didn’t know what they could possibly find so fascinating about my empty palm, but they were inspecting it as though it was covered with scales or something. I was beginning to feel ashamed, as if I had done

something wrong. I looked around at the dark faces surrounding me. Beyond them, I could see Dakin talking animatedly to one of the older girls. Miss Dixie still stood on the porch, running clothes through the wringer of the washing machine and then carefully placing them in a basket to be hung on the clothesline in the back of the house.

I snatched my hands away from the girl. She looked at me intently, as a bully will when assessing his prey. She pointed at me, opening her mouth to say something else. I looked quickly back at the porch behind me, at Miss Dixie, then turned around and punched the girl squarely in the nose.

My mother came rushing over to drag me home, apologizing profusely, grounding me for the rest of my life after first giving me a colossal swat on the butt. I tried to ask her what the girl had meant, but angry, she sent me to my room until “your father gets home.”

I refused to go back the next day, the next week, but eventually, lured by the prospect of toys and other children, I returned to *try* to fit in.

Merry Christmas, Mrs. Carmichael

By the time I was in second grade I could recite “The Night Before Christmas” in its entirety. I’d had it read to me, first by my parents, then Dakin, every year since birth and when I’d started school and learned to read I had committed it to memory.

Was this an astounding feat? It was to my second grade teacher, Mrs. Carmichael. She had overheard me reciting it for two of my fellow students after I had cornered them in the coat closet while we were getting ready for lunch. They had been staring at me in fascination and dread, not yet having the vocabulary to express what they were thinking, but which probably went along the lines of “What a geek!” Mrs. Carmichael, however, was looking at me in delight.

She had taught in the same second grade classroom for thirty years. Tall and elegant, she wore immaculate pastel dresses and hand knitted cardigans on her angular frame and her curly white hair was never out of place. She and her sister had

married brothers, had gone in to teaching together, and taught next door to each other, she teaching second grade and her sister teaching third. She was unfailingly patient with us, and kind, and I had only seen her truly upset once, when she had intercepted a note I had written to my friend Anthony with dirty words on it.

“Why honey, how lovely,” she said, clasping her hands together and looking at me in delight. “How on earth did you memorize that whole pome?” Her southern drawl got even drawlier. She was looking at me appraisingly, assessing me, and as much as I loved her, she was beginning to make me nervous, looking at me as she was in the intense, avid way a starving man looks at a gourmet meal.

“Hmmm,” she said. “Would you recite it for the class after lunch?”

“Uh...o.k.” I said, shrugging. I tore out of the door and down the hall to the cafeteria, forgetting the whole thing within 30 seconds.

“Now class, we have a special treat,” Mrs. Carmichel was saying, 45 minutes later. “KaTrina is going to recite a Christmas pome for us.”

She stood in front of the class, gesturing to me to join her. I got up reluctantly.

“Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house,” I recited dutifully.

I finished to lackluster applause, and Tommy Hartnett shot me in the neck with a spitball.

I slunk back to my seat.

The next morning Mrs. Carmichael caught me before I could sit down.

“KaTrina, she said, I was talking to ma sister, and she just couldn’t believe that you memorized that whole pome. She said there was no way a second grader could do that, and I said, well she already recited it for my class. She still didn’t believe me so I said you’d go over and say it for her class, is that all right?” She looked down at me, smiling winningly and I didn’t feel I could refuse her. After all, it was only a poem and I knew it like the back of my hand.

“Okay,” I said. “When?”

“In a few minutes,” she said.

I sat down.

“Twas the night before Christmas,” I began confidently. I was getting sick of those words.

“When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter, I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.”

Unlike my classmates, these students were listening intently to my recitation. They, too, seemed impressed that I had committed the poem to memory. From the corner of my eye, I could see Mrs. Carmichael nodding her head to the rhythm of the poem.

“Away to the window I flew like a flash, tore up the window and threw up the sash.”

“She talks funny,” I heard a girl whisper to her seatmate.

I looked out at the third graders watching me. They certainly were big.

“Tore up the window and threw up the sash.”

I could see Keith, a boy who rode my bus, in the third row, staring at me intently, as if he had never seen me before.

“Tore up the window and threw up the sash. Ummm. Hmmph.” I shifted my weight from my left foot to my right.

“The moon... The moon on the snow... Ummm... the moon on the... The moon on the breast [giggle... giggle from the front row] of the new fallen snow... ummmm.”

Some of the students began to move restlessly.

“The moon on the breast of the new fallen snow...

I stopped, and tilted my head to the side, trying to jog free the next painful line. I had been fine until I started looking at them.

“Is it something about the about the, the... new snow, honey?” Mrs. Carmichael asked, trying to be helpful but nonetheless unable to hide a quiet look of glee.

I shook my head, shifting from foot to foot. I could feel the weight of fifty eyes staring at me, boring holes into my flesh.

From the front row a blonde haired girl raised her hand.

“I think I know, Mrs. Carmichael,” she simpered. It’s “The new on the breast of the fallen snow.” She looked at me smugly.

“No, Clarrissa, that’s not it,” Mrs. Carmichael said sharply. She turned to me with her most reassuring teacher expression. “That’s alright if you can’t remember

honey, it's a long poem and you've done a good job." She put her arm around my shoulders, giving me a little squeeze.

"Can I start over?" I asked. I didn't really want to start over. She hesitated and I could see *she* didn't want me to start over either and was trying to figure out how to say so politely.

"No, honey, I think you'd better go back to class."

I walked as quietly as I could to the door, hoping to disappear, hoping for Armageddon, hoping against hope that the floor would open up and swallow me. I stepped into the hallway and when the door closed, I couldn't help it, I began to cry in loud, wracking sobs, my humiliation complete. It wasn't just that I had forgotten the poem, but I had let my teacher down. She would be as embarrassed as I was, having bragged about me to her sister. I leaned against the painted cinderblock wall and wailed, until Third Grade Mrs. Carmichael opened her door and found me there. She wrapped me in her arms, patted my back and assured me that it was okay, that even big third graders could not remember such a long poem. In the back of my mind I realized that this was the closest I'd ever been to a white person.

Second Grade Mrs. Carmichel opened her door a second later and walked over to where I still stood in her sister's embrace. Mrs. Carmichael dropped her arms, putting her hands into her pockets. Her sister immediately put her arms around my shoulders as I had now arrived at snurgling, that state of hard crying where one must hitch in breath while simultaneously hiccupping. The sisters stood talking quietly

over my head, apparently forgetting that crying does not necessarily render a child deaf.

“Knew it,” said Third Grade Mrs. Carmichael triumphantly.

“What-how-she was perfect in my class,” her sister said in a disbelieving tone.

“KaTrina,” said my Mrs. Carmichael, “you go on in the bathroom and wash your face. I’ll be in just a second, honey.” She gave my shoulders another little squeeze, then gave me a tiny push in the direction of the classroom. I opened the door and let it close behind me. Forgetting that I had not said goodbye to Third Grade Mrs. Carmichael, I pushed the door back open and paused.

“Damn,” my teacher said to her sister. Then she reached into the pocket of her pristine pastel dress and handed her sister a crisp new five -dollar bill.

Mayberry Days

Summer days seemed to last forever on our farm. Together, the rich, fertile soil of South Carolina and the marshy saltwater inlets and black fresh- water creeks gave us natural playgrounds, incomparable to those made of concrete and steel. We thrived on dirt wars in just-plowed rows, and somersaulted from the long, frayed rope that dangled over the moccasin infested- waters of Horton's Creek. Fun could be had anywhere on our farm. Barefoot and shoeless (and until puberty, shirtless), my brother and I roamed those 300 or so acres without fear. We played all day under the hot sun and cloudless blue sky, pausing only to drink cold water from the well, or gorge ourselves on freshly picked fruit.

And fruit there was in abundance: pears, peaches, plums. Even bitter old persimmons grew on a twisted, blighted tree down the lane. Blackberries grew in a bramble, and wild grapevines provided the sweetest grapes on earth. My father grew cash crops: soybeans, green beans, and corn, but most importantly, my father grew watermelons. And oh, the absolute deliciousness of gorging oneself on the sweet, juicy hearts, leaving the seed-laden meat of the fruit to decay in the hot sun. We could eat as many as we wanted, so we could be picky. We usually tried to find the biggest,

although size was not necessarily an indication of how sweet the fruit would be. We would hold them high over our heads, crashing them down onto the ground with all the force our scrawny arms could muster, and watch the smooth, creamy rind break apart, exposing the meaty red fruit. Then we would gorge ourselves, cool, sticky juice making clean tracks down our arms as it washed away the dirt and sweat from our mouths and chins. If we had friends over, we would break open as many as ten or twelve, each greedily wanting a whole one for ourselves. We would eat our fill, our stomachs bulging out and making us look like pygmies before returning, yelling and whooping, to our games of tag or Red Rover.

Ours was the only working farm in that vast area where miles of forests were interrupted only occasionally by a house or small homestead. We owned hundreds of cows, chickens, and an old mule named Daisy who seemed as old as the farm itself. Until recently, we'd had a pony, a black and white Pinto named Lightning, but he had turned mean in that crazed way that ponies sometimes did, jumped one of the fences next to the road, and been hit by an eighteen-wheeler.

We were the only family I knew that actually owned the land it lived on. It would be many years before I understood the adult concept of class distinctions, but to the adults in the neighborhood the fact that we owned property made us different. It didn't matter that the house we lived in was little more than a shack and for years had no indoor plumbing. Nor did it matter that we were permanently strapped for cash and my father not only ran the farm but worked as a longshoreman to keep us clothed and fed. *We* did not pay rent. Miss Caroline, who lived a quarter of a mile down the

road, and whose ten children were our most constant playmates, certainly understood the distinction. She constantly fought to pay her rent on the tiny three -bedroom house that, to her and her children, constituted home. We did not have that shadow hanging over our lives. And we owned not only land, but a substantial piece of property. So if the adults were sometimes unable to control a thinly veiled comment, it more often than not sailed over our heads-- except once.

School friendships were often hard to maintain after the dismissal bell rang for the day. Houses being as far apart as they were, the distance one would have to travel to visit for a few hours made after school outings rare. But, one weekday afternoon, my sister and I took the school bus home with her friend Cassandra. I don't even think they were that close, we just lived in fair proximity and an after school outing or the chance to have a friend over like they did on television was too exciting to miss. So Dakin and I bypassed our usual stop and ended up at the home of the Frasier.

It was o.k. for a while. There were several children in the family, but none of my age. I puttered around the house, sometimes listening to the girls as they chattered on about kids I did not know and how exciting it was to be in high school. Bored, I wandered out into the living room. None of the other children were about, and I could hear Mrs. Frasier moving around in the kitchen, getting ready for dinner. My mother was expected to pick us up at five thirty. It was now four fifteen. I sat down at the piano and idly fingered the keys. One of my fantasies was to become a concert pianist when I grew up. I longed to understand the hidden meanings behind the codes hidden

in the sheet music. But now I could only pick out random tunes while swinging my legs and whistling listlessly.

The front door opened and Mr. Frasier came in from work. He was thin, and so tall his head seemed to be almost touching the ceiling. He carried his lunch pail, empty now, under his arm, and his dark, kind face looked at me in some surprise.

“Well hello,” he said.

“Hello,” Mr. Frasier,” I said. No matter how friendly, I was always uncomfortable with adults I didn’t know well. He didn’t stop, though, just moved on through to the kitchen where I could hear him and his wife talking to one another. After a while he came back in and, picking up the newspaper, settled himself in his recliner. I was at a loss, not wanting to stay in the room and at the same time not wanting to give offense by leaving abruptly. He looked at me over the top of his paper for a moment, as if trying to decide whether it would be rude not to talk to me.

“So, Little Bit,” he said finally, “how are you getting on in school this year?”

“Pretty good,” I said. He waited, perhaps thinking I would say something else, but I was too nervous to say more.

Conversation was hard going as he, with the Southern habit for manners, struggled to find a topic that would engage me.

“What are y’all havin’ for dinner tonight?” he asked in some desperation, looking at the kitchen door as if hoping his wife might materialize and save him.

“I think my mom’s making shrimp tonight,” I said innocently.

“Hnnnnnn,” he said. “Figures.” A sharp and fleeting expression crossed his face, drawing his eyebrows together and changing his ordinarily gentle demeanor into something dark and brooding. “I’ll bet ya’ll eat a lot of shrimp. His voice oozed sarcasm. Steak every night. I bet that Frank Bastian-”

He stopped abruptly, as if he suddenly remembered to whom he was speaking, and shamefully clamped his mouth down on whatever else he was about to say. Or perhaps he had gotten a look at my face. It wasn’t the few words he’d said that made my mouth drop open; it was the tone. It was almost the same tone I’d heard Miss Caroline use when I’d overheard her and my mother discussing my grandfather and what a racist old son of a bitch he had always been.

But never had an adult spoken to me with such hostility. I was immediately defensive. I felt I should explain to him that my father went shrimping a lot and that’s why we could eat shrimp. Because he went out in his little leaky row boat we called the Bailer, and shrimped all day sometimes, and brought them home and made us take the icky heads off and shell them, and then my mom cooked some and put the rest in the freezer. I felt like telling him that in spite of the fact that our family would be having fried shrimp tonight, the only thing in our refrigerator right now was a jar of mayonnaise and half a container of milk. But I said none of this. I got up quickly and left the room, spending the rest of my time there sitting under the oak tree in the back yard until our mom picked us up. I never visited the Frasier’s again after that.

Birdsong

I opened our back door one hot summer morning and ran down the rotting wooden steps, letting the screen door slam behind me. Shirtless and shoeless, I tried to ignore the hot sand that had been baking under the sun all morning and which seared the bottoms of my feet. I made my way to the orchard's edge and stopped at the old pear tree. I'd always loved this old tree. It stood alone at the outer boundary of the orchard, as if separated from the other fruit trees by age and grace. I liked to think it had stood there forever, regal and ancient, its scarred gray trunk attesting to its age. The year before it had tried to commit suicide by overloading itself with so much fruit that many of its branches broke off from the extra weight. But it had survived, more scarred and aged perhaps, but still producing fruit. Its branches were perfectly spaced for climbing, and it stood close enough to the house to make it the perfect hiding place and look out point. Above all else, though, it was as familiar, and I loved it as much as the old homestead itself. I looked back at the house. It sat baking in the heat of the Carolina sun, silently, as if waiting. Its weathered clapboard sagged on its foundation, age and neglect presenting a façade of aggressive decay. The rusted tin

roof creaked in the gentle morning wind and provided the only spot of sad color to the house. Dry, rotted wood hung from the window frames, and the fluttering of aged curtains could be seen through broken windows. The lawn, oddly made up of thick white sand where grass should have been, surrounded the house, giving no hint of the infernal heat it had soaked up from the hot June sun. Beyond it, where the sand stopped, a row of wisteria bushes stood resplendent with fragrant purple blossoms, timeless, twisted sentinels, their trunks as gray and gnarled as an old man's arthritic hands.

As if by some signal, birds began to shout and sing and squawk in the branches of the trees above, their songs the only thing breaking the heavy silence. To the right of the house lay an open orchard with pear and peach trees interspersed, heavy with spring blossoms and new, unripened fruit. A plowed patch of earth lay beyond, with neat rows of tender green seedlings reaching skyward. A pine forest made a natural border, separating the orchard from the neighboring house as well as the road. A variety of trees created a sheltering canopy; two-hundred-year-old oak trees stood regally, fighting the Spanish moss that clutched at them.

And the air was filled with birdsong. The clear spring morning had called to them and they sang together, cardinals and blue jays and mockingbirds, twittering in a mad, joyous cacophony. High above, black buzzards glided serenely, spiraling on soft air currents, their never-ending quest for carrion as inevitable as death itself.

I stood at the base of the tree for a moment, squinting against the hard yellow sun that filtered through the leaves, turning them black. I began to climb, reaching up

to the first branch and swinging myself up, almost without effort and with a grace that comes with repetition. I climbed up several branches, then sat swinging my legs back and forth and whistling tunelessly. I was thin-- almost to the point of emaciation, each of my ribs clearly visible. My arms and legs were like sticks, thin and wiry, yet they were oddly strong and capable. I looked down at my naked torso. The skin had baked to the color of a copper penny, except where a glimpse of creamy skin could be seen beneath the waistband of my battered, cut off shorts. Old scars covered my legs and torso, testament to the rough and tumble life I lived on the farm. I sat on the branch, biting my lip, thinking about the conversation my parents had had the night before and which I had heard by eavesdropping at their bedroom door. They were becoming concerned because at 11, I still wanted to be a boy--had shown no inclination to partake in girlish activities. At that time, 1975, the term "transgendered" had not yet been introduced, but if they had heard it, I'm sure they would have wondered if it applied to me. They did know what a lesbian was, and I'm sure they had been trying to reassure themselves that "rabid tomboy" was a phase that I would eventually outgrow. But their concern was entirely unfounded. I did not think I was a boy born into a girl's body. Nor did I have any desire to have a relationship with someone of my own sex. I simply wanted to *be* a boy. Boys led lives that were so much more interesting and fun-filled than girls, and that difference seemed extremely unfair. I hated dresses and dolls and--Suddenly, my attention was caught by a sound behind me. I turned on my branch, looking out into the orchard.

Every spring, hundreds of mockingbirds chose the orchard for their nesting place. The small fruit trees were ideal, for they sat in a wide-open field where, except for an occasional housecat, the new chicks were fairly safe from predators. The noise that had attracted me was the frantic, hysterical chirping of a baby bird that had fallen out of its nest. It sat on the ground, pitifully gazing up at its mother, the slight distance to the top of the small peach tree as unreachable as the moon. Its high-pitched chirping was filled with desperation. The mother bird hopped anxiously from branch to branch, calling to her fallen chick.

I swung down from my branch in one sweeping movement and headed out toward the tree, moving carefully to avoid stepping in the patches of cockleburrs that sprouted in abundance. My heart started to pound in my chest. I had always wanted a bird for a pet, had always been fascinated by the sight of a bird in flight, but here, on this working farm, an unnecessary animal such as a parakeet was simply out of the question. It would have been seen as pretentious, just as my mother had been judged as pretentious when she had gone about starting a flower garden. This was a working farm. Farmers did not grow flowers. That was left for the city dwellers we had been.

I glanced back over my shoulder. Only Junior, our black German Shepherd, was about, and he lay on his side in the dust, panting from the heat. I turned back to the orchard, determined to reach the chick before anyone appeared outside. We were absolutely forbidden to play in the orchard, for the chirping of the newborn chicks attracted rattlesnakes. This had been doubly enforced since one of our neighbors, a girl we had gone to school with, had died after being bitten by a rattler.

I zigzagged from clear patch to clear patch, avoiding the dense stands of green cockleburs. They were deceptive, cockleburs. They hid themselves among weeds and clover, waiting for a pants leg or a bare foot to come along. Then their sharp, hooked thorns sank deeply into cloth or flesh, puncturing the skin and leaving holes when they were pulled out. So I stepped carefully, even in my haste.

Suddenly, the shrill screech of rusty hinges screamed through the air as the back door of the house was pulled open and I froze, as if the act of standing perfectly still would render me invisible in the bright morning sun. I held my breath. If my father caught me in the orchard... I opened my eyes after a minute and looked, but saw no one. It must have been Mark, on his way to the south field to check the cows. I let out a shaky breath, my knees quivering a little from sudden relief. The last time I was caught doing something I shouldn't my father had not spoken to me for a week. That had been more painful than if he had spanked me. Still, the baby bird claimed my attention, for it was right in front of me. It was tangible, whereas a whipping was something that only might happen. I continued walking, picking my way through the brambles until I reached the small chick. The bird's terrified chirping increased, for the poor animal was frightened out of its wits. Its mottled gray down had just given way to black feathers. It attempted to hop away, but its ungainly body tilted and it fell headfirst into the dirt. There it could only sit and chirp madly, its terror increasing, for it did not recognize its savior. I reached down and picked it up, nestling the tiny animal against my scrawny midriff. The mother bird's hysterical chirping reached a new pitch. I felt a twinge of sorrow for the mother bird's twittering

desperation but I quickly shook it off. The warm body nestled in my hands was too new. I could feel the tiny heart beating in rapid bursts, like Morse code. I turned back the way I had come, intending to take the bird with me. This was the pet I had always wanted.

The mother bird, with no options left to her, did the only thing she could; she attacked. Down she swooped, legs extended, eyes bulging madly, anger turning it into a dervish. Again and again it made passes at my head, its tiny, clawed feet and sharp beak drawing blood on my forehead. I put one hand up, trying to ward off the attacking bird, swatting at it as one would a pesky insect. But the mother bird, willing to fight to the last, dived again and again at my head. Its gray feathers were dusty and dry. It had apparently sent out a distress call; for other birds joined in, surrounding me, their insistent chirping loud and earsplitting. My nerve broke. Blindly I ran, swinging my arm above my head, the other hand still clutching the chick. I stopped suddenly, in mid-stride. In my haste to be rid of the birds I had run into a large stand of cockleburs. The pain was terrific. I had stepped on dozens, the spurs sinking into the bottoms of my feet and the lower portion of my legs as I brushed past them. Blood was seeping down my legs in rivulets, the skin scratched and punctured from dozens of burrs. And above, the avian militia continued to attack my head. I chomped down on the scream that almost escaped my lips. I attempted to run again and stopped, wincing. My heart was beating wildly in my chest and my breath came in ragged gasps as I tried not to cry. The mother bird's attack was so unexpected I got a sharp, dizzying sense of unreality. Fear, panic and humiliation rolled themselves in a ball

and landed in the pit of my stomach. I was so rattled I didn't realize that simply dropping the baby bird would help resolve one of my problems. So I stood there, frozen, battered by dusty wings and sharp claws. I did have peace of mind enough not to yell, for to make noise would be to bring discovery, and I did *not* want to be discovered in the orchard.

Junior, the German Shepherd, wandered over, investigating the noise. He made his way towards the spot where I stood easily, his feet and coat apparently impervious to cockleburs. He stood looking up at me, cocking his head quizzically, his brown eyes holding the sadness of years. His black coat and muzzle were streaked with gray, for he was an old dog. He gazed up at me sympathetically. He bent his head, and using his mouth, he gently, gently pulled at one of the cockleburs. It came out reluctantly, leaving a hole that began to seep blood. He looked sadly at the blood oozing down my leg. Not knowing what to do next he did the only thing he could to express his sorrow for my plight: he put his head back and, with a timbre that would have put a Bassett Hound to shame, he let out a great baying howl: AWOoooooo.

The birds scattered at the noise--all but the mother bird, who retreated to a nearby tree and hopped madly from branch to branch, close to where I stood.

"Shut up Junior!" I said crossly. I looked nervously over my shoulder to see if anyone had looked out of the house to investigate the racket. Seeing no one, I surmised that I was safe for now and I bent over, studying my legs and feet, trying to determine how to get the worst of the burrs out so that I could move. I knew that the best way to remove cockleburs was to soak the feet in warm water, but that was

impossible. I considered just yanking them out quickly, but I knew the pain would be unbearable. I was stuck. I needed to get out of the orchard *now* before my father saw me. Just thinking about him made me shake a little. I looked down at Junior, who, having finally lost interest, lay panting at my feet. I took a couple of experimental steps, standing on my highest tiptoes. That seemed to work somewhat, and I gingerly sidestepped a large stand of weeds. As I moved, the mother bird once again rose from her branch, still determined to recover her chick. I had forgotten I still held the creature and I threw it up and back over my shoulder as hard as I could. It flapped its wings madly, terror giving it enough strength to fly a couple of feet. I looked down, trying to determine the clearest path to freedom. I took a step to the right and stopped. I slowly inched over to the left, the awkwardness of standing on tiptoe for such an extended period making my calves ache. I reached down to scratch my leg and stopped, out of places to step. I—

“What are you doing out there?”

The simple question hung on the hot air. My heart began beating madly. My tongue seemed to be glued to the roof of my mouth. I had been so intent on determining a clear path out of the orchard I had forgotten my fear of discovery. My mouth had gone completely dry. The perspiration on my skin went from hot to cold and I literally could not speak.

“In trouble, huh?” he said.

He crossed the distance to me in seconds, his leather work boots oblivious to the thorny pricklers. I took a deep breath, gathering all my inner resources, and looked up into his eyes.

He bit down on his lip, his eyes crinkled with mirth. He stood in front of me, staring at my feet, blocking out the sun. His black eyes, so often clouded by a cruelly casual disinterest, seemed to bore right down through my soul.

“Well, Squirt,” he said. He reached down and swung me up and over his shoulder as he had not done since I was a small child. Covering the distance to the edge of the orchard, he stood for a moment under the shade of the old pear tree.

“It’s been a long time since I held you like this,” he said. He set me down in the shade, in a sitting position, then turned on his heel and left as silently as he had come. I sat with blood streaming down my legs, cockleburrs still poking out from my skin in all directions.

I was still unable to speak.

Jacks

It was a rainy day in late fall. Cold and gloomy, as only the last few weeks of fall can be. A heavy rain fell ceaselessly and seemed destined to fall forever.

Looking outside, my friends and I could barely see the thick growth of trees that surrounded the school through the raindrops that hurled themselves like projectiles at the already saturated earth. We were fairly comfortable, though, sitting in a small semi-circle at the end of one of the little used, poorly lighted corridors of our school, having narrowly beaten out a group of ninth grade girls for this spot. It was only in inclement weather that we were allowed to stay inside during our 30- minute recess. And now, the cold tile warmed under our scrawny backsides as we spent this lunch period tucked away, out of the elements. We talked about *who had said what to whom*, and *how she thought she was cute*, and *did you see that short skirt she was wearin'*. Soon, out came the jacks, because even though we were old now, 8th grade, jacks had come back into fashion and we played the game with the passionate zeal that only the latest "in" fad could garner. Ellen Reed, the richest girl in our group (her

grandmother owned an unlicensed nightclub, and Ellen lived with her), popped the top on a can of Coke. We all took a sip, except for Sharonda, who thought it was disgusting to drink after other people had had their mouths on something. One thing about Ellen, she always shared whatever she had. She was a funny looking girl, with fish eyes that popped out of her head, and her grandmother always parted her kinky hair in the middle and made two puffballs on either side of her head with rubber bands. Her skin was dark. Dark, dark--like the inky blackness that covered the chalkboards. I sometimes thought she used her material possessions as admission into our group, as though without them, we would reject her on the basis of her looks.

We were absorbed in our games, the outside of our cupped hands filthy from sliding them across the dusty floor as we swept up the scattered jacks. Behind us, the door was pulled roughly open and wind gusted in, sharp with the smell of wet earth and winter, and our school's newest teacher was almost blown into the hallway.

"Whew!" he said, dripping water all over our playing area. He shook his wet hair like a dog just released from a torturous bath. The new history teacher stood grinning at us, the closest thing Ridgeland High had ever had to a dreamboat. He must have been in his early twenties, blonde haired and blue-eyed, and in this rural, all black school he was wildly exotic. He wore his dirty blonde hair long, on his shoulders. Not particularly daring, considering this was the seventies, but he was a teacher, and this was, after all, the South. He looked at us through strange, depthless eyes.

"What y'all doing?" he asked of us all, and no one in particular. "Jacks, huh? Well, I'm pretty good, can I have a turn?" Not waiting for an answer, he took off his wet coat and hung it on the doorknob of the broom closet behind him. He knelt down, swept up the jacks in one sweeping motion, and scattered them across the dusty floor.

"Who's got the ball?" He reached over and took the small red ball from Cynthia's hand, ignoring her open mouth, then executed a flawless pass of "*Two-zies*," talking all the while and not seeming to notice that he had just broken one of the cardinal teacher rules by engaging in fun with students. Smiling, he gave it back to her, then regretfully heaved himself to his feet.

"I've still got it," he said, smiling and patting himself on the back. "I guess having four sisters was good for something, huh?" He smiled around at us, pleased with himself, and speaking as charmingly as if we were all invited guests at a country club garden party.

"Hey," he said, eyeing Ellen's can of Coke, "can I have a sip?"

Ellen's fishy eyes popped even further out of her head. I heard Annette's teeth click together as she jerked her head sideways in astonishment. Ellen looked around wildly, wondering if there was someone behind her he could possibly be addressing. A grimy blank wall stared back at her. Seemingly unaware of our shock, he casually reached over and took the can from Ellen's wooden hand. Then, in the dim light of a shabby school corridor in a small country town in the Deep South, a young white teacher drank from a can that had been drunk from by five African American girls.

We had known that he was eccentric: he had been overheard having conversations with his students instead of standing in front of the classroom talking at them. He drove a shiny new sports car, low slung, sporty... *convertible*. He had even once worn jeans to school. We had overheard whispered snatches of conversation about him from the other teachers, mostly the women, but some of the men as well. This only confirmed to us that he was an outsider. So, we stared at him, curiously, speechlessly, our minds reaching out desperately to embrace the wider world he had just shown us. He handed Ellen back her Coke, then smiled around at us.

"I'm Mr. Henstangal," he said. He smiled around at us again then retrieved his coat from the doorknob and, nodding gallantly, turned and ambled off down the dim hallway.

We crowded around Ellen.

"Hey, give me a sip," I said.

"Me too!" Cynthia elbowed me out of the way.

"It's my turn," said Annette.

Sharonda looked at us.

"Can I have some?" she said.

Stephen King and The Doubleday Book Club

Summers were long in South Carolina. Schools let out at the end of May and started up again at the end of August. By mid June of the year I turned eleven, the new had worn off the summer and my siblings and I were left to fill twelve hours of unsupervised time. Our father, if not in the fields, worked the docks or went fishing or shrimping, and our mother had gotten a job at a large department store on Hilton Head, forty miles away. This left Dakin in charge, and *she* spent most of her time in her bedroom with the door closed, kissing her poster of the Jackson 5 for all I knew. Even though Dakin and I were thrown together a lot of the time during the school year, there was a five- year gap between us, so it was not a happy union. She was often angered and embarrassed by having her little sister tagging along behind her, and I was resentful of her bossy ways. I had far more in common with, and a closer connection to, my brother, Mark, in our pre-adolescent years. Being a tomboy, I much

preferred the rough and tumble life on the farm to any girlish endeavors. Mark and I spent many long, amiable summer days amusing ourselves, living wild on the razor sharp edge of real danger and simple farm life. We climbed trees in death defying feats of aerialism, captured deadly black widow spiders, and jumped, feet first, twenty feet out of the hayloft. Yet we rarely came to harm, although we were always nursing some cut or abrasion. We were best friends at this time in our lives, before he replaced me with a lifelong love for marijuana and general underachievement.

If not roaming around the farm, he and I spent hour upon hour in the dusty, sweltering hayloft of our barn. There, shunning the perfect blue summer days, we would lie around on the scratchy hay bales in the shadowy heat, breathing in the dust from the soybeans stored below, and have intense literary conversations. Dirty from our ramblings, and wearing nothing but cut off shorts, we were nonetheless miniature academics, our investigation of a text as deep and heated as any academic in a collegial debate. We loved books. He and my father were the only other people I knew for whom books elevated life.

This summer we discovered Stephen King. We had forged our mother's signature on a Doubleday Book Club order form we'd found in a magazine and ordered six books for 99 cents. We made it a point to order only those books with asterisks beside their titles, as these denoted explicit sex or violence. The Shining was one of our first selections. We had no idea what the book was about, and we had never heard of Stephen King or any of the other authors whose books we'd ordered,

but we divied up the six books we'd gotten, gave our sister the free Doubleday Tote Bag, and took our first foray into adult fiction.

My first book turned out to be a dud, an insipid romance novel about a woman who goes to the island of Capri, falls in love with a handsome, rich heir to an Italian car company and when he is tragically killed blah, blah, blah.

I had given up Caroline Haywood for this? Left Henry Huggins and Ramona Quimby behind on Klickitat Street to read a story so filled with cliché that even a fifth grader found it highly implausible?

Mark, on the other hand, had started with The Shining and tore through it quickly, in a matter of days.

“Here,” he said to me as soon as he was done. “You have to read this book, it’s great, it’s scary, there’s this hotel and a boy who can see things and this really cool...” He shoved it at me, convincing me to lay aside the Erica Jong novel I had just started. As we had always shared our books, our insatiable appetite for reading outstripping the number of books we could take out of the library at one time, he knew his and my tastes were much the same. Often during the school year we’d check books out of the school’s library, read them from cover to cover on the interminable bus ride home, then switch and read each other’s books on the return trip to school the next morning. Now, as it was summer, we were cut off from school as our avenue to reading, and my mother would only take us into town to the public library every now and then. Mark couldn’t wait for me to finish The Shining, asking me at least

three times a day if I was finished yet. I put him off, totally excited and not wanting to discuss the book until I was finished.

We talked about it for days, sending shivers down each other's spines as we rehashed the scary parts: the dead woman in the bathroom and how her eyes were like green marbles, the blood and guts that appear to the boy in the hallway. We appreciated the wit that came through the grim plot line and applauded the genius that had created the mystery of "Redrum." We looked up King's other books, reading everything he had written and that we could get our hands on through Doubleday. Although we loved those later books, like chasing the dragon, it was never as exhilarating as the first of his we'd read. We forged more Doubleday order forms, then, when we couldn't come up with anymore fake names to use, we moved on to the Literary Guild, waiting in high anticipation for the UPS van to drive up and drop off our obsessions. We spent the entire month of July reading voraciously books that it would not be appropriate for us to be reading for another ten years, deconstructing texts, and racking up several hundred dollars in unpaid book club bills. We hadn't thought about the bills, or the fact that after your initial order the book clubs started shipping books to you automatically.

We investigated other writers in the horror genre, John Saul, and Dean R. Koontz, but none of them could live up to our first love. Eventually, we branched out to other genres, other writers, our love for those books forever coloring our lives. It wasn't just the books themselves, but the way they catapulted us from childish themes to more adult sensibilities.

Our mother found out how we were getting our books eventually, alerted by the bills we never thought would come and by the ever- increasing stacks of books she kept tripping over in our bedrooms. Thus our relationship with the Doubleday Book Club ended, and we were left only with our library cards and the difficult task of convincing a Southern librarian in the public library that it was appropriate for a nine- year -old and an eleven- year- old to check out books from the adult section. And it was years, well into adulthood, before I could walk into a bathroom and pull back the shower curtain without some trepidation.

The Bailer

My Uncle Joe's visits always caused great excitement in our house. He was my father's younger brother and we had always been told about how wild and unpredictable he was. He had been a paratrooper in Vietnam, and he still retained a wild, go-to-hell attitude towards life. He was open and talkative in a way my father was not, and the two of them together presented a startling tale of contrasts; my father, black haired and black eyed, with burnished brown skin, while Joe had seemingly spurned his parent's genes, and instead of straight black Indian hair he had curly blonde hair. His skin was so fair and pale that his race was indeterminate, yet

his eyes were the blackest black, depthless and inscrutable. Several years after we moved to the farm he had also quit Los Angeles, although he returned to Summerville, the town he had grown up in. He visited us infrequently, a couple times a year, usually driving back home that same day as our house was not really equipped for overnight guests. As well, his wife Lavinia hated the farm, so when they came their trips were brief. Occasionally he would come alone and stay for several days. When he did, he and my dad spent much of his visit on the water.

The two of them had become quite close in recent years. It had taken the onset of adulthood for them to become so, for when they were growing up the nine-year gap in their ages was not conducive to friendship. Joe, my father always said, smiling, had been a giant pain in his butt. Now, my father looked forward to Joe's visits and their shared love of the sea seemed to bring them closer together. While out on the boat together, the two of them seemed to be happier, more at peace than at any other time.

Uncle Joe and my father would spend all day crisscrossing the thousands of small inlets that led to the open ocean, casting their shrimp nets and raiding the oyster beds. Sometimes they would fish from the boat, Joe's blonde hair bleached almost white in the glaring sun. In the evening they would come home with bushel barrels filled with oysters and shrimp and we would feast; the oysters laid out on sheets of corrugated tin laid across a low tower of bricks, and covered with wet gunny sacks. A fire would be lit underneath them and they would hiss and steam until their shells opened, surrendering the salty meat within. I was the adventurous one and, like my

father, loved nothing more than eating them raw, sprinkled with a dash of hot sauce or lemon juice. I loved the way the slightly gelatinous mass could be consumed in one swallow, the rawness helping maintain the intense salt freshness of the sea. Most of all, I loved the way the sight of one of them shimmying on the tip of my stuck out tongue could make my sister Dakin want to vomit.

The shrimp would be placed in a giant cast iron cauldron, their shells and heads left on, and secret seasonings would be added to make the most delectable peel and eat shrimp. Invited guests would bring dishes to pass: fresh picked sweet corn, macaroni and cheese, banana pudding. These dishes would be spread out on paper covered picnic tables to be devoured over the course of many hours.

Much of this bounty came courtesy of the old Bailer. My father had gotten it third hand, its age denoted by its chipped green paint that allowed the weathered wood to peek through, but he loved it nonetheless. He had not known it leaked until its maiden voyage, when he had piled my brother and me into it and rowed us out several hundred feet from The Landing, his favorite launching spot. We'd watched the slow pooling of water in the boat's bottom, and ever after had been obliged to carry a plastic milk jug that had been cut in half with which to bail out the water.

Shrimping was by far Joe and my fathers favorite past time; the slow, rhythmic swoosh of the cast nets punctuating their animated conversation as they joked, reminisced, and tried to verbally one-up each other. Much skill was needed to cast the net, which could weigh upward of twenty pounds. The top would be held in the mouth, leaving both hands free to manipulate the net. When cast, its bottom, studded

with lead weights, would fan out in a perfect circle and sink quickly, trapping as many shrimp as possible. Uncle Joe had once miscalculated his throw and had gotten his brand new dental plate tangled in the thick mesh of the net. It had been thrown into the sea where it sank to the bottom of the twenty-foot waterway, never to be recovered.

On one of his last visits, the three of us had once gotten stranded in the maze-like warren of inlets, several miles out from shore. The motor on the old Bailer had sputtered softly, coughed once, and died. The current was too strong now, to row out, so we would have to wait until the evening, when the tide turned, to get back to the landing. The fact that we were stuck, were *unable* to get back to land, scared me quite a bit; the small wooden boat seemed to shrink to half its size while the vast waterway seemed to reach gargantuan proportions. But unperturbed, the men casually cast their shrimp nets and chatted, and I sat in the rear of the boat, quietly bailing, learning what it was to love the sea.

Slowly, the afternoon wound down to dusk. The light changed and almost imperceptibly the hot, clear yellow sunshine became less hard, as though the introduction of a softer, orange hue somehow made the light more malleable. As the sun moved closer to the horizon the faintest chill touched the air, carried on the salty breeze that rustled the marsh grasses. On the banks of the inlet hermit crabs sidled home, making barely discernible tracks in the sticky mud. Orange light became a more intense red as the sun let loose its rays to play over the water like splintered shards of glass, shimmering, brilliant and so luminous that to watch for too long hurt

the heart. Dipping closer to the horizon, the sun winked in and out longingly, as if unwilling to leave the spectacle it had created. Strong red faded slowly, softly tinged with purple, then on to black as the sun took its final curtain call and relinquished its stage to the evening. The earth seemed to pause, as if the suspension of movement was necessary to usher in the coming darkness. Still, inky blackness ensued, so impenetrable it was impossible to see a hand in front of one's face. The salt smell intensified in the still air. The moon peeped out between two clouds, hesitantly at first, then rose, slowly gaining strength and majesty as it ascended, its gentle light haughtily pale, but no less brilliant than the sun had been. As if on cue the night animals stirred, restless after the brief intermission. Gaining strength, the moon rose higher, bathing the inlet in a silvery light that played on the water like a dream. I sat quietly in the small boat, suddenly understanding the meaning of infinity.

The Body in the Coffin

I didn't expect him to *die*. My father had come home from work early one evening in late August, covered with a white dusty substance that lay on his clothes and whitened his hair. This was not particularly unusual. As a longshoreman, his job was to unload the cargo of ships in the port of Savannah and this could indeed be dirty work. He had done this for years, as the intermittent nature of the job was suited to the ebb and flow of farm life. Even if called in to work, he would sometimes get "bumped" by someone with more time on the job, or, during planting or harvesting, he could decline the job entirely.

It was still extremely hot. We had returned to school at the beginning of the month but the excitement of the first days of school had quickly waned, and we had settled into its hum-drum routine. We had done our homework and been sent to bed. He had likewise turned in early, complaining of a severe headache.

I was awakened by my mother, urgently shaking Dakin by the shoulder.

“Wake up, there’s something wrong with your father, I have to take him to the hospital,” she was saying.

Dakin and I both sat up groggily, not really comprehending. I looked out of the open window. I wasn’t sure what time it was, but the full moon was high in the sky and I could hear the chirps and whines of millions of insects, reminding me that our house sat in the middle of a wood.

Dakin and I got up and followed my mother into the living room. She was already dressed, though her hair flew around her head in an uncombed mass and she couldn’t seem to get her foot into her shoe. I walked over to the open bedroom door and peeked in at my father. In the darkened room I could see him outlined on the bed, a wet hand towel clamped in his hands as his body writhed and shook convulsively. There was a sharp rap on the front door and I turned to see Miss Rosetta, our neighbor. My mother had called her when my father began convulsing, and she had come over to drive them to the hospital. Miss Rosetta and my father had played together as children when he spent summers on the farm, and she had known him longer and more intimately than anyone else in the neighborhood. There were no ambulances this far out in the country. For emergencies, the sick or injured were put into whatever vehicle was available and driven the twenty or so miles to the hospital. Our school-mate Rosemary had died when a rattlesnake had bitten her while she picked corn in an isolated field. The only mode of transportation had been a tractor, and it had taken an hour and a half for the slow moving vehicle to reach the small

country hospital. By then it was too late and she had died. My mother and Miss Rosetta piled my father in the back of our car and disappeared into the night.

Dakin, at 17, kept us together. She got Mark and me off to school in the morning, refusing to let us stay at home as we had wanted. We went to school and waited.

Our mother called the second night. The local hospital couldn't diagnose him. They did not have the right equipment, so had sent him by ambulance to the Veteran's hospital in Beaufort, forty miles away. My mother rode with him in the ambulance, without a change of clothes, money, or a toothbrush.

She called periodically with updates, sometimes a matter of hours, sometimes days, as if she was finding it difficult to keep track of time. Her mother and father-in-law had joined her at the hospital, and they had shared the uneasy vigil. Our father had had an aneurysm in his brain that had burst, she'd said. She wasn't completely sure what an aneurysm was, but they had done surgery and my father had come through with flying colors. He had woken up, proclaimed that he was starving and that he'd love a steak for dinner. She called every day for the next several days, reporting his improvements in a voice that was thin and strained.

Miss Rosetta stopped by our house every day to check up on us. She had driven up to Beaufort to see my father after his surgery, and she assured us that he was well.

“I watched the heart monitor they had him hooked up to and his heart was beatin’ just as strong,” she said. She cooked us dinner, made sure the house was clean, then went back to her house, through the wood line behind our orchard.

A week after my father’s surgery our mother called. Now that he was “out of the woods,” she finally felt strong enough to tell us what she had been holding back. As a result of his aneurysm, our father had lost all of his long-term memory. He didn’t remember her, or having kids, or the farm. He was doing well physically, she said, but we must be prepared for him being different when he came home.

Several of my parent’s friends made the long trip to Beaufort to visit, a testament as to how far he had come in the eight years we’d lived on the farm. He had overcome his father’s reputation for racism and snobbery and if he had not completely purged his own racist sentiments, he had at least earned some respect among the neighbors.

Monday morning found me in my 7th grade English class listening to Mrs. Turner droning on about verbs. She was an odd looking young woman, clad from head to toe in lilac polyester, her hair covered, the only flesh visible her hands and face. She was a Muslim-- one of the new breed of converts that were springing up, denouncing the consumption of pork and “*a- salaam- a- laikiming*” all over.

The windows of the classroom were open and outside the sun was so bright that to look outside for too long gave one sunspots. I sat with my hand on my chin, pretending to be awake, barely listening as the lesson went on and on. I turned my head a little and glanced out of the long bank of windows.

I gave a start. My mother was walking down the long, covered concrete walkway, heading towards the building I was in. I jumped up, unable to contain my surprise and joy. She must be coming to get me because my father had been released from the hospital. I jumped up from my seat, ignoring Mrs. Turner's outraged cry, ran out into the hallway, and pushed open the heavy door to the outside.

"Mommy!" I said, and hurled myself into her arms.

She held me for several moments, her hand lightly smoothing my hair.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked, after several minutes had passed and my father had not materialized on the sidewalk. She removed my arms from her waist and held me at arms length. I looked up at her, but the sun was behind her and it shone so brightly that I could not make out her face. She was silent, and I could feel her inhale deeply, as if gathering herself. My heart speeded up the tiniest bit.

"Daddy didn't make it," she said. For several seconds the soft-spoken words echoed in my head, louder and louder with each repetition. I heard them, but they had no real meaning. I repeated them to myself, my heart beginning to race and tears springing unbidden from my eyes, but something inside me was still not willing to believe. My father was invincible. Besides, he was sitting up in bed, doing well. His heart on the monitor was beating strongly and he had wanted a steak for dinner. He couldn't remember me, but he would come home and see us and the farm and that would be enough to jog his memory into place. She could not have meant that he was dead.

My mother took my hand and led me to the front of the building where my Uncle Joe's car sat idling in the parking lot. The sight of that car, with my uncle and grandparents, convinced me like nothing else, because I could not imagine another reason for my mother and grandparents to be together in the same vehicle. They had picked Dakin up first, and she sat in the front seat between Uncle Joe and our grandfather, her eyes almost swollen shut with weeping. My mother put me in the back seat with my grandmother as she went off to find Mark in his classroom. My grandmother did not look at me, did not speak to me, just sat staring straight ahead at the quiet afternoon. I was only twelve, but I could feel her pain and the intensity with which she tried to hold herself in check from the shocking, stunning knowledge that she had outlived her favorite son. Finally, she turned her head and looked at me piercingly.

“We have to get you a dress,” she said.

People came from all over the county, filling the house and giving it an artificial sense of life. My siblings and I moved woodenly through the day, our shock changing gradually to unreality and pain.

The only thing my mother and grandparents agreed on was that the service would be conducted at the graveside because my father would only have stepped into a church over his dead body.

The morning of the funeral was bright and still. The service had been set for 9:30 in the morning, one day after we had learned that our father had died. My grandparents insisted that he be buried so quickly so that they would not have to

spend more than one night at the farm. It meant however, that many who might have attended could not, particularly those needing to travel from far distances.

My mother, sister and brother and I rode in the big black car provided by the funeral home, second in line to the hearse that had been driven up to the house because, by custom, the dead should be allowed to say a final goodbye to their homes. I thought this was strange, but fitting, because my father had loved the farm more than anywhere else save the ocean.

I sat quietly in the front row with my siblings, watching the flag-draped coffin.

“This isn’t so bad,” I thought. I had spent a sleepless night, afraid of what was to come, never before having attended a funeral. But this was rather like the church services our mother had occasionally taken us to-- when our father had allowed her to take us. After reading several passages from his open bible, the minister nodded gravely to the two young men who had materialized on either side of the coffin. I quivered a bit in alarm. What were they doing? No one had said anything about opening the casket. The young men reached over, unsnapped the locks, then pulled back the door to reveal the body within.

I looked away, but not fast enough to avoid catching a brief glimpse of the body, the livid scar from the surgery standing out starkly under the shadowed funeral tent. It seemed so barbaric, this solemn service in plain sight of an open casket, but for me there was also a strange sense of relief. This was not my father. This may have been his body, for sure, but the man I had known was gone.

“You gotta touch dey face so they knows you accepts that deys gone.” Miss Carrie had told my mother this before we’d gotten in to the funeral home’s black sedan. I had let this piece of wisdom fly over my head, not really caring what she was talking about. But Dakin got up from the white chair beside me and calmly walked up to the casket, flanked by two of the older community ladies. They watched as she laid her hand on the side of his face. When she had sat down, they turned to me, each taking one of my arms as if to guide me to the waiting corpse.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. They grew insistent, urging me to my feet. “No! No!” I shouted, shaking my head back and forth. I began to cry in earnest, letting out loud, piercing shrieks and trying desperately to pull my arms away from the two old crones who gripped them. People were looking at me sympathetically, believing that the poor little girl was hysterical because of the loss of her father. This was partly true, but there was a part of me that was far away and rational, who was not, under any circumstances, going to touch that dead body. I felt a little like laughing at the scene I was making, and because these mourners had no idea about the stubbornness that I had inherited from my father. I was fully prepared to have a screaming fit in the middle of his funeral rather than succumb to this undignified, barbaric superstition. Briefly, I caught a glimpse of Dave Berg, sitting alone on the outer edge of the mourners looking sorrowfully in at me. I realized how much he had loved my father.

Finally, my grandmother spoke, sharply, dismissively, her low voice as loud as a thunderclap under the funeral tent.

“Leave her alone,” she said.

The crones immediately released my arms and retreated to their seats. I buried my head in my mother’s lap, at this moment more traumatized by native superstition than the loss of my father. I had not needed to see my father dead.

After

Sad August moved on to fall. The crops, unharvested, withered in the fields and the animals were sold off piecemeal, for there was no one to take care of them. Our mother languished for a while, for at 36, this was the first time she'd ever had adult expectations placed on her. She had gone from her father's farm to her brother's house and shortly after, at 19, married our father. Now, alone with four children and the farm, she retreated into helplessness and despair.

For our parts, we tried to return to normalcy. We went to school, ate the meals Dakin prepared for us, and tried to ignore the dismantling of our lives.

Soon, too soon, our mother woke up, realizing perhaps that she was still young and attractive, and after seventeen years, free from the grip of a domineering and abusive husband. As well, due to the settlement she had won, she was financially stable for the first time in her life. It had been determined that the white substance my father had been working in the day his aneurysm burst had been Potash, a highly poisonous chemical that had been shipped without labels, and in improper packaging. The longshoreman had worked in it all day without protective clothing. It was believed that this had caused my father's aneurysm to burst, killing him and another man, and blinding two others. Lawsuits were filed and quickly settled out of court.

Our mother went on an orgy of shopping and spending. She seemed to be forever unsatisfied, needy, and incapable of understanding the needs of her children. Dakin was free to see her boyfriend, a 22-year-old man whom my father had heartily

disapproved of and refused to let in the house. Mark and I ran wild, unsupervised, free to come and go at will. It was at this time that he discovered marijuana, and as a result, gradually began to withdraw from me. Our five year old brother Blake simply got by, got in the way.

Our mother eventually met a man she could not live without. After three years of constant dating, clubs, and a never- ending- shopping spree, she met an ex-con 12 years her junior, who had recently been released from federal prison on drug charges and who had, while incarcerated, converted to Islam. I loathed him on sight, as I had loathed all her other “dates.” She moved him into our house, bought him a new car and clothes, and married him.

Eventually, our grandparents came to visit. Their attorney had alerted them when my mother attempted to sell off a piece of the farm, after she had run through all of her settlement money. They showed up one Saturday afternoon unannounced and finding no one at home but me. They came inside, walked through the house disdainfully, and in less than 20 minutes, piled themselves back into their car and drove home to Summerville. It was the last time I ever saw either of them. Years later my sister and I learned that they had immediately disinherited my father’s four children, to eliminate any possibility of my mother receiving monetary benefit from the farm through us.

My mother suddenly decided to move to North Carolina to ostensibly help take care of her mother, who had had a small heart attack, but in reality to hide from bill collectors. She wanted to be gone by the end of the month.

“But what about basketball?” I asked. I had just moved up from junior varsity to varsity.

“What about softball? I’m going to pitch next year.”

She looked at me.

“I’m vice president of my class. The new elections are next week. I’m sure I’ll make president.”

She said nothing.

“What about Vincent?” I yelled. Vincent Ferrell was my first real boyfriend, the first boy I had ever kissed.

By the end of the month the house was almost empty. Dakin and her boyfriend had rented an apartment on Hilton Head after she completed her freshman year at Morris Brown College in Atlanta. I was desperately seeking accommodation, some place to stay, so that I would not have to leave Ridgeland. I could not have said why I felt so strongly that moving away from this place would be the death of me.

“I’ll take her,” Mr. Hartness, my softball coach was the first to say. A tall blonde giant, he had also been my history teacher. He and his wife Betty said they would love to have me.

“She can come and stay with me,” said Miss Gant, the girl’s varsity basketball coach, twice divorced and the most no-nonsense person I’d ever met. I politely declined.

“We want her,” said Robert and Sally Bohnstangel, she 6 months pregnant and he as dreamy as ever. I had had Mr. Bohnstangel for two classes since his arrival, and he remained my favorite teacher, ever.

“Come live with us” this from, surprisingly, Mr. Bobo, the fairly new principal.

Eventually it was decided that I would stay with Dakin until the end of the school year, then spend the summer with my mother in North Carolina. After that, if I wanted to go back to Ridgeland, my mother would consent to one of my teachers looking after me.

So, I took the bus to Wilmington for the summer, at first charmed by square city blocks, convenience stores, and the public pool. I toured one of the three large public high schools, the tennis courts and the gymnasium that looked as if it were a professional arena. I met boys, girls, and became caught up in my reintroduction to the “city.” I tried to ignore the chaos that seemed to be overtaking my mother’s life. I tried to forget the way blackberry juice would run down our faces and arms as we ate more berries than we put into our pails, to forget the relentless search for the perfect Christmas tree, we walking deeper and deeper into our woods, our father complaining that he would have to carry the thing for a mile to get it back home, the cold sting of the hose as our mother danced us around the yard, washing off the black dirt that covered us after a day of rambling, refusing to let these dirty savages into her clean house and the wide, unending vista of open fields, and the sea.