



small Games of Chance

jonathan wesley bell



SMALL GAMES OF CHANCE

Jonathan Wesley Bell

1928

Plantation Sainte Elisabeth
Annunciation Sunday

March 25. 9:45 am. Geneva, Alabama

Big and black the cast iron skillet slams against the wall. Bam! With that she calls out “damn Annunciation Sunday.” Her message pulses through the shanty like an orgasm. It gives no release.

Solidified bacon fat layered the skillet bottom. Most of that slips to the floor in white lard cakes to skid about in pools of drippings.

Glancing at the floor May thinks, “damnation, I’ll have to mop the floor again before Cousin Chinless comes.”

The angry woman stands at the kitchen sink. She leans forward close to the room’s only window. Although small the window holds a large landscape for her to scrutinize--and scrutinize again--so she’s been doing this for the past several minutes.

From the shanty on the rise May scans for her wandering husband. Looking for him down the long sweep of fields.

May’s backdrop is kitchen gloom. Kerosene lamp stands dark on the big round table behind her. Wild flowers in a water glass on the table wilt in the murk. Gloom confines the sunshine into an oval tight around her head.

Sunlight, extreme, warped by cheap glass. It shimmers down her in a water music motion. She tenses full-frontal to the window frame, letting the cosmos pass over her in its inexorable wasting.

White gold on May’s throat, face and hair. May is carved moonstone. Translucent in such strong morning light. Her searching eyes are violets glaciated, radiant. She is a perfect cameo.

Announcing to a fleeting rampage in the other room she says, “You in there! I want you to be ancient stoics. Open your minds. Faites attention.” This is spoken to the empty kitchen but loud enough to silence the other room.

To herself, “Bon, par hasard fortune rolls the dice and drops me in this shit.”

“How come you got a yankee ma who talks crazy?” This taunts her boys. True, hers is a voice unlike any her boys hear.

To people around May does sound odd, she knows. With the family or when in public her impeccably proper Academy English flows in a French accent. From childhood this is a music-less speech, an unstressed monotone, no emphasis on first syllables.

It comes occasionally seasoned with the salt and pepper of Black Bob’s slave-soldier English. Her large hands motion to the words of her talk just like his.

Always to herself May speaks French.

May fillips the window glass to frighten away a dispicable Gull.

She lives only a seagull mile from the Florida State line. About 30 miles from the Gulf of Mexico. How fantastical to her that it should be such a bountiful land and yet a place acquainted with wickedness. The plantation wicked for more than 100 years.

Each day she witnesses some of the evil. Hears of more. Imagines the rest.

Such thought brings the amulet to life where it hangs against her body. For reassurance she touches it lightly. It lies hidden under her blouse. The leather bag stirs burrowing deeper into May's skin, creeping toward the core of her being. Its contents give an infinitesimal rustling in remnants of something become so brittle it has lost all identity and turned mostly to dust.

Among her demanding secrets, desiccated and ugly, the amulet is worn at all times.

It is her personal bag of protection. Mojo alive.

Black Bob's gift to her.

May can do nothing except wait in apprehension for the day to begin. Helpless for GB to appear, get the day started. Get it over and done with—and forgotten, like a child's memory of abuse.

“Where in hell are you! We'll be late!” Another plume escapes her. Somewhere in a field out there her dream man lurks.

Sometimes May wonders if she carries an odor of brimstone. Sulfurous, yellow burning, blue toxic in the air. A stink of her uncontrollable self. Perhaps too of their rank poverty.

For emphasis she again sends the skillet blasting against the nearest kitchen surface.

Bam. Bam. Bam. Three times for good measure, murdering the unseen.

From the other room comes, “Maman, don't break the window! Remember last time? Papa got real mad.”

To this she calls back, “Don't fret, dear, this time I missed the glass just for you. And it is ‘papa became very angry.’”

Turning from the window view, for a mere mote of time, May sheepishly regards the wretched kitchen hoping there is indeed no serious damage.

One plate and two saucers lie broken on the floor at her feet. Poverty crockery, she sniffs, then gives her low deep laugh. “C'est bon, you wouldn't have won any prize.”

Down the sprawling cotton, peanut and sugar cane fields of this once grand plantation she tracks GB with a regard piercing as a wolf's. Plantation manager? Ha. Grand title for a dead end. Shack bully was more like it.

May even scrutinizes the festering quarters where the field hands try to live. Although it being Sunday she knows he's not down there. The workers are taking their one free morning to sleep exhausted in rags.

Farthest below the search bogs to a halt confounded by the swamp. The menace of the swamp stops her short. That malignant world in plain sight, without sun or moon, always amazes her.

At least it makes of Sainte Elisabeth a hideout for herself, from herself. Does the swamp wall her off? Or in? An intriguing quandary.

Out of sight in the other room a chair topples ponderously onto bare pine flooring. May warps into another being, fractured, burning.

“Fini! Those chairs are Aunt Missouri’s. C’est fou. They are the only things we have worth a shit. You might think Mo’s dead but she’s not. Mo will come to take them back. You with them.”

A pause. Now, for some reason, they start dragging the chairs. Ornate mahogany legs grate across poor pine. The din rolls up her back Cracking vertebrae.

Immediately May calls out. “Ca suffit. Who the fuck is minding James Lamar? Repend-moi, or I’ll cut off your pretty balls.”

In despair she immediately regrets the crude outburst.

“Who’s James Lamar?” The timid reply from the other room trails giggles. The woman relaxes knowing her baby is in good hands.

“Get your ass in here, GB Bell! We’ve got to go!” May declares to her ghost of a man. She wagers GB’s hiding to rebuke her.

Her gaze is on the move for him again, roaming back up to their sorry home and its less alien landscape.

Closer to the shanty the scene presents her with a riotous, overwhelming display. Colors run mad. Colors spilling like blood from hundreds of magnolia blooms, from camellias, azaleas, dogwood, hydrangeas, bougainvilleas.

Landscape under glass. May smiles at the whimsy. She becomes La Giaconda. Catching a rebel twist of long golden hair she tucks it back in place.

Without blinking she peers into the hazy morning light of far southern Alabama. A light that makes her sleepy. She drifts.

Annunciation Sunday

March 25. 9:48 am. Geneva, Alabama

Instead of her wayward husband May suddenly comes up with Lucky Lindy. The famous aviator materializes to her from out of the emptiness. His plane spirals down across the glass from the high wide blue yonder. It parts the humidity.

“But we’re too poor to have such expensive visions,” announces May to the empty room.

Reflected in her cold violet eyes Lindberg arrives as a flicker in the warp of the kitchen glass. He’s framed before her by ugly wood, unpainted, splintering.

The plane lands on the plantation in a field of weed flowers its propeller churning their colors in her thought into a whirling kaleidoscope.

Wild flowers on the old plantation Sainte Elisabeth wave to her in expanses of pointillist red, yellow and blue. She feels their freedom like a dazzling abandon.

GB is forgotten.

Motor idles while the hero youth taxis to a stop. Propeller whirls on and on. His plane trembles with expectation, as does May. It turns May head over heels and makes her dizzy.

She understands. Lindbergh is her descending angel with feathers of flame. Wings folded. Halo askew. Grin crooked. He's waiting out there in all his charm. For her. Quickly she pats at her ponderous coil of hair.

Airplane tail swerves left to right to left in a twister of dust. Beckoning to her the flyer jauntily raises a leather clad arm adjusting his goggles with the other.

"Come along May, don't keep me waiting," he shouts to her, impatient to fly off again to France. This time with her.

May comes to him quickly. She scrambles up into the backseat of the plane. Her hands are still wet from the dishes.

"Here, put these on. You'll be able to see." He passes her a pair of goggles.

"Thank you, Charles," says May. She knows she can call him Charles. "I hope I didn't make you wet."

Then up and away they dart, Sainte Elisabeth is soon lost from the earth below. Between banks of cloud they swing.

An ocean appears heaving at them, wanting her. Ocean of life—older than land, older than man—from where her tins of tuna come from. Pondering this May studies seething waters for hours.

A shore arises on the horizon, nears nearer and nearer. They cross the border from Ocean to another land waiting to be discovered. She comes a pilgrim to this land below, creator of the language in her mind, the frame of mind that guides her. All her life it enchants her. The actual home of her home, of the Mission, her nuns.

Stories fill her of its history, kings and queens, grand intrigues and great thinkers.

Their flying shadow casts down becoming an exotic bird motoring loudly across the magic land of France. They fly in their own silences awed by fields of bloody poppies and the tragic sprawl of crosses. Visions abound in this land of sorrowing mothers. Holy Mothers appearing, revered.

The plane, the handsome navigator youth, they bravely proceed toward the volcanic core of her phantom homeland. Her spirit dress woven there by a vulgar couturiere. Night coming up over the planet and before her a wondrous molten lava burns in the dark, a great glowing plain.

Alabama wild flowers exchange for erupting embers marking the glorious City of Light. Paris. Dancing, laughter, art. Another kind of Rome of which she also

dreams. Science, literature, philosophy. Another final refuge for the thinking, imagining world.

She wants to linger, honor it. Paint it on canvas. Light a Galois. Drink a glass of absinthe. Dance on a café table.

Back on Sainte Elisabeth seagulls are fighting for the offal of the field workers' misery. How she hates these aggressive birds. Vermin of the sky, flying rats. The gulls jeer her return. Their gruesome screaming shatters her thoughts, her triumph, dishonoring her flight--'The Spirit of May.'

All May ever learned from her flights, measuring them in her mind by the first one of 700 miles from Oklahoma to here—the view from her kitchen window, the sink of dishes—from the nuns to the ruined Bells to Sainte Elisabeth-- is what she already knew. Never trust human nature, most of all your own. It will let you down.

Wretched Indians in Oklahoma, subjugated Negroes in Alabama, poor Whites in Geneva County, abrogated women kind in general. Odd she could not really change worlds. Never escape the cruelty and bigotry that beset them alike.

The plane disappears. No more wings. No escape.

A dire moment of silence emanating from the front room alerts May and sends the precious day dream crashing to the linoleum. No Lindbergh. No GB. No luck.

1928

GB Bell

Hiding In The Cane

March 25. 9:45 am. Sainte Elisabeth

Haven't seen her but I know she's looking for me from that kitchen window. Angry and getting worse all the while I'm out here. So be it. Hiding is my best option.

There's a cane rattler yonder hiding with me in the stalks. He's coiled waiting for a meal. Brown and black, fresh awake from hibernation. He's saying 'best show yourself GB, before May starts throwing the furniture out the front door.'

She's actually done so. I think high drama pleases her, strange woman of mine. But give her credit she's never called me Green Berry.

Next year I can take that farm to rent up by Coffee Springs. May will like that place. Has a decent house. No niggers or voodoo on it. Klan's quiet up there. And they don't know shit about Skinners. Good land for peanuts and cotton—and I hear for sure prices will be going up in '29. They can't get any lower.

Above all I've got to get her to a fitting' home. Somewhere for her to find peace of mind. On Sainte Elisabeth she's getting worse, I see what's happening. It's a damned place. I should have known what it would do.

May, she simply appeared to me and I felt full to bursting. First time was her welcome home party. I was invited as Rhoda's widower, my cousin by marriage. May caught me by surprise, a seventeen year old winged Venus appearing in Tiersey

Casey's parlor. My dear Rhoda. Such a good woman. But I dried my tears for good when I saw this May Skinner girl. Girl?

This new Skinner woman hid in a corner of that crowded parlor. Dressed in black, no makeup or jewelry, her long golden hair hung loose like a school girl's more than half way down her back. Tresses entwining me faster than a mermaid's. First woman I ever met who didn't need a thing on her. Not a garment in the world she could wear but wouldn't look useless.

Someone played the Casey's piano, 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart' same what Rhoda played for me. I've always been partial to the song. For me it seemed Rhoda played from the grave to give me her blessing.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Bell." May spoke her lines to the carpet. On first hearing that peculiar accent of hers, just commonplace words, it raised the hair on me. A strange nod of her wonderful head made my toes curl. The room ripped. I wonder if she felt the same, never asked her, afraid maybe it didn't.

A lot of staring at her went on in Tiersey's parlor. Now I see what that means to her, her smoldering dislike of being looked at. God forgive me for using it against her these years later. Being a little late to church for instance, I arrange it just to get back at her for some passing grievance between us.

But why in hell would a beautiful woman not want to be looked at? Haven't understood her yet, never shall. That first time meeting me, before turning to escape into another hiding corner, May did raise her eyes to me in a flicker. Or, did she look at me on purpose perhaps drawn to me in return? I do know in that fleeting vision of her eyes she burned her soul onto mine.

I've got ten years on her and I'm nothing special to look at but I just had to try for her, start courting her, all in despair that it was a dream.

Getting her was not easy. Papa Zach took his time coming round to what I wanted. He'd pull that long beard of his and purse his lips. His way of saying you're plum crazy, a Skinner gal in the Bell family.

"But grandpapa, Rhoda was Skinner blood too and you never said squat about it when I asked for her."

"Your Rhoda, boy, was not a true Skinner. She was a Fletcher and that's something altogether different. She bore no shame on her head. Rhoda was a fine young Southern girl. Now this yankee woman you're talking about?"

"Papa Zach, she's only 17, younger than Rhoda. A lady bred."

"This female, I say, is a Skinner from Indian Territory. GB, don't you get too close to her. She'll scalp you."

Almost cost me the Bell Place. Papa Zack would say "you choose between this Bell land and her, son. She's never getting her hands on it" From his growl I knew he meant it.

Then I asked May home because Aunt Missouri said it was the right thing to do. Clever Aunt Mo. She nagged me all the time to grab May before someone else got her.

“Nephew, you hear me now? If you don’t marry that filly, grand like no one here, I’ll marry her myself. Blood shows. Skinner blood? Damn the past to hell.” Less than a minute in the house and Old Zach fell for her, just as Mo knew he would. I saw that foxy look of his. She’s too beautiful. He had his joy just being around May. Although there was never any warmth from him for her.

Back then a lot of hatred still ran down the Choctawhatchee. Does to this day. Unfortunately, no matter what I trust to common sense and for good willing out, times may change but human nature won’t.

Klan began for me that late night no more than two years ago. Two Model Ts driving onto Sainte Elisabeth, fellas come to claim Colonel Zachariah Bell’s grandson. Going to a Klan meeting shames me in the gut. Saying a Bell is one of them is an affront. White hoods and burning crosses? It’s black magic from the devil’s heart.

I went with them only to protect May and the workers on the place, most of those harmless enough. For sure May needs protecting maybe more than my old time jays and their voodoo. Voodoo, stupid stuff, something else worrying May. Got to get her off Sainte Elisabeth.

Each time we pass that damn monument near the river I do think of May’s grandfather. His dishonor pains me for her sake, for my sons, the damn fool got what he deserved. That dismal history is of value only in how it makes her so different, same as her growing up in Oklahoma, Indian Territory, whatever it was called when she lived there.

Same as being raised by Roman French nuns, whatever they might be like. Same as having a high school education and being about the most beautiful and refined woman there is. I know that even her beauty is dangerous for her.

Anger for certain is her demon, just like pride can be mine. When I first discovered her anger, after marrying, it frightened me. Hardly for my person, for her. Such a temper filled me with fear of madness. Such highs and lows of mood. A few times I’ve dreaded what she might do to herself.

Looking back I see how she came to live calmly when we were at the Bell Place, particularly after Papa Zach died. For sure she breathed free when we were on the Gulf, our wedding trip down there.

Woman, you are the pride of my life. Please don’t go bugs on me. Let fortune gives us another chance.

Lady

March 25. 9:45 am. Geneva County

Today, in 1928, age 27, May is lovely. Unknown to her she is discussed in the speakeasies of Geneva, Alabama, in its barbershops, High School locker room, the town’s garage, its churches.

May has the power to replace the men's threatening talk of those Catholic foreigners Sacco and Vanzetti, even of their awe for the Yankees, however unfortunate the club's name. She can displace rumors of the Great Mississippi Flood that some of the denser fear will come to threaten the Choctawhatchee River, the cotton gin and the town itself.

Model Ts and a few new Ford As slow to watch her walking on the sidewalk. From a safe distance the cockier lads whistle at her, 'Ain't She Sweet.' Those who returned to Geneva from the Great War glance furtively after her, for them she revives troubling memories of fancy ladies promenading on the boulevards of Paris.

Hers is a perfect posture and grace unknown before her arrival. Her old clothes mean nothing because it is how she wears them and how she walks in them that mean everything.

May's is the oldest ideal of handsomeness, a robust beauty. Without competition she is the loveliest woman by far in Geneva County, one of the most striking of Alabama. Her classical features are familiar to the mind. Long neck wide as her smoothly-boned cheeks. Chin small and firm. Aquiline nose. Ears flat to the skull. Feline forehead in swept back brow.

Even May's closed-lipped smile comes through time. In those rare moments it appears the smile shows delicately lined lips turning up slightly at each corner. Otherwise her features look strangely numb. Others can't read her looks. She is the image of enigmatic. Her nickname at the Atoka Academy, used only behind her back, was The Sphinx.

When May speaks calmly in French or English the words come tight lipped but articulated. When angry—which is often-- they are arrows whizzing in air.

Her abundance of flaxen hair she piles into a ponderous bun. How she binds it up gives her head an antique fineness in front, stateliness in profile. Her mass of golden hair coils into a crown at the back of her head, archaic, armored with pins.

May remains innocent of what rough men say. That she has big boobs and a damn fine ass. Hers is a sexuality confounding them because such a woman is beyond consciousness.

Inscrutable. May is what the men of Geneva County do not speak of, only intuit, her feminine soul that shames them, ravishes them.

What could be a marble blandness to May, never with a trace of makeup—too self critical for that, and too appalled by attention--breaks up sharply by her eyes. Her eyes are her rarest feature. They are unusually large, pellucid. Violets in ice. Deep ocean eyes. Mystical. More, they have never known a tear. Never wept. Not once.

One young man in Geneva, in love with her, follows her about, covertly to the library and to church. He writes poetry to her that he cleverly slips into her handbag. When found the poems perplex May. She decides they are a joke concocted by one of her older sons, perhaps Maurice though the writing isn't his.

To the young man her eyes are from the other side of the moon. To others they are arrogant in their beauty, and yet again to others they are dangerous. X-ray eyes that see through and then leave folks behind with no concealment, stripped naked.

Beside May's riveting eyes even her significant person pales. Most people in the County, despising her or craving her, still cannot stare Mrs. GB Bell straight in the eye.

Very few men and women take the occasion, the courage, to look and discover this eccentric stranger in their midst. May abides incognito in multiple complexities of flesh and spirit.

She has always been lonely so the concept of it has no meaning for her. When something similar comes to mind May impatiently changes the subject of her thought.

"I know far too many people," she'll think. "Ca suffit. For that matter I'm still waiting for someone to introduce me to myself." Giving with the wry comment her closed-lip smile.

1916

Durant Daily Democrat. March 27

Durant, Indian Territory

SEEKING. Lost girl. Last name SKINNER. Age maybe 16 years. Father's name John Douglass Skinner. Reply: Hubert J. Skinner, 205 Lapine Street, Geneva, Alabama. \$5 FOR WHEREABOUTS OF GIRL DEAD OR ALIVE.

1918

Aunt Tiersey's Tale. Geneva, Alabama

April 1. 6:08 pm. Central Standard Time

The most terrible of wars is ending in Europe. Too many obsolete seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years ago—May and Aunt Tiersey sit close together on a small settee in Tiersey's house in Geneva.

Soft Alabama evening outdoors, parlor windows open wide to embrace the charm of its rose scented breath.

Aunt Tiersey is saying, May, I know you got lots of stories for me. Maybe best you ain't telling me any. What a tale made you. A baby lost in Indian Territory. Then raised up by those French nuns only to get found like in a miracle because of that classified your uncle Hubert kept on placing in newspapers out West.

But have I ever got a story to tell you. Won't take long but it can't wait longer. It's something you must know, about a great sin that befell us.

Aunt Tiersey is trying to be good to May, her kindness awkward and taken for granted like the practiced thank-yous of trained children. Gray hair lumps about an ashen face. Thick glasses wall her off. Edema gives an oversized neck, puffed up arms.

Aunt Tiersey huddles against May in an uninteresting best dress, the one in which she is to eventually disappear. What they will bury her in.

Old woman, young woman, they lock tight into one in the gaslight of Aunt Tiersey's parlor. Yellow of old newspaper enfolds them for this private communion between women of the same blood. Wraith Aunt Tiersey starts telling May of a long ago event.

Aunt Tiersey says: You must know that your grandpa Skinner was a different kind of man. When Alabama seceded from the Yankees he seceded from Alabama. He didn't believe in slavery. Simple as that. Same day news of the Secession come in from Montgomery he took off for Mobile and joined the US Army there before they were run out.

My pa, your grandpa John Skinner, was the most handsome man in these parts. I got a photo of him to give you. See that blonde hair? Not a whisker to hide his face. Ma said he was a vain man and maybe he was. Those are truly good features. Fair skin, blue eyes too in the flesh. Especially look at how firm and broad shouldered your grandpa Skinner was. Guess most of all you see that jaw of his.

Your grandma declared he was a true fool of obstinacy. No idea where this photo was taken. He's in his Union Army jacket.

Take it. Keep it. But never go showing it. Folks here still hold this low. Even with many years gone by. Now you're back among us, a true Skinner come home and betrothed to the grandson of Zachariah Bell. Well, you need to know.

Your grandpa fought all the war through with the Yankees. After surrender he rode home with a gun on his hip still wearing that same Union Army jacket you're looking at.

About a month home come a Sunday morning guess what he done? He rounded up ma and us kids. Hubert, your Uncle Hubert who got you back to us from out West, was 13 years old. I figure I just turned 12. We got made close as pancakes.

Then there was the twins, your pa John, John Douglass Skinner in full, looking like him too, with twin brother Andrew Fredrick who favored ma and who later went lost out West along with him. Both of 'em having their birthdays that very Sunday. Both turning 10 on March 25th.

'It's Annunciation Sunday,' Pa called to us. He told us dress for church then get in the buggy, him laughing and hugging us. Ma kept fidgeting, arguing with him not to go.

Finally he took a coin from his pocket. I still see him grinning at us, his silly grin to make us laugh. He flipped that coin with his thumb. It flew up fast in the air. He caught it, clapped the other hand over it hard and fast to hide it.

Then he says to twin John, call it, son. 'Heads' shouted John all excited to go. Of course, heads it was. And off to church it would be.

'Time to celebrate?' teased pa. "Birthdays you say? What birthdays? We don't have any birthdays today." Then he grabbed a twin under each arm and swung them loopy.

Off we went singing away. He'd even put on his uniform. Can you beat that? In the buggy he held ma close like they were sweethearts, and to calm her fear. I think all of us including himself --no matter all that he'd seen-- were kids out to have fun.

Why Annunciation Sunday? Haven't the faintest. We hadn't been to church since he got back, not even to town. Ma I recall looking at him with questions, later saying how he had never before been a church-going man.

Said she didn't think he knew squat about Annunciation Sunday. No explanation that I know of for how we come singing down that morning, bouncing our bottoms sore, to the Choctawhatchee bridge.

Waiting for us just beyond it hiding to the side in the cypress were those men on horseback with their faces covered in bandanas. Cowardly men, no matter what the cause. We passed the river by a breath when they come charging out giving the rebel yell. You can bet 'The Ants Go Marching' In' got gagged in our throats at that split second.

Ma declared later there were seven men. She screamed and pointed her Bible at them. Pa doffed his Yankee hat, wishing to all a good day.

A man spoke one word, muffled by his bandana. "Traitor." Just that and then they all pointed up their guns. The man who spoke shot pa dead. Then those others fired too.

That's right, your grandpa Skinner ambushed by men he'd known forever. Forget the handkerchiefs on their faces, ma and Hubert knew them well too--all of them our dearest neighbor folks. Still are, and yours as well.

Ma threw herself over pa begging for mercy. We in the back hid our faces behind our hands. I never can get the powder stench out of my head. One of the men unharnessed pa's Chestnut. Then two men pulled pa away from ma.

Another shouted, "Shut up or we'll shoot you all." They drug pa in his uniform through the dirt and heaved him down the bank beside the bridge. We couldn't see just heard a heart stopping splash. I knew they'd flung him into the Choctawhatchee.

They didn't take pa's revolver, just threw it in the mud and spat on it. We saw his blood dripping down their hands. Off They rode with the horse, yelling and whooping.

Once gone your grandma Ruth started shouting 'John, John, John.' She jumped out of the buggy and went tumbling down the riverbank after pa, her Sunday dress snagging in the scrub. She must have been trying to wade after him along the edge of the river. That little woman trying with all her might to get him back.

It was coloreds living nearby --I always say 'colored' in honor of pa who fought for them-- who come running to our aid. Seems about a dozen of them. Must have been peeping on it all. Without a word they went slipping down the bank. We heard them in the river. After a while they brought pa back.

They come slow strugglin' up the bank with his body dripping on their shoulders. Those killer men had stripped pa. First time I'd seen a dead man, naked one too. Since it was pa I didn't hardly look.

Also, first time and last time I ever saw colored men half naked. They'd taken off their shirts. Now-a-days they'd likely get strung up for that. Strange things we keep in mind. Should shame me at the memory I have of them but it don't. Beautiful bodied men they were for sure. I haven't seen such since.

A colored asked ma if they could bury pa right there. It was a warm March day, one said. He'd been in the water too long, another said. Ma told later it wasn't so. The river ran cold. They just knew no white church was gonna put pa in their graveyard. She agreed so they dug him his grave. When done they started slopping that river soil over our pa's empty body, using their hats to pour it down until he disappeared forever.

They put a roped-tied cross they'd made to mark where he'd been laid. If you cross the Choctawhatchee-- I do not if'n I can help it-- you'll see what happened next. In secret colored folks built up a small stone monument to pa. They even put his name on it. 'John Coffee Skinner 1837 - March 25, 1866.' Then below that, 'He Died For Freedom.'

Surely strange to me at 13 years. I didn't imagine any colored could read let alone spell. It was beautiful too what they wrote, wonder where they got that from.

Our white men here took the grave marker down more than a couple of times. Klan tried to put their own cross there but in a hateful way.

Their sign I'm told read 'Jon Skiner Judas. He gona sufer Hell.' They can't spell for spit. Every time that happened, our Geneva County colored folks put their little monument back up. Up and down it goes.

Mind me close, May. Never show GB this photo. Never speak of the murder to anyone. You'll be seeing the grave marker. Just don't see it for real. It's the sin that haunts us. This story is why we Skinners with any brains scattered like dandelion seeds.

Be brave, my dear. We are doomed.

1917
 The Mojo Amulet
 June 12. 8:10 pm
 Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary
 Atoka, Oklahoma

My last morning at the Mission. Black Bob pulls me aside, out of sight of my suspicious and gossiping nuns.

He's taking off the pouch he always wears around his neck.

"It's for you, L'il Pet," he holds it clenched in his black fist so that no one but me can see it.

Wherever I'm going, to whatever Alabama is, I shall never have my names again, 'La Petite' for the nuns, 'L'il Pet' in Bob's own rendition.

I thinks on it, being you leaving. Goin' for freedom. Like me one time. My mam give it to me the night I lit out. It old. Maybe it come from the place we comes from. She give it for what bad it be for the run away slave in 'Bama. I know it for worse then she know. They was gonna whip me dead, that's why I run.

I never told all dis. Now's the time. I done a load of bad shit in my time, but that, that the worse fuckin' bad done to me for sure. The name of that plantation I wont tell ya, it be the devil's. It don't cross my lips.

I run from it hidin' in a scary swamp near that hell fire plantation for days, hounds crying for my balls. Then sneaking down along that wide cocksuckin' river. It goin' faster and faster all night, all day. 'N me on shore goin' no where, just sleeping in the day. Limping down that hateful river in the night.

Wet 'n cold. Nothin' to eat but frogs 'n a rat or two I caught me. Ate 'em raw-- now don' toss your damn biscuits, L'il Pet -- I didn't dare make no smoke. Can't cook with no smoke.

Took me a lot of damn time creeping down that river 'n over to a town they call Peniscola. The U.S.A. Navy got ships there. I hide down in the water near one, listenin' 'n listenin' to the talk of them sailors. One, he talk about us slaves. He talk about someone called John Brown who's about to get lynched somewhere because of us slaves. He talk shit ass mad.

So I waits n' when he come out alone I calls to him soft up from the water. Did it twice, 'n then he gets it. He come over to look down at me hiding in the shadow of that boat. He say 'You must be cold young fella. If I throw you the rope can you crawl up here for me to get you on?'

L'il Pet I all dun in. I don't knows what to do. Trust a demon white man or die. I goes for trustin, maybe it be fear n'hurt in me. I think I be no more den 16 or 17. I clammers 'bout till he got a hand on me n' pulls me up, not so hard for a person to do then. I was one skinny half dead pup too weak to do anything but bawl and shiver.

That how he got me to New Orleans, hiding me on that navy ship. He were a funny duck young fella. An officer some kind. I know the army, not the navy. He took off me clothes, then dried me down like a baby looking me over like I was Moses in the bulrushes. Got me clean duds. Food most all I could eat.

It were a big ship to me, and long as I was on it, only about three days, he call it his unnerground railroad and laugh to beat hell. He hid me wit him in his cabin, he

bein' an officer 'n having his own. That fuckin' damn boatin' time scared me. Never seen no ocean before nor since. Let alone rode her. Don't want to again.

My mam told we come from the ocean, we be sweet fishes that went bad livin' on land. Don't know about that. For Bob that boat couldn't get back on land fast enough.

Twas just afore the war start. Officer called Patrick. Patrick say he come from Boston. Where that be I didn't know. Give me a little money in New Orleans, tell me git away. To Kansas he say. Never heard of it neither.

He done give me a hug too afore I took off. Only time a man hugs me. Kissed me on the lips too. Only white man ever touched me, nice or not, or looked me in the eye. But I feels him be a straight arrow. Well maybe a little bent what with him lookin' at me all the time without my britches and his hand goin' wandering on me at night. No matter, he one of the good uns. Not many.

From there I make it to here in Indian Territory. Danger all the time. Then one thing 'n the other--no need to tell all as most of that I done told you already and what I ain't I don't want to--I got up to Kansas where I at last got free.

I gotta tell you I hate this bad world. Don't think there's anyone in Bama I don't hate. No one in Kansas I don't hate, specially the cock suckin' damn USA army.

White folks? I wish I could kill 'em twice, did kill 'em twice in the War. Only excepting Patrick, and these here nuns, crazy they be.

And you. 'Course you ain't for real white, I raise you better than that. So at least Indian Territory be good to me that way."

"It is Oklahoma now, Bob," Can't help correcting. Damn it. He doesn't notice, he just goes on, old lemon eyes looking off over my head.

"Hey, these nun gals ain't so bad. I don't even hate yonder Sewer brick shithouse. Kinda likes her, to be true. Hey you best not be laughing at her. Maybe ought to think how she take care for you all these years. Don't you look that way, I knows you can't abide her. I just telling you what's so. Plain enough. Here, I hates only one, that shit Sewer Sint X."

Now he's staring at me, full in the face.

I been a no good murderin' robbin' whorin' asshole in my life. So what I wanna say is you the best ever in my long life, Lil Pet. The best of the best.

He stops to clear his throat.

How'd I get through this world of worthless shit ass whites and knife slashing low down niggers? It be mojo, May. This be my mojo.

Bob brings up his old pouch for me to see. He's tilted his head sidewise to take it off. Quickly before I can think to stop him he ties it on me, around my neck, in a bull jerking knot behind my hair. So tight a knot I know then it won't ever come undone. It's on me for life.

Bob said, this is the best I have to give you. It real strong. It got me to freedom in Kansas, then got me free of there. That be power. It got me alive past bein' a Union soldier in the war. That more power than you can guess, L'il Pet.

It be the good mojo. But hush down that word. Never go sayin' it to anyone.

How odd to feel it's on me for the first time down loose on its leather thong. A small leather packet, round, flat. I stand stupidly in the strangeness of this happening. I look down in a awful daze to see it there.

It's there, on me, like a new grown leg or arm. So mystifying a thing. Deep purple like a rotten fig it hangs there between my breasts warm, beating, Bob's heart on a thong.

A rush of panic, too much power. Suddenly I'm clutching for Bob's big reassuring hands.

"Nothing bad must ever happen to you. Take it back." Can that be me childishly stomping a new lace up shoe?

"Take it off me right now, Mr. Black Bob. I won't take it away from you. Fuckin' hell."

Bob said. Silly child you got no choice. And watch your talks Missy. Where'd you learn such bad ass lingo? I think he just winked at me.

If you stomp your foot again I'll flatten your butt. Someone oughta done it before.

Got me a good knife n' gun. Anyhow I'm too old for protectin'. How old? Don't you try guessing.

I am giving you this power thing, L'il Pet. You gotta wear it, I say, you never never gonna go without it. Hide it. Tuck it down under your clothes. You hear me girl. Bama be bad. You need protectin' from Bama.

Obeying him for so many years I must give in, hang my head in distress and quickly hide his gift beneath my blouse so the nuns cannot see this new secret. The bag feels utterly weightless, warm from Bob's body, somehow alive against my bare skin.

Wake up time comes in the coarse French of Soeur Blanche, Bob's 'sewer brick shithouse.' "Wagon is almost ready, La Petite. You must not miss the train."

The nuns, damn it to hell, I now must face them in this rending goodbye. Oh fuckin damn leaving, I'm going crazy. I feel it coming. Can I really do this?

Prairie dust blowing up around us. Huge sky above without a cloud. Bob hoists me up off the ground. How strange to feel again the childhood times of dangling feet from his encompassing strength when he lifted me into the swing he'd made for me in the Mission garden.

Now his farewell hug so rough it takes away my breath. I feel his breathing and see his smiling lips close bigger than all of me. They kiss me on the cheek.

Best get over there to Sis Efie. Looks to me like she gonna hit ground in about a minute. Whoa, there go Sis Claire fallin' onto her knees praying. Maybe that Sint X

goose her from behind? Better go hug em quick. They're crying themselves blind, deaf and dumb.

I stretch up and throw my arms around his shoulders. Now I also feel his years for the first time. My Bob has turned old. One kiss on his cheek. One whisper in his ear, "I love you Daddy Bob."

A mistake because what I willed not to happen did, a couple of tears from his big amber eyes rolled down into the cracked earth furrows and caverns of his face. Unbearable to see. Then came his parting,

Hopes with all my heart you makes it to your freedom. You wear the mojo. All the time.

My last few minutes at the Mission of The Holy Sainte Mary? The familiar habited shapes of my nuns stand stark against the Oklahoma landscape. So out of place. Crazy lost in that time and space. Soeur Claire bubbles incoherently in a sopping mess of mucus. Soeur St. Ephraim weeps silently, devastation shrouding her face. I embrace them both. Accepting the farewell painfully as parting forever.

I kiss the nuns, seven of them, merely nodding to Saint Axe and Soeur Blanche.

Soeur Blanche bosses the job of heaving my trunk and carpet bag into the wagon. Her authority blunter and rougher than ever. She keeps turning ponderously to give me piercing looks that I know too well. Always following me with smoldering eyes, look of a grand Inquisitor, watching for wrong or for what I never fathom.

Soeur Monique St. Aix, Sint X to Bob, then steps forward that leave-taking time to grab my arm and turn me towards her. Taller than Black Bob, I need to tilt my head back to confront that dead fish face, summoning up my ice and numbness to combat it.

"May Skinner, you have never cried. Jamais." Her flawless French puffs dust at me like a clapped shut tome of Boileu.

"Not once since you came to us have I seen you in tears. Either you are lucky, May, or damned. I know what the others can't guess, that you have no religion. You live in a scandalous freedom of mind. In another time we would have burned you."

Bitch.

1928

Lady Of Time

March 25. 9:50 am

Plantation Sainte Elisabeth

May considers herself. Not her reflection, rather her graven image cast in time. She is there in the framed wedding photo hung against pine boarding near the kitchen doorway. She finds reassurance in the photo.

Neither in the couple has aged now to the point of shock. Slant eyed, high-cheek-boned GB stands pine board thin and somewhat more than 6 feet in street shoes. He shades her at 5 ft 8 inches.

She eyes the camera uneasily. He has his mean face on, about to murder the cameraman. Basically she agrees, they look the same today.

Coming in a month their tenth anniversary. May remains indifferent, no anniversary being closer to her secret self. Already she's lived different lives including this one ongoing in treacherous Sainte Elisabeth. If her time moves along it means to her no more than the immutable phases of the moon.

Today, in honor of Cousin Chinless' first Sunday dinner, May wears her best, the same wedding dress as in the photo that through the years has been let out an inch at a time after each of her three babies came. The heavy black skirt covers her down to the tips of her old but well shined black boots.

The daffodil-yellow silk blouse gathering at wrists also frames her finely cut jaw in a high collar. The yellow has kept well carefully hidden from time. Back then it and her hair glimmered almost the same color as in this day's morning light.

Her true concern for the couple in the photo comes from her dread that in aging love will fade to friendship. GB arranged their wedding for May Day, on purpose he admits. Then he couldn't forget it since it was her name month and the very day for flowers and dancing.

To again escape from herself May glances from habit for the missing GB. No man appears there, only a still life of the plantation. Why had fortune brought her to this deep-inked forest and endless swamp where months of mildness blast away into the tormented skies of hurricane seasons? She feels more alone than she can say.

Further around her, Geneva County's landscape is dotted with hazy poor farms, by abandoned small houses disintegrating back into the earth. Those people she guesses running in fright before they too turn to rot. People fleeing north, forsaking this culture of strict rules. Its folk confined in castes by skin color and money. Old hatreds edging in on the extravaganza of nature.

1928

May Is May

Sainte Elisabeth

March 25. 9:53 am

"Listen to me GB Bell, we go in even a minute late they'll turn and stare. Turning and staring Christians. They'll gawk at me over their hymnals with scornful pig eyes. You know I can't bear that.

"Not enough to have fuckin' church and Cousin Chinless for dinner. No, they must also give me grandfather Skinner's death day and father Skinner's birthday, that worthless shit.

May starts in alarm at her own whisper. She's talking to the photo on the wall. Secrets had come out of her unbidden as farts. Today it all comes round again.

Inexplicably to her boys listening in the front room there comes another explosion of temper from their mother.

“I'm living in a fuckin' myth! Or am I a myth? Both.” This from May's lips in Black Bob's English. “Get in here GB or I'll skin you alive.”

“What's got into maman?” The older ones mouth to one another, worried by her agitation, to which in fact they are accustomed although it seems to erupt more frequently today. The younger ones return to their play unperturbed.

In the front room her sons snicker knowing full well no one can skin papa.

A scuffling reaches her. The aggressions of boys alarms May. She fears any violence, most of all her own. May shouts a rebuke.

“Careful or I shall descend upon you with contagion and sable wings.”

When she yells the shanty could be splintering in a hurricane. This flimsy home confounds her with dismay. A too-small living place squeezing breath from their bodies.

A shiver rips down her. Today for her there can be nothing but wrong and wrongs. May sees no alternative. And alongside that a fury she can't name, at what she can't see. Her worst secrets inch closer.

To be free of such thinking May returns to the landscape in her kitchen window. Instead of GB the Sainte Elisabeth swamp confronts her with its black magic.

“God damn it to hell, not more.”

1928

Swamp Of Ages

March 25. 9:58 am

Sainte Elisabeth

Ultimately it is the swamp that never ceases to surprise May. A cloying dark clutter. It is antithetical to the empty prairie on which she'd been raised. The Sainte Elisabeth swamp spreads repellent and tempting, corruption shading off into an abrupt dead zone across this sunny earth's baroque festival.

“Don't go in alone. I'll give you a tour by skiff.” GB told her when they arrived. But he claimed he never had time for that. Alternatively, she read about the swamps. Pestilential air mud thick, stagnant water murdering trees. Mosquitoes in plagues upon Egypt and flies driving creatures screaming mad.

Don't get lost in the murk and swamp gas . . . Don't fall into hidden sink holes. Never get bitten by snakes or spiders. Watch for the gators, the panthers. Never step in sand. Quick Sand is everywhere.

From experience May accepts the double face of everything. Accepts the way things are without fear. In the swamp too she learned grew magnificent plants, vines and flowers amid mysterious scenes. Unique species lived in its decay and nowhere else.

She's even seen where the swamp orchid twines. "Darwin, you might have sailed the Beagle up the Choctawhatchee simply studying Sainte Elisabeth," she muses. "It's rare enough."

At times May hears what she terms her voodoo drums. Drumming from the swamp envelopes the workers quarters and reaches upwards towards her. This she adamantly believes in. GB laughs at her.

No matter, she listens and understands. The drums beat out a tongue of dancing and song. It's a bizarre language to May, one she likes and fears. To her a visceral communion --flesh and pounding blood of life.

Sometimes too she calmly hears the dead amid the Spanish moss. Rustling of rags, low clatter of bones. A snatch of their conversation comes incomprehensible from beneath the Bougainvillea. Low singing. Their anthem. She can't translate it. Perhaps when she's had too much rum she's even witnessed a decayed arm beckoning for her to come. Yes, that she finds dubious.

She knows better than to say anything about that to GB.

"Silence down there," May commands the view. All falls still. May knows to doubt herself. How much is real and what fancy? Not clear. Maybe she even imagines herself?

Black Bob is for real. Oklahoma and Alabama, very real indeed. She comes to understand Sainte Elisabeth to be a melancholic reality laden with nightmare and the flower scent of semen. Just like sliced Okra.

Above all her family is the greatest reality of all.

For May Sainte Elisabeth lies under such twin spells, multitudinous, twinned opposites. Like the same that cleave her in twain. In particular for her swamp fetidness gives off a blatant aroma of mortality.

Down there sometimes she's seeing torch lights on swinging black bodies roped to tree limbs. Looking from the shanty far into the swamp's occasional dim clearings she's seeing countless cypresses and their naked bone-colored roots Old postcards of dead white men, their pants pulled down to their ankles.

1928

Nun's Songs

Shanty On The Rise

March 25. 9:59 am

May's French nuns raise up in a chorus to rebuke her. They to constrict her. Those invisible monitors and devourers of her self.

Soeur Claire: "*May is a wonderful name. You are the child of spring. It was your name when you came to us, our flower of May, our Lilly of the Valley. Also the 'Tears of Our Lady.'*"

Delivered in her favorite pose, hands joined hidden in the folds of her habit, acne scarred lobster-red face uplifted, mouth slightly open, seeing something unearthly in the thick lens of her eyeglasses.

Soeur St. Ephraim: *“You reached up plump arms to me without fear, no hesitation at my ugliness. You baptized me again with the love of our Lady. How lovely you are. Please, for me, try to remain so inside.”*

This in her usual way, holding May’s hand by two fingers and staring humbly down at her bunions-deformed black shoes. Speaking to May in memory from a Victor recording in her head the strongly accented French of the Midi. Her mother tongue despite the successes of St. Aix in converting her into a Parisian. St. Ephraim who May thinks of most often, missing her flat face, flat head, the pasty skin all shining true like an Edison bulb in memory.

Soeur St. Aix: *Never open your mouth to smile or laugh, my daughter. Your teeth are rotten, most unpleasant. I declared your birthday to be April Fool’s Day. That was the day you arrived. Whatever your real birthday it is of no matter. You were born old so do not slump, my daughter, for then you are a peasant. You must avoid the future tense. Your face temps fate and thus it sounds naïve.*

Tall, elegant. St. Aix in her immaculate habit, a coronation robe. Long Goyaesque face, gaunt nose descending in thin bone. St. Aix ever in quiet discretion, always with her rosary of rubies. The gem embedded crucifix dangling from her right hand like a prop. Voicing elegant phrases at May like bayonet thrusts, but always in beyond-reproach French.

Soeur Blanche: *Never be empty handed La Petite, never never never . . . Be on guard, May. Men will be the ruin of you. Take care, beware, be sensible.*

No smile from her jailer. Soeur Blanche as forbidding as the black she wore, petrified muffin face, body a boulder blocking the way looming in fighting stance, and with something always in her hand.

My, always correcting the world, feels incapable of correcting herself. For her sons May strives determinedly to hold up the mantle of manners, learning and tolerance. To make them good Humanists.

“Except Humanists are about as tolerant as frogs.” She remarks aloud with a smile.

The nuns had tolerated Choctaws and Black Bob, just not protestants, the Anglo Saxons or each other. “I think they tolerated me,” considers May. “At least some did.”

Her nuns, the boys knew nothing about them. Yet another secret, another of her mysteries.

1928

The Adored Boys
March 25. 9:59 am

May comes quietly into the front room of the shanty. The room is full of boys. Perfect posture, head up, hands folded demurely in front, May Skinner Bell brings in her commanding yet guarding presence. Her long skirt gives her motion the illusion of floating. To those of the larger world this would be a genteel young lady in perfect rendering.

“When Cousin Louis is here today for dinner . . . Ca suffit.” Joseph Henry and Maurice push about playing the ageless game of grab balls.

“Stop that and listen to me. While he is present in this house, I say, there is to be no reference to 'Chinless Louis.’ Mind me close. ‘Cousin Louis’ it is and shall be.

“If I see one of you making fun of him then you shall be severely punished. By your father.” May notes wryly that her threat is worthless, neither she nor GB have ever struck the boys.

Turning without awareness for it, in her majestic manner, the way of 'les petites filles modeles,' May moves forward to confront these six sons. Seeing what they are up to, yet not seeing in her own way. One simple stare stifles them in place like stuffed toys.

Today, her wedding dress, the precious cans of tuna by the sink, these are what she can offer up for this Sunday dinner, her true first 'high mass' of family duty. Drifting forward into the room, May suddenly considers falling down frothing. She could thus escape church and the dinner. Unhappily she knows there is not enough space left in the room for her to do this.

A frown from May comes rare, almost unknown as a full smile. With no more than a sigh, she turns blandly to the dreaded weekly business of church. What a worthless exercise, a thought she keeps secret. Now she must inspect the boys with her Sunday-eye. They are her masterworks. As ordered they are dressed in their best hand-me downs. Except for the oldest, Buddy, who has none. He is in his work clothes, cleaned, and the new shirt May has managed to buy him, for what event she refuses to recall.

Baby James Lamar is put up first briefly for her approval and passes although she knows that won't last another minute. He struggles to get out of Buddy's arms. Flirts with May for his freedom, another pretty rascal from GB's loins. The others need more scrutiny. They stand at close quarters. The strong daylight deifies her men.

“Now show me your hands, front and center.” The five older boys in the room roust about obediently putting out their hands, nails up, for May to inspect. These boys before her are fast in her heart, how deeply they intuit. Yet no sentiment shows in her manner of motherhood, just her half smile for them. And a laugh so rare that they collect them.

No tears for her sons, none. Her eyes, these glances, and the warmth of her touching, her constant bold presence and teaching --her bunker motherhood fiercely

envelops each one of them. They have a trench line mother on the front line for them.

“Good enough. Except, Joseph Henry I know you helped papa chop cane yesterday but you still have cane tar on your hands. Try again to get it off.” No pining over imperfection. No self-pity for what would be missing or shabby.

She thinks, “What good could that do in this wide world.” Except lose her more time. Time like money she needs and can't find.

“Yes, maman,” says Joseph Henry. Each boy speaks like GB in the pleasant to her drawl of far southern Alabama. “I can try but my hands is all scratched up and that lye soap hurts like . . .bad.” Joseph Henry, 16, so resembles GB that sometimes she catches herself feeling in love with him too. They both have the same exotic cheekbones, slit eyes and soft auburn hair.

“My hands *‘are’* all scratched up and one does not say *‘like bad.’* You might comb your hair again, son.” Correcting, correcting. And nothing ever correct. “Did you really brush your teeth?” She adds, gently.

Towering Joseph Henry half a foot taller than May pushes his way around the others cramped together in the room. It is already stuffed with Aunt Missouri’s round oak table rolled in this morning from the kitchen in advance of Sunday dinner. And Mo’s ornamental chairs.

The boy disappears back into the kitchen, the only place for cleaning up in the house at the pump beside the sink. His boy-man weight now enough to ripple the shanty floor, pine boards over the open crawl space below.

At the same time the oldest, Buddy, moves toward the porch door, a rehearsal of leaving that panics her. “I got to get Dandy ready. Am I OK May?”

“I am going to get Dandy ready.” May has corrected them so often that she guesses their errors might be on purpose to tease her.

Buddy at 18 goes off in eight days--she holds a countdown for the coming pain of his absence-- joining the US Army in Dothan. He is the oldest of GB’s son's from his first marriage, but the oldest to her of her own children.

Buddy calls her 'May,' never mama and certainly not the French ‘maman.’ A small matter with her as he turned out as straight and correct as his father, although not quite as smart. She thinks he must have more features from his mother than Bell, with blond hair, blue eyes and a broad fine face with delicate small lips. May supposes, with a pang of jealousy, that he reminds GB of cousin Rhoda.

“You look fine, dear. Try to keep your shirt clean. And tuck it in, please.”

His actual name she likes very much, Clarence John. When she married GB he was 8 years old. Hard for her to believe how they grow like crops. Made her think of harvesting, the fields reduced to lifeless stubble. She put that thought away.

Today, temper tantrums, Black Bob’s profane tongue, whatever is not in the canon of perfect decorum taught to her by the nuns must be *interdit*, forbidden.

If only it were possible, just for today, pleads May. Today is extraordinary for more than one reason. She sincerely commands herself to behave. Despairing in the knowledge she'll fail. Temper above all threatens her. It shows to herself something is wrong with her.

"Let them think I'm mad." A pugnacious thought. "I am mad because I think. I think therefore I am mad?" Always her interior voice in command. Stilling her outside self into its antic repose.

"They made me up like one of Soeur Marthe's croustade aux pommes, sliced into enough pieces for all. Plus an extra sliver of the unknown for me, La Petite."

Guilt and memories piling up around her, smothering her like unpaid bills. These compound her abiding sense of loss at Buddy's going. She knows he decided to leave in part so that there will be one less in a household without money, with barely enough food.

First time GB introduced her to him he solemnly offered his hand to shake and said, "Call me 'Buddy.'" Later GB in a fit of laughter said he'd not heard that one before. The boy evidently made up a new name for a new mother.

"Oui Madame." He gives her his charming grin, a mock salute, and then turns on his heels with a laugh. May wonders about the girls in Geneva, surely they are after this specimen. Another of her fears.

Whenever one of the family goes out the slattern screen door bangs. At least they have these blessed screens. Here she considers them the minimum of civilization to cling to. But the bang of the flimsy door is an alarm in her head. Leaving. They will all leave her.

Next in line Maurice Davies, 13, the baby that doomed the unknown cousin Rhoda. "You are looking very handsome, Maurice. However, in trying to pull your older brother's testicles you seem to have scuffed your shoes. I did stay up shining them last night. I expect them to look the way I finished them when we walk into church."

Behind him the three frolicking boys GB made in her demand particular concentration-- Hubert Andrew, age 9, Samuel Mancil, just turned 7 and James Lamar. James Lamar, to her constant shock, became a three-year-old golden haired toddler on his next birthday, no longer her Jimmy Lamb although she still calls him that.

Annunciation Sunday. Another of May's reveries. An ancient myth that thrills her. She checked the days on the calendar to be sure. She ponders if she alone in the entirety of southeast Alabama knows March 25 and what it means. The loveliest of earth's virgins being told that she is to save mankind by playing another Leda to another Elysian Swan.

"Full of Grace . . ." Such scraps fill May's head. In passing she considers how big a swan's penis could be.

As usual on this day she tries pushing back into her swamp of secrets the event that probably started her own inchoate story, her damnable self. “Grand pere, you brave and arrogant soul. Today I ought to light a candle for you, Sorry, I don’t light candles anymore.

“And papa Skinner, uncle Andrew—where are you today? Have you lit candles to blow them out on your shared birthday or are yours already out and smoking?”

She found some entertainment in the play of images. Anything to lighten the anxiety of a March 25th overloaded with significance. Coincidence makes her seethe. It makes the improbable probable and that is simply unjust. Who’d bet on her?

“Listen to me,” She orders the boys. “You recall what I told you about the Annunciation, don't you? Remember my story about the Angel Gabriel? You need to know these things even if you don't believe in them.

“Today I expect you to be especially well behaved in church, not so much for The Annunciation. This Sunday is also important for many reasons, Cousin Louis in particular. In any event you know those people are always watching us. They spy on our errors.”

And to herself adds, ‘the yokels here won't know shit about The Annunciation. Why am I doing this? It’s all Voodoo.’

To the room she asks “Now what do we do in church?”

“Pray and sing, sing and pray, pray and sing,” Singsongs Joseph Henry from the kitchen in his new baritone voice.

“And play with the bulletin” interjects Maurice with an edge of his sarcasm. He is the most difficult of the boys, yet melts into sorrowful tears at any sharp word.

“Just don't play with yourself.” Roars back Joseph Henry, braver out of sight. Breaking the hilarity about her, May continues. “Of course, Mr. Joseph Henry Bell. You win today's prize for vulgarity.”

“First we get real clean,” pipes in Hubert. “We use baking soda on our teeth, clean our necks real good, wash our ears inside and behind.”

“Try not to use the word real too often, dear.” Him she corrects only under duress. Her wonderful little thick head, sweet but not her brightest. She watches him with admiration as he plods stubbornly along. He would do fine, she knew. Strong spirit made up for wit.

“Also, we clean our hands *well*.” Damn, she can’t stop herself.

When she provoked him GB said she was a pain in the ass. Fair enough, she was. But normally GB accepted her profanity, drifty absences, her fits of rage, the boys too, without remark. This gave her a tightening in the chest. Love crushing her in its coils.

“We wash our behinds *well* too,” burbles Maurice through his silliness. Now all the boys are carried away in merriment. Boys, thinks May, how brief a time they have to be inane. What transgression had she committed to end up in this crazy hovel full of males.

“You're amusing, Maurice, for such an immature boy.” May knew how to cut them back when need be, like her roses. His name she pronounces emphatically the French way, as it should be, while the people around them pronounce it “Morris.”

“We wear Sundies,” intones Mancil. For him alone only the middle name is ever used. Never would she say Samuel.

“And tight undies *well*.” She needn't bother looking. She knew who added that in a high voice.

Suddenly May is swallowing foreboding. Fear of the coming day menaces her like a whiff of pine tar.

1925

The Last Packard
April 1. Geneva County

Horace suddenly delivered the warning while driving me back to St. Elisabeth, from my last wrenching visit with Aunt Missouri.

Mo had always had Horace for a servant, who she fondly called her antebellum negro, when he wasn't around. Among other duties he drove her new Packard, in livery no less. “Just keepin' things up,” the old woman would explain.

I rode in the back the lone passenger in the luxury of that overtly grand car.

The warning started when I caught Horace peering at me in the rear view mirror, his shiny black face oddly smooth for a man in his 80s. It was a youthfulness enhanced by the chauffeur's cap hiding his bald head. He looked at me in the mirror with what I took for embarrassment. I looked back in what I knew was genuine embarrassment. I had always found this dress up party oddly immoral.

Horace said: You best get ready, Miz Bell. We'll soon be losing Madame Mo.

I started at this announcement. For weeks I'd been refusing to see what probably seemed plain enough to others. Being driven away from her I felt it coming true. I saw Horace visibly fretful. It blighted a fair spring afternoon.

He kept me in his sites, darting glances forward to keep us on the road.

You like your place, Miz Bell?

Changing the subject Horace gave me a sad smile in the mirror. At the time we'd been on Sainte Elisabeth for no more than a month. Horace reminded me sometimes of Bob, except having been raised a house servant his English was white.

“It isn't what we had, but many people have less. The plantation is beautiful. That makes rough times for us better. Tell me, Horace, did you see Sainte Elisabeth before the War?”

It had taken me a while to simply say 'War' here, emphasis on the W, not meaning the Great War, referring instead to the Civil War.

Yes ma'am, sure did. First time no more then a little fella but Papa Zach had me dress up like a coach boy. When the children were older they went to parties there. I went too to kinda spruce things up.

He chuckled at the memory, then went serious.

Anyone told you anything about Sainte Elisabeth, Miz Bell? No? Not surprising. Well then I got orders to do so from Madame Mo. The family here was called the Malgrace, de Malgrace to be exact. The Malgraces were grand indeed. That house was pure glory on show, biggest house I ever seen.

Then the plantation was a whole lot bigger then now. I heard they keep more 'n 250 slaves on it. Long before I was born Sainte Elisabeth must a' been the biggest oldest place around Geneva. River plantation, you know. French folks built it up.

When he was young old Malgrace got it. He bought more and more land for it. Then needed more and more slaves to work it. He got 'em on the cheap from down in Haiti. That's where the Malgrace folks come from. How I hear it Malgrace be one smart man, Haiti be one mean place.

He got a problem, though. You see, those slaves he bought mostly born free in Haiti. That because of an uprisin'. Got put down and slaves that lived through it got put into chains. They cheap because they still acting free.

Another problem is old Monsieur Malgrace was a serious bad man. He take any slave woman he wants. He take children from their mamas, husbands from their wives. He torture who he wants in the worst ways folks know how. More than that, he was a killer. He put men, women and children in cages, let 'em starve to death. He done too many murders to count over the years. People think he the devil, Miz Bell. What I know, he was.

He was so bad the Geneva Justice of the Peace got on him. That never ever happen around here to a slave owner. Yes ma'am, he even got trouble from the white folks, he was that mean to our people. Not that the white folks cared much about us, mainly they was skittery at the thought of an uprising up here.

He spoke the lingo with these slaves. All of 'em spoke it.

"French you mean?" For sure the story had my attention, in whatever language. My new home had its own folklore.

Yes ma'am. But never mind that, from go the biggest problem on your place I hear is that those slaves also brought in the voodoo with them. We had the old religion but it sure weren't strong like what they brought here.

You know Miz Bell there be hoodoo and then there be voodoo. We got hoodoo. They got voodoo. Guess it's kinda like Protestants and Catholics, or something, don't know. No matter, the old ways hang on. Yes ma'am, they do hang.

Silence then from up front. Horace stared intently at the sleek hood ornament slicing through the Wiregrass. 'Spirit of Speed' Missouri would explain. "I just worship speeeeed."

Silence as we drove on in shiny metal, chrome and leather. Mo's other antebellum negro, Old Francis, dead the only person as far as I knew in his life was Mo. I guessed he had children. He mentioned none.

“Horace, stop staring at the blasted road.” I reach up to give him a friendly poke. “I want to hear the story.”

He said: Just doing the old man thing, going off in my own thoughts. Better ‘n goin’ off this ‘blasted’ road of yours. Wouldn’t you agree?” He gave me his most charming smile—yes he had children, no doubt. Aunt Missouri often remarked in admiration on what a disreputable man he was.

It ain’t a nice story, Miz Bell. The Malgrace, no way they’d allow voodoo. Hear those were terrible terrible times then at your place.

Those slaves were hell bent to get free of Monsieur de Malgrace’s chains which folks said ran blood like water. Slaves were always getting loose. They hid in the swamp. He’d find them. Swamp here full of bones because Malgrace threw those he killed into it. The sick and dying too. Back then black people called it Hell Swamp.

Our Folks at your place still say their spirits come up from the swamp at night. The dead traipsing around with their arms out straight and live coals for eyes. But never mind that. Haiti must be one crazy place.

During the War aside from old Monsieur and Madame de Malgrace, living there was two sons and their wives and their nine children, three daughters and their 8 children, three or four aunts and uncles, cousins and so forth. Whole tribe. They was a family too of their acquaintances from Mobile there to wait out the War.

All told I hear there be 30 and more de Malgraces and friends on Sainte Elisabeth. Plus those servants that couldn’t run off, 20 more of ‘em at least. House so big it weren’t even a crowd.

Anyways, news finally come to Geneva by telegraph that on Easter Sunday April 15, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln been murdered. That day was first May. The news went round fast. It was sad for us while others I won’t mention had parties. Malgraces lit the big house all bright with candles. All of em dressed up too in their best.

But soon people nearby started hearing drums from Sainte Elisabeth. Then there was gunfire. One big cloud of smoke began rising up off the plantation. For miles around they could see it. Rumor went round, even over to Slocomb. Neither white or negro folk would go see what’s what till that smoke cleared off. They were that scared.

As for us, Papa Zack and young Rob was still fightin’. No armed white man on the place.

When the new big Bell house burned everyone run off. A few of us hid in the emptiness of the old Bell Place. Where you and GB first came to live. It didn’t get torched because Mama Zach sat on its front porch guarding her door with a shotgun. Miz Mo, me and Old Francis, who wasn’t old I can tell you, sat with her all that terrible night.”

Again he sends me a beguiling grin via the mirror.

Anyway, Miz Mo wants you know what folks found when they at last come up to see Sainte Elisabeth. The big house was gone, down to the ground. Everything taken. Whatever left was lying about down into the fields, off into the swamp. Party clothes, broken furniture, pictures and such.

The worst sight seen any where near here ever was the Malgraces themselves. Their men, women, children, and the house slaves too--all got chopped up by machetes, ripped open and their stuffin' pulled out. Pieces of them left like dog food on the front lawn. People finding 'em got the heaves. The trail of their bits went deep into Hell Swamp.

Their big iron gates was gone. Nobody to this day knows where. Old Monsieur de Malgrace got hung in place of them. They hung him from that gate sign you still see when you drive in. Ain't gonna tell you more about what they did to him.

One Malgrace child, a son, lived. Him was still not home from being a Reb soldier. He got the land. One of his grand children lives in Mobile. I hear she own it now. That de Malgrace son he built the library in Geneva, to honor all the dead. Only good thing to come from those folks. They got the lingo books there too."

"French, you mean." About a mile of silence. I knew Horace well enough by then to be certain he wasn't telling me all. He set the sun visor down and changed the angle of the mirror so I couldn't see him. Local body talk for 'no more telling.'

Arriving at the empty gate pillars to the plantation, which would never again be the same to me, Horace slowed down. Nausea swept over me with the very place coming into view. An image in my head of a hideous old boy, stripped, so sickeningly white, dangling high from the Sainte Elisabeth sign. Covered in flies with the tip of his penis poking from between his lips.

Tension showed in Horace, his chauffeur's jacket pulling tight across his shoulders.

OK, Miz Bell ma'am, there's more. Today Madame Mo say to tell you this otherwise she know nobody around will. She worried for you out here.

The nigras on your place now? All of 'em is coming from Haiti. Mo specially want you to know they come from those slaves who killed the de Malgrace folks and burned the big house down.

But rest easy, I know some of these people and they ain't bad. No ma'am, don't be afraid of them. They won't do nothing wrong, just different from us. Keep to themselves here.

The big car rolled down between the processional of Oaks. Stopped in front of our dreary shanty. Horace opened the door for me, hat off. The car grand and sleek making the house look even smaller and more dilapidated.

GB was astonished when she got that last one, "How in hell did Big Muddy work the bank for that? She's in debt up to her fake eyebrows." Men. Thought May. Mo could still charm a bear into dancing if she wanted to.

I stumbled. Horace caught my arm and guided me up the steps. At the door I spoke again.

“You must hate us, Horace.”

For the first time the old man looked shocked. Then he studied his shoes. “Miz Bell, no offence, you’re a well meaning foreign lady. Never met a white lady like you. So I say yes, I can tell you we have a lot of hate in us. But not for all of you. Some of you we even love.” Then he flashed me his mischievous smile, a silver tooth up front shining like a star.

Her home sagged invisible to Horace, still too careful, May knew, to show pity for whites.

You alright Miz Bell? Remember, no cause to worry. “Madame Mo herself say to tell you that. She say no reason to rile up Miz Bell. Even if Sainte Elisabeth do got the spirits--and the voodoo on it.”

1928

Maman The Beloved

10:04 am. March 25. Sainte Elisabeth

Her pensive regard of the boys is a sign. Maman returns to them from wherever it is she becomes lost in. Gangling about the small room the boys immediately pause in place knowing from experience that for the time being they again have their mother back.

James Lamar catches her attention. Her toddler is wiggling about between Maurice's feet getting floor dust on himself. Dust there no matter how many times she sweeps --and shitting in his shorts at the once, she can tell by that wiggling. She's learned more about the human male in the past 10 years than she ever guessed possible.

Every Sunday the same anxiety bites May, this dread of being late and looked at. The man does it on purpose, she’s convinced. Not vindictive, he means only to teach her. How dare he, he knows nothing. It amazes her chronically how chance drew them together half a continent apart.

For this extraordinary day other than the band of gold on her wedding finger, May’s one ornament is the watch Aunt Missouri left her. A made in France porcelain watch face framed in a fine filigree of gold, shaped like a cameo. Clasped in a gold chain around her throat the watch hangs down between her breasts. To see the time May must tuck her chin to see the hour upside down.

Her one piece of grandeur, it tick-ticks loudly close to her heartbeat. Ticks like a bomb. Ticks along with Black Bob's hidden mojo bag.

“We are clicking clock works,” May asserts to herself, the person she dreads the most. “Winding down heart beat by heart beat.”

“Hubert. If I see that finger in your nose again I'll borrow it to feed the pig, mind me.”

“Joseph Henry, how many times must I tell you, do not touch your privates in public. It is the crudest of men who touch themselves for others to see. Leave it be until you are in private.” Directly May realizes she left an opening for Maurice.

“Don't touch your privates until you're a private in private.” He crows, saluting his brother. This sets the room in commotion again.

Ignoring him, May proceeds. “Mancil. Keep that pretty mouth of yours closed unless you are speaking or eating. You'll be swallowing flies. An open mouth makes a person look as stupid as a mule.”

“Dandy is not stupid.” Remonstrates Mancil through closed lips.

Her high school degree from the Atoka Academy is one prize in her known past. That and her French, her accented English and motioning hands. Her immobile face. Her dignity. These few facts summed up May, what those around could recite, including poor GB. A pinch of guilt in that, she admits-- a woman in hiding even from her husband.

The academy degree keeps her head held to its statuesque best whenever she goes to Geneva, her proud husband's back the same-- pride goeth before a fall? But they are already fallen, banished to the lush sin of Sainte Elisabeth. Could there be much further for them to fall? That worry besets her especially when she observes GB sitting defiantly while they parade their poverty through town.

Her boys are howling in laughter behind her. Let them be, she pities them for what comes next, the hour of punishing religious silence and stillness, obedience to what they know nothing about.

Under stress this morning May uses 'Bobish' as she calls it in her head. A vocabulary of arresting vulgarity stuffed in with the far more acceptable Catholic French and Protestant English. 'Bob' words seep forth from her like earth steam presaging lava to come.

One evening a day after a particularly articulate argument with GB he suddenly started laughing at the dinner table. “My strange May. Did you live with a sailor or a whore before me?”

“Doesn't that make you proud Bob?” One of May's attributes, talk to the dead or absent. Allow them to close ranks about her here in this alien cotton. She finishes the remembrance. “You told me you sailed on water once. I wish you told me more about it. Is that the same as flying with Lindberg? Like flying to France?”

Only on the day before their marriage did GB at last tell her his full name. “You'll see it on the license so no way to hide it longer. My first name is Green. See. . . you're laughing. It gets even worse: I'm Green Berry Bell. I didn't want to carry that around even if grandpa said it was honoring some Indian fighter named Greenberry. I hated it. When I was young and ever since I've insisted on GB. Had to spill some blood to make it stick.”

May could see the anger in him. First time she'd seen it.

“Don't ever call that, young lady. Never, ever.”

She'd promised him with a kiss.

Curious, May once looked it up in the Geneva Library. It had indeed been a popular name among the early Scottish settlers of the Appalachians carried with them down to pioneer Alabama. There certainly was a Colonel Greenberry of long gone fame.

Bang. A pecan shell pounds the zinc roof above her. When the pecan shells drop on the tin like this they are shots fired at the family from heaven. Nigh to a thousand pecan bombs since coming here, never mind, May flinches at each. They draw her back with a weak smile to her academy days reading of John Donne – Ask not for whom the pecan shell falls . . .

“Ahhhh, it got me,” shrieks Maurice in an adolescent scale.

“Enough of this. I want you boys to go look for papa. Check the cane brake, but watch close for rattlers there out now.”

Not even her usual Sunday morning tirade can chastise her dauntless sons. The thought stabs her, love knife to the heart. May braces herself to keep from rushing for them to gather all six safely to her breasts. Her man GB too if he would relent and be on time this important morning. Or for that matter ever allow her to show him a flicker of her love in public.

“There’s Papa, waving for us. And he means it.” shouts Joseph Henry.

“10:09! Let him mean it, damnation. When did you see your father out there? son, you ought to have said so. I've been concerned. Damnation, he’s already hitching Dandy?” A spoiled little girl in a pout staring in disbelief at her watch.

For emphasis she permits herself the release of one stomp from her heavy boot to send an earthquake through the floor boards.

“Concerned? Come on maman, you smashed the wall with your frying pan four times. Said 'damnation' about a hundred times.” Maurice lipping off. “You even called papa a turd.”

“Tais-toi. Be polite in what you say, son. All right then, run, vite -- do not wallow like cape buffaloes – look again at yourselves in papa's shaving mirror, don't push, take turns. And all of you, never ever speak as I do sometimes at home in temper. Jamais. Maman is not perfect but she expects all of you to be so. Comprends-moi?”

But they do think her perfect, and forgot her outbursts.

Looking about the shanty, for a moment May tries hard to hold them all in her mind just as there are. Her boys, coming from her man.

A slip of a message from some wise man read many years ago comes to May: The greatest misfortune is to have once been happy and to remember.

1928

May Amid The Ruins

March 25. 10:11 am. Sainte Elisabeth

GB did his best for May when bad luck struck them but could do no better than bring her to live on the exact spot where Sainte Elisabeth's grand house once stood. White Doric columns had wrapped it like a big present until being burnt to the ground.

Only two columns survive more or less intact. These sprawl, between the shanty and the cane field, half overgrown with creeper. For May, tragic remnants of a classic world.

Her younger boys play near these fallen Dorics, using her garden trowel for their digging projects. "Watch for snakes," she calls to them without fail.

One time they brought her a discovery, two twigs knotted together by a sliver of leather, wrapped in a rag shred of a doll's dress, a pinch of Spanish moss on top for hair. She ordered them to put it back and bury it well.

Last week they came running to the shanty to show her another find. "Maman maman, Pirates!" exclaimed Hubert hopping in excitement. "Blood, Maman," chorused Mancil yelping deliriously. Hubert brandished a rusted machete at her, the handle half eaten by rot.

"Yes, pirates," she'd said evenly. "Now give it to me because you might cut yourselves. And do not show it or mention it to your father, either of you. Promise."

They lived in the 'Shack Bully' shanty. After the War this small cheap dwelling had replaced a small part of the far grander ruins of the master's house.

The shanty's kitchen and front room windows had been placed by suspicious minds. They yielded full views of the main fields like binocular lenses trained on the workers. They who had been slaves and were still so now except in name.

The views were only for guarding this earth's wealth. The windows stood to spy over the black laborers who otherwise lived virtually out of sight, their miserable cabins at the bottom of the cotton field slipping almost into the swamp.

When standing in one of the plantation's three fields it all seems hopelessly huge. Each field held 150 acres or more, one each for cotton, peanuts and sugar cane. Briefly at this time of year two are left fallow, to be reworked in coming weeks and planted again.

Beside the 'house' as they call it, May wondered why people could not be truthful even in mind, the third field still stands in cane although down to the last cutting. May and GB have warned the boys about what cane did to teeth. This a cruel joke because May who says nothing suffers on and off agony from her mouth full of decay.

No matter, once and again they take half a cut, even May. At first May gagged trying to chew sideways on the fibrous matter to get a blast of the cane, unlike anything she'd imagined. Through time she comes to like it, the taste of this corrupting land.

Shack bully house. Unpainted, weathered smooth to primitive planks. Cracked deeply like the faces of the oldest Choctaws she'd known in Oklahoma. They had

four small rooms, one brick chimney. The porch, large enough for a chair, tilted forward onto rough pine steps.

The doormat is her blue rag rug. May's pitiful attempt at keeping the red earth at bay.

May dressed the front with a few of her favorite flowers, yellow daisies, Lilies of the Valley and half a dozen rose bushes. Tame roses she called them, secretly wondering each morning if she'd find them there again or if something savage had visited in the night to devour them screaming.

Sainte Elisabeth she considers proffered spoils, groves of aged oaks, many gnarled fruit trees and giant magnolias in every direction except where they'd been pulled back for views of the fields.

No such blessing for the hovels of the black workers. Far down the fields their quarters remain a stigma in May's consciousness. To May a naked sore without a blade of grass, a shrub or tree to hide its stigma. A ramshackle of human horrors squatting on rust color soil.

Sometimes May wonders if a war were in progress down below. With the black families fighting back the encroaching and strangling vegetation—men, women, babies and the feeble old ones. Repelling the azaleas from smothering them under bulging pinks and throbbing reds.

Up on higher ground, shaded, the shack bully's shanty takes advantage to catch night coolness, daytime breezes. Raised a further three feet on mealy brick supports the small structure is freed from the omnipresent red soil. This raising brought cooling breath under the shanty.

More important to May, it lifted them free of the worm infected soil, too moist and bacterial. Kept out unwarranted creatures that lurk night and day. Snakes galore, huge toads, cane rats, skunks, coons, foxes, even feral cats and dogs. GB spoke of panthers and bears. She pushed that thought back into the bad dream place it comes from although GB claims they are quite real.

"Asshole, he wants me to fear everything so he can play the man."

Above them tower the pecan trees. GB explained these were planted just after the Civil War where the great house had stood. For May, a bare Oklahoma still in mind, the density of trees here is enthralling and she can't imagine a time when the giant pecans were not a gothic cathedral soaring above her.

These she also revered for protecting the shanty's tin roof from the worst of noonday sun. From the furious deluges of hurricanes. From seagulls.

1902
The Nuns' Myth
Soeur Blanche. April 1. Indian Territory
Mission of The Holy Sainte Mary

It is I, the boss, answering this thundering knock on such a storming night. Poisson d'Avril of all days for this rare knock. Our door knows no knocking now. No one needs us anymore especially in a storm. April Fools Day the fool Americans call it. Poisson d'Avril for us. This day honors one of our French saints, St. Hugh of Grenoble.

What am I seeing? A real man stands there. At such an hour, at a convent? The rain slashes down sharp and vertical like silver pins.

For sure he gets no 'bonsoir.' Instead I give him a strong shove with both arms and he falls back into the mud.

"Go away you. We have nothing." I roar through the downpour. I can see his horse beyond dripping in sadness. Tethered to it an even more miserable old mare carries a boy.

Through rain and dark the big oil lamp we keep burning in the courtyard allows me to make out that the boy holds something of curious shape, close up under the duster he wears. Water sheds down its sides. Obviously an adult's duster, same kind the man wears down in the mud.

On the boy and whatever he holds it sags like soggy bread.

Then I hear you. A baby gurgling faintly over the battering rain.

"What do you want here, man?" I demand out into the storm, the gurgle of a baby still in my mind. My English so thick only a few can understand me in this hell on earth where they marooned us in reward for our faith. Doubtlessly ill, the man rises in difficulty from where I'd sprawled him. The rain is stronger than he.

I look with guilty satisfaction at their misery in the rain, the man down on the ground and the boy calling "Pa, pa!" to him in alarm. That's enough for me.

"There, there. Forgive the hard welcome. Whatever trouble you bring come bring it in, all of it. Put those poor horses in the stable, right side of the mission. Give them some of the oats in the bucket. It's there from the man who works here. Yes, a big man is here, to protect us. No tricks."

A small lie, as Black Bob left us in the evenings for Ida his Choctaw woman. I shall absolve myself with an extra Hail Mary tomorrow morning. Perhaps yet another for making them wait in the rain.

While they are out caring for the horses I bang the doors of the other nun's cells to call them to assembly. Since none other has stepped forward these years to lead, I do it. I have become in truth 'Mere Blanche.' They never give me that title, only the authority.

My nuns gather half asleep in their quickly donned habits. Oh yes, I know already the story about to unfold. It's a very old story that enchants all convents.

Imperative first for me to calculate the odds. Who will be stronger. This handsome man is dripping wet, some mud mixed in. He seems weak. But his young son in the duster drooping to the tiles most importantly hides close something

precious and moving. Or our side a row of quibbling, middle-aged women petulant at the hour, dressed for a funeral.

I imagine the scene through the stranger's eyes wondering why he does not run away. On occasion even I find it frightening, the darkened front room of this old mission lit only by our large candles at the foot of the cross, and too by the row of small candles glimmering under the tinted face of the Holy Mother, in which she seems to be wearing rouge and artificial lashes.

And then to make it worse we nuns group forbiddingly, confronting him --dark forms all, some glowering at him in half awake wrath. No English to be heard. We fling French at him defiantly. By herself the figure of that damn Sainte Aix ought to make many run.

Although I silently pray for forgiveness for having pushed him back and down into the rain and mud I must also remain on guard. This Indian Territory demands wariness.

"Take off your coat. I want no muddy swamp in here. And mind where you place it." I command. "We have food for you. Won't you partake?" At last obeying our vow to never turn away those in need. Necessary to offer food twice, since he has trouble understanding me.

These American idiots can never understand me well. My English is perfectly good. Perhaps the accent might be improved but why bother, English is a barbarian tongue. I think they have shit in their ears. For certain, as the expression goes, they have shit on their eyes.

The man shakes his head. He removes his hat to me, nodding politely. "No ma'am, we ate on the trail coming up from Durant." I don't believe a word he says. "Are you hungry boy?" I ask. The youngster looks at his father, then shakes 'yes' at me.

"They told us there about your Mission, so we have come. I need help, not food." The father's own accent, deep south they call it, is not illiterate he knows his grammar such as there is in their primitive language.

What a fine looking fellow he is without his hat and duster, even with drops falling from his nose and hair. His blondish hair begins graying, bright blue eyes. I guess him to be about two decades younger than I, 40 at most. He stands well with a muscled build. Strapped to his thigh, a gun.

"We do not allow weapons in the Mission. Take that off. You may place it with the duster. This is a house dedicated to the peace of the Holy Mother." A look of surprise, then he smiles wanly. Like a child he does what I ask, no remonstrance.

I recall an old nun come back to our mother house from America telling me should I ever go there never to say 'piece' for the people would heard 'piss.' Same for 'sheet,' it became 'shit.' How hard I laughed never guessing I would be doing the same one day.

“Are you sick? We are 30 miles from Durant. That is too long a road. If you are sick leave it outside. We do not want it.”

“No, no. But I am still weak from the illness.” His voice shaking for a moment. “My son,” The boy steps forward, taking off his hat, “he is sorely tired. Please let him sit and rest.” I nod and the boy collapses on a chair with a moan.

Again comes what must be a baby cooing. This time for the whole room to hear. Also something is jabbing at the boy’s duster from inside. Truly an odd sight.

“We are heading north to Tulsa,” the man says loudly, to cover up the noise. “They tell me I have a job up there.” He begins to weep, stumbling forward a step. An act? Lies? I do not trust him at all.

Soeurs St. Ephraim and Claire go swiftly to help him stand. Ephraim has too much heart for own good. However, not to love her would be a sin. For her trouble she gets doused in the rain still trickling down the man. Soeur Claire is a little simple, true, but of pure good will. She takes care not to get wet.

He does not know it but these two women are my lieutenants here. The others are lost in their vows, somewhere else on this planet, or are mean spirited and addicted to gossip. The others I’m guessing must be seething that they have missed the chance to hold up this handsome man.

We’ve started becoming an old nun's club with no real mission for our Mission. Until this visitor comes to our door.

Claire glides off to fetch a plate of leftovers from our dinner. Ephraim stays by the man's side. He finally agrees to lean on her. For sure that’s a pain in the ass of someone I know. Do I hear a murmured hiss from behind me? Returning with a plate Claire carries towels over an arm and a vase of limp flowers in her free hand. Flowers? Yes, this could only be too true of Claire.

I give my stern look to the boy. “Are you 12?”

“11 ma'am, soon to be 12,” he replies, same accent as his father's.

“I believe we have a cake somewhere, do you wish to take a piece of cake?” He looks at me open mouthed.

“The kind lady asks do you want a ‘piece’ of cake,” adds his father.

“You make all wet, boy. Do as your father. Take off your hat and duster.”

“Go on son,” orders the man. The boy, without his sopping hat, looks like a young eagle, so fierce and possessive.

He opens the duster very carefully so that the water does not shed off onto its content.

Strapped to his chest, a papoose bundle. It must have been difficult for a boy his age to carry this weight.

A silence around like a mute’s Ave Maria. After that I take care of business.

April 1. Mission of The Holy Sainte Mary Indian Territory

Gently the man lays his hand on the boy's hair. "I imagine you're about done in."

"It's OK pa, I like having her close. We keep each other warm. My shoulders and my arm hurt some. That cookie box you stuck under her sure helped. Sorry I let it slip away."

The man reaches for the papoose bag on the boy's chest. He pulls the baby out of the bag, warm, dry and almost content.

Behind me the nuns rustle like crows in an oak tree. A little twitter escapes St. Ephraim. A stunned peep peep comes out of Claire who then beams transfigured up at the ceiling palms together like our resident idiot.

I am uncertain, yet it seems I even hear sallow Soeur St. Aix, her of the lifeless lips, missing breast and hips, clearing her throat like a cat too old for heat.

In my life I have never seen such a beautiful child. Golden ringlets and a doll face with violet eyes.

The man wavers in confusion, miserable through and through, tired to the bone. No longer an act? I am unsure. He doesn't seem to find anywhere for the baby to be. If against him she'll get wet.

"She needs changing," Rasping now he begins to weep again. "Ma'am, kindly take her I do feel I need to rest a spell." I think, what a sly man to pretend weakness.

Then at last, bewildered, he simply holds out his hands -- toward me. Yes, he gives the wondrous baby to me.

"Also, my son is injured. Can you help him?" I motion to St. Aix. Already she's stabbing me with her small despising eyes. Her dog's jaw droops in such a frown the corners could kiss the floor.

She looks the boy over. He gives a cry of pain. A kind examination I'm sure.

"Boy's fine," is her firm report. "Before they leave," emphasis on 'leave', "I shall bandage it and give it a sling. But this is all I can do. Now send them on their way to the doctor in town."

I motion for Soeur Marthe Paul to bring the man a plate of food, same as that given to the boy. When she returns she also refills the boy's plate.

"Don't you see they need a glass of wine each." I tell her. Soeur Marthe sticks out her tongue at me but is off for glasses. Wine is our blood now and precious, it must come in by freight from Fort Smith.

"Hear that rain? You are to sleep in the stable tonight," I am telling the man.

He shakes his head, although the boy looks wistful. "We need to move on." Determination seems all the man has left to his name. I am holding his baby, slowly rocking her in my arms. At last she sleeps.

The man and boy finish their plates. Boy drinks from his wine and chokes. Father begins gulping his down, no stranger to wine he.

Glass drained suddenly he is standing. Again that unfamiliar male assertiveness and the wonder of having such a handsome fellow in the Mission sends a shrill tingle through our gloom. "Pardon me. Sister." From the way he searches for the word 'Sister' I catch him out at once for a Protestant.

"You're holding my little girl, her name is May. May spelled like the month. Last name is Skinner."

Yes. I have the little girl in my arms. She doesn't cry at my homely face or at all the dismal cloth of my habit, not at the rigid unsure way I hold her. She looks at me in wonder, incredible eyes, troubling. Such disconcerting intelligent makes me see what I am doing painfully clear.

Now the man tears up again. "She's a good baby, ma'am, almost a year. No problems. Good health. Real sweet. Her ma died back where she was born. Down in Louisiana." He stops choked up, genuinely overcome, I think. By what I'll never know.

"My name is John Douglass Skinner, ma'am. Double 'ss' on the Douglass. And this is my boy Quincy Coffee." The fellow pauses, looks down hard at our floor tiles.. I see he hadn't any intention of telling his name.

Watching him closer now that the baby sleeps I think I detect a sheepish look. Yes, he's said more than he meant to. What is this man planning to say next?

"Don't remember how come May only has this one name. My wife was surely partial to it. We are people of double names. I think we sank into so much trouble that we just let it alone. She's simply May. May Skinner."

Staring now at his boy, the man continues. "Bad luck ma'am, nothing but bad luck came down on us. After May was 9 months cholera came too. My wife died of it. Almost took me. Isn't that right, Quincy."

"Pa, stop!"

At this the man stops and swings about seemingly to hide his sorrow. Instead, I watch him from behind fumbling for something in his pocket. That better not be pocket billiards or they go back out into the rain!

Whatever, he has it now in his palm. The other arm moves forward. Swift motion of the right hand. I hear a soft smack followed by a quick gesture one hand upon the other. Lifting the top hand he bends his head, almost reverently. He murmurs to himself.

Turned to us again, I hear genuine distress in his words. This alarms me. I smell mendacity and shame.

"Another moment, Sister. I am overcome."

I do see it all for lies. A young barmaid from Lille like I had once been? Ha, I understand prevarication well enough, if nothing more than from life with St. Aix. I know too that what comes next is what I've expected from the first.

"Ma'am, to be straight about this me and my boy are headed on as fast as we can. That plus life on the road is no good for a baby. The people down the road told me about your Mission. I'm hoping you'll take my baby girl."

“Pa, please don’t!” yelps the lad. Asserting command the man straightens himself.

Behind me yawning or whispering a usual splitting of nuns--the conservative ones sallow and with ‘no’ on their breath, progressives--those open to change--and the middle group who are still stunned to be no longer in France, to be lost on this frontier of civilization, turning to their prayers for the angel that never comes for us.

“I am from respectable people. This would be a most Christian kindness to distressed travellers.

“Please take her. Just for now. This is temporary, believe me.”

He lays down a worn leather wallet of value on our dining table. Bills come out of it ironed, they are pulled like magic one by one for all to see. My immediate guess is that through time they have been pancaked together between this man's fine ass and his saddle.

“Alright then,” I am saying, my heart trembling. Why am I doing this? Do I need distraction so badly? Yes, anything to save my sanity from these quarrelsome women.

“We must vote, that is our way. “

Voting is away from the man, on little pieces of old newspaper. I give out what pencils we have.

Around me yawning or whispering a usual splitting of nuns, the conservative ones sallow and with ‘no’ on their breath, progressives open to change--and the middle group stunned into a coma, petrified to be so far from France, who have lost their minds on this uncivilized frontier.

Including myself I count it an even three- three- three votes. They’ll never guess how I vote. They think me too hard. Then again they are not holding this child called May.

An ‘N’ mark will be non. An ‘O’ is oui. When our votes are counted it is five to four to take her. Bless whoever joined me.

“C'est Fou.” Hawks Soeur St. Aix, then continues in French. “What life can a child have here. This is a big Poisson d’Avril for us all. Of course, and we take money for this honor. Buying a child at auction!”

Sweeping away in her hateful aristocratic way, rubies on display, as always I wonder at how Aix achieves elegance in the same dullness the rest of us wear like a blanket. Behind her the room falls hushed, expectant.

“All right sir,” Turning to the man suddenly I pity him, standing so clearly in hope and need. He’s just sold us his one treasure and now empty-handed he’s lost.

“We are agreed.”

He no longer knows what to do with those large manly hands. That is the saddest of all. Grabbing up his glass, without permission he pours out more wine. Then drains the wine again in one long gulp. Claire pours him another, slurping with delight, he downs it too. At least he gives us the money to buy more.

“Now listen to me,” I tell him. “No more wine. Your daughter stays with us only until you write or come for her. And that ought to be soon. Until then we agree to give her our best care. And get your son to a doctor tomorrow morning. Do you have anything else to add?”

This gives him pause, but at last he answers me. “We are traditional people in Alabama.” I see him wince in alarm, from the wine perhaps or too I am sure at another slip in his story. Alabama? What happened to Louisiana?

What now. Is he about to turn to do more fumbling with himself out of our sight? But no, he is finishing his parting words for his daughter.

“I am embarrassed to ask, but please just in case something should happen to me so that I can’t return, when she is of age could you send her to school . . . Oh, and to a Protestant church for Sunday service.”

1928

Valla

Hollywood Make Believe Time

Pacific Coast Time. March 25. 6:00 am

Bells from the church down the canyon wake her as usual. Their ringing vibrates into her pillow. Becomes a silver clarity fading away like sleep, like the swimming pool water that the woman forever tries to hold in her hands.

“Good morning you, killer gal.” These, her first words of the day, whisper to an empty bed, deserted house. Her declaration of mockery and despair in equal parts but not her first thought, which she guards unspoken. The devil to even speak it.

She is Valla. “Yep, that’s my name. Ask me again, I’ll tell you the same.” No one asks.

Her vast bedroom remains in fingers of shadow delineated by long slits of morning light. California light brightening by the second at the edges of the floor-to-ceiling drapes. California sunshine too sharp to keep at bay.

The woman lies on her back, arms across her breasts. “Too early. Too Nothing to do. Fuckin’ too-Sunday. Too- shit!”

Her white Cleopatra-barge bed spreads about on all sides. Sheets and the quantity of pillows are of cloud white satin. Top sheet glistens a phony morning dew. Half-slips to the floor when she moves a foot.

Her body lies formally straight, legs together, in a favored nightgown, white satin hugging down to below the ankles plus a short train now crumpled up under her legs. The cut gives deep Vs from throat to waist, from shoulders to small of back.

‘V’ for Valla?

She wondered. Pale breasts cup closely to either side, more than half revealed. Her small nipples pucker up the nightgown like satin wrapped gourmet candy. Nightgown clings deliberately to her buttocks.

Eyes fix on the ceiling, seeing but not seeing it. They are far focused into other places and times. Still as a corpse she waits. Blinking when need be, breath shallow. Otherwise motionless. The woman feels her aloneness in the bed like a child in a blackened closet. Her thoughts are unperturbed by noise of any kind. The canyon road is always empty on an early Sunday morning. Paulette not in yet. Late, good, make it later. The big house stands empty as silence, soulless to her. Hardly a home, merely a structure.

All the furniture in her bedroom is white, carpet, walls and drapes too. Valla revels in white. Clean, pure, empty. When it at last became fashionable she surrounded herself in it, white all embracing, the color her signature, dream purity lost long ago. "Beats the ugly brown I grew up with."

Valla knows nothing about Catholic stuff, that church her nearest neighbor. Their thing about ringing bells is odd enough. At first a few years ago when new to the big bungalow on the mountain drive the bells, morning, noon and evening, drove her wild. They intruded loudly on her life. Worst of all they woke her at 6 fucking am.

"Might as well have stayed on the farm."

She called the church several times to complain. Nothing was done.

At last a young priest came up to visit her. Cute too. As with any man unless a fag he'd not been able to take his eyes off her. Normal. They talked for some time. He said he would have the bells rung less vehemently. Perhaps a slow day-by-day diminution so that his own parishioners would not complain.

Valla accepted this, and noted that indeed it came about. The bells she attended to critically yet slowly the noise level dimmed. This lasted a couple of weeks, but at end they were down to what she could bear.

Now when the bells ring she enjoys them. They give something significant to her life on the canyon ridge in the big bungalow. They give time to the days. She even called the cute priest to thank him. It never occurs to her that in truth he did nothing. The bell noise level never changed a decibel. They faded only in her imagination. At peace with them at last. More so than with the house. Or with Paulette. More today even than with Tony.

At least the bells are good for an alarm clock. Valla needs awakening from her nightmares, too often the same. In the dream the woman hears a baby crying but cannot reach her. The woman strains with both arms to find the baby, to hold her and quiet the crying. Every dream she fails.

Hiking up the nightgown Valla tries to bring herself back. Neck arched upwards dabbing her tongue to the carefully manicured tips of her fingers. For a minute she makes a serious effort to arouse herself. Time passes and those perfect fingers merely dally between her legs. After another minute she stops in irritation.

"Too bad, no juice in the fig this morning." Valla makes the announcement of herself out loud, knowing no one's about to listen. "So what, Valla. This is moving on day."

With that Valla scoots across about three full feet of mattress to the edge of the hulking expanse of bed. “Why the fuck is this a bed for an elephant!”

There she can let down her provocative legs, slipping her feet into high-heeled satin pumps made to match the dress. Then she pauses momentarily, debating her need for a smoke against that for the toilet, or better yet a drink.

“Hells bells, what am I doing up at this time?” Another pondering, take another sleeping pill? On the round glass-topped side table her fingers fumble blindly for a decision. They come up with the pack.

Pulling free a cigarette she fires it with a silver lighter, big as a paperweight. A high fierce fire kindles the tobacco. Paper flares in a quick whoosh of burning gas.

The woman draws a pull deep into her lungs. Holds it. Savors the exhilaration, aroma and taste. Smoke slowly seeps from her delicate nostrils. Smoke trails in curvaceous spirals from where she props the cigarette in a cut crystal ashtray big as a hubcap.

Gathering up a robe from the armchair beside the bed, she slips it on and picks up the cigarette. A satin robe with white mink at the neck. Wobbling at first on the white heels, flutter of white feathers about her, in a few steps she regains her balance. Crossing the room she pauses before an enormous wall mirror in a Moorish frame.

“Morning Valla,” she whispers to her self in practiced whisky- and- smoke voice. “You adorable murderess you.” This delivered with a drop-dead glare at herself, to the tune in her head of ‘Bye Bye Blackbird’.

Pack up all my care and woe here I go, singing low,bye bye blackbird.

“Said Mornin’ Valla Boedecker, Valla Skinner . . . Valla Van Der Dash, Valla Dash? What name today? Praise the Lord it isn’t Mrs. Tony Stampanuzzi ‘The Sausage’. Be you whoever, are you the wicked witch today or Tar Baby?” The talk is to her dim, black and white image. “This the day? You sure? Could be tomorrow or maybe next year.”

Her fingers dapple through the mink, a sensual alternative to herself. Fingers slightly perfumed by her cunt. Valla smears the back of a hand over her cheeks to wipe away the overnight smudges and then fluffs up her bob. Her own distinctive shade of red.

No dye, ever. A natural smoky copper. Not at all an electric red –rather a warm, ancient color, warm like in a shard of Minoan pottery. Hair’s cut short. In sharp defensive angles.

Standing straight before the mirror she turns to each side. Doing her Lulu routine with pursing lips and jabbing a bared shoulder at the mirror, for her a camera. To improve the set while camera rolls she blows Sobranie Black Russian cigarette smoke at herself. Expensive smoke tendrils about the posed image she watches in the mirror.

“At least here I’ve been an actress. Well, at least half of one.” Suddenly she pushes her face against the mirror. Kissing her reflection, smearing it in black, her lipstick color of the moment. It leaves a perversion of her lovely lips in chiaroscuro.

At which there is a sudden and inexplicable merriness on her smoky breath. Pulling down her gown she shows one perfect breast—“Useless. Get lost.”

Under the mirror on the white marble top of the sideboard are her drink things, gin, crystal glass, silver tongs and the white padding of an ice bucket. A few ghost cubes from last night still float in a purple glass. Ice to mimic her eyes in a bath of gin. She makes her drink without a thought for it.

Before the first swallow she stares raptly into the glass. “You got to do what you got to do get going.” The glass is drained to the ice cubes.

Valla’s face in particular remains a work of art. Known for a masterwork even in Hollywood. She can slink into the most coveted speakeasies in town and bring with her a pause in the clamor. Only a very few know her by name, not important enough to know. But her beauty gets respect. More than elegant and stylish Valla is the real thing.

To the image in the mirror she pouts, “A voodoo queen you ain’t.” Then giving the mirror a hard glare of despair he spits, “Keep it together, honey. Movin’ on, movin’ on day at last.”

Valla stabs her middle finger up straight at the mirror. “Fuck you too. I’ll go listen to Bix.”

Drawing the first set of drapes she visibly shrinks from the blast of sunshine. Turning her head she tries to evade the hot news flash of advancing age.

“Holy shit, so I am the living dead. Wrap it.”

1902

Soeur Blanche

April 1. The Mission

Indian Territory

That first night you are to sleep with me. We have no other place arranged for you. Anyway, you are so small the others fear you. I try to give you warm milk in a small sieve, knowing you are nothing more than two. You whimper against me as I prepare to sleep. I sing my croaking French. You put up fingers to my lips in wonder.

At last I pull my breast loose and offer it. You take it sweetly although it has never held milk. I wait in the dark stunned to have a babe at my tit.

You don't push me away. No remonstrance that I have nothing to give, a dry old well. The sensation of such need will remain for life. I know it to be so.

It gives me my only joy. My homely body keeps you quiet throughout the rest of your beautiful sleep.

1928
John Douglass Skinner
March 25. 10:28 am
Bartlesville, Oklahoma

After they murdered pa it turned to hell for us. Our playmates that we'd kept even during the War wouldn't know us anymore. In town bad folks pushed me and Andy, tripped us with a boot as we walked by. Heckled us. "Yankee scum," it went and such like that. At school it got worse. We had fights every week. The teacher turned away. When we went to church the nicer people did the same, just lowered their eyes, not seeing us.

Strange, pa had been with the Yankees for almost five years and during that time no one did or said anything mean, even when the War was being lost. Only after he was murdered, there where he'd grown up and was known by all, did the true hatred come for us.

An old man now, I have seen enough of human beings to know that they are meanest of all when they're feeling guilty or have a shame inside they can't deal with. Like me.

That's what prompted a lot of the trouble they gave us in Slocomb. Surely 'terrible' we did get.

What the fuck, we twins were only little when it happened. Poor ma lived in a daze I think. Sister Tiersey and big brother Hubert got it bad enough, but being young and twins we were the easier targets. No, they aimed most of it at us. Traitor Skinner's twins.

Andrew and I were not identical, which was a good thing. I've seen identical twins and understand a lot about them others don't. It's enough being twinned in life by experiences and thinking, spirit too, without adding the look-alike part.

For instance, we often made silent decisions together. That was how when awhile after we turned 15 it needed no words between us to start getting ready to run away. Our dream, actually, to roam far and free from Alabama.

Because we hadn't a cent between us--no one hiring us for chores or the like, and ma just getting by--I said "Let's go see Miz Whitaker." Andrew nodded, our twins' decision made, and off we went washed up and in our best clothes, walking some few miles to town.

Mr. Whitaker was an old carpetbagger and sinful rich, folks said. He owned the bank in Slocomb. Miz Whitaker we heard of often, being from the Bell folks who were gentry to us.

Everyone whispered loud enough to be sure we'd hear that she'd been real sweet on pa before the war. It was because of that story that we went knocking. It seemed about our only hope for some money, unless we robbed her husband's bank.

It was the biggest house around and scared us. We worked on courage for about half an hour shining our shoes on the back of our trouser legs, licking down our hair,

staring at that house in terror. Finally I said let's go round back to knock. A colored man opened the door, jacketed up, so I but on some bluster. "Howdy Mr. Colored man," I said.

Because of pa ma taught us to always use the word 'colored.' I have ever done so even in the loathsome days here of the Tulsa race riots. I keep doing it in memory of my poor ma who sure didn't get the bowl full of cherries in life. Funny, now they don't seem to like 'colored' any more than nigger.

Andy, he hated pa for what he did to us. Andy did say 'nigger.' That was the one divide between us, at least for almost all the years we were together. Perhaps it somehow led to what happened to us.

Me, I forgave pa even if I thought he was crazy and caused a lot of evil to us for nothing. I thought him a giant on earth, smart and handsome. Brave he was for sure. Believing without doubt in what he thought was right. The hard part to accept was wondering if he just plain arrogant. Selfish?

Ma built him up to us all the time. Always talked about him being a teacher, not a soldier, claiming he'd read about every book in the world, or well nigh to it.

Her pride in him gave me courage to stick out my hand to the colored man and say "Hello, Mr. Colored Man. I'm John Skinner's son, John. This is my brother Andrew. Is Miz Whitaker about?"

The colored man took my hand and gravely shook it. He looked me straight and said, "Yes sir, you look like him. It's an honor to meet you both. I'll see if Miz Missouri be at home."

Back again soon enough he waved us in. Inside spooked us even more. We had never been in such a grand house before. Never would be again until time later in those New Orleans cat houses we liked so much. It kind of dazzled us half blind. I recall Andy whispering, "Think she'll give us a dollar each?" I wasn't expecting a dime, but we were desperate to get away.

Back through that big silent house we trailed the colored man and then into what I now know is called a parlor. In there sat a young lady not so many years older than us, so I figured she couldn't possibly have been pa's sweetheart. She said 'Thank you Horace, go help Frances in the kitchen.'

I asked her real polite if we could talk to the Miz Whitaker. She said nothing, just stared at us, at me particularly. The young lady began crying silently.

"Well then, what do you want, I am Miz Missouri Bell. You can call me Miz Missouri." She at last managed to say, emotion making her voice a trembling echo in that big room, a room bigger than the house we lived in, ceiling higher than our home was long.

I kept doing the talking. Sometimes I led with people and sometimes Andy did, depending on the situation, or the people. It was natural to us. "I'm John Skinner."

"I see that," came her reply.

"John Douglass Skinner and this here is brother Andrew."

“Andrew Frederick. I know that too,” the young lady talked soft as a cattail. “Andrew, you were born first. Your father named you two for Frederick Douglass. Do you know who that man was, like him or not?”

We almost nodded our heads off. Ma had told us.

“You see, even in giving you boys names your papa was more of a rebel than any we had around here. Somewhat smarter too.”

Young lady was a surprising sight, short but most pretty. Dressed for it too in silks and satins, ribbons and bows as they say.

“Wait here. I have something to give you. Don’t touch anything.”

When she was out of the room Andy nudged me and whispered. “Maybe we should get down and beg?” He had a funny sense of humor.

Back, the young lady had two nice leather wallets in her hands. “Here, each of you take one. I’ve had them waiting for you all this time. Don’t look inside and never ever tell anyone ever anywhere about this. You must promise me.”

We did with a nod, “Yes ma’am, promise.” We even crossed our hearts.

“You know what a fortune is? Here, I’m giving you each your fortune.

“Now I want to kiss you each, then go quickly. Don’t ever come back here. Don’t you dare write me. Get out of Slocomb, get out of Alabama. Never come back.” She started crying again.

First she kissed Andrew. He flushed red just as I knew he would. Then she turned, paused, and lifted up her face to kiss me. I bent my head down she being such a dainty lady, expecting the same kiss on my cheek that she gave Andy. No way, she took my head in both hands at the back, fingers clutching in my hair. She pulled my head further down.

That Miz Bell or Whitaker or Missouri, whoever she was, gave me a kiss full on the mouth. A long one too, pressing her lips hard to mine. One kiss among the few to remember in a thousand that’s been given to me.

Now, knowing a woman in the flesh for more than half a century I count that kiss hell-fire strong for passion. I tasted her mint breath, smelled her clean hair and fancy perfume. When I dared looked she was kissing me with her eyes closed.

Then she pushed me away and spat at me like a cat. “John Skinner, get yourself out of my life once and for all.”

And I did. Outside the house we couldn’t bear the suspense. We both peeked. Inside each wallet were ten ten-dollar bills. More than a fortune. After whooping and dancing about there on the street in Slocomb we settled to business.

First thing we walked back home and stole Ma’s old mule. Left her \$25 on the kitchen table, taking it from Andrew’s amount. No note, just the money.

“Where do we go?” was Andrew’s first perplexed question as we went our way adventuring. We rode together with me first. It was a jiggling ride so soon enough I felt something hard poking at my backside.

“Which direction is that pointing?” He asked, laughing and slapping me on both thighs. We were so young and close. “Maybe it’s pointing at you.”

So we tossed our nickel. Rich were we but only that one nickel in coin between us. “Heads we’d go north, tails it’s west.” Said I. Being the best tosser around it fell to me to do the flipping. Tails.

1928

May’s Bull Snake

March 25. 10:28 am. Sainte Elisabeth

For the trip to church the wagon, open bed, pairs to their hard worked mule they call Dandy. It holds May seated in back. She’s held captive there by one of Aunt Missouri’s fine chairs, anchored at center to bolted iron rods that GB rigged for her.

Poor obtuse man he put her up on a throne for their pitiful weekly progress to town.

“What a spectacle he makes of me, a foreign queen of nothing, from no where, going nowhere slow. How people must laugh.”

May feels the eyes of the bull snake upon her. “Don’t even think of trying it,” she messages him. No need to actually see it, enveloping her familiar and friendly. Rapturous and deceiving.

The snake lurks for her in its abode back in the gloom of Dandy’s shed. He and Dandy comrades in their extended household. Invariably, coming from the house, passing near the shed, like now making her way to the waiting wagon, she intuits his snake eyes following her.

Four feet of snake, thick as her wrist, a coiling of brown and black scales. To May he shows himself often, more rarely to the others. The two of them alone he will slither to her like a pet to coil harmlessly about her feet. Such strange reptilian affection perplexes rather than frightens her.

Once in the wagon Baby James struggles about in her lap. The younger children crouch down safely on the wagon bed around the sweeping flow of her black skirt. She faces front to the lean backside of GB beside the younger forms of Buddy and Joseph Henry.

Male haunches, they catch her eye after learning the beauty of her husband’s body. Of how his naked buttocks dimple with muscle, hairless, pearly white and smooth cool water to her hands.

“Hold on tight you all. Here we go. OK for you May? Chair’s tight enough? Did you bring along your bull snake for protection?” GB calls back to her in his usual day-to-day way, reserving any show or terms of endearment for when they lie locked together in the right of love. For loving he murmurs ‘my love’ or ‘my life.’ In battle with her GB uses but one word, ‘Woman.’ Flung at her stone hard. Clucking to Dandy he raises the reins.

Calm returns. Her anger forgotten. The half smile plays. From inside the dark of the shed the bull snake watches her. Hissing its longing for May.

1928

The Old Wagon

March 25. 10:28 am. Sainte Elisabeth

The time scarred wagon lurches not more than ten feet forward when Mancil wails, "Papa, wait. I gotta go."

GB gently whoas the mule to a standstill. The little boy clambers out the back, heading for a discreet spot to let his urine go.

That did it. Damnation. May knows the timing by heart. Without a glance down at Aunt Missouri's watch she knows they'll be late again. Sighing as loud as she can May gives Mancil an encouraging smile, while covertly leaning forward to pinch GB's ass as hard as she can.

"Don't move, Dandy," he growls, as if the mule were doing anything other than lolling in a shabby lump chewing on a patch of crab grass, half of it protruding from between her teeth.

GB's tightened back tells her she's made her point and that he's not happy about it.

More so than most children around at least her boys are fairly well behaved even if she is not. And handsome for sure. The evil eyes can stare at will upon her darlings, she's tried her best to make them too strong to be hurt. They need to be that way. Iron for skin.

And this child Mancil, secretly her favored young, lives brightness, sun on glass. His red hair and freckles define him, totally unlike his brothers. Him she watches from her chair in the wagon, small scrunched form, worn hand-me-down clothes from his older brothers, clearly too shy to pee.

She and him knowing he is different. Both beginning to hope that he'll have the chance, the time, in time, in the unknown by and by, to escape mind and soul from this formidable Wiregrass. To evade the power of a place pulling them down in swamp quick sand.

Stupid she admits to so dread being stared at. Why was she made like this? She pushed the thought away. To speed Mancil along May begins to sing, "Le bon roi Dagobert, avait mis sa culotte a l'envers." The others in the wagon listen, knowing the song, from, their own times.

When her babies come she speaks to them in French. Stopping only because GB gets upset, "Isn't it time to get him off the tit?" Meaning let go a little. Truly meaning use English so that my sons are one with me.

But she is determined to continue with Mancil. By now he like her other boys can understand her in French. Mancil is the best at it, however, and can speak it too if allowed. She warns him not to with a hush.

Her plan in deceiving GB is start the boy reading French this summer when his father is in the fields. Then keep speaking it clandestinely to him whenever alone together. May feels guilt to maneuver so against GB, her excuse is “damn Wiregrass, my Mancil shall escape.” Now she sings urgent to help Mancil and move on. Her voice isn't musical. It rings low, tuneless, away from lilting English into the repetitive prairie of French.

“C'est vrai lui le roi, Je vais la remettre a l'endroit.”

From her earliest recollections life is not musical, not well hidden by cheery songs for children. It is far better considered to her in a poet's reflective wisdom, or similar revelations. Ordained so because living flies by ephemeral, the blooming Tears of Our Lady. Same for life of any kind.

To May, for human life most sadly of all. Mentally, quickly, she gathers these men close around her, grown and young, indelible in her mind replicating them at this instant, dead still in a photograph together once upon a time.

Ah, this is pain to her, too dangerously close to the flicker of her existence. The flicker of the bull snake's tongue. “That was not polite, sir.” She sends the note directly to the snake.

1928

John Douglass Skinner

March 25. 10:37 am

Bartlesville

The West made me a man. More so than all the whores on Gallatin Street. The privations Andrew and I shared in in our long ramblings made us both tough, mean and yet also strangely humble. Like, by fortune go we. It made us even closer if that were possible.

I am shamed that we stole from men and killed some, although only when we had no choice. More than becoming men, who we had been got lost, destroyed. Ma's rearing, the lesson of pa's death, I can see those got tossed along the way and we became empty souls.

Counting up on my fingers I make it 1879 before we were back riding north of Houston. It came one night there in East Texas, a miserable cold one with us together in a blanket for warmth, that we found ourselves bent heads together in the light of our campfire holding a raggedy map so each could see. We were arguing about where to go, unusual for us, normally we just knew where the wind wanted to blow.

“Geneva, Texas?” Andrew suddenly crowed. “Oh my God, John, there is another Geneva.” The name had caught his attention on the map. He whooped jabbing his finger down on the name. “We found it brother. Home at last. There it is, Geneva, Texas.”

He insisted we go see it. The name spooked me. Brought back long banished thoughts of pa and ma, of Mrs. Whitaker, of Uncle Hubert and Aunt Tiersey. Most of all for me brought up the guilt we shared at never sending ma more money. Not even a letter to say we were alive.

Andrew convinced me. He said how we knew by then wandering for so many years that Alabama people tend to group together. Maybe they were there? Although never admitted we were both homesick as hell. Andrew insisted, the oddity of finding another Geneva in our lives would be lady luck and we daren't refuse.

"John, for my sake let's go. I've done some things for you and never asked for pay back. Now for me we just got to go to this Geneva place."

What we found was not the same Geneva for sure. No more than a hamlet of a dozen rough wood houses, a new post office, and one general store. The forest around flat and marshy. It sat in a clearing in what was then a vast wilderness running up to the Sabine River and the border with Louisiana.

Sheer coincidence had brought us full circle from Geneva and Geneva County, Alabama to Geneva, Sabine County, Texas. A circle of fate though one not returning us exactly back home.

My guess is that we stayed partly from such sentiment. We silently knew we'd started on our way badly, how we treated ma. The guilt I'd grown accustomed to grew inside Andrew too.

We had money from the work we found on our way back across Texas. For that matter I still had the full \$100 lady Whitaker had given me in the very same wallet, now worn flat by my one-thousand days in the saddle.

I kept my money intact, money's always close to my heart. What we spent came from Andrew's wallet. A miser with my own twin? He seemed to accept this for a quirk of mine and let it be.

We used the Texas work money to start the business. Felling trees was something we knew about from back home and too time-to-time in our travels and the odd jobs we'd found. Forests at hand all about this other Geneva seemed to rustle money at us in the wind through the pines. Money just standing ready to be felled and harvested.

Our lumbering slowly made us a small fortune, with which we built the lumber mill. That made us prosper all the more. So we built the lumberyard and hardware store. Above the store we added a nice big apartment to live in, three bedrooms a parlor and kitchen. Then at last I settled back to look seriously and with ardor for a wife.

Strangely, it angered Andrew. Or not so strangely with hindsight. My determination this time got him truly upset. "What do we need a woman here for? There's more than enough to satisfy us without bringing them home to stay."

I married Sally in 1887. Saw her in Nacogdoches one day and she made me think of ma. She was better looking but shared that motherly look.

We had Quincy and until she died on me in Geneva guess I could say I was feeling well enough satisfied. You know, not exactly happy if such exists, more like contented. It sure took me a while to get accustomed to staying in one place. Sally and I were together for nine years, till her death did us part.

1928

**The Making Of May
John Douglass Skinner**

Then come a most fateful day of life. Off I went to buy a stand of timber I'd heard about for sale. It was on a straggly hump of worthless farming land about ten miles off from Geneva.

Man who owned it, I knew, was a beat down loser fellow named Boedecker, a German. Rode up to Boedecker's cabin that day no way of knowing what creature was living there. No way we ever know what's waiting for us.

Rising in my stirrups to tower over that shit yard, chickens and pigs making a clamor, I called out for Boedecker. A shrew faced woman washed out like a rag showed herself at the door. Told me to quit hollering like the sheriff and come in for coffee. Said she'd go get her husband from the field.

Hag plodded off in no great hurry and I eased back in the saddle to wait. No way would I put clean boots down in that muck. Recall then fetching my smoking gear out of pockets, somehow they were always in different ones. Pinched some loose Bull Durham onto the paper. Rolled a cigarette in one hand as I had learned from years of riding.

How many thousands of times I'd done that. So many small things of life a person don't think of. But then something happens that makes you never forget even the humblest related acts.

Before I could finish the first drag of smoke, match dropping from my fingers in slow motion onto the Boedecker farmyard, I heard a light step on the front porch. A man of my age I knew well enough without putting a thought to it what kind of creature made those kinds of steps. I put on my best woman pleaser smile and looked up from my cigarette.

My mouth fell open. I'm positive it truly did. Not just a saying but the real thing. Jaw-down gaping stupid right there in the saddle. Who would ever have thought it possible for that lost stink hole in East Texas to offer such an awesome vision. Those eyes, that red hair, her wondrous skin and figure.

"I'm Boedecker's daughter. So why do you think you can come riding in here without a name and sit up there smoking like God Almighty." This girl was telling me off. Her cheeks flushed hot. A fine perspiration rose to her brow.

"Start by getting down like ma told you. You can take off that hat too." One furious flash, cold mountain water over spring violets, and Oh God save my soul.

“Come on in and have your coffee before I throw it at you. Best put out the cigarette before you set foot inside – use your boot sole. The butt goes in your pocket, not on our land.”

Then like a scent of pine in a spring breeze that mere girl laughed at me. "Ma will chase you with a knife if you don't wipe your boots."

She trailed music after her into the cabin telling me the most wondrous name on earth.

“You can call me Valla.”

The Divine Miz Missouri Slocomb, Alabama

Mr. Whitaker sank forgotten in time, quick sand sucking up over another desperate hand, although this one not so noteworthy to lose. Only his wealth would be remembered by others,

According to legend he had also been ignored in life, by Missouri at least. Her senior by many years, he lay alone in the Slocomb cemetery for 40 some years before they put her in next to him.

Whitaker held a fortune somehow acquired during and directly after the War. How, never a discussion for May's ear. The ever-more exaggerated amount of it, the source of it, such became whispered stories that assisted Aunt Missouri, who probably didn't need much help, to attain grandeur in Slocomb.

He left her his share of the bank plus the house, the finest in Slocomb, perhaps post war the most impressive in Geneva County. It stood near the center of the little town surrounded by tall live oaks and beds of carefully tended flowers. A two story wooden mansion tied in a verandah ribbon. An extra tower-story stood in the middle of the front crowned by a loggia roof.

May termed it Italianate style first time she visited. Perhaps because of that alone the house-proud old woman had taken to her quick and fast. “Nobody in these parts knows that much, child. Doubt few even know what 'Italy' means. We're gonna get along fine.”

GB laughingly referred to his aunt's house as the Slocomb funeral home. That quip often made sent Aunt Missouri to turtle dove chortling and smoothing down her dress on her ample hips. Truthfully, May knew, GB had pride in being related to this small palace, the same to Missouri Bell Whitaker herself.

From their first meeting Missouri showed extraordinary fondness for her nephew's young wife, blatant enough to stir gossip in Slocomb. Strangely it did not make May uneasy although it came with a constant gaze, an emanation of feeling that went beyond the very little she knew of friendship.

Missouri took her drinks in the evening, on her verandah when evenings were fair, otherwise by the fireplace in the front parlor. The old woman also smoked while

savoring her three or four glasses, May didn't wish to count, of Makers Mark whisky. She smoked Ramses II cigarettes ordered from New Orleans, secured in a silver ring holder.

Missouri always appeared in either a fantasia befeathered turban or, for outings, in a full low-brimmed cloche hat that obscured her forehead and partly veiled her eyes. It became a masquerade when her chauffeur, Horace, paraded her out in the resplendent Packard for her daily drive.

The old woman flaunted southern Alabama in many different attires, similar in exuberance, varying widely in color and beading, bows and feathers. May imagined her bedroom closets to be caves of an actresses treasures in shimmering dresses, gaudy turbans and glowing cloche hats.

Missouri succumbed to her penchant for feathers, dazzling long shawls and ankle length dresses. In dresses her taste ran to daringly low cut black satins with trains, of differing fabric patterns, decked in drapery skirts and lawless ruffles. For best occasions, she added strands of pearls and a more than a few boas.

The old woman painted a glowing center of bright red on each cheek. Then she colored on a lavish rosebud to the center of her wide lips and doused herself in expensive French perfume. Mo, her nickname in the family, flashed the same merry slit eyes that GB inherited, same black color, same slanting shape.

Saucy eyes looking out critically at the world almost smothered in the core of too much mascara and eyeliner. A regard that lowered the rest of Geneva County to serfdom. May admired her naturally long lashes and that strong Bell nose and chin.

"I'm no beauty," she'd drawl through her mischievous grin. "Just arresting, although to my regret never arrested."

Topping her out below the ever-present turban or cloche, orange curls flickered about framing a rotund face. In all, having long tired of playing the southern belle, Mo escaped by costuming herself up in eccentric finery and creating outlandish faces.

"I live now, honey," she told May. "I'm a flapper, see?" She'd wave her arms and all the silk fringe took flight. "The past's for dead people. I'm the mighty Mo."

She saved her genuine affection for GB and the boys. Especially, unaccountably, showcasing an ever loving warmth for May.

Despite her claim of living for now, In private Mo told May quite a lot about the old times in a quivering voice. Many dead stalked her.

"We lived fine before the War not that papa compared to the Mancils or the de Malgraces, but it was a lovely home with four big rooms downstairs and four upstairs. The cook house out back, you know, the old way. It was pearly white with large floor to ceiling windows downstairs that opened onto a wide porch.

Downstairs was the parlor, a handsome dining room, both with furniture Mama picked out in Savannah. Papa's smoking room and office were there. Each room of that house had a fireplace of marble come straight from Italy.

“Mama and Papa's bedroom was upstairs. We children slept in our own along with Old Francis and Horace to guard us. They aren't much older than us, you know, so that was a joke. They slept on the floor beside our beds. Francis beside me and in the other room Horace down by brother Rob's bed.

“We had 50 slaves or so, I mean nigras, excuse me. Four adults for the house and the rest for papa's fields. They were all family to us. I still don't understand how folks can say they burned that wonderful home to the ground. It must have been unknown bad nigras on the run to have done that shameful thing, not ours. We were good to ours. They adored us.”

When Missouri got onto this subject May tried changing topics. At that period she was seeing Mo three or four times a week, even up until she had Hubert. After that Missouri would come out to papa Zachariah's house where they were living, GB having inherited it when the old hero died.

What a funeral Zach's had been, Confederate flags and almost a hundred faltering old men inside moth eaten gray uniforms. They buried him in his own confederate uniform below a statue of himself, Captain Zachariah Andrew Bell, Alabama 31st cavalry.

A larger version of the same statue had years before been erected for the Confederate memorial in front of the courthouse in Geneva--the same that GB saluted with the boys every Sunday without fail.

Papa Zach saw his children survive the war -- Missouri and Robert, his first born, father of GB. Mo called her brother Rob in her talks. GB's mother died when he was a baby of malaria, a year later his father followed of pneumonia. Papa Zach and Mama Zach raised GB alone from then on. Spoiled him too according to Missouri. Mo and Zach had been close, closer than most fathers and daughters.

The focus on first names here continued to mystify May, the constant use of double names, made up names, or even the middle name instead. She grew up always using Soeur with a nun's chosen Saint name. For others, for her to use more than a title and a last name was improper. Particularly odd, using last names such as Mancil for a first name. But when GB insisted on it she yielded.

The middle and former upper class had their own naming system too. Missouri had been named in honor of the 25th anniversary of Missouri becoming a slavery State, when she was born on that date in 1849.

Being around Zachariah and Missouri helped May understand GB. At first she had been hurt that he deferred to Papa Zach or Aunt Mo, rather than to her.

Missouri, sensitive to people, picked this up. “Don't fret over it, May, it's our way, you'll get your turn to be revered. Just bet you'll have a granddaughter some day name of Oklahoma. Oklahoma Bell, that's kinda nice.”

Our way? May considered this but found in general she didn't like 'our way.' It sounded haughty. No contrition for the terrible wrongs 'our way' had caused and were still causing. All they had to do was look at the workers quarters on St.

Elisabeth or even at poor Horace moving about in invisibility. They wouldn't look she'd discovered. They couldn't.

Mama Zach, had also been invisible. GB's grandmother whose actual name was Leah, held on for a while helping with the boys post Rhoda. She died about the time May arrived, probably glad to hand it all to another.

Mama Zach apparently possessed no identity of her own until the tomb stone proclaimed one – Leah Emmeline Mixon Bell -- joining the Bell graves in the Slocomb cemetery.

"You don't mean to say my Mama Zack had a grand name like that," roared Aunt Missouri through her tears. "Why didn't she call it out!"

May's times together with those two characters, Papa Zack and Mo, were also teaching sessions in southern prewar manners and customs. With a deal of glee, Missouri, in her own way, even taught May how to use a fan, serve tea, cut flowers and arrange them to best effect and light a man's cigar. It was a game for Missouri, a useless gentility for dolls, and she would shake with laughter at the results.

Her great project had been needlepoint, but May who knew the art well from her nuns had balked there.

"Damn, child, you're spoilin' my fun. You do such elegant work I wanted you to do a good rendering of a nude man in point. Never seen that, I mean in needle point. Maybe a copy of the David, no fig leaf. Thought we might sell it at the Garden Club summer picnic. Give him a bit more size for value."

Missouri was never happier then when she felt shocking. About Cham, her favorite dog in the early time May knew her, "He came dick draggin' back this morning. Must have had a great time. Look at him licking those balls over there like they were ice cream." About the Whites of Geneva County: "No more fun than dead maggots."

One afternoon in the parlor in Slocomb Aunt Missouri had accosted her with an accusing tone. "Don't tell me you have no middle name.

"No middle name? That's a new one. Well damn middle names. May Skinner, 'MS' now that doesn't strike my fancy, sounds medical. 'MB' looks like you got branded by us Bells. You could make one up for yourself. You're free as a bird, while I got this army mule train of history chained to my ankle.

"Nothing's more important than naming, honey, except money of course." Missouri explained. "Both make a class. It's identity here. Can't forgive Papa Zach forcing brother Robert to give poor GB that awful name. He must have been loco.

"You not having a middle name is tragic. 'May's too short and you're too grand. Tell you what, I'll name you. You're gonna be May Elizabeth. That's perfect.

"My first name is actually Elizabeth, bet you never would have guessed. Doesn't fit me and too long to go with Missouri so it's never been used. Anyhow no one alive remembers it.

“Still brand new. We’ll just blow the dust off it. Name of the father, son and holy ghost I formally bequeath it to you. Herewith, go forth, May Elizabeth Bell.”

From then on Mo used this double name for her without fail. Alien at first it came for May to actually be her secret name. May Elizabeth.

When the babies came May made a point of presenting them ceremonially to Aunt Missouri. Her children all having died at birth or soon after, the oldest it was said making it three years--no more.

“May Elizabeth Bell you do make the most lovely of boy babies, do not stop. Fill the whole world with them.” This gleeful drawl giving May a particular heartache of her own.

One name never raised around May was of course Skinner. May felt it lingering invisibly, a vulgarity the better people avoided noticing, like a fart, and that the poor were afraid to use.

“Call me May Elizabeth.” I remind May Doll to this very day. She has such poor retention.

“And you have become May Elizabeth Doll.”

“Mais non,” she replies. “Let me be as I am. I wont change, ever. Jamais.”

“Tais-toi,” I order. “Do as Aunt Missouri says.”

1917

May Skinner

That January of 1917 Uncle Hubert’s wire came. At last he’d found and claimed me, the lost dog. A miracle to the nuns. A disorienting tremor to me.

The news came down like falling stones and rafters, my refuge the Holy Sainte Mary had fallen. Leaving the Mission was not my most profound experience but, yes, the trip was frightening beyond description. Very exciting too.

It snatched me from one culture up into another, from a life of deep sadness and being alone to one too crowded with others. From Oklahoma to Alabama. In truth I come to realize that in my long trip nothing about my outcast life changed.

In Atoka I was the French Catholic, the Mission child, a waif left on charity and dressed to suit a reformatory. Everyone stared at me, whispered about me, a community that wouldn’t accept me.

In Geneva County foremost I am John Skinner’s granddaughter, himself a dangerous memory lingering like storm clouds over the Wiregrass. Here, everyone stares at me too, whispers about me, another community that won’t accept me.

Bob taught me about what was beyond the Mission walls. Not at once, piece by piece over my time of growing up. He still taught me when I left the Mission to travel alone far far away to this place called Alabama.

Bob’s lips were thick and charred. His nostrils where huge, sensuous, a word I intuited but didn’t know until I was at the Academy. His wiry black hair flecked with

gray curled close in a skullcap. Bob didn't waste much time on shaving. Gray stubble prickled his cheeks.

His large eyes, for me at least, were kind, kinder than any I've seen on a man. Even than GB's.

For obvious reasons, when a child I had no playmates my age, nor even knew how to 'play.' No toys, except a rag doll that Bob made for me and that I always slept with.

She came made from rags—an oddly thin body, limp legs and arms-- all a patchwork of materials sewn together rough but ruggedly in course black thread. She wears a brown rag dress.

My doll arrived with a moon face, faded blue cloth of a strangely heavy texture. Matching pewter button eyes showed me when older the battered 'Great Seal of the State of Kansas.' These I know are Bob's army jacket buttons.

Long rag strips give her hair varying shades of black and gray. I love the hair but at one point decided to give her a coiffeur. Ladies of Paris demand elegance. This I achieved in uneven cuts using Soeur Marthe Paul's kitchen shears.

Asked once by one of my nuns for her name I was at a loss. Name? I knew no names. So I called her May, like me. Merely adding 'Doll' to give her more importance.

When talking to May Doll I did so alone in the long-gloom days of the Mission's front room. I declared to her, "You won't ever be like me, don't worry, hush."

May doll knows all my secrets, or at least those I myself know. She knows about my anger. Although hidden with care, unknown to all, she keeps me company for days when I am too sad to want any company, she is with me in spirit when I feel too shy to enter a room even where my own sons talk and laugh. May doll sees how high in the sky I can be, also for days over how sad.

After May Doll came with me to Alabama I asked her if she liked it here. "Mais non, I don't like it here. Can we runaway? Leave here forever, s'il tu plais? I am afraid. Such a very dangerous place, especially for a rag doll."

I believe no truer words ever came from May doll. Because she lacks a mouth such talk is divine. I imagine her beatified, Saint May Doll.

To make it all more complicated, since coming to Sainte Elisabeth I've become convinced May Doll is in truth a voodoo Doll. This doesn't alarm me. May Doll has never been naughty magic.

Impossible to ever write any of this although Miss Engle will be disappointed. What I know stays secret in my trunk. There can be no memoir of me other than a question mark on my tomb--I should explain that May Doll and I converse in French. This French is beyond reproach. Even St. Aix would approve.

In early June 1917, when my passage came from exile to exile, from one orphanage to another, there were many young men on that train. Green recruits rode along high on manly spirit, off in their new uniforms to their own great experience.

Most were too shy to look at me. The more brazen attempted to flirt. Myself, I stayed apart. I'd already aged far beyond them.

I was at that youthful time of certitude what those high spirited young men would become when I saw them shipped back made old by the horror. I had already seen my own horror.

I'd rotted in my trenches, been gassed, survived what had been for me the nightmare flares on the barbwire of my Marne, Somme, Verdun. Enough.

I foresaw little hope for them. I held no hope for myself. Nor do I today.

Only the dead know my story, although then I didn't yet fully understand this. The dead weren't yet talking to me. All remains unknown these years later, although I am certain that behind my back my dead tell my tale's mystery.

1924

**Run Before It's Too Late
Aunt Tiersey Skinner Casey**

May 31. 7:14 pm. Geneva, Alabama

Here in the kindness of dusk I sit guarding to myself some small pieces of May's puzzle. I'm guessing this poor young woman is a tormented puzzle since the day she was born.

I know that soon enough I'll be taking my pieces of her away into the wide blue yonder. Then who'll know?

Never have said peep to May about the reward Hubert offered in that newspaper advertisement he placed out West over so many years. Offering five dollars to find her? I told him it was cheap. Made me feel like we were buying her at the Five and Dime. Money for a child.

Big brother didn't listen to me, never did. I told him to offer \$25 to get a result and not look bad. He just said to hand over \$20. Hubert, I miss you.

Used to be a lot of Skinners around. They ran away or died. What's left is me, cousin Chinless--that poor fool--and now May. It's some better for us, fewer folks remembering. Still enough hating us.

Never told May about the odd exchange of letters between that nun in Indian Territory and Hubert. I read them all.

To this day she thinks finding her, so forth and so on, happened by miracle in the spring she came here, in 1917. What a laugh. The first letter about May came out of the blue all the way back in June, 1907. Guess May would have been seven years old by then from the birth year the nun gave us.

Told Hubert the pages of that nun's letters were so beautiful they ought to be framed. He said, "Good idea, Tiersey, fetch me a frame."

Nun's first letter seemed too cautious, suspicious to me. Just said 'might be her, don't know, not certain' and so forth. Second one, more than a year later, was more assuring, saying it couldn't be possible although the girl did seem to be the one we

searched for. She gave a box number address in a place called Atoka, Oklahoma. Couldn't even find it on a map in the library.

Signed herself 'Sister Saint Axe' somebody. Some Saint. In 1913 a letter came saying the girl was ill. We still didn't even have a name for her. For a while we heard nothing more. Gave up, thinking she'd died.

Suddenly in 1915 this nun sent a letter telling that 'May Skinner' lived. Not to worry, she was in good hands. May Skinner? Why not tell us first letter she wrote. Sure got Hubert hot. He began pressing that nun for more.

Hubert wrote asking how come they'd agreed to take in a May Skinner for all these years. For how much money was his real question. Nun answered back in her own sweet time, saying the child's father had left them 'an adequate allowance' to pay her keep. Hubert replied faster than clink-clink asking if there was any of it left. The nun never answered him on that score.

Then Hubert wrote if our John Douglass ever came back for this child or asked about her. If she knew where our brother lived. Did she know of his twin brother Andrew Fredrick? Never heard on that either. Worthless.

In February 1917, the year May came to us, this woman now signing herself Sister Sainte Aix of the Mission of The Holy Sainte Mary—where do Catholics get such names? and that 'e' on saint?—explained that May would graduate from High School at end of May and would be ready to travel to us in June. Arriving in June? High School? Might be a couple folks in Geneva County ever got a high school diploma. So exciting her truly coming home.

We knew naught standing there on the station platform expecting her any minute, just her name. No photo, nothing. May arrived on the train from Mobile big a conundrum as 'why.'

We never got told those nuns were French or that our little May spoke it too. What a shock when she opened her mouth and that accent of hers fell out. Who'd ever imagine a Skinner speaking French. With the war in Europe on then France always had a headline in the paper.

For sure the nun not once hinted about her looks. I didn't give a fig, I'd of taken a cross eyed dwarf. Still, was I ever in shock when May came in sight.

She just sort of floated on the train steps looking about for us. Had to hug Casey's arm to stay on my feet. Could that be her? I kept looking around for another 17 year old girl. This one just absolutely could not be our May Skinner. For me she came in a Valentine card of cupids and lace. The train blew steam hosannas up my skirts.

But then she meets GB Bell here at the welcome party. Of all people. Then they get married. Then he gets three on her. Now I hear he's busted, taking her off to that Godless Sainte Elisabeth. What to do?

At the train station back when never in our days had Hubert or me seen a girl so pretty. I recall panicking. My strong feeling was to jump for the train and stuff May back inside it. Tell her run before it's too late. Wish I had.

1928
Rolling Out
March 25. 10:37 am
Geneva County

But at last leashed to Dandy's frail withers the wagon is jerking them onward toward the Geneva Southern Methodist Episcopal Church. They are off to a place May doesn't want to go, from a place she is desperate to leave. To May they go helpless.

They in the wagon are trapped in passage under the ironwork announcing "Plantation The Sainte Elisabeth." It sags high in tattered rust. Sunlight angles so that as they pass under the wording ghost letters glide backwards over their heads.

May holds her breath rolling between those massive gateless columns. Forlorn grandeur standing charred black, marooned for more than 60 years. She always senses madness there fortified and loathsome.

This suppressed spot of abhorrence. To May it comes in a hot satanic touch to her cheek. She refuses to pass any hint of the corruption on to her family. They know nothing about where they come from, where they are, about her.

Perfect timing, Dandy twitches her tail at them. Underneath their own sign the mule lets loose in full on red dirt. Splattering followed by the acrid odor of fresh excrement, hardly new to any of them.

"Well, I do agree with Miss Dandy," intones Maurice in his most solemn drawl, his voice ranging up and down some octave or more, mischievous eyes a taunting glint. Buddy and Joseph Henry roar. She even sees a ripple across the shoulders of GB's cheap black suit coat.

"Flesh is flesh, my sons, it doesn't vary much among us, animals and men. But we, excepting Maurice that is, should have finer thoughts," again the laughter.

Laughter she finds sad. It does not settle into memory. It tears much quicker than a cry of pain. Unjust, so fragile a sound and how easily killed, like a flaring parakeet beset by crows.

"Papa, that's not fair," shouts Maurice to be heard above the wheels. "That sure is one dandy homemade pie, whew," More laughing.

"I was saying, master smart alec, we have thoughts that can free us from the body," persists GB, choking down a chuckle. "Practice when you're around your mama. Try keeping to higher ground."

When GB speaks the boys, James Lamar too, listen. Maurice lowers his eyes although he opens his mouth to reply, then thinking better of it sits silent. May guesses he swallowed a crack about her temper and expletives.

Most people around respect GB, for honor and wisdom. Yet she knows also that some find him absurd. To his back she hears enemies snickering 'Bad Luck Bell.'

James Lamar complains in her lap, wanting to get down and roll with the wagon. Mancil holds on to her chair, "To help keep it still, Maman"--in truth holding to her. Hubert hovers faithfully near her, sitting with one arm braced on her hip. She touches his frumpy down head, wanting so much good for him. Maurice slouches insouciant at the tailgate staring at everything except her, yet as they progress whenever she turns his way she catches his eyes on her.

Up front, GB silent as usual, the most silent person May ever met except when he lies in her arms and begins softly spilling to her things from his thoughts wonderful thinking pouring into her life like his seed.

What a man, and that nobody knew other than her. He she holds among the core of most guarded secrets. She comes to live in awe of his intellect, seeing the tragedy of it lost in the Wiregrass. How she longs for those rare occasions when his mind opens to her in love a pleasure sure as what his body gives her.

Pilgrimming on he clears the way for them like the prow head of his own dreadnaught. Arrogant in jaw, chin forward as they jostle town ward. Slant eyes set darkly on the road, lean shoulders rigid. A message she reads of defiance. Herewith announcing: one honored woman, six fine looking sons-- Bell Clan on the move.

Her good deed for the world was marrying this man. He is still her lover. The one being to lay her sadness on, inflict her fury without shame. She cannot perceive why she keeps her secrets guarded from him.

In alarm May suddenly makes note to remind the boys to keep James Lamar well away from the Lilies of the Valley, those in front of the shanty. 'Tears of Our Lady' are also mild poison-- leaves, berries and the dainty white bellflowers too. May finds the ironic normal, how something lovely, revered and rich, can be venomous.

May

Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary

The nuns were, according to their want, guardedly affectionate, indifferent or unloving. Ever reproving. Strict and distant. Kisses, given only for 'bonjour' in the morning, for 'bonsoir' before going to bed, were never more than a fleet pass of parchment lips to the cheek. Hugs were unknown.

Their feelings for me, from those few that held any, showed in fragile currents of affection, clumsy caresses that were a flick of finger bones. Most hands came down on me in corrective taps to my shoulder or hands.

They told me, La Petite-- as they called me -- nothing when I was little. No history of me. Silence about me as if I were nothing. To have been raised in a convent, by nine ancient-to-me French nuns, made me I suppose old too. An old child alone. The Mission of The Holy Sainte Mary stood a mile and more from town, no neighbors nearer than that.

A hundred or so Choctaws lived not much further in the opposite direction over the rolling prairie hills. Locked away to themselves in their proud hatreds. Poverty accepted in the simmering incomprehension of their Trail of Tears. Perpetual victims.

Until I started school in Atoka I spent my days inside the Mission, mainly in the large front room. I was given paper and pen, a few children's books in French. The world around me was French. The nuns spoke it invariably without any sense that they had been transported into an English speaking world. I spoke it too except to Black Bob. Manners, attitudes and a good two thousand years of culture were French. All for me to learn.

It was forbidden to go out beyond the front gates, where France ended and the barbarian domain began. But I could play in the courtyard there. Gate locked and closed on the land beyond. Peeping out I followed the dirt road that passed by in an empty line from horizon to horizon, no other building in sight. I came to thrill in the empty landscape. And loved the road for all the possibilities it presented.

At back of the mission were two acres or so of garden, mainly vegetables, corn, tomatoes, potatoes, and 'mais oui' the garlic and sweet onions. There too I could go, St. Ephraim or Soeur Claire warning me each time to beware of scorpions and rattle snakes. In the garden was the well. It became a mystery to me, water given up miraculously from deep in the earth, cool and fresh.

In the garden were the wooden 't's, another perplexity—where she wondered was the rest of the alphabet. These she would learn marked the graves of friars and nuns. The transformation of these citizens of France and children of the Holy Mother into the letter t struck my young self as funny magic. No one bothered to explain them.

Wherever I went inside the Mission, or outside, front or back, at some point I'd ever catch the watchful frowning of Soeur Blanche. She my jailer.

My one friend was Black Bob. One of my earliest memories is hearing the nuns calling him. Looking back I see that Bob-- so big and rough, scarred on face, arms and hands -- felt sorry for me, although this did not occur to me then. I'm sure there was an unconscious twining between us, he the father and me the lonely little girl in need of teaching and protection. Things were as they were for me. I knew nothing more.

1902

Indian Territory

Later May was told how on arriving at the Mission what arrangements were hastily made to accommodate her. Beyond the heavy doors to the aisles of dormitories, facing on either side of the courtyard, Soeur St. Ephraim and Soeur St. Claire voluntarily moved to sleep in the nearest cells side by side. While still a baby and toddler, May learned she had slept alternatively with these nuns every night.

They moved her at age five to sleep alone in a small bed in the Mission's large front room, near to the stove for warmth.

One of her first jobs as she grew older was to know where the nuns were placed and to fetch them if needed. In memory May still recites their names according to the ordering of their cubicles--five to the left of the courtyard, four to the right. After St. Ephraim in the left corridor came Soeurs Blanche, Jean Dominique, Odile, and Saint Terese. Down the corridor from Claire, on the right, lived Soeurs Marthe, Bertille and St. Monique Aix.

By the time May could remember there remained only two with medical training at The Holy Sainte Mary Mission--Soeur St. Monique Aix, their nun from a titled family, title or name none knew, and Soeur Blanche, the working class bully from Lille.

These two sisters had rarely spoken to each other in years. They most often communicated in notes passed back and forth by May. This meant that if an emergency arose May was to call on Soeur St. Monique Aix when the situation was serious, and upon Soeur Blanche otherwise whose skills were thought less professional. May learned this meant Soeur Blanche was the mid wife and nurse, St. Aix the doctor, a hierarchy Soeur Blanche often dismissed by puffing her puffy lips.

Mostly Soeur St. Aix spent time in the chapel situated at the end of her corridor and directly beside her cell, playing solitaire or reading her own treasure of French novels. She lorded the chapel to such an extent that at least two nuns referred to it bitterly as the parlor of La Comtesse. St. Aix it was who each First of April turned up her long pinched nose to May on morning greeting, "Ah yes, our Poisson d' Avril."

But Soeur Blanche could be anywhere, fiercely pronouncing opinions on each person's work, everything done or to be done. Beyond the chapel, she ruled.

At start of her fifth year it was Soeur Blanche deciding it was essential that 'La Petite' have English lessons. These were to be by Black Bob.

Black Bob had been at the Mission when this group of nuns arrived. 'Our inheritance' as Soeur Blanche referred to him, not without respect. He was ancient to May and truly oil black, very big and stronger than any man in the world. Bob was their handyman. He worked chopping their wood, endlessly carrying in big buckets of water, fixing what broke, digging holes for trees or cutting down those that died.

For years before May came, it was Bob who fetched their mail from town, brought in the few provisions needed, and most importantly gave the nuns a sense of protection. In summer he kept the prairie grass cut for the nuns theoretically to protect the mission from prairie fires but more so to keep back the wild and dangerous creatures that the sisters imagined to be encircling them.

In winter he lit the fires in kitchen and front room. Before leaving, when cold chilled the rooms, he heated buckets of water for the nuns to fill up their old-fashioned bed warmers.

Indispensably he set mousetraps in strategic places about the Mission, then raised up and disposed of the mice, the quick and the dead. In unison the nuns were afraid of snakes, bats and rodents-- their greatest fears were of the mice running up under their habit skirts, of spiders in any shape or form creeping into their sheets, of scorpions crawling into their shoes at night for warmth so that May awoke in spring and summer to rounds of shoes being pounded loudly on the floor tiles.

They also avoided heights. Assured they would crash down from any ladder onto Mission floors in a dreadful mess of under garments, flaying legs and worse, of broken hips. They were not young.

Of course their principal dread was of Man. May thought this strange when older. Jesus had been a man, she reasoned. Bob was surely a man and they worked with him as if he wore a skirt. Anyway, May was inculcated with the knowledge that there were far too many men in the world, they were frightening and most, except for the Pope and Black Bob, didn't do any good at all.

Teaching 'La Petite,' as the nuns called her throughout her life with them—except St. Aix who more often referred to her icily as 'My Daughter', which as intended enraged May and elicited "I am not your daughter!" with a hard stomp of her boot. -- was a task Black Bob accepted with dignity. He did the job in great seriousness.

"It be me who to teach you, L'il Pet, so mind me good or I'll flatten your butt." Teaching first the words for every object, every activity associated with the Mission, the land and sky. The showing and naming of things went on outdoors, summer, fall, winter and spring, even in rain and snow. Bob was impervious. Her small hand rested in his time warped giant's paw.

He slowly repeated these words again and again, with a gusto of ornate talk in his slave-army accent. With him French was forbidden. To May his language was the alternative both thrilling and lovely.

He told how he was born a slave in 'Bama. Wherever that strange place could be.

"That place a sight prettier 'n here. Green? L'il Pet, you never seen such a grand shit ass green. But you gotta work it hard, choppin' cane, pickin' cotton till your mother fuckin' fingers die off.

"Glad I got me a place out here. Weather do suck a big 'un. Dry here like dust in your mouth. All time that wind comin' at you. It going bang bang bang at you non stop. I don't like the cold neither. No matter what at least here I can call me free.

"For slaves in Bama life wasn't what you call life. It was shit. It hurt me bad, what those murdering cocksuckin' pig assholes did to my mam." This impressed May deeply even though she understood it but vaguely.

When she turned seven Soeur Blanche again dictated. "La Petite must go to English school in town. She is an American, she must speak American.

“I do not hear much difference in the way these uneducated people speak. But I keep remembering the first American nun we spoke to when we arrived in Saint Louis. This English of Black Bob's is not at all like hers. Something must be done.”

Thus May went to school in Atoka, walking to town a full empty two miles forth and back by herself each day. Nevertheless, the afternoon sessions with Bob continued until May left the mission.

Thinking back she herself muses in humor over what a strange creature she must have seemed to others, dressed in old fashioned black dresses, speaking in an incredible mixture of Soeur St. Monique Aix-- who had for years taken responsibility for her French speech, reading and writing and from whom May often received ruler slaps on the back of her hands-- and of Bob. To this day she thinks in that bizarre melange.

Good fortune awaited her in the town's grade school teacher, Miss Howard, who took May with fitful kindness but lectured the class not to mock her. Notwithstanding which they relentlessly did so with the evil intent of children, their pack instinct aroused against a weaker foreign presence.

Miss Howard worked with May half an hour each day after school for that whole first year, a saving grace against the pack that otherwise awaited her beyond the school yard. After the first year May spoke English as well or better than any child her age.

Aside from school and Bob, though, she lived foremost in a sequestered French world of language, manners and thought. A childhood heavy with medieval religion, rigid with discipline, black abounding in color and thought. The sole emanations from those dark rooms.

At end of first year, Miss Howard gave May the class articulation prize, while remarking privately that she spelled 'like an Indian'.

1928

Distressingly Late

March 25. 10:48 am. Geneva County

To May they do seem to be rolling faster than usual this morning. Dandy, she considers, might be in a friskier mood lightened of her load.

May wishes she too could dump her load of conflict, worries, endless questioning, and unwanted memories in the road. Most of all her damn secrets and mystery danker than a swamp sweat. She'd leave it coiled, steaming. Her pile would stink too, draw flies for a feast. But at least she'd be free of it.

If stripped bare May would be far more foreign than she is seen to be. Danger for her if stark naked for all, to be known to all. Instead she hides, a woman hiding her past even what she doesn't know of it. Cloaking forbidden beliefs, or lack of them, secreting blasphemous thoughts.

One protection May uses against fear and evil, Bob's amulet hidden on her chest. Bob's amulet came hot to life after her arrival in Alabama. It scorches her skin to this day.

Another solace for her, one she has long discounted but can not escape, she turns to now. May troubled, May in trouble, alone May, lonely May, frightened May, May in fury, fatherless May, motherless May, mother May. Anxious while the wagon jolts her forward to what this day before her brings she turns in a few seconds of distraction to a discarded consolation—while also thinking wryly of Dr. Pavlov's dog and smiling back the urge to bark.

Nous vous saluons, Reine, Mere de misericorde, notre vie, notre joie, notre esperance, salut

1928

Choctawhatchee River

March 25. 10:50 am

Toppling up in a hard bounce onto the bridge the wagon abruptly takes on a new sound. Changes from the slurring of iron rims and mule shoes sliding through soft dirt to a clacking-cracking, plop-plopping over the bridge's wooden bed.

Stale water sours the scent of the world here. River stink overwhelms all else. The river can be seen on either side of the aging iron bridge frame either surging along in its channel or caught idle in rotting stagnancy around tree trunks.

Each Sunday on their way to church this crossing makes May feel a dizzying antithesis, the wagon moving west, the river moving south. She is in awe of the Choctawhatchee River writhing down to the Gulf. Its lane hedged on both sides by skeletal masses of dense cypress.

A huge bird starts up from the cypress as they pass over. The family turns in unison to gape, speechless for once, watching the wondrous bird soar up into the sun.

May wishes the moment could be repeated again and again. It left her bedazzled, "That's a Blue Heron." Even GB sounded husky. "It's got a wing span of at least seven feet, maybe the biggest I've ever seen.

May accepted the amazing bird for an omen. Good or ill? It had flown away from them up into the sun's blinding aureole. She could no longer see it for real. Gone too soon.

'Choctawhatchee' chanted the ignorant boys. Dispelling the wonder.

Even James Lamar tries to burble the sound. It is a tradition to chant the river's name as they cross over. GB taught it to them with care. He takes time through the years on these drives to Geneva to point out the animal and place names of everything they pass.

'Choc taw hatch ee Choc taw hatch ee Choc taw hach ee.' The river name becomes an incantation as they jolt over the uneven span of the bridge.

May does not sing the river name along with them. Anyway, they make fun of her when she uses the word, flattening it under her accent. She rides silently over her own story drowning beneath in the muddy river.

The place arrives. Buried on the other side of the dull-red Choctawhatchee. Right here, just after the bridge ends. Here, when the wagon returns to its usual muffled sway and jangle, red dust billowing about them. Here lies the murder mystery of this very day at the side of a forlorn Geneva County road. Annunciation day following her down the road of life and over a river polluted with crime.

Was this message left to her by the giant heron, a legacy hanging in the mid air of her mind? May considers it probable, the heron had disappeared into the firmament directly above the grave.

In her mind's eye the image of her grandfather comes to her. Stiff, clamped jawed, glaring at the world from inside his photograph. His Union army uniform unfurled on his shoulders like a defiant battle flag.

GB, does he know this exact spot, what it means to her? Yes, of course he must, without doubt. Husband and wife they haven't once alluded to it. Everyone here does know, she believes.

Grandfather Bell, their own Bell patriarch, Papa Zachariah, with his eyes firing bullets in every stare over the pomposity of his white beard, held all of the cards, more than May cared to know. Yet too he never mentioned it to her.

Papa Zach dying almost nine years back but living on not only among his family but also, unfortunately, throughout the entire Geneva County. A hero to them of the Confederacy. A hypocrite to her stinking of prevarication and bigotry.

Only her boys she fervently hopes are innocent. Her one and only prayer. They must never know.

Passing the spot of spots as May refers to it she makes to wipe dust from her eyes although in fact she's glancing quickly to the side. She does this every Sunday drive to church. Today, it's his day. Yes, the marker stands.

"Happy death-day, grandfather," This offered in English in a mere movement of her lips.

Aunt Tiersey dead. Uncle Hubert dead. Everything they owned going either to far strayed children or to taxes and debts. No ties remain of any kind except for what the wagon carries. Herself and these boys, all of them dead sea scrolls about to collapse into hourglass desert sand. Excepting of course for Chinless Louis.

This marker to her Grandfather, such persistence in keeping it, never fails to strike admiration. Also the crazed heroism of the tale it honors.

Yet in truth to May the marker ever resilient reminds her unwillingly of a mortal skin growth oft removed that grows back bigger, blacker, each and every time.

June 20. 10:43 pm

Summer solstice, Saint John's Day Eve. For the evening of this day GB always goes to the Masonic Hall in Geneva, the solstice she learns being the most important Masonic day.

He always returns late and too cheerful. Repeats what he thinks is clever year after year with a big grin, that Masons honored summer Solstice eve holly and ivy.

Two years ago the first St. John's Eve here at Sainte Elisabeth, GB left her alone with the boys. She is not forgiving him for that. He doesn't even realize what he did. How he'd gone laughingly on his way.

"You hear drums or singing down there don't go looking for it, you might end up touring in one of those darkie jazz bands. Worse, you might disappear forever."

Still joking he'd kissed her as he went out the door. "Remember what I told you about the gators, moccasins and leeches? Well, voodoo is worse. Those voodoo gods, whoo-wee, you and the boys better run and hide."

Ha, ha, ha. Son of a bitch.

It is the first time she feels fear at Sainte Elisabeth. Difficult for her to believe. But later that night she does hear drumming coming from below, clapping too, bullfrog-like singing. Bob had been correct. She's home and it is a voodoo land.

Then May lies sleepless alone in their bed, tormented by humid heat and mosquitos, cursing GB for leaving her with drums beating time from the dark heart of Sainte Elisabeth.

In a panic she gathers the boys around her to sleep together in the same room. No more than surprised, they are too groggy to inquire. Full moonlight from the unclouded night sky flows in, dismaying her, affording them no hiding places, offering them up to raptors.

Lying there sweltering, she and the boys are trapped in that first St. John's Day Eve. Holding Bob's magic bag eventually she even catches herself praying to the Holy Mother. At this she laughs inwardly at herself.

In the depth of the night May suddenly hears different sounds. Those totally unusual for Sainte Elisabeth. These bring her quickly, silently from bed to stealthily don her coat over her nightgown, slipping it on backwards so that her front is defended.

From the kitchen window she follows the headlights of three model Ts making the turn between the de Malgrace columns. Six car lights bobble about in the distance coming in amid the ruts of the old lane, stuttering as they pass between the parade of oak tree trunks. They come, pause, round lights probe the moonlit plantation where the road turns down toward the workers quarters.

She fires up the front room lamp. Whispering into the bedroom she rous up Buddy, her tall strong 16-year-old to come stand beside her at the front door. Buddy so sleepy he forgets to cover his yawns like she'd taught him to. May so agitated she doesn't think to remind him.

Now the cars proceed up toward the front of the shanty. Exhaust smoke rising in the moonlight, braking, they stop in a row almost bumper to bumper, sizzling. Together she makes out that the three cars hold perhaps 13 or 14 men.

“What’s going on, May? These fellows aren’t friends of papa.” Fully awake Buddy too feels the threat.

“No they are not friends, son. Do you know where papa keeps his shotgun?” The boy nods, alarmed, yet excited too, she can tell. Males. The cars idle, pistons grating, only the glow of cigarettes burning to show life inside them. Still no action. No wave. No move to alight.

One of the dim hulks in the rear seat of the lead car begins to whistle, the others snigger--“Let me call you sweetheart, I’m in love with you.”

Buddy is back. May grabs the shotgun from him before he can wrestle for it. In her hands the shotgun becomes ponderously deadly, far worse than when the bull snake lovingly twined up her leg. “This damn thing loaded?” she keeps her voice steady.

The boy nods.

“I do not want to hit anything or anyone, dear. I just need to tilt up and pull the trigger, right?” They were lit in the oily glow of burning kerosene, toxic wisps polluting the purity of a country night in June. Enough for her to clearly see his innocent young face twisted in a solemn nod.

Where in hell are those damn dogs? For that matter where was the fucking bull snake when she needed him.

“Who are you gentlemen and what do you want here?” May calls out through the front door screen, where she has come to stand her ground. Her voice far more calm than she thought possible. To this the driver’s door on the first vehicle slowly opens. A short thick shape heaves forth, nothing more than an outline to make it possibly human.

“Where’s GB?” The man’s high pitched whine hits them like a gunshot blast itself. The county accent is strong in it.

“I’m Mrs. Bell. What do you need my husband for? Your name please?”

Now the man lumbers forward to the steps to the porch. “Sir, that’s far enough unless you tell me your name.”

In the shadows this lit cigar is a threatening circle of fire. Like a peephole into hell, thinks May, or a wrathful spot of wrong ready to consume all that’s good.

“Guessin’ he ain’t to home or you’d not be a aimin’ that at me. Him and us had a date tonight.” Crude tittering comes from the cars.

“He’s in bed sick. I won’t wake him. Tell me who called for him, and a message if you wish. I’ll tell him.” Buddy, close behind her, seems about to burst. Instead he whispers in awe, “You told a lie, May.”

“Tais-toi, my son, this is very serious.”

“You’re the yankee foreigner of his. You the Skinner woman who can’t talk straight, ain’t you.” Not questions, statements. May brings up the gun barrel into the moonlight glow that has turned the wire of the front door screen to a gossamer white.

“Heard you was the feisty kind. OK, no GB then we’s a goin.’ Just tell him we’ll be back for the next meeting. And tell him we gonna take care of the bad niggers you got here.”

May’s temper flares. “Harm anyone on Sainte Elisabeth and you’ll pay dearly for it.”

Thick shape shoots a spark at her. He’s tossed his cigar butt onto the porch. He turns.

“Pick that cigar up off my porch, sir, and take it with you.” Her words astonish her even as she hears them spoken.

From inside the second car a voice she thinks to recognize sends back the words in a mimic of her accent. The others guffaw.

On his waddling return to the Model T the fat man pauses to spit into her Tears of Our Lady. At this the force of her anger is the violence of a clattering lid on boiling water.

“That was not polite. Mind your manners if have any.”

“Don’t preach to me, Skinner woman.” May thinks she hears growls from the cars, same if filled with wild animals. “We might come back for some fun, never know.”

Door slams. Gears rip. In slow motion the trio of Ts begin to back around and maneuver toward the road out.

“Do not tell your father a word of this, Buddy. I won’t have him angry with these men. That could be a very bad thing. Understand me?”

The boy’s head bows somber as a pallbearer.

“Now back to bed with you. And thank you, son.” She hands him the gun so awkwardly that at last he does smile.

“It wasn’t really loaded, May. Papa’d never let me give you a loaded gun. I’ll take that cigar butt away so he won’t see it tomorrow.”

“Please throw it into the rubble.”

Before closing the front door May looks at the dim landscape of Sainte Elisabeth spreading before her like a magical druid time land. Full summer-solstice moon shows a face both sad and wise. Her glance at the land, quiet now, no drums, no Fords, is caught fast on the spot on what jolts her like a vision.

At first she sees what she takes for a statue down by the start of the footpath leading up to her door. It would be a tall heavy stone slab, Neolithic, carved into the image of a woman. That or more likely a primitive and towering pillar? Left by the men as a curse.

Whatever it is, darkened and ominous, it stands on guard down the path toward the doomsday cabins that have fallen now into total blackout and silence. No faint

laughter, no singing, no drums. Not even any ghostly wisps of smoke in the light of the moon twining up from chimneys.

This figure, human she hoped, remained before her until the sounds of the cars faded away. Only then did it take the form of a woman, not at all a statue. May amazed watched it swiveling like a heavy stone on wheels, like a remnant of the larger ruined world.

An unknown woman. She goes stalking back down toward the swamp, vanishing into thickening mists.

“Oh my God, mama, what was that?” May didn’t even notice he called her ‘mama.’

“What was what? Go back to bed. You need your sleep for that math test.” May yawns fervently, hoping to end the conversation and with that to make it all a dream for her boy. “Take the rifle and put it back, carefully, wherever your father keeps it.”

After shooing a now wide-awake Buddy off to bed with his brothers, May herself collapses into one of Aunt Missouri’s chairs, beside Mo’s table in the kitchen. She turns the lamp down low, not off. She wants some light to pierce her lingering alarm, the high tidal wave of anxiety that whirls about her head. Beside her a glass of rum shines amber. May empties the glass in big gulps. No, GB must never know of this evening.

When her GB at last returns grinning stupidly she slaps him so hard he had her hand print on his face the next day. Her fury stamped his cheek for almost a week. Fading to a dim purple tracing of her fingers, the same in cave paintings too old to be believed in.

In return he merely gives her his bewildered look of concern. More and more she sees this expression yet is wordless to explain herself.

Sainte Elisabeth. Cousin of Mary. Elizabeth, suckler of John the Baptist. Second most revered mother of the Bible. Why name the plantation for her? For that matter, May almost smiles, why had Missouri felt compelled to give her the same?

And who indeed had been that mystery standing guard in the work road in the bold shining of the moon of St. John’s Eve? A human woman?

Nonchalantly she asks Buddy in the morning what he made of it all. He could do no more than look blank.

Later the lad commented, squeezing her heart with his amazement. “Why don’t they like you, May?”

In answer she could think of no lie that would suffice, no truth that wasn’t too convoluted to tell.

**Child May
Mission Of The Holy Sainte Mary
Indian Territory**

In waves of recurring Sundays May is beckoned back. Far away through the tunnel of time and space. To regard the world from the Mission's back steps with Black Bob or spy around the front of the building in safety behind those massive stone corners.

The Mission building had originally been built by Benedictine Friars coming from France through New Orleans, then by wagons to Fort Smith and on into southern Indian Territory. They founded the Mission of St Joseph. Indian converts, or recruits-- actual slaves in their way she supposed-- built it. The mission rose when the Indians were still on the land around. Before anything else to see but earth and sky. Before Atoka existed.

The building's sturdy walls were of irregular gray stones brought down from nearby hills. Bland to the edge of existence, being flat-roofed and without ornament or exterior windows. The structure added but one flourish to the empty expanse around it. This a square bell tower standing 20 feet at front and center, a cross atop its stones.

This humble bell tower rose over the lolling roll of treeless land much like a prison guard tower. It became the central point of reference to May amid a grassland that came sweeping up to directly touch the compound on each side. An emptiness so powerful that it made ready to swallow the Mission, tower and all.

Sometime after the last Friar left, or disappeared into a garden. The single Mission bell also disappeared. Black Bob said it was swiped by a marauding band of rebels to melt down into firepower. Child May believed this explanation too prosaic. Sometimes when playing May suddenly heard the missing bell speak. A canon bass booming all the way from wherever, thrilling her from head to toes with the heroics of battle.

This was becoming but she chose instead to see the bell returned to France in a puff of little bare cupids, miniscule cream pastries for genitals.

French nuns were sent to reclaim the mission a few years after the last friar died. French Friars to French nuns. May's nuns. Thus it changed gender to the Mission of The Holy Sainte Mary while retaining its heart of France.

A small inner courtyard made a crude cloister to protect a cherry tree that gave in abundance. In time May climbed up into its branches gathering cherries into a wicker basket. Once a nun told May how the cherry tree, unfortunately not this one, lowered its branches to the pregnant Virgin that she might have cherries on command. Through years of trying to 'command' this without success, May at last accepted that she herself might not be another Holy Mother.

Light came into the Mission only through courtyard windows. Gloom prevailed inside its rooms. As a result May gloried in the sun. Sunny days drew her outside. Sun held sway over her then, whatever the season, and when possible she kept her face turned to it enthralled, eyes closed. Her sun king.

Interiors were a combination of hospital and prison. Tile floors, pine beam ceilings, blank white walls dulled by decades of smoke. The rooms held virtually no furniture except for beds and many ponderous French armoires. In time even May would have her own armoire trained in from Dallas.

What furniture there was was for sleeping, hard dreams. For work, hard benches and tables. For thinking, hard books.

The mission's long front room held row upon row of books. The Friar's library rose up there like additional defensive walls. Their books piled high on shelves, 278 volumes in all. May had counted them upon finishing them all, even to the most abstruse.

For all her years at the mission this was May's true home. She slept, dined, read in it. Through time her first small bed grew in size like magic.

The room had served the various projects the Friars pursued. Serving them as refractory, reading room and for the long work on translations of French religious texts into Choctaw.

In one creaking volume on a back bookshelf May discovered a lurid illustration of St. Sebastian with more arrows than the pins in Soeur's Odile's pin cushion. An intriguing illustration because the saint was quite handsome and almost naked.

Thinking of Indians May had once shown this to Soeur Saint Aix. "The friars were like this?" she'd asked. Without a pause Saint Aix had replied "exactly, just like that."

Why should the Mission be so dim and hostile? In defense of what? Although later figuring it was made so from European fear of the vastness about. When a teenager she decided the lack of light and windows were emblematic of what religion demanded, a blind mind.

For the nuns the front room became a commons, a place for their dining, sewing, conversation, and gossiping. But May soon became possessive of the front room. It belonged to her for 15 years. She especially liked its large fireplace and Franklin.

Except for the etching of Mary in ecstasy and a crucifix of Jesus in agony, the room's one ornament hung in a niche between bookshelves, a framed copy of the official photo of the reigning Pope. May went through Leo The Great XIII, Pius X, and, during the great war, Benedict XV.

When they might surface to mind for some reason she dismissed them quickly as 'her pompous pontiffs.' Looking back May found Calvin Coolidge a vast improvement, which to her was not a compliment.

This then designated her known history, one of the missions for the Civilized Tribes, as they were known. Each nation-- Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, Choctaw-- having been relocated by the US Army, force marched from the southern Gulf States to what would become the horror of 'Indian Territory.'

1913

Bob's Tale

August 15. Mission Steps

May's best times with Bob were those of summer. Almost every summer day, while a madly colored Oklahoma sunset kept her enthralled, she and Black Bob sat together on the back steps of the convent.

There, out of hearing of the nuns, Bob told her exuberant tales of the African religion he knew, also of what the Indians, at least the Choctaws, believed. More stories to explain the unknown to young May. One fine day he related what became May's favorite.

Bob said: I grow up with the voodoo, child. I can't explain it, too deep. Big secrets, lots of power. Peoples come from the ocean, the big water. There be a great creator and then there be a woman, Yemaya. She sort of like the Mary these sewers always asking for. I knows both the voodoo and Jesus from my mam. Catholicks is something else. But these Choctaws they got the best religion I know.

For them you makes your own up as you goes along, so much I can tells. Makes sense don't it? One thing's for sure they think they comes from the earth. That's right. They says men were first down deep in darkness. They begins to try to crawl out.

So they crawls and crawls and crawls. It be damn hard work for em. That tunnel was god damn tight. Some of em wants to stop and stay squeezed in the dark. But two brothers say no way. They be very brave. Damnation L'il Pet who'd wanna live stuck in the dark even tight as good pussy.

So, those two brothers they keeps going, acrawlin' on. They about done in when one of em spies this glintin' cat eye in the distance. That right. On they go racing for that cat, hungry maybe for cat.

Now don't get scared, L'il Pet, they ain't gonna eat no pussy. I gonna explain it to you sometime in a thousand years or so.

Bob paused there in the story to swallow a laugh which from experience May guessed meant he'd thought of something funny to say and then decided better.

Closer they get to that eye glowin' at em the bigger it gets up yonder. Finally they sees it ain't no eye. It's something else they never seen afore. It be the big thing other from dark, but they ain't got no word for it. When they at last crawls to the end of the dark tight place they been in forever they pushes n' pushes, plop. They pushes themselves out into all this white open place.

They couldn't see nothin' a whole week. But then little by little they see. Like kitties, you know. First this 'n that. Then the world. Themselves. Most of all they see the big light above 'em.

Then those first two brothers-- oh yea they be twins, forgot that part, real important to the Choctaws-- they bow down low to the light thinkin' he be the Great God of all.

But the Sun, he say to em, you can call me Sun boys. The two fellas fell down half blinded and began bowing and scraping.

Sun, he don't want this, no way. He roar, 'Ya best save that for someone else'. He makes the twins turn back to look over their shoulders. 'You best look yonder boys or you can cram it up the ass,' says God Sun.

And sure they do. Then they see the truth. They done got born our of Great Mother Earth's pussy. All that crawlin' was so to get born by her.

Then Bob bellowed his laugh, slapped his knee, flashed her his wide half-toothless grin the silver tooth up front sparkling with merriment. "Fuckin' great, ain't it."

1928

Valla

March 25. Hollywood

At 12 Valla turned a full woman. Trapped on that worthless scrap of land her pa worked. The Jones were the poorest of the poor in Sabine County. Smart Valla had to stop school when she was 11 to work with him in the field. She being the youngest by many years of their nine children. The others running off long ago. Late in her 15th year she found herself freshly married.

Two and a half years into the marriage, at 17, she became pregnant. It took longer to conceive then they thought it would.

Then came the real shock. Valla carried twins. John looked like a whipped dog when he got the news. "My fault, they come down in the family every so often." The pregnancy went wrong. Her feet swelled. She had fainting spells. Her back felt broken.

Last two months the doctor made her stay in bed. Even then it was a long horrible delivery. The doctor's face showed her a gallery of conflicting emotions.

The babies began coming toward the day's end on April 30. A day of ceaseless rain, violent tornado sky, a high wind whipping the pines about the clearing where they lived. In the worst of the storm Valla hollered that they were being blown naked as jaybirds.

First out, the boy. Born 11:19 pm, just as the earth trembled and howled. He died 10:28 pm. Nine minutes of life. He gave one lorn cry. Then turned gray. That is the life story of her baby boy. They called him Fletcher, according to John after his mother's people, Fletcher Andrew.

Valla held him briefly, nothing worse in life for a woman she learned than holding a dead baby. She never forgot. Nor lost the echo in her mind of his fleeting hopeless cry. She knew they both grieved for Fletcher Andrew Skinner. Sensed John did even more than she. At least for Valla his death was muted in the ongoing pain and dread of bearing the next one.

One dead, she knew the other was to die too. Repeated horrid grasping for air, a second despairing cry, all then over and done with before living could go wrong.

They would have another child. So she pleaded for this one to go too, she couldn't bear a living rebuke. even while doing what the doctor asked.

Despite herself she pushed with all she had to end the senseless ordeal. The second one crowned. Valla screamed at the same split second and damned John Douglass Skinner to hell more than a few times.

That was precisely 12:01, May Day, 1900. A moment utterly unique in human history. The date, one of two of any importance, Valla keeps to remember. This one of joy. Time of a girl born to take air lustily, cry with enthusiasm, clamber closely to her. A baby moving outside of her body. A baby struggling for all she could to get life.

When at last that baby's first cry filled the room Valla wept. The Doctor, after such a miserable labor, evidently relieved, proclaimed it a well shaped sturdy female. Life time for her daughter, fighting with nature, commenced directly, the tiny human winning its first skirmish just in time. That remains the one and only moment Valla holds fast in her deepest of being. An ambitious creature it turned constantly to her, to Valla, for help.

Doctor took her away for a moment, a long moment to Valla. Then came to give the child to her, saying, "Storm's over. There are stars showering on us tonight. The ancients would call it an omen."

He pulled the curtains open at the foot of the bed and dimmed the lamp. It indeed seemed to her that the sky fell on them.

"Also, the baby was born with a caul. Do you want to keep it?" Apparently she'd shaken a decline since nothing like a caul had ever been found.

Mostly, Valla recalls the instant the baby came into her arms, a moving breathing weight. This time a living being come from her body. John planted this in her. Never before or since had Valla been needed in such a frenzied frail demand. It left her in glory, glory she would guard as one flicker of what she thought must be happiness. A moment only, yet enough to make her feel worthwhile, accomplishing something of inestimable value.

She'd been able to nurse the little thing. That made her proud. As did the baby, ugly as sin, eyes swollen closed, bald, blood red, face pinched and flat like a wizened fairy nailed to a cross. Those tiny wrinkled fists fighting thin air, small mouth searching about in panic until Valla poked a nipple between its lips.

John had kissed her, and the baby. "I'll be right back ladies, just five minutes." She knew from his empty eyes, despite a stiff smile for her, what those 'few minutes' meant.

Then her daughter needed a name. Names made people. They gave reality and sustenance. Why hadn't she and John talked of it before? Maybe they'd feared bad luck? That they got. What if life left this thing in a minute, pop, a nameless balloon fizzling out into falling stars? Valla lay desperate for a name to protect what she had brought forth.

After an eternity of needing him close John returned, bumbled uselessly nearby his face beaded in sweat wet dirt lacing his cheeks like spider webs, eyes wild from cruel scenes. Valla let him hold the baby for a minute.

“I want to name her May, May Skinner.”

“That's a wonderful name, Sweet Valla of mine. Why May?”

“Well one minute less and she'd be April.” John gave a laugh like a sob. That memory wounds her. Poor man had little to laugh about in life, for that matter nor did she. They both knew each other felt haunted by the loss of their boy, later never mentioning him again so that he died twice.

“She's OK, John. Don't worry. May is as strong as you are. Tell me what you did.”

“I put him in the lumber yard, wagons will pack it down. We can add a stone if you want.” When John took him away she had feared he'd do the wrong thing. But she faced too much then, no time for either of them to make the right decisions.

Later, she'd catch him standing in the lumber yard, over the very spot, lying boldly to people about how he'd buried Fletcher Douglass grandly in some far distant cemetery. ‘My son’, as he called him, was thus laid properly back into mother earth.

To Valla this was shameful. Over and done with like a dog and then turned into a good story with himself as the star. But then thought Valla, guess it doesn't mater. And she'd forget.

At the time she said: “You did give him words, something. John, please tell me you did.”

“I said, I lay here back to earth my baby son Fletcher Douglass Skinner. God rest his tiny soul. Was that OK? Sorry I did it quick but I just couldn't bear it, Valla. I couldn't. I had to make it end. And I'm sorry for the middle name but he had to have one.”

Her big man melting down into grief, fighting it hard like most men do. After a moment he lifted his face to her. She hadn't the strength to touch him, just give a smile with love in it.

“You'll tell Ma?” He shook his head yes. “Andrew?” He shook his head no.

Only then, Valla partly recovered from the ordeal, did the meaning of twins to John come to her and of what that might mean to Andrew. She couldn't fully understand, only knew something cruel had happened to her husband and his brother.

“You did fine. I'm proud of you. Now attend to this beautiful girl friend of yours.”

“And for a middle name?” He fussed, hovering handsome and virile, touching her and the baby so lovingly and cautious. “She's got to have one. Everybody in Alabama has a middle name. My mama's name, Ruth.”

“Mary,” exclaimed Valla, so exhausted she slurred her words. “Her middle name is to be Mary.”

“Why that?” he'd blurted. Then stopped lost in her dazzling eyes fighting sleep. Quickly smiling he lay his hand over hers to join them together.

“May Mary Skinner.”

Dimly she hears him now repeating the name, growing at peace with it. “May Mary. Guess it was for the best she didn't come a minute sooner,” he joked back. It would be OK, Valla knew, holding her May Mary closer in those far gone, wee hours of a far East Texas darkness. Stars shooting through the heavens.

To herself thinking, I'll always know he'll wish for our boy to have been the survivor. Valla slipping into a drained drowsiness rested safe with a good man to guard them. Intuitively sensitive to men, she knew he didn't like the middle name. She also knew he watched over them like a father wolf sniffing for life.

“Still storming?” She groaned to him.

His reply a groan too as if they were sorrowing conspirators instead of lovers. “The storm stopped the moment she was born.”

Why didn't he say ‘our son?’ Valla wonders in her drowse. If he did say anything in that wasteland of a lumber yard, why not it be for them both?

May Mary needed a blessing too. She lived. Why doesn't he love May Mary as much as the boy?

At first the questions were disturbing. Soon she let them go, so young and in love, with them both.

May Mary she held all the closer. Valla and May Mary went to together, watched over by papa wolf.

May Mary. May Mary. May Mary, a name meant to give protection.

Also to bring the child forgiveness, mused Valla faltering in her terrible thinking. To grant her forgiveness for killing her brother.

1928

Geneva, Alabama

March 25. 10:56 am

Entering the town of Geneva, to reach the Church they turn up a side road at the foot of Commercial Street. This area always interests May being the town's river harbor where the Pea and Choctawhatchee rivers meet. A joining of streams explaining the town's reason for being. Also its richness.

Barges anchor here for taking cotton and other produce down to the Gulf. Fishing boats too. Along the riverfront are the warehouses for sugar cane and peanuts. A large gin is here too for what little cotton comes in these days, most of it from Sainte Elisabeth. The town's two sturgeon-canning factories line the river. A raw smell of fish permeates. Air is thick like mud. Dust hovers over all from a week teeming with freight wagons.

Just across the wide flow of rivers, down stream, its swamp sinking into the turgid current, Sainte Elisabeth is only six miles away by road yet here fades otherworldly, impossible.

Dandy snorts at them, sneezes. Laden wagon labors up the brick street to higher ground. Dandy complaining ee-aw when the incline burdens her pulling. They reach town at last, Safe above the flood prone confluence of the rivers.

Commercial Street shows her Geneva's wealth--a new high school, the citadel of learning in this small town, four banks, three facing blocks of prospering shops, offices for doctors and lawyers, two gas stations, three former bars now since Prohibition advertising themselves as 'social clubs' including the hilarious for her 'King Tut' where GB doused himself with bootleg.

Doorman's Dry Goods comes along here, Maurice stocking its shelves after school. The new movie theater too.

There's GB's Masonic lodge, three stories with two tall columns, second oldest in Alabama he's quick to tell. And then the handsome de Malgrace Memorial Library building, a good library for an out of the way place. This May's own true church although the name makes her cringe.

Her Saturday to-town afternoon is passed here, moonstruck in the stacks. She had gone first opportunity to research Bob's mojo bag, what had never left her body since he gave it to her. No help, the topic turned inexplicable. When she located what seemed a reliable reference the next would contradict it in part at least. Much of what she read she could attribute to exaggeration.

Apparently, May surmised, mojo was part of hoodoo rather than voodoo, but neither had become a theme of facts. At least in print by white writers. Something so profoundly African was a good joke thought May on the WHITE ONLY sign on the library doors.

Before reaching the prideful white columns and red brick of their church they pass a few blocks of large homes. The lawns of the big houses are well tended by cheap negro labor, children doubtless of the slaves who'd built the church itself.

Lined on both sides by oak trees, the street has a processional appearance to May much like at Sainte Elisabeth. Despite all, she feels the town's wistful charm. Aunt Mo herself incarnate.

On a Sunday morning all is closed. No cars for Dandy to beware of. None parked along the storefronts. The street extends empty. Showing that they are of course late. The main street looks spellbound. The inhabitants on a sudden vanished.

Life is only an eerie echo of their own brash noise. Their mule's shoes sound to be breaking the street bricks in two. To May a terrible din announces their arrival in jangling harness and chains, the rhythmic churning of iron rimmed wagon wheels, in the flow of loud boyish chatter.

May stifles a need to call out to their mule and wagon, 'Hush, be quiet, People will hear, they'll look and stare.' Whenever being drawn through Geneva in her chair and old wagon May feels the doom of an aristocrat being carted to the block.

Rolling more sedately now through old town Geneva, GB enacts the usual ceremony of arriving to town. He grandly gestures the boys' attention to the statue

of the Confederate soldier out front of the Geneva County Courthouse. The building a tribute to petty corruption and deceit.

“There's your great grandfather Zachariah, boys. Give him the salute.” Her boys always do. May never does. For her GB's theatrics are pitiful. The thrust hands to their brows, the loud comments. She knows he hopes for an audience that can be reminded of his identity, that he has one left.

“He's contaminated them,” thinks May bitterly. Feeling the bitterness a sharp pinch of guilt.

Geneva -- the capital of a small kingdom. Old and sleepy are the small towns it governs --Samson, Slocomb, Reheboth, Coffee Springs. Spanish moss drips from live oaks festooning their dusty red streets. Geneva County, spellbound, abides in a celebration of by gone days that is forever taking place.

“Hurry GB, we'll be the last in. You know that makes them more disagreeable than usual.” She means ‘stare at me,’ never saying it.

1910

Soeur Blanche

Poisson d'Avril. April 1. The Mission

Sitting outside here on the one bench surviving from the Benedictines I'm thinking their asses have kept it warm for mine. For whom do I keep it? From the distance, from where the nuns spy on me, what a sight I must be. A huddled lump of a habit, a black mole on the cheek of spring.

May's birthday, today, the day we assigned to her, naturally brings me to dwell on her. Although I need no excuse. Can she really be turning 10.

Inside the others are creeping and rustling about like lizards, spying on me, laughing into their hands, their sharp tongues flicking. Let them. At least my black bulk ruins their view of these spring daisies.

Few birthday gifts are ever given here. May has a homemade doll once given to her by Bob. I gave her a ball one birthday secretly leaving it for her early one morning on her pillow. May bounced it, ran with it in the front court. It gave her great pleasure.

For months the ball worked as I wished getting her outside into the light. Then it disappeared. May looked everywhere. No ball. I should have replaced it but there is so much intrigue inside the mission.

One of the nun's, who need not be named, even accused Bob of stealing it, what nonsense. He'd rather die than do anything to sadden her. No, I sense the intervention of St. Aix--perhaps she heard the ball bounce once too often?

Another birthday I had Bob put up a swing for May. She thinks it was all his idea, which is good, since she doesn't like me. He made it from hard wood and sturdy thick rope. It hangs from the cottonwood by the well. She swings there when schoolwork and her chores are over.

Sometimes these are normal swinging times for her. Others are frightening to watch from my perch in the tower. My opinion is that the nature of her swinging depends on what happens any particular day between May and a nun, between May and the children at school. Then again it can seem to result from an internal mystery.

Bad days, May swings hard and high. When she flies high as possible she continues, on and on. Her amazing eyes seem not to see the prairie beyond our walls. No singing or laughter, no smiles. She pumps the swing, a blank expression for all to see if they would only look.

Bob and I do. More often now I must ask him to stop her. He sidles up grabs her by the waist and whisks her off. She does not react. This moment of trance scares me. When her feet are on the ground again she wakes up--that is the exact word for it. May shakes her golden hair in bewilderment.

She does the same thing running in the front court. No ball now she simply races back and forth from left wall to right wall. When she arrives at a wall she slaps it with both palms, swivels and races back. There again I see her face change, leaving the Mission for some place only she can see.

Then there is this tower that has lost its bell to consider. She would not like it if she knew I was here without her. Recently after months of her begging I began allowing her to come up alone. Always a book in hand.

At first I was concerned but hoped it might be good for her. However, the sisters I sent to fetch her back began to report that she wasn't really reading. Instead, she stood in the center of the tower staring. Worse, May might not obey them. Now I've seen for myself.

Up there May loses herself totally, more so I think than in the swing. The surrounding landscape absorbs her like a sponge leaving no May. Nothing remains of her, only an empty body. For hours she is up there like that.

Getting her down becomes my duty. I heave my large self up those tiny steps to command her to come down. Obeying me is in her nature. May comes, but it is not May. I must shake her to make May come back.

Once I found her up there standing on the short parapet. So close to the edge my fear was that in calling to her she would start and fall forward. I made her promise on my rosary not to do so again. Could she be possessed? I ought to deny her the tower. Something inside me says to leave it be.

Perhaps worst of all, for her soul, are the temper tantrums. True, the worst come with St. Aix wrapping her knuckles over a mistake in grammar or manners. Those lessons are ever fraught with tension. They are held in the front room so one can pay witness.

"Fuckin' damn French. Plus perfect shit. I'm not a peasant. I am May." I've heard this. Also the slap of the ruler.

Recently she actually stabbed St. Aix in the forearm with her pencil. The dry cat was only appeased when in penance I made May wash our dishes for a week.

Her first high rage happened with me the time I drowned the new born kittens. After kicking me hard in the shins May raced about bucket in hand, screaming at the back of the Mission, ending up on the ground her dress drenched in water and all six of the dead kittens cradled in her lap. She shook one after another of them.

“Wake up” she called to each in turn, much in the voice I use to wake her in time for morning prayers. Anger brought blood into her cheeks. This crimson flush, the very opposite of a blush, is the one telltale sign for us that a fit is forthcoming, her face usually an alabaster marble.

One such time Marthe Paul tried fending off the fit by dousing her with a pot full of cold water. Nothing came of that except Marthe Paul won a firm push that landed her in the water.

Otherwise May is such a demur and kind child. She is certainly precocious. Despite her tantrums with St. Aix, our resident snob of ill intent sent me a note last week reporting that May possesses excellent control of grammar and that she progresses from Pascal to Moliere. Charming reading for a girl just turning 10.

What is in that woman’s head? There is a mystery concerning May and Aix, ongoing, terrible.

I also tried to find her a playmate. Here she is so alone. Thinking companionship would give her strength. This was George, Bob's youngest, a boy of 12 then, when May was 9. George did not work out. May apparently intimidated him to the point of idiocy. He simply sat on the floor of the front room gaping at her.

I wrote about a playmate to May’s teacher Mademoiselle Howard who seemed to be interested in her, even impressed. I received a note back that finding friends for her students went beyond the scope of her duties.

Merde, that’s a cool one for you. Probably doesn’t like Catholics. Or we French. Maybe she doesn’t like May after observing her fall into a trance? She can be intimidating.

This week the Mademoiselle Howard woman sent me a note saying May erupted in a rage in the playground, knocking down two older boys and hurting them. When discovered she was sitting on the back of another girl pulling her pigtails. The warning being she’d be expelled if it happened again. The woman can warn all she wants, it won’t happen.

I know the children torture her at school. A woman who comes to pray with us, one of the few white women to do so, has a child at the school. Her stories of what happens to May on the playground are harrowing.

What is wrong? Is it this land that fills us all with anxiety, too open, obscenely bare? Heat emanates from May. I can only sorrow for her.

Just recently I turned at last to Black Bob, asking him what could be wrong. Our conversations are difficult since I barely understand him. But he looked quite

surprised by my question. He was most adamant. Saying she's a good child. Better than any he'd known. According to him "if folks don't do right she tells them true."

I think I agree. Holy Mother I pray it is so.

Here, I pluck one lovely daisy. I'll put it in water and leave it for her birthday, in the front room, no note. A secret. A mystery just as May is herself.

Aunt Mo

Slocomb

In time, Missouri began to drink more, smoke more, while reliving a past that might or might not be fully accurate. The first crisis with Mo had been when Aunt Frances died, a personal tragedy that at first perplexed May.

"She was my mammy girl, you hear. I can't live without my Old Francis." And indeed the eccentric white woman grieved long and hard for the black woman who had been no more than a couple years older than she. Who slept with her as a child, when they were both children together. Her live-in cleaning lady and cook for a lifetime. Horace, the future husband of Francis had been given a piece of floor by older brother Rob's bed.

May found a decent hard working woman to replace Old Francis. After less than a month that was no good.

"You just can't make a servant out of white woman. May Elizabeth don't you look at me like that. You're a stranger here, you don't understand. I won't have self righteousness in my house. Tell me what's the difference between our nigras and your Indians out West? Where you any better to them? Why does the Klan burn crosses on the lawns of those rich Jews in Dothan? Honey, we're all together covered in blood."

So they found a series of black women for her, giddy young ones who knew nothing about handling crystal or shining silver, lazy ones who didn't care, bitter older women who clearly hated Mo and the servant status. Finally they gave up and Horace took over the house duties as his wife before him. He refused to cook so Missouri had her meals catered in by the Fleur des Lys Hotel in Slocomb, the one nice hotel in the Wire Grass.

May loved Mo, the feeling mutual. They talked a lot about GB, the boys, hard times, good times. They never questioned one another on their lives. Mo had a a telephone, a phonograph.

When happy Mo would play her phonograph rolls --one with Fritz Kreisler, others of arias by Lucrezia Bori or Caruso. And above all a collection of Viennese Waltzes. Although a short plump woman she would still dance a bit, slowly and with as much equilibrium as she could manage. Those evenings when a glass of bourbon finished---wham--she slammed it into the bricks of the parlor hearth.

One such evening, her turban slightly awry, an earring missing and her lipstick smeared, Missouri plopped down thigh to thigh with May on the fireplace sofa. Fritz Kreisler violined the scene for them.

"I have some words for you," the old lady caressed one finger load of rings. "I loved your grandfather and he loved me. I'd say now we had a certain kind of affair. He was more than good looking, he was a god. He looked like he'd been made by Michael Angelo.

You have his eyes and hair, the fine perfect features. Both of you deadly handsome. I think that's really why people here aren't drawn to you. I bet I'm the only friend you got. Folks shy away from what they don't understand, what makes them feel inferior.

"Your only friend she's a fraud for sure. So off with the costume, this here is a stage prop, see." Missouri pulled off the turban with her sauciest grin. May couldn't stop a gasp.

"I figured you do that." The tight old lady ran a withered hand over her bald head, deathly white. "It all fell out when I had malaria after the War, same spell of it that killed Amanda, GB's mama. Wouldn't grow back, the hair not her and I like my hair better. Went to a passel of doctors, down to Mobile, over to New Orleans.

"Nothing worked so I went to the turbans and then when they came into style took up cloches too. Praise the Lord for the cloche hat. Turban, cloche and my makeup got me Mr. Whitaker. A mean bastard of a yankee that I deserved."

Turban back in place, Missouri patted May's nearest hand. "Wouldn't worry, I won't be pulling off my wooden leg next. I didn't mean to shock you, honey, just wanted to be honest with you, well almost. There's still a bit of staging goin' on around here. Always will be.

"Your John Skinner would have expected that of me. He was the most honest man I ever did meet. He was also a true gentleman.

"We met at the academy here in Slocomb. He taught the section for girls. Let me tell you I was his star student. A few of us got together with him in secret, making likely excuses to our folks. We were wild and daring for those times.

"That was your grandpapa. Yes ma'am. Professor Skinner himself. Think he read whatever there was to read. He sure was on fire to change the world, while I was sure on fire for him. You'd call me pretty then, hard to believe so. Sixteen years old and hot to know the curious creature man.

"We had a place down by the Choctawhatchee, a clearing hidden from sight. Whenever possible he and I stole off there to talk, have a picnic. He did kiss me. Maybe a few hundred times. I still have those locked up in a jewel box that's right here." For drama Missouri touched her fulsome left breast that was almost hanging out of her dress.

"May Elizabeth, that's all I have left of your grandpapa. Not the breast, the kisses." Mo poked it safely back in place.

May moved to put her arms around the old lady, whose makeup was flooding down her face.

Missouri pushed her back. "I knew he was married. Being about ten years older too, and with baby twins no less, plus your Tiersey and Hubert.

"Ruth I knew she being a Fletcher, refined people. Sadly she didn't have any personality that I could ever get a hold on. Don't think John could either. Unkind to say, but to me she was sorta like soggy Lady Cake.

"He was ever the well mannered southern gentleman though. Can't say less of that good man. How I was smitten by him, still am. Don't misunderstand, I don't cry for me, or for him. Just for lost chances."

Aunt Missouri turned fierce pounding a pudgy fist on the sofa arm her bracelets chiming. Suddenly she struggled to her feet and staggered down the room to fetch more bourbon. Returning she remained standing, braced against the fireplace. Slow smoke arising from her Ramses. Waving her drink for effect.

"Mostly I cry from anger. Maybe that freethinking cost too much. Your grandpa thought his way away from me. He thought his way out of living. Whatever he set his course to he went for it with gator jaws.

"Know what? John Jefferson Skinner didn't become a Yankee soldier because he was an Abolitionist. If he were around now know what he'd be? He'd be one of them Bolsheviks. I think they are sexy and he was too."

A pause for another swallow of courage, another pull off the cigarette, "Wonder why it never occurred to anybody that I was his lover?"

This last caught May by surprise and she blushed. "Fuckin' damn blush." In confusion May had spoken. Aunt Missouri tittered.

"Good for you. Talk like a man do you? I think like one."

Gulping the last of the bourbon and with a saluting clink of bare ice in May's direction Mo smashed that glass with particular vengeance into the fireplace. She then sank back deflated into the sofa.

"Honey, I love you for a lot of reasons, just one being your grandpapa. One other thing I adore about you is that I can do, say, whatever and you never once look like you just sucked up a fly."

1928

The Extra

March 25. 10:15 am

Hollywood Time

Home sweet Hollywood home. Cram it. If there is paradise this ain't the address.

Mocking laughter accompanies a diamond glint of ice in the morning sun as Valla takes another swallow. Furious, she flips the bird at the world, pushing her free middle finger straight up at the scene around her rigid as a knife blade.

Take that.

Once a jewel of a woman, so beautiful she made a room of New York socialites silent, even when she entered middle age she remain a remarkably lovely woman.

This morning Valla wears simply what came readily to hand. A \$25 wide brimmed floppy hat, white with a black ribbon around the crown. She's in \$60 black silk slacks, \$75 black angora sweater. Color to match her toe and finger nails, black lipstick too. Her \$100 black satin sandals are from Paris.

Valla's wearing about \$200 in gold--bracelets, necklace, stalactite earrings. No rings ever. A ring would tempt the devil, she'd say.

Even her viper-thin white snakeskin belt glimmers at center with a golden buckle. For Christmas Tony gave her the gold watch and matching band that are too expensive to even take seriously.

When she tires of black she wears white, "or the other way around, whichever.

"A red head's got to be careful of what matches if not she'll look like a circus clown."

Otherwise, Valla sneers at it all. Things, money, people, sex, herself. Even Freud. Still, the price of everything is in her head. She can't help keeping track of how valuable she is, her worth secretly reassuring her.

For her one of numerous great things about gin is it forever matches whatever. Great for a girl of means. For her gin sparkled like the fresh squeezed juice of diamonds. Ah and smuggled British gin, the only kind she'd drink, was pure art. Of inestimable value particularly during Prohibition, which thanks to Tony she never noticed.

She thinks: I should call for Paulette to bring me another. Should but feel too lazy for that. This might be my last good moment of life. Who knows what the bastards are planning. Anyway, Valla's moving on.

"Here's to you, assholes. All this gaudy nonsense. Your rich bad taste. Your gaga looks when I show up. Your phony talkie parts."

The woman in the hat, by the big pool, beside a monstrous bungalow about which she'd lied to Tony saying it was even bigger than Morgan's yacht. It wasn't. She knew because she'd been on it. Also telling him no one had a bigger dick. The sap believed her.

Exuberant hat tilts back to suddenly reveal her head, startling apparition, sun and pool water shimmering together over her face, turning to fire in her hair.

Valla kills her remaining drink in one gulp. Ice cubes rattle, loud and sharp. That to make a point to Paulette, the one person who she knows to be listening.

Yes, here saunters in Paulette from out of the nearest bungalow door. My very own extra. Monster-butt maid-- Tony's guard, spy and drink counter--heading straight for me like a sow on back legs.

Paulette stands disapprovingly, what's new, shading her eyes with both big chocolate hands.

"Are you planning to stand there long? I'll have you removed from the premises." Valla holds up the empty glass and shakes it at Paulette.

“Who you talking that crazy stuff to, Valla? The swimming pool? Any fish down there? Then do something productive. Go for a swim, maybe catch one. I’ll cook it for your dinner. Folks hear your talk n’ you’ll get locked up in the loony bin. Sure got you a bad temper and wicked tongue.”

Paulette beyond middle age, is tall and big boned. Shades of her white self show through her black skin. When hired her only dictates were, no staying late, no bell, no uniform, no sinning stuff in front of her.

Valla is 44 years old. People think at most she might be 35. Tony she hopes thinks as she’s insisted, that in fact she has yet to turn 35, which by her is late this year and getting later each time she mentions it. As of now she has it for November. She’ll pick a day sometime, maybe going all the way to New Year’s eve to give her as much of being 34 that she can get. Every moment counts when they’re slip slipping away like gin down her throat.

Hollywood has been home, as she calls it, for nigh on 9 years. But she’s nobody’s fool excepting her own. And that is true. This isn’t a home it’s a set, she tells herself with assurance.

Here Valla Dash made a hundred silent movies: woman on street looking in window, slave girl among 20 others, Victorian lady dancing at a ball, office girl buying a newspaper on a busy street, woman sitting in hotel lobby, woman sitting in a stagecoach with baby, woman in hoop skirt and bonnet waving at a ship, woman with baby running from Cossacks, woman with baby on a train headed for disaster, woman with baby on a sinking boat.

“Always the extra lady. And why all the prop babies-- just for me. Yeah I’m the extra woman, think I have been for a long long time.

They’ll put that on my gravestone. An Extra.

“If they give me another god damn ‘woman with baby’ write-in I’m going to tell them they better make it a dog or else I’ll put Art on fire soon as they roll. One time, to make me laugh and ruin the scene, the bastards put a real monkey in the baby clothes.

Sometimes Valla misses New York. Her home too for many years. Although she is not into counting years, most of all not her own.

From sea to shining sea, but Valla never forgets she’d been born in East Texas near the worst wide spot in the whole wide world, the dreary clearing of Geneva, Texas, population 95 and she hopes declining.

Sabine County girl-- that means you can’t go any further in East Texas except to spit across the Sabine River into Louisiana. Geneva being too small for a real church they baptized Valla Jones in the Southern Baptist church of Milam, Texas. Remembering this makes where she is now seem somewhat for the better. It makes her feel almost victorious, like she deserved a lifetime achievement award-- helped along the way by ass, tits, face and a few blow jobs.

Behind the present, in her magnificent head, she has an iron door locked and barred. What is hidden there seeps out at her like sewer gas.

“Sure, glad. Glad glad glad, whatever. The bastards for sure won’t come for me, after all these years. What you have to do, you do. You don’t turn back on doing, the done, the undone, or you’ll go do-do in your pants.”

She gives the pool an equal bedazzlement, her wide real smile very rarely breaking the dead ivory of her regard.

At first Paulette did a sneering house slave routine for me-- ‘Good morning, Ms. Valla. You having a nice day, Miss Valla?’ sort of crap. I’d just tell her the truth, I always do, just like my ma taught me.

“Real nice day because it means one less for me to go.”

No matter what, she stayed nice until Tony flipped on me. Since then the real Paulette emerges, nasty material for a good prison matron. But I like her better this way. She gives me reason for being.

“Valla, you been out here too long. Get back inside. You dumb or what, ain’t no white woman alive out this early in a sweater worth more than I earn in a year. And with a glass of gin. I’ll fix you coffee but not before you come in. Your strange breakfasts getting stranger and stranger.”

“What you have to do to get going, you do,” I tell her. Monster butt. A real bossy fatso, but after seven years we’re accustomed to each other. Becoming Tony’s investment guard goon-- on me --has gone to her head. Ok I tell her. Up and coming in.

My new part is for a real talkie. Classy woman walks into Hollywood mansion. Script has me murdered. Shot in the gut just as I enter the house. 10 minutes of film. Five lines of talkie-talkie, couple of screams. Earns me \$1,000. They even want me to do it without a baby.

‘Huh,’ as Paulette would so aptly put it.

Movement does feel good, cigarette between fingers. Going across the lawn slow just to show her what’s what, that woman guarding me from the studio window. I’m still free. Free the same like when I ran away in 1902. Can’t beat that.

“Paulette, honey bun. I’ve come home. I’ll take coffee if you please.”

“Coffee? Huh. That’s new. No coffee’s gonna sober you up Valla. You were born drunk. You want it in the sunroom or dining room, madam.”

“Sunroom.”

“Oh Miz Valla, ma’am. You got da prettiest face ever I did see.” Paulette doing her fake Topsy routine. It isn’t funny. No voodoo Queen is funny.

“And dose eyes, lordy. Makes me want ta get down on ma knees afore ya and kiss yore ...”

“Ass? Fuck you too, Aunt Jemima.”

“I’ll bring your coffee. But you are staying inside until it warms up. No way around that business. You catch cold then I got to put up with your nasty temper tantrums.”

Valla Dash, her California name, eventually always does what Paulette tells her to. Dallying is pretense. Much easier to do so than deciding for herself. Everything that is except with drinking--Paulette says it's beginning to ruin her looks.

”Bullshit.” declares Valla staring intently at her face in her bedroom mirror. “Not a wrinkle yet,” she tells the mirror mimicking her long gone East Texas accent.

“Paulette. Hey, tons of fun. Cut. We start all over from the top.”

She switches to her New York Silk Stocking District croon. “Change of orders, bluebird. Bring me that damn drink right now, darling, or I’ll sell you tomorrow. Bring it first thing. You hear me. And out here by the pool. I don’t have enough courage to drink any damn coffee.”

Did I just see a silent ‘bitch’ on those lips smudged by too much ultra red? She’s got kids so some guy’s fucked her. I’d like to see who. Bet he had to put a paper sack over her head. Wouldn’t think she’d get the pick of the litter. Maybe she had to put one over his head. Maybe they both wore sacks.

Yes or no to the part? Guess I’ll play solitaire to figure it out. Although ‘no way’ is the only reply I know. Know your Nos. Then cheat. But what’s the point of cheating at solitaire? Whatever.

Up in the house, in retaliation, just to piss me off, Paulette's put on that Al Jolson again turned up loud.

My heartstrings are fucking tangled in god damn Alabammy.

Mammy--Mammy, I'm comin'—I'm so sorry that I made you wait.

1926

Passion According To May

A week after moving into the shanty, close to three years previous--furious at the work for her to do to make it decent, at the surrounding deadbeat culture swallowing them up like Cronus-- she lashed out at GB in the kitchen where he sat having his lunch at Aunt Missouri’s table.

“You, Mr. Bell, think you're so grand almighty with your name and bootleg gin. Merde, look where we are. You think those poor people 'down yonder' as you delicately put it, your workers, are beneath you? Do you think those you call ‘niggers’ or 'poor white trash' are beneath us? Fortune gave them tails. We got heads.

“Shit, we're chained together, the same. The one and only difference between us and those you call 'them' is that we have screens. We wouldn't have those if I hadn't insisted. GB Bell, you can cram this poverty up your ass.”

Then she struck him hard on the forearm with her chopping board.

Returning her a wild look, mix of fury and hurt feelings, he'd drawn back his arm, fist clenched, ready to plow it into her face. A bolt force. In fright she cringed away, an arm over her face.

Instead, the front door banged. When she dared look he was gone. Running to follow she saw GB striding alone in anger down the hill to the fields. May called after him desperately from the porch. He wouldn't turn his squared back an inch.

She raced so fast down the path she at last plunged forward off balance against him. A tackling embrace. Grabbing him breathless from behind, arms around his waist, she tried dragging him to a halt.

"GB, GB, GB." That's all she remembers saying.

He turned then. Looked down. She cowered on her hands and knees. "I figured I might end up having to be a papa to you," He'd whispered hoarsely still hot from high feelings.

"Must I be a mama for you too?"

He paused long. Did she see bitterness draining from him? He stood avoiding her eyes, refusing to speak, studiously intent on the red dirt on his boots.

At last, a wry twist of his mouth. "Tell you what, I'll be both." Raising her up, May stunned to silence, he'd held his head smashed against hers. Momentarily he put his lips to her hair before turning and striding on down to his work.

Finished, that most frightening fight she tries but fails to forget.

1911

May

When May turned 11 Soeur Blanche decided, reluctantly, it time at last to honor their promise to her father, starting La Petite off on a Protestant course. She ordered Soeur Claire to guide May to the front steps of that fated Methodist church, no further.

May remembered clearly how the Atoka town people gawked --a nun come to town. More diverting than a penguin. And to the steps of the Methodist church, never.

The appearance of Soeur Claire's black habit, white wimple, the rosary attached to her belt swaying along with her long skirts as she marched May forward, it likely provided a topic of much talk in that disheveled frontier village. Claire ignored recognition, but clutched May's hand all the tighter.

"Remember our Lady," warned Soeur Claire in her soft French with the rolling r' of the southwestern Midi, she like Ephraim from the depth of France. She herself clueless of what Protestantism could be.

"She will give you courage, dear. Do as the others do in there, then when it's over come straight back to us the way I've brought you. Don't talk or look at any man. Our Holy Mother will care for you. And above all never say the word 'Catholic.'

In tears Soeur Claire let go of her hand, a sorrowful, dramatic wrench as if they were forever pulled apart. May mounted the steps going to the guillotine, and her heart quaked entering through the open doorway.

Ah, but in fact it had been fun. Yes, she stands by the word 'fun.' No matter how boring it strikes her boys who after all take to it like frogs fucking in the early spring time. Also, those Protestants were friendly while the bare simplicity of the Atoka church amazed her, only the cross up front empty, no agony or sorrow. And most of all no Virgin. How odd.

In time she learned the English Bible sayings, in the wonderful language of King James. About singing in a group and the sometimes comical-to-her lyrics of hymns. Lines like “there is a fountain filled with blood” left her in glee. From the Atoka preacher's sermons she gathered vague lessons in the worn out radicalism of Protestant thought.

She heard about the Old Testament too for the first time, which she much preferred to the New Testament. Many enchanting stories there almost equal to those that enthralled her in her Greek book of mythology.

Altogether, church in Atoka was another kind of schooling for her. Now how thankful May is to have had it, especially with these Geneva people, in this place, where she could fit in only to a point of not being burnt as a witch—not yet.

“What a load of fuckin’ bullshit,” muses May. “Damn it, about now they’ll be starting the first hymn.”

1928

**The Man Who Never Goes In
March 25. 11:04 am**

May, impetuous on this day of momentous birthdays, of betrayals and murder, of Chinless Louis, jumped down first from the wagon. She hurried on alone toward the front steps of the church. James Lamar was left in Buddy’s hands.

She charges on through the jumble of parked cars, pickups, wagons. Ordinarily she waits for the strength of GB’s arm before facing the inquisition of church. Not so today.

Instead, with apprehension she finds herself proceeding on alone while GB hitches Dandy and helps the younger boys down.

To her dismay she has ‘The Man Who Never Goes In’ standing in the way. This is her name for him because every Sunday he is found skulking about out front of the church. Does he wait outside for someone? Perhaps boycotting the service? Or maybe in exile for bad behavior.

Today without GB’s arm he’s not edging away. He slouches alone with May flaunting his size, grimy hands pulling on his overall straps. A month of Sundays, the Man Who Never Goes In wears the same overalls, faded blue and patched. And the

same long john shirt. Never shaven, brim of a sweat stained felt hat shadowing his upper face.

May understands her mistake. Her walk is brisker. Suddenly The Man Who Never Goes In moves in close to intercept her. Puckering he spits so accurately that the gob lands quivering on a sidewalk brick about two inches from the toe of a wedding boot.

“Everything all right there, May?” GB calling from behind, guarding her. May glances back, he’s on his knees to tie one of Hubert’s shoestrings. He’ll have red dust on his Sunday best.

May steps lively circumventing the hawker and the man but not without blasting him with her coldest violets-under-ice glare. Her loudest ‘get fucked’ smile.

She swishes her black skirt protectively, frantic to get this horrible day moving forward. And too because she is afraid. Feeling more alone than if someone had dropped her into the middle of the Choctawhatchee. The Man Who Never Goes In whispers to her as she passes him, fast forward to the safety of church steps and columns. He also manages to grab her elbow.

“Skinner woman,” His malevolent rasping chases her—will chase her. May paused with a start. His foul breath wreathes her like smoke. She’d never hear him speak, imagining his voice to be high and nasal, the worst sound the County could produce. Instead his huge Adam’s apple bobs, and the voice comes rich and bass. To avoid the obscenity of the Adam’s apple she looks down, only to see that his overalls are hitched high so that bludgeon-like genitalia show too clearly in his crotch.

The Man Who Never Goes In smiles at her. Without looking she can feel it to be so. Wide mouth full of tobacco stained teeth, gaunt lips—emaciated like everything about him—it speaks again. The prophet awakes.

“Think you’re above us? No reason to. ‘Cepting that thing you got on. I wants it. Give it to me. That thing you got between your tits. No decent white woman wears that.” May could sense his excitement, like a dog about to hump her leg.

“Go away, sir. You are most unpleasant.” Without thinking May clutches Bob’s amulet through the yellow satin blouse.

“Better give that thing to me or I’ll come take it. You jes’ a Yankee that puts on airs. Can’t even talk straight. You the granddaughter of that traitor John Skinner. Think it grand being a Bell? They ain’t worth spit now.”

Side vision shows GB still occupied in something with the boys.

In a sudden grab for the amulet The Man Who Never Goes In lets her elbow go. That’s enough, May makes a dash towards the church steps.

“Honey gal, we gonna tar ‘n feather you. Me personal gonna feather your pussy.” Holding up long dirty fingers in her face he wiggled them.

“Everything OK there, May?” GB’s deep voice rises to her. “Hey there Obadiah, how you doing? You go about you business now. We best be going in.”

No, GB could never hear any of this. Otherwise, she knew he'd go straight to jail for murder.

1928

Annunciation Sunday, Geneva Church
March 25. 11:11 am

May sits in the pew in a burning rage, some fear too. Furious in part at her fear. A threat of violence and the great fears of her life, for the family, for her secrets to be revealed, rush in upon her.

What she dreaded most, memories, came down upon her so foul her throat worked convulsively to keep her from vomiting. The Man Who Never Goes In, Obadiah as she now knew his name to be, had done his work well and she damned him to hell.

May wordlessly poured all the epithets Bob had used down upon his head. Moment by moment she worked the anger out. Sent the ugly gargoyle of it out of herself like a foul smelling fart.

But not those memories the scene had raised, what she so darkly wants to be free of, those that no one else will ever know. Those abide. Mysteries she can never be free from.

How did that asshole know about the amulet? She is ashamed that her suspicion turns to GB. Of all around she has faith in his loyalty. Who then? Had it slipped loose sometime in town? The poison of suspicion.

This sanctuary atmosphere she finds stifling. "God damn it to hell," Groans May. Not only did these hick draculas threaten her, they ogle her to their content. They study her like a specimen, down to dissection, while baring themselves to her too in their peeping, voyeur eyes.

"They're baring their minds' private parts to me. They can't flash anything that I don't know about." She erects invisible walls against them. To push ugliness away she forced her mind onto her plan for the day. She can find consolation in that. Although she knew too well that when her plans went wrong as they too often did she would be a despairing mouthful of toothache.

She grabs for one of the paper fans provided in the pews by the local funeral home. Fans herself furiously. GB leans to whisper "are you OK?" She ignores him. She'd concentrate instead on Chinless Louis.

May's invitation to Cousin Louis gave 2:00 for dinnertime that afternoon. Chinless can't read so she sent it to a neighbor lady who cooks for him. Chinless is important to May. The wordless wisdom of their shared pariah status keeps them close in thought even when they have spoken but a few words together since May's arrival.

To this dinner at Sainte Elisabeth she sent Chinless a long overdue invitation after suddenly thinking of him one day. It came while stretching to hang sheets out back

of the shanty, a light breeze giving the world a whiff of fresh clean laundry, his face came to her in the wet white sheets. Like the Shroud of Turin, she thought. That made her laugh but she took it as a sign.

“Guess what GB,” she said over that evening's meal, “You ever hear of the Shroud of Turin?” GB seeming interested shook his head. “I'll tell you later,” their joke for their time in bed whispering to not wake the boys.

She'd tell him she wanted Cousin Chinless for Sunday dinner as soon as possible. 'Chinless' -- May falls into using the opprobrious nickname. The cause of the cruel name comes into her thoughts as they dutifully, obliviously drone the Apostles' Creed. *Conceived by the Holy Spirit. Born of the Virgin Mary.*

No one could see Louis without thinking of his nickname. He is without doubt one of the homeliest men to behold. Bald head, a bird's nose on a face that fell back under his mouth straight to dangling wattles. Then the insidious stuttering lisp. Cousin Louis walks a lonely road in life.

Louis, somewhere beyond his 70th year, retained the vigor of a younger man last time she saw him. It dismay's her to realize more than a year's gone since then. She begins to hear word going round -- Chinless Louis be getting senile, Chinless got the dwindles.

What hurt May most is the look of tolerance Louis carries with him. He beams approval of the world, everything in it. He's far from a simpleton, May knows, although people here accept him for one. She wonders how he can continue such a pathetic life, so lonely, alone in forbearance.

Despite the charged atmosphere of time in the Sanctuary, May's attention is torn between the watch in her lap and glancing over to be sure the boys aren't fidgeting too much on the hard pew.

Buddy has placed a hymnal over crotch she presumes to conceal an erection. Hubert and Mancil play with their service bulletins. Clarence John has been trying impatiently to concoct some entertaining shapes for them but has run dry of new ideas. For himself Mancil she notes manages to create something like a bird and therefore Hubert tries to copy it. Maurice idly toys with his fan advertising the Mixon Funeral Home in Geneva.

“Right everyone, let us now fan ourselves unto our funerals,” calm again the smile of secrets and mysteries plays on May's lips. Sitting head down, cheeks resting in palms, elbows on knees, Joseph Henry noisily thumbs through a hymnal. Buddy furthest down sits straighter than his Daddy, a couple of bookends distant and inscrutable, except that Buddy has slipped a couple of fingers under the hymnal. And they are moving.

May ponders what thoughts the young man plumbs so seriously, doubtlessly irreverent.

Her whisper goes to Mancil, “Tell Buddy I need to borrow his hymnal, pass it down please.” As instructed her message is sent from boy to boy. The fingers are stilled.

Buddy blushes. Men, thinks May but smiles to herself. The Man Who never Goes In has gone far away.

During the service, as GB does every Sunday, he holds James Lamar. This morning, his pocket watch gone-- the usual past time for the toddler-- he turns over his Sunday hanky. Big as a napkin, it becomes a playful cover for one of the funeral home fans. This serves for a while to keep their bundle of energy in curious peace-- or almost.

Above the human wave of coughs, scraps of talk above a murmur, a child's complaint, dropped hymnals, the confined rustle of clothing— sounding to May like all around where stifling back the urge to take off their clothing—and contrapuntal to it come the reverend's opening words of his sermon.

“Blessed art thou among women.”

May catches a low chuckle from GB. It comes as a gift beyond value, a passing pleasure in something his youngest child is doing. Without a thought, from long habit of intimacy, she lays her hand on his nearest thigh. Through the cloth she feels the muscle sharply contract.

1918
GB's Tale
Apalachicola
May 1

The preacher said the words, just words for me looking back. The ocean made us one, woman and man. Gulf of Mexico is less than away from here by the bird. By road like 80 miles or more door to door to a boarding house near water edge.

For a honeymoon I took her down there in Aunt Missouri's new Packard. Then, Mo bought one each year. From boyhood I always felt a lot of affection for Aunt Mo, no surprise she let me borrow it. Guess feelings were reciprocal.

I planned it that we got married in the morning at the preacher's house in Slocomb. Then made off to Apalachicola in time for afternoon sunshine. That car made it work.

We had a room at the Carrabelle Hotel, water view promised. And so there was one too.

My arm around her I felt May tremble when I opened the door to our room. Her comment made about the view, “This is the first ocean I have ever seen. It's far more than I had imagined.” It came like wonder from an astonished little girl.

Hotel was OK, not fancy, which I had worried about. In our wedding best we wouldn't have fit in at better places. I've been about to some, New Orleans, Savannah, Charleston. Toured the old South when I was young and wild. Learned a bit too much for my own good.

Carrabelle Hotel stood nicely painted, all white, nothing shabby. Maybe like staying in one of the big plantation houses from before the War except with a beach and some fellow retching his guts out in the next room.

May had been saddened throughout April by the news in the papers, the latest battles for Ypres, casualty counts that were unbelievable in a war that seemed never to end. I assumed our wedding and this trip to the Gulf would bring her some cheer.

But no, she remained subdued the whole two days we stayed. Not that she's a big talker anyway. She did tell me, "Thank you dear, here I can forget the mustard gas." Hardly what I had hoped for.

For two days nary a laugh only that strange smile made with her lips closed. I've learned it's the only way she can smile.

When we were first alone there she struck me as magnificent--that is the exact word. Full of old time grace in face and motions. Quietly dignified, that's what she was, now too. Most of the time.

The hotel set to westward so our room turned a brilliant warm orange as time went by. A light doing the strangest thing to my May's hair. From soft blonde it turned to a living fire. She stood framed by the Gulf water view in our room.

For about an hour that big orange sun sank down in the sky. At last touching the ocean horizon behind her. It hung there blazing in her hair, cutting her an outline of fire. For a few minutes it remained with her and made her put up both hands to touch the window in wonder.

Then to me it looked truly like she held the sun, a ball May balanced on a long rippling purple line, lowering it down slowly behind the horizon. So hot looking that you expected the ocean to boil as it disappeared.

Sun vanishing drained from her the glory I had seen yet left my May with me. Oh my God in heaven.

I've never been in awe of any woman I've known in the manly way. Never dear Rhoda who was almost invisible in here passive sweetness. But I was a goner that late afternoon alone in a bedroom for the first time with this awesome woman and her burning hair.

That whole time she simply stood looking out at the ocean. The sun setting, vanishing. Sights others take for granted. Even when it got dark she stayed quietly staring, the darkness becoming the deep blackness of the sea at night.

Some fishing boats were heading in to port. Their lamps flickered as they came closer. Waves to shore where about the only sound. I could feel her curiosity for what changed with the nighttime.

I guess May got lost in a personal get together with the Gulf, the ocean, falling into an intensity you rarely see. I dared not say a word to her for that good hour while she stood at our window.

She stared out entranced while I just sat staring in awe at her, now my bride, trying to swallow as quietly as I could. It occurred to me then how I knew nothing

about this strange woman. Not a thing except the facts Hubert Skinner related which were about five sentences of story. Lengthy as a salesman's guarantee.

My lady of secrets. People elsewhere, other times, might worship her. They do not here. They might destroy her. No way could they ignore her, which has set me on guard of her ever since.

That time at the Carrabelle is when I decided never to ask her questions about herself. I didn't want to know. From what I beheld in front of me they were better left alone. Telling might break her into pieces.

A while afterwards the room darkened. I asked her if I might light the lamp. I recall how husky my voice sounded and like coming from afar. Had to clear my throat to reach her, wrapped up as she was into herself and what she saw or heard out there.

The first thing she said, clear and strong? "Thank you, dear. You could never have given me anything more than this. Oh my, what time is it? We must freshen up and get downstairs before they stop serving dinner."

Dinner. That wasn't what I had in mind. I had a baseball bat in my pants. We never speak of that time. It's private for us both. We ordered a nice meal of fresh fish. Although May had never eaten it before she took it in stride. She took it all in stride. Even me. Still does, for the most part.

Except for the gulls. "I don't like those gulls, they scream." She told me so in Apalachicola. And so I in time then bring her to a home of seagulls, screaming in the air, screaming on the garbage. What curses me?

May was so poised and self possessed, hard to believe she turned 18 that very day. I had no idea of what to expect in bed. What I discovered was her comfortability with a man. I also discovered in due time the finest figure of a woman I ever beheld, big breasted, perfect hips, thighs and buttocks. Lying in her nakedness, her long hair now pale in lamplight, a spray of it about her, I recall the thrill of sheer appreciation that came over me.

One thing she did tell me then. Like a child suddenly, she hesitatingly, shyly held up a small leather bag that hung from her throat.

"This bag was given to me by a friend, an old man in Oklahoma. He told me to always wear it. Do you mind?"

It looked repellent, a dirty, petrified thing that I wouldn't touch although I think she wanted me to. Living wild, younger, I had slept with more than a few colored women. One time before I'd seen that kind of bag, in a cathouse in New Orleans. The whore said it was voodoo magic. Bullshit, but how did my May get one. From who? Why did she need one?

All my questions could not intervene. I sorely wanted to touch her, not the damn bag. It was May's first surprise of many, for her to have it and for me to react against it. Just one of a number of surprises that come with this woman. Good and bad.

“Whatever protects you, my love.” So it has stayed. I bless whatever it might be if it guards her. Screwy jigaboo thing that it be.

There in the hotel room shadows rocked by the roar of the ocean waves, I found what fortune brought to this poor man. Pure woman giving and receiving without taint of shame. I knew then, still know I do not deserve her. In time I am learning slowly that all GB Bell should be proud of is this woman-- and his sons --nothing in me, in any corner of me, to be proud of despite what people might think.

She was no virgin. She stared straightly into my eyes, nary a blush. And I no virgin for sure, too many times with women though only this one to remember.

Did I hurt for it? No, a bit surprised, but then again not really. I wanted to ask her how, who, but couldn't. Her strangeness is too great for me.

1928

The Staring

March 25. 11:36 am

Twinkling stained glass colors blotch their heads like electrified jelly beans. It's restless time for the older boys. May could have timed its coming. At the end of the pew three shaggy heads huddle to whisper.

She tried to cut their hair well, to make a lie that they could afford the barber. Her hair art looked shamefully amateurish to May. For some reason on GB she managed better. Joseph Henry must be telling a joke, about sex without doubt. The more into the story he got the louder his croaking whisper.

May took the unused stubby pencil from the pew back holder in front of her, provided to make a special donation or request a pastoral visit, and scribbled on her bulletin: SHUT YOUR MOUTH JH -- THIS MINUTE-- ANYONE LAUGHS & THEY'LL HAVE DINNER BY THEMSELVES IN THE PRIVY.

She nudges Mancil to take her important message and pass it down, but he is too involved in playing knock-knee with Hubert. She squeezes his trouser leg hard just above the knee. Turning in dismay to see what's wrong he gets the note. Knock-knee and the joke are rapidly left unfinished.

A haze of boredom settles on the boys. To May hers is basic police work for the requisite social rite. Her toddler, among the numerous bored, wants to get down and stagger drunkenly in the aisle. Jimmie Lamb struggles to escape GB's arms. May feels an occasional tug at her sleeve or a jab in the ribs from those flailing small elbows or shoes.

First married, Missouri coaxed her to rebel, having deserted the church many years back, jumping the fence of Bell tradition entirely by going over to the Episcopalians. But to May it would make no difference, one church or another.

“Tell my nephew you're staying home to do needlepoint. Or escape with me over to the Social Register. I want all the class I can get, darlin',” Missouri had declared with that naughty sauciness of hers.

“For sure you got that natural as honey. Maybe you don’t need Episcopalians. You ooze status, you’re petit fours and éclairs’ all over. Don’t you know these folk hear your talk and melt, just peek at you and feel their guts sink, or twist as might be?”

“You’re getting more attention than anything happening here since the Yankees steamed up the Choctawhatchee and stole the CSA Baumer. That was a gun boat, darlin’. You gotta know these things. Took her right off the cotton docks in Geneva. Steamed her down to Pensacola. My my, what shame. They all pretend it never happened.

“But they sure got to admit you’ve happened. Can’t ignore you, no matter how hard they try believing you’re only clear Jell-O. May, you are one real woman abouts for sure.

“Young lady you so damn striking you could pass gas and they’d call it 'status.' Me, I gotta do things like going over to the Episcopalians. Anyway, they do have status. That makes me as happy as Bourbon going down on ice. I get high on stat--us.”

Without thinking May looks upon the dutiful heads of the congregation. Knowing full well they are bored almost to anguish just like her boys.

A young man turns fully to stare meaningfully at her. Longingly? Is sex all, Darwin?

Others have stared too this morning. Imagination, or more so than usual? Why the fuck do they stare. May reassures herself that it is because of her wedding clothes. What no one else here but GB has seen. That is surely the reason. She wants to attribute it to the honey hue of the silk blouse, whereas she regularly attends in her trademark black.

“I’m an antique too, which doesn’t help.” Dress to the floor when mid-calf is the fashion. No hat or gloves. Still she is proud of her outfit. She smoothens out the thick fabric of the dress. Hat and gloves? Merde to those.

Long hair in this stupid bun, when the other women turned to short hair years ago. Her hair stays long because she remains incapable of cutting it. No matter that every so often in preparation she holds the scissors in hand, a towel over her shoulders, the mirror on the kitchen table with an old newspaper spread on the boarding to catch the droppings.

All for naught, she can merely lift the scissors. They won’t open.

Chagrin but nothing compared to what comes my way from the congregation, staring oafs. To ignore them, if nothing else presents itself for attention, I focus stupidly at the blank white wall above the altar. Immobile face in place. But what might be betraying me this morning? I’m drawing continuing attention from these men like guerilla gunfire, and for different reasons slyly from the women.

Ok, I expect their gossip, criticism and worst of all their pity. “See how poor she is now.” pity I must accept knowing it to be the most dangerous because it cloaks

their other feelings. Sitting alone to face these alien people. No protecting nuns, no aunts, no mother to be seen, no Black Bob.

In defense to staring I mount my half smile. From practicing before Aunt Tiersey's dressing table mirror I know the smile looks always the same. But to me they vary greatly: a contented smile, the contemptuous smile that I use too often. My angry smile.

For these church people I put up yet others, my "Oh dear, I'm so stupid," and the 'stay away' smiles. These dosed to my shame with a good pinch of the 'contemptuous smile.'

For the boys I invented one that is their one true mother's smile. Then there is the smile I give GB, his very own and no one else's.

1928

Sunday Dinner Menu

11:47 am

To be free of fear, staring and such absurd illusions May concentrates on her menu for Sunday dinner. What she was planning for Cousin Louis. As an appetizer she'll put together two cans of mixed fruit, drained, with a sugar, lemon and rum sauce. For a main course she has white albacore tuna in olive oil--never in water—which she seasons to coax some taste from the blandness.

To mix with the tuna she makes béchamel sauce. That will be served on white flour biscuits. She'll prepare collard greens too but made her way with only a touch of sugar then slowly cooked in bacon with a clove of garlic. The garden peas are already shelled. Yesterday afternoon she had made a pecan pie for dessert, Aunt Tiersey's recipe. In her entire life Aunt Missouri had never even boiled water and thought recipes were for the help.

More Rum tops off her dinner for a digestif with coffee. No matter what money is at hand, no matter what their circumstances, GB keeps replacing the bottle of rum in hiding in the kitchen. May shares the same taste. Every Sunday evening in honor of work done, she pours herself a stout shot. Sometimes more than one.

Once planned May had fretted over her dinner for days, would it be enough? Of course not. She herself will take her diminutive servings to help it stretch. And how to pay for it? May saves her sewing money, that must do. That would leave them without a penny in the house.

Soeur Odile had taught her to sew in the best French way, remarking that she had a gift for it. Sewing was the one teaching from the nuns that remains of any real benefit in their hard times. Odile was not a favored nun. Poor eyesight gave her a squint, a frown, a furrowed brow. But when May became accustomed to the nun's precious wine bottle glasses she grew to understand that the poor woman had no personality. Only religion gave her any substance. She was too bland to mean harm.

May had begun her small workshop by tacking up a note in the library to promote herself as seamstress. The librarians had agreed to allow her to meet ladies of the town to pick up work and then return with the reparations to receive her small payments. These transactions occurred on Saturday afternoons when May was naturally at the library.

Each coin so earned was saved. Small payment by small payment May accrued enough to cover basic extras.

Most recently the Southern Lilly white flour for making the béchamel and the biscuits, she has no idea how much that luxury cost only that it left GB just enough for the cans of fruit and two cans of the expensive tuna, plus some butter, fresh milk and cream.

She'd asked GB for the cream to whip up crème de chantilly, or as she joked, cream de shanty, for the pecan pie that otherwise seems so common here. Pecans simply came dropping on them from above, or as she put it strictly to herself hard knock pecans fell on a hard knock life.

No, what her sewing money covered would not suffice for nine people. Not so until after work Saturday evening when Maurice somehow brought home two more cans of tuna from Dorman's Dry Goods. She'd known the truth but hadn't the heart to go after him for this theft. Satisfied, she figures that four cans ought to suffice. To be sure she'll extend the béchamel sauce that GB so highly favors.

1928

A Vision

March 25. 11:55 am

The final hymn May knows too well. Again she must stand up. In honor of whom, or of what. Up and down they go bobbing in a deceptive unison, reaching for any possible divine intervention, for comfort, for a believable eternity of something or other, of someone, for them.

She holds the hymnal open so GB can see the page too, wondering if like her he'd lost faith in anything eternal. No, she knew he trudges on his way without much thought for it.

"He's stronger than I am," she says to herself.

"All other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand." He sings in a good manly voice. May of course never sings. She mimes by opening and closing her lips a bare eighth of an inch.

This particular moment has become lost. Dizzy in rising to her feet she gives herself to the cosmos soaring above the communion rail. It reminds her of the Bijoux theater waiting for the movie to begin with the little man down front playing a tinkly ragtime on the piano.

Beyond where the Chancel wall should be, above the sanctuary's apex the screen brightens out of black, flares up before her eyes in a fiery mosaic of a bewildering form.

"Good, at least this is in color. They say color is coming." From the amorphous it clears into a vaguely familiar face. Not Clara Bow. For sure not Gloria Swanson.

"Hello maman," flashes through her thoughts.

Before her on the movie screen drums pound silently. "The way they ought to," May can't help commenting.

A giant black woman squats naked belly ballooning, tits drooping large as hams. Scruff of hair tangles between the spread thighs. The arms are also spread wide in welcome. Her face shows nothing except a sensation of contentment and an enfolding spirit large as the woman. No expression other than what to May resembles the face of the full moon.

May tastes the raw fiber of chopped cane. Savage sweetness. Before she can understand what she sees her inner self has started praying. "Please get rid of that Man Who Never Comes In. He's such a pain in the ass."

Instead of a reply a snippet of Buddy's singing wafts to her along the pew, "All other ground is stinking ground . . ."

Pop, the chancel wall resents again to the commonplace. How boring, laments May. The source of the world had vanished before she could recognize it. Perhaps it was a movie about nothing at all? Turning her perfect head to send a deadly glare toward Buddy she hears a small commotion closer by.

"Maman, didn't you hear me? Wake up. I've been talking to you for a long time." It's Mancil whispering. "I gotta go."

"Need to use the toilet," replies May, choking back 'oh Lord, not again.'

Starting in apprehension May leans her lips against GB's ear. "My dinner, we must go, please hurry us along. Let's be out before the crowd."

He whispers back. "Rest easy, I'm starting down the aisle. We'll be the first out, first down the road. Be ready, they'll stare you with a vengeance."

"Oh, Mancil needs to . . ."

"Lord, not again," groans GB.

1928

May's Noon

It is noon. May feels it so. Unconscious as the flow of time through sky, through earth, through cognitive beings, each day May feels the advent of noon. All the life she recalls held day-to-day centers of passage, matins, noon and dusk. The nuns pausing at Angelus for their three Ave Marias that May learned too to say.

Ave Maria, gratia plena Dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictys fructus ventris tui Jesus. Sancta Maria mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae.

Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grace.

Hail Mary full of Grace

Whether in Latin, French, English most often the incantation comes to her in a fragment, a phrase racing through her head. She catches it for a mere breath, this mental distraction for a split second bound so into herself that she can't recall first hearing it.

The prayers do not disturb May unless she notices them and then they make her ask herself if she'll ever be free of them. Many private places in May open up to this ancient chant.

To herself, to May, she says "praying isn't belief, it's fear of the dark, dying, losing the ones I hold closest. I can't say it doesn't matter. It sure the fuck does. Unfortunately, praying just doesn't accomplish anything.

"Oh cram it, May. Just pray you have enough on the table to fill them all up."

1926

Tale Of The Workers' Quarters

August 15. Sainte Elisabeth

Two years ago, but May still often walks down in the full afternoon sunshine of that summer day. The day also an anniversary in her life like none other, that none other knew. Yet also another coincidence. Another spin of the bottle.

May's mind turns often to such scraps of memory, to her the seared parchment fragments from some gutted library of the ancient world. Bits and pieces of what remained of her from the Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary.

The afternoon she recalls she could go down to the workers quarters only because GB had gone off to yet another Masonic event.

He'd taken Buddy and Joseph Henry with him to town so they could see a movie. Maurice, uninterested in Rudolph Valentino, stayed home. She could then leave him minding Hubert and Mancil, sitting him to avidly reading Huckleberry Finn, a prison guard with his chair turned backwards against the screen door.

GB had told her never to go down alone. "Order, my ass." booms May at the absent GB, marching defiantly. Down the rough red track they go. August, Assumption, and Sainte Elisabeth simmers in a steam bath. Pressure so low it burdens her arms and legs physically in its heavy cloak.

She carries James Lamar then just a babe of a few months. One arm full of him, the other hand keeping James Lamar's head covered with a dishtowel. She herself in omnipresent May-black, the long sleeve cotton dress thwarting coolness and, she hopes, what they head down into, the land of flies and mosquitoes.

To blot the sun a grand Panama perches on her head tilted forward rakishly. Her only hat, flamboyant enough to delight her, GB gave it on her first birthday together.

GB's barkless dogs follow her of their own accord. They frisk several paces behind obviously knowing the road well, clearly sharing none of her curiosity or apprehension. They don't come close both sensing they are in disfavor with her. Although for once they aren't. She's relieved they follow. They are indistinguishable to May and she wonders could it be physiologically possible for dogs to be twins?

For some workers GB is 'Mr. Tall Bell.' Those that feel friendly call him 'Boss Tall.' May isn't aware of what they might call her. None have yet spoken to her. May muses on the bloody history of this land. What did the lack of 'howdy' or of smiles mean for her? They had been at Sainte Elisabeth for two months, long enough for May's sense of politeness to become guilt. And so today she goes down.

Peanuts to one side, cotton in bloom on the left, it is a longer walk than she imagined. In such oppressive weather it gives her pause to turn back, tempted to go for a sit in the shade on the porch of the shanty.

Seducing her back fresh limeade she'd made after lunch on the glass reamer, covering it in her pitcher with gauze cloth, setting it to cool in the shadows of the bougainvillea. Limes she'd fresh picked at early morning with the dew still on them, these from among the various fruit trees standing to the far back of the shanty. In her gathering of them she also filled her pockets with almonds, apricots and figs that opened into vaginas. "Call me Demeter."

These people she comes to meet have none of the ingratiating bowing and smiling that irritated her on the sidewalks of Geneva. The colored people there got down into the gutter until she passed by cheeks burning in shame. The Sainte Elisabeth workers she saw didn't grin.

"Stick with me Bob," she says aloud to James Lamar. "Tell me why I'm so frightened. Is it guilt, shame, what?" Oblivious, James Lamar's piping and coos give her a strong companionship. "I will conquer this silliness," she tells him. "I will, you'll see. This is my home."

James Lamar squirms, fat infant arms flailing about as mindlessly as gnats. She pauses on the track hiking him up to better tuck him in safely against her breast and tight in the crook of her elbow. His towel hat needs adjusting. Her Panama too. They are almost there. For courage May turns to briefly look behind her. The new view disorients her completely.

The fields sweep up far in all directions giving a sense of the true size of Sainte Elisabeth. From here even the shanty looks good on it rise framed by a spread of flowering bushes, sheltered by handsome trees. In today's shocking glare the tin roof glints. An salacious wink directed her?

The de Malgrace house remains a phantom presence. Where it stood seems to May a cutout from the humidity. The air thins for its former columns. The memory of it shows clearly inside a boundary of oaks. Their home stands ghost swallowed in an invisible maw of a large rectangle, an actual space still visible to her all these years later.

The shanty she imagines to be about the size of the vanished entrance hallway of the grand house. So they live their lives in no more than where the de Malgrace hung their hats and received the hateful smiles of their deceiving guests? Is it their courtly French she breaths in the air at night? Damn, she's come all this way to live with Soeur St. Aix.

May understands the mind of whomever laid out the plantation, everything to make those down here look small, feel small. All to give power to those on the rise. Yet it also speaks to her of swelling wrongs, of forbidding, unforgivable deeds.

Her plan, stop at each shack door. She hears drums? No she doesn't. Yes. No. She refuses to hear them. "Stop it. Fuckin' voodoo, what in hell are you anyway." Shifting James Lamar she manages to free a hand to caress the bag beneath her blouse.

May has names for GB's dogs. "Even dogs deserve names, Mr. Boss Tall." She calls them Pollux and Castor, never sure which Cerberus is which. Castor she thinks has paused to flop, black fur on bare red earth. He gnaws at fleas assiduously.

Her self-mocking smile and her reverie end together when she staggers into a wagon rut. "Fuckin' damn path."

In a shockwave the squalor hits her in stark sunlight. "Oh my god."

She stops off balance in a moment of dismay. What she sees up front is more than poverty, it is a suppurating squalor, flecked with the writhing commotion of far more flies and mosquitoes than she had anticipated.

Stink is the first sensation. A rancid dead air of bacon drippings, burnt cornmeal. Of shit, putrid standing water, garbage.

The air is laden by strange humid scents of rotting wood from under the cabins and from the stove pipes the smoking futility of wet-wood that will burn but not be burned.

She had never been near such a repellent place. It far exceeded the encampment near the Mission where the Choctaws pursued their own struggle.

A deadening reality smacks May-- one-room dwellings, sagging broken roofs, gaping chinks. Worst of all to her there are no windows.

She might as well have come to Africa, or Haiti. Wherever, she knows they and she live thousands of miles apart, time and space in twain between them.

Not one person to be seen at doors or windows No one outside in the curdled mud that separates the rows of blighted shacks built so close together that human activities of any kind were communal. The emptiness catches her unprepared. Minutes before, while on her shanty steps above, looking down, she'd detected a good deal of activity in the workers' quarter.

Entering the area some skinny curs slip out from nowhere to bark half-heartedly at her and her silent beasts. "They at least say hello," observes May of the friendly butt sniffing and mock battling going on between her dogs and theirs. A group of

sick looking puppies tried to lark about too, and in them she could clearly see a strong resemblance to GB's male dogs. "So shanty and hovels do mix."

She concludes immediately it will not be a successful get together. An alert of some kind preceded her. 'Miz Boss Tall acomin' down.' This refrain comes to mind just when she puts her hand up to knock on the first door. No reaction, nothing but simmering silence that makes May yearn for the safety of lemonade.

"Alright then, Jimmy Lamb, hold on. If we run away we'll never be back. It'll make us worse then the people who made this happen."

May hammers the door, terming it to herself 'a polite firmness.' This first knock summons the same as the others she will give to doors in the quarter. A long pause. Perspiring with the weight of James Lamar in her arms, she's adding her own stink of sweat to the madness about.

The pause in opening eventually ends with the door cracked to a sliver. Darkness in the crack along with half a face. A slight view within of something obscene but which she could not help but strain to see.

From cabin to cabin, time after time, an old woman shows at the doors, how old in truth May fears to learn. Fleshless, dug hanging withered under a flour sack dress. Women turned ancient far too soon, wrapped loosely in wrinkled ebony, eyes bright and yellow, teeth gone. Hair tight to their skulls, short wires knitted down. Some are almost bald. One face shows sullen, swollen from fists. Women looking dazed at their own bare feet.

Once a younger women opens the door, no more than a girl, giving a hard phony smile. A suckling naked child hangs on her. May eyes the sickly baby with great perturbation. In sorrow she compares it to her suckling pig of a James Lamar.

Each time the same for May, a straight glance, then her speech. "I'm Mrs. Bell. Please call me May. I wanted to say hello since I'm new here. Do you have enough food . . . Do you need a doctor? . . . Can you read? I can teach you . . ." Resentful—or fearful—only 'no's shook off her questions.

Sometimes from beyond the partly cracked doors May hears a man's low voice, a word or a growl, sometimes coughing, and once a groan--they must all have worms she thinks. Younger children impossible to hush she hears too, complaining softly, crying, twitters of suppressed miasmatic mirth. Here there are endless colds, infections, fleas, lice.

Not once does a man actually appear. Although signs of many children make their presence unmistakable. And strangest of all to her, never a word passes. Just the shaking heads.

"Fuckin' damn doors," She laments. "May, this is stupid stuff."

Half way through this task, one row of hovels visited the opposite row left to go, she pauses in dejection at the visible demarcation where hamlet slides into swamp. Her boots sink in sponge, a mush of Wiregrass slurping up her boots.

For May, a lingering perversion hangs in dead air here dripping chains from the Spanish moss. This is the ugly face of bigotry. Pestilential. How could she have been so oblivious to its existence.

For sure GB and Aunt Missouri have contracted it. For the first time she understands that all her loved ones have caught it. Infected at best by passive association, passing the plague on and on in mute acquiescence.

“We are guilty of this all together. We will share the same terrible punishment. When retribution comes, I beg, leave my own alone.” A wailing in her mind as old as human existence.

What weak, worthless placating. Her inner voice filled her head with a whimpering dread.

Leaving to return is no longer an option for her. She must look at this long and hard.

GB’s dogs desert her on the sly. May supposes they are more intelligent than she. They’ll course home to lie panting under the house, sniffing at lemons in the air.

She pauses uncertain, deeply troubled by what surrounds her. “Why am I so god damned ashamed.”

She’s arrived at the verge of this swamp. It bears a name, Lytle Bayou. It spreads from far up river down to them, then onwards through empty countryside into Florida. From Sainte Elisabeth, she knew, the swamp extended in width about five miles until swallowed by the Choctawhatchee.

About 20 feet beyond her position the cypress forest commences mixed with live oaks and dead birches. Their rot spreads back into an obscurity of stagnation. The corruption comes for May, creeping up her legs.

The swamp looms. It breathes, has a thousand eyes. It moves her way with a giant maw open and oozing bad breath. Swamp bird cries warn her away. Insects become Bosch devils swarming about her. She and her baby are sinking. Sogginess will soon rise to her chin.

“Reality be damned, Jimmy Lamb. I can take no more. All of this is some shit assed nightmare. Let’s go quickly. We’ll forget it’s here.”

At the very last moment, catching May as she turns, a beam of sunshine blurts onto the dismal scene. It’s a virile emanation descending, illuminating.

It seems to May to center on an orchid. Actually on the one and only orchid she’s seen down here. In the sun it’s a supernatural white.

From books she knows this to be the very rare ghost orchid. In May’s thought it should be called a ghost fairy, a delicate and fine hominid shape floating up high above her. Although to her ever after it will be simply the swamp orchid.

This one bloom dangles from a vine, a climber on the trunk of a cypress. She thinks it the most beautiful flower in the world. The swamp orchid talks too.

She says, I am so lonely. No one comes to looks at me. No one wants me. No one needs me.

Sunlight goes. The swamp orchid disappears.
James Lamar squawks. May turns in a gasping rout. Cringing at her cowardice.

1928

Homeward Bound

March 25. 12:05 pm. Geneva

The wagon bounces back, taking them again past the movie theater.

“Look there.” Exclaims Maurice. “They’s showing the Black Pirate at the Bijoux for another week. It stars Douglas Fairbanks. I just know you'll like him mama. Papa does for a fact. Can't we go, please.” Unusual for him Maurice is genuinely excited as they rumble past the Geneva movie theater.

“They are showing. Do not use an ‘s’ with they. I'd love to go, Maurice. All of us can go soon as the check comes from Dothan.”

It agonized her that family life, these expectations and needs, were in the hands of a man they had never met. Hearing something in her voice, to possibly give her peace, GB has Dandy trotting up Commercial Street toward home.

They go again through the empty Sunday morning of Geneva, the churches not yet out. 'Trotting' in regard to Dandy about equal in May's mind to their pig's trot to the trough at feeding time. They in the back jolt together over the bricks of the street. Up front Buddy holds tight to a delighted James Lamar. Her young boys go “Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh . . .” in a song to wagon wheels tossing them up and down on the uneven bricks.

“I don't like goin' so fast, what if there's a snake crossing the road and Dandy steps on it and gets bit and then dies. Then the wagon turns over. Then we die. And what if . . .”

“That's enough, hush Hubert. You'll scare your brothers silly,” commands May. “Buddy, can you hear me? If you get tired of James Lamar pass him back to me--do hold him close dear.”

“I want to go by Grandpa Zach's place.” Complains Joseph Henry, who seems to revel almost as much as GB in the family's time in heaven before they'd tumbled down to earth on the backs of boll weevils.

'Zach's place' is a farm of about 150 acres centered about an old white house. It lies across the river onward closer to Slocomb and then a couple of miles northwards. The comfortable house features two dormer windows above a wide front porch with railings and lattice boards around the base to hide the clear space. The out buildings are modest.

This house is older than the State of Alabama. Built on a low ridge it delivers far more presence than it actually possesses. Even now It has no name other than 'The Old Bell Place.'

In time the family built a larger home, nearby, burnt at end of the War along with others. Then the Bell's retreated to their original humbler house. Now owned by

strangers, people from Dothan, it remains well tended. The new people there, when crossing paths in town, acknowledge GB or May by a cool nod.

“You know full well Cousin Louis is coming for dinner at 2. Even if poor Dandy makes it snappy we’ll barely be ready.”

In turn GB shouts from the front to be heard over the jingle of harness, the trotting of the mule's shoes already on the Choctawhatchee bridge. “There’s a woman back there nagging at me that she needs all the help she can get. From you too Dandy. Move on there.”

May reaches forward precariously on her chair to give GB a forgive me pat on his shoulder. Those fucking nuns they had her always asking for forgiveness. Why couldn’t her heathen self resist? The touch surprises her with its power. Her touch turns electric. She feels the surge down through her fingertips, through his Sunday coat and shirt, onto his naked skin. Skin she sometimes grips with all her might when their coupling rises to its height.

Her one true worry in the dinner is for Maurice to get caught about the tuna and lose his job. A family tragedy of far more import than any can of whatever.

The thought of dear awkward Maurice makes her feel a burst of affection for him. “Maurice, please don't fret. I'm certain we'll get a check from Dothan next week. Don't worry darling. We'll see that movie. If no check comes I'll have made more sewing money by then. We'll all go look for this mysterious actress in the corner.”

Oblivious to the implications of all things except the sensation of hurrying Mancil grins widely, showing his jack-o-lantern mouth with the missing baby teeth.

“When's Chinless gonna come,” pipes Hubert for the third time.

1926

Watch Woman

August 15. Workers Quarters

Shamed by the rush of relief she feels, May reaches the last of the hovels. This the conclusion of her duty. It has been a descent from sanity.

Surprising her a young boy answers her knock, opens the door wide, looks her in the eye, grins. He puts up his hand for her to see, his pretty face without a trace of resentment. In surprise May blurts, “Why you have six fingers, young man. Amazing.”

He laughs merrily. “Yes ma’am, you right.”

“This my boy, Ulie, real names Ulysses. Ulysses S. Grant. My husband is US Grant. I’m Twyla Grant. Call me Twyla.” A very tall very black woman towers behind him to block the view inside. May takes in this big half hidden woman. She knows at once she is the dark statue of a woman guarding the path on the night of St. John’s Eve.

“Ulie take this stool I brung out n’ sit it down over yonder. You rest on it some Miz Bell before you going back.”

With a proud nod for her, the boy heaves at the stool from beside the crude steps to the cabin. Evidently heavy for him because he half totes half drags it with both arms to the far side of the crumbling cabin.

Fashioned low and round, the stool is itself a study for her. Hand made long, long ago, its age showing in the worn down vague insignias painted on it in blue and red. Carved serpent heads, mouths open, thick wooden fangs for traction, decorate the base of each of its four short legs.

“Thank you, Mrs. Grant. I accept the kind offer. My baby, his name is James Lamar, is quite a weight. Please call me May. Ulysses, I think you might be about seven?” Her guess makes the boy grin wide, crooked pearly white teeth and one missing in front, as if she knew his best secret.

“I have a boy five and another seven. You are most welcome to come play at our place. Their names are Hubert and Mancil.”

Eagerness made May rush through her words. “Can you read? Come any afternoon. I’ll teach you.”

“L’il one be needing a drink and a change. You best go tend him. We think on this other. Good bye, Miz Bell.”

Left alone May sits in her long black dress in sudden amazement, she really is in the Wiregrass, among these desperate hovels. She takes the hat off. The dress mats to her body. Her hair too is dripping. The afternoon begins a slow closing.

Well, I have never been in a stranger place than this, muses May. At least I think not, excepting the Mission.

“Oh cut the crap, May. You don’t know whether to shit or go blind down here.” She hugs James Lamar to free him of encroaching woe, pushing from mind where they are, what they witness. “Whew, you stink my little darling. I’ll fix you.”

May in fatigue gratefully appreciates the stool wobbling under her, serpents and all. Although she can’t swallow a faint cry of pain from her hemorrhoids. They had come with Hubert’s birth.

A hand on her shoulder makes her start. A long strong black hand. Twyla Grant, the sole name she has from all this damn missionary work, has come out to stand behind her.

“You take this, Miz Bell. Peel it n’ put a piece of it where you hurts. Stick it in good and hold it tight. It’ll draw out the swellin’.” “It was a garlic bulb.

“Why. . .” May stifles a fart. “I do thank you, Mrs. Grant, most kind of you. I’ll try it. I’ll try anything.” May babbled on in consternation but realized she and the baby again sat alone. No more tall woman.

“What do you think of this place, Jimmy Lamb? A garlic bulb. Guess I pass as a recognizable asshole?” May couldn’t help laughing out loud.

Cleaning up James Lamar requires commandeering the dishtowel he’d been wearing on his head. Afterwards she commences giving him her breast.

Eyes watch from everywhere, hiding eyes in shack holes and chinks, catching her glowing, enthroned. Hair turning to gold before them. Such beauty never seen there before. Unknowingly she is a story for generations.

She tries fitting the Panama on James Lamar, laughing at the comical result. He bubbles through his suckling. This delights May and she claps the baby's tiny hands together, giving him a kiss on the brow.

Far too hot now. She unpins her bun and lets down the gold. She hears nothing but Jimmy Lamb at her breast. Nevertheless a soft clacking of tongues, clapping of hands, patting of feet arose from the cabins.

She talks to the baby in French. "How about that. We met a boy with six fingers. We talked to the madonna of the moonlight. We have garlic for our very own Feast of the Assumption. We even might have at least one pupil. And best of all, you and I saw the magnificent swamp orchid. We heard her too. That was wonderful, don't you agree?"

Oh but wasn't this a pitiful anniversary of my heart. Mystery makes her hold her baby closer.

1928

In The Wagon

March 25. 12:25 pm

"For that matter, son--when shall we get there? We are still on our way. Cousin Louis must take his time." She corrects Hubert in a soft tone. The boys and GB take this for a good sign.

"Boys, do please be patient. You know he walks over. He's growing old. Everyone does, even you, mes petites jeune filles." This joke never fails to raise remonstrance. "Who's a jeune fille!"

"Remember to always call him Cousin Louis. Don't be unkind to him." Maurice rides on the wagon bed beside her while they bounce homeward, jostling together in a layer of dust. Knowing Maurice needs a look from her she swivels--yes, he sits waiting for her, just so he can turn away.

"I'm hungry." Gripes Joseph Henry.

"Soon, my love." May reaches around Hubert to put her hand to ruffling Joseph Henry's hair. He looks at her like a puppy getting petted.

Hubert carefully holds the Bell Family Bible in both hands leaning tight against her other side so as not to fall forward or back as they go. This is an elect duty that she hopes doesn't make the other boys jealous. The Bible holds about 150 years of family in scraps of paper. May thinks of its GB's book of the dead.

James Lamar is drooling on Buddy's clean pants. Mancil alone of the bigger boys still fits on her lap.

With reins in hands GB turns his head to give Hubert his look of caution. "Hold the Bible tight, son. You know how much it means."

An odd battle had begun between GB and her when they came home married, when they stood facing Maurice, Joseph Henry and Buddy.

She never considered anything else possible but for her to be 'maman, ma maman.' Only that holds significance to her. She said it to herself before sleeping when small, facing the big empty convent room. When asking the nuns about her maman she had used it nuns incessantly when young, although later not at all: is ma maman really dead, is there any news of ma maman, can't you look for ma maman?

Impossible for GB, he threw out the French first thing. GB acknowledged that 'ma' and 'pa' were not agreeable. He wanted what he'd grown up with, mama and papa with the stress on the first syllable. After the battle heated with him she retrenched to ma-ma, emphasis on the second syllable, and pa-pa for GB, pronounced the same. At last May felt the conflict too trivial, she came to peace with GB's wishes. Whatever the word, she revered the honor of holding it.

Oddly enough without an effort they had for the most part all turned to calling her 'Maman.' French pronunciation.

"I sure hope we can see that Black Pirate, maman." embolden by her glance Maurice continues his theme.

"The fellas at school say its great. Royston has seen it three times. He says look sharp at the scenes because in some there's one real babe back in a corner. He claims she looks like you."

"Maurice Davies Bell in my presence I will not have you referring to any woman actual or on screen as a 'babe'. It is demeaning. It is most disrespectful." Maurice shrinks at her chastisement, a glint of the possible tear.

Oblivious, May has no inkling that Maurice's discerning friends already masturbate to images of her own face, body, her eyes.

"I am certain you'll be a man who treats women as equals, dear. Just be more considerate."

She changes mood, patting down wisps of strayed gold back into her bun. The road improves. Sends them flying free again.

She turns sharply from her invisible May Doll to give her forgiving smile to Maurice.

"Hush, hush, says May Doll. Don't worry . . . You won't ever be like me."

1917

My Nuns

May 31. Atoka Academy

This is May Skinner's essay written for Miss Dora Engle's English Class, Atoka Academy. It was returned marked A++ with this note in the margin.

Dear May, You have written an excellent essay. You are a good writer and should use your talent. My hope is for you to continue on to college. Should you decide to do so I shall be pleased to write a letter of recommendation. Whatever you elect to

do I am certain it entails a bright future. My best wishes in your new life. I will miss you.

May's Essay

My nuns wear black habits from neck to shoe tip. Black shoes are hidden on most of them unless seated. To make themselves even more different from worldly women they bind down their breasts under their clothing. All this gives them heavy figures that don't look human.

The Mission is not well lit and that makes my black garbed nuns seem like shadows. Their movements are deliberate to the point of ceremony. To me the nuns appear to be floating about the Mission. If someone new were ever to visit us, although no one has during the 15 years I have lived there, I think they might be badly frightened.

My nuns all wear the same white stiffly starched head band. It stands about four inches high. Actually this white band across the top of their foreheads is their most visual attribute. It is so stark a white it appears like an illumination against their pervading black. Making them perhaps all the scarier to others. Above and surrounding this band--called a 'cornet' or horn in French-- they wear what English terms the wimple. It is a white head covering draping down halfway over the chest. The wimple closely frames the 'cornet' plus the chin and throat of a nun.

Over the head, wimple and cornet, they place a black hood. The hood covers not only the nun's head entirely but also her shoulders and upper back. In front the end tails of the wimple are laid out on top of the hood, falling down to where their bosoms ought to be.

For reason of the wimple they must always eat or drink their wine daintily. Any spillage might disgrace the purity of the wimple. My nuns are quite critical of how each other looks so this is important.

The Order of my nuns wears a hood made to protrude rigidly forward from their heads just above the cornet, perhaps by three inches, and too at the side of their faces. Thus, each nun's profile is obscured from me, excepting that of Soeur St. Aix who comes from an aristocratic family. The tip of her lordly Gallic nose is visible to all.

My nuns wear narrow loose belts of black leather. Each nun has a hook on the belt to carry the rosary that swings noiselessly when walking. Soeur St. Aix added an extra hook on the opposite side of her habit for the ornate and old crucifix she values. Soeur Blanche's extra hook bears the ring of keys to the Mission doors, cabinets and stores. These clank at her hip with the slightest movement.

Adornment other than the rosary includes a simple crucifix hanging over the chest and their spiritual wedding ring, being Brides of Christ, which graces the ring finger.

My nuns dressed me when young in black blouses and long skirts. These become somewhat brighter and fashionable as I grow older. They sew very well and receive patterns of recent dresses from France.

My time with them goes by in a school of manners and of French culture. I am to walk like a nun, indoors at least, to be nun silent when appropriate, to be polite, although they are not always so with one another. I must read French literature, philosophy and history each day. They expect me to be a refined young lady. Unfortunately I am not one.

1928

An Intruder

12:38 pm

Plantation Sainte Elisabeth

Dandy's pile at the vanished plantation gates is almost gone. As they roll over it May notes how beetles and flies contend for leftovers. Once again, the hoary wrought iron sign hangs above her. The blade of a guillotine.

Sun at an exact angle in the sky casts down a flicker of its shadow. A decorative scrolling ripples across them as they enter. 'Sainte Elisabeth' rolls backwards over their heads and faces, ghastly to May. Quickly she regards each of her family in turn, the state of their union gathered in this frail wagon. In her mind pulling them closer together.

Otherwise, whenever returning, clear of the gate columns May savors a neutral moment, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, a sense of entering back into a unique secluded corner of the sub tropics.

It hit her in a shock wave, her sons had never seen snow.

Now they bounce down the rutted still-grand lane between mirroring rows of stately oaks. She cringes at the insolent, ceremonial approach to a place deceitfully pleasing to the eye yet of the human heart so heartless.

Dandy shivers to a stop and again excretes.

"From Shit to Shit." This May declares to herself with certitude glancing into the gloom of Dandy's shed where lord bull snake shits to his hearts content. But is he a he? For sure from the way he hisses to her.

"Maman gotta shit, papa gotta shit, all god's children gotta shit. Without doubt GB should think me insane. I am."

"Son," remarks GB to Joseph Henry. "Watch how much green grass is in the hay."

GB helps her gather alight with Baby James, who she knows is both soiled and hungry.

"I need the older boys to clear a tree." He's telling her. "Fell last night. Got to get it done before work tomorrow morning."

He gives her his manly no-nonsense tone that she detests. At first May corrected GB when he spoke, just as she does the boys. The sight of the blood

rushing angrily under his face skin up into his scalp made her stop. Now, when in town she notices after years together he speaks more like he's heard her speak, and that sends another kind of flush up into her cheeks.

"Fine, leave me with Hubert and Mancil. They are good helpers. Aren't you?" She hopes no taint of irony seeped forth. The little boys grin at her idiotically.

"Maurice, for now go along with papa. As soon as he says you're finished come directly back to help me and bring in my chair from the wagon. We need it for dinner."

Before the boy can make a snide rejoinder she silences him with a slow turn of her face, cut white marble in high stark light. Already, behind them, Buddy and Joseph Henry are racing each other away on the work road. Clearly joyful at being excused from setting the table.

"Don't forget the 'Black Pirate,' maman." Then with a whoop Maurice chases after them.

Herding her remaining two up the path from Dandy's stable to the front porch Hubert begins mimicking the boisterousness of his older brothers in a shoving contest with Mancil. The boys tussle deeper into the garish knife wound in the soil that a thousand passages of feet have rutted. In reply James Lamar squirms forcefully in her arms.

"Little you, stop trying to be a man. And you big two. Arret. Think you'll track all that mud in my house? Think again. I need men workers not silly boys with dirty pants. Scrape your shoes clean. We have too much to do for Cousin Louis."

Their dogs frolic along. GB's mongrels as usual stay well clear of May, they are never allowed in the house and get shooed off the porch by broom.

"Scat Calibans. Back to where you belong," May swishes her skirts angrily at them. They duck low and slink back down the path.

Suddenly she notices it. Bell Bible goes slipping away. Thud, the book hits the ground and tumbles back on the path. Bells fly helter skelter in their flow of birth, marriage and death certificates. Dropping skirt May steps back onto the Bell Bible, giving it a sound dawn-of-creation squish into the mud. In consternation she bounds to the first front step. Then stops.

Giving a cry of horror she clutches her throat. James Lamar whimpers. And yes indeed-- the front door stands wide open.

1918
Helpless
May

Normally, GB bought the tuna because he shopped for everything. He assumed the duty of all shopping early in their marriage and never remarked of it. So insouciant that May truly tried to believe he held no grudge. Still, that he did this

work made May guilty, guiltier Saturday by Saturday until it burdened her. She had failed him.

On Saturday when they like almost everyone around 'went to town' she gave him her list of what was necessary. Later it would be waiting under a canvas tarp in the back of the wagon on Commercial Street. This because May could not use money. She did not understand it, the reality of it in hand frightened her. Mathematics was not a problem. It was coinage and paper money itself that perplexed her utterly.

She tries accepting her 'money syndrome,' as she terms it humbly, to make it no more than another of her many eccentric flaws. No. It remains a major shortcoming. But her life until marriage had been without money. The nuns never gave her a penny, not out of meanness, simply because it was unnecessary. Bob did the shopping in Atoka. They allowed no candy money because of her teeth.

Leaving for Alabama, not knowing about her damned \$10 bill, Soeur St. Ephraim had given her a \$5 dollar bill to tuck into her bodice. She'd given the five with great ceremony to GB when they married. A childlike awe in her at even touching the bill. Her own ten lurked hidden among her secrets.

Her trouble began first weekend back from their honeymoon, facing a household to provide for, the entire shopping trip in to Slocomb she felt rising distress. Going by buggy, GB's boys in back. Evening before May labored over writing up a list of what seemed needed. She knew something important would be forgotten. In agitation she'd at last summoned courage to show it to GB, just as they stopped on the small town's main street, not far from Aunt Missouri's house. GB read her list in silence.

With a puzzled look he said, "Well, seems to me you won't be leaving much in Slocomb for other folks. Here, let me make it simpler for you."

He then solemnly lined through something like half of the items. "There now, that won't be so difficult." Not so. It came, what she dreaded most. He gave her money. She took it numbly and just sat there clutching it.

GB already noticed she never carried a lady's bag or purse-- not knowing she never would. That first shopping Saturday he proudly flourished out for her a small black knit bag with a dainty string handle.

"This is a gift I hope you'll find useful," he'd told her shyly. To help her start he opened the snap, folded in the revised list. Gently prying loose the money from her hand he dropped it in too.

The small bag closed with a reassuring ting. He also gave her a canvas carrying bag to hold the purchases. "There now, Mrs. Bell, go forth and conquer."

Off she went while he took the boys to see Aunt Missouri. It was misery enough showing herself in the shops, let alone contend with real shopping.

May tried. She studied the list as she went, deciding what stores would supply which products. After that she commenced with more confidence. Not near finished with the revised list, horrified, she found her new purse empty.

She retraced her steps assured she'd drooped it. Mystified she went back to look for GB at Mo's. The boys were with her but no GB.

"He's knocking back a few, don't you mind. Bell's handle their liquor just damn too well. So you're out of money? No problem, here's some more." Missouri simply unsnapped the precious little bag and plopped in more coins.

How easy it is for her, thought May in admiration. With that May had been able to finish. However, then there were too many bags. She found a colored man to carry the bags to the buggy.

Boys and a too-happy GB gathered up they at last returned to The Bell Place by late afternoon. Helping her put things away GB lost his temper.

"We can't afford these things. And we don't even need half of 'em. What got into your head. No way the money I gave you bought all this. You better not have gone borrowing from Aunt Mo. That would make me truly angry, May. This is one sorry mess. What in hell, woman. You crazy?"

He would have gone on except May grabbed the poker from the fireplace. "One more word, GB Bell, one more God damn word and I'll throttle your butt." He'd opened his mouth and bang, the poker lashed around him hard on the buttocks. Starting to make a move toward her, bang, it came down harder.

Then he collapsed in merriment to the floor. "You can't shop for shit but you sure are a champion with a poker."

"Don't ever call me 'woman' again. 'Man.'" She'd stomped off to cool her temper. That was her one and only experience in shopping for the family. GB took over.

Moving to Sainte Elisabeth without a word on it May found she'd been named official family bookkeeper. To her this was simple, not a problem, while money in hand, that remained her bane.

1928

Shack Bully Shake Down

March 25. 12:40 pm

"Hello? Anybody in there? Better talk to me. I have two big mean dogs with me." No sounds of furniture legs grating or of human's diving for cover. Not a step on the floor boards that even a mouse made creak.

May wonders apprehensively. Who, what, could be in there? No image of anyone or thing known comes to her mind. Nothing to steal except Mo's bequeathals and they would make for a cumbersome sack.

"Whoever you are get out of my house. I'll close my eyes and count to ten. Run away or else! I can't hold these dogs back much longer."

No reply. "I have an axe. I'm bringing it in!"

Nothing happens. May motions for the two boys to stay close behind her.

Stealthily mounting the porch steps she balances on tiptoes to peer into the shadows of their front room. The shanty rooms receive a minimum of light.

Murkiness covers the interior for which she is normally grateful since there is so little to cover.

With a kiss May sits James Lamar on the bottom step. Turning to Hubert and Mancil percolating in excitement on the porch steps, May whispers. "Keep Jimmie Lamb safe.

"Hubert, hear something wrong? Then you grab James Lamar, drag him away. Get fast to the privy and lock yourselves in there. Mancil, if something happens you run bloody hell screaming for papa. You understand?"

The boys nod back. Both turn pale with the contagion of her fear, of children suddenly sinking into a nightmare. Even James Lamar now catches the dread too.

"Shhh, hush baby." She stations Hubert and Mancil side- by- side guarding him on the step. She gives the three her 'Be Strong' look.

"D'accord, you stay here and don't make a sound. Dites-moi."

Turning she notes her two big 'mean' dogs have come back to sit bookends to her children on the porch steps. One of them busily licking Hubert's ear while the other rolls over to lay its head in Mancil's lap, a tip of dog penis showing in adoration.

Fists clenched for a fight she begins a slow creeping toward the shanty front door. May moves across the porch, tip-toeing. Step by step the interior becomes clearer. May peers closely for danger. Easing through the doorway the dimness thins inside.

The room is empty.

Stealthily shifting like one of her haunting nuns, she heads into the shanty. Sidling to the kitchen doorway by instinct unknown, May glances first at the counter by the sink. Her four cans of tuna are gone.

"Boys, goose those dogs with hot pokers. We been shit assed robbed!"

1928

Tale Of The Tuna

"Who's taken my fuckin' damn tuna," roars May flushed in fury. Her wedding boot stomps the floorboards. Frightened, Hubert and Mancil hang closer. Even baby Lamar stops struggling to be put down. The dogs sniff timidly at the kitchen threshold, their tails down. May doesn't notice this and in another moment they are gone.

Appearing out of the front door frame she addresses the boys who have carefully kept close to her skirt, raising her arms GB's shotgun in hand over them.

"All the tuna's gone. Vite. Come help search. Don't sit there with your dicks in your hands, get in here."

May scoops up James Lamar to lead them in a rushing return into the shanty. It takes no more than a few moments to search the house thoroughly. "Maybe it's one of them homos." offers Mancil, fascinated by the ragged men desperate enough to

come through the gate pillars begging---May giving them something when she has it to give.

“It's hobo, son, I'll explain homo another time.

“I know, I know. Bet it's Ulie, Mama,” sputters Hubert trying to control his nervous laughter. “We done left, I mean we left the latch off. You know how he is.”

Undeterred by any hobo story, knowing well that mischief in Ulie's eyes, May yells loud enough to be heard a good distance around the shanty. “Ulysses. I want those cans in my hand this instant.”

Although not always a kindly tempered and tolerant man with people of color, to her surprise, despite the name, GB shows affection whenever this handsome smart little boy runs about the house.

“Ulysses S. Grant.” Shouts May shaking the shotgun and James Lamar. Yes, he shows a prankster's glint in the eyes, but intelligence too she learns with admiration when the little boy gobbles up her reading lessons as if starved for them.

Then she seats him half an hour or so at the table teaching him to read. He is willing and bright as her best.

Hubert and Mancil snicker. May wipes that frivolity away with one oath. “What in the name of plus-perfect hell.” shouts May. “Merde. Where are you?” No Ulie to be heard. More useless dartings into back rooms.

“Ulysses S. Grant. Come forward this minute with my cans of tuna. You'll get the spit spanked out of you if you don't.

“He's not inside.” Declares May, tension mounting in her. No tuna, no Sunday dinner for Chinless. Worse, none for the rest of the family. And she didn't have enough left in her larder for a real supper either. They'd go hungry for the whole day. It happened once before. The shame of witnessing it enough for her to promise ‘never again.’

“Hubert, run down quick to the stable and look there. Check the back yard--privy too. You let him get away and I'll stick a broom up your ass. Mancil, you watch James Lamar. I'll leave him here on the porch. Let him near these Tears of Our Lady and I'll cut your sweet zizi off.” Enraged, May speaks her Bobish from rote.

The boys ignore her talk. They are accustomed to it. To them no more threatening despite the menacing temper than the daily squalls gusting in over them, the sky's toys gone missing from off the Gulf of Mexico.

1913

Harrowing Of May

November. Sunday. 10:50 am. Atoka

Bitter late-November wind blasted down Court Street, Atoka's main way, cutting at May. Dust rose in devils from the street's dirt bed. This the only movement in sight other than the roll of tumbleweeds aimed towards her. Now and then one came close enough to snatch at her skirt.

Ice Age cold pierced the long black coat she wore, the frigid gust snapping its fangs at the black wool cap Soeur Ephraim had knitted for her. She pulled it down snug again over her ears.

Breath visible in the cold to her a puff of May Skinner a signal to the world that her shy 13 year self was not invisible, no matter that she be the most self conscious girl in Atoka. No matter that she must keep her stunning eyes always down and by habit moved briskly along the boardwalk.

To reach church she needed to walk the length of Court, the church at the far end on the corner of First. From the Mission to the Church took her about 45 minutes unless she ran, which she refrained from since it took enough to face the inquisitive, or admiring, stares of the congregation without perspiring.

Nevertheless by the time she approached the train station, closed on a Sunday morning along with every store on Court Street, she realized she was hopelessly late. The entire street from where she stood to the far end lay empty, not a horse or buggy. Baptists and Methodists already entered at their respective church doors. Soon they would be starting the first hymn. She needed another ten minutes.

May dreaded more than anything in her young life being looked at. Entering late always drew attention no matter how small and silent she sought to be.

Going unnoticed was hopeless in any event. Unbeknownst to May her looks already turned from 'pretty' into the surpassing beauty kind that is always tragic. There was no hope for her with golden hair hanging modestly short about her face like a frame, held back by amber combs that Soeur Blanche placed with strictest rough care. No escape with such fine skin and delicate features. And then her eyes, the cruelest of additions.

For Sundays the nuns recently made her a new gingham dress, black of course, without ruffles or show, though quite fashionably cut about the waist, bust and shoulders. Trimmed at collar and cuff in a black and white plaid design. The collar rose high on her neck, buttoned tightly up the throat.

Looking at herself in the store windows on Court Street, she admired how discretely, if elegantly, her nuns decked her. Best of all, to her relief, with nothing to draw attention.

Her murky reflection there tempted May because in her life she rarely if ever saw herself in full. At most usually in no more than a face mirror, like that hanging high over their water basin in the Mission toilet.

For safety's sake this chilling small room had been built into the Mission building itself. This happening when her French nuns replaced the Friars.

Holy shit, thought May with a swallowed laugh. Too cold for laughter.

She at last passed the railroad crossing, stepping cautiously over the tracks. It traditionally presented her with a point of time. So many minutes from there to school, or telling her how long it would take her to go between their raw iron rails and the handle of the church door.

In alarm, her quandary rose. Go on or give up? Arrive late at church or return early to the Mission?

The cold, the time, the empty street--clearly sensible to return. One stubborn determination pushes her on, to escape the confines of nuns and mother church, old Europe clinging to a scrap of unfinished Oklahoma.

No Thanksgiving feast for the Mission table this coming week. Never any Easter eggs to paint in the Mission. No Fourth of July flag waving. May came to learn at school about American celebrations, at church too. What went neglected by her nuns in ignorance or from disdain added to May's growing rebelliousness.

The worst being Christmas, with more of the same to anger her, no baubles, garlands or tree aglow. Instead, a small wooden stable appeared by the hearth in the front room. There May would be expected to place the Virgin, blue with a wire halo of sharp little spears about her head. The Redemptress in glory. Our Lady along with ox and donkey figurines that May preferred because she felt no need to be reverent of them.

The baby Jesus got plopped onto a bed of real straw on Christmas Eve. Then on Epiphany her favorite of all came out to complete the manger. Ornate figures of the three kings, Les Rois Mage. These were richly painted and very old. She was warned each year to treat them with particular care. Small masterpieces of French culture.

Now she imagines her nuns looks of contentment if she were to come back defeated. Onward she goes faster than before. No way would she allow them that satisfaction. Going over the tracks despite herself she slowed to play a stepping game with the rails and ties. Off again and across Court Street she had in view another encouraging landmark of her progress, the station and its freight depot.

Only then did she spy him slouched, thin, hugging himself against the cold at the corner of the depot. He waited leaning against the building edge, course wood walls conjoining where the front ended farthest from her.

One hand in pocket stuffed down straight-armed for warmth. Wind whipped at his cheap suit coat. He rolled his derby hat in his free hand, round and round he did so like a performer in a circus. From her distance, the twirling caught her eye, interested her. It seemed to draw May nearer step by step. Closer yet the hat looked to be decorated in bits and pieces of prairie earth, flecks of wild grass and burrs. Closer, she saw he was too.

How long had he waited there? To May he was her 'Indian.' She'd met him at church. He came in to stand at the back, alone, and to the christians utterly invisible in the air of animosity

Indifferent, the old reverend-- a true circuit-riding preacher from the early days of this rough land, still so harsh and barely civilized, only a part of the USA for a few years-- welcomed the young man. Thus he became a regular. Never sitting down, always alone, neither greeted nor given a smile.

Partly in defiance, one Sunday May smiled at him. Immediately she knew it for a mistake. A significant error in her short life among nuns. She had also lifted her eyes. She'd shown him what she sought to hide, those deep blue, violet eyes glazed in holy water, a sight to fetch any young man.

Again and again Soeur St. Ephraim ordered her never to show her eyes to a man: "Tu est trop belle, ma petite."

Indians to May were a part of life since she could remember. They were the reason for the mission, for her nuns. If Black Bob would only speak well of them she was ready to believe in them--Bob was infallible.

Long ago Bob explained how he knew about them. That he returned to them each night. He had been married once to a Choctaw woman, still 'had' a Choctaw woman too, named Ida.

He liked their ways. "They sure is a strong good people. Excuse me L'il Pet, but I likes them a lot more than shit ass whites. Dem Choctaws is fuckin' damn fine. Or least most of 'em. They take me like another bird on the limb. L'il Pet, white you is, you can't help it. Jus' don't go actin' like 'em.

"I knows for sure folks coming in different colors, coming from different times and places, they's not at all the same as ones or t'other. Each got their own heads on, but different directions, straight, backwards, upside down.

"Real big mistake, L'il Pet, not to know this. So now you do knows it too. Right? Sewers thinkin' we all the same, love love love. They don't know shit."

Choctaws brought food to the Mission sometimes in payment for nursing or sometimes they came for food. Either way it was an amiable transaction of good will.

So May smiled, showed her eyes. It was natural to recognize his existence especially when no others would be civilized to him. One glance raised and the young man stared in amazement, then grinned back showing her a row of crooked teeth.

He did not have Indian acne, as the nun's called it. Soeur Blanche said it came with poor diet. Whatever it seemed endemic. The absence of it alone in this young man's face made him striking.

His face, broad and flat, bore a large lordly boned nose above finely lined lips. The high cheekbones, sharp, defined both the wide lean cheeks and the broad forehead. Everything served to further emphasize his own eyes. Totally opposite from May's -- a mystifying darkness in them, wide set but slivered on his face. His eyes roved playfully alert, constantly darting.

Blue-black hair fell lank to his collar and about his ears. He or someone cut bangs over his high brow. The ears protruding like small coffee cups gave him, thought May, a slightly stuffed animal cuteness. He was clean too.

Unlike many Choctaws he wore his suit as if it belonged on him, not to matter how badly tailored it was. May saw in him her first man of interest. Growing in solitude-- her only company old French nuns, an even older Black Bob-- she knew nothing of the young male, not the body, not the danger.

Except for vague references in private from clearly alarmed Soeurs St. Ephraim and Claire, she was the most innocent of virgins. Innocent, yet worse self-confident in her innocence. Hadn't she a full successful first year behind her at the Atoka Academy?

After that fleeting exchange of glances, smiles, she'd found him waiting when service let out at the curb far side of the church steps, near where Court Street started. It seemed he knew she came alone. Too, he knew where she would be heading.

1928

Nether World

March 25. 12:49 pm. The Shanty

May herself acts intuitively, charging down the porch steps. Bending low, the shotgun for prop, she peers down under the house. Sure enough far back in the gloom she spies the trace of a sprightly face. "Ulie, you are very bad to take those cans. Bring them to me this minute."

At her voice Ulie huddles back yet further into the safety of the airspace, almost disappearing into the semidarkness.

"God damn it to hell. I want my fuckin' damn cans."

Then, astonishing the small audience who happen to see it and that becomes legendary about her in their lifetimes, the very lady like Mrs. Bell quickly strips off her wedding blouse unbuckles her wide black belt and drops her skirt. Blouse, belt, skirt and gun are left on the porch.

In her white smock and old-fashioned bloomers, she sprawls flat and begins crawling under the house. She goes in at a wiggling swimming motion, fast forward. Trying to avoid seeing what she moves through, must of moldy leaves, spider webs, and spiders, beetles, cockroaches, dried dung, a few rusty cans, old bottles, shards of broken glass poking through detritus like teeth of bear traps, gnarled somethings the same to her as mummy fingers clawing out for eternity.

She avoids what she can, including indistinct husks of skin caught in rattraps. And who lay buried here? Front the brittle crunching beneath her she guesses she moves across a vast bone yard.

Drug along underneath her bare skin Bob's sacred amulet tugs hard in her neck. She considers in dread what it would be like to feel a knife sharp snap, to know with a rush of fear and grief that the amulet had broken away from her for the first time in 11 years. What would happen to her if it lay covered here, lost under this foul detritus.

May grits her teeth. The grit in her teeth. She sneezes.

She tries protecting the amulet even as she goes slithering over a sickeningly soft half century of loam the color of rotten meat. She interleaves her horror at

what she moves through with stares straight ahead at Ulie. Something rustles. She quickens her pace. Something crawls over her leg.

She cries out “Get off me you whatever you be, cock suckin creature.”

Closer she scoots to Ulie the full calamity of his situation transfigures his little boy’s face. Any black child on Sainte Elisabeth knew not to mess with any white people. Most of all the shack bully people. It was only that she had been kind and the family seemed to be like his own.

Reaching one arm forward far as possible fingers pointing wide for all the space they can claim, her wedding band of gold dulls to a glowering rust. Just as a ridiculous hysteria is rising in her, the ring gives her an eerie calm.

“That’s our dinner, Ulie.” She says evenly. “Give it back, s’il tu plait. Please give the cans back to me. Toute suite.” No response.

Glancing about wildly for help a stick anything to give her better leverage, May can’t avoid the scenery. It is being buried alive. The rafters supporting the shanty’s board floor are only inches from her hair. Masses of webs between them are tomb-shroud-white in the crepuscular light of this inhuman place.

May can discern Ulie squirming up against a far recessed brick column. The flimsy little fellow fades himself into a nondescript decomposed brown thing.

In her panic May screams in French. “Vite, vite. Il faut que tu comprend bien, c’est tout pour nous. C’est tout, c’est tout. Don’t you understand? It’s all we have.”

In fury she forgets and Rising up sharply she bangs her head hard on a rafter. The pain makes her yelp. A sting piercing down through the mass of her hair.

“Shit ass rafter!” her bellow flies muffled by the house above.

“Miz Bell.” shrieks Ulie, shrinking further back from her, constricting in an immobilizing shock that shows in his suddenly dopey eyes.

To her this is too much. “What kind of hole of Calcutta am I living in?”

And then the words in supplication pour out from her lips unbidden into this dank soulless hell. *Ave Maria, gratia plena Dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui Jesus. Sancta Maria mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae.*

With this Ulie jerks in terror, she hears him sobbing in terror. He extends one skinny arm, hand out cupping one tin towards her. It comes forward in his six-fingered hand.

Then come number Two, Three, Four. All the cans have passed to her in an agonized ceremony of infuriating solemnity.

“You gonna shoot me, Miz Bell? Please don’t hurt me none.”

Cans retrieved May starts the struggle to back up. Struggling to be free of the fearful nether world of the clear space. “I don’t know what to do with you, Ulie. For now let’s just escape from here. Follow me.”

Two tins clutched in each hand she scrambles yet faster backwards on her elbows. Ignoring whether her underclothes are decently in place or not. Although more mindful of the tuna.

About a foot to her right she catches more than a rustle. A real movement. It's a giant toad buried up to its bulging eyes in muck casting blinks at her with a leaf for a hat.

In an attack of panic May goes in a sudden from a crawl to a rout. She makes a raw scraping scamper on her elbows.

Seeing that Ulie hasn't moved she calls to him, in a pant. "Ulysses S. Grant . . . It's a nightmare in here . . . Come out quickly . . . where it is sunny . . . or I will spank the shit out of you."

1928

March 25. 12:59 pm. Sainte Elisabeth

Clear of the underbelly of the shanty May sits stunned on the ground against the porch steps. Everything that she crawled through covers her, in hair, face, eyes.

One eyelash troubles her especially with a delicate strand dangling down into her vision a tiny spider attached.

She takes big gulps of the living spring air. To her coming back out is a return from the dead.

"Maman maman, you OK?" A very worried Mancil calls to her, staying obediently on the porch to keep his little brother from tumbling down the steps.

May raises a hand to wave at him. From the wrist a dead fly half eaten swings fast in the cobweb. In front at least her underclothes look like they will never be white again.

Feeling the amulet over for damage May finds her magic whole despite its ordeal.

She cuffs her hair sweeping off the worst whatever that might be crawling there. The strand with its tiny maker she carefully plucks from her eyelash and drapes it on the nearest Lilly of the Valley.

Tuna cans, those trophies, she cradles close in her lap. Soon enough she has Ulie there too.

"Very naughty." she gasps, hugging him. "Shame . . . to cause . . . me grief."

Ulie starts to sob wildly. "It was a jokin' thing, that all, ma'am. I so sorry."

Catching the visual absurdity of her situation. May suddenly finds herself laughing aloud. How peculiar. She can't help it. Part relief, partly her own sense of humor.

She rocks and holds the hysterical boy tight. May wipes tears off his checks with her bare hand. This makes her laugh all the harder. In wiping his face she smears on more loamy detritus from under the house.

Ulie's sculpted cheeks are streaked in dullish red designs that basically reflect her own fingers. She decides she finger painted Ulie into the image of a Choctaw warrior.

Ulie chokes down his sobs, “You gonna use your mojo on me? Don’t do that to me, ma’am.” His sixth finger gentle rubs the amulet.

Choking down more hilarity she gives him a kiss, on the forehead, avoiding the cheek now worse than before with more tears and snot.

“It’s Ok now. Calm down. Take some deep breaths like I do. You’ll be fine.” Obeying, Ulie takes big gulps. May knows that his touching her, her kissing him, if witnessed could bring consequences.

“You be sure to wash your face and hands before Twyla sees you. I’d let you do it here but for now you’ve done enough. Oh my but you are a sight.” She could not stop another fit of laughing.

This causing Ulie to gaze in wonder at her, despite his woe. In a swift odd jerk, still crying, the little boy in her lap reaches up to touch her own face. His small hand caresses it, smoothing her mess of long hair. Six fingers pull more spider web balls from it, a look of awe in his big tearful eyes. He gently plucks a last remnant of the web strand from her right eyelash.

He nods solemnly at her. “Ya ain’t gonna spank the shit out uh me?”

“Non non, pas de tout . . .” May strangles back another fit of mirth. “When I am angry I sometimes say bad things. Ignore that my dear. My boys know me, they do. You’ll get use to me too. All right, then, run home. Remember to be here tomorrow. Be sure to wash your face as soon as you can.

“Mr. General Grant, sir, no more pranks on people that cause them such trouble. Will you promise me that?”

She gives him another kiss.

With a solemn nod the boy pops off her lap in a shot scampering down the hill. Already he becomes a smaller and smaller form racing away over the red work road. His ragged too-large overalls flap like flags.

The sight gives May a little turn of the knife. Another one racing away from her into an inscrutable beyond. She watches him fully aware that he like Buddy, like the rest of her boys, rehearse the same for their futures.

Nevertheless, she must smile at the memory of Ulie’s cheeks and the tender touch of his fingers on her face.

And these cans of tuna? Sweat coursing her over from her effort, she sits now cradling nothing but tuna tins. A drop of perspiration lands on one. The drop of her sweat becomes a sparkler decoration or a torch of victory or a diamond from a box of Cracker Jacks. Tins glitter in the daylight, the silver trophies of her tuna Olympics.

Mancil suddenly appears beside her, full moon eyes on her. “Maman, you were laughing! You want me to run get papa?”

They’re eating me up alive. Another stray thought to be ashamed of.

“Fuckin’ damn tuna. I can’t stand the smell of it.”

**May's Indian
Atoka, Oklahoma**

10:59 am. Sunday. November 23

He claimed his name was Charlie, which she knew enough to doubt. He did not give his Choctaw name. She wouldn't have expected him to. In response she gave only her first name.

He seemed ecstatic, "May? For sure? Like the sweetest month? It's the magic time of the earth. You have a perfect name. Names are important. Do you know you look like spring? You look like the month of May."

Such attention confused May. She recoiled into her shell of nunnish good behavior, not looking at him directly again, not smiling, and staying a couple of feet away from him as they walked.

He never tried to touch her, hold her hand. He seemed duly respectful, even courtly with her. That first long walk back to the Mission ended strangely. When they came in sight of the front door Charlie abruptly disappeared. Turning to say goodbye she found him gone. During the week that followed she seriously wondered if he had been real.

But the following Sunday he appeared again, at back of the church, standing alone. Ignored. Now for sure her Indian.

Bob and May on the back steps of the Mission one summer evening, with no sunset diverting them from anything else, the old man suddenly told her something new. "L'il Pet, you ever look at yourself now that you're a woman? You knows you're god damn beautiful, L'il Pet? Not beautiful like them whores in Dallas. Whole lot more.

"I'm tellin' this so you can watch out for hunting dog man. Them evil hunting dog mans gonna be lookin' for doves like you. Then they'll track you down, those fuckers, long nose to the ground, tongue adroolin'. When they smell you then they gonna howl and grab for you. You unnerstand me child?

"We men folk got this little bit of skin hanging on us and it makes us bad." May laughed, so pleased by the story, like a fairy tale.

Bob frowned back at her, got up fast and moved on off down the barren land to where he lived. Preventing her from asking if she could see his own interesting little piece of skin.

Bob stayed away from her then for a whole day. When he returned again to their shared step she felt so relieved she hugged him. She feared she'd hurt his feelings.

"I asked ya, do you unnerstand me child."

May nodded back contritely although in truth she did not understand anything, nothing of what he was referring to. He never again raised that topic. However someone else did.

The very night he returned to sit with her in the afternoon Soeur Blanche barged in on her schoolwork time in the empty silence of the front room. Soeur Blanche,

“That brick shit house” as Bob called her, abruptly delivered to an awed May a blunt, graphic expose on the male body, human sex act and its consequences. Understanding made unavoidable.

Throughout the fall of her 13th year Charlie walked her back from church. Yet he always disappeared before they reached the Mission door. They never did hold hands. May loosened up enough to speak to him directly, to show her eyes again. She asked many questions about him, each evaded or answered she knew by lies.

Connecting him only to church, it surprised her to see him there at the depot corner obviously waiting for her. At least she would have company for the walk to church.

Instinctively she knew in advance they must obey the rules of Atoka --she'd not be able to go into church with him. It would be trouble for them both, more so for him she guessed. No, she would go in first and tell him to come a few minutes after her.

Charlie didn't move from the freight depot wall. Nonchalantly donning his decorated derby he cheerily raised an arm to wave her over. May smiled at him. She quickly crossed the street. With Charlie near the wind slapped her checks less furiously, the November cold gnawed less cruelly and Court Street had lost its emptiness.

1928

Valla

12:01 pm. Hollywood

“Fuck the 25th of March. Fuck it. Fuck it. Fuck it.

I need another drink, but if I have another drink I might stagger off the stage, not good. Too early.”

Valla in her living room. Joint's larger than Grand Central Station in New York, or about so, she thinks with disdain. Too glitzy, too show off, too nouveau riche. First time she saw it she knew Tony had decorated it himself.

Satin white wallpaper, wrapping-paper for her life here, around cream colored sleek furniture. She lies stretched out on the sofa, one arm flung up, forearm across her face to give her darkness.

There are good things about Tony. He's a hood, and that protects her. He is rich, and she accepted the best because even the best she knew could not upstage her. Tony also kept his fists to himself, maybe he knew she would kill him without a blink of her cold eyes if he ever dared hit her.

Bad things were he stands shorter than she, bore an ugly scar across his abdomen. He had no manners. Also, Tony's cock erect did stand large. With that he rutted like a goat, always showing it off, aiming it at her like a cave man's club. She

can barely get her mouth around it about which he complained like if it were her fault.

Far worse, he must be meaning to dump her. She didn't need Mama Marie to figure that. She had her 'extra' work. Sure as shit that couldn't keep her near to this style. A hand runs down the embroidered French gown. A silver satin gown. It is her favorite for 'before late evening' wear. The silver gives more fire to her hair, more ice to her violets.

Some days she changes outfits five times a day. 'Don't want Sweetness with nothing to do.' The radio on, Bix Beiderbecke--her Bix. She loves him for everything he's recorded. Tony says he was a loser alky. 'Son of a bitch meant that one for me.'

"In the Mist" floats to her from the other room taking her back into her own mist. March 25, 1902, Geneva, Texas. One never to be forgotten birthday party for those Skinner twins. Valla's favorite place and day.

It started no sooner then she heard the fading clopping of the horse, John gone off to buy his stand of timber. Wasn't too difficult figuring what Andy wanted coming into the bedroom that way, naked, hard and giving her his weird grin.

Yes, they were twins, but for sure not identical. Her John had it beat on Andy for a body. Andy had gone middle age, while John stayed lean and wiry. She yelped at the sight of him, surprising her like a bullfrog with a spider on its head. Instinctively she'd struggled over to reach for May in her crib. May, most precious of anything on earth.

But he snagged her foot before she could touch the baby and was on her fast. She smelled the whisky on him, saw the crazy look. He hadn't shaved. Sunday afternoon, the hardware store and lumber yard were closed. No neighbors to hear screaming.

Andy tore at her panties, actually did tear them off. Now he was snaking up ripping open her night shirt. She did all the struggling. He just crept up silently looking at every inch of her as he came forward.

"Don't do this Andy. Andrew. Andrew Fredrick Skinner. Stop."

I managed to reach to the side bureau and get the drawer open. John left his Peacemaker in there just for me, for when he was out buying up more acreage of virgin forest. Looking back I wonder what he secretly guessed about Andy. They did have their secrets.

Andy knocked me back but not my hand and slid his dick over my belly. Then he looked at my face, hollow, angry eyes boring into me, a rape of the eyes to me.

"You did this, it is your doing Valla. I loved him before you. Then John sees you. One look at your eyes. All the time it's been the same. What John sees and wants, he gets."

He ran a hand over my hair, long then, pulling a hand full up to rub in his face, smelling it. My hair then so long that he could scrunch up and rub himself between the legs. Instead of looking me in the eyes he put his hand over them.

“No eyes more dangerous than those, Valla. Can't have them on me. Not now. You ain't using them.” His voice comes back in nightmare, mad, slurred.

“Used to be we always shared everything.” The words smelling of his thoughts. Clear low growling, the gutter dog. Posed to poke me, I screamed again.

May was bawling in my head like a fire alarm. At last my fingers curled on the gun butt straining through John's mess of receipts and loose change.

Suddenly I hear someone else crying. ‘Oh my God, Quincy? Run honey.’ John's son from his first marriage, he'd gone to play ball at friends. How come he was here, low, at the head of the bed crying in my ear?

Then, at the last second, in the darkness of Andrew's clammy paw there came that damnable blast. It never fades. Coming back again and again it makes me deaf, like then, makes me think for a moment that the world exploded into ruins and fell upon us, we four, in that bedroom.

When I saw again, smoke spiraled up from somewhere. Andrew was off me. I looked for him but couldn't find him in the room.

Crawling over to get May I found blood on the sheets. Hers? No. Blood of another's for sure mixed with what felt like pieces of cheddar cheese. It didn't stop me.

At last I got my hands on May. Lifting her up to me again. Quieting her. Squeezing her safe. All that I've ever wanted from life, to get her back in my arms.

“It's all right my sweetheart, it's all right, Mama's here, don't you cry, everything is good now, you're OK. I'm OK. All the bad is gone.” I rocked her close, until both of us fell silent.

I looked fast again for Andrew, making sure he'd run off.

“Quincy, where are you boy!” He lay huddled beside me in the bed.

Andrew? No, he was lying in the corridor to the kitchen. I saw him there face down in what looked to me like a halo of blood. Screamed again thinking he would stir, get up, come back. Lying on his paunchy stomach on my new carpet. I'd bought it last week from the best store in Milam.

“God damn you to hell, Andrew Skinner. Get off my new rug. Get your britches on. You want John to find you lying there drunk with your old ass for all to see. He'll shoot us both.”

Then again I heard that other crying. Who? Where from? Turning I saw Quincy, holding to me tight. Quincy still crying. Why? No one hurts a sweet kid like him.

“Hey Quincy Boy, what's wrong with you? You see it's all OK now? Don't let it scare you. It's OK. Uncle Andrew's gone crazy on us, but maybe he'll be OK too. We'll just wait here till your pa gets back.”

Quincy shrinks up like a slug against me. A tall eleven year old boy, handsome as John.

“Andrew Frederick Skinner, get yourself presentable.”

I had begun as a friend to this Quincy boy. Slowly turning into ma for him too. He'd just begun letting get close to me, already closer than friends. Strange, he became my own boy child lost but now found.

Beside me on the bed, a burn hole the size of a silver dollar smokes hot at me in the sheet. My eye travels the bed to where lay John's big Peacemaker, nearby, where I had grappled desperately to find it in the nightstand. Nightstand drawer hung open. A stench of powder. I understood.

1928

March 25. 2:08 pm

On The Rise

Making a quick dash from the stove to the front room, May claps her hands. "Oh, haven't you dear crazies done well with the table." she tells the boys. Amazing that it can at last look fine and finished. The front room classed-up with the china and a vase of roses. Her dinner in good shape, waiting in warmed bowls on the kitchen counter. A pause of relief offers a good moment for

To her the scene is priceless, the two men moving together almost tenderly through the bright Wire Grass light. Chinless, no, peeking outside.

She had begged GB to give her some extra minutes. And there, the dear man's still at it, sauntering about the place holding the old fellow steady with his arm, showing this and that to Chinless.

Damn it. She must remember to think 'Louis.' Say 'Louis.' Louis appears pleased by the attention. Shame momentarily darkens her good spirits. "I ought to have invited him sooner. What's wrong with me?"

Some slow Alabama talking, she admits, can be useful. She needs just another moment to coil her hair tighter. Another then to finish up by washing her face again to feel free of what seethed beneath the floor. For one moment she holds cool water on her closed eyes, seeing the truth of what they were down to.

Furnishings: Feeble as that old man tottering up to her front door, ugly as that old man himself. The front room on typical days, which are all her days except today, contains the large trunk. A couple of rickety chairs and her antique sewing machine.

GB tried to do something for here, building book shelves. Her books decorate a wall. These are her comfort. There is no rug.

In the two bedrooms there are six beds and two cheap armoires or chiffarobes as she'd learned to say. Already she hears the boys when out of view arguing about who will have Buddy's bed. It brings back the ache she knows too well.

But the kitchen is truly their room of life. Empty except for Aunt Missouri's dining set that consists of a large table plus eight padded chairs to match. These already show the wear they were never intended to bear, particularly the one that carries May to town in the wagon. Here is cooking, the room for cleaning up, for

bandaging wounds, for homework the place where she does the accounts for the plantation.

They end the days here gathered around the kerosene lamp to hear her reading aloud-- Dickens, Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson. Sitting there in a circle, together around the table, until she starts hearing GB snore or someone giggling or feels furtive fingers trying to tie together the shoe strings of her day-to-day lace ups. Then May knows she has fallen asleep on the book.

Old linoleum fits the kitchen floor boarding. The importance of the kitchen shows in the linoleum, worn down beyond any discernible design other than family life in passing abundance. Unnerving gnaw marks edge it at the doorways. To May left by some fevered beast frantic to get to them for its dinner.

May

Shyness, forever another nemesis to May-- even now at advent of harmless cousin Chinless-- rises uproarious and stinging to her cheeks. Shyness at the end of her time in Atoka kept her from making friends among the girls at the Academy. Only two would have done for her, they were eager candidates. May fled from them.

In Alabama she'd never been approached by any women other than Tiersey and Missouri. The thought of contact made her shrink from approaching another woman for even an exchange of pleasantries. This relieved May, but also left her utterly friendless when both her old ladies were gone.

One time when visiting at Aunt Missouri's a Whitaker 'cousin' to Mo by marriage arrived for evening cocktails. A snappy sharp-minded woman from Birmingham who'd just returned from France. Who even knew some French. In advance the lady sent Missouri a couple bottles of red Bordeaux wine for their drinks. May, dressed for the occasion in her Sunday best, hid in a total fright behind Missouri's front parlor curtains when Horace went to bring the lady in. She stayed hidden the entire cocktail hour, which at Mo's meant far more than an 'hour.'

At long last, after the woman left, a tipsy Missouri poked one of her plump bejeweled hands through the curtains with a full glass of Makers Mark on ice.

"You probably need this. You like hiding behind drapes? Kinda like in Hamlet? By the way your two big left feet were butting out from under my velvet the whole time. Thelma and I sat here sipping that fine French wine wondering what you were up to. It did put a damper on talk.

"Why are you so shy, child. A gal with the finest head in Alabama? You're hopeless. How you ever gonna have fun?"

May survives by standing outside herself, looking back to smile at her pratfalls.

1928

2:19 pm. Sunday Dinner Time

Ready for her guest, May pauses to arrange her mind properly. Swatting away the biting flies of her timidity and fears.

“There’s nothin’ to be scared of here, L’il Pet. All of these loves you. Jesus H. Christ, what more you want.”

Unaccountably elated, had she been drinking rum, May flings the door open wide. With too much bravura she steps to the porch proclaiming a warm welcome. Too energetically beckoning them in.

“Bonjour Monsieur Louis Black, how are you, sir? You are a kind cousin to come. Enter please. You are looking fine. I imagine you must be tired from all the walking?”

When after speaking too much to herself, May’s subterranean French accents her English more strongly. Her hands move more emphatically. People understand her less. Louis looks surprised. And baffled.

A moment of silence among the men, young and old. May’s presence stills them in place. Framed by the doorway her unique loveliness becomes a passing portrait of a woman’s image never to be forgotten.

Stepping into the overcrowded room Louis brings an old man’s aroma. But clean she can tell, and thankful for that. He carries that odor of a body in disuse, stale fleshed. Frailty comes in. Something unknown in her house. The shanty, barren cheapness be damned, usually abounds in a rambunctious liveliness that lights it aglow. Seven males to energize the rooms.

Chinless seems uncertain of what to do with himself. He gives May a wan smile. For the first time in this setting May sees the man in him, aged now, but before surely a real man. A sad thought comes with this that no one knows his story and likely no one ever will. Louis’ eyes May notes are teared up. Tears streak his cheeks. She can only imagine it comes from rare kindness. GB earns her blessing again for his gentle attention that so clearly touches Louis to the heart.

Her boys are gathering in, overwhelming the front room. They are her finest produce, she thinks. She grows them, and day-by-day they are looking better. Day by day they are closer to going off to market.

“Cousin, this meal is in honor of you. Here is your place at table. Do come and sit down.”

The boys gawk about, hands unsure, in then out of pockets, shoes sliding about uncertainly, an intimation that this herd might suddenly bolt for the front door. “Ca suffit, calme-toi, tout va bien mes cheries,” Without meaning to, May hears herself returning to French to bring them to order. Merde, for sure she hasn’t enough to satisfy these men.

1928
2:30 pm
Chinless

May keeps a close eye on Louis. It gives her the telltale flush to see that GB does too—keeping Chinless’s water glass full, passing him extra biscuits, and finding talk when the table falls silent.

Before, with Papa Zach dead, Louis visited them once over at The Bell Place. That awkward event of introduction. All of those dinner-guest Skinners being dead now, most sadly Aunt Tiersey. All gone except for Louis and May.

No doubt, facing her now across Sunday dinner, her cousin makes a pathetic sight. His emaciated frame hangs in ancient clothes, shirt collar dangling down his chest, ballooning trousers from another period held up by suspenders. Louis' head is so big it seems impossible to be balancing atop such a flimsy neck. He tried to shave for her dinner she sees. Raw scrapes, cuts on both checks, irregular patches of prickly white stubble.

Too much shows in those glassy blue eyes --Skinner eyes-- that betrays him. Louis is intelligent. May senses it like a communication going on between them. It makes his fate the more mournful for her.

This thought causes her to cast a quick glance around the table to be certain the boys are behaving. So far they'd been flawless in manners, those she'd been able to teach them, and polite too to Cousin Louis. Today they are her pride, GB as well, shaven and washed. His dark hair oiled down, his mustache trimmed back. The handsome face shows to its best. Sometimes looking at him, slant eyes and straight cheekbone ridges, it occurs to her that long ago Seminole blood surely strengthened the Bell line.

May tries to talk of Tiersey and Uncle Hubert. It seems to bother Chinless. Instead she gives over conversation to GB and the boys.

Her table being carefully laid with the china from great Aunt Missouri, May's thoughts veer to her. Bone china, "Made in England," the set arrived on Sainte Elisabeth in a crate delivered by Horace. Coming to May at one of the darkest times of her life, a few days after Missouri's funeral. On opening the grate she gasped-- there in the paper wrappings nestled magnificent plates, cups and saucers in a soft egg shell white, decorated on the rims by an encircling intertwining ring of inlaid silver wreaths. They give the table-- Mo's table and Mo's tablecloth, May's dinner-- a communal blessing.

That morning the older boys had rolled Aunt Missouri's round oak table like a big coin from kitchen to front room, the while May's throat caught in fear for its welfare. They opened it out for an extra plank. Covered in one of Aunt Missouri's linen tablecloths it looks like a dream to her, a white perfection. Porcelain rings to silver knives and forks. The shabby room recedes insignificant, too weak for irony.

Tuna in béchamel, her white flour biscuits, string beans and greens, what she has been able to serve rises above its humbleness. Back in the kitchen she has their dessert waiting too, that pecan pie. Cream to be whipped sits cool in a bucket of pump water.

Flies gather. May muses on their attraction. Dead fish or wet underarms?

She darts a glance around the table, a pleasure just to see it set correctly, to her an emblem of civilization. Then more so her cherished men sitting politely around it, if a bit self-conscious. The long litany of manners, especially table manners, came back to her as if just learned . . .

“Above all, whatever a guest's manners are like do not stare if they are different. Just keep doing as I'm teaching you to do no matter what.” Sainte Aix. May drilled her sons like a French nun. During a couple of her sessions on manners even GB indifferently sauntered through, nonchalantly passing by although she knew he watched curious as a little boy.

Hubert to her right, she whispers, “Please close your mouth when you chew, dear.” Mancil to her left, she cautions, “Go slowly my love, see if you can be the last one finished.” At the moment her boys are too polite. Knowing boys it makes her uneasy.

1928
Au Table
2:39 pm

Cousin Louis finishes two helpings of everything. May sees GB and the boys holding back. She does too. They'll all be hungry tonight. What remains in her larder? A dark question to push away until later. May catches Chinless looking expectantly, watery and nearsighted, at the greens.

A fleck of white sauce glues to the right corner of his flaccid lips. Biscuit crumbs speckle his napkin, tucked up tight at his turkey throat. In concern she wonders at how much the old man has to eat. Soon they should visit him again, this time maybe taking vegetable soup instead of preserves.

The greens lay at hand in an 'Aunt Missouri' tureen its top in place to keep them warm. A small 'Aunt Missouri' gravy boat waits beside it. The latter among the most elegant in the entire set. To May greens are alien as the red soil here, like the place's sense of age, of sad histories, hanging listlessly amid the festering density of life. First time she tried a bite of greens, at her welcoming supper at Aunt Tiersey's, she choked aghast.

She decided then to do her best to cook like Soeur Marthe Paul managed in Indian Territory. When a child she spent much time in the kitchen helping with small tasks. Watching in fascination the alchemy of cuisine. To her best ability, she does the same here. Vinaigrette dressing with a touch of pressed garlic is offered in Mo's gravy boat to help make the greens edible.

She passes the bowl of greens over to GB allowing him the honor of presenting the next course, humble though it be.

“Now Gentlemen, attention you all, here comes a fine bowl of Mother Bell's greens. And you know how good they are. So share fairly with all to enjoy.” At that

he serves himself, and then the bowl begins its journey. The gravy boat following. Depending on the holder sometimes this shining Scheherazade wobbles precariously, May holding her breath. If steady she relaxes.

At her side she senses tension in Mancil's small body. It heats like a tiny canon about to go off.

"Mancil, you need to go pee pee?" she whispers softly to him. "Just say excuse me please, fold your napkin, place it beside your plate and go on back." She ran a hand through his tight red curls. With all those freckles, she thinks, he's just about the most darling little boy anywhere. Mancil vigorously shakes his head, keeps his face down. "Are you felling ill, sweetheart," she croons to him, truly worried. "No ma'am, I'm fine."

Passed back to her, she takes a small dollop from the bowl. To her relief after she drops that onto her plate, enough remains for a nice first and second helping for Cousin Louis. A spoonful of dressing for herself, then both greens and sauce go across to Louis.

Uhhmm. GB clears his throat to catch her attention, shifts his eyes tellingly down the table when she looks at him. Her focus diverts to Cousin Louis. Chinless sits slumped over his plate. Greens untouched.

Damnation. In a flash she got GB's message. She's forgotten the molasses.

Molasses not on the table. It makes May blush. After the War her Skinners fell close to poor white trash, near as members of any local clan could go. Only their familial connection to respectable folks kept them from sliding over the line. Like most poor people here they drowned their food in molasses. Something that made her laugh out loud first time GB explained it to her. He admonished her with a shake of his beloved head.

"Don't be laughin' at these poor people, May. They use molasses because they haven't much food to put on their plate. What there is is always the same, and not much good. Molasses is used by them to live on, fill up on, get some git 'n go from."

May now truly regretful, "My gracious, Louis, what about the molasses for the table? I am truly sorry. Did you enjoy the meal at all?"

"I enjoyed evvvvvery bite of it, Couthin May, evvvvvery bite I tell ya. Don't fret none." Still, he eyes the gravy boat resting nearby like an enemy ship sailed too near.

"That is most gracious of you, Louis. You are too polite. I apologize. I told Mancil to take care of the molasses. I thought he'd put it on the table when it was being set for you.

"Mancil. You go immediately, you hear me, and bring that bowl of molasses I set out for Cousin Louis." She feels it, the spring of tension beside her popping when Mancil dutifully rises and heads for the kitchen. What can be the matter with her boy. Watching, May is alarmed, although by training and character she hardly shows it. Her coat of many colors, she keeps him in mind as he goes.

She named him Samuel. GB insisted on the 'Mancil' for a middle name, and then too on using it for his day to day name. The Mancil family is a proud connection to GB. They are distant cousins and before the War held more slaves, land, and one of the finest plantation homes in Alabama. Although she allowed the name for Mancil, at first she could actually hardly bear to use it. Samuel, Samuel, Samuel. May yearns for a Samuel. Her judge and prophet. She knows she needs both.

1928

Fine Dining

March 25. 2:42 pm

Just as May prepares to fetch him back with all her wrath, Mancil at last reappears from the kitchen holding the small bowl of molasses with great attention. He makes her so proud. The little boy places the bowl near Cousin Louis' plate.

She doesn't approve of this but says nothing--she will tell him later to never single out a guest. Her boys have so much to learn, so little time left for her teaching. Manners are a code of conduct. The social contract of most importance to her. Manners give grace and harmony to humanity. Manners are all.

May waits a moment. Talk goes on around the table. GB updating Louis about Buddy leaving for the army, that Joseph Henry starts to talk about the oil fields in Texas. About Maurice's job at Dorman's and what the teacher told them about Mancil. How well Hubert could run, faster than any boy his age, drew pictures too and that James Lamar was the smartest toddler in Geneva County.

He dandies James Lamar on a knee as he talks, the old game of tossing the little one up and down, then suddenly straightening his leg so the child gets a sudden shock of free fall. Baby James squeals.

The mid afternoon light fills the windows of the shanty. It profiles each person at the table in a softening glow. GB's long lean face looks almost happy. Buddy hunches forward attentively, obviously enjoying adult company and talk.

Maurice yawns, somewhat bored. May makes a note to remind him about yawning at the table. Hubert licks his plate, turned away hoping in vain to escape her notice. That crime would be on her list of reminders too. The light catches Mancil lighting his hair in a pale fire.

Oblivious, May doesn't observe how each man and boy at the table, even Maurice, stare at her again and again in awe of her handsome dignity. Without knowing, she is the spirit of the table incarnate.

"At last, Cousin Louis, thanks to Mancil you have molasses at hand. Would you like some now?" Her hand motions to the bowl that suddenly is the center of attention.

Louis peers at the bowl sideways, a covetous look accompanied by a tongue slightly protruding from the left side of his lips. "Yeththhthh Ma'am, would indeed I

would, thurely mighty kkkkkind of you Couthin May.” Before she can hand it to him Chinless grabs it for himself. Two thirds of the molasses gets pooled on his plate.

How comical to her to see a fine plate swimming in a cheap brown swill. Rather, Missouri’s finest deserved the French fare she has known all her life. Savory gravies and dressings. Through time such meals become treasured memories. Glued down with molasses Savarin becomes defiled. But Cousin Louis merely swats away a fly then bends forward to virtually embrace the plate.

“Expectant silence of a sudden going around the table. Why? I sense only contentment here swinging me off into one of my saddening reveries.

A gale of laughter storms across the table, the boys raucous in their glee. It catches her confused. Rising in alarm, she glimpses Mancil with a wan smile that fades as he sees his mother moving quickly to bend over Cousin Louis who seems to her to be dissolving in a fit. May holds him by the shoulders, so fragile she fears breaking them.

“What is wrong, Louis, are you ill?” Cousin Louis manages to shake his head. The old man is raw red. Sweat and tears fleck the wrinkles of his face. Despite herself May too had a moment when she felt a laugh rising, clamping it down fast. He did resemble a turkey with his long spindly neck and the Adam’s apple gone spastic.

“Water pleathe,” croaks Louis. She quickly refills his glass.

“Cousin Louis, pass me down that bowl of molasses if you please.” When GB speaks the laughter breaks off dead quick. “I have a bite of greens left here myself. I’ll try some molasses too.”

Louis still strangling makes no motion to pass the bowl. May picks it up and goes herself to serve GB. Giving May a smile of thanks he takes a half spoon of it for his remaining bites of greens. He not only likes May’s cooking he gloats over it. In all of Geneva County he alone gets such fare.

GB takes a bite, swallows hard. Then he pauses deep in thought. After a moment he clears his throat and declares hoarsely, “That my dear is your best greens sauce ever. Here, I’m sure you boys want to finish what’s left. Don’t leave a drop in the bowl.”

This reignites the boys’ mirth, even Louis able now to chuckle wanly. “GB you are a fine hoth. Here GB, wwwwant me to path you the wwwwater?” At that the whole room again erupts with delight.

All except May.

First she protectively grabs up the bowl, cradling it carefully in her hands between her breasts. Then flames of her dreaded temper flicker to the ceiling when she sniffs it cautiously, the men suddenly pause in place seeing her transfigured before them.

“Couthin MMMMAY, don’t you bbbbbe angry, pleathe, thithththth hath been a moth fine dinner. It were a ggggggood joke.” May sets the treasured bowl back on

the table. Her face mottles in conflicting colors of clenched fighting knuckles. Each of her sons in turn is pierced by her darkening eyes, violets in a glooming tide.

Without warning she slams the floor with one of her heavy lace up wedding boots. It rattles every piece of china on the table, every pane of glass in the shanty quakes. For the males around an earthquake ripples through the pine floorboards.

Joseph Henry shows his brothers two fingers meaning this was mother's second epic outburst of the day. Only Hubert and Mancil know it actually marks her third great stomping on this strangest of Sundays.

"I know what this is. How dare you do this. How dare you insult my Cousin Louis in this house. You've ruined my dinner. You've insulted Aunt Tiersey and Aunt Missouri. You wont eat my cooking for awhile -- damn you to hell -- you bastards."

Striding out she leaves them with a mighty, cracking bang. The screen door is flung off its hinges. It careens flat to the floor where it quivers in a death rattle.

Mancil sits solemnly guarding his fine china plate, in his lap where it had to when fury struck.

"Good catch, Red," remarks Buddy with a wink.

1928

On The Porch

2:47 pm. Sainte Elisabeth

Sitting on the top porch step May struggles to keep from storming back inside to attack those laughing males with blows and kicks.

"Bells. Worthless SHIT," she screams the words for the State of Alabama to hear. "Not even good fertilizer. That pride you flaunt? I spit on it."

May bends to spit on one of her yellow rose bushes. Inexperienced in spitting she mainly drools on her chin, wiping it off with another curse.

At her back, in the small room just beyond the screen door, GB is motioning with a finger at the boys to bend closer. His whisper-- "Remember, sons, when mama gets like this either run for it or keep her clear of the kitchen knives." He puts the same finger to his lips to keep them from giggling.

Soeur St. Ephraim. Child you become unstable when you are this angry. I weep in fear it will ruin your life if you cannot make it go away.

May can't budge from the porch step she's plopped on knowing of nowhere else to go. Sainte Elisabeth is raked by her glare of contempt. She tries counting to ten in French, as the nuns told her to do. To no avail, the anger rages on inside her, so out of control she can't focus on a thought.

Soeur St. Claire. Count friends and sing a happy song.

Among the worst fits for May came over GB ordering her to change her first vote, a newly and proudly emancipated white woman, from La Follett to Coolidge. She banged a rolling pin down on his shoulders. This while they were still living at The

Bell Place. That kind of violence very rarely erupts from her. It makes her shrink with dread of what might be hidden inside her, what she is helpless to smother.

Yes, her shanty awaits expectantly silent. Those males pause abashed hoping for her return. Their attention on her like a spotlight panning in vain for the lost star performer. Only a single furtive clink of a fork tokens that a hushed table fills the front room.

Aunt Missouri. May Elizabeth, now I've seen it all. You sure took your panties down for them. Go give 'em some more hell. Won't hurt them. Nonetheless I have to say you have a prickly disposition same like your papa. Didn't do him any good. You ever think of taking dancing lessons? When the fit comes on, you know, do the Charleston.

That is a thought, Mo. I've never danced in my entire life.

Aunt Tiersey. Let's all be angry together.

Soeur St. Aix. When you are like this I do not approve, pas de tout. I won't have it. Act like an adult instead of a nasty child. I raised you to be a lady, my daughter. Act as such or else I shall fetch the ruler. And, close your mouth.

May opens her mouth wide. It feels ridiculous. Has felt so seemingly forever. True, she does have bad teeth. But in the beginning and until her mouth had closed into cement she had used a jack-o-lantern grin on the hated St. Aix, knowing how it mocked the gaunt patrician.

"I am May." She reminds herself. "I am named for a goddess of spring. My mother and father whoever those assholes were or are named me that.

"I am May Elizabeth now. I shall live up to the name no matter what." No one ever understood her, could guess her thoughts. She would be burned at the stake if the truth were known just as St. Aix had warned. A life of hiding her thoughts knowing they were dangerous. How thin and fragile her skull is for holding herself in and hidden.

Peace comes to her quickly. Staring out one moment from the slanting porch of the shanty, she is the next looking from the mission tower. Her position is westward facing into midday sun, a cloudless sky the same blue as the Madonna's dress.

Her viewpoint is of the immense expanse of prairie. The land rolls gently away from her treeless and empty of dwellings or roads. It flows in soft lines, subtle contours rising and falling in great curves of mother earth. The landscape ripples with summer tall grass. May can see forever. She can see beyond anything built, living, known, on and on into startling clarity. There is nothing in her way.

She hears Soeur Blanche calling for her to come down to the mission. Obediently her free hand rises toward the tower ladder.

Contemptuously, Aix is snarling on and on about her peasant men. "That does it. Fuck dat."

Standing up she smooths her skirt down, tidies her hair. May shuts her eyes. She takes three big gulping breaths of Alabama springtime. Head held high, her smallest

smile secured, with a bustling swish of skirt she rises, turns and reaches out to open the remnant of the screen door. The other hand gropes for the pouch secreted beneath her blouse. Determinedly she holds it until her face relaxes into its familiar lines.

1928

End Of The Storm

March 25. 3:13 pm

May's return to the chastened room of men is a grand entrance. "Are you ready for some pie?" she asks, knowing the answer from each of them, looking at each in turn, falling in love with them again.

To Mancil she adds, "Ne me pas regard. Je ne t'aime pas. Tu est un enfant mechant." The men and boys go blank. Except Mancil who at her words drops his head to the table beside his plate, covering his head with spindly freckled arms, weeping into Aunt Missouri's tablecloth, a rich and wonderful place for a broken heart.

"Blue blazes." Proclaims May. "You men have made me forgot to whip the cock suckin' crème de chantilly."

Around the table all are turned to statues except for Cousin Chinless who is slapping his knee and giving the hog laugh. He laughs with such gusto, face raised to heaven, that tears of merriment cover his cheeks.

"Couthin May, you do bbbbbbbeat all. Thithithit the beth Thunday dinner I ever hhhhhhad. And for thure the mmmmmmost fun I've had me in a long ttttttttime."

1928

2:39 pm. Hollywood Unreal Time

"Valla, you ain't goin' for no damn drive. Can you see straight, huh? Anyway, I got the car keys. Wanna come get 'em?" Paulette pushes her mug at me grinning, dangling the keys on a big black finger. "I don't care about you but what about those poor pedestrians. Anyway, Mr. Tony would have my liver whole if something happened."

I hadn't thought of a drive, or had I? I do have on my mink, somehow have my purse and gloves. "Just thought of some fresh air, platypus. OK OK. I'll go sulk by the pool."

Paulette looks surprised at what an easy spoiled child I am tonight. But then she doesn't have a clue that John Skinner's dead twin, brains in spaghetti sauce, smolder in my guts. Or does she?

"How come a woman like you with all you got don't care about nothin'?"

My head reeks of gun smoke. Did I do the right thing? I had done the right thing. Yes. Except what I had done was shoot John's brother. Right thing, murder?

A sudden thought. For sure Andrew wouldn't have left anyone alive in the house for John to find. That meant May and Quincy were to have been dead with me. Three to one odds, I didn't doubt I'd done the right thing, whatever that was. Couldn't recall the gun in my hand, couldn't recall much. Couldn't recall cocking that gun as John had taught me, easing the trigger back. Sort of like getting ready for a drive up the coast that I don't remember planning to take.

"You come with me Quincy. We three are going to go sit together in the parlor. You go get a Dr. Pepper for yourself. I had some on ice just for you for after your game. Don't go down that corridor, use the side door through the parlor, honey.

"I'll need to get up and dress. Don't watch now. I'll give May some breast. Know what, I think I might just have a dash of your pa's whisky.

"Can you bring me a glass full of the chipped ice that's cooling the Dr. Peppers? That's a darling. Thank you, you're my man."

Quincy did as I asked, moving slow and like he'd been struck by lightning. Poor hurt kid. What a tragedy seeing him mince around Andy in the hallway, not looking down, so pale I wondered if he fainted.

"Don't do that again, Quincy. I told you, son, go through the parlor." First time I ever called him 'son.'

Quincy sat waiting for me and May just as I told him to, in the parlor. He had his Dr. Pepper and my glass of ice. We three sat quietly together as if nothing had happened. May took breast with me and Quincy in the parlor, like we were waiting for company. Actually my breast didn't have much milk then as she was about weaned. But all I wanted was her to be close and to forget the nightmare. Can't never forget that last sweet sucking. Those lips on me. Her small hands kneading my bare skin.

Not pondering why, I'd put on my best go-to-church dress. It was a soft blue gingham with small deep blue flowers on the high collar and long cuffs. I wore a new pair of panties. All seemed clean, normal.

I poured the whisky over the brim in agitation. Took my first sip and spewed it out on the rug. First alcohol I ever tasted. Forced myself to take another sip.

There we three were on the sofa each having our drink, mine running rivulets down my wrist. What a nice Sunday afternoon get together. Guess we were all in shock.

This scene went OK for a few minutes. It gave me time for thinking. Not good I've learned if you aren't smart. No one's called me smart.

Folks about knew I was the best looking girl around. Lots of jealousy followed me, much unjust gossip. They'd say I'd tempted Andrew. Made him wild for me. Then shot him dead when he came to collect. However their mean minds imagined it they'd go for the dirt with salt and pepper. Lizzie Borden took an ax . . . Valla Skinner took a gun . . . Fact: I had murdered a man, my husband's twin, and left him lying on my hall carpet for proof. The gun and burn hole were on the bed.

Here in the dusk near the pool water. Light ocean breeze in the palms. What's past could be a bad movie, unbelievable. But it's my past, see. Lousy or not. The rushes of me in my mind.

Here I am again in fantasy land. Kinda forgotten in Tony's golden cage. So what's else to do. I finish the gin, too bad they didn't vote Prohibition in a lot sooner.

Concerning that thorny topic, Paulette's wrong though, it's not booze put years on me. Maybe one at the throat—yeah go for the jugular-- could be another year on me at the corner of my eyes. Hardly the internal damages I caused all by myself. The aging inside.

That crazed rush out the door can't be blamed on the second full glass of whisky I eventually chugged down. Well, maybe the second glass helped. I hadn't had breakfast that morning, no lunch. I was just a kid. I'd been constipated for two days. I got confused and opened the wrong door. Got lost and floundered by the wayside. Whatever.

Except the decision was all mine when made. I couldn't let my baby and John get the raw end of what I'd done. At every turn my head spun round to a certainty of what ruin it could make for us all. A hell of a lot. I knew.

In crazy deliberation I somehow totally panicked. That's the worst combination a girl can wear. It all shouted 'run.'

Pure 19-year-old aged-panic in a shot glass. And I gulped it in one swig.

"Please bring me a piece of that paper on the table, and a pen too--one's in the desk drawer." Quincy obeyed going like hypnotized. It occurred to me then that he wasn't walking quite right, his arm dangled.

The note I wrote to ruin my life:

I shot Andrew when he tried to rape me. Didn't mean to, it just happened. I got your gun out of the side table. I love you John Skinner and never another. I can't hand May this mess. I leave her with you. Please keep loving me. You need to take care of Quincy. Somehow he got hurt. Give him a kiss for me. I leave my soul in May. I embrace you with my life. Valla.

Again I had to hold May. Bowing low over her while she fussed, holding her close, trying to take her back inside me. She quieted then and I put her back into Quincy's arms. He liked holding her, giving her tickles and kisses. I ruffled his fine hair, same as his papa's. Kissed him on the lips too. A long goodbye kiss.

Then I whispered to him, whispering as if Andy could hear anything but the flies nibbling his brains. It was my secret to his pa, my precious spoken map for him to follow and find me. Wild swig number two and I bolted.

Turning, I ran from them. A scaredy-cat mother scampering off from her children. It was also goodbye old Valla, I just didn't know. Fear kept me from looking again at those sad two.

I packed some clothes fast. Half fell with the suitcase down the stairs to the store. Didn't want anything except to get out of there, get away. Took all the cash from the till, a lot too as it included Saturday business.

Suitcase tied behind me I rode off on Andrew's mare. Not once looking back at the upstairs windows over John's hardware store. "Skinner Bros Hardware & Lumber." I knew Quincy stood there calling to me, pressed to the glass, May crawling on the floor beside him.

On my way, alone for the first time in my life. Right off I started aching, feeling old and empty. Absence caving me back to bare bones.

May? May Mary, so what. Everyone votes, except Paulette of course. Did I truthfully leave my baby because she was heavier than my suitcase?

1902

**Skinner Bros. Lumber Co
March 25. Geneva, Texas**

"Where is Valla, son? Tell me quick."

"She left, pa. Mama Valla's gone. I feel so bad for her. Before going she held May. She give me a kiss.

"Pa, she didn't look so good. Valla looked near as dead as Uncle Andy. You seen him? His brains are in the hall. Then she run out crying. I heard her going on all the way down the stairs. Plus lugging that big suitcase of yours.

"She left this note for you. Read it, quick pa, right now." A piece of paper wet with tears flapped before my eyes.

That letter was read through my own tears. Andrew dead by the hand of my own love. My one true love gone.

Then Quincy started wailing again, looking me with wild eyes, truly in shock. Looking just as stunned as I felt.

Hope dies harder then we do. Leaving May again with Quincy, poor kid, I made a quick run for the stairs. Took them in a bound. Calling her name in a way I couldn't believe came from me.

Out back, no Valla. No horse. She'd taken Andrew's mare.

Maybe an hour lost or more so that searching for her was nonsense. Probably I went a little mad, not thinking clearly at all. I scoured through the store, the lumber yard. All I found was the store till open, money gone. No Valla.

"Damn it, girl, I told you not to read all those cheap novels."

A ma leaving her baby? That spooked me. I had lots of guesses why, but it still seemed twisted. Maybe she had fled in terror. That much I could fathom. But why not wait for me. Did Andy really rape her? I found that difficult to believe.

"You stupid bitch." My worthless anger. Only 19, off that poor farm at 15 from people too worn out to even see how beautiful she was, an other worldly beauty. I

took her too soon, too young. Didn't know a thing except the trash she read. What clear headed decision do 19 year olds ever make?

Fuck it. If she'd only waited. Why the hell not. We'd be outlaws, but at least together. I knew why. She'd been afraid I'd stop her. I sure would have too. Oh my God, or did she run thinking I'd doubt her, see it as her tempting my fucked up slob of a twin?

Back again at the apartment I turned to caring for Quincy and May. They'd not had much attention for sure. Did my best to bandage the boy up. Got him to change clothes. Fixed him a sandwich. May I bathed, got her into a clean diaper and clothes. Gave her a warmed up bottle from the milk we kept on ice in the cooler.

Andrew's body I covered in a sheet, shooing away the flies. When twins go opposite ways in mind it's hell. It's like the devil in the one tries to get into the other. Choking on a God bless that I couldn't be sure he deserved I bade him farewell.

After my kids were in better shape, Quincy calm, May happy but looking about for Valla. I scrawled a message, shedding on it some of my sorrow for Andrew. 'Closed For Funeral,' it read on a sheet of Quincy's school paper. Went down and taped it to the front door of the store. Then I locked everything down tight. We couldn't leave until tomorrow. Soon as the bank opened in Milam I'd pull out my . . . well with Andrew dead it was no longer 'our,' money.

We didn't have workers. Andrew was too tight to pay them, said we could do it all. We sure did. So I guessed no one would get suspicious until a couple of deliveries came by to find the same note in place. I didn't want to be optimistic but I thought we might have as much as a week start. Andy would stink to like shit by then, leading them to him.

Wanted to bury him in the yard along side his nephew-- Andrew Frederick Skinner and Fletcher Douglass Skinner. But brother had gone to too much fat for that, anyway the blood would leave a trail straight to him. They'd dig up my little son too.

Where to run? No where better to run in 1902 then Indian Territory, haven for lost souls and outlaws.

Next morning I packed May's few things, plus bottles, clean diapers, her blankets and teething rings. I checked Quincy's hurt arm, not good. Got his gear ready too. I took a change but no more.

Saddlebags full to bursting, I rigged a papoose like carrier for May. It had rope holders which I padded with shredded blankets. When I tried it on Quincy he looked relieved. "I can do it OK Pa, gonna be fine." Then I put my plump warm wiggling baby in it and he almost fell over. "Lord son, think you can manage." He straightened up and gave me this sad, wan smile. "Guess I have to."

I draped him in Andrew's duster, the best quality we sold down in the store. Made in Chicago. Top grade treated canvas. Put on my own too.

We three were quite a sight. Especially so after I managed to hoist Quincy plus May safely up on our pack horse. They weren't a heavy load, but the most precious I had left. I tied Quincy to the saddle. To help him with May I wedged a cookie tin between the saddle and the papoose frame. It would do for awhile, lifting her up so that her weight didn't pull on his hurt shoulder.

Before leaving I told Quincy I needed to pee. Instead I went back into the lumber yard. Took a good look at it. Not much by today's standards but it had taken a heap of dreary work over years of my life to build it up, and of Andrew's too. One look was enough, compared to what I had lost it held no more meaning to me. I knew the smartest thing would have been to torch it, couldn't do that though.

Walking to the one spot of any value to me there, I recall taking off my hat. Just stood in silence for a moment thinking back to the night I buried him. My son, Fletcher Douglass Skinner. Nothing to mark him. Valla mourned him too much so I left him bare.

Off we went. I led, turned half ways round in the saddle, holding the mare's reins in one hand then my own in the other. Had to keep an eye on my youngsters and on the road, watching too for danger. Also toted those heavy saddle bags between my legs. Got a bad back from riding that way. Still have it. My body giving me hell for what I done.

Finally, we straggled forward with my newest Colt on my hip and a shotgun in the saddle carrier ready to pull fast. Couldn't go out in Sabine County without one or both. Couldn't go much of anywhere then without them, strange how quickly things changed. Sure thing I couldn't take my kids to Indian Territory without protection.

We went without any songs to sing. I left the house as it was, except I kept Valla's note. Have it now in my hands. My own note replaced it: *I shot my brother Andrew when I caught him trying to molest my wife. We have run away where no one can find us. John Skinner*

Andrew's body, the sheet I'd covered him in already soaked through with blood and brains, the Peacemaker--sure did feel bad parting with that old gun-- I had to leave them together on the floor. That way they'd know it was me that done it.

Valla ran off. I ran off taking the kids. We scattered like chickens. Our dead chicken hawk left to be found. And joke of jokes, no one about there from our Geneva in Alabama. We'd been lured by a trick of chance.

Soon as the Milam bank opened I took out all the money we had and closed the account. It came to \$875.47, a fortune then that me and Andrew had hoarded in secret. Not even Valla had any notion of what wealth we'd amassed.

I headed across the Sabine River into Louisiana. We then doubled back up north toward Indian Territory. It was terrible painful going. May might cry, need her bottle, get tired of riding, need a change. She came first. Quincy tired too, an 11 year old with a crooked arm so brave and true.

The rutted lost road, the countryside, poor farms, rough towns--Valla I thought of being up ahead of me sort of like a road mirage to follow. Knowing well I still wouldn't find her even if she were to take pity and come to save my bad man's soul.

Brimstone instead would plunge down upon me from on high, wretched soul that I am. Damn you to hell Andrew Fredrik. My bad twin? No you were the good one. You always did want our lives to be different. You were just too crazy.

"May Mary?" I've never spoke her full name aloud. It wasn't the name to say to find any redemption for me.

1928

Flight

8:16 pm. Bartlesville

Our story went like this. Starting on the 26th it took us five days to the Indian Territory border. Worse trip of my entire life, nursing Quincy, caring for May, my head full of worry and doubt, dragging along a dead heart.

I'm turning 68 today and hoping I don't make it another day-- so I was 41 years exactly that early spring in '02. Young it seems now, even so it was hard going. Up we rode north through Mansfield and Shreveport. Then on into Arkansas.

From up above Texarkana we turned west at last toward what I hoped would be safety. Once across the border I did feel better, not so much like eyes were always crawling up our backs. Although Indian Territory gave out no welcome mat.

There we stopped one night at an inn in the town of Hugo. Behind the bar was a beaten up old woman, knuckle marks under her eyes. I sat May on the bar. She did baby things, crawling about on the bar. The hag played with her, kept hugging her and such.

"You got an angel girl here, sir, the likes of I ain't never seen. But your boy looks poorly. I suggest you get him to a doc fast. I hear they have one in Atoka. On the way there's a Choctaw Indian Mission run by nuns. Go there now. Way's no more than a track through grass so mind you don't get lost. I'd head there fast as you can git, if you know what I mean. "

Clear to me that warning meant the law was looking for us. So I took the hint in all speed that very afternoon. Heading north onto Choctaw nation land, open country. Valla was still leading me on.

It struck me then that it was April Fool's Day. That April Fool's day was no joke. Indian Territory did fool me, made a fool of me. Valla too.

On the way up to Atoka, damn, it started raining hard on us. We should have stopped but no way, we no where in sight of anything, all empty land. Onwards we had to go. That's when I began making the wrong decisions --I think-- still not sure. May stirred, whimpering a lot, trying to get out from under Quincy's duster.

That chance to get out and crawl on the bar counter top now made her unhappy cooped up. She'd been incredibly good until then. I imagined those big eyes and that

baby doll face of hers alone inside the duster these past days, riding and riding. Valla sure made a great baby, that's all I can say.

Some crying, of course, a bit of fussing, but nothing at all like anyone could expect. No, my May was amazing day after day on that long road of trial and tribulation. Whenever we stopped to feed and change her she'd come out from duster blinking and happy. I know she missed Valla all the time. Strange baby of ours, for some inexplicable reason she no longer begged 'ma ma ma.' It had become just 'da da da.' This made me go weak.

She became strongly attached to Quincy. His name in her small mouth became 'Win.' Win win win. Quincy talked to her almost non stop, struggling to entertain her. That talking did something for her I guess because after the first week she was babbling away in her own language.

From our start in Geneva I managed to keep May propped up on that same biscuit tin. It alone got us through. Her weight and motions would otherwise have done in Quincy not further than the Sabine River.

Rain grew from a drizzle to a torrent. Light ebbed away slow going and each time I noticed it getting darker I felt more and more alarmed. Light gone the downpour washed out will power. I began looking back where we'd come from.

Then in a flash tearing open the dark lightning showed me that reassuring glint of biscuit tin go flying off into outer space. "Pa, tin's gone . . ." Quincy in alarm.

"Can't stop to look for it, come on. You're my man, Quincy. Hold steady for me."

"Win win win."

Directly, Quincy began to go on me. He burst out with, "Pa I just can't." The woe in his voice brought it all back -- that plus this long dreadful passage to nowhere. It made me more hopeless than I'd ever felt before. We were lost in misery. I'd led my children off into this horror. Moments like that ought to humble a man and teach perseverance. It passed me by.

But then turning in the saddle I saw shining through that storm from the house of the dead the faint glimmer of a first light.

"We're almost there son, hold on. I see a light. Whatever it be we stop there."

Valla's star to our rescue?

1913

Atoka

November 23. 11:01 am

"Let's go quickly. Charlie, we'll be late." They stood close enough that wreaths of their frosted breaths merged, their spirits touching visibly, hers from delicate lips, his snorted from the dark holes of his nostrils. He pursed lips and began a jaunty whistling of jimmy Crack Corn.' Delighted, May smiled at him and sang along. A song Bob sang to her many times.

Jimmy crack corn and I don't care,

My master's gone away.

“Aren't you cold?” She stepped crisply nearer, pressed by time. Only then did she note his disheveled shirtfront, and more, his eyes narrowed to hot slivers. His hands bunched in fist-like forms in his trouser pockets.

“He’s so miserable,” worried May. She heard the tinkling of small change in one of his pockets.

One step nearer, enough, a hawk upon a sparrow. He lunged for her. Clamped a hand over her startled mouth, half open with a scream. He dragged her struggling back with his free arm and around the corner of the freight depot.

Slammed up against splinters of wall. A call for help useless. Escape impossible. May’s fluttering heart suddenly became the fate of a bird in the claws of one of the convent cats.

He hung her up off her feet, tore at her coat. Strands of her hair caught and pulled from the roots in the splinters of the wall. Charlie’s strong arm held her crucified against the side of the depot. Nailed up by the hand on her mouth and jaw, elbow out locking back one of her arms. His other arm he kept straight down sandwiched between their bodies. May struggled against the crushing weight of his chest smashing onto her breasts.

Whisky stink on his face and clothes. His hand on her lips filthy, clammy with sweat. His body gave off a new aroma, something ferocious to May. An odor more frightening than the physical force being used on her. His heaving chest forced the breath from hers. His heart beat drummed on her breast while her own gave mute piping’s for mercy.

She clenched her eyes not to see, not to believe. Blindly she struggled, trying to kick, knee him, fighting to get her mouth free of his dank palm. Anything so to scream for help. Fumbling fingers down below in his pants, she heard that and cringed further. He tore her dress downwards shredding her panties in one hard yank. Then May managed at last one pitiful twerp of a scream. It blew away into the frozen emptiness around them.

“No Charlie, no. What are you doing? Why is this.” She mouthed the words into his palm. Shaking her head back and forth.

Opening her eyes May tried to catch his glance, hoping that could bring back sanity. Her Indian had no thought for that, his eyes locked downwards. He was drooling.

Exhausted, her effort turned to a faint mewling. “Holy Mother help me.”

Charlie let her drop a few inches. Letting her fall through a smoldering tunnel, falling miles past animal flesh, glinting eyes surrounding-- down and down.

“Arret. Arret. Black Bob! Je veux ma maman!”

Shooting pain brought her to a stop. Her scream then heard through his hand. He bashed his fist into her stomach, grunting, she suddenly went limp.

Finished, the young Choctaw simply dumped her then in a mess in the dirt beside the depot. May lolled broken, legs underneath her, head lolling. Her hair, wood-sliver flecked from the wall, slicked in sweat to her forehead, glued to bloody smears on her cheeks, her own blood from his fingers.

Cold hard stones struck her—no, not stones. He had flung the change from his pockets into her face. “White bitch.” And then he spat in her face.

May lay on her side a small heap in tangled golden hair, a damaged package waiting to be collected at the Atoka freight depot.

“Come back, we’ll be late Charlie.” Mind speech so thick May wonders who it belongs to, what it means. “To . . . meet someone I don’t know.”

Half blind in disbelief, she saw her friend Charlie one last time. He went away from her lithely scampering, buttoning his fly in flight. Up through scrub he ran. Up toward the open prairie. Once there, to her, his ever smaller form transformed, flying off above the empty landscape a miniature eagle regal in feathers soaring in free form.

May’s concluding thought before keeling over into blackout, “Holy Mother, where were you!” Throughout, not one tear fell.

1913

Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary

November 2, 11:46 am

Soeur Blanche had become unreasonably alarmed about May that terrible Sunday morning. Some improbable reason. That Sunday had begun no differently from any other.

The what and why of it was to be debated through the years among the nuns, held as mystical by some, mere good fortune by others. Soeur Blanche herself attributed it to the Virgin’s divine intervention. Perplexed by the odd compulsion, why else should she have sent Black Bob out into such bitter cold to Atoka to look for the girl. She wasn’t even late returning.

“You don’t come back without her,” thundered Soeur Blanche after the dust of the racing wagon.

If not for that eccentric act, for which the nuns indeed thanked the Virgin, May might have frozen if not to death at least to a dangerous degree. Otherwise too the Atoka protestants would likely have found her coming out of their churches. If so the ensuing scandal seemed another blessing to have been avoided.

It came about, May heard, that driving toward the church Bob himself felt a warming of the heart while riding down Court Street. By pure chance he’d stopped inspect the side of the Freight Depot.

Finding her there he carried her wrapped in a horse blanket to the wagon his tears dripping onto her face. It would be the one story he could never tell anyone, not even drunk.

Bob came flying back into the Mission courtyard bellowing for help. He then ran with her body in his arms into the front room. He'd come blasting into the Mission frigid air in his wake.

Still assured of potential Indian attacks Soeur fainted while Soeur St. Marthe fled to the kitchen for a butcher knife. May herself was incoherent and unable to move or speak.

1928

**Performance for Maman
March 25. Late Afternoon**

This particular baseball game turns serious. At bat, Maurice sheds tears. Buddy strides from the pitching mound to have a man-to-man with him, in truth comforting his younger brother. Buddy always pitches. Maurice always gets upset. Joseph Henry always loses his temper and sulks. The little ones just have a great time. When GB is around for a game he sits with May. "Don't want to show them up," he once explained with a wink.

A year before GB whispered to her a fleeting vision of him going pro. That faded, although he'd been the best player on the Geneva High team. He insisted on helping his father on the plantation.

Buddy told her, "It's OK, Mama May. I know I'm not that good. I'd rather be of some use." When he dropped out May saw the coach looking like his wife had left him.

These family matches are fun for all because Joseph Henry could hit so well, but didn't try. Buddy pitches earnestly to him. Yet he could modulate the pitch according to the player without them noticing, so his throws were 'baby' pitches to Hubert and Mancil, even less difficult usually for Maurice. That not so just now, hence the tears.

As always May lost track of the score. When James Lamar strayed safely from her lap she would clap vigorously at whatever happened.

"Maman, stop that. You're on our side. We're losing to Buddy again." complained Joseph Henry although knowing his mother comprehended absolutely 'zilch,' as he put it, about ball.

After GB left in the wagon to drive Louis home James Lamar took a nap for an hour. Energized, he hops, kicks, struggles at anything possible in the way of his getting off the porch away from May and joining the game. No other means to control him except to sit on the porch steps, her broad back as a barricade. The railing around it fencing him safe.

When he's distracted by something other than climbing on her she herself dozes in short lapses of attention. One cry from the game, one sensation of James Lamar making a prison break and she starts fully alert.

Behind her the screen door, anonymously repaired, stands again in place.

Sometimes when the boys are sufficiently lost in their game she shifts her attention to her flowers. The Lilies of the Valley look bedraggled, marking the spot where she dove under the house to commandeer her tuna. How has poor Ulie fared with Twyla? She must inquire tomorrow.

Strong spring light in late afternoon. They were perched so far east in the Central time zone that light here stayed much longer than in Oklahoma. At first this disconcerted her, although soon it became one of the pleasures her bizarre new home offered.

Now Hubert comes shyly forward to bat and she must watch. Maurice she notes looks highly pleased to be on second base, cocky too that she sees him there. Mancil frowns scuffling his worn shoes in dust, waiting his turn at bat. Extremely worried, she knows. Bat and ball were stolen out of The Bell Place by GB before all was surrendered. Games are played on a flat area of soft sandy soil.

As usual the boys play down in front of Dandy's shed, Dandy one of the regular game attendees absent this afternoon with the wagon. Dandy gone that left the old bull snake to watch them.

"Dandy knows more about ball than you do, Maman." Scorns Maurice.

A retort momentarily breaks the game. Surely a gunshot coming up from down below. May grabs James Lamar in fright. She looks at Buddy for reassurance. A second shot echoes like a short bark. He shrugs his shoulders to give her peace and makes another pitch.

The Sheriff has been twice since their coming to Sainte Elisabeth. Looking for culprits, she assumes. The Sheriff not bothering them with details. Times before she's heard other gunfire from the shacks.

On the weekends they also hear raucous music in the night, sometimes screams too that set May on edge until GB pulls her back against himself and hugs his arms about her. Once from her safety in distance she watched two young men brawling down there in the mud. "It's their life, not ours," GB consoles.

"Maman, watch us. You're the crowd in the grandstand," calls Hubert.

Mancil's turn at bat. Very determined he stands pathetically uncertain of his small self. The same light on him causing the red in his hair to flicker. May can sympathize with the self-consciousness of red heads. She thinks of it as being born left handed, like she had been. The nuns kindly but firmly forcing her to change handedness.

Buddy makes certain to send him a 'baby pitch.' To his obvious astonishment Mancil hits it away. The little boy stands in irresolute stillness. Buddy gets to him in three jumps, swoops him up and carries him to first base. The while Joseph Henry scrambles with noticeable indifference for the ball. Maurice scores a run to home.

"Run run run." The boys continue yelling for no particular reason. Startled, May hears them clearly, a warning to all.

This afternoon of wrenching delight in being together. She refuses to allow the universe to ignore it, or erase it. The boys play ball for maman. Maman cheers.

1928
Even Tide in the Shanty
March 25. 8:16 pm

Mo died from heart disease in the Dothan hospital on April 17, 1926. May had been too distraught to go to the funeral at the Episcopalian church in Slocomb.

“Don't fret yourself,” soothed GB on returning that sorrowful day. “No one under 60 was there. Though there sure were enough of them. I was the only one without a cane. Among all those Cadillac's and Buicks our wagon looked prehistoric. Horace drove the Packard to the graveside. Nice touch on the bank's part, although I hear the Board uncorked some champagne when she passed on.”

May knew he tried to comfort her in his way. Since coming to Alabama Mo's death had been among her greatest griefs.

What remained of anyone, even so grand as Mo. This oak table, these chairs. She should put to Mo's account the china, of course, and the Limoges watch, some silverware, two silver candlesticks, and two still intact crystal glasses. Her inheritance in sum from Missouri. Only these, plus four bottles of Maker's Mark. And her middle name.

GB took care of two bottles of Bourbon, she hid the others for herself, gulping a shot now and again until the last lingering savory drop stung her lips with regret.

Nevertheless, May also harbors a touch of uncharacteristic resentment. She hates the sensation.

“What about money, Aunt Missouri? Didn't you know? Damn.” That thought makes May clench up, venality edging in on her love for the eccentric old lady.

When she died everything was sold off. Although she'd managed toward the end to stuff Horace's pockets more than once with as much cash as she could get in hand. He too grieved for her, quietly. May could only guess that stoic GB did too. Why can't men show what they feel?

“Damnation, why can't I?”

Calm of Sunday evening prevails in the house, all in, safe and sound except for Buddy, out having fun with friends. Finished cleaning up, she simply sits fingers splayed on the bare mahogany grain of Mo's table as if to play a reflective sonata.

It's a grand place of rest for a few moments. With the table still in the front room resting came easier for her beyond sight of a day's labors-- the stove, sink and pump. Out of sight, out of mind, May forgets the mostly empty shelves of goods that otherwise bring instant panic to heart.

In the early time of their acquaintance Missouri often took her and Rhoda's two older little boys out for drives. Horace drove. Dressed in a black coat with a black chauffeurs hat. Buddy and Joseph Henry in states of highest boy wonder sat up front beside him. Horace grinned back at them in comradely glee through the rear view mirror enjoying the sight they made parading slowly through the center of

Slocomb. An engaging grin showing how fond he was of Missouri, and too that he found this make believe spectacle as much fun as she did.

May, observing, understood that while dubious that the Bell slaves 'adored' the family, Missouri's recurring vehement assertion, Old Francis and Horace at least took Mo on in turns as their own large child to care for.

When they drove out into the country, Missouri's silk scarves in colors according to whim went whipping around behind her in the breeze, the feather on the cloche hat-of-the day danced. The drives made her chipper. Buttressed by lady like sips of Makers Mark from the rear seat bar. "More speeed, Horace." She'd shout. "More. There's no mule in front of you."

She'd bring along a hamper with sandwiches from the Hotel Fleur de Lys, plus pie for the boys, and a bottle from her own stock of wine. These drives with a picnic were May's best times since arriving. Excepting that they included at end a certain spot along the Choctawhatchee where in days of yore now misted over like the river at dawn an ardent pair lay embracing in the grass. This spot apparently held no sadness for Mo, it made her gay.

"You know what May? Having you here makes me a star. Those folks we just passed on Beauregard Street, guess what they're saying --there goes that rich old Missouri Bell with that French woman GB got in Indian Territory.

"What could be more wicked then that. Know what I've learned? Strange things can give us close to happiness. That is, if you believe in happiness. I do believe in God Almighty, but happiness? Well to me that's stretching it."

Helping her get ready for the wedding, Mo asked, "You have your pattern selected, honey? What initials? I need to know. You using your first or middle initial for the monogram? You know that middle initial is just on loan. Some time far away I might take it back."

How clearly May still recalls that slightly slurred soft drawl. "You got to have a pattern, you know, for your china, silver, linen. It's a pattern for life." May looking lost. "Pattern? Monogram?" She didn't understand.

Seeing how bewildered the foreign young woman looked, and considering what Mo knew about her nephew's finances--which it turned out was bulls eye accurate--she went silent. Only adding a moment later, "Don't trouble yourself over such nonsense, you'll get your pattern soon enough."

May reaches out from where she sits to caress the trunk load of Missouri's crazy love.

"Goodnight Missouri, my Spirit of Speed. It's your May Elizabeth here. Thank you for the baptism. Middle name and all. It's really me. 'ME, ME, m.e.' When GB sassed her by saying the ME stood for Methodist Episcopal May had draped a dripping dish towel over his head.

"Need to go, Mo. GB's waiting for ME in bed. Isn't that strange to be happening to ME, to you and ME, more than anything I ever imagined?"

The 'waiting' she expected from the pat on the fanny GB gave her when he took the boys back to their beds. That certain kind of pat. Thinking of him startles her from weary reverie. She rises to go to him.

1928

Something In The Dark

What stops her midway to their bed and GB is something rolling across the porch floor. Something arriving to strike a blow against the closed front door. It gives her a moment of alarm, although bringing to mind nothing more dangerous than a pecan shell. Is it a signal? For whom, from what?

She waits in indecision, half ready to call for GB, enticed to go peek through the lace onto the starlit front yard.

Plop. Rattle rattle rattle. Ping. A second pecan shell rolls across the porch to the door. This is too much for May. She'd needed courage to contend with this odd place, her new home. If it once makes her turn in fear she knows she'll be lost.

Courage she has, unaware, from the even stranger place that made her. Sky black at noon in billowing dust. Cowboys. Choctaws. Outlaws, Whores. Everyman with a gun. Funnel clouds charging across the apocalyptic-colored horizon. Horsemen of the Apocalypse coming for all. Dangers lurking especially for her. The simple almost daily acts of leaving for school and church and then the returning to the Mission were dread filled and only overcome by a stubborn determination.

Treading lightly to the door a sound goes with her, the soft swish of her long black wedding skirt. Kerosene lamp in hand she quickly opens the door wide maybe to catch a coon on the porch. The yellowish light turns her head into the image on an antique coin.

Empty porch floor boards. No coon. No gang of formless blunt shapes demanding GB. Did those heavy stupid men lure her out? May knew she ought to run fetch GB. At her feet she spied two pecan shells by the threshold.

"Hello there." She calls uncertainly through the wire of the screen door decorated with live and dead insects. Her aspiration to fly away mirrored there in a flutter of useless wings.

"Hello. Who is it, please?" Should she stay or should she run?

1928

Valla

6:30 pm. Hollywood

Wherever I went during that time I used ma's name, Alma Boedecker. Alma, ma said, meant soul. Valla I like better. According to her it means the 'chosen one' in German. Ma told me that when I was little.

After a baby-per-year before me she kept little patience for the young. But despite the poverty grinding into a snarling shrew there are kinder times to recall. Like in the morning when she still had strength, hard brushing my hair before school.

“You really are the chosen one, Valla, how could you come from us? I can't keen that. Chosen to be the Lord's vessel, no other explanation. That or you come from the moon.”

Waiting for John to come for me, to bring me May as planned, I lived in boarding houses for young women. Mainly I found work in shops. Work was all I had. I did it better than about anyone. Pa used to say 'work is prayer.' He was strict Baptist. It was easy enough for me to go plain for sure, I didn't wear makeup. Still they hired me then wanted to fuck me.

Many evenings in my spartan lodgings in Kansas City I composed letters back to John Skinner. Letters of love, explanation, begging for forgiveness, for him to come find me. Knowing nonetheless he'd never forgive or understand why a girl could go so bad. In the dreary early mornings before another dismal day started I'd tear those love letters up and scatter the scraps on my way to work.

Waiting, waiting. John didn't come. No John, that sent me an invisible message clearer than any he could have written to me. His absence told me that danger, a murder, still chased me away from him and May. It sent me sorrowing onward in a restless escape that's still not quite finished.

I left him a letter with the preacher, also in the plan. I went on to Chicago. This had me making shoes in a factory hell. I could take it OK. I felt safer in Chicago. A city like that made me anonymous. Chicago also began to wake me up. I could be totally lost there. Reassured for the first time in two years of hiding.

Only in Chicago did I began to peek back timidly at what had happened. The feeling of holding May never, has never, left me. Instead of turning her into a tiny ghost haunting my boarding house room I began then remembering her ever more crystal clear. She became my small companion during times of otherwise despicable loneliness.

That was when I began drinking. A few swallows of cheap gin after work, not more. Then it became a glass of gin, doubling to two.

1928

Formed From Shadow

Shanty On The Rise

March 25. 8:30 pm

Out there in the shadows in the mass of bougainvillea glowing in moonlight May makes out a lone wavering form. Stepping onto the porch she catches it closing in from out of the shadows. A stately easing forward from where the columns of old Sainte Elisabeth lay swarmed with strangle vines. Twyla Grant.

May spoke regularly to Twyla when passing in the fields, mere polite hellos. No more in truth than with another of the laboring wives of the fields. Twyla works day to day with her husband, US. Neither reads nor writes, May knows this from the work slips they give her for payment, their oddly distinctive 'As' as signatures over a firm X.

Twyla wears a white cotton-sack dress, fashioned from two sacks, no shoes. Hair cut short hangs unevenly around her gaunt face. Coming a step closer to the lamp light she emerges as a sleek health-shined black woman of middle age. May can not hide her interest in the dress. Green sequins sown onto the front form the message *GOD IS LOVE*.

GOD glitters above her breasts. IS appears near the navel. LOVE is worked so that it spreads across her lower abdomen. Under other circumstances May would wish for time to consider this message and its broader significance. For now this seems unlikely.

“Old Daughter done it,” Twyla answers her interest, body language saying don't ask more. Looking closer May presumes Twyla is pregnant again, although her girth and the large green word IS makes it difficult to posit.

What gives Twyla her foremost uniqueness is size. She towers more than 6 feet. The height accentuated by breadth. Wearing nothing under the sacks, white sacks whimsically stitched, her womanly form prevails over the night. Large buttocks and breasts, distended tummy from many babies, or whatever might be there now. Her muscular thighs cleave together in a V between powerful legs.

To May this living effigy of fertility could be arriving off the wall of mankind's oldest dwelling. Or more likely from the men's toilet in the Geneva gas station. For certain she had witnessed it that morning on the chancel wall of the church in Geneva—whites only. On Twyla's protruding venus mound the warning would be coloreds only.

“Good evenin' Miz Bell.” Needless to identify her indelible self. Twyla comes from a rarity, this according to GB, the Sainte Elisabeth tradition of straight standing look-you in the eye plantation hands. But in fact none but Twyla would look her straight.

May in alarm, “What's the matter Twyla, is Ulie sick?”

“Might be so. You tell me. You knows something bad happened to him here today. I'm come to find what. He done cried all afternoon. He don't eat. “What you do to my baby, Miz Bell? There no sweater chile here.”

Although only partially realized in the night, Twyla's anger is palpable. May catches it across the space between them.

“Miz Bell, you beat my boy?”

Proudly closing the gap to no more than one big step away, Twyla stops almost at eye level with May who remains on the porch in greeting.

“It bad what happen here. Now if you beat my Ulie I wanna know why. And it better be right. Otherwise me and US, all a' us will be gone tomorrow. They got jobs waitin' over at the Homewood.”

Turning the lamp up May sets it down on the porch boards. She silently closes the house door behind her.

“Can't stay long, I comin' from Meetin'. That be church to us. If'n we move out I need to git and get ready to go.” In a rush Twyla spits words at May, “I know what you done. You know it. You put the evil eye on my boy.”

“No no, not at all. Believe me, this was a special day for us, Twyla. My cousin Louis came for dinner.” May descends the steps and moves forward so that they about two feet apart.

“I knowed that. We know what's goin' on. Don't we got eyes. I knowed Mr. Black since I was a child. He a sad soul. But a good one. I tells my children call him Mr. Black, never Chinless. I tells them don't taunt him like others do. I say, he like a baby in God's eye. Then I tell 'em about his grandpa, yours too, that John Skinner, US Army man. All know about that.”

Moving yet closer to stand directly aside of this towering impressive woman May is struck by her dignity and intelligence. She casts what May thinks of immediately as a spell of her own upon the night. “She contains multitudes.” Thinks May in awe.

Mosquitoes and moths flutter near the lamp light. Whooshing over their heads bats hunt for insects. Swallows dart in the air. Owls call in the distance.

“I'll tell you what happened, Twyla. If you promise not to punish. . .”

Twyla interrupts May, strong in her velvety baritone voice. “Never promise on what you ain't heard of.” her pent up indignation beginning to pour. There is new menace here. May also senses a swelling emotion in herself, one far from anger.

She puts out a hand to take up one of Twyla's own work ruined hands, however unwillingly that hand be given. A clammy tense palm much larger than May's. Long fingers like new dug carrots.

“I would never hurt Ulie. Your boy, Twyla, he's like one of my own. If you take him away it will hurt me. He's learning to read now. Did you know that? He's a smart boy, very smart. Don't take him away from me.”

All around the two women night bugs of southern Alabama make their beating, purring, drumming, screeching music. An orchestral that frightened May until once, among evenings GB came courting her, they sat out in a spring night much like this one, in the swing on Aunt Tiersey's front porch. He took her hand --like she has just taken Twyla Grant's-- to carefully explain sliding his fingers across her palm for emphasis each element in that terrible chorus, naming the many creatures who's life sound joined the throng. Since then the night music held no threat for May.

“Well then, what makes him cry.” Twyla snatched her hand free.

“He’s crying because he feels bad. He took the food we had for dinner and hid it. It was a joke to a little boy. Sadly it wasn’t a good one. I have a bad temper, Twyla. I yelled at him.

“I’m sorry but that’s why Ulie is crying. I never touched him except to hug him in my lap. I gave him a kiss not a blow.”

With a soft laugh May continues, “That little fellow hid with my cans of tuna under the house. I crawled in after him to get them back. That’s all. He has no idea that we have nothing. just four little cans.”

Twyla is so black it is hard for May to detect any change in her expression. GOD IS LOVE glows vaguely greenish between them.

1928

May’s Friday Afternoons French Plantation Sainte Elisabeth

Besides meals and clean up, a duty that alone takes much of her day, May does washing on Fridays, rubbing at their work and bodily spills out back in her big zinc tub. “My office,” she calls it.

On Fridays May tells the family, “I’ll be in the office if you need me.”

Was that too sarcastic? Intimations of self pity?

For Fridays she dons an old pair of GB’s overalls, rolled up at the ankles and one of his worn out work shirts. There were the two pigs to feed with a fond scratch to their ears. Also the chickens to care for. The chickens she did not like. She’d need to change Dandy’s bed for fresh straw. Being cautious to avoid any encounter with the infamous bull snake.

It happened frequently however. The coils moving over in a quick slither motion to roll like butter around her pant leg from ankle up virtually to thigh. Tongue darting, its black and gold eyes on hers but not like a hunter’s more like an adoring pet.

“It likes you, May. My Queen of the snakes.” GB quelled his humor when he saw anger beginning to smoke. “So what do you do then?”

“Well for sure I keep a close eye on him. I always tell him ‘no tricks’. I talk to him some more like that’s a ‘Good monster, now go away.’ Then I pet him. After a while he goes away. But he frightens me GB.”

Keeling in laughter GB couldn’t even speak.

“You’re terrible.” Stormed May, swatting GB in the butt with her broom -- something else for him to warn the boys about, don’t light mama’s fire when she’s sweeping.

Besides Friday, for the rest of her days she still had bookkeeping to do, letters to write begging for money from the lawyer in Dothan, caring for their pig, helping in the fields. Day after day, getting the boys ready for school, watching over their homework, 21 meals a week, dishes after dishes, and then sweeping over it all to

chase out dust and creatures. Her too—piles of sewing in a corner to do for the ladies of Geneva. Her source of the money that she couldn't even understand.

But Friday to her chagrin, laundry day of all days, includes scrubbing out the privy, the loathsome chore she does in the afternoon after the clothes are hung to dry.

Friday afternoons she passes full time in 'her office.' Using a hard bristle brush and a pail of bleach in water she attacks the privy thinking of French heroism at the Marne. "Marchons, Marchons."

All her boys know the Marseillaise, all verses by heart. Its blood and gore inspire them in war play. They learned the Stars and Stripes somewhere. But she outlaws any singing, whistling or humming of Dixie about the home, although admitting it alone of the national lyrics she knew contained neither bombs bursting in air nor slitting of throats in its lyrics.

Friday afternoons the Marseillaise belts from the privy, May with her head inside, her ample rear sticking out the doorway. Her hair, bunned up so tightly for the work, wrenches at the roots in the vigor with which she scours away their excrement, sluicing it to hell with buckets of water. May will think "Why me? It's all shit and fury signifying nothing."

1928

Glimpse

8:47 pm. Sainte Elisabeth

There is no breeze nevertheless the lamp goes out. The only indication that Twyla remains is in small disturbances of the total darkness. May senses her powerfully nearby. Feels her mounting antagonism.

Nothing can be detected of her as if Twyla herself had left with the lamp light leaving only her strong spirit behind. Not a feature, no attribute of her to be traced, just the black hole in the night where she had vanished. May feels an empty space cut oddly out of reality. Out of focus. Hot as the flame that's gone. She holds the thick glass base of the lamp tightly, close, her only weapon.

Slowly May's eyes adjust.

Then suddenly it comes. Overwhelming her. Corrupting the evening time, wild fragrances of wisteria, jasmine and moonflower make her spin.

She hears supplications to the Virgin Mother. They come to her as if from the coiled heart of a sea shell.

It is French rolling high pitched in consternation, turning to anger and now to terror.

Paris dresses, satin sheen, rustle frantically. Bejeweled reflections contort in tall window panes, in ceiling high mirrors, in glass over the dead faces of ancestors.

Men are rushing hither and thither through candle and chandelier glow.

"Upstairs everyone, quick. Bring the guns. Vite vite."

Some piano piece grand as Mozart full stops in mid chord, haunting the air, a music box outcry chopped off at the neck. It is a memory, a frivolous defiance of what the illumination by chandelier, candles and dozens of ornate mirrors declares clearly.

Embroidered armchairs topple. Ornate tables roll spattering trinkets of silver and gold over richly woven carpets. Some are clutched up in lace finger gloves, held close for protection along with cherished rosaries. The chandeliers tremble in their reflections. Candle sticks topple onto velvet drapery. Panic ignites, catches, spreads.

A hundred candles join into one conflagration. May is dazzled and tries without success to blink the scene away.

Screams from the women, men in fury shout, children cry in the flaring of nightmare screams. The mad barking of dogs, neighing of horses, the house cats slinking off into darkness.

Through the rooms before the tide force the window glass shatters. No more of golden lights. Front doors splinter in twain. Crude torch lights and the stench of pitch enter unannounced. Surrounding the house, storming in through the reception hall, sweat slick faces, naked bodies, usher in a violent storm, oceanic, waves and wind rising more merciless than the worst that any hurricane could summon.

Faces are tormented by rage. Also by pain. Blood drips, runs, sprays, spatters, pools. A payment in judgment.

Black smoke comes, telltale. May smells it. A pall of it envelopes her. This is the harvest of Sainte Elisabeth. Injustice and inhumanity.

A whoop of laughter coming up from down near the swamp breaks this perverse reverie. It sets May free of it. She shudders in relief.

Night here never silent, silence so unique it comes like a fleeting catch in breath to alert that evil is nigh or that the time for mourning arrives.

In such a silence on this high ground, men, women, children, no longer black or white, become phantoms gathered to sigh on wan breaths. Victims displaying their bitter griefs to those who have the vision to see.

May shakes it with her head. Shakes it away. Shakes it vigorously. It breaks easy as a spider web curtain.

“You back again Miz Bell? You been far away.”

May assures herself this comes along with the swamp night of Twyla. From the too redolent moonflowers of Sainte Elisabeth. Or perhaps from an unusually heavy lunch.

1913

**Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary
November**

May woke up to big changes. Most palpably inside a different mind in a scary world. She came to in her bed, in the convent. Soeur St. Ephraim and Soeur St. Claire

hovered over her gloomier than their black garb. No sense of time remained to her, no strong awareness except that lying down was hiding, seeking protection, dazed, wounded.

Some terrifying coldness spread inside her, its numbing sensation made her hands and feet useless. Ice took her thoughts and left her speechless.

Later, she would learn it was almost a week that she lay so, stunned into inactivity on her bed in the front room of the Mission. She knew little except what ailed her was more than a bad cold. This cold inside her was something else odd and dreadful.

Then, her one allotted week in bed used up, Soeur Blanche she recalls most clearly giving her wake up call in profundo. The heavy nun appeared one morning rearing up black and purposeful at her bedside, not the raven of Poe, rather a thunderhead rolling in off the prairie threatening to strike down in judgment.

As always her sing song French boomed, different from the others, 'Belgian French' sniffed St. Aix. Nothing subtle about Soeur Blanche.

"So, young lady you have discovered men. I think one or two other women have too. They are not so kind. Yes I am sorry it happened this way. But don't think you are special. Women are raped all over the world, many every minute of the passing day. Like this." Soeur Blanche snapped her thick blunt fingers.

"Our Lady replaces their evil in our hearts. She gives power to forgive, never forget, but to know that men are not all bad. Some can love and be loved. That is why I'm a nun.

"La Petite, time to get up. Up up up. Go back to your business-- school, church, work here at the Mission. How selfish to linger and moan. You must earn your keep. You must give us a return in what you achieve."

Speech finished, the powerful arms of Soeur Blanche pulled off the blanket and raised May to her feet, bare feet on cold tiles. "Wake up I say." Soeur Blanche shook her. Then the Sister clapped her big hard hands inches from May's face, cannon fire at last blasting directly into her ears.

"Allez y. It is time for school. You should not be late. No whining." And she didn't. Although henceforth she went forth a new May.

New May kept her face immobile like the nuns. New May walked with their slow decision. She wore her own hand made dresses of black. New May kept her eyes locked down in aversion. Like May before, new May never wept. When the nuns asked occasionally if she recalled anything to tell them, new May professed no memory of what happened to change her.

In that period she often prayed to Mary, in silence before an imagined looming statue. Never mind sightless eyes, her large ears must be for listening.

"Who made me? For what? This?"

The spirit statue never answered her prayers, never wept in reality for her as the nun's stories told could happen. Then at last May got the message-- no

communication. Nothing to pursue, no dialogue, nothing beyond her own petition sucked up and blown to Arkansas.

At school her teachers and classmates slowly retreated in awe of their altered comrade. In only a week she'd become another person, older, serious, always polite but not warm. They inquired curiously if she had been ill. She mumbled lies.

Sometimes she rebelled against this new personality, yet turn back she could not. Without being aware of it she became the 'May' of her lifetime.

1928. 8:55 pm. Sainte Elisabeth Dark Conversation

This perplexing woman remains mute and accusing before her. It is justly hard to understand an inscrutable person like Twyla Grant. How utterly different creatures the two of them are. With nothing more to say May waits, it's a stand off between two universes of opposite experiences, opposing realms of identity, between winners and losers.

Sorrowfully May turns away from Twyla to go back inside to her duties. Poor GB, a duty?

Dandy moves furtively in her stall. "That be king bull teasing your mule, he the oldest snake here, older 'n our oldest', older than anything in Geneva County. Old Snake loves you, I know that. He likes to climb ya, don't he. He wants to mate you." Twyla clears her throat, loud as a bull frog. "How come you make them signs on Ulie's face? What that? It be your spell."

May swivels, smiles, "He came out from under the house covered with dirt. I tried to clear it off with my hands but they were covered too. Because he was crying it turned into something like paint. I thought he looked like one of the Indians from where I'm from. There were Choctaws there. Some came from near here."

"You got nothin' to fear a' us, Miz Bell." Twyla interjects raising a hand. "Like today. You might a hear gun shots this afternoon? We done took care of that. We handles our own.

"Ulie he a sight. Bet you was too. Too bad you had to crawl 'neath the house. Scary I bet." Not a move to go, just standing, Twyla takes her time for a good long look at May. "Lots of spidies down there? Toads and mice?"

"More than I could count," replies May, wondering where they are going, the two of them out in the night, with this odd talk. Their meeting goes beyond her. She yearns for the security of GB.

"Mr. Bell is waiting for me, Twyla, I think . . ."

"Ya got a good 'un. No bad in Boss Tall. He can't help the way he feels to us. It the curse on white men. I had me a bad life till US. Seen lots of bad things. None so fine now to tell true. But he try for me that sure. He work till he can't do nothing else, or almost nothing. Sure don' like spidies. I got ta ask you. . ."

“Yes, Twyla?” May trying to hurry things along. Also she now intuits uneasily a touch of fear in her visitor. Of what?

“You say somethin’ onto Ulie today, under the house. He tole me. Talk that ain’t existin’. I wants to know what that white spell be? Maybe you better take that off him.”

For a moment May looses her way in this deranged conversation. Then it comes to her, it was her Ave Maria.

“It’s no more than a prayer to the Virgin Mary, Twyla. In the language of the church. I needed my tuna so I said a prayer to the Holy Mother. I don’t believe in it myself. It just came to mind and please believe me it can’t hurt Ulie or anyone, doesn’t help them either.”

Twyla pauses in thought, lips pursed, even in the shadows her mouth is a succulent fruit. May realizes in a jolt that Twyla was probably handsome in her day.

“It OK. This be good. I’m wit all that. Ulie don’t know shit about Mary. We go AME. That’s African.” Visibly relaxing she gives May a rocking of her head side to side. “Sure scare him bad. Guess I best go tell him so he don’t have a nightmare and wet the bed.”

1914

Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary

May never saw Charlie again. She shyly asked some of the friendlier Methodists about him, they shrugged in distaste. Indians came and went. Asked, they would frown and warn her to keep away from him.

By end of May, school in recess, she did little more than sleep with May doll in her cot a book in bed with her. It was her only comfort to lie there giving her mind in devotion to printed words, feeling warm and safe. She passed the days in a blur excepting when boss Soeur Blanche roused her to get something done.

In her numbness May felt like she had fallen smashed down to earth and into nothingness. She even wondered if that was what had gone wrong with her. But knew differently. Her childhood had gone away with the violence that had torn her hymen. She’d broken in the same grip Soeur Marthe employed to snap a chicken’s neck.

Late February she quizzed Bob about Charlie. They were working together in the kitchen preparing supper. Bob had not spoken much to her since he'd been told about what happened, and what was happening inside her. He seemed more than sad to May. She knew so, his anger coming from his nostrils dragon hot and fiery. That late afternoon working on the meal he suddenly turned to her.

“L'il Pet this make me feels bad. It make me feel so low. I ain't feel this since I done a bunch of killing in the Yankee army. You know that? I was in the First Kansas Colored Regiment. I done fight at Island Mound, Cabin Creek and for sure at Honey

Springs just north of here. You know, those was the first battles ever 'tween colored soldiers and the whites, those damn rebs." Bob trailed off lost in his past.

"We won em all too, that we did. All excepting Poison Springs. Lost that. Good name. The fuckin' damn rebs killed 167 of my friends in that regiment. They murdered them, then and there. Every one that surrendered and the wounded too. They cut 'em all up, living and dead. I won't tell more. This bad feelin' is like that.

"Now you say this fella was a Choctaw. Sure? Was he about what 19 or 20? Have him ears like these?" Bob placed cupped hands to either side of his grisly head.

"Ears? Why yes he does have ears sticking out of his hair like doll cups." May, in those days still prone to falling into a daze simply told Bob the truth. "Charlie is my friend. I don't recall him very well, Bob. I don't remember much of what happened. I remember liking him at church. I remember what wonderful ears he has."

"So it be a Charlie," mused Bob on his way out.

Afterwards Bob disappeared for a week, rare but not unknown to happen. Sometimes they knew he'd gone hunting. Soeur Blanche thought he had another woman hidden away someplace. Soeur Aix said he was drinking. Whatever, this time as before the nuns received him back without questions. He resumed his work and with May was back to his old joking self.

Except, tied to a belt loop at the side of his jeans, Bob boasted a new ornament. This a small Choctaw leather pouch. To be polite she inquired of it. Anything new about Bob was remarkable.

"Just some feelin' goods. Never you mind my business."

Soon after, in the middle of the night, May awoke drenched in sweat. She keeled in a wrenching cramp. Turning quickly in her small bed May puked where the feet of the Holy Mother would be if there were any such thing as lithographic feet.

In that vomiting revelation it all came vividly back to her. A Sunday morning on her way to church, a rough beast come round to teach her pain and humiliation.

Fearful memories then nagged her insidiously, never leaving her again although she experienced times, even years, when they would recede behind a wall of self sorrow.

"Cut the crap, May, you got a hard fucking. You deserved it too, dumb shit." From talking so to herself her thoughts turned rougher than before. Her mind began to revel in the vulgarity of Black Bob's tongue. The language comforted her, her friend and protector had come to stay with her.

Sometimes in safe darkness she felt the opening between her legs, the blistered core of her small volcano of life. Frequently it she might have been crying, that she had a large tear drop planted permanently on herself just like the one on the Mother's litho cheek.

Fingers to her face, dabbing the soft cold skin told her otherwise. "No one will ever cry for me. Not even me."

1928

Twyla

9:14 pm. Sainte Elisabeth

In one cautious motion Twyla reaches forward a very long thin arm. Deftly pulling on its thong Bob's pouch slips out onto her fingertips. Comes free from where May keeps it hidden, always safe between her breasts. In sotto voce Twyla gives a kind of pop popping sound like the popping of a paper bag.

"How'd you get this mojo you always be wearing?" Twyla rolls it slowly between thumb and finger tips. "Ain't never heard of no white woman with strong man mojo on her."

With all her might May clenches her hand hard over Twyla's and the amulet fearing this strong woman might rip it from her neck.

"Easy, Miz Bell. You're stronger than you look. Don't hurt me none. It be danger for me to wear. Belongs to you. Got time on it. Got the throw of dice on it. Sure thing this mojo is power. I feel it all the way up my arm." Twyla's words are dream talking.

She releases the amulet and May quickly tucks it away.

May says, "a wise old man gave me the bag. He was a father to me. He had been a slave, then a soldier for the North. He even lived with the Choctaws. He knew so much. He said the bag would protect me. His mother gave it to him. He said someone had it before her. He said it is very old."

She speaks through many veils.

Twyla suddenly looks keenly at May showing the whites of her eyes piercing the murk. May understands without knowing how that she is being judged for trust.

"Down below they think you be Yemaya, 'cepting you white. You got a white pussy with the gold hair? Can I see?"

"God is Love." Blurts May.

"That for sure. I'm readying for another one myself. Old daughter she make this for me and tells me what it say. I can't read it but I feels it." A low rough laugh, man like.

"I meant no, you can't see my pussy." May is stifling her own laughter.

"Never mind me none. You got the purple mojo, that the color of the Great Mother. They don't speak to you cuz of that. Only me speaks to you. They don't put an eyeball on you. That be big trouble.

"But they want you to look at them. That be good luck, for sure. They feel happy Yemaya come here. Ulie he do too. He talks to you and he can look you in the eyes. Ulie different cuz he be marked with the six fingers."

Twyla releases the pull on the amulet. Quickly May tucks back her precious time scarred pouch-- sweat faded, old and small-- back into the safety of her blouse. She feels it in place strong and sure.

Gulf breeze blows clouds through the sky. Moon suddenly shines clear.

"I never told you nothin'. You hear me? Trouble for me if you don't. You gotta promise me." Twyla lifts her hand palm vertical towards May.

Obediently May puts up her courtroom hand. "I promise. I will never say anything."

"Ya needs a rootworker? We got a good rootworker below. Tell Ulie if you wants her. He tells me. We get her for you. Uhm . . . Uhm." The talk seems to finish there, the solemn 'Uhm' sounding like 'amen' to May.

The woman towers with both arms bent at the forearms, hands together above her belly. Palms up. Her ravaged face shines blacker than black in starlight but with a wide beckoning smile lifting the high cheekbones yet further. The voluptuous figure shows forth animated through the plain angles of the shift.

"Done got you two pecans, Miz Bell. If that's OK."

May laughs. She turns to see Twyla giving her a smile of many meanings. The sight stymies May for her own many reasons.

"Why yes, you did indeed, Mrs. Grant. I see them there on the porch. I'll use them in pancakes. Another time you gave me garlic, remember? Thank you for the gifts."

Twyla chuckling. "Tell you what. You know how we women loses the pussy hairs in bed or on the shitter? If'n you think it no trouble, save one of them tuna cans, wash it good and save them pussy hairs in it for me. I be real grateful to you, Miz Bell.

"By the by," Twyla's voice nonchalant as if about to ask for a cake recipe. "Bad times come to Sainte Elisabeth today. You hearin' me Miz Bell? You all play ball when white men sneak through in automobiles. Went round real quiet, whistling low.

"We on watch. Mr. Bell's twin black dogs come up to 'em waggin'. They catch one, the one not so smart.

"They noosed him. Hung him whinin' dead from what always been called the hangin' tree. An oak we knows from bad times. The Malgrace hang us from it like hams."

In a sudden May hears the swamp calling out for somebody to come look at her. A jagged song of allure. The siren swamp orchid calls out its enticement in vain. Nobody near to admire her splendor.

"Not right, Miz Bell, but it were only a dog. They already noosed more than one of our young men. That be true wicked.

I cried over two babies dead cuz no doctor come here for us. Babies need crying over. Young men do too. Dogs sure don't.

"Not to fear them bad ass men. Hangin' dog be a warning to us. They expect to come sometime in those cars, lots of trash white, burn us out down below. Chase us into the swamp for good. We know so. We be waitin' for them. We give em a welcome to hell Sainte Elisabeth."

Again stern, a sorrowed queen in motion, Twyla turns not waiting for a reply and starts her disappearing. Taking her large dignity down the path toward the cabins. Once she's on her way, May eyes with a start of disbelief the dull glower of an old machete in her hand.

Throughout their talk Twyla, all the while, had the machete hidden behind her left thigh.

"Don't worry none 'bout that. It for protectin', Miz Bell." She marches on. "Too much goin' round at night. You know. Sainte Elisabeth got more ghosts than any place. Some good. Some they be meaner than any sick rat born.

"Don't you fear them none. You safe from 'em. These our own. They afeard of Yemaya, you can bet that."

Her white shift ebbs away into rising swamp smoke, rich buttocks parting it into a tunnel tunneling back into time. Or, wonders May, away into the future, the forever that preys on everything.

"I watch you all the time. You got nothin' to fear for. That is I be hoping so. You good for tonight least wise."

Again the chanting voice floats to May. "Yemaya be the Great Mother. She be rivers. She be oceans."

1928. March 25. 9:35 pm
In Love's Safety
Sainte Elisabeth

Easing the screen door shut, May closes the house for the night. Troubled by the exchange in the yard she latches the screen door, locks the front door. Doing so for the first time since her panic on that first St. John's eve.

The lamp too she leaves burning on high in the front room. Black creepers of kerosene tendrils lick the walls and stink up the room. She stares hard at the barren reality of the room, their life.

Which dog she asks herself, Pollux or Castor? She guesses Castor if she has them correctly in mind, the more playful of the two. Twyla's story left her more than troubled. She couldn't mourn for a dog she didn't even like, but cruelty so senseless, gratuitous violence, what protection did her books offer against this? Her rage stirred.

Buddy out there somewhere, where and in what shape? Twyla out there, oh lord how absurd. What else out there? "This place isn't for real."

'Yemaya?' She repeats the name several times in thought, finding more peace and calm each time the name returns. 'Yemaya.'

On second thought she goes back quickly undoing the work of her fear. Front door stands wide open, screen is unlatched to welcome her Buddy, lamp burns low, all as usual for any other night.

"Do not be up to anything stupid, my young lovely. Come home safely."

What a loathsome thing fear is. She jabs it back down where it comes from, deep inside where her rage is also held. Fear and anger. Her bad luck twins. Ever she vows never again to let them loose, while hearing back a subterranean jeer from the shithouse hole where they lurk.

Why a harmless dog? So dumb and cheerful.

Sharp pinches to cheeks, quick brush strokes at her hair. Using a forefinger of baking soda she makes an attack on her teeth, being careful to stay clear of those that hurt. While doing this she decides not to tell GB about his dead dog. He needed his night's rest.

Morning, with pancakes and sunshine, then she'd ease it to him. She knew he'd grieve. GB had a sentimental spirit, something shriveled in herself. It shamed her to think it weak but couldn't stop the thought.

GB, of course, to be expected, waits impatiently for her. Room shrouded in night, enough moonlight comes in for her to see him lying naked on top of their coverlet. He'd not done so since their honeymoon.

"What in hell kept you? Your honor guard stands at attention my Lady of Mystery." He whispers hoarsely but his usual droll humor comes through. She looks at him in moonlight wondering at the emotion in his voice. She looks again. He's erect.

The sight gives her a strange acknowledgment of power, that her body can do this to him, pulling on his blood like the moon on the waves coming on to the barrier islands just beyond Apalachicola.

GB grabs her chemise skirt pulling her down beside him. "Slam bam thank you ma'am for that great dinner." He nuzzles his face in her hair while his hands roam under her chemise.

"GB, stop that and listen. I just learned why the workers won't talk to me. You'll never guess."

His voice coming from the depth of man's desiring. "No more talk." She tries remonstrating, that he did all the talking, helpless to stop her woman's wish to have the last word. Relentless, he pulls her hair over them both.

"Why pepper sauce?" She manages before he smoothers her in himself.

1928
Bad News
March 25. 9:35 pm
Bartlesville

I dread most of all days the Day of Fool's each passing year. It's a day raising up my bad side and bad doings, the worst in me. On this tray by my sickbed I have four shot glasses of rye. One for each of the people I loved and hurt. Guess my life as a twin means nothing but bad. Star crossed.

We left Atoka the very next morning, After breakfast at the rooming house we rode straight for the station, loaded up the horses, then took our seats with the saddles under our feet. Problem with money is that you always got to be guarding it.

At first I didn't know what to think or how to feel. Just confusion. Still, seemed I'd managed under the circumstances. Of course I grieved for Andy and for Valla. I went aching, miserable in heart with missing my beautiful young wife and baby girl. But when the train gained speed, a sense of calm came to me. It was strange.

I heard Quincy begin to cry. "Damn boy, how come you got any tears left in you? What's wrong now." I recall the crudeness of my impatience. The boy with a look children can have of eternal woe shook his head fiercely at me.

"You mad at me for leaving May here? That's it, isn't it." He shook his head no, then more vehemently 'yes.'

"Is your arm hurting? Seemed to me the nuns fixed it up OK.

"Come on, it can't be bad for May there. They're decent women. I just can't give her the right care now. And with Valla gone."

Quincy's tear stained face turned ashen. So I took him in my arms, hugged him and gave him the last kiss he ever let me give.

"I'm real sorry, pa. I was hurtin' bad when we were together at the house, before taking off. Don't remember much of that. But now all I can think of is shooting Uncle Andy . . . It was when I crawled up to the night stand. I pulled your Peacemaker out of the drawer. That was what Valla had been trying to reach for.

"They didn't notice me. Uncle Andy kept on doing wicked stuff and Valla was fighting him, seemed like they was both screaming in my head.

"So I took your gun, pa. I killed Uncle Andy. He had beat me bad. No reason I swear. I just got back from ball. He grabbed me in the kitchen by the ice box fixing a Dr. Pepper. Don't you hear me. I shot Uncle Andy dead. It weren't mama Valla. I shot him, Pa, in the head close up. He exploded like a melon."

The boy managed his good arm around my leg to hold it close. He stopped crying. Just lay there curled up against me, shaking. It seemed to me I was hearing May crawling about nearby. Da da da.

"I held your gun up over the edge of the bed. I cocked it like you taught me. Pulled the trigger back like you showed me. Then the whole room cracked open on us. Valla stopped screaming and made a grab for May. Uncle Andrew stared at me, looking almost like you. Then he rolled away staggerin' back toward the hallway.

"It ain't a true letter Valla wrote, pa. Valla got it all wrong. Uncle Andy went crazy, then Valla went crazy. When the gun fired we were real close together. To her it got mixed up. That's why she thinks she did it. I tried to tell but couldn't say nothin', just felt tired. I'm telling you the truth. You got to know that. I mean the part about her not shooting Uncle Andy."

"Hush down. Take it easy boy." It came turn for my voice to shake.

“Something else Pa, and this is real important, last night I suddenly remembered more.” Then he told me Valla’s parting instructions on how to make contact with her in Kansas City. And to bring her May.

“This morning all of it made me feel real bad. I didn’t know how to tell you. Not a word. And with May gone I didn’t see what use I was. I thought maybe I’d turn myself in to the Atoka sheriff. That then you’d go back and get May, go find ma Valla.”

I sat there stunned, train moving fast. Never before heard Quincy call Valla his ma.

“I left the rooming house before you were awake and I did go the sheriff. I told him the whole story. He just laughed at me and said I must be another Billy The Kid.

“Pa? We done a bad thing to leave May. It’s a sinning not to go back for her, right now. It’s more sinning not to go find Valla, fast as we can.”

The churning clack of train wheels drowned out talk. Further away we were carried the greater the distance grew between father and son. That finished it.

Didn’t know it then but I’d lost both my children in Atoka, Indian Territory.

1928

More Of Valla’s Tale

Hollywood

For New York I knew what I wanted. A total make over. I’d drop the last trace of my accent. Someone would teach me how to walk, sit, rise from chairs like a lady. How to dine properly. All the manners they didn’t have in Geneva, Texas. I wanted to not only talk and move correctly, I meant to dress like a lady too. To think like a lady? I knew myself well enough to know that wasn’t going to happen.

First I took a small furnished apartment near Union Square, proper but not expensive. Next I found an elocution course and classes in manners for young ladies. For months until my money ran out I struggled to recreate myself. I did. It was only then that I went back to using my real first name. Valla Boedecker.

I bought one nice dress for the new me. At sales I bought a stylish purse, lace hankies and a lower-line French perfume, subtle and not too young.

Come dawn of an early spring day—before then I’d hurried along New York back streets, avoiding the crowds-- the new Valla Boedecker strode forth on 14th Street. I was confident for sure at 22. Brazen? No, I had nothing to lose.

My red hair flowing down my back, cut and curled by a coiffeur, I sallied off holding my chin up so the world could stare to it hearts content, keeping my eyes on view. Am I a vain bitch? Better believe it. And stare New York did. I cut my way through that crowd on 14th Street like Moses parting the Red Sea. My first thrill of the power a beautiful young woman has, it made me high, fearless.

Walking calmly into the most elegant shoe emporium that crossed my path I landed a job in about 20 minutes. My familiarity with shoes, all I knew then, helped too I admit. This was the Dashing Shoe Emporium. The products were above

average, but far above any reasonable price for their quality. It was another lesson for me, price is the key to what people want, to what each person wants and can afford the suffering to get.

'Dashing' shoes as they were known came, I was to learn, from a loathsome firetrap factory on 28th Street, The V. D. Shoe Company. Good name. It was far worse than the factory where I had worked in Chicago -- another lesson, people believe in the illusions around them, they want to know nothing of the human cost involved in their creation. Strange creatures we be.

The 14th Street emporium being the company's flagship store it wasn't more than a month before a striking man in his early 30s came in one morning, walking the aisles of display with a thoughtful assessment. The thoughtful assessment fell on me when I was attending an elderly well-to-do matron with what I considered then to be my best reserve. Worth shit now.

That man's eyes never left mine. He kept circling back through the aisles. At last, in one of half a dozen or so aimless passes, he at last took off his hat and gloves, pausing most insouciantly to talk. Within three months we were married. Strange things happen, they say? Well they happen to me all my life long. I found myself one morning emerging to be the social butterfly Mrs. Harold August Van der Dash III.

This, my biggest opportunity of all came as 'Hal.' I called him Hal, along with his special group of friends, or 'Harry' when we went to dinner parties, the opera, society events or to dine out -- what tedium these became, ah but at first what excitement. The worst to manage were the weekly Sunday brunches at his parents monster mansion on Columbia street in Brooklyn Heights. In the house on Columbia Street, where ceilings yawned above massive furniture that seemed carved by the blind, he was never anything except Harold.

He sure came equipped with the money, at least that. Prince Hal, charming and fun. Intelligent and well educated, Princeton class of 1884. In the years we were together he taught me the refinements of what I know about the big bad world around us. Sometimes I teased him, calling him my Professor Hal.

Damn, if he hadn't been queer I might have fallen in love with him.

1928

Yemaya

Sainte Elisabeth

On Friday afternoons in old-timey Alabama May stops for her own bathing, saving the last of a demanding day for herself. Weather permits her this, except for a few weeks and even then she often accepts the cold having bathed in cold through her memory.

She energetically works the heavy pump handle calling up fresh, clear water from a hideous pipe thrusting at an angle into the unknown of the earth. To her like an anus to the bowels of the earth. This good water so apposite to that stagnating in

the swamp below she assumes to be one reason for the big house having been placed in this location.

Bucket after bucket are needed for her bath. May strips with no one near to see. She bathes herself squatting in the zinc wash tub.

Baths in mind on arrival she planted her favored plants and flowers in a semicircular swath a few feet back from the tub's position. Agapanthus, marigolds, begonias, roses, petunias, zinnias, hibiscus. A shield of plants blooming valiantly, giving her too the pleasure of adding their own colors to the chaos of hues surrounding her.

Sponging her naked self she uses a soap she keeps hidden, for herself alone. A soap with a texture and freshness she can not afford that she buys clandestinely, her one purchase for herself with sewing money.

Despite children her body remains firm and young. Commanding in its sexuality. A bold feminine figure becoming the human focus of the moment's reality. Her physical space proportioned in a natural perfection that art seeks.

Blonde hair draping down loose and wet. It hangs down in twining tresses around her breasts, nipples erect in the cool pump water. Aureoles a tender pink.

The hair cascades golden, sunshine dappling it through the leaves on the towering limbs of the pecan trees above her. Tangling hair tumbling onto her thighs covering her full venus mound, the pubic matt there of the same old-gold color.

This woman's confident nakedness in the mildness of a Gulf Coast light steals the scenic power away from the land's riotousness. She subdues Sainte Elisabeth. Scenery fades away before this nude woman in her self-enclosed routine of bathing. It itself, her body, is the blitheness of a spring day.

May wraps a frayed white towel about her belly. She steps from the tub. "Fini." Done. She can often sense, from his hiding place in the taller grass, the old eyes of the bull snake upon her.

Later, each Friday evening, she will eventually scold the men. Standing at their dinner table dishes or a pan in hand. Fridays she brings to evening table her alien perfume, scent of soap they do not know. Hair smelling of spring fed pump water. They know to expect what she will say yet blush each time.

"You're so almighty proud of having a cock. If it's big enough then aim it." Release of pent up Monday fury concluding usually with a flourished pan banged into the sink.

Then she is empty, content that the work be done. May can feel abused, misused. Then of a sudden become flooded with a heart bursting gratitude for this family.

"I meant 'penis,' of course." At which the table roars.

The emotion comes rushing into her being. "Without them," she berates herself, "I'd be empty, not a face, not a person. First wind along and another Skinner would blow over into the Choctawhatchee."

1928

Valla

Ours was purely a lavender marriage as they were called then. That it was bigamous too, which remained my own little secret, had no more bearing to me then that homosexuality was regarded to be an heinous sin and punishable crime. Oscar Wilde was a recent memory making respectability all the more essential for 'the boys' as Hal called them. Out here no one gives a cat's ass about it, and about half the guys are that way.

Also, I like the boys, then and now. Outlaws like me. They're fun, no coming on to you all the time. Some are intelligent. Some sad and tortured. Some, always heartbroken, I've even cradled in my arms like babies. Exchanging my own babies for strapping fellows who like cock? Strange being am I.

Hal got us a regal apartment on lower Park Avenue, with a butler, the resident pimp when back street trawling brought nothing in the net. We kept amiably to separate bedrooms.

Harry's parents had been a problem of course. Old Dutch Brooklyn family. Somehow he brought them round to accepting me. The price however was a contract. This allowed Mrs. Valla Van der Dash all the jewelry and clothes she might acquire or be given, plus a one year lease on the Fifth Avenue apartment should the marriage be dissolved or in the event of Hal's death. Yet it further stipulated I not receive any other inheritance or money, and must not use the Van der Dash name should the union be dissolved. Who the fuck cares about a name, I'd already used a few. Did I sign without hesitation?

Those few years went by in a flurry of parties. Evenings ending with a show kiss, then he'd be scampering off into the underbelly of the city while I took a cab home alone. Naturally I had enough of my own most quiet affairs on and off.

Ten years together. Most of it fun. Hal pursued the sailors. I worked the blue bloods. But the times I recall most fondly now were the few evenings at home, just the two of us, friends playing cards. We really were friends. To my surprise I realized I had never had a friend before.

Then Hal died in a drunken orgy on board the family yacht up in Newport. He apparently went over board en flagrante locked passionately to a Portuguese stevedore. It was hushed up. The funeral was truly painful for me, no tears, in my life I shed none. Must admit the loss of my dear funny friend brought me close. Hell, I missed him. I still miss him.

The contract was ruthlessly applied in full. An inventory was made of all items in the apartment except as agreed my own clothes and jewelry-- not inconsiderable as Hal always liked to deck me well, it helped bring him fishies he told me with a laugh. The fishies got him in the end.

This was how I entered motion pictures. A one-time boyfriend of Hal's came to tea one afternoon soon after the funeral--which he had discretely avoided--and told

me about the Astoria Studios in Queens. That they were making gangbuster movies there. He had a friend at the studios--the boys always had 'friends' in the right places. This friend wanted to see the famous Valla--the boys had a thing for me. I had an appointment.

That led in the fall of 1916, war in progress, to 'Valla Jones' finding herself making movies. From the very first despite pleading, offers of money, lots of it, I understood one rule. I dared never be center screen.

Fuck. My face was perfect for the screen. They all went a flutter. But no way. That was pay back time for me I guess. You can't have it all. From the start my 'career,' none but the opium headed would call it that, could only be as an extra. A face lost in the crowd. Tony nags for me to get a role. Acquaintances too. A couple of directors want me, and that's OK.

So now I even have a talkie part. Who cares, no one wants to find me anymore. I'm not wanted anywhere by anyone. Nah, there's no danger in having my face close-up across the country even if in a small part. It's over. And if my biggest dread hasn't been getting hanged, then close to it is the fear that some ugly knocked up girl will show up at my door with a cardboard suitcase bleating 'hiya Ma, I'm home.'

Long as I have Tony the sausage to spot the bills, who cares. Since he's no longer so sure a thing, I took the talkie. No one under creation gives a fuck now about me or my past. And so what anyway.

Enough thinking to make me puke. But I need a good life, come whatever. Indoor plumbing's better than scratching your butt on a privy seat.

1914

Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary

May's first period arrived on Advent Sunday, 28 November, 1914. Her periods at fist erratic settled into a pattern close to the first date, rarely more than a couple of days off. "Regular as the moon," bubbled St. Claire.

Naturally, the majority of nuns were thrilled by the date of her becoming a woman, finding it almost miraculous, akin to actually receiving May as a gift into their arms that rainy night years ago. They said nothing to May but among themselves her coming remained the event of their time in the Indian Mission life. There became a matter of 'before May' and 'after May.'

When her period became settled on or around Advent it furthered her in their imagination, more strongly associated her in their minds with their faith and with the Holy Mother.

Of course there was also 'Before Charlie' and 'After Charlie.' It fell to Soeur St. Ephraim to ask. "You know child, our bodies have things to tell us. You have had a most horrible experience but now we must begin to ask what your body is saying.

“You began your menstrual cycle on a sacred day marking the preparation for the Holy Mother’s delivery of our Lord Jesus. For that reason we know the date of your monthly time, forgive an intrusion into something so personal.”

Throughout this gentle inquisition, May, who had been sitting with school books open at the long table in the front room, kept her numb face turned toward St. Ephraim. When St. Ephraim finished May raised her eyes. With Ephraim she did so.

“St. Ephie, you know I love you and Claire like mothers. I waited these day before alarming you. I am certain from what books explain that I am pregnant, being about a week late.” Soeur St. Ephraim began to weep, holding tight to May’s hand.

“I have names Sister. don't cry. This will be a happy time. I want it to be so for us all. If I have a girl, she'll be Mary Elizabeth, after the Virgin and her sainted cousin,” A concoction May had made to please the nuns. “If a boy, it will be, then I want him named Samuel Bob Skinner.

“What lovely names, May. You've become a woman, too quickly. Oh too too quickly, ma petite.” Poor St. Ephraim could take no more, she fled to the back of the mission to the chapel for comfort. It occurred to May that back there St. Efié could run foul of St. Aix's life time game of arrogant solitaire. Not so, reputedly, Soeur St. Aix merely shrugged delicately at her weeping visitor’s news and pronounced it a loss of potential, returning calmly to the slapping of cards.

Alone again, May turned to the image on the wall. “Fuck dat.” This happened on the afternoon of Advent Sunday, December 7, 1913. May knew there could be no doubt. All the signs foretold the coming, a constant thought the past days that made her smile at its incongruity. Again she was causing a rare commotion in the Mission. A pregnancy, like her menarche, announced on Advent: Replacing the tedium of their old personal wars, whispered gossip and bickering, this brought an actual thrill of titillation to the nuns.

Exception being Soeur Blanche, who for two days stomped about frowning, finding nothing right and telling Black Bob, sitting alone on the back steps in his cowboy hat and sheep skin coat, “Go away with you, I don’t want to see a man again ever.”

At 13 May was pregnant.

1914

Father, Son and The Holy Swing Atoka, Oklahoma

At the mission, the mystery of who the father might really be --no one in the convent having ever seen or heard of Charley and only Bob close enough to her to know his name --simply added to the growing excitement among the Nuns as the months passed.

Their French chattering stopped whenever May entered the front room. She knew she became more than before the center of their worldliness. It never occurred to

her how she became in their sheltered brains the nexus between the mystical and the temptations of the avoided.

After Christmas she had returned to Atoka Academy classes. Her pregnancy at least timed kindly so that given her wide build she managed not to 'show' until beyond the end of term. This in part helped by clever needle work on her dresses by St. Claire.

One afternoon, first nice day of spring, once again May inquired of Bob about Charlie. "I wish he'd come see me. Could you find him for me? Ida might know who he belongs to. You think maybe he's afraid? I don't want him, only for the baby's sake. Do Choctaws put a curse on people, Bob? Do they? If so I sure don't want one on my baby."

Looking left and right in evident alarm, Bob hushed her.

"Shut your mouth. Don't know nothin about no curse. Voodoo got the curses. That's what I know. Voodoo with the Choctaws is strong, that so, though they don't call it that. But I ain't seen nothing out here or anywhere strong like voodoo back home. Excuse me L'il Pet but you got to be careful in what you say, don't go talking loud.

"Oh, for sure that bad news Choctaw be afeard, sure thing. He won't be comin' round here. Don't you worry. Just keep that May doll close."

May earnestly attending to what seemed an incoherent reply caught his furtive movement of hand. A palm clamped over the Choctaw pouch on his belt loop. Sometimes the old black man did the same with the odd thing hanging about his neck and hidden under his shirt. May shrugged these away no more important than his special aroma, which she loved but that made St. Aix gag.

When her belly distended and her face filled out, then when she moved about the Mission a more expectant silence welcomed and followed her. Awe among the nuns turned to consternation. Each saw in their own way a moving tangible vision of their Lady full with child, the kind of form and beauty that seemed miraculous.

May allowed them all to feel the baby moving. Hating their hands on her but conditioned by life with them to do as they wanted. All did too, except Soeur Blanche who said she was too busy for such nonsense.

"Another human being to be miserable." Hissed Soeur St. Aix. "We have too many." Feeling the movements in his turn Bob's maze of wrinkles seemed to slacken. A much younger Bob lit by grinning surprise.

Baby was a concept she herself found stupefying. It couldn't be growing along with her tummy. Life coming from her seemed inconceivable. Would it be like May doll lolling half dead and blind? Or more like the cat having kittens, letting them nurse. Would Soeur Blanche then drown it in the pail in the kitchen? Did she want a he or a she, a he frightened her so she begged for a girl.

"Think of the blessed Mother," soothed Soeur Ephraim rubbing her feet. "The Holy Mother was chosen like you, and like you there is no father."

In her few times of genuine bitterness May would counter with the thought “Holy Mother, holy shit.”

The nuns ever warned her away from any more running in the courtyard, climbing up the tower steps and most of all the swing. This though they noticed that since May came home in a daze her dress torn and bloody she had not run again nor been near the tower stairs nor climbed into her swing. Even her tantrums abated.

The first small tremors of contractions began in the latter part of July. Soeur Blanche sent Bob for the Atoka doctor. After the examination he pronounced her proceeding well, and that she had a mature body for her age.

Nonetheless, Soeur Blanche knew about delivering from young women and braced herself. May could die, the baby could die, both could. Her faithful pragmatism gave May a 50% chance to win out. “But the child’s pelvis is wide for her age. She is sturdy and healthy. I know my job well.”

Soeur Blanche consoled herself with the old prayers and reassurances she believed in. “Guide me, Mother of mothers.”

But then, May, child May, indeed reemerged cautiously and when periods of euphoria took her she could not refrain from running.

When sad she felt compelled to climb up to her tower for dreaming. Most of all even after she was warned that she was close to term May could not be dissuaded from using the forbidden swing.

Swinging was her true glory and she made certain no one could be watching, like on a Sunday when the nuns were at chapel.

Swinging away, swinging free of the physical reality of her pregnancy. May escaped then, same she had done from not having a mother or father, from loneliness and the rage that frightened her.

Come a Friday afternoon, 14th August, the eve before Assumption and the nuns were occupied in cleaning and preparing the Chapel. Assumption plus the newspaper reports of France at war fully distracted them that day. Headline yesterday announced that Alsace and Loraine were again being lost to the Germans.

Soeur Blanche said nothing, but they in the mission knew she fretted over the fate of Lille perched helpless on the Belgium border.

May grasped the opportunity and freely made her ambling way to the swing. Her girlish figure ballooned grotesquely, to the point where she felt ready to go bang. She pondered if giving birth would be like shaking and then opening a warm bottle of Dr. Pepper. An explosion of fizz.

August heat made swinging even more tempting. To push hard up high gave a rush of cooling wind on the perspiration pearly on her forehead. Falling back eased the gravel-burn pain in her lower back.

May, flying back and forth, drifted off into her other world. To visiting the Emperor’s court, which the noble St. Aix told her about time and again. To incognito travels far away in any direction, Italy – India - China, to become any person other

than herself. Words in her thoughts describing this unknown soul on the swing, long blond hair floating like a magical cape behind her.

A hard pump upwards and her trance broke. May felt an inner turmoil. Guts twisted like snakes in coitus.

So far there had been days of fatigue. Times of feeling she carried a stone ball in her stomach, thinking of it like a marble upon which Michel Angelo was busily carving for her a perfect baby. A marble cherub.

She had known both wretched nausea and insatiable craving for big slices of Soeur Marthe Paul's croustade au pommes. And the crude old nun had obliged without a word—they had eaten croustade au pommes every Sunday for a month.

But this seismic catastrophe did not come from the baby. Suddenly May experienced a flooding sensation just as the swing came back down. A gushing of fluid that sopped through her dress. A clear sticky fluid enveloped her legs down to her socks.

In consternation, "what the fuck!" May dragged her feet into the worn swing rut, her habitual point of braking. The cottonwood limb gave an alarming inch to her added weight.

In fear, there was also a fleeting comic thought to be remembered and laughed over. Did the old tree help her to a stop, easing her down like the cherry tree at last ready to give its fruit to the Virgin? She wondered

"For sure I'm no damn virgin now. If I were I'd become famous far and wide."

May hoisted up her belly with one hand, her back inward with the other. Resolve gone she felt terror spreading about her. What she imagined drowning might be like although she'd not once been in any kind of water except the bathtub's.

Waddling in a sudden panic toward the kitchen door she called out in a voice she herself heard waning, getting softer word by word,

"Warning. Here I come ready or not." Her attempt at levity made her all the more frightened, it was like a too easy charade. So ostensibly fake it made her feel even more that she was about to die.

To herself, "I'm just a little girl. Maman, you are a bitch to leave me alone in this fuckin' mess."

1928

She Rises From Her Warm Bed

Sainte Elisabeth

March 25. 10 pm

After, and when she hears GB's heart beat change, May gives him her life in a kiss. Then as usual, when lying here awake part of many nights, she begins listening to the outside. Drowsily alert for danger. Probing any mischief. Always eavesdropping to the breathing in the house, knowing each breath and who it belongs to. Drums, barely audible.

“Come on, this is tiresome. I’d rather find a goat on the roof.”

It strangely occurs to her she might be pregnant from this love making. A passing thought she rarely has, unless she is.

Easing away and out of bed she walks softly into her other realm of duty.

Again she cleans herself at the kitchen sink, then washes her hands and face with plain water. Pumping herself a glass of water she reaches into her secret kitchen niche for the bottle of rum. The label claimed it came from Cuba but May figured Tampa more likely.

With her golden hair loose to the floor shadows of weak light define her beauty in a way never seen by day. May becomes another being. Dressed in a long dressing gown that she has kept for a decade she savors the last swallow of rum and the warmth it gives, hugging herself against the cool dampness of Sainte Elisabeth.

To anyone looking upon her May would obviously be a young woman. To anyone knowing her thoughts she would be ancient.

She tries counting days since her last menstruation. They get lost in a muddle. Fuckin' damn periods.

May's were easy, no cramping, only a headache sometimes, nothing strong enough to send her to bed. For her periods she staunches the menstrual flow with one of the boy's thick cotton socks that she boiled before to be pristinely white. A sock when needed she kept belted on. When bloodied she hid them in a sack under her sewing until, cycle over, she washed them out with bleach when alone in the house.

“No twins from this.” This thought or prayer, whichever, registering like a memorandum to herself. “Twins interdit.”

If she can figure the days right, it might be true. If so this one shall certainly be a girl. She knew, not a doubt. A girl at last. “And she shall be called Mary Elizabeth.”

Stop dreaming, move on. Someone, one of hers, is not in -- a note of sacred breath is missing. And tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. Already her Monday blues are coming. Worse then ever.

1914

The Flipside

August 14. 6:00 pm

Into the kitchen May staggered draining as she moved. Soeur Marthe Paul had just returned from the chapel to start yet another croustade au pommes. She turned, one glance and bellowed for the whole mission to hear.

“It’s time, Sisters. Water broke. Get ready all.” Soeur Marthe Paul helped May to the front room, that is by half hauling and dragging her along like another sack of potatoes.

“Sit here, you naughty girl. You were swinging, weren’t you. Shame. Do not move. I’ll be right back.”

Then with a swipe of a work-horned palm on May's cheek, thought to be a caress, she was gone. May lay alone still leaking, now making a puddle in the bed. She sat looking calmly feeling empty of thought at the Holy Mother in her black frame bought in a Sears catalogue and sent to the Mission from Chicago.

Soeur Blanche led the charge into the room, followed by St. Ephraim and Claire. "Move the bed closer to the stove" thundered Soeur Blanche. "You there, strip the sheets. Ephraim, get me the old oil cloth from the pantry. We must cover the mattress. We will need all the old white sheets too. Claire tell Soeur to go to the tower and hang the red bandana, she'll find it at the back of tower door. Black Bob will come when he sees that. Marthe, bring my bag from my room.

"Someone start cleaning the rendering pot, scour it good. In that we sterilize." Then, jabbing a finger at a shivering May, "You there, do something. Strip off your clothing. If you've been swinging then you're strong enough to take of yourself."

All obeyed. Soon enough the bed had been prepared. They gently lowered May into it, the short narrow bed of her childhood.

Soeur Blanche's element. "Are you having regular contractions?"

May shook her head, now too tired for talk. All she wanted was for them to go away and leave her alone. This happened to every person on earth, how could it be bad?

"When you think they begin you must say so—no, you will know beyond doubt my child, what you have had before is nothing-- I must be here. We can time them together to pass away the time." Soeur Blanche bathed her then, although she already drifted up into her swing of sleep. May was never to know that what began as Blanche's offensive on the western front soon turned into the gentlest of purifications.

Waking, the first of what she learned were real contractions began. From then on she did as told. Listened to comforting words. Saw conflicting emotions in the faces of Soeur Blanche and Ephraim. Soeur Claire took leave after her second episode of fainting.

At May's initial scream the other nuns came running. After that her screaming intermittently haunted the mission, all its rooms, for hours. On and on the screaming went where none had been known before.

As Soeur Blanche feared it was a long, difficult birthing. Several times she prayed knowing May would falter, be gone. The girl writhed in torture. The sheets were changed a dozen times to be wrung out in the kitchen by Soeur Marthe Paul who looked amazed each time at the amount of sweat a slim girl could shed.

Soeur Ephraim found a thin straight twig of a cherry tree limb, one blown down by the last storm. She told May to bite on it. Yet every time the pain inside her ripping like a real tornado she opened her mouth to scream and the cherry tree wood went rolling down the sheets.

At one point May screamed out. “Don’t let me die like this. Make it stop. It’s killing me. Why is it killing me. It’s tearing me apart. I don’t want there to be two of me.”

Hush hush child. The only comfort the nuns could give her.

When May gave her most agonized shriek—too weak now to scream—she managed obediently with what seemed her bitter last breath the mighty push demanded. Then came sliding knife blades down between her legs. To her terror it did truly feel that she’d been rendered asunder.

May knew this was the last effort she could make. It was over. She’d be glad to die, whatever that meant.

However came in a plop, expelled like a giant turd. May screamed again, “I’m sorry I puked where your feet would be.” The nuns never understood this hollered message, but all found it troubling.

At that moment although too delirious and hurt to notice, at last the baby’s head had oozed out of May. Went free slithering into Soeur Blanche’s waiting hands.

The nun frowned and briskly cut and tied the cord. A slap of her heavy hand and the stuttering cravings of an infant filled the Mission. A sound the nuns, the majority at least, agreed to be a heavenly blessing. But puking on the mother-of-god’s feet?

“A man in the Mission.” Commented Soeur Blanche with more than a hint of disapproval. “Oh well, we’ll put dresses on him.”

1928

Valla

March 25. 10:40 pm

A great extra am I. One of the best there's been. After three years at the Astoria Studios, at the urging of another of Hal's boys, I moved on West. I get even better jobs. Those are swell boys, great connectors.

Lawyers signed away my married name in New York, so for Hollywood I changed it again to Valla Dash--after all, shoes made my life.

Damn I was too beautiful to be ignored in Hollywood, although my contacts from the Astoria Studios helped too. Soon enough and my extra work picked up. For a few years I made 15 or more films a year at top extra pay. My claim to fame--the most sought after nonentity in Hollywood. Sure good enough to live on.

Here in California my thoughts at first hardly ever strayed near May. Maybe I feared tainting her with me. She became my lost relic in the long frolic. Then suddenly not so.

This the case back then on the odd-day-out in February, sitting alone at a bar down in Long Beach, minding my own dreary thoughts sipping on gin in a speakeasy.

I was imagining May. How she might look. What kind of person she turned out to be. Probably with a husband and kids. Or she's a whore. A murderess? Dead? No, I

am certain I would feel that inside. Mama Marie would tell me. Some hint from the sky. Where is my May? It was eating me alive at that time.

Enters Tony, camera shot close up to sad lonely woman at bar suddenly approached by darkly handsome short guy, a walking muscle. Tony leans a cashmere coat elbow casually in a pool of gin on the bar and put his lips to my ear.

“What's yer name, good lookin'?”

I tell him. Then instead of giving him the brush for some reason I pull back and laugh in his face, one of those lean Italian faces that look like they've been sketched in charcoal.

“Well, Valla Dash, I'm Tony Stampanuzzi, aka The Sausage. Note that's a real name. We're gonna hook up. Unless you have an attachment who's tougher than me.”

“Perky little asshole, aren't you. Where do you wops get those crazy names, from the comics?” Short Tony, shoulders like a gorilla's. He shrugs them at me, mouth apes ‘fuck me and see.’

So from that first meeting I understood him, an outlaw too, just like me. Again he was older, my type for some reason.

John and Hal both older too. Tony has about eight years on me. For real. My age I keep unknown. Hope he still believes he's 17 years ahead of me. Damn, but that's ridiculous. John was 38 to my 15 when we married. “Winter and spring,” ma's first remark when I told her we planned getting married.

I see her in the shack, cooking. “That's good. He's got money. ” Then she looked like she might cry. “You know I was born in Germany? My pa took us to New York when I was a baby. I was pretty when young. I had blond hair. I met your pa at a Baptist camp meeting here in Texas. My pa came here to raise pigs. That's what he did in Germany. Pig sickness, bad soil, drought. We got it in the face and busted out. Your pa's got bad blood, probably insectuse.”

No matter, ma liked John, women did. Might do so today.

At the bar Tony looked me over with a hard eye. “How did any woman get killer peepers like those?”

He placed his hand on the check. “That's mine and so are you. Oh yeah, bulls eye, you're right I am an asshole.” I wonder where the guys get these lines. Jesus H. Christ. “Also you are one magnificent looker.”

Another nobody fella. So full of his own shit. None of these guys can figure that maybe they don't really measure up. One hundred guys in my life but only one real man. John Douglass Skinner set the standard too high. All the rest are mediocre. Yet I take the tumble again thinking that like the booze it will make faces from the past disappear.

“Ah, the wisdom of El Magnifico. Italians are a race of genius,” I told him. I like my Park Avenue drawl and can put it on thick, particularly after a drink or three. “What, prego, may I ask, is such an Italian gentleman doing in this mobster dump?”

For the trouble of my wit Tony laughed me in the face, load of garlic. "I own it, doll." That seemed normal enough. The man I most wanted, a bootlegger. Back to the larks of an outlaw game.

1914

After Birth

August 15. 9:49 am

Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary

The baby was born on the morning of 15 August, 1914. Following 15 hours of labor. Surrounded by an excited babbling of French. At the age of 14 May became a mother.

"No more silliness," Soeur Blanche clapped her hands.

The baby was then immediately put to May's breast, although she was too weak to hold him. Soeur Ephraim did the holding, not even waiting to wash and dry it.

At the fussing and flapping she heard behind her, Soeur Blanche ordered silence.

"This is the best way for a woman's first, rush it to the tit. Especially so for a child's baby. We must pray for them both. Most of all now we must pray that May lives. Add a prayer too that she has enough milk. Otherwise we must pray that Bob finds a nursing mother among the Choctaws."

St. Claire in great agitation dropped to her knees while clutching May's foot.

Soeur Blanche placed another pillow behind May's head while she lay barely conscious in the drenched sheets. Ephraim and Claire were then instructed to quickly bathe the baby in the warm sterile water that filled the big copper rendering cauldron.

"Quickly, we must dry May," Ordered Soeur Blanche. "More sheets and another blanket."

Odile caught the eye of Soeur Blanche where she stood rummaging into the open doors of one towering armoire her head completely lost among the shelves. "May I ask what you are doing there, ma soeur!"

Odile in a fright pulled out the entire contents of one shelf. Peering at her armful of white linen she brightly replied, "Ah, here they are. I have 30 sheets ready to use."

When the baby had been swaddled tightly in cotton, Soeur Blanche put the red swollen face up for May to see. May tried but hadn't the strength to reach for her son. She fell back instead on the pillows pale and immobile. Ephraim herself took the child and held it to May's breast.

No sound except for the crying of a hungry enfant. But then, observing that May could give milk, that the baby took milk, the nuns virtually in unison crossed themselves.

Because none of the nun's watches were in agreement, for the time of birth Soeur Marthe Paul was dispatched urgently down the passage toward the chapel, to

the cell door of Soeur Monique St. Aix. That nun, all knew, owned the best watch in the Mission.

Answering to the rap without opening the door St. Aix listened to the request through the oak. Then she slipped a faded velour 'thank you' note of white roses on thick paper under the door. "9:49."

"How would that one know anything about any of this," snorted Soeur Blanche.

Looking like she faced a tiger in the arena, Soeur Marthe Paul replied, "She called to me through the door that because of all our commotion and with the windows open for the heat she had not slept at all. Anyway, she says she heard the child's first cry and noted down the time."

In truth the long delivery had worn the big nun out completely, left her sagging in despair. It felt to her like she had gone through delivery herself. The most turbulent in her many years of midwifing.

In a hurried script on a scrap of newspaper Soeur Blanche sent Soeur St. Axe one more note. "A hard delivery. It is a boy. La Petite does poorly. I do not think she will live."

1914

Samuel Bob

August 15. 9:51 am

"Name him Samuel Bob." May's voice startled the nuns. "Everyone call him Samuel Bob, not Sam." May was sure she announced this clearly to the room. Instead her voice came faint as a spiral of incense. It meant the nuns needed to bend over her to understand.

Their black habits lapped at the white sheets and the golden May. "What a scene this makes," thought May. "I'm in a Caravaggio painting. This is most disagreeable,"

Aloud she managed, "Tell Black Bob I want to see him. Don't tell him the name."

Talking then became too much for her and she lapsed into a lingering silence.

Ephraim came back from the kitchen minus Bob. "He says, I think, because you know it is difficult for me to understand whatever he says, that he will come back tomorrow after he takes a bath. He says not to worry, May will be well."

Everything went slipping away. Going far away. May knew the same regret she felt when finishing a masterpiece alone in the night. Like the last page of *Les Fleur du Mal*, redacted, which Sainte Axe had given her upon hearing she was pregnant--much to the horror of the other nuns, but the one favor she could ever thank Axe for.

Watching May faltering so weak and wan Claire ran babbling to Soeur Blanche's cell door. "Come quick, Sister, I fear we are losing La Petite."

"Nonsense!"

Soeur Blanche then arrived to brush all aside. "Come back right now May Skinner. I order you. Come back down this minute." She leaned over the girl with her habit

and crown shielding her, yelling at her loudest. Both black clouded arms hugged tight about May rocking her none too gently.

“Marthe Paul, you are to make chicken broth. Peel an apple and cut it into small slices. Ephraim, massage her legs. Vigorously, I say. Someone try to find something around here worth reading aloud to her, no not Fleur des Mal.

If there’s nothing any of you can find to read then talk to her. We must keep her alert. Claire, bring her a glass of wine with sugar. Do as I say. Run everyone.”

The bear of a nun clapped her paws hard as thunder. “The rest of you start singing Les Marseillaise.”

In a coarse hush, which the others almost missed because of their singing, May asked for her doll. Soeur Blanche fetched it quickly. She tucked May Doll at her side. May lay without experience, the doll became herself, she became the doll. For her nothing occurred except the ongoing far, high, swinging through darkness.

Suddenly, with a whimper, May returned to consciousness. Arising from the lost at noon on August 15, Assumption—while their Holy Mary floated up out of sight on a puffy Tintoretto cloud. Then convent experienced its greatest flurry ever of flapping black sleeves and nodding hoods.

Soeur Claire fainted. Marthe Paul buried her face in her apron and sobbed. On her knees before the photo of Pope Benedict XV, St. Ephraim bowed her head in prayer, Odile calmly returned to her sewing.

“It is not a miracle,” snips Soeur St. Aix at dinner to the circle of nuns, precise as shears on Parisian cloth. “Such is typical after long arduous labor especially for the first child. Don’t be silly, perfectly usual in all ways, I assure you.”

But the event was too monumental for the simple life of the convent, already made excited with the daily reporting on yet another war between Germany and France. With Belgium being 'raped' in lurid journalism, horrors real and fictional goading the newspapers gleefully on. The nuns were desperate for diversion.

They would not know until days later that May began to deliver on the very day the armies of France and Germany first clashed. The Battle of the Frontiers had begun. On the day’s evening the first casualties were posted to moaning crowds in Paris.

Somehow, so far away, the nuns in Oklahoma understood. On that same remarkable day the sky fell on their beloved Europe. The young men began to die.

This day of pain, never to be forgotten. May moved quickly on into a profound peace. A child arrived. Her child, bringing her for the first time the fiercest love. “All at once it’s all that life can give me,” came to mind. May passaged on into another person entirely. By nighttime she managed to give tit to her son. The first knowledge took her.

Soeur Marthe Paul was sent again to Soeur St. Aix’s door with the message that May was alive. “Of course she is,” came through the oak. More robustly, Soeur

Marthe Paul reported back to the Sisters, “St. Aix wants to know ‘when shall we at last have breakfast’.”

To this, in relief at the good news for May and her baby, the nuns joined in near hysterical laughter. Henceforth whenever there was tension or trouble in the mission, Soeur Marthe Paul would repeat, “Mais oui, and when shall we at last have breakfast.”

1928
John’s Tale
March 25. 10 pm

How dare this kid judge his father after all I’ve made for him. To be judge for what he has and will be having. Honor they father, I should have beat that law into him those years ago.

Instead he and I roamed a bit in what became a silence between us. We rode across the country in what I thought to be a companionable quiet. It wasn’t. He got so he wouldn’t even speak about Valla and May. When I tried to he’d look away.

I didn’t have time then for the past. I was looking for a store to buy. Instead, I bought a parcel of 500 acres right here, near Bartlesville. But ranching was what I knew from my days of roaming the West with Andy, so I took to that, laying out for a big herd.

At first we lived in a tent. Had to hire some Cherokees to protect the claim, and us. It was a savage open land and a most dangerous time. When I thought of them I said it was no place for a beautiful woman or a little girl -- told Quincy the obvious often enough. Guess it didn’t get through. I could see him withdrawing from me more and more.

We got caught up in Oklahoma oil fever. In 1907 we blew a first well on the land here. Lady fortune. Pure chance.

That was it, once oil bubbles in your blood you’re a goner. The whole area was money mad and turning bad. Before the oil, those years gone since the night in Atoka, I kept putting off going back to claim May, because of business, Quincy, the roughness of the new ranch, no school, no doctor, you name it. Then add ‘oil’ and forget about honor or love. Named my ranch ‘Skinner Bros. & Son, Cattle and Oil.’ Since no son is about people just call it Skinner Oil.

I did too write a letter to May at the Mission in Atoka. One, but wouldn’t that be enough? I sent it just a few months after my first well blew. Said that it was time for me to come back and get her.

Got a letter quick, short as my own, from one of the nuns. Damnably snooty. It said in this refined script that May got legally adopted by a couple in Dallas. No more May for me. Told me she took with her what was left of my money. Also writing to to stay clear or they'd have the Sheriff on me.

Strange letter and I guess it ought to have made me suspicious. Actually it did but I ignored the feeling saying to myself that after all they were nuns, they had to be good and trustworthy. A man can lie to himself easy as to any other man.

As for Valla, yes I never forgot her true story according to Quincy. All this time she'd probably been running from what she never did. Sad, but no, I never took action again after my first attempts. Seemed to be sunk into quick sand like in the swamps of home. Couldn't take any real action.

For a woman I took a Pawnee who couldn't speak English. For years that was perfect, who wants a woman for talking. Even though I could see how much Quincy despised me for it not being Valla. Fuck him.

Squaw eventually ran off with a younger fellow. Haven't replaced her.

Hopelessness can make strong people weak quicker than anything. Once I was proud of being a strong man, then weakness got me. I couldn't find a way to be strong again when it came to getting back either Valla or May.

Quincy? He's sulks in silence, a grown man and war veteran acting like a spoiled boy. Came home from France demanding we run classified ads for Valla and May in newspapers across the Great Plains. Sure thing, boy. What a juvenile idea.

He runs the business, from his place. Hasn't set foot here in years. Only time in recent times he mentioned anything about his sister he gave me a geography lesson. "Pa, you ever counted miles? You know we're not more than 180 miles from Atoka. That's less than four hours by car."

All alone tonight. Housekeeper has the night off. Once Quincy built his Mansion in Bartlesville he never came back here. Put his pretty girl in it. They made two girls that I never see--twins, not identical people say--guess it runs in the family. The one is named May, of course. The other, Valla, of course.

This is what his wife tells me. He never shared a word of it with me. Not how he came back more dejected than his wife has ever seen him. No, Quincy never forgets.

I wouldn't want to see them in any event. Tonight I can't stop thinking of the past, the good and the bad in me is too engrossing to leave behind. It shouldn't go into the grave with me, too many stories that ought to be remembered. If I can't tell them no one will recall thing about me. So all I got to ponder is the past, right? It's all I care about. So ponder on, John.

Now the melanoma chews away like a rat in the garbage. Chomp chomp chomp. While still alive it's eating me all up, leaving only the loneliness. Melanoma, old man's disease.

The morphine gets me by. But morphine don't do shit for being left alone. No one's sad for me. Look around. Any of the sons of bitches I've known, are they here to hold my hand? Not a one. This is neither kind nor fair. Everyday, even today, my birthday, I have a weeping time.

1928

May

March 25. 10:15 pm

She takes up a newly filled lamp, lit, back to the front room. She sets it on the table. Sighing, she sits down inside its small circle of Paleolithic illumination. One hand drapes the arm rest of this Missouri memory. “Chair, bet you never dreamed you’d end up in a dump like this.”

Beside her is a third glass of rum, only a jigger in it, no more. The day, and this evening, she breaks her rule, two glasses at most for her worst blues, one for evenings when she soared. While waiting for Buddy she rolls up her hair into the accustomed bun, working with hair pins between lips hugging the thin robe closer against the tangoing cool dampness in her limbs.

Hair proper again, May selects a book from one of the two long shelves GB had made when they moved in. Her own bookshelves, there being no other books in the house but hers excepting the Bell family Bible that she only allows out of their bedroom drawer for the weekly parade to church. This small extravaganza of books, 52 in sum---she had counted them years ago---came after the family itself in May’s ordering of what meant most to her. Each title held a place in her mind. Sometimes in trying to sleep she named them off one by one, on a good night getting through them once.

Top shelf is for French books-- Pascal once abhorred now fondly included-- bottom for English for the most part poetry and novels. She has her French encyclopedia, one thick English dictionary. The books stand guard over the civilized.

In hand her prized Shakespeare. The binding shows much wear, telling of how often through the years it lays open. The book came gift wrapped, a personal parting present, from Miss Engle.

She keeps her letters and photos inside it. There are no love letters, GB had never written to her, and she indeed had no lover before him to give her a ribbon wrapped packet. Here are her sad letters and photos not meant for the light of day. Pieces of a May no one living knows lost in the conundrum of time and space. Her soul miniaturizes into “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,” Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1911.

May finds her way to the Tempest. Without particular thought reaching merely for the solace of its magnificent fantasy. She sips a bite of rum, that burning is a pleasure too. Sandpaper on the tongue, a blanket draped on her brain.

1928

You Do That Voodoo To Me

March 25. Hollywood

Sometimes Paulette gives me voodoo creeps. She's doing it this evening. She brings dinner to the table, all for me, me alone, brings in a bottle of wine. All for me

too. A good French wine from the cellar Tony toys with. Does he know shit about wine? Like do bears shit in the woods? The plates bear a Caesars salad, following the gospel of the dietician, which is the current rage in Hollywood.

She moves like a big sleep walker, giving me the zombie eye. Doesn't say anything. Just serves. Makes me feel like the loneliest woman on the planet. Sundays Tony and I dine late. It's a habit, Tony or not. I admit lately I'm keeping her later and later. She's pissed because of that. Guess I'd be pissed cooking for bad ass me then standing around waiting while I pick at the dish like a rotten kid.

Paulette knows no pity. Just her duty, and her judgment. It's the judgment I see in her that spooks me. It's like she's read my life and now closes the last page with a "You are damned" sentencing. Since first meeting her I've been waiting for Paulette to suddenly stare me down— she never looks me in the eye-- and boom in baritone "murderer," letting me choke to death the while on whatever this shit is that she douses the damn chicken with.

Voodoo came into my life when Tony took me down to Mardi Gras about two years ago. I tried hard to get out of it, but he refused to take 'no.' Claimed it was business and he needed the best looking woman in town on his arm to impress the honchos from Chicago. Although it seemed way too close to Sabine County I had no way out. We took a first class sleeper from LA. I just hid in the compartment from El Paso to the Louisiana line, said I had a head cold.

Actually once in New Orleans I felt quite safe. A world apart as they say. I think the place suited me more than anywhere else I've been, even Paris. Wandering around town for the fun of it I stepped into an 'occult bookstore.' Found a short book on voodoo and bought it. What the hell, why not. Anything's worth a try. That's how I discovered Voodoo Queens. In particular Mama Marie Leveau. Queen of the Queens.

Tony stayed busy with the goons during the days so after reading about her I went out by cab to St. Louis #1 Cemetery. Christ there must have been 500 people there lining up to get to her tomb and mark their three XXXs.

The cabbie I recall said it was worse then because of Mardi Gras. "But there's always a line, lady. A person can be a movie star, like you ma'am, but you still got to wait your turn. "Flashed me the big male grin I know so well, the one whimpering 'oh please please please let me fuck you.'

"Mama Marie was for the poor and sad folks. To get close to her everybody gotta take a turn in line. They stand and wait for hours just to mark their three Xs on her tomb. They make a wish for health or love. It's more than just New Orleans, I drive people out her from all over the country, from Europe too."

I didn't have time to wait so never made my three Xs to Mama Marie. But that started my interest in her. I've read about all there is to read about her that I can understand. Never had religion except for Baptist, which suited me about as well as a straight jacket. Never thought of my life in terms of good or bad, just flowed on the

ticket of looks and will power my folks gave me at birth. Not all bad. Had good times too, some.

Strange then to begin having spirit feelings. Nothing big time, nothing to change me, just something new and unusual to consider. Have I prayed to Mama Marie? Yes, hundreds of times since then. At real low times especially, being lonely or remembering the bad part of my past, then I've turned to her.

Voodoo isn't what people think. It's much much older than Christianity. It's a religion of one spirit, protective and wise. I feel the goodness of voodoo through Mama Marie. Only problem is that it's got a lot of ancestor worship, like the Japanese. Not sure I want to worship my dead.

Can't recall all the things I've prayed for. For sure for the Cadillac. At least that I got. Even prayed for Hal. Prayed for my long lost lover. Prayed for my dead baby boy. Prayed above all over and again for his twin sister to be well and happy. For her to forgive me. After that I feel a certain peace, for a while at least.

I have a framed likeness of Mama Marie. Keep it bedside. Told Tony she's a Brazilian drag queen I got to be good friends with in New York. These days it's OK to be mulatto if you're Brazilian. Never hear back from Mama Marie when I pray to her, too bad but expected. Never got much back from Jesus when I was a Baptist, for that matter. Nice though to have her to talk to now and then. Anyway, I know she's the best woman ever.

I need her every week after my mahjong afternoon. We ladies of money and time gather together in a Whitley Heights mansion subtle as a hard on in tights. Wear our most fashionable. Play with our pearls to draw attention. Get half smashed on martinis. Some are stars, or think they are. Not smart enough to know their times run out, some have a voice like a monkey. Talkies are leaving them hit and runs.

I refuse to tell them, Tony, anyone that I have an offer. About passing that audition in a breeze. So far I'm not even telling myself. Paramount Studios too. The girls will piss on the Persian carpet. Too bad I'm not taking it, if only to pour burning oil on this town's small parts.

No, my mahjong friends are not friends. They're mean competitive shrews too old to be in heat. You can predict what they'll be talking about even before their Cadillac engines cool. Right now it's Aimee Semple McPherson. Give me a break. And if they ever get a bit real it's because of the gin, and then it's just to pull out photos of their kids or grandkids.

Kids. They coo and grunt giving me shit eat grins as they pass photos of look-a-like kids pass round the table. Some of those women I know claim to be my actual same age. Unlikely since those one time kids are far more than grown now.

Afternoons when kid photos come out it sends me back here to have a talk with Mama Marie. Soon as I'm home from being eaten alive at another mahjong party I go straight to the bedroom, shut the door and talk to her.

1926
The Fall
May 31. Morning
The Old Bell Place

The auction at The Old Bell Place, what we still called it, had been far worse than I expected. One old family possession after another came out the front door to be eyed by calculating eyes. Pitiful offers were pitched like baseballs. Standing in front of the small collection of neighbors and strangers, I felt painfully clear to sight. Every intimacy of our daily life lay strewn on the front lawn in the light of a nice Autumn day, Indian summer here being like a day in August.

Each time as a spattering of uninterested low bidding commenced GB muttered some terse bitter sounding comment about it under his breath: Mama Zach's silver set, Papa Zach's grand leather armchair, Aunt Mo's girlhood armoire imported from France, and so forth. As the furniture and possessions of value came forth for bidding I began to understand some of the all powerful pride of this Bell clan.

Far from rich they were comfortable and proper. They pioneered in Alabama years before it was a State, fighting in the Indian Nation wars. After the Civil War they'd found the strength to carry on. They were strong which made the taint on them of slavery, their actual pride in it, all the worse.

As for me standing there arm around GB's narrow waist, I hadn't really looked at it all before, not so carefully at least, not at the house itself or what had been in it. Leaving it today I did look. It suddenly became my own second home leave-taking, after the Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary.

Watching the auction in progress I thought too of Missouri who had brusquely refused to attend. "I never could abide that old house the family returned to. Going back in time to what? They forsook the ruins of me."

Can't smile over that memory now, not recalling GB all knotted up in inexpressible woe. To GB it will always be truly home. Deep inside him, surely losing the land most of all must have been twisting grief inside him. The land closest to anything sacred to him. A shame twisting in him too that it was GB Bell who lost what generations of Bells had striven to accumulate.

The house, just a plain white house. Nice to most people in this poor wire grass, front porch and dormer windows up stairs. But I saw it in his way at last. It dawned on me that I was learning something profound that unhappy day. About happiness being nothing but a memory. Also about 'home.' Have I really known one? Never.

A relief that the auction occurred on a school day, the older boys were gone. Horace agreed to take Hubert and Mancil for the morning. New born James Lamar, less than a month old, stayed in my arms.

"I am not going through that with GB." explained Missouri. "I will not look at the pain that'll swell in his eyes. Anyhow, I am not my best today, May. Not well. Think I'll have Horace drive me over to the doctor." Last words I ever heard from Missouri.

When they had struggled out with GB's mother's piano, I felt his body go tense as a charley horse. That was when I started coaxing him away, "Come on GB show me Sainte Elisabeth. I must get started working on the house. Come come come. "

He pushed me away but back I came at him nagging. Finally after giving him a pinch in the ass he reluctantly followed. Walking backwards though like a dog for the blind gone blind. For some reason once we got free, GB defiantly taking the buggy, on the list of things to be sold, we started to laugh hysterically. And then he too cry. A few tears only.

A couple, we'd lived there since 1918, almost eight years. More than two of that while Papa Zach was alive, demanding and irascible with age. For me they are happy years. Which is what I mean by learning something that day about happiness. Typically human, the years there didn't seem so happy, they become so only on looking back.

We and GB's boys slept upstairs in the two bedrooms, leaving Zachariah to have the downstairs dining room to die in. In the morning one rose to views of mist, low to the ground and thin, wisping up like smoke from small damp fires. Not at all the thick swamp mist of Sainte Elisabeth that very slowly dissipates in high walls of cottony mist coming out of the swamp like a powerful holy ghost onto the fields.

Viewed from our dormer window the Bell land spread far away in a low landscape of squares, rectangles, oddly shaped patching of different small fields. Most surrounded by hedges or short fruit trees, tall pines, some Wiregrass.

There I was in Alabama, a true farmer's wife. If I heard GB stir I might tiptoe back to bed and snuggle with him until he was awake enough to play. The best game a girl could play. He being more interesting to hold than May doll. Soon after I'd need to get Buddy, Joseph Henry and Maurice up and ready for school. Give them a kiss. The almighty kiss of human kind. Trying to teach them to give love back.

I conceived and bore Hubert in that same upstairs bedroom. My first baby from GB, clumsy and funny. We three then together in that room. Mancil had been born up there too. James Lamar as well.

Papa Zach's death was hardly sad for me. I found him arrogant and dictatorial although Mo reminded me often that The Colonel accepted me into the family and although he might be one "difficult geezer," as she referred to him in endearment, he meant well.

I sensed he did not mean well at all and lived on in selfish deceit. To me he was always "one difficult old cock sucker."

When I came to that house I dealt first off with Rhoda's three boys. A range of needs according to their ages-- from Buddy at 9 to Maurice age 3. Papa Zach exacted homage from me. GB needed his own time with me too. The only help the farm could support was used in the fields that stretched out around the house, most of it cotton land.

At The Bell Place early on I felt dismay at my lack of housekeeping experience, once in a rage bellowing out “I ain't a damn whit more than a fuckin slave. They call this freedom? They can stuff it up their ass.” This came in frustration over the size of the job handed to a young untrained woman. Guess I put all the force of Bob into that one.

Papa Zach howled back enraged at me from the dining room, “May Bell you shall not ever use nigger talk again in this house.”

Damnation but it really was a happy time. Really? Really May, cut the crap. Nothing is perfection.

On that first ride over to Sainte Elisabeth I held no expectations of what was coming. GB had been lucky to get the position of plantation manager, bestowed by word of mouth to him through his Masonic connections. Many families were losing their land then due to the boll weevil. A disaster time, especially for the smaller farmers, also for some bigger farmers like the Bells. If you grew cotton then you were ruined in three straight years of failed crops. Banks repossessed homes and worse the land. Auctioning off belongings became common, too much so. The market for farm implements, furniture and such saturated.

That's when a 'nice' home like The Bell Place drew a small indifferent crowd to its auction. We'd see a few pennies on the dollar of what sold.

Aunt Mo's bank, no longer hers in fact, owned us, although not by much. Again through the Masons that small debt was soon to be forgiven. But it left only the proceeds from the auction to start over with.

Distracting as my emotions were at the selling off I kept mental track of the prices accepted, sadly so. It came thus far to about \$20. I reasoned that after the farm implements, buggy and most of all the horse were sold we might see some \$40 and change. Maybe, depending on what the game of fortune bestowed.

A whole family's story, more than 100 years of life and endeavor, reduced to that.

The while I gave the asshole of an auctioneer the finger, hiding it in the folds of my dress. To myself I remained hopelessly defiant, “Well it's fuckin' damn sure you can't auction off memories. Can't sell love.”

GB coughed to get my attention, guess he saw me day dreaming as we rode along. “About the new place, May, I need to warn you. it's a pretty rough house for us. No electricity, no indoor toilet or bath. Don't you worry, we'll make do. Something more our style will come along soon enough.”

The hoarseness in his voice told me it wasn't just the auction and the low bids that were upsetting him. I began to prepare for what might be coming. The nearer we came the more GB turned morose and silent. Letting the horse take its head it for a long ride.

Then at last he led me into another country, “Sainte Elisabeth.”

Yet another unique view of life opened up to me, sweeping me off to the far away, the most exotic place I had ever seen. I felt myself sinking into the illustrations from my book of Uncle Remus stories. From afar, at first, even the hovels of the laborers took on that folk tale aura.

When we pulled up the rise to the manager's shanty the spell shattered. I had expected something completely different, to fit the grandeur and mythology of a real plantation. That illusion dropped from my hands and broke into a thousand pieces. "Let go Tar Baby, Let go I sez," came to mind.

I also began to feel my loathsome temper rising like the Goodyear blimp. "What an asshole loser." To my credit, growling this low and in French.

1914-1915 The Mission

There came an intermittent flow of letters to the Sisters from France. The stamps, the return addresses, such details fascinated May.

In late August, 1914, the letters began arriving in surprising numbers. By early November the letters coming brought worry to most of the nuns, grief to a few-- word of the wounded and missing, and above all the dead. Young brothers, nephews, cousins, childhood friends. Earlier wars did not prepare them for this scale of slaughter.

These men were often too young for the nun knowing of them to have seen them, most of the sisters having been at the Mission for more than 20 years. Nonetheless, grief hung its heavy purple drapery over the place.

May felt the alarm around her and sympathized to a point. She did indeed harbor old dislikes of some Sisters, those with unkind, bitter spirits. For the rest five of them were on pleasant terms with her, and among these she did claim two 'mothers' --Soeurs Claire and St. Ephraim.

In late-November a death letter came to Soeur St. Ephraim. Her own youngest brother Jean Baptiste killed in action during the Battle of the Marne. For the first time in her stay at the Mission May took the humble shape of St. Ephraim in her own arms, an adult becoming a child again. May the girl an old woman now took her turn to comfort. They were soon to see the barrage of horrifying statistics -- 250,000 French soldiers lost at the Marne alone, and that almost at the beginning of the war.

Much worse to come. Statistics of such magnitude that the unique tragedy of each individual life extinguished could not be fathomed. This had not happened in the memory of Europe.

Then the Sisters of The Holy St. Mary went into action. What money they had went home. They begged the Atoka community to give money for medical supplies. Not much came, but what did arrive was immediately sent on to the French war effort. Leaves turned on the few trees near the Mission, fell like tears thought May.

As usual Bob raked them into piles and burned them. These Mission trees were the only adult trees in the area, planted long ago by the friars. The prairie had no heart for trees and Atoka was too new. This autumn, May imagined that the smoke rising sullenly from Bob's convent garden fire to be wafted in from the horror in Europe. The leaf burning made the Mission betoken an aura of war in progress, air smoldering and stinging when the wind shifts over the trenches.

The front room of the Mission turned cold. May kept Samuel close to her breasts wrapped in an old buffalo skin that many years gone came in payment to the mission from the Choctaws.

Bob visited them often in the front room pretending to clean. There one day in November, the day of their first hard frost, he found May and Samuel huddling together from the cold. He sniffed at their buffalo hide once and began moving toward the kitchen.

"They sure could a done you better 'n that, hell fire. I be back soon, L'il Pet. Fuckin' damn old women. No sense to even wipe there own asses." When he returned he held a mighty buffalo bull hide, thickly furred and fragrant. "My woman got so many I just give un to you and the child."

He wrapped Samuel and May up tight inside the hide. May felt truly touched. She gave Bob a kiss. Hardly the first one, yet it made him go shy. Looking down she noticed a sunflower on the robe. A single sunflower saved since the summer and pressed flat. Reaching out May gently touched its brittle petals. In turn she felt suddenly at a loss. Bob swaying from one foot to the other obviously wished to be a thousand miles away.

"They grow down among the Choctaws, trash flowers. Poor peoples got nothing at all but these useless flowers. Too bad they can't eat 'em. I thought to save one for the winter. Brightens things up. Ida pressed it between a couple of boards she has."

"I think it is the most wonderful flower of all. I'll keep it between pages in a book for Samuel to have when he's grown. Bob, did they tell you Samuel is named for you? He's Sam Bob." She shortened the name for once so that Bob could use it. One of the rare times with the war on that May felt she could laugh out loud with joy, decently.

"Gotta go, L'il Pet, those sewer women making me dizzy with this and that they wanna git done. The Brick Shit House is fightin' this war by herself." Bob quickly escaped before she could see the wrinkles and scars on his face screwing up into sorrowing remembrance perhaps of his own terrible conflicts.

While at play with her Samuel Bob Skinner she giggled often enough, every day, discretely hiding it when possible. Samuel Bob had plump baby arms and fingers. His darting bright eyes looked about with fascinated interest. She was arrogant of him. His looks, his eyes and hair, how strong and stout he grew, how intelligent and good.

May having no family except Black Bob found a whole new one in her Samuel. He rarely left her arms, and then to be held tenderly by Soeur Claire or St. Ephraim. Her two odd mothers became Samuel's grandmothers. May resolved the strangeness of this by consideration of the mystery of her own history. Or was it reversed, she debated.

"Histories. I would rather have mysteries." May explained to Samuel Bob. Who to her delight burped a drool of her milk in reply, turning his head on his neckless body with pursed bow lips and eyes that bobbed without focus. "Samuel Bob, you are a tiny mystery. You are above all my best mystery. Everyone who comes to honor you must first pray to me, Your Lady of Mysteries."

May found this thought hilarious and rolled merrily with Samuel Bob in the luxury of the buffalo bull robe.

Her days for months were passed with Samuel inside the Mission's front room. She loaned him her May doll The three of them sleeping together.

"Land of my heart and soul." She whispered to him.

When in time he began to call her something near to 'maman' May exulted. "At last there is a real 'maman' here."

Soeur Claire read to them in the evenings by the fireplace. The fire now tended with care by Bob who stayed on more and more at the Mission. During the readings May played with Samuel Bob, a most alert baby. With some embarrassment Bob explained his extended presence, "Ida say you need me here more, so it OK with her."

Claire read pious French poetry and some careful fiction. The latter meaning most often the elite and delicate sensibilities of the Comtesse de Segur from the pages of "Les Petite Filles Modeles." This kindness sent May foraging in her barely attentive thoughts to find suitable comments of appreciation. Her own taste in books of the moment, in the backdrop of Atoka, Oklahoma, ran to Stendhal and Thomas Hardy.

The "Les Petites Filles Modeles" were relics to her of another age. Readings sometimes bored her to sleep, Bob too if still around. Certainly it worked to lull Samuel to sleep. The French like water lilies guarding him in a hidden pond of babyhood.

The evenings passed thus, and the days were soon filled with work in the kitchen. Soeur Blanche gave her a papoose. Thus her hands could be free to work yet Samuel would always be near. No one remarked that May herself once upon a time arrived in the same gear.

She never needed in that time any distractions or entertainments. His midget hands encircled her thumb. His big black eyes searched for hers, huge enough to swallow her whole. His greedy little mouth ever ready to root for her breast.

Particularly she delighted in bathing him, sitting close to the kitchen stove, sitting on a rug with a pan of soapy warm water, holding him as she sponged his

tender body. Staring in rapture at his beauty. His head, arms, belly and legs, his tiny penis. Dry and clean she'd wrap him again with her in the buffalo robe.

Am unknown feeling grew in May. She considered the feeling cautiously before naming it 'joy'. Yes, that was what it meant, this sensation when studying her son.

Samuel at first looked all Choctaw with a round face, straight black hair and wide set eyes high in his face. Eyes ever alert and avid. His skin however was honey hued. The eyes were bright white against the skin color, irises golden, brown pupils inset with tiny sunflowers. His long lashes grew so thickly black it seemed to May he wore makeup.

Passing Samuel's nine months May actively tried again to wheedle Bob into finding news of Charlie among the Choctaws. She explained it meant no revenge, only for him to see his son. Also she wanted to forgive him. Forgiveness became an obsession. If she did not perform an act of forgiveness then her great joy in her baby would be a lie. The cruel start of Samuel's life might haunt him like her own stalked her.

She wanted her Choctaw back only long enough to glimpse his son. To baptize him in some manner of the Choctaw way. Piecing together the making of Samuel so that unlike hers his spirit would not drift in limbo. It might protect Samuel from that heavy frost of mind and soul that struck her.

Bob looked off into the distance whenever she mentioned Charlie. Without her seeing it he would always put a palm over the purse at his belt. He'd lower his voice, absently giving reassurances. "Sure enough L'il Pet. My gal's folks lookin' for him with her people, that sure. He be anywhere abouts, Ida she'd knowed it."

Evidently, nothing was heard, no trace of Charlie coming to May's attention. He had flown for good in her mind, the eagle off into sky high oblivion. No matter, Samuel held her enthralled, closer than she held him. It was that May like many mothers still wanted more. Something, whatever, protective of him that could never slacken, never break.

Samuel's first birthday, August 15, 1915, passed without a party. It was also a year from the start of the war, a year of never before known slaughter. It was not a time for parties.

On the morning of his birthday, despite her expectation of nothing more than what her own had brought in her years at the Mission, store-bought baby clothes appeared at the feet of The Virgin. Anonymous offerings.

She dressed him in each in turn, parading him about the Mission to be admired. One fit perfectly, the others, meant for future months, drooped like a clown's and made May and some of the nuns laugh. The Holy Sainte Mary desperately needed laughter.

Later in the day Bob appeared. He held out another doll he'd made. This one for Sam Bob. Like May Doll of years before the creation contained odd fragments of his military uniform, shaped long and flat. More of a large amulet to May than a doll.

“Ain't that something,” he beamed in grandfatherly admiration watching the baby grasp for it stalwartly with big avaricious eyes. “Sam Bob he the most man baby ever.”

They named it 'Bob' doll on the spot. It became a part of Samuel. Bob Doll remained almost always in his hands until one cursed evening, Christmas Eve, when in a burst of enthusiasm he tossed it into the fire. A tragedy for all, Bob Doll was consumed. “Like Joan of Arc,” thought May.

And the war raged on.

1928

Valla

The Bungalow in the Canyon

March 25

Back door booms closed, saying ‘you are the extra that time forgot. You’re sealed alive in a studio tomb in Culver City.’

When Tony was seeing no wrong with he built a small screening room here. Then found somehow all the scraps of me on screen, snippets of this and that in about 40 movies. Mostly crap roles in bad movies. I’ve watched them all. Some several times. Eventually I tired of me.

When leaving Paulette always gives the damn door a good hard slam. That’s Paulette’s ferocious goodbye. She leaves at 11 so I know another day is about over. One less to go.

This empty house spreads out around me like a big back lot. It’s all for show, a false front for false folks. Aloneness the only thing that’s real. Aloneness I can touch, hear, smell. Aloneness I can see in my mirror.

Wish a Pacific wave would come right now. Come crashing through the house. Paulette would fine me in the morning expired with the fish, choked on kelp, my face turned into grated Parmesan by the push and pull of sand. Tides of the sacred moon.

Sure as shit Paulette told me early on that she grew up in New Orleans. I knew it. Of course this makes me watch her all the more closely. She does carry herself like a Queen, haughty with a corn cob up the yazoo.

More and more it seems certain that she is one. It would have to happen to me, ending up with a Voodoo Queen for a maid.

“Eatin’ later ‘n later. Eatin’ less n’ less. You need me for say what?” This was said at my own dining table tonight. Empty room big as Cleopatra’s throne room. Me just sitting there with my wine glass in one hand a fork with nothing on it in the other.

Paulette likes to come at me like that in a sneak attack sticking her huge moon face with those tiny hot eyes right in my puss. She’s got a Big Bertha contralto to

go with it. Talkies soon to be the new greatest thing on earth she could be a star if she weren't black as sin.

She uses the voice well too. Gets a kick out of gunning for me with it from out of the blue, startling the shit out of me while she's clearing off the untouched dishes. For a tip I always leave her a cigarette butt in the middle of what I won't eat.

Maybe she's getting even with me for all the lynching going on. Actually the war between us cuts the boredom and after all I'm the director and producer here. I'm the one can make the cuts. She's just the cop brought in to control the mob.

"OK, Valla or whatever your name is. let's talk some. Let me ask you somethin . ." No 'Mrs. Van Dash,' which I instructed her to use, not even a 'Miss Valla' which makes for a great Metro Goldwyn Mayer name.

"How come a fine looking woman like you ain't got no kids? That's unnatural. I got 8. Not a single one of them is any good."

Right about now she's driving back to her mother's house down in Crenshaw. Difficult imaging Paulette having a mother, she seems immaculately conceived. Tony bought her a used car, had someone or other teach her drive it. All so she can get to this God forsaken dump. Come here regularly and on time. Paulette does have a lot to do here. A bungalow? I think it has more rooms than the Waldorf.

Yeah, Tony pays her well. I come expensive, for caretaking and spying. I don't feel so bad for her. Anyway I give her an extra afternoon off just for staying late. I need late. That's when it gets bad here.

"And another thing, how come you keep that picture of Mama Marie in your bedroom? That's the only good thing I know about you."

1928

What's Past Is Prologue

10:54 pm. Sainte Elisabeth

On impulse May rises from the Tempest and goes to again inspect the wedding photo on the wall. For her this is compulsion, strong as reality or hearing a clock ticking them by.

She and GB are caught side by side for as long as the photo should last. Holding aloft the lamp, May appears to be twice as thick as he is. The top of her head comes to just below his eyes. Their foreheads are so mismatched she stifles a giggle. His very high and narrow. Hers very broad.

May cut his hair for the day, saying she wanted him at his most handsome. He trimmed his mustache neat and short. She had forgotten he wore his Masonic pin. "What a dear sap, wearing that pin to his wedding."

She values the obvious about GB, that he's a strikingly fine if unusual looking man. He drinks moderately, doesn't smoke, although she wouldn't have minded if he did. For sure he's a good father. He's not a philanderer, neither the time nor energy

for that. No meanness in this male. She'd struck him a couple of times, well, more perhaps, in anger.

"Why shouldn't people simper at my antique eccentricity. They ought to. I should find it droll too. But I don't, really. Just can't see it that way. Wonder why we can't see ourselves as others do even in the mirror."

The few times Soeur Claire went to Atoka with May, the petit nun held a running commentary on the people they encountered. This for May brought an agony of embarrassment not because anyone overheard the comments, after all they were whispered discretely in French, but because they were dreadfully perceptive. The French gift for sarcasm, a gift to her too.

"That one, c'est incroyable! Surely she never looks in the mirror before coming out." These hissed comments came thrown to her dismay like stilettos. When interrupting her French critique of the world, Soeur Claire would beam adoringly at May's own face of those years ago. Was it perhaps softer then? Less stoic? A virgin Mary May?

"Hope to hell I've learned something from all this shit."

Self inspection over, the photo held value in convincing her that at least some of the past indeed occurred. Yes, she believes, once upon a time this photo did happen. The proof before her.

She hasn't a single photo of the boys. When remembering this she vows to go in their best to a photographer in Geneva, requisite before Buddy leaves. All of them in a photo. For that matter, sometime before May Day she and GB ought to have one taken for their 10th anniversary. "I'll wear a different dress. Then we shall see if there is magic to stop time."

But no way she can pause her seamstress work to make a new dress for herself. No money comes from Dothan. Time runs out.

"Can't escape fate," this with a tight mocking smile, "Guess the Black Pirate comes first." Impelled to find more reality to comfort her May bends again to the trunk, pulls the nail clasp free. The heavy lid eases up silently.

At bottom under the best quilts, ones not used even on the coldest of winter days, her fingers search until they find her precious wooden box. It surfaces rarely. Compared to the inestimable weight of her Shakespeare this box is yet heavier with relics of May. It contains a small horde of memorabilia that represent her inchoate past in disarray. The detritus of being May carefully preserved.

It is the box that came with her wedding boots. She places it carefully on the table. Opens it with a bit of self conscious ceremony. Timidly in a childish way alarmed that all might escape in a magician's smoke. Nothing left of May to hold, investigate, believe in. There she keeps her May Doll. "Hello Miss May Elizabeth Doll, I hope you're happy tonight." May Doll scrunches up into a ball hidden in a sock.

“You are my oldest friend now,” She soothes the doll with a touch to the bulging sock. “Yes, you are my only friend. And I know you don’t like it here. You don’t like your middle name. You don’t like being stuck in the sock. What a bitch you are.”

Here she hides from the sun her Atoka Academy diploma. There too a rosary presented to her by Soeur St. Ephraim. It she kisses before replacing.

“How hard teachings die even those we don’t give credit to.”

In the box she keeps the pen knife that Bob gave her before she left, “Shit happens, hope this don't never be used. Though I says a body needs one good knife in life, ain't it so.”

The box holds her train ticket from Atoka to Geneva. This along with a newspaper clipping from the Atoka County Times announcing the names of her graduating class from the Academy, naming her Class Valedictorian.

Also, four clippings from the Geneva Reaper: the first relating her return to Geneva County, Miss May Skinner arriving and so forth. The second announcing her marriage to GB -- printed surely at the instigation of Aunt Missouri. The third an obituary for Aunt Tiersey.

The fourth clipping is in memorium of Mrs. Elizabeth Missouri Whitaker, ne Bell. This emanates sadness. Her spirit of speed gone in a flash.

“Let’s have a drink, Mo. Let’s talk and listen to opera. I want you here in your turban and feathers.” In white tissue paper along with Mo’s death notice she keeps Bob’s sunflower.

More than once May has considered that in the myth her life became that perhaps in strangeness and perversity Missouri was in fact her grandmother. Weren’t those references to a long ago love affair with Union-soldier John Skinner hints to a secret meant for her? How to figure, how to guess. Aunt Tiersey would have known. Too late.

If so then she and GB would be cousins. May when thinking this always hoped it were so, it would make them even closer. Also, maybe at least one of here boys, Mancil most likely, would then have been given six fingers like Ulie and be a Voodoo Prince.

She hid away the thoughts as usual into the ocean depths of the trunk of secrets.

1928

May Skinner Bell

March 26. 12:30 pm

Sainte Elisabeth

Running motor in the far away, May blinks to attention. The Tempest and the jigger of rum are both finished. Annunciation day finishes too, leaving her in it’s annual wake, a universal ache, a web of conflicting emotions. And in her very own ode to melancholy.

Standing up with a weary sigh May crosses to the window. She turns the lamp knob, hot to the touch, flame shadows gutter on the walls glowering and low.

Curtains inch cautiously apart. She stares out into the nighttime of Sainte Elisabeth. Car lights slash across the glass and she winces. This might yet end badly. Lights bob about over the rutted road beams like monster eyes struggling with the darkness.

Down between the grand avenue of oak trees they come. Lights stuttering between the trunks. One car. Uncertain and tense May waits for it.

Ku Klux Klan again? Twice in one day. Maybe they wanted the other dog. They liked this time of night for their evil. Three times now they'd come. Their visits weren't far from her thoughts. First that terrifying parley on St. John's Eve, then again about a year ago coming in for some poor soul down below. All she knows of their visit that time: shouting, one woman's scream, silence, the Klan cars rumbling quickly away again not stopping at the shanty.

Up late, she was the one witness of any authority to that raid. Yet she'd feared telling GB or asking him questions about it, same as with so many other stories that surrounded her, that he might fire up in male animosity at the intrusion and charge off to land himself in serious trouble. Nothing came of it other than a grim looking GB the morning after.

So much fear. All around. Taking her too.

And now they'd come again. To hang the other dog? Evil rolling on patched tires into their fallen Garden of Eden.

May strides to the porch easing the screen door closed behind her. The lights turn down away from her toward the workers shacks. Ku Klux Klan for sure. Uncertainty turns to alarm. Who would they take this time.

She stops when the lights pause for a couple of minutes. Then the swing around laboriously, making turn around below. Now they come bobbling back, up the rise along the trail toward her house.

In alarm she speaks. "There is blood all around us."

1928

Sainte Elisabeth

March 26. 1:11 am

Are those shameless men, bullies, killers, returning to lurk about, to throw their still lit cigars and cigarettes into her flowers, or worse peaking at her through the front windows. Devilish whispers profaning her name?

Come returning just to scare, to spread their evil like mule shit on the fields? Or did they mean real harm? This time May is prepared to fetch GB from bed. In fact she's on her way to him.

That damn dog who never barks! They should have hung them both!

Low echoing laughter comes from down the path. Young men enjoying themselves. She stops on way to their bedroom when the lights back up and then bobble away down the trail.

Now she hears low yips. Beyond the shadows near Dandy's shed she makes out the form of their remaining dog. He's standing on hind legs at the wire fence, nose in the air. This tells her clearly. Buddy's coming.

May sets the lamp on the table and arranges her scene: light on high, Shakespeare reopened, she sits again, hair quickly tidied. She gives the doorway her rigid most severe back.

At the same time her temper flares -- at weariness, the hour, at her worry, at young men in their flagrant audacity to enjoy themselves.

He steps at last up and onto the porch. This Buddy step is none too steady.

1928

Soeur Blanche
March 26. 1:30 am
St. Louis

Here comes bed check. The flashlight beam held down to the tile floor hunts through bed wheels. The light passes so closely that I can see the smears left by a dirty mop. Training up and down quickly scanning we old, sick, helpless forms—the light makes some murmur. Whiners.

Memory is all. Remember. I am 87 years old. This is the mother house in St. Louis, Missouri, America. My name is Arlette Rivaud. I was born in Lille on January 11, 1841. My father, Jean Rivaud, was a day laborer. If they still live I have 3 younger sisters and two younger brothers. Two nephews died in the Great War. Several cousins too.

Starting at age 16 I worked in a cafe, serving coffee, beer and cognac the day long and into the evening. In that time I picked up my enjoyment for a cup of coffee, full strength not this colored water they dare call coffee here. Calvados also became a too common pleasure. Ah to have a glass again.

'Arlette cherie, un pression est un calva,' comes the call down the bar. The men crowding in of different ages and shapes. Leaning on the bar, sitting legs spread at the tables. Accordion player going through the same tunes every night. Men rolling their cigarettes, tamping pipes, men filling the merry tunes with smoke and sweet Calvados.

Young Arlette, auburn hair high in combs, enjoyed the crude banter with those men, most of them my regulars. Particularly the homely ones brave enough to flirt. A thrill for me when young in being surrounded by men. Mirrors didn't lie to me, I had no looks.

One night on my way home from the cafe a man raped me in the park. In a drizzling rain. I was 28. He caught me from behind in arms like thighs and dragged me struggling into bushes. I said to my family that I didn't remember anything. A lie. He was a regular man at the bar who had smiled at me.

Soon after I became a novice and then a nun. That was in 1873. I have been a nun for 55 years. In 1889 I came to the Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary. I served Our Lady at the Mission for 33 years. Five years ago I left Atoka and came here. They brought me to the infirmary six weeks ago when I fell breaking my hip.

Memory, always searching for correct memories. How pitiful. Arlette, another Calva. Pull up your skirts. Come sit on my knee.

1928

Pure Chance

John Douglass Skinner

March 26. 1:11 am

This is the beginning of another sleepless night. Pain will be creeping on. Only thing to do is stick me some more morphine. The sacred needles are on the night stand in easy enough reach.

I had them bring my bed downstairs here. Halfway to the front door, halfway out of the house, halfway to the end of my time. Also I can see just in case someone comes visiting. No one does.

Got two night lights on for company. Housekeeper left me a bucket of ice, some water and another bottle of Scotch. Real Scottish Scotch, no bootleg shit.

Camel after Camel, drink after drink, shot after shot, just waiting for it all to be over with. My own coughing haunts the house. But no voices.

At least yesterday is gone. One last time. Andy's birthday-- my birthday --the day I lost Valla and my baby girl. Though I still think I did what was right with May's life. Why in hell won't Quincy believe that? For that matter why don't I?

Life went wrong ever since the day me and Andy turned 10. The day that wicked man Zachariah Bell shot pa dead. So then why is it me getting the big cheat?

1928

Soeur Blanche

March 26. 1:15 am

St. Louis

Life at the Mission ended with May leaving. Even the nuns not fond of her I saw sagging. We sagged communally. We fought more often. We were never the same again. But I hid it, pushed myself harder. My role was to be the strength of all. I followed my usual routine, kept my usual way. My orders rang loud. Hardest hit visibly, none knowing of my own heart, were St. Ephraim and Claire.

Ephraim I knew kept contact with May by letters back and forth. Not I, too much pain to hide. But some of hers she read aloud to us, others not. After her death I took them, reading them again and again. I have them here. I know of May's marriage, the man she took, of his children and then of her own. The last letter in the packet tells of the birth of her youngest, and that they were having hard times and must move to another place. This last arrived when there was no more Ephraim to read it or reply.

A few years after May's leaving Ephraim became even quieter than by nature. I guessed she was ill. She began to stay in her cell, praying. Four years after May left I called in the Atoka doctor. Uterine cancer. Ephraim slowly dwindled to a skeletal presence. Her death in 1925 took away our last true spirit of the Holy Mother.

I should have written of her passing to May, but could not. Also I had St. Claire to deal with. Unstable even when she arrived, in May's absence she slowly lost her mind. Visions haunted her of the Virgin and of the devil. In the end she began raving, demanded we call her Bernadette, disfigured herself with knives.

Finally Bob and I took her by ambulance, my first trip by auto was hardly a joy, to the sanitarium in McAlester. Saying goodbye to that old friend I realized she no longer knew my name.

Soeur St. Aix went home to France. She quickly took off within a month of May's leaving. Of course she could afford to do so. Voila, one morning Aix declared her work accomplished at the Mission, was packed and gone the same day.

The youngest nun among us she was 58 at her return to France, young enough for another life. Someone here knows more, her true name and title. This nun informed that Aix transforms into Constance de Malgrace, Comtesse de Saint Paul Cap de Joux.

What a joke. The name's heavier than that bad reed herself. Too bad they don't send them anymore to have their heads chopped off.

1928

Valla

March 25. 11:15 pm

The beautiful woman sitting in a white satin robe at the white Egyptian dressing table in the white bedroom looks carefully at herself. Up close. A camera zoom to her face. It's good. She didn't think any woman in Hollywood could do better.

She begins to slowly paint her eyes. Black mascara, black liner smudged above up to where her natural eyebrows been. Now plucked bare. Those she replaces with black arches so fine, so sans serif they almost disappear when she looks. No rouge. lips painted fulsome, heavy, black. The lipstick applied to completely cover both lips. Clara Bow, flappers. The woman in the mirror was too unique for mere passing fashion.

It took time in particular to do her eyes. That was good. She wanted most of all to waste time. The image in the mirror emerges slowly. Queen Nefertiti has arrived there alive, eternal.

Valla knows Paulette has been trying to do a swarming thing on her, bee stings and black dog bites included. Low class Voodoo.

She just shrugs it off, ripple in the mirror. She flips Paulette the bird, this too to see in the mirror like a slice of a film. The feature length Life of Valla Skinner.

Doing it so often today that her finger hurts.

Tonight the old quandary is back. Why didn't John ever come? Why didn't he bring May to me? What pure shit love is. Stinks and browns your nose when you rub in it.

1928

An Ancient Story

11:40 pm

He comes up softly behind her, then she feels his strong young arms about her. That gives her a sudden pain of deep interior love, she groans so low the boy doesn't hear it. It breaks the tension.

"Mama May, I am truly sorry to keep you waiting up for me. You should have gone to bed. I'm old enough to take care of myself. This was my goodbye party from the boys."

'Goodbye,' it fills her with a fierce piercing dread. It is also the first time since marrying GB that he's called her 'mama.' Always before just 'May.'

"The boys took me to this great place up to Dothan. Nig . . . colored place. Did they every have a great Dixie Land Band. Man oh man, I had fun."

"How many drinks, only beer I hope?"

"Not so many, just enough to have a good time, that's all. Maybe four beers, maybe six." He gave her his handsome and charming grin. "I was dancing all the time so I never felt a one. Didn't count 'em."

May strokes his mass of hair. Waiting to hear if there is something else for him to tell her. She gathers he does, knowing him.

"Buddy, did you see anything strange driving in tonight?" her question brittle despite effort, although he clearly didn't notice. "Nothing hanging from a tree?"

"No ma'am, except some leaves." How pleased he is with himself.

Buddy comes round to kneel at her side and lays his head on her knees. Something new about him comes to her, a feeling of change in him, plus closer now she catches a whiff of something that confuses her. An earthy odor emanates from her big boy, something male under a light whiff of a tawdry perfume its aroma the sickening sweetness of chewing gum.

"I had my first girl, mama. Don't be mad at me." This blurted toward the floor boards.

Now she detects a slight slurring in his speech. May sits considering Buddy's words without flinching. Her surprise was that it hadn't already happened. She'd begged GB to talk to him about the matter, of what measures a man can take. GB's awkward silence then told her he'd said nothing.

At this point May guesses her 18 year-old didn't know whether to laugh in joy, weep or vomit. His hair still feels the same as when he was a defensive little boy of eight watching his new mother's every move like she might turn into an witch if he blinked.

"You didn't force her . . ." She says this before she can think, an old panic rising.

"Of course not, Mama May! It was the most wonderful experience of my life."

"I do hope she agreed, Buddy. " May can't help admiring her son although being proud of her boys made her uneasy, as if their fall would surely come.

"We danced and danced, then she put her head against my shoulder. After a while we both sort of went ga-ga. Then somehow we were outside. We ended up in the back seat of Harry's car."

"I can think of more comfortable places to star off in, my dear."

"Mama, I have something else to tell you . . ."

Apprehension again startles May. Her eyes murky in the clouded atmosphere of kerosene light search his face. The young man is thankful her eyes are dimmed, partly lowered like lamps themselves.

"Did you pull out, Buddy? Say you did." He blunt words made all the more astonishing to them both when May swiftly leans back and gives him a quick swat on the back of his head.

"Ouch, I did my best Mama." I told her when I said 'whoa' to push me away, just like papa warned me to do. I'd pull out. I mean then I couldn't. well you know." Kneeling before her he's lists sideways.

May's voice turns even again. "You know the possible consequences of that, my son." There were moments despite her disbelief when life sounded Biblical, when history did seem to turn in a wheel of fortune.

"This is your responsibility as much as hers."

"But she held me in with her legs. They was as . . ."

"*Were as* . . . tight as vices?" offers May, the sarcastic word play lost to Buddy.

"For sure that's the truth. And afterwards I ask why and she says it was because she fancied me. That she knew I was leaving for the Army. She said it was just between us, that no other soul would ever know."

"What kind of girl was she, a Honky girl?" The perfume, recognizable for what it is, invades the entire room.

"That's '*Honky Tonk*.' No ma'am. She never asked. I wouldn't have given her any anyway as I never had any, where would I get money? The fellas bought all my beers. You never gave me a chance to explain, listen."

Hearing hurt in his voice, May returns to stroking his head. "Hush now, don't wake the others. What's done is done. So who is this young woman? You do know her name I hope, at least that, son." She senses him tense as if awaiting another blow.

"This girl is the prettiest in the world. But Mama, it's all fine. I'm not bringing any trouble here. She's just a nigger gal.

1928
Soeur Blanche
St. Louis

When down to a few old nuns, some feeble, some out of their minds, I decided it time to close the Mission. Without Black Bob I suppose I lost courage. I informed St. Louis and permission arrived for us to pack up and leave. Soeur Marthe Paul found a position as a cook at a dioceses school in Tulsa. I hope her English and her disposition improve for them.

Soeurs Terese, and Jean Dominique accompanied me on the train to the convent home in St. Louis. One after another they died. Here now I know no one.

All thins out like cigarette and pipe smoke after the café had closed. 'Arlette cherie, un pression est un calva,' comes the call. I do recall the accordion tunes, that snug collusion of drinking, smoking, card playing men.

Here they stare at me quizzically. I forget more and more English. The little I ever learned begins to shrink to nothing. Returning to French I am in a cage.

Black Bob grieved as much as I did when May left. I sensed it about him always until he died. With May gone Bob seemed lost for what to do.

One late afternoon I opened the back door and found him there on the step, by himself but talking out loud, sitting to the side to leave room for her.

Saying nothing I closed the door. A few days later I peeked out and saw him there again, again talking aloud to the empty place beside him.

Another week passed and just when the sky began to change color I did something I would never have dreamt possible. Difficult to imagine it happened.

Stepping out I quietly gathered my skirts close and sat down on the step beside him. Hardly wide enough for both our ample behinds.

In no way did he acknowledge my presence. Never did.

The Mission in full life had been a place of rumor, gossip and small cruelties. My sitting with Bob didn't go unnoticed. Strangely, there were no loud whispers, no innuendo, no simpering.

Only that It was purposefully planned that once I should accidentally hear that Bob referred to me as 'the brick shithouse'. Hardly news to me, I was born one. Rather than anger I felt touched that I held a place of any kind in his life.

Together we had done much for May. His swing for her troubled spirit still hung lonely in emptiness before us dangling useless in the sunset.

That first time Bob continued his talking when I sat down, not a pause even to look at me. No surprise.

From then on whenever I looked and saw him there I went to join him. Bob I believe recounted again all the stories he had told May on the step.

They horrified me, they fascinated me, what I could understand of his talk, which was not enough, although soon I could understand much more.

A sunset time he reached over and took my hand, not my hand in truth but May's. We sat there, me the brick shithouse a black one too in dress and this fierce old bull of a negro, black like my habit---our hands together. Missing our May.

1928

Deja Vu

March 25. 1:23 pm. The Shanty

"Clarence John Bell! God damn it. How dare you. Enjoy the free charms of a young woman and then call her a . . . a Damn you I can't even say the fuckin word!"

"Well, you just thought it. How come you can . . . "

"Tais-toi. I am ashamed of you. It is one of the worst sins a man can commit. Attend moi?"

This time she gives him the pointed tip of her boot, a hard sharp strike to his crack of his behind. Now at last she feels him trembling.

Damnation, the young bull laughs at her.

"Hey, Mama May. Please don't beat me up. And you hush yourself. Don't want to wake up the others do we." He grins up at her beguilingly, so boyish and pleased with himself.

"Don't go getting worked up. I grew up here remember, not out west. There are things built into me from here. I don't like them, you taught us not to like them. But I can't change the way things are. I mean. OK, she is a most willing and cute young woman of black skin. How's that?"

"Tell me her name," persists May, unmollified. "You just met her tonight? Why the drive down to the workers quarters, Buddy? I watched the lights." Suddenly May visualizes that thin thread of car light beams bouncing down the lane toward the workers' quarters.

"I promised not to tell and I won't." Buddy stood up, a good six feet of manhood. "And she wont tell neither."

". . . *either*, Buddy."

"Who's going to correct me in the army? Biloxi's a long way to kick me in the butt."

"It's a speak easy by any name. Selling booze on the sly. What if you'd been arrested? Police raid these places. What kind of dress did she wear?"

"It was a red dress, and it made her look pretty."

“And that perfume I smell?”

“Yes ma'am she had that on too. She smelled like flowers in the rain.”

“How could any girl from here, from down there, have a dress like that? How could any girl from Sainte Elisabeth have the money to smell like flowers in the rain? For sure she can't be working here now, not enough money pays off this land, not for going all the way to Dothan for a good time. If so I would do that myself.”

“May, don't you think other guys have done her? I couldn't be sure if I'm the daddy. She's a speak easy girl. Smuggled booze and jazz players. Yes, I know her. She's from here, OK. Then she went over to Dothan. Where else would a good lookin' colored gal go to work? We just had some beers, some fun. Talk all you want, May. I'm not looking back at her, ever, for whatever, never. She wanted it. They're used to taking whatever comes. It's just good times.”

May's anger begins to rise along with the image of Twyla Grant's oldest child. She saw Laverna last about a year ago. A girl of 15 looking like 20, tall and striking, her mama in miniature, much softer in youth, more refined in face, a winsome girl. Then Laverna Grant dropped off of the plantation landscape without a remark, and one didn't ask why when that happened. Laverna Grant? Mother of All, pleads May. This is pure shit.

1928

Sad Time

March 25. 1:30 am. Bartlesville

Clock says day's done with and over. My bad birthday. My last birthday? Only a crazy gambler would bet on death.

If I told aloud the happenings this day marks no one would believe me. Guess they got small lives and smaller minds.

All alone tonight. Housekeeper has the night off. Once Quincy built his Mansion in Bartlesville he moved there. Put his pretty girl in it. They made two girls that I never see--twins, not identical--guess it runs in the family. The one is named May, of course. The other, Valla.

I can't stop thinking tonight of the past, the good and the bad in me is too engrossing to leave behind. Into the grave is to a future of nothing I can imagine. All I got is the past to ponder, right? So ponder on.

One of many times I got terrifically drunk on April Fool's twas a night in a Wichita saloon. There I actually told my story to some fella I knew. Not a real confession because I left out parts nobody but me should know.

My pal was drunk, just not as drunk as me. A friend? Maybe not so close. For some reason I don't make friends. But through the booze I clearly recall and can't forget that when I told him my story, about leaving May with the nuns along with some dollars, the son of a bitch stood up in disgust. He tossed down a wad of greenbacks on the table.

“Skinner, that'll cover the drinks. You are one sorry mistake for a man. Tell me you had \$200 in your saddle bags and you sell your baby for one hundred bucks. You're the lowest cheap skate I ever did hear of.”

Seemed everyone in Wichita turned to stare when he walked out on me. Still can't believe how cruel people can be about things they can't understand. He just up and left me to mope alone in my drink.

A sale? No way, I'd rather cut off a nut than sell my baby girl. For care it was, damn it, not to sell. Only how to explain it to the world? The confusion haunts me today more than the corrupting tissues of my cancer.

1928

Soeur Blanche

This is self indulgent. Nonsense. Dwell, Arlette, on something else. I shall think instead of the blustery day in Atoka when May graduated from the Academy.

Ephraim was ill and could not attend. Claire said she would sob throughout and stayed at the Mission, probably sobbing there anyway, the silly.

Bob drove me over in the wagon. I pretended I did not want to be dusty from the walk. In truth I wanted more dignity in honor of May. For the same reason I wore my silver crucifix and high white cornet. Anything I could do so she'd not be ashamed of me. How proud I was to be there as ambassador for her from our Mission.

Knowing Bob would not be welcome I planned this also for him. To have him hitch up the wagon, very rarely done then, so he could be there too. I took a seat up front as we arrived early. Bob stayed where these Whites wanted him, back down by the road standing tall on the wagon seat to see.

It became evident that I was the center of much attention that afternoon. Perhaps it had been a decade since I'd been to town. I cast an indifferent eye on the idiots.

After the ceremony something remarkable happened. I was trying secretively to wipe away my own weak tears when May appeared before me. She took me in her arms, as I had once taken her, hugged me tight and kissed me--a real kiss--on the cheek. The only spontaneous kiss she ever gave me.

Then she scampered off holding her new straw hat to her head just like a little girl, running to the wagon to give Bob a hug and a kiss too.

Here I lie in silence, in a long room of old age and pain. What a stupid waste of time. I don't even have anything in my hands.

But I have May in memories.

In the photo she is so lovely. She is a young lady of such glowing freshness.

All who come by ask about her. They inquire if she is an actress. I say yes.

1928
Mother And Son
Sainte Elisabeth
March 26. 1:38 am

“If her time should come, son, has your future been worth five minutes in the back seat of Harry’s car? You’ve been young rabbits and the price for that is bunnies.”

Suddenly he catches what May implies. He faces her in genuine shock.

“Are you suggesting that if this girl is knocked up I gotta marry her? That if there’s a kid I’m papa? No way. You know that doesn’t happen here. They lynch for less.”

May clutches him by the hair, no more stroking. Old violence takes her in a bitter cold. All comes back at her. Voiced by seagulls swiftly darting for her.

Suddenly in a rage she pursues him with an earnestness he has never seen in her. Her eyes turn up onto him, blazing violets. Totally disconcerting the young man. Her accent is strong in agitation.

“It’s the greatest wrong to just walk away buttoning your fly. Whose lives are more precious than others? Damn it to hell, son. I’ve taught you better.”

“I ain’t your son, May. You know, some say you’re a yankee oddball with your nose in the air. Some people here say you put on airs that ain’t yours to show.”

“*Are not.*”

“You dress like an old lady. The way you move so slow like always on show, folks here think you’re into voodoo. Your talk, how mad you get. They all think you’re crazy. I do too.”

He stood close, menacing in his tipsy anger, trying to hurt her. May catches the full male animosity splintering on her from raw wood siding. Depot siding. Once again she lies dropped. Someone broke May Skinner that Sunday morning in Atoka.

Her Indian is disappearing in flight. He goes up into the cold barren sky over that inimical prairie.

“You are not a man. It takes a lot more than fucking to be one. You are still a thoughtless, selfish little boy,” Storms May, snapping her fingers in his face.

Her rage rips free, tainted by a despairing fear. “Damnation to hell. Wake up you, you fuckin’ asshole.”

“Bitch.” An ugly whisper spit in rage at her from between his lovely lips.

1928
Midnight. Valla
Hollywood Make Believe Time

Her bathroom is not much smaller than the cabin she grew up in. Through the candlelight her mother stoops to cook over the fireplace, too tired to utter a word.

Valla sinks another inch into the steaming water of her marble bath. Vapor steam rising from the puffy pink landscape of bath oil hiding her nakedness, the still surface of water holding around her loveliness.

It blurs the lights of the candles she lit. Twelve stuck at crooked angles in candle holders of differing heights. Number for the months of the year and not for the Apostles she had any expectations of ever seeing.

Placed around her bath, they gave a dim lurid glow to the Italian tiles. house. In the distance she has Bessie Smith singing on the victrola.

*Baby won't you please come home, I mean Baby won't you please come home
Baby won't you please come home Cause your mama's all alone . . .*

No other lighting in the bungalow. Paulette already home cuddled up with her giant ma regaling her with tales of beauty and riches gone mad.

Valla feels the tug on her nipple. She cradles her arms. Yes the weight lies there too, a breathing warmth. Sleepiness already creeps into her head.

“You are the month of May,” Valla addresses the tallest of the candles, the fifth, focusing on its sturdy flame licking at the surrounding gloom. “Sure sorry you got me, kid. I had some bad mojo for sure.”

Taking Tony's shaving razor with its heavy gold handle, she gave it to him for Christmas a few years back, she clenches each hand in turn into a fist, locates the main vein and slices. Neatly as a tomato comes to mind.

Lowering razor and hands into the soap suds. Sharp grimace and low bleat of a slaughtered lamb. In amazement she watches the billowing red of herself spreading out through the puff balls of soap bubbles. Pink cotton candy getting redder by the second.

In silence Valla waits in guttering candle light hoping they will soon fade from sight or gutter out. Alone, the fifth one lingers on to the very last. “Sturdy little shit.”

Beside the empty bottle of barbiturates and the drained glass that once held her last gin, three somewhat soggy notes lay on the tiles of the sink counter below the wide expanse of steamed over mirror.

One for Paulette, “Alright, you win, Voodoo queen. Get me out of the bath before I’m too ugly for an open casket.”

One for Tony that reads, “Asshole.”

One for “Whomever.” It reads:

If ever a young woman shows up named May she’s my kid. If someone wants to look for her try finding a Quincy Coffee Skinner, maybe in Oklahoma some place, he’s her brother but not my kid. Go figure. May gets everything I have, jewelry and clothes, including what’s in my bank account. Give Paulette, the maid, \$100, my Jolsen record and the Victrola. She also gets the dingy table service bell.

Her lids close over the last twinkle that men could not forget. Iced violets, long lashes, even more remarkable with makeup and mascara melted by the steam and mapping her chest in black creeks.

“Mama Marie wait for me. I'm coming.”

One slim arm rises limply from the bath suds, bubbles clinging to it like ocean foam mixed with a spreading spume, Aphrodite arising. With a finger from the other hand she makes the effort, faint as she feels.

Three Xs in her blood mark the sheen of bathroom tiles in candlelight.

"See there, Marie, I did get to give them to you, one for John . . . one each for my baby twins.

“May Mary I wish you heard me. I've called to you so many many times. You don't answer but I know you're there. True to tell, and now maybe you'll listen, I knew no one was looking for me all those years ago. So that's not why I stayed low, hiding away and playing the 'extra' in life. No honey, I did it because I was so frightened I'd find you, or that you'd find me.

“I hid from you. With all my heart I think you know why but if not then Mama Marie will be sending the news to you in a sweet dream.”

No more Bessie Smith. Midnight bells toll muffled somewhere in the distance. All more distant. Tolling coming up from the Catholic church down the canyon road. Her canyon tunneling forward into whatever. They do not toll for midnight, then for whom?

A slow motion shot of her arm rising from the bath foam, covered in suds. Darkened set of a room clammy with steam, of an actress's fingers, hers? Fingers touching Mama Marie's three Xs.

“Please let her live . . . have love . . . be free of hate.”

Blood streaking over the Italian marble. Rivulets of essence meandering through steam on white marble. Priceless pigment staining this exquisite marble.

Beautiful red head lolling back to rest on marble. “Movin' on, babe, same day I moved on from you. Do not ever forgive me.

“Whatever . . .”

1928

John Skinner

Bartlesville

But I do also see that coin flipping in the air, up over a photograph of some pope. Me, Quincy, even the nuns, all standing behind me. But I'm sure watching it fly up and up, rolling over and over in the air.

The one from my vest pocket. Kept there for safety with my watch. It's the very same precious 1861 US quarter that pa flipped so long ago that Sunday morning to decide if we'd stay home safe or risk gong to church.

Coin's here in the palm of my hand. I'd say it's quite worn now. Etching rubbed so that from a distance it always looked like a full moon face to me, and up close not a bad image of Valla herself. Maybe of May too now that's grown.

Colored men who brought pa back to us had his clothes. I took the courage to sneak it out of a pocket.

Who was the loser of that toss? May I guess. I have no way of knowing if those nuns were kind or cruel. I never believed that letter about her being adopted. Pure shit. They lied to keep her. Lying to keep something says loud it's got value. That much I know.

So what kind of woman did she grow into? If she's cruel to men that's good. Does she live in plenty or want, is she alive now or dead. Whore or teacher? I am so fucking curious, so wanting to know her.

Mother and daughter they both make pay and pay again.

Image of May in her class photo is branded into my skin. Feels like live coals there. The skin's peeled back raw. Won't heal.

No suffering, no amount of loneliness or pain is enough. I played a wicked gambler's game on the head of my baby girl.

I see myself then, younger, still turning women's heads. I that black night I knew full well those horny nuns were grubbing me up alive with their eyes. I'd cast my spell of charm and manhood on them, musk, sweat and tight jeans.

There I stood peering at the quarter under the edge of one hand where I'd caught it on the back of the other. Heads I would get May.

Heads it came. Valla 's face rested tails in my palm.

But no. I quickly turned it over.

Hardly cheating since only me was in the game, or knew how the toss had come up. My moon madness.

I called it 'Tails' in my deep man's voice and turned them a mournful face.

1928

Shack Bully's

March 26. 1:40 am

For a moment May fights the force welling inside her to call her Buddy back, go after him, put her arms around him and hug him with all her might. Why must she lose her temper?

Something was wrong with her, stopping her. Something she couldn't grasp with her intelligence and education. It didn't come clear, not in French, not in English, not in Bobish. The moment passes. Foulness of burning boll weevils in her mouth. Another minute May turns off the lamp.

In the moonlight she hears lonesome dog. He's moving about snuffling in her rose bushes, probably a possum too close to the house. Or is king bull right now in

the crawl space below her feet coiling about a victim? Does she make out the image of Twyla Grant hovering in her unearthly steam, machete in hand?

On the sudden May is seeing through the dark thick prehensile stubs crafting with nimble patience. Following an old skill they carve upon a fragment of mammoth's tusk. They bow over their made image -- evoked exaggeration --of their mate and mother. . .

Closing the front door on those outside votaries, the night sounds, swamp sounds, all are dimmed. Inside, through thin partitions she hears Buddy angrily removing his clothes--clothing that she would need to wash first thing in the morning, scrub them hard to get out that odious perfume, semen stains too in his underwear. To her, self pity is revolting.

"Nonsense, most mothers are worthless." The subject haunts her thought. "They desert. They don't love. They are stupid and selfish. They beat. They ignore. They pervert. They even kill their young. Perhaps worse we won't let go of them, keep them on the tit, as GB says. We pull them along through life like pets."

With that pleasantness, sleepy, depressed May turns at last knowing her way in the partial darkness, too weary to fret more about what she couldn't understand or change.

May moves like those in darkness do, hands out to feel.

"Human nature really pisses me off."

Down the hall and into the bedroom, she searches out her place of safety, curling up beside her man. Her one spot of something like comfort and peace.

"Not my son?"

May's Dream

26 March. Monday. 1:50 am

Holy Sainte Mother Mary dreams along with May. Her fake lashes spread in a zombie stare, a Jewish aristocrat with aryan features and complexion, companion of childhood and first miseries. This apparition leads the way for May's dream.

Down in the quarters, May arrives invisible. Swamp mist creeps, surrounding the hamlet's close built shacks. Smoke-thickening the darkness it encircles like a wall blocking out all else.

Except May. On the path between the shacks the mist is no more than a tracing smearing the edges of reality. Tendrils of it swirl about the raised outlines of the hovels, hiss out from underneath them. Images of King Bull snake twining and untwining while slithering toward his prey.

Through the thin wall of another, May watches a couple mating. At another she hears a child urinating into a bucket. Beyond another an old woman cries. Further on a baby cries.

May hears the rustle of the mother moving to its call. No mother for the old woman, although May somehow knows she bears one close in mind in this time of pain and sorrow.

One of the dogs comes out of the mist from under a shanty. Barks at something, unseen enemy of man, or so it smells.

“Shut up!” A man's commanding voice echoes out as if to silence the world. The cur slinks back into its humble place in the mist of time.

In the first of the facing cabins, she finds the Grants. They sleep. Laverna's arrival for a surprise visit making them glad, yet too tired to show so.

This lovely young woman sleeps in her negligee, the only negligee on Sainte Elisabeth. Laverna's make up smeared like blood on her mouth by the thin sheet she keeps pulled up to her ears, seeking more warmth since becoming accustomed to comfort. Pretty indeed with a face untouched by concern. She sleeps with the two youngest.

Ulie, moved to accommodate his oldest sister, is tucked up tight, 4 children now to that bed. Earlier he'd been restless until a hand under the thin blanket came caressing. Soothing. At last he fell quiet to the comfort of touch.

Every fact of living is made plain here. Nothing can be hidden.

Twyla and US have their bed, the newest baby between them. They made love earlier. Sweat, sweet semen, the perfume of their bodies overrules that brought in by Laverna. They mate almost every night, mating a solitary pleasure for them both.

Twyla turns as May watches. Her great body a female landscape hidden by the sheet. Ample and fertile. Suddenly her eyes open wide. Piercing through the walls.

Eyes trained on May. No reaction, not a movement in her face or body, no change in the emotion or meaning of those eyes.

Twyla simply stares, at May. Then eyes close and she sleeps again. Rolling toward US her right hand comes free of the sheet. The machete is there. Clutched tight.

Other creatures of earth and air sleep in this night at Sainte Elisabeth. Others hunt for food, fight for their lives, losing or escaping. Yet other things hide in the shadows and wait. May looks at them all sometimes in comradeship and sympathy, sometimes with curiosity, not infrequently with fear and loathing.

The strangest creature of the dark -- in the wiregrass, in the pine forest, in the swamp, in the shacks, shanties, farm houses, great houses -- is mankind. Man is big and smart, at least the adults. The smaller ones need care and protection. All need something, love, money, healing, revenge.

Only a few miles away from this chaos of complexity the ocean laps at land, land and ocean mating in an insentient union. The moon there unseen by any man is a completely different kind of light from it is when he is present. Mankind alters whatever it experiences. May's dream here tells her mankind cannot imagine what it has not experienced.

Invisible she visits this earth wide event, ocean to land, back and forth, in and out. Floating into it without body. Moon. Night. Waves washing the land clean.

She understands truth is written in the sand for her to read. It eludes her when a wave wipes it away. Then she could wait on forever, for the next answer in the sand and another wave to obliterate it before she can understand.

The Hour of the Wolf as some call it comes. Comes sniffing for coincidence, the best meat on the human bone.

Back at the shanty it circles about Sainte Elisabeth in last rites of breath, cries of the new born, screams of grief, bleats of pleasure. And all the while more and more semen spills into millions of wombs.

In her dream May observes closely. In this night-- tonight --hundreds of millions are lost without the Mother's bearings. No sense of time in their passages of split seconds, in their past, in what will come. They are blessed by ignorance, simply living as best they can. May sees.

But the substance of human time, powers of myth making, 80,000 years of adoration and need abounds. Forms are drawn forth everywhere to amplify Her being and power. Even from marble mountains in far off Italy.

Yemaya. Our Lady of Mojo. Mother of Time. The Swamp Orchid. Hundreds of names could be used for her. May Elizabeth Bell.

May dreams an hallucinatory clarity. It ends like a movie with a final camera shot. Close up. The lighting effect electrifies a black lost corner of the Lytle Bay Swamp.

At center screen, out of the black, a sudden shell burst of blinding Nova light. This softens to sight into a glimmering shape of the white orchid of the swamp. Damp perfection rising from the frightening unknown of the swamp water.

For the closing second of her dream it shines into May's being filling her with a miraculous purity.

"Ma Dame." May hears herself whispering, awake or asleep she is uncertain. "Guard us. Bless us. Help me . . ." A prayer incongruous to her, useless she knows, yet still comforting. In sleep she smiles her smile of self mockery.

Among the cabins no lights shine. Only a dim glow down toward the swamp tells where inside a cabin four young men lounge on the bare earth. They play craps in tattered overalls. No shirts. Their skins shine, black with the pink glow of youth and health, ineffably beautiful in the dreary glow of the kerosene lamp.

They hold their dice in belligerent fists. Their few dollars lie on the floor in sight. They pose tough, high on gambling, moonshine, reefer.

These young fellows she watches entranced. They make their meager bets. They try different ways to placate the invisible lord random.

Kissing the dice before rolling, blowing on them, rattling them beside an ear, even tucking them down for a moment between their balls. In silence they give up their own prayers to whatever for divine intervention.

The Devil's bones roll. The dice fall helter skelter. They roll harem scarum. They tumble across the beaten earth. They slow to a halt. Every time, fortune is once again blind.

The odds are even on all. Yet hope, another kind of drug, each time like a tide rolls back into their shining stoned eyes. Heads or tails. Tails or heads.

Cheating is the only winner.

May sees but is clueless. Turning she puts her arm over GB and fades.

Hitting Bottom in the Trunk of Secrets Shanty

There are more papers in her trunk of secrets, that followed her from the Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary. They lie in the dark of the trunk, in the dark of the front room, in the dark of the night, places that are the same as her mind.

Uncle Skinner's fateful telegram reads comical in the significance its barren language holds for her:

GENEVA ALABAMA Sister confirms May daughter of John Skinner STOP Come home STOP Wiring money STOP Uncle Skinner STOP

Each time May reads this she must suppress her mirth at all the STOPS -- warnings? STOP This? STOP them? STOP me.

At the moment May has in hand the old wallet given to her by Soeur St. Aix one terrible afternoon long ago. On the eve of departure. It she holds cautiously. Her father's?

The grim nun said it contained the last of the money left in exchange for her, her inheritance. Taking out the one \$10 dollar bill the wallet has held throughout the years May stands weighing it in her palm. Half curled, a fragile shaping of green-- a leaf, some wing, one very strange butterfly.

Rarely does she hold it. Such a difficult relic of her fragmented story. Too strange for May to assimilate. Her dread of money surfaces the few times she gingerly takes it in hand.

May wonders if this bill bears any remaining value. To anyone. To her? Or otherwise if it might be unique and a collector somewhere would give her a small fortune in exchange? Or, that it embodied the mystery of being herself. Anyway she could not seriously contemplate letting it go. This \$10 bill gives her a remnant of a past somehow reaching far back, a token too of her having been once for sale.

"My worth dwindles to this. Bon, ca suffit. damn parents."

Also in this trunk of secrets, like a Permian virus lurking, is the one and only letter from Soeur Blanche. Written in a large French scrawl. It she read once. Perversely kept. Never touched again:

"Cher May, I hope you and family are well. I write with bad news. Black Bob is dead. Soeur Sainte Aix sent him to Atoka for her private mail. There he also visited

the saloon. Unfortunately for us all he died in a fight there. He had gone to a saloon where white people go, people who liked him. Still, someone knifed him.

The people say a Choctaw did it. They say he was a man with no ears. How strange, can this be true? What an odd place we live in. I do not know more details.

Black Bob is buried here. I had yellow daisies planted over him. As you know we were fond of him. He was a good man. We pray for his soul. Many Choctaws came to the funeral. One was the woman Bob lived with, Ida. She said she thinks he was more than 80 years old. I find that can't be possible.

Ida brought his Civil War army jacket to put beside him in the coffin. I saw pieces of the cloth had been cut away. Some buttons were missing. Very curious although I think I guess what the material was used for.

Over the grave she said that you were his daughter. No other news. I think of you. Does that surprise you? I send my blessing, Soeur Blanche."

First time May read this letter she walked out of the old Bell house where they were living then. She went mind misted over down into the cotton field, walking an entire row not seeing a single bud of cotton, not one boll weevil.

Alone, far away from the house and the family, where the pines and Wiregrass world began she simply turned up her head, screaming in fury at the limp empty sky. Baring her teeth. Fists clenched so hard blood ran from where the nails stabbed her palms.

Scream upon scream of howling rage. Finger nails raking the red earth until they too were red with earth and blood. Until she fell exhausted her face contorting in the dirt. GB and one of the workers eventually came running to find her. What they found made them suppose a snake had bitten her from the way she writhed and cursed. Later they would say it looked like she had been trying to bury herself alive.

But when they laid hands to her she straightened immediately, stood, letter in hand. Her hair pulled loose hung around her in a golden rain.

May brushed earth away from her dress. The letter she used to wave them away. "Leave me alone. Someone died. That's all."

1928

Mother And Son

March 26. Monday. 2:11 am

Sainte Elisabeth

"Maman? Tu est la?" Mancil stands hesitantly in the dark at her bedside, urgently whispering to her in French. "Maman, you hear me?" A gentle yet insistent nudging at her hip. "C'est moi."

"I know who you are, Mancil. Yes I am here where else? Go back to bed. I am too tired for your remorse, save your guilt for tomorrow." Without taking note they naturally continue in French.

May's anger simmers drowsily in her half awareness. Her body feels too heavy to move. She begs any spirit listening for the respite of rest.

"I got a nose bleed bad, maman. Hubert done it, did it I mean --he did it but we were pillow fighting so I don't think it counts as naughty." He touches small hand to her shoulder.

"I have a nose bleed, maman . . ." Groggily May figures it to be about 1:30 in the morning. She must be in the kitchen by 6 to start the stove with left over kindling she had at hand.

Why was she struggling awake at this time when tomorrow morning she'd need to be up to start feeding them again?

Stifling a groan of self pity she rises from her place in bed to face the humid night chill. Without thinking, she pulls the covers after herself to cover GB's back. To Mancil it is as if mother suddenly opened up into a large flower giving her protective shape to the scary blackness surrounding him.

"Tais-toi. I'm here as always. Be quiet or you'll wake the others. Go to the kitchen. I'm coming." The spoken sounds of her thoughts in French are rarely allowed out loud. She hears herself and feels it to be a secret slipping forth.

Speaking in irritation to a child or animal in French she knows how harsh the language can be, she heard it so daily at the Mission. Especially with children which the culture deals with strictly. It is a grating sound to her of a rip tide of irritation running below a lovely placid sea.

Once again she wraps her worn robe tight. She moves him not too gently by prodding his small shoulder forward with the point of a forefinger. They go cautiously like the lost, although the boy at least is accustomed to the gloom. His white night shirt proceeds a clear form for her to push forward, and also to follow.

Thud-thud thud.

"What's that maman? Who's on the roof? I'm scared."

"Don't be silly, son. When the wind comes up and it rains pecans on us." Despite her calm reassurance the boy grabs her hand.

"This noise is different, don't you hear?"

First May stops him by the sink in the kitchen. Moonlight from the window ripples grotesquely in the bottle glass. "Stay still here, young man, not a sound. Don't be alarmed. I'll fetch the lamp."

It takes her a moment to get a hand on the lamp in the front room, still warm from earlier. She scratches a kitchen match, lights it, glad there is enough oil left for the light.

She hears herself mumbling sleepily, still too numb in the head to be sure of what she is doing. The lamp, Missouri's quilt and May together, they progress back to Mancil. Thud-thud-thud.

"Damnation to hell, you have blood on the night shirt. Quick, take it off." May scoops up the little boy's arms in this precious white night shirt--in turn worn by Buddy, Joseph Henry, Maurice and Hubert. After Mancil gets his next growth it will

go to James Lamar. She pulls it over his head and piles it by the sink to add to her Monday scrub.

“Tiens. I've fetched you one of Aunt Missouri's quilts. But you won't touch it till I make sure the bleeding's stopped.”

“I'm cold, Maman.”

“Bear with me a moment, Mancil.” Turning to the pump she draws enough cool water to wet a rag, one of GB's worn out socks, and bunches it clinically against Mancil's nose. This is not an hour for tenderness.

“Ouch.” complains Mancil.

“Shhhh. Go on, try to keep your head up.”

“It's cold.” Mancil remonstrates. “And I'm cold too and I don't like pecan rain.”

“Samuel Mancil Bell! Good. It's a lesson. All lessons are cold and disliked.” Everything passing between them in her Mission tongue, unthinking. Next she again turns away from him to attack the blood stains on the night shirt. Wetting a small hand towel May scrubs away at the stains.

Mancil stands shivering behind her, his small nakedness accentuating his fragility. One glance back and May is aghast. She quickly wraps the quilt about him. Applies the cool rag herself to his nostril. Shame struggles over irritation.

“Hey there, you do look like a king in his royal robes. Here your majesty, a cloth of moonlight silk to bind your battle wound. Doth the Good King Dagobert wear his underwear inside out?”

A reference to the Bon Roi gained a tense smile from Mancil. “I don't have my underwear on, Maman.”

Holding the wet cloth to his face her mood changes again to irritation. A too-long day of bad tricks, senseless acts and ill temper overwhelms her.

“You're still bleeding. Damn it, Mancil, hold your head back. Press this cloth up against your nostril. Keep it there. I am not going to hold it for you all night. The bleeding will stop soon if you do as I say. Head back I said.

“All right now. Be very still. Get blood on this quilt and I'll skin you alive.” A sense of hopelessness invades the ugly excuse for a kitchen. Her special day over and gone. What now to look forward to but work, endless work that seemed to attain nothing but more work.

“Damnation. I have done nothing but clean, dress, feed you all day. Then you need me in the middle of the night. Why must boys battle so hard? Don't you think there is enough battling in the world? If you're hurt it serves you right.

“Look at me when I talk to you. No don't. Keep your head back. What in hell am I doing? Always doing doing doing for you boys.”

Mancil droops, leans back against her, she refuses him angrily bunching the wet cloth again to his face.

“Fuckin' damn children. I never had anything that you have. Yet you never consider thanking me. You just drain me empty. And when I'm old and empty you'll leave and forget me.”

Lunging, he wraps thin arms about her and breaks into wracking sobs. “I'm so sorry I was bad, Maman. Don't you love me anymore?”

1916

The Mission. 4:10 am. February 26

An awakening came for her in the yet gloom time of the Mission, before the first coming of dawn, a day already laden in snow on the prairie. Morning so early no one stirred in the Mission. May awakened in confusion, brought to by a cry from between her arms. From Samuel? A cry? C'est ne pas possible.

At first she truly could not believe it came from him. From her happy plump son. They were together cuddling as usual in the buffalo robe, on her old small pallet by the Franklin stove. The only bed she remembered sleeping on in her life.

An isolated bed for a little girl to sleep in alone, her aloneness all the more severe and therefore amazing that it went unseen by the nuns. Such bitter loneliness now forgotten.

She and Samuel were warm together in the shrouded front room. One guttering candle gave them a flickering arboreal glow.

All her life she had only known here, these rooms and especially this room. The Holy Mother's image on the facing wall to her small bed for companionship. The friendly face giving soul to the room.

Between these images, herself in the flesh and The Mother on lithographic paper, stood the huge fireplace. Life, Fire and The Mother? More magic?

The scene had seemed just old to May, never odd or strange, only ancient. In morning light a Renaissance scene to her. In afternoon, it turned Gothic. In the evenings when studying, she felt as if illuminating something in a monk's cell.

Another cry. May held Samuel closer to her breast, a swelling of fear constricting them together. Caught into the coils of our communal demon.

1928

**Rocking. 26 March. 2:25 am
Sainte Elisabeth**

The Bell family rocker so old and revered went at auction to others, those strangers she detested almost as much as the people she knew. They would never know its true value.

Instead, for rocking the younger boys, May uses one of Aunt Missouri's straight back chairs. Too heavy to move in rhythm to sooth a mewling child. She rocks with Mancil as if she were rocking herself. Carrying their weight with indifference the chair is too solid to even creak.

She rocks in cadenced ticks of a cerebral metronome. Each motion softly pains the small of her back. No more than another among all the small pinches and pricks that mark a trail across the map of her day.

Already she sang him some vapid hymn twice. So bored was she with that, instead of Mancil it sucked her down. Left her groggy and blinking.

No, it did not work. He still stares up at her, sleepy but alert. May can't help but give her smile at her self image of the moment, a mother who can't sing rocking in a chair that can't rock with a child who won't sleep.

Damn you May Doll. Say you hear drums? You talk nonsense. Tomorrow I'm giving you to Jimmy Lamb. From now on you're Lamb Doll.

Besides Dagobert and 'frere Jacques, dormez vous', which are hardly calming, she can't think of other music to sing.

Damnation. Why didn't those worthless nuns teach me some nice bed time songs? For that matter why didn't they ever sing me one single note except for their dreadful latin, *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*. The turkey buzzards.

So now she sang Mancil nothing coherent. Merely humming to him for a time, to no avail, in a low tone deaf drone.

"Anyone at home?" she whispered.

"Oui, maman, c'est moi."

Rocking continues, more roughly. The metronome in her head is more difficult to follow.

This little one sprawls arms and legs akimbo across her lap, the quilt lolls open revealing his naked loveliness. May holds him as if he were the god child one among the thousands in Italian art.

It is an American replica of Michelangelo's Pieta. May the massive, enveloping mother mourning the son stretched smaller across her lap an offering to the world, broken and lifeless, though lovely too in death. She the marble, he the decaying flesh.

"Where the hell did I get this shit from." Whimpers May.

1916

26 February. 4:23 pm

Mission of the Holy Sainte Mary

Jumping up with Sam Bob she ran for the cell door of St. Ephraim.

"Sister Ephie, Ephie, it's May. I think Samuel is sick!

Without a moment's pause St. Ephraim came awake and to the door. Shrouded in her sleeping dress, her gray hair disheveled.

"Come in quickly, child, and lower your voice. Remember this is the period of silence. The Sisters sleep.

“Yes, he has a fever, certainly. I will hold him for you. Take this towel, fill it with cool water from the pump. We must bath him in cool water to break the fever. Then rouse Soeur Blanche.”

May scampered silently as she could through the darkened halls and rooms of the Mission to fetch back the towel drenched in pump water, more than cool at this time of year. Then she rapped and begged at Soeur Blanche’s door to come quickly and help them.

May took Samuel back into the Mission front room His one and only small world. Soon enough, Soeur Blanche's massive hulk arrived bossing them out of the way. To frown heavily and give out orders.

I remember the sense of relief she brought in with her. But also the insupportable heaviness she carried like an unkindness of ravens on her shoulders. Herself presaging the unbearable.

1928

Lullaby

March 26. 2:28 am

Sainte Elisabeth

May moves from the waist in choppy forward and backward motions, as if stabbing the room with her upper body. A commedia dell’arte of rocking.

Sometimes she recites two words of some song going forward, then returns to start again. Sometimes she changes effortlessly from one song to another. Other times she hums, then abruptly changes to something else entirely.

Finished with the a snatch she can remember she returns to its beginning and starts afresh. May isn’t aware of what she does. She’s not listening to herself.

The lyrics float in a cloud. Melodies come from the bottom of the Choctawhatchee.

1928 March 26. 2:30 am

Mancil snuggles closer between her breasts. She pulls the loosened quilt tight to cover him again. Eyes still closed, May intuits, blindly, without a thought of how she knew, that her son begins nodding off from drowsiness towards sleep. How many countless times has she held a sleepy child?

A moment of calm. A stillness that bonds. To May if there is a soul inside her this is it. To remember forever, or at least as long as her forever would be, she closes her eyes purposefully blinding herself to bad thoughts, anger and fear.

The lines come alive from a schoolroom in springtime, in Atoka, Oklahoma. She is standing to recite them. Some of the girls giggle nervously. Miss Engle is leaning back against her desk in silent approbation. Swinging her ruler like a baton.

1916. The Mission

For three days May sat in the front room of the Mission with Samuel bundled up in her arms.

Everything she did for him--bathing him several times each day with cool water, changing him into ever warmer clothing, trying to get him to take her milk, singing to him, talking away about books and poems--those weak attacks on his fever where blows of hammer-to-chisel inside her, creation in progress out of the chilled core of marble.

May rocks against the insentient block of Aunt Missouri's dining chair. She rocks from the waist in choppy forward and backward motions, as if stabbing the room with her upper body.

But no. These words did not come from that schoolroom, rather from somewhere else, an occasion and time that eludes her. She could actually reach to take it in hand if Mancil weren't such a weight. Other times she intones something she finds lyrical, then abruptly realizes how bad it is. Finished with whatever she begins on a new 'whatever'.

Sometimes she hums the tune in her head. Sometimes she hums aloud, crooning a flat line like the horizon around the mission.

**1916. 12:25 am. February 29
Mission Of The Holy Sainte Mary**

On the morning of the fourth day I watch as Samuel's eyes film. His face shrinks into that of an old man's. He is blue. He looks very wise to me. His body had not stirred in the past hour. He seems too weak to move. Time passes by. I feel the passing. Then it arrived, Death in a total eclipse. I saw it for the ultimate reality it is.

Samuel sighs out his last breath. It goes invisible. May in a panic thinks she must catch it, in a jar, in her hand, swallow it back into herself. His eyes empty.

I sit still, holding him in my arms uncertain of what to do with this heavy piece of furniture, a trunk with nothing inside. This is not my Samuel. Desolation drops on me, stupefying and bringing in the age old human ache I must live with until I too am a piece of furniture. 'Grief,' one short word. I rage against it. It wont go away. I'll never get back what is gone.

All the nuns gather immediately, St. Ephraim and Claire weeping softly. St. Aix stands alone at the back of the room. Soeur Blanche steps forward. She touched Samuel with her big hands.

"His soul has left us, May. Be strong for his memory, and for yourself." Blanche bends, a stone idol moving. She kisses my Samuel, closes his eyes.

His soul gone? Yes, I felt it leave. Uncanny as when a relentless wind of a sudden stops, leaving a stillness that sends shivers of apprehension.

Soeur St. Ephraim is taking the body. I hear her weeping going away with it, far away until out of hearing. For a while I sit with my arms in the accustomed position to hold my Samuel. His weight still against me, warm and moving.

When I let my arms go down it is like breaking them, a sharp quick cracking pain in each. Standing too made me feel my body coming apart flesh peeling from bones.

1916

The Lyric of Life

February 29. 10:45 am

I go trailing the empty buffalo robe behind me out into the garden, to sit on the swing in a great aloneness. The universe closes its eye. The aloneness becomes desperation to find something, a companion being, somewhere.

Soeur Marthe had said it was a very cold day. I feel no cold but wrap myself tightly inside the robe.

Then Samuel returns to me. It happens. Now we are together inside the warm fur. We sit on in the old swing. When I begin to swing I warn him to hold tight and feel his small hands clinging to my neck.

We swing for a long time. Up and back, to the stars and back to what I can't see or know, the dark side of the moon. As in my childhood the swinging takes us far far away where we can hide, different and together.

1928

Shanty On The Rise

Mancil's eyes lids are closed. Long lashes on his cheeks lie still. May is certain, without a thought of how she knew, that her Samuel Mancil nods off from drowsiness to the ancient ocean-deep wonder of a child's sleep. A hurting anxiety takes her. This is too much like the birth and death she has known.

At last it occurs to her to wonder what Mancil makes of this strange new singing his mother has created for him. If her Mancil still ponders anything at all.

Lowering her words to the verge of a whisper May keeps moving to the rhythm of its phrases. To her it's a bane for rage. Or is it for love? The same?

May bends over him until she feels his breath on her cheek.

1916

Into The Garden

March 1. 10:00 am

Bob flipped a coin to choose the site. Did he cheat? Probably. It finally came up for a spot near the swing and well. For me the best location of all.

He then dug the grave accordingly into frozen earth behind the Mission vegetable garden. The hole claimed a spot amid shriveled stalks of prairie grass. He dug it among the many generations of dead Mission cats, far from the crosses of the nuns from before I arrived. Such a pitifully small hole it was, not much more than for a jack rabbit.

I watched Bob make the doll bed-like coffin for Samuel. Mainly so coyotes or vermin couldn't dig up the little body before it could molder and gnaw it to nothing. I wouldn't have minded if he fed them.

The nuns sent urgently for a priest to come from Fort Smith, but none arrived. A repeat of the farce of when they wanted him baptized. It signified nothing for me. The nuns, all of them, stood in a circle around his grave. They sang the Latin litany, bowed and made the sign of the crucifix.

Atoka's doctor came. "It's cholera, May, struck the Choctaws hard, some whites too. I had so many I couldn't come sooner. Whatever I might have done would not have helped your son. The Indians say it came from one of their own who had left long ago and just returned. Strange name they give him, No Ears. He's OK, of course."

Later, Bob placed the wooden 't,' my own now and not funny magic at all. He burnt it with a hot poker. Clumsy letters, still warm to my touch, summed up my son: *Samuel Bob Skinner, August 1914 <> January 1916*

Bob placed my boy in among the prairie grass so brittle they broke where he moved in his work at the head of Samuel's grave.

I valued Bob's effort for Samuel but the cross seemed cruel. Merely another 't' marking another untold secret. I stood away from the tight knot of a very few mourners, my nuns, some Choctaws, huddled against a wintry sky, a prairie sky, gaunt and stark. Wind in their clothes agitated the figures into a dance.

That day ended with me on the back step indifferent to all who ask if I wasn't cold sitting there. Replacing Samuel I held May Doll in my arms. Bob stayed to sit beside me, his ancient face unbearably sad. He put his arm around me. Hardly the once and only time he'd comforted me, just the last. Where is your comfort now Bob? I need it every day.

"L'il Pet, I buried some of my own young'uns. Those that made it ain't much good. Well, maybe George, we'll see. But none a them carried my name. I'm true proud you done dat. Thank you, girl."

Only time I recall him ever using my real name in all the years, almost my entire lifetime. The Oklahoma sky would not put on its sunset show over the spot where my Samuel lay, my baby a small frozen carcass. In a far distance the horizon, a smudged line, made a weak frontier between a leaden landscape and a leaden sky. I was so afraid.

While sitting on my accustomed step, despite the old camaraderie, the mission, garden and land around seemed to me another universe from myself, a huge cold storage that I no longer inhabited. The 'May' such as I had been was gone.

I pretended Samuel was with me. I placed my palms together and thought of him alive in there, in the space of darkness between my palms. I still do so. My little secret that is the greatest of all. No pretense because in memory he is sound, laughter, his first baby talk, and too that cry of doom. In memory he is a series of

images from birth to his death. Sounds and images, sensations of him nursing at me just like my other babies, or like the feel of GB's head between my breasts.

"He died on a February 29th," remarked Sainte Aix when stopping before me to pay her respect. "That means you need recall this pain but only once every four years. I think that a blessing."

Bitch.

1928

Oh Moon of Alabama

March 26. 2:48 am

She'd finished the humming a while ago. Tired of it. Same for the faux rocking. Irritated by their silliness. "I'll never ever hum whatever again or do stupid rocking in this straight back chair." The angry musing rankled.

Very tired of a day that would not end May sags, empty, unsure of what to do. Nothing motivates her more than to sit on in a rapture and regard Mancil's face.

The dried trail of blood from her child's nose brings to mind her Choctaws' Trail of Tears, one of a million cruelties in human history. Taking the cool towel she had kept at hand May softly dabs the blood away into oblivion.

Time runs through her like sand. She is a big sand clock shaped well for the passing. The same sand she discovered at Apalachicola with GB, when entranced by what to her stretched into endless vista. The same as swamp quick sand.

Inside the shanty the family sleeps except this uncertain soul. Aromas and racket outside are an anarchy that only she and GB stood guard against. And he, May hears snoring.

She feels what a pitiful defense they put up and lacks all confidence. Twice she starts in alarm at what she takes for steps on the porch. Once she hears a boot step in her flowers beneath the windows. Are they being stomped to death?

Once a bad man's face comes close to stare at her in the nearest window, dimmed into a faded sketch. The Man Who Never Goes In? Yes. Of course. He'd come as she knew he would eventually.

At the same time May could swear that in the other front window a satanic cigar glints below the wadded shape of a cheap hat, above the outline of a bulbous gut. Now the buffooneries pop like soap bubbles before her.

One mosquito hovers above her head. Faint murmuring of angry flies reach her from the windows. She spies a dead unrecognizable blob of a bug on the floor boards in the nearest corner. Beside her a daddy long legs daintily stealths down the shanty wall. Lamplight casts it larger in shadow the very image of a famished hunter.

The creature comes for them, only their size saving them.

"The hell with all that. Anyway, I detest nature. We think it something good or bad so we can believe in God."

Concluded, this one's inner voice sinks away lower than the Wiregrass. A semblance around her of utter tranquility, in tone of the guttering light on the rough scene. Soft breathing of a comforted child. She continues to sit protecting Mancil inside the comforter without knowing why except to maintain them in a fragile safety zone. Long golden hair, violet eyes in ice.

Her secrets sweep May from thought to thought. Rising to her throat they become a burgeoning sentiment. Death be a waste of time, she declares.

May holds time alive in her arms. All her sons, and GB too if he would let her. The thought of holding GB naked across her lap brings forth the smile to her lips. Her short sharp laugh she feels might be a possibility for eternity. Laughing until the end of time.

“Samuel Mancil. Mancil Samuel. Clarence John, Joseph Henry, Maurice, Hubert, James Lamar.” She read the list in her mind. Visualized each one. One by one she touched them, on their hair, on the cheek, held their hand. Looked them in the eye. “Good enough. How could I want for more.”

With her free hand she grabs for the leather cord around her neck, pulls the leather pouch free. Its ancient purple touched for aid so many times that in lamp light it turns from an image of a fig to black amber. Power in it warms her hand against the night coolness. Its power runs in her veins and sinks deep into her bones. May clenches it fast.

A motion inside captures her attention. Not the chair this time, herself. Something virginal is moving in her depths. Alarmed by an alien sensation, in consternation May leans further forward protecting her Samuel Mancil from the unknown. She shivers to herself uneasily, embarrassment by what she knows not.

In a desolate arctic place the long frozen thaws. It comes, improbably. An apparition rises forth from the corner of her left eye. Tickling from eyelashes to her cheek, the droplet rolls in procession.

She closes down in defense. “Hold tight, May.”

The ice drop slips down her cheek, a sensation far more acute now that it slides freely in slow motion. An unknown property of herself has emerged, further perplexing her. Bringing more strangeness to her life. Sorrow and love intertwining, those competitors for the human heart.

First of its kind, falling from the marble face it is crystalline blue. Descent changes the tear. Delicately it pales to the shimmer of a distant nova.

This tear plops onto her child's forehead. Her living and dead child. One blessing drops from her cheek to his cheek in a infinitesimal splash.

1928

Ancient Plantation Sainte Elisabeth
March 26. 3:00 am

Late spring nighttime, gibbous moon has crept up high over the plantation Sainte Elisabeth. Tonight's moon promises uneasiness to the hunted and haunted. Sainte Elisabeth moves forward into the final quarter onward to the unknown of a full moon.

An anarchy of scents pervades the damp air. A vast horde of insects buzz. Thousands of bullfrogs boom. It is a raucous garden of renewal and death. The lonely chorale of the Cosmos.

The Wiregrass. Palpitating and primitive. Full of conflicting desire.

1928

Aunt Missouri's Chair

March 26. Monday. 3 am

May pretends a jungle foliage hides them, an impenetrable covert where she holds them together in a breathless silence. Age old stillness of the hunted. Still as hiding. Warm stone, warm as blood.

A weak quake stirs in the curves and carvings of wood beneath her.

Quick steps on the porch, up onto the porch. A sharp fracture of glass. Growl of an early hominid its elongated and hairy arms swinging. Something crosses her peripheral vision like a comet.

"This is for you, Skinner woman!"

1928

Up, Up and Away

March 26. 3 am

May sits on hugging Mancil. How tired she is. How much she wants to be rid of sad stories. Bad people. Of a sudden Mo's chair gives an inch.

"What in the name of plus perfect hell?" May articulates crisply in surprise. Her half smile plays.

It is a rich mahogany chair with arms. Old green leather on the seat and armrests fastened in place by a hundred deep sunk, round headed brass nails. There are Sphinx claws for feet. The back rises curving around a carved floral design. It reached to the top of May's head. The chair is more than a chair, it is a throne.

Again the chair stirs. It begins to quiver in a slow ascent. "Mon dieu," pronounces May in rapt wonder. "What have I done."

The chair raises her up, taking her and Mancil up, up. She looks down amazed at the peculiar view of the front room glowering in the light of fire.

"It was ugly, but not that ugly."

Then this sight is lost. Their ascent clears the ceiling. Bursting through the roof hot tin pearls in the night, it curls back for them to pass. "Better than a can opener," declares May.

She senses rather sees that Mancil is wide awake. "Hold me tight, my dear one. Don't be afraid. Here we go. Entend moi."

“Maman, what’s happening? You cried!” A small finger touches her face, wipes away the diamond tear. He’s looking up at her in deep wonder. “Don’t be sad, I’ll make it OK. I never seen you . . .”

“I have never seen . . . “

She takes him in flight the quilt flapping in glory. Above fiery shanty, GB and the boys, Dandy’s shed, above bull snake and lonesome dog, over cotton, cane and peanut fields. She rises over the workers’ burning cabins with a fond thought for Twyla and Ulie. Bayou Lytle swamp spreads away, a night ocean that alone is not in flames.

“At least it’s a free ride and for once we’ll have something unusual to talk about at breakfast.”

She holds her child close, wondering if this in fact were his dream, not hers. But it is not a child’s dream, such malevolence demands knowledge.

May susurrant. “Alright, Bob, I’m game. Let’s go visit the other side of the moon. Maybe we could hide there forever.” With her free hand May squeezes her mojo.

Universe above comes down closer and closer ever while their old chair climbs higher and higher in a blankness spangled with stars, toward a full moon risen. Stars seem near enough to touch. They multiply in the dizzying firmament.

Her worn slippers go slipping off into space. They fall like shooting stars. Her freed toes wiggle in praise. The chair creaks under the the weight of all the invisible freight she’s carrying with her.

“Damnation,” May exclaims on the sudden. hair flying wild around them, free and trailing in long flickering wings all the way back to the shanty. Eyes frost the heavens.

“Damn it all! I left May Doll behind. Is she ever going to be pissed off.

“Bob?”

“Li’l Pet?”

“I have your mojo.”

“That be good, child. For sure you needing it. Hold it close, tight as that young’un. Don’t you let ‘em stray.”

Nothing in her way, May rockets away. She soars across the Zodiac. She goes moon chasing. When reaching it she takes a left, turning the corner of the moon to where its safe.

1928

A Mighty Conflagration

March 26. 3 am

GB’s dog sniffs it and snorts apprehensively. Whines at the men moving their shadows through darkness. Barks once uncertainly at the ephemera.

First, May notices the sudden quivering glare in the glass of the two front windows. Light dancing in a solo performance, to a music she alone hears mute and mysterious as she is herself.

Crashing follows next, tremendous volleys to her. Windows dissolve in their frames. Glass missiles into the room slow motion, flying in random trajectories. Shards, tiny spears, baby arrows prick her face. “Like Saint Stephen,” announces May.

She covers Mancil with her body. Then quickly changes her mind and sets him on the floor wrapped in the quilt. May gives him her ‘I love you more than my life’ kiss.

“Run get father!” The little boy needs no more, he ‘s gone in a small bird flapping of quilt. The quilt is soon left behind so to her he becomes a blanched spirit blowing away in the wind. A force of nature.

Tender shoots of smoke sprout from the cracks in the floor around her. They grow between the pine boards supporting the house. When the first licks of flame come they follow the cracks in all directions. Flames crackle in the window frames. They lick in under the front door. Sparks shower from the ceiling.

“Greek fire,” she muses. “It’s the fall of Constantinople.”

An acrid odor of burning hair rises from behind May. Heat crawls up her spine. It means nothing to her beside the grand ending she’s witnessing.

“Holy Mother, you bitch. All of this is your fault. Annunciation Sunday, my ass, it’s not even an original myth!” Says so or thinks so?

Kaboom. She knows that for a blast from the shotgun. She hopes it fired into the sky. Can the sky be murdered? Will they all face a jury?

This is when May senses that the room is suddenly become crowded. Bodies and fire contend in motion around her in the small space of their home.

Each body is a precious identity to her—Buddy, Joseph Henry, Maurice looking in woeful horror at her, GB comes holding James Lamar, with Hubert and Mancil on either side gripping his nightshirt. They are all coughing, which worries her.

This is her man. These are her sons. She knows them so well and wants to hush their fears. Her various names surround her—May, mama, maman. Several voices are calling her as if to waken her.

Strong arms like none others enfold her. No other arms like these with their power. None but GB’s.

Those arms again. Lifting her, twirling her about, taking her away.

Something is thrown over her. Damnation, why are they beating me on the head. What the hell.

To her, voice muffled, a very private talk like when they are in bed. “Well, at least you won’t be needing to worry any more about cutting your hair.”

“Fuck you, Green Berry Bell!”

1928

Geneva County, Alabama

In the ticking mechanized time of man 6:45 in the morning arrives for a moment of eternity. The rising sun reveals the Wiregrass in translucent light, a barbarous sprawl, palpating and primitive.

At rising and setting on Monday March 26th the sun mists up a spectral light over much of the reality here. Some of the shanty on the rise stands, even part of the roof. The shanty is no more than a smudge on the horizon. It has transformed into a place smoldering low and resentful.

Down below the workers' cabins are reduced to nothing. Visible remnants already sag into the mud. Soon there will no longer be any evidence of human habitation.

A thin gray of hovering smoke gives to everything on Sainte Elisabeth, most of all to the swamp, a beguiling fugue of contrapuntal themes, mystic and transitory. The sunlight's coming in streaks to the sky of glowing flamingo flames. It's a still-cool dark time that gives relief to the scene.

Morning, the sun shines raw upon the ruins even through the aimless dissipating layers of smoke. Its clarity returns when the afternoon showers are blown in from the Gulf. Yet later, humidity rising, a pregnant sunshine comes softening down the edges of Sainte Elisabeth.

Up by the shanty Aunt Missouri's chairs stand all in a row drying. The kitchen table angles against a singed pecan tree trunk. May's books spread in confusion on the bare path. Her trunk is a guarding presence.

Movement in the shed. Talk. People arising from where they slept.

King Bull Snake coils invisible deep in his corner of the shed, a cane rat's tail drips from his mouth.

Outside Dandy jerks her head at a biting fly. And in complaint at having spent the night outside. And of being left hitched to the wagon.

One of Mo's elegant Edwardian dining room chairs stands secured in the wagon bed.

A line of workers trudges up the rise, to a listless singing of sorrow.

The old mule waits, mule silent. He's passing time until the family comes.

Loads up.

Leads on.