



SCHOOL of
GRADUATE STUDIES
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University
**Digital Commons @ East
Tennessee State University**

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

8-2003

Southern Star.

Shanda Schrae Miller
East Tennessee State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Miller, Shanda Schrae, "Southern Star." (2003). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 803. <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd/803>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact dcadmin@etsu.edu.

Southern Star

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Shanda Miller
August 2003

Dr. Fred Waage, Chair

Dr. Michael Cody

Dr. Theresa Lloyd

Keywords: Southern, Appalachian, Adolescent, Cycles, Fiction

ABSTRACT

Southern Star

by

Shanda Miller

“Southern Star” follows protagonist Sally Gayle through the cycle of maturation. Complex family relationships and secrets hinder Sally as she searches for her identity in this bildungsroman set in a small, rural area of Southern Appalachia. Taking a minimalist, cinematic approach, “Southern Star” experiments with form and technique in an attempt to convey pure story to the reader. The work particularly focuses on character development, authentic dialogue, and a sense of place.

Copyright 2003 by Shanda Miller
All Rights Reserved

CONTENTS

Page

ABSTRACT	2
COPYRIGHT	3
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
2. SOUTHERN STAR	15
WORKS CITED	66
VITA	67

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has always been a part of my life, an ever-present tradition at both family and community events. Introduced early to reading and storytelling, I learned to create stories, fleshing out the people, places, and objects that populate them. But more than the concretes of life held those stories together; it was the feeling behind, in between, and around the stories that gave them legs. It was the human experience that carried the story to the heart.

For me, the transition from oral tradition to pen and paper was a natural step. Reading was also a family tradition, and I developed a blood thirst for reading and writing. My experiences with storytelling taught me economy of language and that detail and careful phrasing are the building blocks of a successful story. I incorporated these concepts into my story creations, and, thus, developed a minimalist style.

While I enjoyed the oral tradition of story and that of the written word, the cinema also had the lure of story that captured my imagination. I especially considered the movement of scene and the conveying of emotion. These elements, too, found their way into my writing, shaping it into the style exhibited in “Southern Star.”

Though I always considered myself a writer, I decided to seriously pursue writing as a career after studying the craft and its most successful artists. I have learned something about the craft from everything I have read and studied. However, those whose influence is greatest are L. M. Montgomery, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Wilma Dykeman, Mark Twain, and Lee Smith. They more than told stories; they brought places and people to life and imparted truth through their works. Although literary leaders in

different genres and times, these authors all have a common quality: believable, transcendent fiction. That is my goal as well.

When seeking advice about writing, “Write what you know” is a repeated phrase one hears. Taking that path, I endeavor to translate my Appalachian heritage and experiences into realistic stories. Appalachia is not the stereotypical land of the ignorant and crude that is etched into the mind of America. In writing about my home and its people, I want to dispel the stereotypical images and to show Appalachia as it is, the good and the bad and the in between. I know the Appalachian south, the stunted areas in the region where time is slower. I know the people who inhabit the land. I live daily with the humor and wisdom that is shared on general store benches, the malice and gossip and the brotherly love in church pews, the kindness of strangers, and the oddities and wisdom of folk culture that spill into our modern lives.

“Southern Star” began while I was free writing in my journal and happened to glance up as my Pepsi can chinked against the porcelain figurine in the corner of the windowsill. The line “The Pepsi can sweated on the windowsill beside the porcelain girl and her tiny violin,” wrote itself, accompanied by the basic idea for the story and the unbidden image of an old man in overalls, rocking on a gray-plank porch beside his dog. Although he does not have a rocker or a dog, my grandfather became the inspiration for Chase. After that, however, Chase became a separate person and a real individual to me. While I strive to let the characters retain individuality, I also want to show that they represent the essence of the people across the region. Many of the characters began from images of people I have seen or met in the region, and I want to make sure to translate reality onto the page.

My main intent was to successfully write a “good” story. In “Southern Star” I attempted to explore the maturation of an adolescent girl in Appalachia and the cycles of her story. Drawing on my own experiences, “Southern Star” delves into an Appalachian community and its culture. Focusing on character development, a sense of place, and authentic dialogue-- focal points for the aforementioned authors as well-- I tried to encourage suspended reality. Many of these writers also deal with themes that I explore in “Southern Star”: the journey motif, maturation, cycles, and regionalism.

Dickens, Montgomery, and Twain explore adolescent journeys and maturation while using humor and description in character development. Regionalism also comes into the stories these authors created. They also use dialect and believable dialogue to create a sense of both place and character. Reflecting their influence, “Southern Star” attempts to achieve these same effects. In the first scene I rely on dialogue and description to create a sense of place. The verbal exchange between the characters reveals country accents and specific language modifications. Uses such as “yer,” “you’ns,” “this’n,” and “mebbe” and phrases like “Don’t you worry none,” “hold yer horses,” “spittin image,” and “T’weren’t nothing” point to place.

Wilma Dykeman and Lee Smith bring Appalachian culture and complex family relationships into their works. Dykeman uses symbols, imagery, and folk sayings in fleshing out her stories. Inspired by her work, I allowed my writing to reflect my own culture. Smith, too, relies on regionalism but also brings a wealth of humor into her writing. This is also something I like to do. I enjoy bringing humor the pages of my work, capturing humanity at its most funny moments. For example, when Sally mows the lawn in section three, the humor of the situation reflects not only her character but

also quirks of human nature. Once she realizes that a certain boy is about to drive by, catching her at her worst, as she thinks, and perhaps glimpsing her underwear as well, her vanity and pride take over: “Sally let out a little scream and abandoned the lawnmower. She ran behind the house, jerking her bra and panties off the line as she passed by” (47). Her answer to her father’s question shows her sense of humor. When he asks her what she is doing, she replies without hesitation, “mowing,” and the unmanned mower inches slowly across the yard.

Drawing also on Dickens and Austen, I used flat characters to give my story a true-to-life quality. In his article, “Defence of Flat Characters,” George Clay discusses the value and credible humanity found in flat characters in the work of Dickens, Austen, and Tolstoy. She relates that flat characters, though not fully fleshed out, are vital to the story. The men at the store, the baseball players, the church members, the clerk at Kmart, and various other tangential characters move in and out of the story, and although they are not fully fleshed out to the reader, they make the story more realistic.

I also became aware of another Dickensian element, noting that names had multileveled meanings. The title of the story itself is significant. “Southern Star” implies a guiding light to those who wish to find their way. Moreover, Sally is the “southern star” of the story, rising to her potential brightness as the story progresses. “Southern Star” also refers to the many characters that are trying to rise to their full potential, seeking a southern star to guide them while they themselves continue serving as guides to other characters. Two of the characters have names that immediately connect to their character. The name Ms. Gypsy suggests color, a colorful personality, a wandering spirit, and an ability to see and read people and futures. Ms. Gypsy dresses and talks

colorfully, foreshadows events with her dialogue, and travels in her Winnebago, touching lives across the community. Wearing clothes of many colors has a dual purpose. Ms. Gypsy has a dual personality. She is like a jester and a sage at once. Humor and wisdom find harmony in her character. Her multicoloredness also refers to the biblical coat of many colors. Ms. Gypsy's wearing of them shows that she loves and favors those who need the most help.

Garner's name also has various meanings. To garner is to: gather, acquire, get, gain, collect, earn, harvest, reap, and, importantly, to bring together. He earns/gains Sally's trust and affection. He also becomes the catalyst of the story in the middle sections. After meeting Garner, Sally comes to terms with her secret past. He brings Sally and her past together. He may somewhat "harvest" Sally's character as well. He guides her through her journey, and like Chase he becomes a Southern star for Sally, showing her how to get home.

Although the names play an important role in character development, the development of the story itself relies on the detail. I used specific images and descriptions to help tell the story, to flesh out the characters, and to provide the sense of place. As Stephen King advises in On Writing, I began looking for any themes and symbols that could be further developed. After rereading "Southern Star," I began further developing the themes of suppression, repression, secrecy, emergence, maturation, and cyclical patterns.

I also concentrated on recurrent images/symbols like horses, pennies, the rocker, the porch steps, the tomatoes, and the screen door. Horses are traditionally associated with transportation and journeying, dually pleasure and work, racing, and are often

referred to as beasts of burden, as they carry the baggage of their rider. Pennies appear several times in the story. Sally saves all the pennies that Chase washes and gives her. Although considered insignificant, they eventually grow in value and are often deemed objects of luck. The saving of the pennies illustrates how growth can come from small numbers. The pennies are also symbolic of the bond between Chase and Sally.

The rocker and the porch steps are details of home and country life. The porch is a sheltered place and the steps lead to home. Rocking is associated with comfort and anticipation. The rocking chair and the porch are waiting areas. They represent Chase's continued movement that remains rooted to home.

The tomatoes and the screen door are also recurrent details. Tomatoes grow on the vine until fully ripened at which point they break off. This progression parallels Sally's own maturation. She must come to maturity before breaking with home ties. The screen door becomes a filter for the home, letting in the good and keeping out the bad. The screen door is a mainstay of southern homes. The door may be shut, but the home is never fully closed to the outside.

Numbers and colors were also recurrent elements. Four was readily noticeable. Four is the standard number of family, stability, and harmony. The number four also relates to the four seasons and the four elements. Four is the number of song lyrics and accompanying sections that also represent the seasons and elements. The seasons represent the cycles of life. Air, fire, earth, and water represent psychological qualities. Together they become psychological harmony.

Color imagery also figures prominently into the details of the story. Reds and pinks are associated with Sally, and other females; yellow is mentioned in connection

with Paul; and green is obviously linked to Chase. Red is the color of sexuality, anger, blood, warning, passion, death and life, hate, love, and danger. Pink is traditionally a feminine color, associated with blossoming love and adolescence. Yellow is associated with cowardice, sickness, insanity, and yet also with sun and harvest. The color green is often paired with the idea of growth and life.

The main theme of “Southern Star” is that of a journey—a young girl’s dealing with maturation. Connected to that is the theme of cycle in Appalachian life. Appalachian cycles of tradition, abuse, repression, suppression, and migration are evident in “Southern Star”. Like the migrant Appalachian workers who leave but yearn to return to their southern home, Sally Gayle, the protagonist, is taken out of Appalachia to the city and then moved back to Aber County, North Carolina. Her life, too, parallels this cycle. She moves in and out of adolescence as the story progresses. Other themes, including sexual repression, female self-assertion, and hearth and home also contribute to the story’s message.

The repressed past and her family’s secrets hinder Sally’s coming to terms with herself. She is seeking guidance, especially from a mother figure. She looks to Lisa and Ms. Gypsy to help her break the repression. She is also sexually repressed because of the lack of female influence. The repression of emotion also pervades the story. Feelings are seldom voiced by the characters. The suppression of the female by males is also a recurrent theme. By keeping Sally from the truth, Paul, and Chase, have suppressed her true identity.

The Dickensian theme of hearth and home also finds expression in “Southern Star.” The old home place in Aber County reflects the idea of family connections and ties

to place. The land, the house, and the people who lived there become important to Sally and Paul as they journey homeward. The journey itself is the most important theme. The entire story is the journey of Sally Gayle towards self-realization, home, and truth.

The composing of “Southern Star” allowed me to experiment with form, style, and technique. Using the long story, which falls somewhere between the short story and the novella, allowed me to develop “Southern Star” more fully. The techniques in the story is different from any other approach I have thus far used. I wrote in third person limited to provide the basis for the lens-only approach I wanted to take. I believe this objective approach is successful in giving readers pure story to allow them to see the story without narrative influence so readily obvious.

I also experiment with paragraph organization and dialogue attribution. I eliminated most attributing phrases like “she said,” choosing instead to focus on the patterns of speech of each character and the positioning in the text as a means of attribution. I was impressed by Hemmingway’s “A Clean, Well-lighted Place,” in which he eliminates attributive phrases. It was more natural and flowed easily, the way I had always thought dialogue should. It brings the story to immediacy with the reader, helping to suspend reality and immerse the reader into the created world.

To achieve this effect, I completely eliminated phrases like “so-and-so thought” or “he felt.” I endeavored instead to let the dialogue, action, and details speak for the character’s emotions. I mostly used simple sentences for the narrative body. I wanted a clean, clear, simply honest approach to Sally’s story. The structure and mechanics of the story were necessary from the beginning. I wrote the story in a lens-only manner. The narrative is cinematic. The meaning and emotion are in the actions and speech of the

characters and in the details of the narrative. No room for authorial or narratorial judgment or projection.

I also divided the story into four parts, each somewhat corresponding to the four lines of the song at the beginning of the story.

I. She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes.

In this section we meet the protagonist, Sally Gayle and get back story for the proceeding story. This is the spring season in the cycle, marking the end of one cycle and the beginning of a new one. It represents a rebirth. This section also corresponds to the element of water. Water represents feeling and emotion and life and birth. Water also means change.

II. She'll be riding six white horses when she comes.

This section further develops Sally and her story, showing the beginning of the homecoming. Parallel to the summer season, this section is the beginning of maturation. Also corresponding to the element earth, section II shows that Sally and Paul need to be realistic, keeping their feet on the ground as they evaluate their lives.

III. We will kill the old red rooster when she comes

Section III is the climax of the story. Sally comes back to the country. Old secrets come to life. The dead past is finally brought to light; Sally seeks herself; and we are more aware of the past of which Sally is ignorant. As the section tied to fall, section III is the height of the year where maturity comes to a head, and the time of harvest nears. This section further corresponds to the element of fire. Fire destroys the

illusions with which Sally was living but cleanses and purifies at the same time.

IV. We will sleep in feather beds when she comes.

The last section, still exploring the theme of joyous return, has Sally come full circle to complete the cycle. She is coming back to Aber County to her family. Again the gravels dance in celebration of the wanderer's homecoming. She has run the cycle, and the end implies that all is well. She now has the luxury of putting the past to rest. As the winter section, this shows the end of the year's cycle. It is a prelude to rebirth, the beginning of an end that leads to a new cycle. Corresponding to the element air, which represents wisdom and clarity, this section inspires Sally. Her life is clearer now that she is completing a cycle.

"Southern Star" ends without an explanation of the after events of the story's close. There is something alluring about the indecision and the edgy, cliffhanging. I incorporate the idea of "always leave em wanting more," as Ms. Gypsy says, into "Southern Star." The fact that her story is still ongoing ties into the journey motif of the story. The journey is never over and neither is the story of a life.

Overall, "Southern Star" is about the journey toward self-realization. The goal is to tell a good story and to remain true to character and place to produce an honest portrayal of an Appalachian girl's coming of age.

Chapter 2

Southern Star

The Pepsi can sweated on the windowsill beside the porcelain girl and her tiny violin.

“She’ll be coming round the mountain . . .”

A few gnats tried to squeeze their black bodies through the tightly woven wire of the window screen. The dog barked at the loud whirl of the passing bumble bees, snapping his teeth angrily as he flung his head from side to side.

Chase stood up and took his hat off the table. The screen door snapped back.

“She’ll be riding six white horses when she comes . . .”

The floorboards creaked under the rocking chair. Chase kept his eyes on the blue-grey gravels of the road. Under the waist of his overalls, his left hand fastened and unfastened the metal catch as he pushed hard on the floor with his black boots. His right hand tightly gripped the white handle of the fly swatter.

“We will kill the old red rooster when she comes, . . . yee haw!”

The gravels danced.

“We will sleep in feather beds when she comes, . . . yee haw!”

The yellow truck spun off the road and onto the short green grass beside the house. The dog lazily stood up and followed Chase to the edge of the porch. Chase brought his long brown hand over his eyes and squinted into the yard. The driver’s door opened, letting long blue jean legs dig themselves into the ground with the heels of grey, snakeskin cowboy boots.

“Thought you’d be out in the garden.”

“Too hot in the middle of the day to be out there.”

“Yeah, it is. Well, how you been doin, Dad?”

“Can’t complain, can’t complain. You’ns?”

“Fine, fine.” The passenger door opened. “You need help gettin down, Sally?”

“No.” Shiny patent leather Mary Janes landed on the grass. Sally leaned into the door and pushed it shut. She turned around and walked towards the shaded porch, placing one foot in front of the other all the way.

“Come say hi to yer Pa, Sally.” He lifted her up and sat her down on the porch. Her frilly dress billowed out as she came down. She pushed her dress down before looking up at him.

“Hi.”

“How long you had this’n, Paul?”

“Sally here’ll be five come August. She’s the spittin image of her mother.”

“Yeah, but this’n ain’t got no yaller skin or beedy eyes.” He scratched the peppered stubble on his pointed chin. “Yore a mite prettier than yer maw. Good thing you didn’t get her yaller skin.” Sally took her eyes off the big dog and looked up at him. “Yore a bit like yer granny. She didn’t have no yaller skin.” Paul patted her head. Her shiny brown hair was hot to his touch.

“Where’s your hat, Sally? Run and get it.” Paul hoisted her off the porch.

Sally skipped across the yard towards the truck. She stood on the tips of her toes, unable to reach the black door handle. Paul watched, waiting.

Sally turned and looked around. She scanned the yard, ran over to a wooden crate, and began dragging it to the truck.

“Don’t you know it’s easier to ask a grown up?”

“Sally don’t like to ask for help, so I just let her do what she will.”

She dragged the old crate under the truck door, climbed onto the latticed top, and opened the door, reaching inside for her hat.

“Put Pa’s box back where you found it,” Paul called out as she climbed back down with her hat.

The tiny pink ribbons fluttered behind her as she picked up the crate and raced across the yard to the chicken coop. She stepped under the shade of the sloping roof and walked around the chicken coop, following a speckled hen.

“Dad, I need a favor.” Paul’s steel-toed boot splintered the rough wood of the porch floor. “Sally, stay in the yard!”

“Cluck, cluck,” Sally said, hunkering down and sticking her fingers in the holes of the chicken wire.

Chase left Paul standing on the porch.

“You watch out for those banny roosters. They’ll bite them little fingers off,” Chase cautioned, coming over to the coop and reaching down to pull her hand out of the wire. “You wouldn’t want to lose yer fingers, huh?” Sally shook her head. The big German Shepherd came slowly closer to her, holding his head down as he sniffed, and keeping his eyes fastened on her. Sally made two fists, hiding them behind her back.

“Ole Wallace won’t hurt ye. You’re not afeared, are ye? Why you’ve a heap of years over Wallace. He’s just a big pup. Go on, rub his neck.”

Sally brought one hand out and stroked the dog’s head. Wallace lay down on his back, holding his paws up.

“He wants ya to rub his belly, don’t ya, boy?” he asked, rubbing the dog’s white belly with his black boot. “See how he likes it?” Sally laughed as the dog wriggled on the warm grass, pawing at the old man’s leg. She bent over and tapped the dog’s chest with her hand. Chase smiled at her. Taking her small white hand in his long brown one, he led her back to the porch.

Paul carried the pink suitcase into the house. He rubbed the threadbare material of the couch and sighed. Framed photos lined the mantle. His youthful face was everywhere-- on the hearth, on top of the TV., on the wall beside the Elvis clock. Paul picked up the trophy on the end table. The golden figurine shined atop the red and yellow pedestal.

“That’s for the year you all were state champs. When you beat East Highland.” Chase pointed to the gun cabinet beside the TV. “All the rest of em are in there if you want to take em back with you.”

Paul placed the trophy back on the wooden table. “Nah, I don’t have no place for that junk.”

Sally held onto his belt loop as she followed him to the edge of the porch. He picked her up and hugged her tightly. Her cheeks reddened as Paul put her down.

“I’ll be back tomorrow morning, okay? You be a good girl and Daddy’ll bring some candy back. That’s my Sallykins. Give us a kiss.” Her brown eyes glistened and she blinked. Paul gently grazed her cheek with his thumb. “Bye, bye, Sally. Mind yer Pa.”

Sally loosened her grip on Paul’s t-shirt. “Bye.”

Her eyes followed him across the yard. Paul turned as he reached the driver's side. Shouting over the sputtering of the engine's muffler, Paul waved and backed out of the drive.

"Daddy?" Sally worked her hand out of Chase's grasp and ran to the graveled road. "Daddy?"

Chase hurried after her, picking her up under her arms. He held her in the crook of his left arm. Her thin legs dangled against his chest, letting her Mary Janes click together.

"You can sleep in yer pappy's old room." He placed Sally's pink vinyl suitcase on the patchwork quilt.

Sally held tightly to her Rainbow Brite doll, hugging it to her chest with both arms as she twisted from side to side. She bit her lower lip.

"Don't you worry none. Yer daddy'll be back afore you know it." He scratched his head. "You wanna go see the chickens again? Up on the hill yonder is some cows. You ever seen any cows?" Sally stopped twisting and shook her head. "Let's go up to the big barn and slop the hogs. Then we can see if old Birch'll give you a ride. You ready?"

"Uh-huh." Sally clutched the doll under her left arm and held out her hand.

"Let me get my walking stick, and we'll head out." He led her to the back porch where he pulled the long stick off the stack of firewood. He picked up an old bucket, waving away the flies. "You wanna walk or ride piggy back?" Sally smiled and pointed

to his back. He sat down on the steps. “Can you climb on? That’s it. Now, hold yer horses.” Sally giggled as he stood up and joggled her around.

They climbed up the hill, using the worn path that separated the tall grasses. Sally plucked leaves from each tree they passed, keeping her collection in the pocket of her dress. She looked down, watching the house grow smaller below them.

“Now I’m gonna put you down, right here. You stay. I’m gonna slop the hogs, then we’ll go see old Birch.” He propped his walking stick against the barn and turned the wooden bar before sliding the door open. Sally watched him step into the darkness before counting her leaves.

“Shoo.” Sally pinched her nose and turned around. The grey boards of the toolshed were covered with nails that held bridles and horseshoes. Sally walked up to the shed. Her eyes focused on the rain barrel beside it. The barrel’s bottom was sunk into the ground on the sloped bank. Sally climbed up behind the barrel, and placing both hands on its rusted rim, leaned over the mirrored surface. Her streaked reflection wobbled on the water. She stuck out her pink tongue and laughed. Splash! Sally brought the palm of her hand down on the water. Smack, smack. Both hands splashed the water, forcing waves over the barrel’s sides. Her dress was soaked. One more splash wet her face and the little curls around it. Sally rubbed the water out of her eyes, smearing brown rust onto her cheek. She wiped her hands on her dress.

Chase stepped out of the darkness and shut the barn door. “You look like one of them pigs in there. Don’t know if I should let ya ride old Birch or not. Might scare him.” He took out his handkerchief and wiped the rust off Sally’s face before carrying her to the

fence beside the barn. Sally squirmed on its rough pole. Chase whistled. They waited. He cupped his ear. "Here he comes."

The horse stepped leisurely along the fence, bobbing his head as he came towards them. Chase climbed over the fence and lifted Sally from her perch. The horse stopped. Chase put his hand to the horse's nose, letting Birch nuzzle against his palm.

"I brought you somethin, Birch. Here you go." He patted the horse's neck. "You ready to ride, Sally?" He led the horse to the fence and placed Sally on Birch's blanketed back as he grabbed the twine rope. The horse stepped back slightly, shaking his head. "Easy, boy, that's it." He led the horse around the fence, keeping one hand on Sally's leg.

"Yore not scared are ya?" He patted Sally's leg. She giggled, wobbling as they turned the corner. She bent over, hugging Birch's warm brown sides. Chase led her back to the fence and lifted her off. Free of the rope, the horse raced down the slope and turned, coming back fast.

"I know what'cha want." Chase dug into his front pocket and counted out the sugar cubes, picking the blue fuzz off before holding them out to Birch. "Come on, Sally, let's head back to the house and get us some supper. Whatta ya say to taters and gravy? Huh?" Sally held onto his hand, looking up at him as he scanned the fields of yellow tobacco leaves and nodded his head.

Chase slowly opened the door. Sally was awake, standing in front of the window.

“Breakfast is ready. You go warsh yer hands.” Sally turned and began dragging the quilt over her pillow. “Don’t you worry none about making yore bed. You just get cleaned up.”

He tucked the quilt under the pillow. As he stretched out to smooth the wrinkles his foot hit something solid. He bent down, raising the quilt.

“El, I be.” He scooted the jar out and wiped off the dust. The dingy Mason jar was rim-full of pennies, greenening in clusters. He carried the jar into the kitchen where Sally sat swinging her legs at the kitchen table.

“Hope ya like bacon an’ eggs,” he said, setting the plate down in front of her. “Eat up. Those eggs are from my own chickens. They’re good for ya, make you grow big and strong.”

Sally sniffed the food, pushing the eggs with her fingers. Chase turned back to the pennies. He opened the jar, straining to turn the tight ring. The ring gave way, scraping harshly against the glass. The pennies battered the sink as they fell from the upturned jar into the sudsy water. The bubbles grew as the water rushed down from the faucet. He rubbed the pennies together, sifting them through his hands.

“I’m thirsty.”

“Huh?” Chase started. Sally stood beside him. Her lips were glossy. “Did ya like that bacon?” He looked at her plate. “Don’t ya want them eggs?” he asked. Sally crinkled her nose and shook her head.

“I got some orange juice in the fridge.” He wiped his hands on the striped dishtowel before popping the red cap off the jug. Sally held the little red cup as he poured. She quickly drank the juice, reaching out her cup for more. She let the last drop

fall onto her pink tongue, licking the bacon grease off her lips and wiping her hand across her face.

“Yore pa’ll be back soon. You better fix yer things together afore he gets here.”

Sally ran back to her room. Chase finished cleaning the pennies and dropped them by handfuls back into the jar. Sally came back carrying her pink suitcase and dragging her hat and doll behind her.

“Set yore stuff over there,” he pointed. “I got something here for ya,” he said, holding out the jar of pennies. “You can buy some candy with it mebbe.” Sally struggled to hold the heavy jar. Outside a horn blared. “That’ll be yore pa.” He picked up the suitcase and the doll and opened the door. Paul stood in the doorway with the screen door caught behind him.

“Hi, honey. You have a good time with Pa?” Paul took the heavy penny jar out of Sally’s hands. “What’ve we got here?”

“Ah, I had them old pennies laying around the house. Ain’t nothing.”

“Whatta ya say, Sally?”

“Thank you.”

“Well, we’d best be headin back. Betty Jo’s got the boys, and I promised I’d get back today. What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. T’weren’t nothing. Glad to have her. You’ns come back.”

Paul put Sally’s things in the truck and turned to pick her up.

“Tell him bye.”

“Bye.”

“You come back and ride Birch again. Next time I’ll let you feed the chickens.” Sally stepped forward and hugged Chase’s leg. His hand cupped her head. “You be a good girl, ya hear. I’ll see you’ns.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll talk to ya later.” The engine whirred. Paul threw up his hand and backed out of the driveway. Sally twisted around in her seat and waved until the truck rounded the bend.

II

Lisa wiped her wet face on the apron and fanned herself with her hand. “Supper’s ready!”

The boys rushed in, grating the metal chairs across the floor. Paul wiped his wet face with his red and white paisley bandana and leaned over the pots on the stove. He lifted the lids and sniffed each one.

“What is this crap?”

“It’s chow mein and . . .”

“What the hell is that supposed to be? You spect us to eat that?” The boys sent up a chorus of ‘yeah’ and pounded the table with their fists.

“Damn it, Paul. You could at least try it before you go running off the mouth. Why can’t you just keep your mouth shut for once? Huh? . . . I’ve worked in here all day. I cleaned house. I cooked.” She threw the ladle into the boiling pot. The stove eyes hissed as the water hit their hot surface. “What have you done except lay around on your lazy ass and tinker? God, I’ve had it up to here with your shit. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to eat it. But don’t you dare come in here and start on me!” Lisa ripped the

apron from her waist and threw it in Paul's face. He watched as she jerked her keys from the rusty nail by the door.

"What's wrong with you, woman? Ain't you got no sense of humor?"

"Go to Hell!" Lisa slammed the door behind her, leaving Paul holding the apron.

She ran down the apartment stairs, hitting each metal step with stomping blows.

A tall blonde stepped in Lisa's path as she reached the second landing.

"Where are you going?"

"God, Sally you scared me half to death." Lisa patted her chest, fluttering her pink-polished nails against her ribbed tank top.

"Is Dad home yet? I need some money to go over to Casa's with Kelly."

"He's been home all day. Probably got fired again. Trust me, now is not the time to ask him anything." Lisa tilted her head and looked at Sally. "Listen, sweetie, you do me a favor. Tell your daddy that I ain't coming back til he gets his act straight. Tell him when he does, he can come a crawling!"

"Don't go, Lisa, please. Daddy don't mean no harm. Please, Lisa." Sally grabbed Lisa's manicured hand.

"I'm sorry, baby, but I just can't go back now. You understand." Lisa put her hand under Sally's chin. "Don't you worry none, baby. Everything's gonna be alright."

"Where you gonna go?"

"I'm heading to Mama's. Here. If you need me call, okay?" She pushed a strand of hair behind Sally's ear. "You'll need a touch up for them roots in a few weeks. Call me and I'll take you to lunch, okay?" Lisa moved past Sally. "You take care now, you

hear.” Sally nodded. “Ah, now, don’t you get upset.” Lisa hugged Sally quickly and continued down the metal stairs.

Sally watched Lisa throw her purse into the car and then speed through the yellow light. She sighed and continued up the next flight. She could hear Jeff yelling from the apartment. She took the steps two at a time. The door was open. Flies covered what remained in the clear pots. She hurried to her room. Mortal Combat raged in the boys’ high tech room next door. Sally turned her music up until the windows vibrated. She dropped her book bag on her swivel chair and flung herself onto her dusty-rose bedspread.

“Turn that crap down!”

Sally rolled her eyes, mimicking Paul’s command, and jumped up off the bed, stomping across the floor until she stood in front of her white wicker dresser. She tapped the tin lids of the mason jars. The pennies clinked against the glass.

“Do, re, me, fa, so, la, te , do, a deer a female deer.” Sally tapped the last lid and spun the dial on the radio until she could barely hear it over the chaos next door. She swept aside the lace curtains and looked out the window into the parking lot below. She could see her Dad’s rusted yellow truck. The boys pounded on the wall. Sally sighed and dug into her pocket. She unfolded the Kleenex and read the lipstick numbers.

Sally sat on her legs in the blue recliner watching the black-and-white show and trying to duplicate the whistled tune.

“Also starring Don Knotts.”

“Boys! Sally! Get in here!” Paul shouted from the kitchen.

“Whatta ya want, Dad?” Sally called back without turning from the TV.

“Just get in here!”

“God.” Sally unfolded her body from the chair and muted the TV. She shuffled into the kitchen and jerked the chair out, sitting down hard on the folding chair’s metal seat.

“Where’s your brothers at?” Paul stood shirtless by the sink, pouring out a crushed can of beer.

“I’m not my brothers’ keeper.” Sally said in a sing-song voice.

“Don’t you sass me, young lady. You’re not too old for me to turn you over my knee.”

“Sor-ree. Jeez.” Sally rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. She blew a bubble until it popped, sporadically spreading lilac gum across her face. Sally pulled the remaining gum from her mouth and blotted it on her cheeks. Paul yelled again. Sally tapped her red nails on the plastic table.

“Sally, go get your brothers. Tell ‘em I said to get in here right this instant!” Paul clenched his teeth.

Sally walked through the hallway to the boys’ room. She did not knock, throwing open the door instead, and immediately yelling Paul’s command. Jeff lay on his back, tossing the orange and blue Nerf ball into the air.

“We didn’t do it,” Jeff and Greg whined in unison.

“You’d better get in here fast or he’ll tan your hide good.” Sally shook her finger at them in turn and tossed her long blonde hair. Greg stuck his tongue out as she turned around. “I saw that, you twerp.”

“Did not.”

“Did, too.”

“Did not!” Both boys yelled.

“Uuhhh!” Sally clamped her hands over her ears and hurried back to the kitchen.

Paul was seated at the table with his hairy, tanned arms folded on the tabletop. Sally stared at the hair that grew out of his dark nipples and wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“They’re coming.”

She sat down, turning her head to the window above the sink. Jeff and Greg quietly pulled out their chairs. Paul sighed and scratched his head.

“Well, looks like we’re gonna have to move again.”

“Where to?” Jeff asked, looking at Greg.

“Well, Sally and me are gonna go back to Aber. I reckon it’s up to you’ns,” he pointed, “whether you’re coming with us or not.” Paul watched their reactions. Jeff and Greg stared at each other across the table and raised their thick eyebrows.

“I’m glad we’re going,” Sally volunteered. “It sucks here anyway.”

“You suck!” Greg kicked Sally’s chair. “I don’t want to go to some stupid farm.”

“Me either,” Jeff added, standing up. “I’m calling Mom.”

The boys ran out of the kitchen. Sally looked at Paul. He slid his hands down his face.

“Hey, Dad, when are we going? I’ll start packing.” Sally jumped up.

“Hey, Sal.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad, too.”

III

Sally pulled on the seat of her jean cutoffs and sat down on the top step. Wallace climbed slowly up the steps. His hot breath hit her directly in the face as he panted. Rubbing his neck, Sally gently nudged him off her lap. Suddenly Wallace's punctuated barks stabbed at her eardrums. Sally looked down the road. Around the turn a camper broke through the wall of dust and bounced into the driveway and stopped short of the tool shed.

Sally stood up.

A short woman in a bright red dress jumped off the running board and hurried to the porch.

"Who are you?"

"Sally."

"Where's old Chase at?"

"Grandpa's up there slopping the hogs." Sally jerked her arm toward the hill.

"Well, I come to tell him something. So, iffin you don't mind, I'll sit and wait."

Sally stood aside and let the woman climb the steps. She sat in the rocker and pushed off her shoes with her feet. Her toes were brightly painted in red, green, and yellow. Sally kept her eyes on the woman's colorful toenails, watching the pudgy brown toes tap the floor. Drawing her eyes away, she looked out into the yard and laughed.

Wallace sniffed the camper's tires, lifting his leg at each one. Sally pulled up the taller weeds that grew along the steps, tearing the blades of grass into small pieces and stacking them on the step. Pursing her mouth, Sally began to whistle.

"Whistling girls and crowing hens always come to a bad end."

Sally's whistle died in a shrill note.

"Cold hands, warm heart. Dirty feet, no sweetheart." Sally smiled.

"Smartie, smartie, had a party, nobody there but old stink smartie."

Sally got up and went into the house, banging the screen door behind her. Chase met her at the back door.

"Where you off to in such an all fired hurry?" he asked.

"No where. You got some visitor out on the porch. A crazy lady in a camper."

Sally snorted. "Hateful ole biddy."

"That ain't no way to talk about your elders."

"I don't care. Everybody's crazy around here." Sally flung open the door, running down the back steps to her bike. She threw her leg across the heated seat and pushed back the kickstand. "Owwwww!" Sally grabbed at her leg, jumping off the bike and entangling herself. The wheel spun over her as she lay clutching her leg.

"What happened?" Chase lifted the bike and knelt down. The woman joined him on the grass.

"You hurt bad, youngen?"

"Oh, gah. . . yeah. . ." Sally sat up.

"Ms. Gypsy, run in the house and fetch me my backer from the mantle." Chase looked at the raised red patch on the back of Sally's knee.

"No need, I got some snuff in my lip." Ms. Gypsy hooked her finger under her lip, scooping up a black-brown gob of snuff and saliva. Chase held Sally's leg up for Ms. Gypsy. She slapped the dripping wad onto the swollen area.

"Oh, Lord, what is that?"

“It’ll take the swelling down in a hurry.” Ms. Gypsy helped her up, keeping her hand on the snuff. “Stand still and let me work it in.” She rubbed the snuff in a circular motion on the bee sting.

“Gross!” Sally gagged.

“There, that’ll do. Put some vinegar and sody on it after while. You’ll be all right. Feels better, don’t it?”

“Not really.” Sally wiped the tears out of her eyes.

“She’s fine, Gypsy. A little bee sting won’t hurt nobody.”

“Pends on whether they’re allergic or not. Me, I’d swell up like a balloon.”

“You ain’t lergic, are ye?” Chase turned to ask Sally. “Where’d she go?”

“She went around the house whilst you were figuring. Looks as mad as the hornet that bit her.”

“She’s been carrying on like that fer pert near two weeks. Paul can’t do nothing with her, and I hate to meddle.” Chase played with the catch on his overalls as they walked to the front porch.

“She’s just out of sorts. She’ll come around. Meantime, why don’t you take her over to the school, show her where everything’s at. It’ll start back up in no time.”

“Yeah, I been meaning to, but the crop’s coming in. I ain’t got time and Paul’s working ever minute.” Chase scratched his chin.

“Well, I’ll beard the lion. She needs to meet some kids her age, too. Staying here with an old coot like you ain’t exactly sunshine and cookies.” Ms. Gypsy slapped her thigh. “Both of you need some action.” Chase stopped flipping the metal catch.

“Uh, I go over to Dub’s all the time. Played Checkers Tuesday.”

“Nevermind. I came here to ask you if you wanted to go to town. Maybe that youngen would like to get out, too.” Ms. Gypsy slapped Chase on the back and hurried around the house.

Sally’s leg was red and swollen. The brown juice stain from Ms. Gypsy’s snuff was dried and cracked around the white whelt under her knee. Sally sulked in the rocker.

“Well, how bout it, Chase? You’ns want to go to town this evening? I gotta pick up some pickles at the grocery, and I need to stop by K-mart real fast. You could get some chewing backer, and maybe Sally here could get herself a new outfit. Put some color on that child. Look at her, pale as ghost and it summer.” Ms. Gypsy pointed.

“I could use a box of backer.” He scratched his neck. “Reckon mebbe we could go to the fish house?”

“We’d have to go in. My Winnebago won’t clear.”

“Well, me and Sally’ll get cleaned up and you can pick us up.” Chase walked with her to the camper. “When you wantin’ to go, Gypsy?” Chase kicked the front right tire.

“Be ready by one.” Ms. Gypsy swung herself up into the cab as Chase backed away. “Be there or be square.” Her horn blared Dixie as she peeled out of the yard.

“Here’s ya some money. Don’t have to tell yer daddy where it come from.” Chase dropped a crisp twenty into Sally’s lap.

“No, Grandpa, I can’t take your money.” Sally held out the bill.

“I ain’t no Indian giver. Now, just put it in your wallet, and let’s go rest on the porch until Gypsy comes.” Chase went out and sat down, rubbing Wallace’s bulging

sides with his foot as he rocked. “Way down upon the Sewanee River, far, far away. There’s where my heart is still . . .”

Sally finished tying her shoes and stood up. Her blue jeans fell over her boots, loosely covering the heel. She pulled on the bottom of her shirt and ran her hand over her hair, smoothing her ponytail. Her faded jean purse lay limp on the ottoman. Sally swung it onto her shoulder, letting its force smack her in the back. She wadded the crisp bill into the tight pocket of her jeans.

“You want me to lock the door?”

“Go ahead, I think I hear her coming.”

Sally turned the doorknob until it clicked and shut the door behind her. Chase was lazily chewing on a birch twig. He handed Sally one, telling her to pick off the buds before chewing the bark. Sally gnawed at the spotted twig and spat out the pieces of bark.

“She’s here! Let’s shake a leg.”

Sally broke off a small piece of the twig and hurried to the camper behind Chase.

“Come in and make yourselves to home,” Ms. Gypsy called out.

Chase bent as he entered the cab, holding onto his hat until he was comfortable in the bucket seat. Sally stood beside the open door and peered in, wrinkling her nose at the scent of pickles. Carefully, she sat down at the booth, scooting over to the tinted window. The scenery flew by as the camper sped towards Talver. Sally counted the cars, punching the table at sporadic intervals.

The camper took up two parking spaces. Sally squinted at the sun over the big Kmart sign. The sliding double doors welcomed them into the air conditioning. Sally

wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and pulled on her cotton shirt. She fanned herself with her cupped hand and followed Ms. Gypsy to the carpeted island where Jaclyn Smith smiled over her collection of clothes.

“You like this?” Ms. Gypsy held a floral print dress up against Sally. “Nah, makes you look sick. Here we go.” The new-fabric scent engulfed Sally as the thin cotton dress pressed coolly against her skin. “It’s you, babe.”

Sally turned and looked in the full-length mirror, arching her head.

“Oh, look at this. Yellow will bring out your tan. You’ll want to try this, too.”

Sally searched the rack for the right size. “What about this?” Sally held up the sleeveless white crop top.

“If you’ve got it, flaunt it, I always say.” Ms. Gypsy held out a stack of clothes.

“Go try these on.”

Sally looked around. The pink and turquoise sign above the aisles advertised the fitting rooms. Sally walked up to the elevated counter and coughed. The sales associate looked up from her magazine.

“Hello. How many have you got there? Six? Okay, take that room right there in the back, honey.”

“Thanks.”

Sally shut the shutter-like door, locking it with the hook. She took off her shoes, grimacing as she untied them and pushed them into the corner of the small dressing room. She looked in the mirror, noticing the yellowing of her bra. She quickly pulled the dress over her head. Her cheeks were flushed. She looked in the mirror. The dress clung to

her body, ending its embrace at her knees. She looked over her shoulder, following the outline of her curves down to her bee sting.

“Sally? Come out here and let’s see how you look.” Sally stepped out. “Beautiful. Wait til them country boys get a look at you, child. Turn around. Mmm, mmm, mmm. We’ll take that one. Now, try on the rest.” Sally smiled and meekly returned to her fitting room.

When she emerged, Sally’s hair was frizzy. Ms. Gypsy handed her a wide-tooth comb, commanding her to fix it. “By the way, your roots are showing. Better get a bottle of Clairol.”

Sally touched her temple. “I think I’ll let it grow a while.”

“Well, let’s go see what they’ve got over here,” Ms. Gypsy said, leading Sally through the aisles to the cosmetics. “I need some nail polish. You go busy yourself over there, and I’ll be right over.”

Sally scanned the rows of lipstick, reading the colorful round bottoms. “Sultry Summer Peach, Racy Raisin.” She giggled, pursing her lips in the small, cloudy mirror above the rack. Lip gloss hung in bright packages on the wall. Apple, pear, melon, berry. *For Tasty Kisses Try Berry Bash. Make him crave your lips!*

“Find something?”

Sally jumped. Ms. Gypsy pushed the squeaky buggy into the corner and picked up a bottle of perfume.

“Here, smell this.” She held the open bottle up to Sally’s nose. “It’s my favorite. Just like Red Door.” Sally coughed.

“Nice.” Sally pressed against her jean pocket. “I think I’ll get some lip gloss.” She pulled a package off its wire hook. “Where’s Grandpa?”

“He’s sitting out there on a bench waiting for us. You ready? Let’s go then. I don’t know bout you, but I’m bushed. I’m ready to eat.” She patted her stomach and navigated the unruly buggy into the checkout line.

“Find everything alright? Hot today. It was supposed to rain, though. Guess they never get it right, do they?” The cashier smiled widely.

“You talking to me?” Ms. Gypsy looked up at the cashier. He blushed.

“Yes, ma’am. How are you today?”

“Just dandy. You take checks?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sally held out her twenty. Ms. Gypsy pushed her arm away.

“I’ve got it. You hold on to that.”

Sally guiltily pushed her twenty down into her pocket.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Can I see your driver’s license?”

Gypsy opened her beaded wallet and pointed to her picture.

“That’s fine.”

“See me? That was back when I still had that perm. Awful stuff, perms.”

She put the wallet back into her purse. “You ever had a perm?” The cashier shook his head and handed her the bag.

“Have a nice day. Come back and see us.”

“Sure thing, kid. Toodle-loo.” Ms. Gypsy waved, swinging the white plastic bag on her forearm.

Sally flipped her hair, catching a tangled strand in her zirconium pinky ring. Her eyes watered as she plucked a few hairs from her scalp. She rubbed the side of her head as she studied herself in the warped mirror. She squeezed the pimple on her chin and blotted the blood and water that dribbled out. She tore off a small piece of tissue and stuck it to her chin. The blood spread out, absorbed by the blue Kleenex.

Chase knocked on the doorframe, “Cut yourself shaving again?” He chuckled. “Church starts in fifteen minutes. You ready, yet?” He snapped his new overalls and buttoned the wrists of his dress shirt. “Come on, let’s go.”

“I’m coming already.” Sally carefully arranged her hair over both shoulders and batted her eyelashes at her reflection. “God bless *you*, sister.” She curtsied low before sauntering into the living room. She spun around. “How do I look?”

“Neat enough, I reckon. Get your Bible and let’s go.” Chase lifted his hat off the hall tree.

“It’s a little too short for a girl your age.” Paul crossed his arms. “But, I guess I don’t have a say anymore in what my daughter does.”

“Oh, Daddy.” Sally rolled her eyes and walked out.

The old green Ford chugged into the graveled parking lot of Redwood Baptist Church. The white wooden building sat nestled between the forest and Johnson’s Hardware. The sign hung rusted beside the bright green steps. It read:

SI N BROKEN MESSA E INSIDE

Sally turned to Chase. “What happened to the letters?”

“Oh, lost all the G’s and a few others ‘bout four, five Sundays ago. The Gorden boys stole em for their truck. See,” he pointed to the multicolored truck parked at Johnson’s Hardware. G, G, & G SALVAGE was taped to the passenger side door. “We only had four G’s, and they got em all.” Chase slapped his thigh and laughed. “They park over there every Sunday now so’s no one will notice.” He laughed harder. “I swear, Zeke don’t even know them boys got the letters. He even told the preacher to take up a collection for more letters so the sign won’t look so poorly.” Chase winked at Sally and waved to the Gorden brothers as they walked up the churchyard.

Sally pushed open the door and jumped down. Paul scooted across the cracked seat.

“Wonder who’s here,” he mused, searching the cars in the parking lot.

“Let’s go get a seat ‘fore Ralph and that bunch show up.” Chase shut his door and pushed Sally toward the steps.

Loud music sounded in the parking lot. Everyone’s head turned to the camper that jerked to a stop in front of the walkway.

Strains of “Big girls don’t cry” filtered through the open windows. Sally squirmed on the cushioned bench and pressed her leg against the carpeted cubbyhole where the songbooks stood upright beside the King James Bibles. Her shoulders jerked convulsively as she dug her nails into her fisted hands. She looked at the crescents on her arm. Chase remained unaffected, looking straight ahead to the pulpit where Reverend James Marsh directed the few choir members as they sung the last lines of the hymn.

“ . . . None other has eh-eh-ver known.”

The choir returned to their seats, and Reverend Marsh addressed the congregation. “Today’s message is ‘Living in God’s Garden.’ As I prepared for today’s sermon, I came across an uplifting passage in Isaiah. Turn with me to Isaiah, Chapter fifty-one, verse three. Ah-hem. ‘For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.’” He looked up and scanned the pews. “Let’s go to the Lord in prayer. Brother Tobias.” The preacher nodded to the clergyman.

Ms. Gypsy’s golden oldies drowned out the prayer. Sally nudged Paul. His lips twitched as he motioned for her to stop. A peel of laughter erupted from Sally. Clamping her hand tightly over her mouth, she got up, knocking the knees of everyone in her pew as she struggled to get out. She walked quickly down the aisle, avoiding the curious and disdainful eyes that followed her.

“Just like her mama.” The woman in the straw hat held her hand over her mouth as she whispered to the man beside her. The boy looked up, his eyes wide. Sally hurried through the swinging doors and out of the building.

Ms. Gypsy chased a barefoot boy across the parking lot. He ran across the gravel, laughing as he zigzagged onto the two-lane road. A horn blared. Ms. Gypsy caught the child’s shirttail and jerked him violently down onto the gravels, falling beside him and losing her sandals. Sally ran to Ms. Gypsy.

“Are you okay?” Sally pulled on Ms. Gypsy’s arm. The boy stood up, hiccupping snot bubbles onto his dirty face.

“Just lost my wind, that’s all, and my shoes.” She turned her shoes upright and slid her feet back into them. “Tommy, you know better than to run out into the road. How many times?” Ms. Gypsy clutched the skinny boy in her arms, rubbing his face into her dress. “You’ll know better next time, right?” She pushed back his sweaty hair. “Go on back to the playground and stay away from the road. Run along.” She dusted off her dress and straightened the sunflower on her black gauze hat.

“What are you doing out here?” She asked, limping over to the open camper. The windows vibrated. She leaned inside and pulled out a jar of pickles. She reached into the green liquid. “What a good girl am I.” She sunk her teeth into the bumpy pickle and held the jar out to Sally. “Pickle?”

“Nah, thanks anyway.”

“Well? What are you doing out here? Preacher point at you?”

“No, I just got too tickled. Besides, everyone was staring at me. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“They’re just curious. But they say curiosity killed the cat, so there’s hope.” Ms. Gypsy finished her pickle and climbed into the camper. “Come on in. That dust is choking me to death.” Sally followed her inside. “Here, have a beer. Relax. It’s a root beer. Just a little jokey-poo.” She twisted the cap on the glass bottle. “Don’t throw that away. I can get a nickel for it at Dub’s.”

Sally gulped the root beer, coughing as the carbonation tickled her nose. Ms. Gypsy cocked her head.

“Your Daddy come today?”

“Yeah. He didn’t want to, but Grandpa made him, I think.”

“Met any boys?”

“No,” Sally blushed.

“Want to?”

“I don’t know.” Sally’s blush deepened.

“Yeah, you do.” Ms. Gypsy laughed. “I know just the place, too. Whatta ya doing tomorrow?”

“Nothing.”

“I’ll pick you up around ten, after the mail runs, and we’ll go cruising. Now, get out, I got some praying to do.” Ms. Gypsy ushered Sally out and closed the door.

Sally stood outside the camper, looking at the stained glass windows above the church’s doors. She heard the toilet flush in the camper and ran softly back to the truck, holding her hand over her mouth.

The rough gray planks of the porch were damp and slimy under her bare feet. Grabbing the peach basket, Sally ran across the wet grass to the garden, her feet smacking the smooth dirt of the paths as she raced through the bean vines. The tomatoes covered the ground in a medusa maze, spreading up and out along the stakes. Sally parted the vines, looking for color. Her fingers were sticky. She rubbed them against the stake before burying her yellowed hands in the dirt.

A red tomato lay bulbous and ripe under the vines. Unearthing her hands and rolling the dirt off in worm-like strings, Sally snapped the tomato from its umbilical vine. She held it in her hand, feeling its sun-warmed skin. The scent was inviting. Sally wiped the tomato with her shirttail. She tore the green cap off the top and turned the tomato

over to its pointed end. She bit. Juice ran in tiny streams from her puckered mouth, gathering on the tip of her chin and dripping onto her purple shirt.

The last bite was gone, the inedible parts discarded. Sally gathered the remaining tomatoes, plucking even the faintly pink fruits and filling her basket, and started back. Chase sat whittling on the porch steps.

“That’s a mighty fine batch of maters you got there. I bet there won’t be one left for supper.” He reached for a tomato. “How come you to pick them green maters?”

“I like ‘em best that way. Want me to fix us a plate and salt ‘em down good?”

“You go ahead. I’m fixing to go over to Dub’s. Gotta get me some backer and cornmeal. Mebbe I’ll bring you back some pop. What kind you like?”

“Whatever. Could we get some chips, too?”

“I’ll see what he’s got. You stay here, then, and I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Okay, bye.” Sally watched him around the turn and then carried her basket into the house.

The bell over the door tinkled as Chase entered the general store. An old leather couch blocked the last three aisles near the freezer. A group of men sat smoking on its cracked cushions, laughing and coughing.

“Well, I’ll be. Is that you, you old dog?”

“I reckon. How you been, Lester? Ain’t seen you around for a while.”

“Been down in my back lately. Had to lay abed for a couple of weeks. Supposed to be there now, but I just couldn’t stand it anymore. You know how Buela is when a

body's sick." They both laughed. "Well, you making it all right, Chase? Heard you had comp'ny.

"Yeah, my son and his girl are at the house for a while. Paul's trying to buy the old Campbell place next to my land. He's been a laying rock every day it don't rain."

"I seen that girl of his. She's a looker. Kinder reminds me of that school teacher down at the elementary." The smoker's bench quieted. The men leaned forward, letting their stubby cigarettes ash to their fingertips.

"Looks more like Rose when she was young, if ya ask me. She does have Paul's nose, though." Chase coughed.

"You mean your nose, you old peacock."

"Mebbe she does kinda resemble me, but I'm her kin, too, ain't I?" He juggled the two-liter and the cans of soup, carefully keeping the pork rinds on top. "Well, I'd best be going. I left Sally a minding the house. Good to see you, Lester, boys," Chase nodded to the leather couch and winked at Lester. "Come on up when Buela'll let you."

Sally slowly shut the door, cringing as the doorknob spun back into place. Chase's overalls draped across the bed and onto the cedar chest at its foot. Sally crept to the cedar chest and opened it. The lid creaked. A doll lay perfectly centered on top of the quilt. Sally picked up the doll and ran her fingers through its curly black hair. She rubbed its dress.

The once-red velvet was dusty and patched. The doll's dress held the scent of dried flowers in the folds of the yellowed eyelet lace. Sally pushed the doll's eyes open.

They snapped shut quickly. She flipped the doll back and forth. Open. Closed. Open. Closed. She dropped the doll on the bed. Its black eyelashes touched its rouged cheeks.

Sally turned back to the cedar chest. Old mothballs littered the floor as she lifted out the quilt. Sally glided her fingertips over the raised stitches, tracing the outline of a bonneted blue girl. She laid the quilt on the floor and dug into the underbelly of the chest. Christmas tree ornaments and family photos pressed against the sides. Sally held each bauble in her hand, turning it over to see the detail. She looked intently at each photograph, studying the faces.

The tall clock in the corner chimed loudly. Sally quickly packed the pictures back into the chest and stood up. The doll lay on the bed. Sally stepped forward, sinking her feet into the quilt. She felt the break and heard the muffled crunch as she shifted her weight to reach the doll. Quickly, she jumped aside and knelt beside the quilt. She pulled back the folds. The quilt lay open, revealing the broken picture frame.

Ms. Gypsy yelled from the camper. Sally waited until the horn sounded before running out to meet her.

“Get in. We’re behind schedule.” The camper bounced down the road towards the general store. “Aught-oh, Spaghetti-o.” Ms. Gypsy pulled over on the graveled road. “I gotta go.” She killed the engine and hurried through the camper to the bathroom. Sally waited in the passenger seat, looking at the pictures littering the dashboard.

“Ah, much better.” Ms. Gypsy buckled her seatbelt. “It’s times like these I’m glad I’ve got a porta potty.” She laughed. “Say what you will, but there’s something to be said for convenience.”

“Is that why you drive a camper, Ms. Gypsy?” Sally looked at Ms. Gypsy’s sunbonnetted profile.

“Well, partly, partly. I bought it off my nephew cause I needed a place to pee when I’m on the road and cause I like to see out when I’m traveling. Either way, I’m satisfied.”

The camper started easily, and they pulled back onto the road. Dub’s General Store greeted them at the next turn.

“I’m parched.” Ms. Gypsy threw her black sequined purse onto her shoulder and motioned for Sally to get out. Ms. Gypsy held the door open, letting the entry bell jingle above her head as she fanned the door. “Just wanted you to know I’m here,” she said, winking at Dub and blowing airy kisses to the smoker’s corner.

Sally followed her into the back of the store. She watched as Ms. Gypsy ran her hand across the glass cooler’s doors.

“Ah ha.” She grabbed the grape soda and handed it to Sally. “What’s your poison?” she asked, hiding her head inside the cooler.

“Cheerwine’s fine.”

“Ain’t it though. We make it here ourselves. State pride.” Ms. Gypsy set the glass bottles on the counter.

“Will that be all, ladies?”

“Yeah, yeah. Give me my change, Dub. We’re in a hurry.”

“Here you are. Don’t take them curves too fast, Gypsy. You ‘bout run over my dog yesterday.”

“Humph, good riddance. I can’t stand poodles,” she pushed Sally through the chiming door, “or their owners.”

Swelling clouds of dust followed the camper along the curvy road, settling over them when they stopped.

“Here we are.”

“This is the school? It’s so . . . small.” Sally looked at the brick building. Kudzu sprawled across the banks that flanked the small school. “And ugly.”

“Your daddy helped build this one after the other’n burnt down. See that fence? That’s where they practice football and all them ball games. We’ll just go sit on the bleachers and watch.” Ms. Gypsy pointed to the rusty metal structure behind third base.

The bleachers swayed under their weight as they climbed. Sally shaded her eyes and followed the arch of the baseball.

“Heads up!” The uniformed boy ran towards the bleachers where Ms. Gypsy was sitting, holding her black umbrella over her head. The baseball hit the umbrella, ripping through the slick fabric and tangling in the wired structure.

“Ms. Gypsy!” Sally extracted the ball.

“Nice catch.” The boy smiled. He held his mitt up.

“He’s right,” Ms. Gypsy whispered, nudging Sally with her elbow.

“Put her there,” he said, hitting his gloved hand with the naked one. Sally threw the ball directly at his glove.

“Hey, you’re a natural. Wanna play?” Sally shook her head and sat down beside Ms. Gypsy.

“Okay. But you’re wasting your talent.” He ran back to the diamond.

“What did I tell you? Tall, dark, and handsome.” Ms. Gypsy chuckled. “Now, we’ve gotta run.” She stood up. “Always leave them wanting more.”

The sun reappeared from behind the fat clouds as Sally pushed the sputtering mower across the yard. She mowed in circles, dizzying herself as she went around and around. She wiped the sweat out of her stinging eyes and pressed her hand into the small of her back. She leaned on the mower and started another circle. Around the turn she saw a topless jeep. The baseball player was driving. Sally let out a little scream and abandoned the lawnmower. She ran behind the house, jerking her bra and panties off the line as she passed by. Sally collapsed against the side of the house and panted. The jeep disappeared behind the Johnson’s barn. She closed her eyes.

“What are you doing?” Paul nodded at Sally holding her underwear.

“Mowing.”

Paul’s eyes followed the mower slowly inching across the yard.

“I’m glad school starts soon. You need something to occupy your mind.” Paul gave Sally one last arched look and carried the bucket of shelly beans to the porch. Sally threw the bra across the line and placed her panties back under the clothespins.

“Why me, God?” She wiped her face with her shirtsleeve and caught the mower. She glanced at Paul on the porch. He looked up.

“Sal, why don’t you take a break? I got some good news.” Sally let out the choke and walked over to the porch.

“Lemme guess, I get to mow the back yard, too.”

“Well, maybe, but that’s not it.” Paul pulled a piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and unfolded it before handing it to Sally. “I bought the Campbell place. Soon as I get the lumber, we’re gonna build us a new house. Whatta ya think? Huh?”

“That’s great, Dad!” Sally hugged him. Rust and sweat mingled on his clothes as she sniffed. “Did you tell Grandpa?”

“Yep. Me and him’s going over there this evening to look for a clearing for a house seat. I called your brothers, too. They’re excited about visiting us.”

“Yea,” Sally rolled her eyes.

“Well, they’re almost excited. I told them we were gonna have horses” Paul stared at the ground. “Betty Jo was excited, too.”

“That’s nice.” Sally shrugged her shoulders and wiped the sweat off her nose, focusing on the jeep that was coming back up the road. “I gotta go, Dad. I’ll be right back.” Sally ran into the house and watched the jeep from behind the curtained window.

“What do you mean, Betty Jo wants to come see us? I can’t believe you, Dad. You can’t be serious.” Sally paced the floor. “I mean, she’s just using you now that we’ve got the land and all.” Paul sat at the table in the kitchen, watching Sally hold her head.

“She’s just coming for a visit with your brothers. Nothing serious.”

“You can’t be serious,” she repeated.

Chase came through the corridor, carrying a basket of brown eggs.

“Look how many I got this morning. Them banny hens sure do lay good this time of year.” He set the basket on the countertop. “You’ns want some breakfast?”

“I’m outta here.” Sally pushed past Chase and ran out of the house.

Chase shrugged. "She never did like eggs."

The ballpark was deserted. Sally pushed her fingers through the wire fence, staring blankly out across the field.

"Change your mind?"

Sally jumped back, twisting her fingers in the wire.

"Ow, shit!" She sucked on her middle finger, shaking her other hand and rocking her body.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." The boy pushed open the fence. "It's never locked. The team will be here pretty soon. You want to watch again?" He held the fence open. Sally walked through.

"Maybe."

"You left pretty fast last time. I'm sorry the ball hit your mom's umbrella." He laughed.

"She's not my mom." Sally turned her head. "My mom's dead."

"Oh, sorry."

"It's okay. She died when I was two. I don't remember her."

"Oh, well, okay. Hey, what's your name? You going to go to school here in the fall?"

"Sally Gayle. I don't know."

"Your Dad bought the Campbell place, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I hope you stay. And play for the team," he added smiling. He ran towards the dugout. Turning sharply, he jogged back to the bleachers. "If you didn't

know, I'm Garner," he held out his gloved hand. "Oh, sorry," he tugged on the mitt and held out a tanned hand. "Nice talking to you, Sally Gayle." He ran back onto the field. "See ya, later."

Sally walked slowly along the road. Blue Buttons and Oxford daisies nodded in the breeze. She pulled the flowers, plucking each petal one by one as she neared home. Chase whittled in the rocker, shaving and shaping the block of wood.

"What's that?" Sally bent over to inspect the wood.

"Don't know yet." He braced his foot against the porch beam.

"Um, aren't you cutting it pretty close? I mean, you're gonna run out of wood any second."

"Nope. It'll come on its own. No need to rush. It'll come out. You'll see."

Chase chipped away at one end.

"Whatever. Where's Dad?"

"He went over to the new place. He'll be back in a few hours."

"Oh." She swung her leg over the sawhorse Paul had left in the yard.

"Well, I'm going down and get some tomatoes, you want some?"

"Yeah, take that bucket there," he pointed to the white one turned upside down, "and pick a mess of green beans. We'll have 'em for supper. Gypsy'll be coming, too, tonight."

Sally nodded and picked up the bucket, flicking a green slug into the grass.

"Might want to get a couple squash, too. I'll show you how to fry a batch 'at'll make yer mouth water." He whistled. Wallace perked up his ears, but didn't move.

"Take Wallace with ya, and watch for snakes."

“C’mon boy,” she nudged Wallace. He sat up and pawed at her. “Don’t you want to go with me?”

“He’s getting plumb lazy. Just wants to lay in the shade and have me bring him his meals. I’ve spoiled you, haven’t I, old boy?” Wallace yawned and stretched.

“Come on, let’s go.” Sally swung the bucked back and forth, walking behind Wallace as he trotted through the paths.

The bean vines were yellowing. The bug-bitten leaves clung to her clothes and irritated her exposed skin. Red blotches appeared quickly, and Sally scratched her arms and legs until long red, marks crisscrossed on her tan skin.

Her back ached as she bent over the vines, pulling handful after handful of half-runners. Sweat gathered at her lower back, staining her shirt. The beads of moisture on her upper lip trickled into her mouth. She spat, “ugh.”

“Eat a tater bug?”

Startled, Sally stepped back, tangling her foot in a cluster of vines before toppling backwards, landing hard on her butt. She squinted up, shading her eyes with her dirty hand.

“Whoa, there. Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.” Garner smiled and helped Sally to her feet. She dusted off her clothes and looked at him. “Um, your Grandpa said you were down here.” He nodded in the direction of the house. “I, uh, I came by ‘cause you left this at the field.” He handed her a pink bandana, neatly folded into a crisp square.

Sally wiped the sweat from her face and blushed. “Um, that’s not mine,” she laughed, nervously pulling stray bean leaves from her clothes.

“There’s another one right here,” Garner leaned over and disentangled the leaf from her hair. “There,” he wiped his hand on his jeans. “Well, I guess, I’ll see you later,” he paused and pressed the toe of his tennis shoe into the soft dirt.

“Oh, well, okay. Thanks,” she ran her fingers through her hair and pulled on her shirttail.

“Okay, then, I’ll see you later.” Garner walked a few steps along the row. “Hey, you need some help?” He turned and gestured to the bucket. “I’m an old pro, you know.”

“Oh, really. Well, by all means, go right ahead,” she held out the bucket. It swung between them. “Fill ‘er up.” She grinned as he took the bucket from her.

“Yes, ma’am.” Garner saluted, the dimple on his left cheek deepening as Sally laughed. They bent over the vines. “My mom cans about a million of these ever summer. Does your . . . family can . . . stuff?” He looked away quickly and cringed slightly.

“Nah, Lisa wasn’t really into the whole do-your-own kinda thing. Her cooking was more . . . packaged. You know, Hungry Man and all that.” She laughed and turned away.

“So, you’ve never done this kind of thing before?” He dropped a handful into the bucket.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve gotten plenty of experience this summer. Especially stringing ‘em.”

“Yeah, that’s the hard part.” They laughed and moved the bucket farther down the row. Sally added another handful and stood up.

“I think we have enough now,” she dusted off her jeans and blushed, backing away. Her fingers measured the hole in the back of her jeans. She felt her cotton panties exposed and pulled her jeans higher as she tugged her shirt to cover the hole. Keeping one hand on the rim of her jeans, Sally lifted the bucket and started towards the tomato patch.

“Here let me carry that.”

“Thanks.” Sally stepped gingerly over the squash. “Could you pull off a couple of those?” She pointed to the yellow squash.

“Sure.” He dropped two prickly squash into the bucket. “Is that it?”

“No, I’ve gotta get some tomatoes. Over there,” she pointed. “Go ahead.”

Garner set the bucket by the old plow and began picking the ripe tomatoes that were staked beside the old tractor frame. Sally walked behind the staked rows and let go of her jeans. “Am I getting the wrong ones?” Garner looked confused.

“Oh, yeah. I just, uh, thought I’d get these pink ones here.” She gathered the tomatoes in her arms and carefully dropped them into the bucket. “That’s enough, let’s go on back.” Garner lifted the bucket and waited. “Go on,” she shooed him, “I’m right behind you.”

Wallace barked loudly as they neared the porch. Gypsy and Chase looked up. Sally shook her finger at the panting dog, “you traitor.” Wallace rolled onto his back and squirmed. “That’s not fair, you know I can’t resist big brown eyes.” She rubbed his belly.

“Hear that, boy? You’re in luck,” Gypsy smiled at Garner as he deposited the bucket on the porch steps. Garner and Sally both blushed.

“Guess yore staying for supper then,” Chase added, taking out his pouch of Red Man and filling his jaw with tobacco. Garner looked at Sally. Ms. Gypsy clapped her hands.

“Course you’ll stay, honey. You helped catch it. Now, you can help eat it.”

“Reckon I’ll go get us a pop.” Chase picked up his walking stick.

“I’ll go, sir,” Garner offered.

Chase scratched his chin, “Well, it is a mite hot to walk it right now. Iffin you don’t mind.” He pulled out his old leather wallet and held out a five-dollar bill.

“I’ve got it covered, sir. My contribution to dinner.” Garner turned to Sally, “you wanna go?” Sally looked up at Chase. Ms. Gypsy elbowed him.

“Go on, honey. It don’t make no nevermind to us,” Gypsy smiled and winked. Chase nodded. “Nice to see you again, Mr. Ballplayer. I’m Ms. Gypsy,” she offered her hand. “Here, you can shake it or kiss it, if it don’t make Sally jealous.” She giggled as Garner blushed and shook her hand. “A one woman man, are ya? Well, I guess that’s okay. Chase here is a one woman man, right stud?” Chase coughed and fingered the latch of his overalls.

“Just a second. I’ll be right back.” Sally backed up the steps and through the door before turning around and going to her room. Garner raised his eyebrow and caught Ms. Gypsy’s eye.

“Don’t look so worried.” She nodded towards the house. “She’s just a little superstitious.”

“Wanna see something neat?” Garner shifted into low gear and turned off the road. “It’s really cool.” He parked the Jeep under the swaying Sycamore. “Come on.” Sally unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed over to the driver’s side.

“It’s over here.” Garner waited by the dogwood. “Look.” He pulled back the limbs.

“Wow.” Sally looked at the waterfall. White water gushed down a fifty-foot rock face into a little pool at the edge of the bank. Garner held out his hand.

“You can feel the spray off the falls from here. Try it.” Sally reached out, nodding as the water fell in needlepoints onto her outstretched hand.

“Didn’t I tell you? Neat, huh? I swim down here. See there at the pool. The water’s real still and warm. The sun hits it all day.”

Sally looked up at the rushing water and swayed forward. Garner steadied her.

“Sorry, it makes me dizzy.” She covered her eyes with her hand. The tree limb snapped back as Garner let go to put both arms around her. He led her back to the Jeep and helped her settle into the bucket seat. “Feel better?” Sally nodded. Garner let go of her hand and shut the door. “I’ll show you how to get down to the pool another time.” He started the engine and pulled back onto the road.

Ms. Gypsy’s camper came into view. Garner parked beside it. “I’m gonna put the top up. It looks like rain.”

“Okay.” Sally lifted the brown paper bag out of the backseat and carried it to the porch where Gypsy and Chase were reading the Farmer’s Almanac.

“Signs are in the bowels tomorrow. Guess I’ll be putting off my kraut making until Monday.” Gypsy smacked the paper. “I knew something would prevent me from

fixing them cabbages. What did I tell you, Chase? I said just yesterday that something would come up. I can't get ahead for dragging my rump."

"What took so long?" Chase worked his knife on the dark whet rock on his knee.

"Oh, you old coot, course it takes a little longer sometimes. You ain't that old, honey."

Ms. Gypsy patted Sally's back. "Put that drink in the icebox and check on the beans. I think the pot's about to jiggle. If it does, turn the eye down to medium and tell me what time it is."

Sally hurriedly shoved the two-liter into the refrigerator. The pressure cooker sizzled on the stove. She hurried back to the porch.

"It's not doing anything yet, Ms. Gypsy." Sally held open the screen door.

"Come on in, Garner. Let's watch tv. It's time for my show. You like Andy?" Garner followed her into the house.

"Ain't that sweet? Little lovebirds. Coo, coo. He's a cutie pie. Almost as handsome as you, Chase," Gypsy pinched his wrinkled cheek. Chase dropped his whittling knife.

"Gypsy, I think the beans are jiggering."

She stood up. "I'm gonna get a pickle. You want one?" She added, "sourpuss," under her breath. Chase shook his head. "Okee, dokee, then. I'll be right back. She bounded across the yard as Paul drove up.

"Morning, Sunshine, how does your garden grow?" Gypsy tipped her sunbonnet to Paul and crowed loudly.

“With silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row.” Paul grinned. “You staying for supper?” He rolled up his truck windows and slung his tool belt over his shoulder.

“Yep, going to get my appetizer right now.” Gypsy disappeared into the camper.

Paul reached the porch and rested his leg on the bottom step. “Hey, Dad, did Steve Mann call about that lumber?”

“Yeah, and Betty Jo called. Said don’t call her back. She’ll be here tomorrow with the boys.”

“Great. I’m gonna take a shower before supper.” He dropped his tool belt at the door. “Hey, ya munchkin,” Paul pulled on Sally’s ponytail.

“Hi, Daddy. You look worn out. Long day?”

“Yeah, who’s your friend here?” Paul addressed Garner. “You look familiar. Is that your jeep out front?”

“Yes, sir. I’m Garner, Sally’s friend. You know my mom, Bonita. She said to tell you hello.”

“Bonita. Yeah, Bonita, nothin’ . . . yeah, hey, tell her I said hello, too.” Paul’s shirt unsnapped with a quick pull.

Ms. Gypsy waved the oven mitt above her head. “Get your feed bags, it’s time to chow down!”

Sally stepped sleepily out onto the porch and squinted as the afternoon sun hit her face.

“Dad, still over at the house site?” She rubbed her eyes and waited for a response. “Grandpa? Hello? Anyone home?” She walked to the back porch and cupped her hands over her mouth, “Grand-pa, hell-o-oh.” She waited. “Okay, then.”

Sally walked back to her bedroom and made her bed. She changed out of her gown and into her shorts and spaghetti-strap tank top. She lifted her mattress and pulled the cracked picture frame out. Her fingers slid over the black and white faces.

“Ouch,” she brought her bleeding finger to her lips. She sucked on the jagged cut and made her way to the bathroom. The running water diluted her dark blood. She slathered on the green ointment from the round tin. The gauze of the band-aid soaked up the salve and blood. Sally jumped at the sound of knocking and bumped her head on the open medicine cabinet door. She quickly dashed to the living room and slid her feet into her jelly sandals.

Garner stood whistling with his hands in his pockets. Sally leaned against the door facing. Garner smiled.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“So, you ready?”

“Almost. Come on in. I need to find Grandpa and let him know I’m gone.”

“Oh, I saw him on my way here. He’s down at Dub’s. Should we wait for him or something? Wouldn’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Yeah, I guess.” They sat silent on the couch. “So, you want something to drink?”

“Nah, I had something while ago.”

“Oh,” Sally sighed. “Hey, you want to play Nintendo?” Her voice went up an octave as she listed her games. “I’ve got Super Mario Brothers Three and Tetris and , uh, I’ve got, uh. . . ”

“Yeah, cool. I’ve only got Super Mario Brothers Two.”

“Come on,” she stood up. “It’s in my room. Dad can’t stand for me to play in the living room. He cusses about the cords getting in his way and says the music gives him a headache.” Sally laughed and ushered him into her room.

Garner sat down on the bed and picked up the broken frame. Sally searched under her bed, “I’ve gotta find the other control thingee.” She sneezed as the dust rose up. “Tck. Here it is.” She blew off the dust and handed it to Garner. He held the photograph.

“Is that you with Ms. Lovelace?”

“What?”

Garner pointed to the woman holding the toddler. “That’s Ms. Lovelace. She was my sixth grade teacher. How do you know her? That is you, isn’t it?” He looked intently at the faces. “Yep, that’s her.”

She stared blankly at him. “No, . . . that’s my mother.”

She sat in Chase’s rocker, feeling the smooth imprint on the wooden slats. Garner sat on the steps.

“Look, Sally, I could be wrong. They say everyone has a double, huh?” He looked at her with a half smile. She gazed out into the yard. Garner pulled at the weeds beside the step.

“Would you drive me over to see my Dad?” Sally’s voice was low.

Garner jumped up. “Yeah, come on. Let’s go.” He held out his hand. She grasped it and smiled at him. As they walked towards the car he placed his hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure everything’s alright.”

Sally slumped in the seat, silent and brooding until they reached the house site. Garner gave her hand a squeeze. “I’ll wait here.”

Sally nodded and walked up the plank that led to the would-be doorway. Angry voices sounded behind the panels.

“It wasn’t my fault we divorced! You were the one sowing seed in every furrow from here to Cuckamunga!”

“Me! You were selling more than Mary Kay door to door.”

Sally rounded the corner and saw Betty Jo slap Paul.

“Don’t even try to blame me, Paul. You had to knock up that Lovelace bitch. Twice. First, I have to keep that brat daughter of yours. Then she shows up with another one nine years ago. That’s why we divorced. All our hard earned money going towards paying off that Goddammed slut.”

“Shut up, Betty Jo. It wasn’t like that and you know it. And he wasn’t . . .”

Paul’s eyes locked with Sally’s. He walked towards her. Sally backed away.

“Honey, . . . wait,” Paul called after her as she tripped over the bucket of nails in the hallway. “Sally!”

She scrambled to her feet and raced out, running down the plank and past Garner’s Jeep.

“Where are you going?” Garner called to her, reaching for the door handle.

“Hey!”

Sally's running form disappeared around the bend in the road. Paul came and stood beside Garner. His face was pale and haggard.

"I guess I better go find her."

Sally walked past the church. Johnson's Hardware was deserted. She walked up to the Coke machine and put in her quarters. The Sprite tumbled down the chute. The aluminum can was cold and dented. Sally pressed it against her neck and cheeks and popped the tab. The fizz flowed over her hand. She sucked up the overflow.

She stopped at the payphone and dug into her pocket for another quarter. The cord was frayed. The dial tone was static. The numbers were almost invisible on the black keypad.

"Sally!" Garner ran towards her. "Sa-hally, wait, . . . listen . . . I . . ." He bent over, placing his hand over his chest as he gasped. Sally let her left hand slide off the side of the black-lacquered phone. The tears dropped off her flushed face. Garner stood straight. "Are . . . you . . . okay?"

"I'm leaving." She cradled the phone with her shoulder.

"Just wait, Sally. You don't know what you're doing."

"Yes, I do."

"What happened back there? Your Dad's out looking for you." He tried to put his hand on her shoulder. Sally backed away. He reached for her again.

"I don't care!" Sally held the Sprite over her head. "I don't . . ."

Garner held onto her arm, pushing it back down.

"Look. Before you leave, I think there's someone you should meet."

Sally looked into his face.

“Ms. Lovelace lives just around the corner. I’ll show you. Okay?”

Sally nodded and let Garner lead her along the paved road. She was out of breath and wheezing when he stopped in front of the yellow house. He pushed open the white gate and gestured for Sally to go through.

“Want me to wait here?” Garner leaned on the gatepost.

“No, you come with me, okay?” She clasped his hand and pulled him to her. She stood on her tiptoes and planted a soft kiss on his cheek. “Thanks.”

Sally took a deep breath and knocked on the door. It swung open quickly.

“Hello, there. Can I help you?” She stuck her head outside. “Why, Garner, I haven’t seen you in a while. Who’s your friend, here?” she looked at Sally.

“Um, this is Sally. Sally Gayle, meet Ms. Lovelace.” Garner stood aside.

Sally wrung her hands behind her back. Ms. Lovelace’s face blanched.

“Paul,” she whispered, “I knew he was back . . . come on in.” She twisted her hair. “Here, sit on the sofa. Are you thirsty? Hungry? Can I get you something?” Her voice trailed off as she walked to the kitchen. “I have brownies!” she shouted and came back in carrying a silver platter. “Here, eat these. They’re really good, my mother’s recipe.” She sat down on the edge of the sofa, wobbling slightly.

Ms. Lovelace chewed on her fingernails. Sally stood up and paced around the room. Suddenly, she stopped and turned to face Ms. Lovelace. “I have to know something.” She glanced at Garner who nodded. “Are you or are you not my mother?”

Ms. Lovelace giggled hysterically. “Oh, I don’t have children. Believe me, I’d know, but I can’t blame these hips on motherhood.” Her laughter stopped and she looked intently at Sally. “I never thought . . . Well, I always had to clean up her messes,” she

sighed and got up. She took Sally's hand. "Honey, I'm your aunt Alma May. Your mother was my sister."

"Was. So, she is dead?" Sally pulled her hand out of Alma's clammy grasp.

"Yes, God rest her soul. Two years ago. Her and little Paulie both. They died in a car accident." She looked away and blinked.

"Paulie?"

"Your half brother. Didn't Paul ever tell you? She came up to see you, you know about nine years ago. Took Paulie, too, to meet his sister." Alma opened the doors of the bookcase and pulled out a photo album. "Here, I'll show you," she guided Sally to the sofa and dabbed at her eyes with the sleeve of her dress. Sally looked at Garner who shrugged, looking back and forth between the two.

"Um, I'm gonna walk down to the Church and back. I'll take you home when you're ready." He winked at her and shut the door.

"See," Ms. Lovelace pointed at the photograph, "they were Prom King and Queen. And here they are at Graduation. Liz had such pretty hair," she sighed and turned to Sally. "Don't you remember when she came to see you? She came back here and said she you were growing up fast. Tall for five, she said. She brought your picture back, too." Alma turned the page and pointed to Sally's school picture. "Paul sent me photos every year until the accident." Sally stared at the photos and newspaper clippings.

"That's Paulie. Wasn't he sweet?" Alma tapped her fingernail on the smiling face.

Sally looked at the boy in Osh Kosh Bigosh with Spaghetti O's stuck to his chubby cheeks. Tears wet her cheeks.

“Oh, here’s his last picture with his second grade class.” Alma sniffed. “He was so handsome and ki- hind-uh, oh.” She cried into her lace handkerchief. She sobered herself and stood up, leaving the album in Sally’s lap. “I have something for you.” She scooted down the dark hallway.

Sally turned the pages, staring at the pictures. Her face paled.

The crying toddler struggled on her hip as she blew smoke into Sally’s face and drunkenly asked, “How many beau you got, darlin?”

Sally dropped the album on the floor.

IV

“Hello. This is Lisa Bunton. May I speak with Paul Gayle, please?”

Lisa drew squiggly lines on the open phonebook.

“Paul, um, I thought I’d let you know that Sally’s here with me. . . . She called me from a payphone. . . . How was I supposed to know what was going on?” She erased the smile on the stick man’s circular face, replacing it with a frown and adding bushy eyebrows. “Listen, Sally’s fine here with me. She’s welcome to stay . . . Well, I’ll bring her back if you want, but . . . Who? A Gypsy’s coming to get her? . . . Oh,” Lisa lifted her eyebrows. “She’s pretty upset. . . . I would be, too. Can’t you understand, Paul? You’ve hurt her by not telling her. Yes, it is my business. . . I care about her for her own sake. It has nothing to do with us! . . . You want me to come where?”

Chase sat, tightly gripping the rocker’s armrests. The floor creaked and groaned under the forceful rocking. Paul slumped on the porch steps, holding his head in his hands. Both men sat upright. The open jeep drove slowly by. Paul put his head back

down. Chase resumed his fast rocking, reaching beside him for his whittled figurine.

Wallace galloped up the steps, wagging his tail and sniffing at Paul.

“Get off, you dumb mutt.” Paul pushed the dog. Wallace hung his head and lay down in front of Chase’s rocker. Chase propped his foot on the dog’s side and rubbed back and forth as he moved. He turned the smooth figurine over and over in his hand. He pulled a splinter from the horse’s shank and blew the fine sawdust from the wooden folds of the little girl’s dress.

“She’ll be coming round the mountain when she comes, . . . She’ll be coming round the mountain when she comes. . . .” Chase stopped and whistled.

Paul looked over his shoulder. Chase kept his eyes on the road.

“She’ll be riding six white horses when she comes. She’ll be riding six white horses when she comes. . . .” Paul tentatively began.

“She’ll be riding six white horses. She’ll be riding six white horses . . . ,” both men bellowed. Wallace thrust up his head and howled.

The gravels danced.

“She’ll,” they held out the word, “. . . be riding six white horses when she comes, . . . yee haw!”

Works Consulted

King, Stephen. On Writing. New York: Scribner, 2000.

