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## First Cousins: A novel on youth, family, love, faith, and responsibility (Original novel)

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**First Cousins: A novel on youth, family, love, faith, and  
responsibility. [Original novel]**

Jones, David Myles, M.A.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1990

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**FIRST COUSINS: A NOVEL ON YOUTH,  
FAMILY, LOVE, FAITH, AND  
RESPONSIBILITY**

by

David Myles Jones

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Masters

in

English

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The thesis of David Myles Jones for the degree of  
Masters in English is approved.



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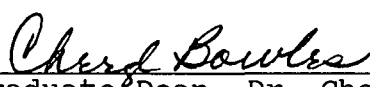
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## ABSTRACT

First Cousins is a contemporary novel detailing four months in the life of William Reginald "Jack" Jackson, an 18-year old African-American graduate of Valley High School in West Des Moines, Iowa. Themes of initiation provide the primary focus: as a young adult, William must learn how to carry out new responsibilities toward family, friends, and the future. The novel's central conflict emerges from William's blossoming relationship with his adopted cousin Natalie, a rebellious 18-year old who must also come to terms with the new demands of young adulthood. Set primarily in North Carolina and Iowa, the novel is narrated from William's first-person point of view.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Interstate 80--Leg 1 ----- 1  
The Past is a Trip--and Sometimes It Changes ----- 5  
Life After Death--Reality ----- 43  
Sarah and Sarah: The Old and the New ----- 65  
Planning a Change This Time ----- 104  
A New Home in the Old Corn ----- 144  
Why I Learned to Love the Files ----- 195  
Work, Women and Weed ----- 245  
The Place, the Party, and the Price ----- 265  
Taking the Ball ----- 285  
Interstate 80--The Road Back Home ----- 295

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**Interstate 80--Leg 1**

She never wanted me to go. She NEVER wanted me to go. I tell myself that but still it's hard to feel guilty.

Natalie's here and I have a glass of orange juice. The time is 8:27 a.m. We're in a place called DeKalb, Illinois, about seven hours east of Des Moines, Iowa, where I lived most of my life until today. I'm staring through the big restaurant window at the car we bought, wondering if we got took. Probably not, for \$350 we're lucky to make it this far with a 1973 Ford Maverick, stick shift on the column, banana yellow. I suppose I can stand the way it drives except for the steering. Every groove we hit and we're all over the road.

I'm tired of driving but Natalie can't drive a stick. She didn't tell me till after we bought this car Monday. She picked a hell of a time to tell me, about an hour ago when we passed the freeway exit for Galesburg, Illinois. For fun we thought about changing our minds and moving there instead, and we'd save about a thousand miles of driving. New York doesn't need us--it's too crowded already. Chuckie's waiting, but so what. I could get a job in the Galesburg feed store and she could be a

housewife. We'd be an All-American black family living in Corn Fuck, Illinois.

Not a chance. We have a place to go and a life to start, and we're damn good at working against the odds after these last three months. Even with the bullshit that went down, everything turned out all right. In spite of everybody, we're together, we're young, and we're going to New York City. I've always wanted to go there, Natalie even more than me. She's ready to be one of the crowd and see things she'd never be able to see in Forest Hills, North Carolina, her home town and my home away from home until this summer. We have to find a new home to replace the ones we're leaving.

Right now Natalie is in the bathroom making herself prettier. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever gone out with, not that I've gone out with that many girls but I don't need to. I'm not one of those people who needs to try everything five times before I figure out what I want. I'm leaving my confused friends behind. They'll spend the rest of their lives in Des Moines wondering what happened, how they got left behind in my dust. You can bet on that.

Natalie's on her way out of the bathroom. She's wearing her yellow shorts. "And now we have--Miss North Carolina."

"Shut up, Willie! Where's my doughnut? Did you only get one for yourself?"



I never get tired of being with Natalie. That was the real reason I went back to North Carolina, even though I didn't know that was the reason. Ever since we were kids running around chasing frogs, something was happening between us. I was seven the first time I remember meeting her at somebody's wedding, my cousin Mel Ann's. All that night we danced, looking like fools, but everybody loved us and we had a great time. It was almost like I had a girlfriend all of a sudden. Me! The champion king of mud and bugs and baseball, doing my thing with a woman! Mother heard about it and at the time even she thought it was cute.

I don't believe that we were destined to be together or anything like that, but I do know it worked out nice for us to start our life as friends and turn into lovers when we got old enough to love. Neither one of us knows what happened but it works, and that's what counts. If we could get everyone else to understand maybe we wouldn't have to leave, but now it's too late since we're on our way to New York, with a car full of clothes and every dollar we have in traveler's checks. I should call Mother but it's too nice to be with Natalie and away from everyone else. It's nice to be away from all those people who know exactly what I want, better than I do. Both of us, Natalie and me, have always had that problem. Not anymore. We're moving.

"You made short work of that doughnut, Willie." That's Natalie talking. "We won't be able to keep ourselves fed in New York. It costs more there."

"I'll dance on the street for extra money in Central Park."

"They'll mug you and take your money."

"No, they won't. They know I'm bad."

"They sure do."

Natalie and I have the same kind of mind. We both are having a great time now that life is one long summer vacation--no more Valley High School! It's been one super intense summer vacation, too, and bound to stay that way. That's what makes me so glad that I can at least count on Natalie, 'cause if there's nothing else I learned this summer, one thing I did learn is there's some things you never can count on. Amen.

### **The Past is a Trip--and Sometimes it Changes**

The very first day I left Des Moines to go down to Carolina Mother freaked out over nothing. I can half understand her freaking out over us moving to New York, but here I was going to North Carolina to be with her family. MY family. Most mothers would want that, wouldn't you think? She argued and argued with me, and barely stopped short of telling me not to go.

"You should have applied at least," she said as she was driving me to the bus station. "Are you even thinking about what you're going to do now?"

"Of course I'm thinking about it, Mom," I said, remembering the 22,000 times we had that same conversation. "I'll be back in a month. Don't worry."

"Are you going to get your job back?"

"They said I could." I had been working at Banker's Life for about a year and a half, typing insurance forms. Basically they said I could come back anytime, like they always did when I went on vacation. But Mother couldn't help but rag anyway. That's her job. I gave her a hug across the car seat when we pulled up in front of the station. "I'll talk to you later, Ma. Don't worry."

Telling a mother not to worry is like telling a fish not to swim.

"Call me when you get there," she said, sounding sad. She was dressed in her uniform and ready to go to work, waving for one last time as I went inside. In less than an hour I was on the bus, thankful that it wasn't crowded and I had room to stretch my legs and crank my radio.

I'm good at bus trips. When you're not driving you can seriously space. What I mainly thought about on the way to Carolina was the future, leaving school and having to get a life. At home I argued with Mother a lot, partially because we think in the same way on a lot of subjects. She's a very proud and determined person, an old-fashioned workaholic type that you don't see too many of these days. My mother says, "Be a success, don't be BLACK and DUMB, 'cause then it's one more strike and you're out." I'll always be thankful that she taught me that, tight as times are. Maybe someday she'll realize that she's taught me well, and I don't need to hear the same thing ten times a day anymore. Eventually every child grows up--even me. I constantly have to remind Mother that I'm not the same Willie she used to bounce on her knee--harsh but true. You can't change reality by looking the other way, remember Ma? She used to tell me that herself.

Going to North Carolina was like going into the past. Those pictures you have in your mind of being really young,

and short, standing around with your uncle or your little girlfriend or somebody--sometimes you want to go back to that exact picture. My brain took a picture in Forest Hills, in the family graveyard, a little ways into the woods. I'm standing barefoot with a torn shirt, giant oaks and pines all around me, all around the little dirt path that leads to Bee's house. It's almost sunset. My feet are planted in the graveyard grass. I stand there taking it in until night falls and the mosquitos suck you dry unless you go outside.

It took two whole days to get to Forest Hills by bus, and it started getting crowded south of St. Louis. Crowded buses are a hassle, when someone's elbows are pressing into your side and your knees are packed against the seat in front of you. The whole way from St. Louis to Raleigh I couldn't think, read, or do anything besides change positions, shuffle my feet or wish I was someone else.

I was very glad to FINALLY get to Forest Hills, in the middle of a long hot afternoon on a bus that should have been junked. At the station Aunt Bee was waiting for me. By the time I stepped into the depot and cleared my throat I saw Bee coming toward me, wearing the hospital greens she always wore on her off days.

"Hi, Aunt Bee," I said, dropping my handbag to hug her, meanwhile sweating in the sticky air. She was a stocky woman but not fat, just strong. I didn't have time to be

shy about hugging her in the middle of the bus station, as quick as she grabbed me and pressed me to her.

"How're you doin', Willie?" She held me by the shoulders and examined me. "It's nice to see you. C'mon. You got any more bags, Willie? Let me get you home."

She talked very clear and slow, so it was easy to listen. She told me about my uncles and cousins and nephews and aunts and what everyone has done for the five years since I was there. She had that same big blue Chevy with the landau roof, driving slow down the main street--I don't even remember what highway it is. It used to be a country road. Now it's just another city street with a 7-11 and a chicken stand on every corner.

Like before, we drove up a winding gravel road to get to her house, past trailers and a drainage ditch. Everybody stopped to wave as if they'd never seen a car. I hammed it up waving at people that I didn't know--half of them were relatives anyway. Things happened slow down there, so they all got excited over people like me.

Bee's house had 6 rooms but it still looked like an overgrown trailer set on cement blocks, very rectangular. Sweating like a pig, I felt like a fool in my heavy jeans and my long-sleeved shirt. By the time I sat down on the plastic covered couch in the living room Bee was handing me a glass of homemade lemonade. She didn't need to ask if I wanted it.

"Thank you, Aunt Bee."

She stepped to the window to turn on the air conditioner, then noticed how I was sweating. "Let me get you a paper towel," she said, laughing. "Ain't so hot in Des Moines, is it?"

"No, it sure isn't. Thanks again, Aunt Bee."

I loosened my shirt and looked around the living room, which was small and sort of stuffy. Bee had it fixed up nice, with plants on every table and family pictures on the wall. On a stand in the corner of the room, there was a three-foot statue of St. Paul. There were framed pictures of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary on opposite sides of the statue, just like I remembered. Usually it made me nervous when someone has their religion all laid out, but I was never nervous there. As a kid I would sometimes stand next to the statue and wonder about Christ, with Aunt Bee watching and smiling.

We kept talking for half an hour or so, till I started feeling tired and uncomfortable in the same musty clothes I was wearing on the bus. Bee noticed and offered me her own bed to take a nap in. "Don't forget you're still at home, Willie," she said.

I couldn't help but smile at how nice she was to her long lost nephew, and I walked over to give her a kiss. Afterward I showered, changed into my red gym shorts and my Tar Heels T-shirt, hit the bed and slept like a rock.

I woke up because I knew someone was in the room, and I hardly remembered where I was. The person sitting at the end of the bed looked familiar, then I knew who it was, even before I grabbed my glasses. "Natalie!" I said. "Is that you?"

"Who else?" she said, laughing. "How you doin, Willie?" We hugged like madmen.

It's always weird to see someone you haven't seen for a long time. First there's the surprise and "How you beens", then there's the small talk and judgments. I looked at Natalie and tried to guess what she was thinking. She looked different from the way I remembered her: taller but still stocky, with a build that Bee must have had when she was young. Her hair looked stylish with a loose curl. Her clothes were bright-colored, and they had a nice hang on her mature body. Letters can't tell the whole story of all the changes that happen when you don't see someone.

Natalie stepped back a bit and shook her head. "I can't get over it, Willie--you look so good. How'd the football go last year?"

Her compliment threw me off guard. "I started," I said, in a scratchy voice.

"I bet you were good, huh? You know, I missed you. You are not a good writer."

"I never write anybody but you," I said.



"You didn't write me enough. This place is dead. It needs news. How's your mother?"

"All right." We were looking very comfortably at each other, like we did when we were younger. "I missed this place."

"You don't have to miss it now," Natalie said, with her incredible smile. "You're here. Come on."

I checked the time and threw on my flip-flops before following her into the hallway. The house was quiet--strange. I figured that Bee had gone to work at the hospital. "Where is everybody?" I asked Natalie.

"I don't know," she said, "but I'm glad they're out. You remember what it's like around here in summer, don't you?"

"Yeah, crowded. Wall to wall kids."

"Wall to wall flies." We stepped into the kitchen for a minute to pour ourselves a glass of lemonade before leaving. "Willie, sometimes I try to kill all the flies in the house, if I'm bored with nothing to do. I lose count after 15 or 20. There's always a few left, too. You think you killed the last one and then some nappy-head cousin walks in holding the door open and letting more in."

I gulped more lemonade. "I take it you don't like living with relatives."

"I don't know, see, that's it." She walked to the kitchen window and pushed the curtains apart, then motioned

me to come over there and I walked up and stood beside her. Through the window there was a view of Bee's trim back yard, a wide field of tobacco, the trailer where Natalie and Aunt Sarah lived just within yelling distance of Bee's place, and the thick forest beyond it all. The tops of the trees blocked part of the sun, light shining through the branches. In another hour it would be dusk. I almost forgot about Natalie as we stood there, breathing, remembering. Finally she spoke again.

"I've never been anywhere else, Willie. I love Ma but sometimes I want to leave." I turned to Natalie again and noticed her eyes, guessing that she needed another hug, and she did. We stood there in each other's arms for a moment. It was warm, it was summer--we were both wearing shorts and loose fitting shirts. I almost forgot she was my cousin.

"Ready to start our walk?" I said.

"Sure. Anywhere you want to go?"

"Let's take a short walk by the graveyard first," I said. "If you don't mind. That's not strange, is it?"

"No. It's pretty over there. Aunt Bee still weeds that place. No one's been buried there since Clayton died. There's no more room."

"I wanted to come to that funeral," I said, a little sad remembering my favorite uncle. "My mother just couldn't afford it. I had money but she didn't want me to go down by myself."

"Let's go," said Natalie, taking my hand and leading me into the backyard, a place I always remembered. There were a couple of kittens chasing each other near the edge of the tobacco field. The grass was very damp and there were frogs that would suddenly leap in front of us as we walked. I thought about what a long journey it would be for a frog to hop from the Tar River all the way to Bee's place. It would be like hopping back to Des Moines, I thought.

Holding hands, we moved closer together as we walked down the path toward the cemetery. It hardly seemed wide enough for pall bearers to carry a coffin, something I had seen them do at least once. The thick trees blocked a lot of the sunlight, making the walk spooky.

"How long are you staying, Willie?"

"I don't know," I said. "I quit my job in Des Moines. I guess I'll stay till my money runs out, or everybody gets sick of me."

"That'll take a long time," said Natalie, "for me to get sick of you."

We reached the cemetery and stopped for a moment, seeing the worn gravestones and the mounds without flowers. You could tell that Bee was still cutting the grass, but it still seemed like we had discovered a lost monument, something not seen in years. I kicked off my shoes and so did she, then we began to walk slowly and look around. I had never forgotten that place, and from the picture in my

memory only one thing was really different--Uncle Clayton's grave had been dug in a far corner, the name on his stone clearly cut, without much moss. There was an old wooden bench just in front of the treeline near Clayton's grave. We stopped to sit.

Natalie pressed closer to me, and I caught her eyes. She had a confused look, like she wanted to talk but didn't know what to say. I enjoyed watching her. She was very pretty and sexy, too, but sitting there with her made me feel strange.

"Willie," she said, "I always liked you. I mean, I like you in a way that...like a boy, not just my cousin. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't." I felt more nervous, remembering that Uncle Clayton was right there in front of us. Even so I squeezed her hand tighter. "I guess I like you too."

"You knew I liked you," Natalie said. "I know you did." She pressed her head against my neck. I breathed deeply and slowly, my arm around her back. I wanted to kiss her.

"You know, Willie," she said quietly, "I'm not related to you."

I was so confused and nervous I almost shook. "What do you mean?"

"Ma adopted me. I'm not your cousin."

I cleared my throat. "How come I didn't know?"

"It's a miracle you didn't know, 'cause that's all everyone used to talk about when Ma first adopted me. I was five years old but it seemed like they talked about it forever."

I thought about what she was saying. What the hell was happening? I looked out over the gravestones and wondered what my relatives would think. Natalie's adopted! Did that make any difference?

I felt a kiss on my cheek, and turned to look into Natalie's eyes again. I couldn't look anymore without kissing, lips meeting lips this time. There we sat on that old chipped bench, by my uncle's grave, at dusk, kissing like we just got married. I finally lost my nervousness for a while, and we stayed there and kissed until nightfall.

"Will you be my boyfriend, Willie?" she asked, in the dark.

"Yes," I said, without a pause.

"We can't tell anybody."

"I know."

We leaned back on the bench to be cozy for a while longer. Whenever we moved the bench creaked and the paint chipped. I barely remembered where we were until I turned away from Natalie to brush some paint from the side of my leg. Again I noticed the gravestones which were just light shapes in the moonlight. We sat up together.

"We better go back," I said.

"Yeah." She obeyed my tone and stood quickly. "Let's clean up first."

I took my time and enjoyed brushing all the paint I could from her legs and back. "I'll do the front," she said, with a little smile. We hugged each other one last time before finding our shoes and walking toward the path, still hand-in-hand.

I wonder who's at Bee's house," I said.

"Could be anybody," said Natalie. She spoke slowly, like Aunt Bee. "It's Saturday. I bet Billy's in the kitchen, drinking beer. And Carolyn's probably there by herself, doing laundry."

"You really know, don't you?" I said as we reached the pathway that led through the trees.

"What's to know? I've been here thirteen years. This same house. This same ugly house, Willie."

"I don't think it's ugly," I said.

We came out of the trees and walked into Bee's back yard. Every light in the house was on it seemed. I could hear voices and laughter from the kitchen. Natalie sighed quietly when she heard the voices.

"Billy's there," she said. "Remember him yet?"

I knew I remembered Billy, and it wasn't a great memory. The whole time I knew him he always seemed old, with a heavy smell. He played cards and drank beer with

Clayton a lot. Sometimes he'd give me advice with his alcohol breath. He'd never call me by my real name, either. My name was Bean, he said, because my head looked like a lima bean. I hated the things he said but I shut my mouth. What can you do when you're 13 years old?

"Old drunk Billy with the bald head?" I asked Natalie.

"Yes."

"And he smells like booze every time you see him?"

"Yes." Natalie laughed. "At least I'm not his blood, babe. You are."

"Don't remind me. I have to see him now."

Natalie shook her head. "So do I, don't forget. So do I."

We were standing by the clothesline in the back yard. I wished I knew what I looked like, after kissing and squirming for who knows how long on a wooden bench. Luckily Natalie had her hair pick so I ran it through my hair a few times. I tried to guide her in fixing her own hair, which she couldn't really do without a mirror.

"It looks fine," I said. "Trust me."

"Where should we say we were?" she asked.

"Just say we were down at the graveyard to talk," I said. "And see Uncle Clayton's grave."

"Sure. Why not? They might not even ask."

"Yeah." I gave her a kiss, quickly. We went to the back door.

When we walked in Billy was sitting at the table, a Miller beer bottle beside him. He looked over his shoulder and recognized me right away. "What it is," he said slowly surprising me with his memory. "Well, I'll be damned. You're a big boy now. How is that so?"

I shrugged. "I eat a lot."

"I'll be damned. Your head don't seem so big now 'cause the rest of you is grown. Carolyn!" he yelled toward the hallway. "Come on out and see how your nephew done grown all big and ugly!"

Carolyn came from the hallway, carrying a laundry basket. She was yellow-skinned, heavy and quiet, dressed for housework in a long T-shirt and sweat pants. She dropped her basket when she saw me standing there.

"Willie! Is that you?" She squealed and hurried over to hug me. There was no escape.

"Good to see you, Carolyn."

"Good to see you, child." She stepped back to examine me. "God almighty, you're bigger than Billy. Play football?"

"Yeah, I did."

"I bet you did. Boy, what did they feed you back in Iowa? The feed corn's better out there, huh? Good to see you."



"Thanks," I said, hoping there was no one else in the house I hadn't seen. I didn't want to hug or be insulted by anyone else.

"You're old enough for a beer now, huh, partner?" said Billy from his seat. "Go ahead. Grab you a Miller."

"No thanks," I said quietly.

"What do you mean, no thanks?" said Billy.

"Let him alone," said Carolyn, with a motherly voice. "Don't force this boy to drink. You don't need to be drinkin' all that beer yourself."

Billy's answer was to take a drink from his bottle, then offer it to me. I said no again. He finished the bottle and pulled himself up from the chair to go to the refrigerator.

Carolyn shook her head, picked up the laundry basket and carried it to the corner where the washer was. "Got any wash, Willie?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't be shy. Whatever you got, I'll do it."

"Why are you washing now?" I asked.

"Why not? Line's still out there." Carolyn busied herself with the machine buttons and detergent. "What did you two do today?"

"We just went for a walk," she said.

"Better watch that girl," Billy said suddenly, sitting down with his beer. "She's liable to get you in trouble. She ripe as a peach."

"Billy," Natalie said with a sharp tone, "You need to close your mouth."

Billy laughed, but Natalie didn't. "Let's go," she said, turning toward the door.

I followed, with a last word to Carolyn and Billy. "Good to see you both," I said.

"You go ahead," said Carolyn, a little mad also. "Come back when this uncle of yours has gone home."

I heard raised voices while we walked through the back yard. Natalie was moving so fast I had to put a hand on her shoulder. She took my hand, squeezed it and smiled finally. We walked arm-in-arm across the field to Aunt Sarah's house.

"I'm sorry I got mad," Natalie said, "but that man! I thought he'd act decent the first time he sees you at least. I guess everybody's family to him."

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't have manners. He always acts the same roguish way. Even to you, somebody he hasn't seen since I don't know when."

A small hairy terrier ran from under Aunt Sarah's porch as we came to the house. The dog yapped loud and scared me. He ran to the end of his chain and kept yapping. I

stepped back. "Don't be afraid of Soda," Natalie said. "He only bites his food."

"I don't like dogs," I said. There should be a law against other people's dogs charging at you, even if they were chained. Why should a person be charged at just for walking by? I think the dog knew that I didn't like him, because he kept staring and growling when Natalie petted it.

"I'll take him to the back," she said. "Come in."

The living room seemed smaller than I remembered it. Aunt Sarah still had the same black and white TV, a square console with skinny black legs for the stand. A picture of Jesus hung above the orange couch with the shiny plastic cushions. There were a couple of homey hanging plants, but to me the place looked like the demonstration model where no one lives but everyone sees. I don't ever want to live in a trailer.

Natalie was leaning over the counter that separates kitchen from living room. With the way her shirt was hanging I remembered how sexy she was. I tried to remember how I felt about her before, but I couldn't. All I could think of was the way I felt right then, wanting to run across the room and grab her, touch her, have her, something. Instead of running, I walked across the room to where she was.

She kept leaning against the counter, straightening up as I came from behind and leaned my thighs against her hips, massaging her shoulders. She turned and we started kissing again. I barely remember walking into her bedroom and lying down on that bed. I felt very relaxed lying down with her, kissing, feeling, trying to imagine her sexy body underneath the dress she was wearing.

We fell asleep after a while, on top of her covers. I don't know what time it was when I heard shuffling. Then the light came on in the hall. I started to panic and scrambled for my shirt, putting it on as fast as I could. I shook Natalie and whispered into her ear. She made a noise when she realized what was going on, just as Aunt Sarah was walking by.

"Netty?" I heard Sarah's shaky voice.

"It's me, Mama," said Natalie. We were as still as toy soldiers. I prayed she wouldn't open the door.

"Good night, babe," said Sarah.

"Night, Mama." We heard a door close.

I breathed for the first time in a solid minute, too nervous to whisper. Finally, I slipped on my flips. Natalie stood up and tiptoed across the room for her robe. "I better go out with you when you go out."

"You think we ought to wait?" I asked.

"No. Ma's probably dressing right now. Let's go quick," she said. We opened the door and tried to move

fast and quiet. Of course, the quieter you try to be the more the doors squeak, the floors creak, and the footsteps echo. I knew Sarah would hear us. At least I was out the door before she saw me.

The living room light came on as I was running beside the tobacco. Behind the house I could hear Soda yapping away. Damn good thing we put him in the back!

The kitchen light was on in Bee's house. About that time I realized that I didn't have any excuse for where we had been. I didn't even know what time it was. It could be four in the morning, for all I knew. I tucked my shirt in and ran a hand across my hair. Hopeless. Walking in, I hoped that everyone was in bed, deciding just in case to say that Natalie and I had taken a walk.

Carolyn was ironing as I walked into the kitchen. "Good morning, Willie," she said. "I thought I was the only one up this late. Or this early."

"I guess not," I said, walking around the ironing board and pulling up a chair nearby.

You're on vacation, Willie. No reason to go to bed early," she said. "Do you even know where to sleep at?"

"No."

"Bee cleared out the back bedroom for you. You just missed her. She came in with Sarah not long ago."

The tone of her voice seemed to hint that she knew something. I looked up at her and caught a direct glance.

"Do you always iron so late?" I asked.

"Not all the time," said Carolyn, returning to her work. "I just walk over to help Bee whenever I can. We've got a big family, Willie. Sometimes it's a big lazy family. So I help her do laundry."

I tried to think of a tactful way to slip off to bed. Then I remembered it was late enough to just tell her I was tired. As long as she didn't ask where I had been, I was home free.

"Where were you just now?" she asked. "Did you and Natalie go out?"

"We went down to Rudy's for a soda. Then we went for a walk. It's so nice around here, you can just walk around." I took that moment to excuse myself for bed.

"Sure, Willie," said Carolyn, at last taking a break from her work. "You go on in. It's almost three." She caught me for a hug, then kept on talking. "Sarah missed you when she came in. I told her you were fine, and big, and staying till we run out of food." I laughed with her, before moving toward the hallway. "Try to go see Aunt Sarah when you wake up tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay. Goodnight, Carolyn."

Bee must have been up because I heard her call to me when I walked past her room. "Good night, Willie. You rest good, all right?"

"Thanks. Good night, Aunt Bee."

Finally, I was locking the door to the back bedroom, the end of a day that began with sunrise in Jackson, Tennessee, or some such town. It was almost dawn again. I dropped my clothes on the floor and turned out the light. The bed was more like a cot, almost too narrow and creaky to lie on, but at least it was under the window and I felt a bit of a breeze for the first time that day.

I was tired, no doubt, but couldn't get to sleep for a while. I'm usually that way. I'm not a certified insomniac, but I have this habit of lying in one spot, and staring at the ceiling, not touching myself although I end up thinking about women. I had someone new to think about that night. I figured Natalie would already be sleeping, just across the field. The window was open, but I couldn't quite see the other trailer-house from the bed. I wondered how Natalie explained the little midnight walk to her mother. She must have heard us both when I went out. She would probably think it was some neighborhood punk sneaking out of her bedroom, not Willie, her nephew from Des Moines, but that probably wouldn't make it any better for Natalie! I dreamed I was in bed with my new babe again, and again, until I opened my eyes to the sunlight.

The room was familiar, because I had slept there when I last stayed at Bee's. You could tell very easily that it was a guest room--there was nothing in it to make it seem like a certain person lived there. Every person's room

usually cluttered with whatever they're into, like make-up for girls, or week-old shirts for boys, or models, or toys or something. This room had just your average clean, chest-of-drawers, a little desk and a couple of chairs, spotless. Bee maintained that guest room the same way she did the cemetery--always trim and ready for someone unexpected to drop in.

I sat up in bed, figuring it must be ten o'clock, with the heat already creeping throughout the room. It was becoming another sticky Carolina day and I always sweat too much even when everybody else is strolling around totally comfortable. Getting up, I dug a green pocket T-shirt out of my overnight bag.

Was Natalie there already? I hesitated before leaving the room. Taking off my shirt again, I wrapped it a towel along with shorts and underwear. Quickly I slipped into the bathroom next door and showered, remembering as I toweled that I had lost my comb. I stared into the mirror at my bushy and uneven hair. Mother had been nagging about a haircut before I left. Examining my low-budget look with torn green T-shirt and ugly looking hair, I wished I had gotten one.

Oh, well.

With my hand I brushed my hair back as well as I could, and finished drying off. A little clock stickered above the stool said: 8:47. Not too early to get up around that



house, as I remember. Well-fed and well-rested kids wake up early. It was a small miracle that no kids could be heard around the house--where were all the relatives?

I stuck my dirty clothes in a paper bag and tossed them into my room. From the central rooms I heard a couple of voices and piano tinkling as I started down the hall nervously, hoping it wouldn't be long before I ran into Natalie.

Passing her door, I heard Bee's voice. "Willie," she said, with that country accent. "Willie, good morning."

"Morning, Aunt Bee."

"Will you come inside for a minute, Willie?"

I walked in. She was reclining full length on the bed, showing how tired she was but I could still tell she was STRONG. Bee is more than a person; she's a presence you can never be separated from when you're in her house. She had worked late at the hospital but here she was awake before me, prepared to give me the word on something.

"Willie? I just needed to ask you about last night. Sorry to be in your business. I'm not your mother, I know."

"I understand, Aunt Bee."

She couldn't tell how nervous I was. "It's hard to ask a young man that ain't mine what he does outside this house. I felt that way with Chuckie and I feel that way about you. One thing I ask, Willie--if you go out tell

Carolyn or me where you are. We like to know. Even if you're just with Natalie, we still like to know. Things aren't the same as they were, Willie. It's not always safe."

"I understand, Aunt Bee. I'll tell Carol next time I leave."

"Now you go out to the living room. Your cousin's here and I know you're hungry."

A smile struggled its way to my face. Maybe I left a little bit too quickly, I don't know. I felt eager to see Natalie, and she must have felt the same way because she was already there! What could be better? I brushed past Carolyn in the kitchen doorway with a quick "Good morning." Lucky for me she was in her nightgown and didn't seem ready to talk, so I passed without any more inspection into the living room.

Natalie was sitting at the piano, wearing a yellow sun dress with thin straps. I liked the way she was strong and sturdy with a big butt. Her arms were muscular for a girl's, and her little muscles were flexing as she played. I think she knew I was there--was she not sure how to greet me? I knew how to greet her! Feeling bold and sexy, I pressed my lips against her neck. She smelled so good, and felt so soft, I was happy. She stopped playing and took my hands as I was kissing her. I kissed her harder, moving my hands to her shoulder and pushing her strap down, totally

without thinking. Then I heard a door slam down the hallway, and we straightened up quicker than a couple of soldiers. The piano music started again. I picked up a TV guide from the coffee table beside me and started leafing through it. "Good morning," I said to Natalie.

"Good morning, Willie. How is my favorite cousin today?"

I had to smile at what she said. "I'm doing great. How about yourself?"

Natalie stopped playing and shifted around to face me. "I'm doing all right. You know."

Her smile told me everything I needed to know. "How about a walk?" I asked her.

She lowered her voice level, hearing someone's footsteps. "Shouldn't we have breakfast first?" She blew me a kiss and I understood that she wanted to be careful--another tar paper excuse for why we were running off might not wash. Before turning away I took a deep breath and gave her one more serious look, with my blood pumping like a mad river.

Just after we finished talking, Carolyn came in. In the way she looked I could see no new discoveries--it was just Carolyn, with a white blouse and her blue cut-off polyester shorts. I imagined it was Mother standing there, which wasn't hard to do. Carolyn had the same figure and the same manner as Mother. They acted different, but

looking at them you could tell they were sisters.

Carolyn looked at us and began to laugh. "Never seen twin cousins before, till now. Can you two take time out of your schedule to eat breakfast?"

"Sure," I said.

"I knew you could, Willie. Natalie, bring your boy in here so we can feed him. Can't have you shrivelin' down to nothing. Your mother would never forgive me. C'mon." She went to the kitchen. Natalie and I followed her.

I always felt comfortable sitting in the kitchen. Slow-paced country time really took over when you sat down in those brown cushioned swivel chairs, around the enameled kitchen table. It was amazing how there was always hot, delicious food and clean plates whether Bee was expecting you or not. The room was bright-colored with flowered wallpaper and waxed tile and big windows to let the sun in. At Mother's house we would drum the silverware on the table and yell, "Service!" when we felt like being obnoxious, but without being told we knew we damn well better not do that here.

There were a couple of hot dishes set out when we picked up plates and chose seats opposite of each other, in the middle of the table. There was ham in one dish and fried potatoes in the other. The steam was coming up like it does in those Mickey D's commercials, only this was ten times better because it was real and homey with nobody's

plastic plates. Slowly, too, I was learning to look at Natalie with a little more cool, without my jaw dropping down and drool dripping out. I decided to eat nice and slow to put on a good act, instead of bouncing up and down killing time, thinking about Natalie.

The rest of the food was just as hot and kept me hungry. Even those tomato pies (or whatever they were) looked good, when they never had before. Aunt Bee sat down when everyone else had loaded their plates. She glanced around the table, looking pleased and peaceful.

"Will you say the grace, Willie?" she asked.

I had never known a real grace until I started staying with Bee years ago. At home, we always said, "God is good, God is great, thank you for the food we eat," which lasts about ten seconds and doesn't even rhyme. No one took time to pronounce the words at all; our attitude was get it done. Bee had a special, orderly way to do the whole thing: serve the food, sit down, pray, then chow. When I was a kid we even discussed the Bible every once in a while as we sat at the table. I remembered her favorite grace by heart. It came right up:

"Good Lord, thank you for the food we are about to receive for the nourishment of our bodies. Make us honored and truly thankful for all of our blessings, and thank you for watching over us through this day. I ask this in your son Jesus' name. Amen."

We ate and talked about old times, stuffing our faces without shutting up. Mostly we talked about my cousin

Tamara's wedding, which happened the last time I visited. The wedding was right there in the living room of the house--small room, but even I felt a little bit of that special wedding-day feeling. Natalie reminded me of how we were dancing in the kitchen to somebody's overworked tune box. I didn't know how to dance, but I was trying. Natalie could really get it out there, little ol' country girl that she was. The parties we went to in Des Moines you usually didn't dance, you just found a place to stand and stuck out your chest like Schwarzeneger. Carolyn laughed when I told her that.

"No, I don't believe you did much dancing in Des Moines, Willie."

"Well, hey, I was young," I said. "Since then I have polished my skills."

"What, you learned how to walk?" said Natalie. The whole table was laughing by then. I felt Natalie put her bare feet on top of mine. It felt nice.

"Yeah, Curtis and Kelly and Mel Ann were all down that weekend," said Aunt Bee. "You all went to the step show downtown. That's the one day I saw everybody dress--shirts tucked in, lipstick. Natalie scraped all the mud off her knees for one night."

"I remember that. We stayed out late," said Natalie. "Were you with us, Willie?"

I couldn't believe how much this crew could remember. Natalie was right--things didn't happen too fast in Forest Hills, and if anything did happen, no one ever forgot. I strained my brain to try and go back to that time. Suddenly I did remember. "I didn't go," I said.

"Why not?" asked Bee.

"No clothes, I think. I don't think I had anything that matched."

"He's a shy boy. I remember," said Carolyn. "You stayed at home with us and watched TV. I told you to go. How come you didn't listen?"

"I don't know. I guess I just didn't want..."

Bee interrupted. "You don't have to explain. They knew everybody and everything, and you didn't. That's reason enough right there."

"At least you danced with me." Natalie gave me her specially made smile, sweeter because only I knew what it meant.

We ate for a long time. With the kind of breakfasts they had, the box of frosted flakes on their fridge had probably been sitting there since my last visit. I downed about four plates of food and three glasses of milk. There wasn't any reason to be shy--they expected me to eat. If I didn't stuff myself, I doubt if they'd let me leave the table.

The food was so good I almost forgot to be horny. Almost. Natalie's feet were sitting on top of mine and I never forgot that she was there. It was so great to have our little secret that no one else knew. It was something new and something old at the same time. I couldn't remember how it all started, but it was too exciting for words. I couldn't believe it, but at the same time I knew it was true.

I was throbbing and I wanted to leave the table. A sideways glance wasn't enough to keep me still anymore. Natalie knew it, too. I could almost hear her mind whizzing along, trying to think of an excuse to leave the table.

Finally, she stood up. "Let's go walk off some of these calories, okay?"

I tried to be casual, standing up slowly and stretching. "I guess. Where we goin'?"

"To the river. C'mon." She walked around the table and grabbed my arm. "Bye, Bee. Bye, Carolyn."

"You're gonna make me walk?" I said as we left the room, trying to sound unenthusiastic. I knew the act had worked when I heard Bee and Carolyn laughing. I laughed with Natalie while the front screen door was slamming, and we started down the twisting gravel road through the maze of trailers.



About half a mile later we got to the black top, and Natalie took my hand even though it was day. "Kiss me," she said. I did. I gave her a nice tight full body hug and a long sloppy kiss. It was hard to stop, but we had to, there on the road so close to the house. We managed to get ourselves walking down the road again, moving that much faster because we were thinking about the same thing.

"Do you know where we're going?" I asked Natalie.

"Yes. There's a trail that runs along the road. I hope it's not muddy. It shouldn't be."

"Do other people go there?"

"Nobody that I've seen."

"Who do you go there with?"

"Chuckie." She answered, then caught a hint of suspicion in my voice. "Just Chuckie. And you."

By the time we got to the path it was midday, and it was HOT HOT HOT. Hot enough to make Des Moines seem like Siberia. Hot and sticky too, with flies and bees and everything else buzzing around. I could smell the river.

"How close are we, Natalie?"

"There's the path up there," she said. I could see a narrow opening into the trees that surrounded the road. We made a quick turn, did some high-stepping through some cattails and reached the path.

"Come on, Willie." We were almost running. The going was pretty easy except for some low-hanging branches, and

the MOSQUITOS. The path itself was clear of grass but not dusty. I wondered how it stayed so clear--it must have been a popular fishing route--or something. The grass was growing everywhere but there on the path.

At a little turn the path widened a bit, and we stopped. I could definitely hear the river a short distance away, even though I didn't stop to look at that point, really. Natalie and I took each other, squeezing and kissing like slobs. After we kissed for a while she sat on my stomach and undid her shoulder straps. Her breasts flopped all over as she rocked back and forth. My shirt was underneath my back getting rubbed in the dirt, which was soft and wet enough to stick. It didn't bother me though. We got so relaxed after a while it might as well have been the Ritz we were lying in.

Pretty soon we were lying down right next to each other, feeling grubby and tired. Her face looked pretty up close and we kept on kissing every once in a while as we talked.

"Does this seem weird to you?" I asked her.

"No. Not really."

"Huh. It seems weird to me. I guess I never thought about us getting together, you know what I'm saying? This is crazy."

"Not that crazy." Natalie gave me a long kiss.

"You're my boy, Willie. I don't know. Everybody's got to like somebody. I like you."

"I figured you'd have a boyfriend around here."

"Get serious, Willie. I doubt if Ma'd let me have one, even now. That's a shame. 18 years old, can't even date unless I lie and say I'm going to my cousin's."

"So you never had a boyfriend before?"

"Not lately. I had a couple in junior high school. You couldn't pay me to go out with those dudes now. I was ready to graduate."

Trying to brush the dirt off each other wasn't much use. Mud from the path was sticking to my T-shirt in little streaks, because the shirt was balled up under me for a long time. We managed to brush most of the dirt off our bodies. With some of the wildness out of me, I started to look around and think about how pretty it was out in the woods. It was about three o'clock as far as I could tell, but neither one of us felt like rushing back. We sat down again, under the trees and in the same dirt we just tried to brush off our clothes. I heard the bugs again. Soon we were touching each other. I couldn't help it, seeing her walk around with nothing on but a little pair of shorts. I wanted to make love to her so bad but somehow we managed not to, even with hands going everywhere. With our stomachs pressed hard together, she whispered to me that

someday we wouldn't have to hold back. That sounded good to me.

It was cooling down when we finally got fully dressed and started back. Time for excuses. It might as well have been school--my mind was blank. Natalie made a suggestion as we came out from the path and turned toward Aunt Sarah's house. I wanted to let go of her hand but somehow I couldn't. It kept us from needing to speak. We'd just walk, look at each other, smile and smooch every once in a while.

"I had fun today," she said.

"So did I," I said.

"I know you did. I can still feel it."

When she said that it made me think and I didn't want to talk for awhile. Instead, I started making up excuses in my head. You can only shut out reality for so long. Here we were walking back to Sarah's place at damn near six. What time had we left? I couldn't even remember. Nobody had seen us, which was good in a way, but it meant we couldn't use anyone else as an excuse. My shirt was muddy, my hair was all nappy and junky looking. Neither one of us had a comb or a mirror. We could go to Sarah's house first to clean up, but they probably had already eaten dinner and were wondering why my hungry ass didn't show.

"Let's say we went swimming," Natalie said suddenly.  
The house was ever closer.

"Without swim suits?" I said.

"I can get mine when we go to my ma's house."

"What about me?"

"I'll give you a handbag to carry in when we get there.  
They'll never know you didn't swim."

The idea seemed to make sense in my head. I remember leaving the house that morning in a total hurry, but we could say the bag was already packed, if they asked. Feeling totally forgetful, I hoped they wouldn't ask--how long could all the excuses hold up?

About half a mile behind Sarah's house, we walked through a tobacco field and followed a long, dirt path, trying to avoid everyone. I kept expecting some little cousin to jump from behind a bush and so did she, making it easy to keep our hands off each other. The biggest scare I got was turning a corner by Clayton's old place and this gigantic spider web, the hanging kind, appeared all of a sudden right at eye level. It was the kind that hangs from a limb and gets wide and heavy on the bottom like a bird's nest. From the branch it hangs from to the bottom of the web it's about three feet, I swear. I never want to see the spider that spins those things.

We knew that Bee and Sarah were at work, but we were careful to walk around the back of Sarah's house and scan

Bee's yard for cousins before we went in. We did a "007" peek around the house and flew in when we didn't see anyone. Soda didn't even bark. That was the fastest we had moved since we left to go kiss. I fell out on the living room couch as soon as we were in, needing at least five seconds of a brain break.

That was about all I got, too, because Natalie ran in and out of her room in a flash. She had on the same dress, but she was perfectly clean and fresh, like that morning. She was carrying a handbag with a swimsuit stuffed in. "So Ma Sarah will know what we did," she said, smiling. "Now, what about you?"

"Do you really go swimming in that river?" I asked.

"We go wading. My aunties don't like it and neither does Ma, but we still go."

"So I should tell them I went in wading?"

"Sure. Why not?" Natalie's voice sounded casual again, assuming the plan would work. "Go over there and tell them I'm too tired for dinner, if they're eating," said Natalie. "It'll start to look funny if we get there together again."

"But they'll know we were together all day."

"M-maybe. You're right. It wouldn't make sense to say you took a walk yourself, would it, Willie?"

We were quiet for a while to think things out, deciding it was impossible to say that we hadn't been together for

the whole day unless we made up a whole big long list of lies. Everything would fall apart if we forgot anything. As it was I felt burnt out, not about to come up with a lot of b.s. to cover ourselves.

"We'll go over together," Natalie said. "We might as well say that we were hanging out, swimming, looking for crawdads all day."

"And we didn't find one."

"No, we didn't, did we, Willie?" She finally sat down beside me, making us both relax. "That's what happens when you're in my pants all day. We don't get anything done."

Natalie put on her nasty smile again. "I wish we had somewhere to sleep so we wouldn't have to rush."

"It's not like we rushed today," I said. "We spent the whole day out there."

"So you're done with me, is that it, Willie?"

"I didn't say that. I'm done for right now. I like being with you, Natalie."

"Yeah. Ain't it nice? I bet you're having a good vacation."

"Hell yes!"

Natalie stood up and fetched me the handbag. "Let's go. When they ask us, say we went fishing for crawdads all day."

It was a short walk to Bee's house. I expected to see little cousins in the back yard, but there weren't any.

The house seemed silent even when we reached the door. It was just as silent when we entered the kitchen.

"They weren't going anywhere today, were they Willie?" said Natalie. I shook my head. That morning had seemed like ten hundred mornings in Bee's house, except for the way I wanted Natalie. That evening was different, though. The dishes weren't even clean. In Bee's house, you wash the dishes after you eat. She had no mercy if you didn't.

I searched the back rooms while Natalie checked the living room, where she found the note, and screamed. I met her in the hallway, holding her as she whispered the news to me: "Ma had a stroke." She fell onto me, practically out cold, shaking.

I held Natalie up. In a few moments her shock disappeared and she cried with every muscle in her body. I finally guided her into Bee's room so she could lie down. I didn't call the hospital when we were supposed to because of her crying. After a while the sun went down and the house grew dark, night sounds from the outdoors ringing through the room. I didn't think Natalie would ever get quiet again, even after her crying grew soft. There wasn't time for me to get sad yet--she had lost her mother and it was her turn to freak out. The room grew darker and quieter, seeming almost like the night before with Natalie, all alone in a bed, as sad as we were happy yesterday. The funeral had already started.



### **Life After Death--Reality**

The afternoon felt long, hot, and soggy in the Bethel A.M.E. church, a mile down the black top from Bee's place. Aunt Sarah's face was left uncovered during the funeral ceremony. She was wearing a white sun dress and black pearl earrings, looking quiet and Christian like she always did. It wasn't hard for me to look at her lying up there--she didn't seem very dead. It was much more depressing to listen and watch Natalie, who was sitting beside me. She stayed completely quiet, staring at the preacher up front although I could tell she wasn't listening. Almost everyone in the church was sobbing or crying, but Natalie stayed quiet. I took her hand and gave it a firm squeeze, causing her to lean against me. She started breathing hard but nothing in her face seemed to change--her look was as long as the afternoon. I tried to put my mind somewhere else, but it didn't work. All I could think about was sweat and crying and hard wooden pew pressing against my butt and the front of my knees, which were beginning to seriously hurt. I turned my head to catch a glimpse of Carol's watch at exactly 1:30. The preacher went on speaking.

Be eternally grateful for the warmth and love this woman gave to each and every one of you. As her

spirit ascends to the holy kingdom, let us not forget the lesson she has taught us. The wisdom and mercy of the Lord is manifest in this world; we know that death of the body means redemption of the soul, as long as we remember the mortal sacrifice made by the son of God..."

The air was cooling as the family members gathered around the new grave at the plot behind Bee's house. The hole was dug about fifteen feet from Clayton; they'd probably have to clear more land before anyone else could be buried there. For the first time all day I started to cry, seeing them carry the closed coffin to the edge of the hole. Natalie was praying, with her head down and her eyes tightly closed. Since most of the crowd was quiet I tried at first to keep from making noise. Aunt Sarah was dead, after 58 years of living and working and raising one beautiful child. It was Natalie's turn to take my hand. For that day at least, we didn't have to hide the way we felt about each other.

At 7:30 I was lying full length on Bee's couch, with Natalie at my feet. Bee decided to go to work even though the burial was barely over. Also, she had decided it might be better for me to stay at Sarah's house with Natalie for the time being. At first I wasn't sure if I should, then I figured I might be able to help.

Carol walked in from the living room, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "Is anybody hungry?" she asked. "There's plenty to eat."

"No. I'm not hungry," Natalie said.

Remembering that I hadn't eaten earlier, I followed Carol into the kitchen. Like Bee, she would heat up practically eight dishes of food just for a snack. This time it was barbecued chicken, butter beans, corn, mashed potatoes, and collards. Carol pattered around the kitchen as I ate, watching me sometimes, at other times staring at the sink or the cabinets or the washer. Nothing needed to be done.

"Are you hungry, Carol?" I asked.

She stopped messing in the silverware drawer long enough to answer me. "No, not at all."

"Sit down," I said, surprising myself with a fatherly voice. As if she really had to listen to me, she sat down.

"What's on your mind, Willie?"

We watched each other's eyes for a long moment. I spaced out and almost forgot what I was meaning to say.

"What's wrong?"

I still didn't answer right away. "It has to do with Aunt Sarah dying. Natalie's by herself."

"You can help her, Willie. She won't have problems when you're there. She loves you, you know that?"

I repeated her question. "She loves me?"

"Of course she does."

As I concentrated on sweat control, Carol kept speaking in her quiet, sensible voice. "She needs you to sit and

talk and encourage her. Not too many people can do that for her. She doesn't let them."

I put my fork down. What did she know about us? She adjusted her hands, preparing for her next comment. I waited.

"Willie," she asked, "how long are you planning to stay?"

That wasn't the question I expected. "I don't know. Two more weeks, maybe."

"You know, you can stay for as long as you want. There's plenty of room over at Sarah's place. You can get a job around here and stay a while if you want to. We'd love to have you. Would your mother mind?"

"Do you think I can get a job around here?"

"I think you can. You're smart enough to do a few things. This isn't Des Moines, but there's still jobs."

I don't know why I decided to stay but it seemed like I should. Carol was excited when I said yes. "Natalie will be glad to hear you're staying. Go tell her now, Willie."

I sat next to Natalie on the living room floor and whispered the news into her ear. What a kick seeing her smile a little bit. She leaned over and hugged me. "I was worried about staying at home by myself. Now I can have you instead!"

Both of us were glad to have a bit of good news after a totally depressing day. After we moved all my things to

Sarah's house, Natalie finally relaxed enough to eat something and laugh a little. We decided that for the time being we wouldn't sleep together. Because of all the relatives it would be hard to get away with that even if we really wanted to. I also decided to wait a few days before moving into Sarah's bedroom. For the time being I could sleep on the couch.

I stayed awake for a while that night, remembering Natalie's good night kiss. Plus, I kept thinking about the funeral, and where I was, lying under my blanket with my eyes open, staring at the blank empty spaces which are doorways during the daytime. Night drags when you try to force yourself to sleep. Insomnia is a habit I didn't want, especially on a day like that one. The same thoughts kept repeating themselves in my head. Like on that last day I didn't get a chance to talk with Aunt Sarah; I just heard her voice calling for Natalie. Sarah was different than Bee and Carol, more secretive in a way. You didn't see her laugh very much, never very interested in having fun, it seemed. The other relatives weren't as close to her, like they were to Carol. Sarah was never married. She always went to work on time, sewed, cooked, was there anything else? The flowers in front of the house and the garden were always nice. That was all, as far as I knew. What a trip.

A sleepless night is when you see the sun before you drop off, but you have to wake up early. I opened my watery eyes after what seemed like five seconds of sleep, with a headache and a sore neck. I heard running water and clacking dishes. Wearing an apron just like Carol's, Natalie was cleaning the kitchen. I could tell she was sad, but she still looked beautiful, a pleasant sight to wake up seeing.

It didn't feel like time to get up, so I stayed where I was. I like having nothing to do and nowhere to go when I wake up. Some people get bored when they're on a long vacation, or when they graduate from high school and have to work out a new plan for living. I almost never get bored. The problem is sometimes I never get started. I wondered where I could apply for a job in Forest Hills. What did people do for a living anyway, I thought, other than work in hospitals?

I flipped over on the couch. Natalie heard the creaking and called to me. "Morning." She sounded a little like her old cheerful self.

"Morning, Natalie." Slow riser that I am, I didn't get up to greet her. It was Natalie who walked over to the couch and sat on the edge, putting her hand on my shoulder. Then she leaned over and kissed me.

"I wanted to come out here and be with you," she said.  
"It was hard to sleep."

"You should have." I snuggled a little closer to her.

"Next time I will. This isn't the last night we'll be in the house together. It's the first." She walked back to her dishes.

The room was cool and quiet. With the soft blue light coming in, it couldn't have been much later than dawn, maybe seven in the morning. Natalie looked calm but not rested. I suspect I must have looked the same way.

The phone rang. "You getting it?" I said to Natalie, feeling lazy. She grabbed the phone with a hand still covered with suds.

"Hello...Chuckie! Hey, what's up?"

Hearing my cousin's name made me sit up on the couch. "Where they at, Natalie?"

"Santa Cruz," Natalie said.

"Let me talk to him," I said, but Natalie was talking into the phone a mile a minute again. In a minute or two though, her face changed and she looked sad. I knew they had gotten to the subject of Aunt Sarah. Then Natalie started sniffing and snorting like she had when she first found the note. I didn't want to listen but it was impossible not to. Natalie wasn't talking on the phone anymore; she was just crying into it.

"Put Mona on, Chuckie." Natalie choked out the words after five completely depressing minutes of sobbing that made me remember Sarah's funeral more clearly than I wanted

to. Natalie's talk with Mona kind of faded into the background as I thought about Sarah. Her things were all around us, but she was gone. I wished I could think about something else.

Natalie hung up the phone. "Mona and Chuckie said to tell you hi. They didn't want to talk right now."

"I understand," I said, shutting my eyes, wishing it was night so I could try again at getting some sleep. The couch felt cold as ice and hard as a rock.

"Ma's dead, Willie," said Natalie, through my closed eyes. "She's buried, out there with all the other dead ones. I won't ever see her again."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I mumbled the first words that came to my head. "You have your aunts, at least. And you still have me."

Natalie's eyes were getting wetter again. "I love you, Willie, but you're not my mother. Neither is Bee or Carol. I love my aunties but they're not my mother."

Hearing Natalie mention my mother made me wonder how Mom was coping with the bad news. Then my thoughts went back to Natalie. "You can get love from other people," I said. "Aunt Sarah wasn't really your mother, but she loved you."

"If Sarah wasn't my mother, I never had one," said Natalie very quietly. "I must have been brought to this world in some way I don't know about."



I decided not to say anything more, watching Natalie's eyes get hazy. I sat up and rubbed her back for a while, but pretty soon she was crying anyway. I knew she needed to cry and there wasn't much use trying to say something deep. It has to be sad when your mother dies, adopted or not. She cried for about an hour. Afterwards I kissed her, walking her back to the bedroom. She was feeling very heavy in my arms until she lay down in her bed and took a couple of breaths.

"Go back to sleep if you want, Natalie," I said. "I'll be right over here."

She sniffled and flipped over to her stomach. In a short time she was practically snoring, breathing hard and looking very relaxed. I caught a little sleep too, just sitting there. Morning could be a great time for sleeping, if it wasn't fouled up by school and work. Otherwise I'd sleep till ten every day--as long as I didn't have worries like the ones I was facing then.

Altogether, it took about a week to find ourselves and start our new living situation. After three days of watching Natalie full-time and making sure she wasn't freaking out, I started looking for a job, which is something I think everyone hates to do. It's especially bad when you go into a store and stand there looking stupid until all the customers leave, then tell the cashier in your most quiet voice:

"I want to fill out a job application."

And then they always say, "What?"

But I can be a smooth talker when I have to be, and I could tell a couple of places were interested in me right away. One of them was Osco Drug, a place I wouldn't have minded working at, but they wanted me to wait for two weeks till they decided. My break happened when I had the guts to apply at a semi-respectable place of business--Blue Cross/Blue Shield County Processing Center. I'm glad I learned how to type.

My typing test came out at 56 w.p.m., with no mistakes by a stroke of luck. Afterwards they sent me in to talk with Jayne. She's one of those slightly overdressed pushing forty business woman types, but at least she was nice.

"You're William Jackson?" she asked, her reading glasses falling toward the tip of her nose. She had very red hair.

"Yes," I said.

"And let's see, you're a new arrival from Des Moines, is that right? Do you plan to stay here in Carolina for a while?"

"Yes. Most of my family lives here, and I enjoy being with them. That's why I came."

"And you worked for two summers with Banker's Life. Your main duty there was data entry?"

"Yes, Ms. Arnold," I said, looking at her deskplate to find her last name. She smiled.

"Can you tell me why you chose to apply at Blue Cross?"

The interview went on like this for about 15 minutes, and toward the end it got very friendly. She talked a little about her oldest child, and I explained my role as house watcher after Aunt Sarah died. She listened to everything I said, and told me she was sorry that a young person had to face so much pressure. She wished Natalie her best.

I had the job. The pay was \$5.75 per hour and the title was Claims Submitter. They told me to report first thing the next Monday--that was the beginning of the pay period, and I would be paid in two weeks. I didn't need much training, Jayne said, because the job was simple and I was intelligent. I was glad to have a supervisor who seemed so likeable, having expected much less.

Natalie squealed when she heard what happened. "Pretty soon you'll be president, I bet. They know a star when they see one."

"Naaah," I said, "it's just a job." I glanced at the clock as I spoke: 3:30. Thursday afternoon. It was getting harder to remember how long I had been in Forest Hills. Seeing Natalie every day was a comfortable feeling, even though those intense horny feelings weren't messing with us like they were that day we went to the river.hadn't

come to us since then. We still kissed a lot, and one night we even slept in the same bed, keeping our clothes on in case some unexpected person showed up. I guess you could say we were pushing our luck. Sometimes we acted like we could explain our way out of anything.

Not too many cousins hung around at first. Usually you couldn't get a moment's quiet for all the relatives--no matter whose house you're in. Maybe it was just the grace period after someone dies--even the little kids appreciate the way death changes everything, a person they know will never come back. Well, Friday morning, I think God must have sounded the "all clear" signal. At 7 o'clock my second cousin Keesha slammed the door and woke me up. Good thing I wasn't sleeping with Natalie. Keesha is seven years old, nobody's fool, and asks more questions than the FBI. She's a hard person to trick.

"Why are you sleeping on the couch, Willie?" was her first question. She's a pretty little girl who is full of energy at 7 o'clock or any other time. I'm a dull boy when I first wake up, and sometimes all day long.

The best way to defend yourself from Keesha's questions is to tell her exactly what she wants to know, without even thinking about lying. "Nobody cleaned out Aunt Sarah's room yet, Keesha," I said. "It's rude to clean it out right after she dies. I don't want to sleep in there yet."

"Are you afraid of her ghost, Willie?" Only she could ask a question like that and still be cute.

"In a way I am," I said. "I get a creepy feeling if I stay in there, with all of Sarah's things lying around. I'd rather stay out here."

"Can I go see?" asked Keesha. By the time I could answer it was too late to stop her. Kids move at incredibly fast rates of speed when they're off to do something they shouldn't do. I was too sleepy to care, so I let her go.

She came by again about two minutes later, with the exact same expression on her face. "How was the room?" I asked as she paused to see if I was still awake.

"There aren't any ghosts in there," she said as if she had known it all along, talking to me as if I was the child. "It was no big deal."

"What's going on at Bee's house?" I asked, closing my eyes again.

"No one's up except for Carol. Everybody else is a slug-a-bed just like you." She turned and headed for the door. "Later, dude."

"Stay out of trouble, Keesh." After the screen door slammed the couch felt comfy. I could tell that things were getting normal again, since I wasn't having any trouble sleeping. Too bad it was so light, or else I'd have been into a dead early morning sleep, the kind where

you sleep through floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions.

Maybe an hour later two other little ones came in, Nikki and Mike. They were twins, about five years old. I could never keep all those relatives straight, so I just call them my cousins. Mike was the shy one, who stayed dirty most of the time because he liked to play outside better than talk. I only knew who he was because he had come up to Des Moines with Carol about a year before, when he turned four. His mother, Joanna, never made a big secret about who was her favorite child, and it was Nikki, the cute, clean, adult-like twin. I'm not too cute and sometimes not clean so I liked Mike, and he liked me too. I was one of the few people he'd actually talk to.

"Auntie says come eat," said Mike in a voice barely loud enough for me to hear. "Bring Natty too, and hurry up."

"Oh yeah," I said, looking back at the twins. "What if I decide to sleep for another six hours?"

Nikki spoke. "If you don't get up now you won't get any food. Then Auntie Bee will come over and beat your butt!" She dived forward and gave me a push. I grabbed her and we wrestled and giggled for a couple of minutes. "You gotta go now!" she yelled, and she meant it, laughing as I tickled her.

In a minute or two they were on their way back to Bee's place, and I finally dragged myself into the bathroom to wash up. Surprisingly Natalie wasn't awake yet--there was definitely enough noise and light to wake her up.

I knocked on Natalie's bedroom door, and went in when I didn't hear any answer. She was lying face up in the bed in her yellow night dress, face turned to one side. As I walked over to the chair beside her bed I noticed how comfortably she was sleeping--breathing very deeply, totally relaxed. It made me feel tired again just watching her lie there, so I sat in the chair next to her bed. She was snoring just a little bit and her chest was moving. I watched her very quietly for a while, not wanting to wake her and not wanting to leave. Finally, I stood up and headed across the field to eat dinner at Bee's. The weather was sunny, the sky clear as a big blue bowl.

There wasn't much conversation at dinner, just a lot of fast-chewing kids and head-shaking adults. Nikki sat next to me, looking straight at me and chewing with her mouth open when Bee and Carol weren't looking. I got tired of acting like it was funny and started frowning at her, but she kept acting the same way. That's the sort of meal it was.

"You sure Natalie isn't sick?" asked Bee, her brown face wrinkled in the sunny kitchen. "Usually she doesn't sleep this late. She likes to eat a lot, like you kids."

"I don't think she's sick," I answered, with a fork in my hand. "I saw her before I came over. I tried to wake her up, but she looked like she needed the sleep."

"Don't worry, Bee," said Carol. "She probably needs some extra rest. I think she's been suffering more than anybody."

The worried look on Bee's face held. "All of us are suffering, Carol. That's no reason to let her starve herself. She still needs to eat."

"Can we go outside, Auntie Bee?" asked Keesha, holding her plate in her hands and turning in her chair.

"Wait till she's finished talking," said Carol.

"Children, you can go," said Bee. There was a general rattling of dishes and sliding of chairs, along with the sound of four pairs of little feet hitting the floor running. The way they moved in the same direction at the same time, it seemed to me they had some childhood project going outdoors. "Rinse your plates and wash your hands," Carol said, and they washed up at lightning speed before disappearing.

Bee waited for a minute until the screen door stopped slamming. Her presence was strongest there in the kitchen with a small quiet group at the table. This is where she read her Bible and prepared the meals and did the laundry for ten people if she had to, to keep things running. Focusing on her face, it looked exactly like the one I



could always remember. I don't know if getting older changed Bee. I couldn't imagine her as ever being a child.

Carol started gathering up dishes of food from the table, carrying them to the counter where she would top them with plastic. I knew the routine. "Can I help?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it, Willie," said Carol.

When I looked at Bee again her head was drooping a little, and her eyes were getting watery. I got worried. What was happening? I hoped it wasn't something new, because enough had happened already. It was something else to see Bee crying.

"Who's taking care of that child?" asked Bee, in a shaky voice I had never heard before.

"All of us will, Bee," said Carol, without losing speed in pan-wrapping. After the last two pans she did stop to listen.

"We can't do for her what Sarah has done," said Bee. "Sarah has given her faith and direction and the kind of love that only a mother can give to a child. How can we give her that kind of love?"

Carol stopped her work and approached the table. "Now, Bee, listen to what you're saying. You're saying the child cannot get by without Sarah--do you really think that nobody else can love her?"

"Nobody else can love her like Sarah did. That's why she isn't coming here today. The least we can do is share what we have with her. And she's not even here."

Carol nodded at me, meaning I could leave. I left in a flash, maybe so fast that I wasn't polite. Seeing Aunt Bee cry made me too restless to stay. I was glad to be walking across the lot on my way back to the other trailer.

The sun stalled in the middle of the sky--hot, with nothing but sweat and bugs. There were 10,000 of those little red beetles flying around--box elder bugs--which I cannot stand. In the old, old times when they had plagues of locusts, there's no way I would last. Not without screen doors, Raid, and air conditioners.

I went into the trailer and walked straight down to Natalie's room, knocking softly. I let myself in after she didn't answer, to find her naked on the bed, not far from where she was before. She put on the smile, and we had a nice wet kiss, which we hadn't done for a while. I wanted to lie right down beside her but I was careful at first. Not a minute later I was pulling off my shorts.

We made love. It felt terrific to touch her whole body. It was incredible how good it felt. I have to say that after that I think we were really in love.

I wanted to lie naked with her for a while, but she suddenly stood up and pulled on her gown. "We need a few rules around here," she said, "before somebody comes in."

"You're right, Natty," I said, as I stood up and dressed myself. "There's about six little spies running around right now. Keesha, Mike, Nikki, the whole bunch. They could have been looking this whole time. The window's open."

"It's hot," said Natalie. "We might as well turn on the air. Is there any breeze out there?"

"No, not really," I said, going to the window and shutting it. For a minute I thought I heard cousins round the house, but I didn't see anything.

"I'm hungry," said Natalie, walking over to the window for a hug. "I suppose you already ate."

"Of course, sleepy-head."

Natalie pouted, to be silly. "And you just let me sleep through it, huh? Thanks a lot." She kissed me.

"Next time wake me up, and we can both eat."

We had a nice moment as I remember, holding each other while we stood there by the window in our little love-daze. There wasn't anything on our minds except each other, sweating as we were in the back bedroom with the sun coming in. But we moved quickly when we heard the front door slam. Like we were acting, Natalie grabbed a magazine and sat on the bed, and I kept staring out the window. It was Keesha, two hours dirtier but just as pesky. She came into the bedroom and leaned against the doorway, looking us over.

"Hi, Natalie, hi, Willie," Keesha said between hard breaths. "What are you guys doing?"

"Nothing," I said. "What's going on outside?"

"Oh, we're chasing each other around." Keesha turned away for a second, as if she had a secret to keep, too. "It's hot and stinky in here. Boy! Why don't you guys open the window?"

"We're about to turn on the air conditioner," said Natalie setting the magazine on the bed.

Keesha stared at me a little strangely. "You're sweating." She crinkled her little nose, and looked at Natalie. "You're sweating too! I didn't know you sweated."

"Live and learn," said Natalie quietly.

Keesha crinkled her nose one more time and stood up from the wall. "I'm not staying in here." She was gone in a second. After the front door slammed I heard the sound of kids leaving. Then I started to feel the heat in the room.

"We better do something," Natalie said. "If anybody else comes in we don't want to be standing around, looking crazy."

"Maybe we should lock the door." I checked my reflection in the dresser mirror to see how I looked. No better or worse than usual, I decided.

"Nobody locks doors around here, Willie." Natalie came to the mirror to check herself too. "You forget how it is.

Everybody has to be able to walk into your house anytime they feel like it. Otherwise, you're hiding something."

I knew she was right. "I don't know if I can get used to that now, Natalie. We can do it differently, since it's just you and me living here. We can say you're scared or something."

"It might work at night, but I doubt it. Plus all the grown-ups will want a key. You know Auntie Bee and Auntie Carol would."

Natalie stopped talking. I felt sorry for her, trying to get used to her new situation. Every day at least once and sometimes all day long you could see her getting sad. I started rubbing the bottom of her back with my hand. I saw her eyes in the mirror and I could tell she was about to cry.

"Awwww, Natty, I'm sorry," I said, feeling stupid and useless. I wasn't ready for more crying on that hot afternoon.

"Let's do something," said Natalie, with a lot of throat in her voice. "Let's clean up the house, okay?"

"Okay." We kissed again, and left the room finally.

Once the air was on, it was easy to work. I got relaxed once we turned on a little music and actually started to talk about something other than the family and sex. I made Natalie laugh, loud, more than once. We stayed in a good mood all weekend long, and I'm sure Bee

and Carol noticed the change, too. They made a big giant dinner for me Sunday (as if they didn't usually). I enjoyed myself and almost forgot that I was away from my real home--or maybe I remembered that I was at home. Sunday night I slept with Natalie, locking the front door to keep out the pests. No one disturbed us that entire night. Sweet!

### **Sarah and Sarah: the Old and the New**

At 8 a.m. Monday I began my new job at Blue Cross, tired but happy. After I met the main office supervisors, Jayne showed me to my terminal. We had to walk across the street to the annex, a small, older-looking brick building that looked and smelled like a clinic. I asked Jayne if it ever was a clinic. "Yes it was," she said, "But now there's nothing here but files." I hated the look of the place, with 3-time reject carpet and ugly institutional wallpaper, with stuffy air besides.

She led me to a corner of the first large office where five women were sitting, facing the side window right in front of them. Within five minutes I learned how to run the machine--type name, provider number, date, illness code, length of stay, cost of treatment, whatever. Working at Banker's Life I did almost the same thing, except I was working from a green screen instead of a keyboard. Felt great to move up in the world!

On my right there was a good-sized pile of forms to process. I wondered how many I could finish--it was my first day and I wanted to make a good impression, so I dug in with that energy you have when you start a new thing.

Isn't it silly how hard people work on the first day of a job?

"Hello, I'm Linda." The voice surprised me because I had been concentrating completely, but I stopped and turned to greet the brown-haired girl next to me who was holding out her hand.

"Hi, Linda. I'm...Jack."

Linda laughed very politely and easily. "You don't remember your name very well, do you?"

I tried to laugh with her. "When I moved down here my family changed my name for me. They changed it to Willie. Back home people call me Jack because my last name is Jackson..." I stopped because Linda was still laughing. "You know what I mean!"

"Of course. I'm only playing, Jack," said Linda.

"Hi, Jack, I'm Jenny," said a blonde girl sitting on the other side of Linda. She had a very young face, looking more like an overdeveloped 14-year old than someone who had a full-time job. "Very nice to meet you. Where are you from?"

"Des Moines," I said, glad that everyone was friendly.

"Is Des Moines in Illinois?" asked Linda.

"Iowa," I said. After I spoke I realized that everyone was working again, but they still talked. It was a trick I wanted to learn, too.



"I'm from Cedar Rapids," said a quiet voice from the other side of me. "Have you ever been to that city, Jack?"

"Yeah, a few times," I said, while looking at the girl who spoke. She was about my age, but very short, with straight black hair that was longer in the back than the front, and a very small nose. It's weird that you would notice a person's nose so quickly, but hers stood out. She was cute. I stopped my work to look at her directly as I finished talking. "I have a friend that lives there. We always go to the zoo and to the parks. It's fun."

"My name is Sarah," she said. "Welcome to the crew. Now we have two Midwesterners."

"So what," said Linda. "This new one doesn't even want to work."

Linda was just being funny, but I decided to concentrate on harder what I was doing anyway. The day went by at lightning speed. Before leaving, I brought my count over to Jayne. My total: 82. Jayne was impressed. "That's good for a first day," she said. "Most people finish about 150 once they've been here--but I bet you'll be doing that many by the end of the month. Who knows how many you'll get done after that."

"Thanks, Jayne," I said, and told her good night. The bicycle ride home went by fast. The temperature on the Frontier Savings clock read 81 degrees, which is practically cool for June in North Carolina. I barely

broke a sweat on the stretch ride home, the long straightaway on County Road 352. Traffic wasn't bad either--sometimes I rode completely on the gravel shoulder when the cars played little games like they do sometimes. I decided that when the paychecks started coming I should to work out some better transpo. I couldn't always count on dry biking weather.

Waving to a couple of relatives along the road, I tore out on the last few winding blocks of gravel and pulled up in front of Bee's trailer. It was almost six--too late for the first feeding. Little Mike was sitting on the small cement porch when I finally reached the shade. "Hi, Willie," he said. I laughed because he was sitting there eating a piece of watermelon.

"What you been up to?" I asked after a stretch pause.

"We walked down to the river with Chuckie. Caught some crawdads."

"Chuckie's back, huh?" Whenever I came down before I always spent a lot of time with Chuckie, who was my age and acted just like me. We were made to be tight friends.

"He's gone now," said Mike, between bites. "We ate all the crawdads, too. You shoulda been here, Willie. They were good."

I don't like crawdads that well so I wasn't sorry for missing them, but I was sorry I missed Chuckie. Why had he stayed for so short a time?

"Is Chuckie working? Do you know, Mike?" I asked.

Mike amazes me with how he can talk and eat so well without choking. "He quit his job when Auntie Mona and him went to California. Now he's moving to New York."

"No kidding." That news surprised me. "Why is he moving there?"

"I don't know. Ask Ma." He was out of information. I walked past him finally and went into Bee's house. No one was sitting in the living room but I could hear rattling in the kitchen, so I went in there. At the table Billy was having a beer with his feet on a chair, while Carol was taking care of the dishes.

"Mr. Ugly," said Billy, his usual humorous self. "There ain't no room at the table for you." I decided quickly that dinner could wait until Billy left.

"Billy, leave my guest alone," said Carol, in that husky tone she used when she expected you to listen. "You either shut your foul mouth or take it somewhere else. You get that?"

Billy didn't answer right away, but he was thinking. "I don't know why you think you own this house, 'cause you don't. If I go it's 'cause I want to, not because of your damn mouth."

"Get out," said Carolyn, with a voice that sounded like a man's. "Take your blessed face somewhere else, Billy." He got up and walked out quickly after that--I would have,

too, if she had spoke that way to me. He left his beer on the table, which Carol poured into the sink and threw into the garbage can in no time flat.

"I'm sorry, Willie, that you have to come home from work to listen to this. If Billy wasn't my kin, I would not let him in this house at all. That's the sad truth. I do feel sorry for Mike."

I nodded my head and we were quiet. Then I remembered I was hungry. "Did you already eat?" I asked Carol.

She went back to her dishes. "Yes, we just finished, but Natalie's expecting you. I think she cooked something special for your first day of work."

"Did she really?" I tried not to sound too excited. Still, I couldn't begin to keep from looking happy.

"She told me to send you right over. Now listen at me, I haven't asked you about your first day at work. How was it?

"Great," I said, my mind starting to wonder what was waiting for me across the way. "The job is exactly like what I did at Banker's Life in Des Moines. All I have to do is type forms. It's easy."

"Glad you had a good day, Willie." I'm sure you're hungry so you better head on home and get your dinner. Your twin cousin's been waiting on you." Carol stopped and smiled for a minute. "Thanks so much for coming down to stay with us. I know it hasn't been that easy since the

funeral. Sarah was a special person. Everybody who knew her says that."

Carol was starting to show her feelings with wet eyes. "Everybody has a hard time with this one, so soon after Clayton. There's only four of us kids left now--Bee, Mona, your mother, and me. At least there's some family left around here. Otherwise, I might think about moving to Raleigh."

"What would you do out there?" I asked, feeling rude about being ready to leave.

"Oh, any sort of job would do for me," said Carol, sounding more like herself again. "My little sewing place is doing fine. I could do that type of thing in Raleigh very easily. If I moved I don't think I could have a shop, though, because the rent here is cheap and business is easy to get...but I better not get started. Go eat, Willie."

"Thanks." I was never a person who skips too many meals, and if I've already missed one I don't play. I hurried across the field to my adopted house, enjoying the cool of the weather once again.

Natalie was sitting on the couch, wearing a pretty blue dress when I walked in. Seeing her look so cute and smelling the food at the same time an experience. Natalie's a pretty girl to begin with, and when she's dressed like that and smiling at you, you smile back. "Hi, Willie," she said, and she met me with a hug and kiss when

I was halfway across the living room. I grabbed her bottom and squeezed but she told me, "Now, now, let's eat first," and with a last kiss she took my hand and led me to the little kitchen table, which was set with candles and everything. "We have a surprise guest, Willie."

"Who?" I said, dumb shit that I am. About that time Chuckie appeared in the hallway, smiling like he just got married. I was impressed by how mature he looked--tall, tan-skinned, tight curl, trim and not greasy. I almost cried for being happy to see him.

"Dude!" Chuckie ran on in and I caught him in a hug. "About time you came down, boy!"

"How about you?" I said. "They got buses, planes, trains too that go to Iowa. I coulda showed you how they party in Des Moines."

"Des Moines! Who has time to go to Des Moines? I hit both coastlines, New York City, San Francisco. That's where it's all at, man!"

Natalie calmed us down enough that we all took a seat and passed out the hot food--chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes and corn-on-the-cob. A meal that good made it hard to choose between eating and talking to Chuckie.

"You have to see California, man," Chuckie said as we were chowing on seconds. "What you heard about the mamas out there is all true. I don't care where you're from, you eyes will pop."

"Is that all you can talk about is the 'mama's out there'?" Natalie said sarcastically. "This ain't the street. Let my honey enjoy a quiet dinner at his new house." She leaned over and kissed me while I was chewing. I must have gotten the strangest look on my face because Natalie and Chuckie both started to laugh. Then Chuckie leaned over and patted me on the arm.

"It's all right, 'cuz," he said. "I know what's up. Don't worry, chill."

I looked at Natalie and she sort of nodded her head, telling me that all was fine. Chuckie understood that what we were doing was more than just a game. It was real, maybe even love. Natalie kissed me again to make the point stronger. I looked up and saw Chuckie smiling at us both, as relaxed as ever.

Soon after dinner we walked Chuckie to the front stoop to say later. His car was in Bee's driveway--I don't know why I didn't notice it on the way in. The car was a dented but well-waxed Nova, black like his mother Mona's car. I felt an impulse to go riding somewhere as I shook his hand and walked him down the stairs.

"Till next time. It's great to see you, dude," he said.

"Eh--" No words. I hugged him again. Natalie took her turn, then he backed slowly towards the car.

"Call before you take off. Don't be a stranger, dude," I said.

"No way," said Chuckie. We watched him long enough to wave as he pulled out of the driveway. Then I took Natalie's hand and we slowly walked back inside.

Sometime that evening, I think we both realized that we were more than cousins. It should have been obvious, but some things happen before you really understand them. After I knew for sure it wasn't any big surprise. All through our meal we were thinking about each other, thinking about our bodies and everything else that makes it so terrific to love another person. I don't know what changed if anything did, but whatever it was it was fucking great. Natalie was my girlfriend.

Soon I was totally adjusted to my new home and new job. For dinner we split time between Bee's house and ours, but since I usually got home after Bee was getting ready to work, it was a nice excuse to eat separately from the family. We had romantic dinners with candles as often as we could, something we always liked to do. Sleeping with Natalie became my favorite bad habit. Luck was with us--no one noticed the locked door for a long time. Maybe it was a matter of time before someone did, but it would be easy enough to explain if it happened once, and we could get smarter after that.



At work, I found an unexpected solution to my transportation problem by another stroke of luck. It happened toward the end of August, when it was cool enough for me to walk half a mile down the main road to catch the bus to work. I liked riding my bike but it was a pain keeping clean and dry of sweat till I got there. The bus route nearest us brought me nearly to the door of work.

Sarah, the short black-haired girl I worked with, saw me waiting for the bus one day and talked to me about it during break. "You don't have a car, Willie?"

"Not yet," I said. "I don't know how long I'll be here, so it doesn't make sense to get one yet."

Sarah got this concerned, slightly motherly look in her eyes. She was like that--never hiding what she feels. "What, do you need a ride to work? I can give you a ride if you want."

I told her I didn't really need a ride, but she insisted and it didn't seem polite to say no. In the back of my mind I was worried about what Natalie would think, but I figured it would be okay just to ride to work with a woman. As it turned out she didn't mind, so I met Sarah at the end of our gravel road the next day. She drove an old white Rambler with a push-button ignition and steering that wasn't exactly safe. I didn't care too much, though. Junky cars and bad driving didn't bother me as long as we didn't hit anything. We almost hit a lot of things. Sarah

could make Main Street seem like the L.A. freeway, with all of her shifting, braking, honking, and changing lanes.

"People drive too slow around here," she said one Friday on our way toward home.

"Where can people go that you need to get to fast?" I asked. "There's nowhere in this town worth getting to."

Sarah smoked cigarettes and drove with one hand, which didn't help her steering. "I'm impatient--not that Cedar Rapids is such a big place. Maybe I'm just a frustrated woman."

Sarah looked kind of radical with her punky haircut, four earrings in her left ear, no bra and no make-up. No one seemed to like her at work except me. She didn't talk much to anyone else.

"We should go do something," Sarah said. "I don't have anything going on tonight. What are you doing?"

I tried to think of a good lie without being unfriendly, but I couldn't. "I'm not sure. I'm supposed to eat dinner with my cousin."

"Your cousin Natalie? She's the one you live with, right?"

"Yeah." I instantly realized that the truth wasn't a very good excuse.

"Call her up from the bar. Let's go have a drink. C'mon."

Sarah had her mind made up, but somehow, the thought of going for a drink didn't seem right to me, maybe because I was eighteen and I had never been to a bar. I wasn't old enough to drink in one. I didn't think they'd arrest me, but it would be pretty embarrassing to get kicked out. Sarah didn't look old enough herself. I asked her how old she was.

"Twenty," she said. She looked about the same age as me, or maybe a little older because she smoked cigarettes.

Natalie was still on my mind. "Let's not stay too long. Usually I'm home at the same time everyday," I said.

"Relax," Sarah said in her friendly devil voice. "No need to sweat. Call her up when we get there, okay? Act like you're single every once in a while. You're not holding a wife on me, are you?"

"No," I said, taking a deep breath. "Are you?"

Sarah didn't answer until she thought about it for a bit. "I'm single now. I just broke up with someone, and it's very stressful. I survived, but that's it."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"The person I used to date is kind of crazy. Bonkers. I hate to say it, but--sometimes, this person beat me up."

Instantly I felt sorry for her, but I was curious.

"Really? Why did he do that? Was he crazy?"

She gave me a glance as we went through a stoplight.

"Can I trust you, Willie?"

I paused, then nodded my head. "I'm good at keeping secrets."

"And you won't tell anyone? Especially not at work? Promise?" Sarah was turning paranoid on me. I wondered why. Did she murder someone or what? "Gossip goes around fast with the people at work," she said. "Ever notice you don't see me talking to too many of the girls?"

I noticed. During break time she usually sat by herself in the little eating room in the main building. The other girls either took walks or sat outside. I split my break time between Sarah and the socialites, depending on whether I was in the mood for five airhead girls or one very deep girl. Sarah was a very good listener, great for when I wanted to talk.

"We'll talk some more when we get to the bar," Sarah said, turning onto a side street. "I trust you."

"Thanks, Sarah."

In front of us appeared a mini-mall that was almost new but practically deserted, with a factory clothing store and not much else. Forest Hills was not a shopper's paradise. You could tell by looking at this mall. 5:30, Friday afternoon, payday, weekend, a summer evening that was cool enough for a stroll without sweating like a pig. Beautiful day--partly sunny, a nice low breeze, low-traffic streets, the smell of home-cooked food--yes!. We got out of the car after we parked and smelled barbecue so good we damn near

asked for some. Right by the road there was a huge brick house, and in the front yard a fat bearded man in sweat pants was spreading sauce on some chicken. He waved at us. I bet he would have let us have a piece if we had asked. It looked like the whole neighborhood was out on their porches. Nothing beats a good, solid wood frame house with a porch swing and a cool drink on a summer day.

There was a bar at the end of the mall called "The Stomp," with a cheap new age plastic sign complete with a picture of a foot. When we went in a couple of redneck-looking faces turned around, making me nervous, but no one seemed to care by the time we sat at the bar and ordered a couple of drinks from the pretty brown-haired bartender. She even stopped to give me a smile and joke a little as we ordered. "My name's Jody," she said after bringing Sarah two cold Buds, and bringing me a screw-driver in a tall, frosty glass. Sarah caught me looking at Jody's ass as she was walking away. "I guess you are single. But then again, you men are always looking."

"That's all we can do," I said, memorizing the color pattern of Jody's shorts. "Why shouldn't I look?"

"No reason why you shouldn't," said Sarah, between mouthfuls of beer, "as long as you don't forget to drink. Salud."

"Salud." I don't like strong drinks too well. I'd rather have them tasty. My first drink could've cleaned

the paint off a car, but I drank fast anyway. No matter what I'm drinking--water, milk, beer, soda--I drink fast and drink a lot. We both finished our first round in nothing flat.

"We've got a couple of party monsters here," said Jody, returning to wipe and refill. "I don't even have to ask if you want another round, 'cause I know you do."

Sarah was laughing and looking silly already. "You're a woman who knows her job. I like that. Of course we'll take another." She paid for the second round quickly, refusing the five I offered her.

I took a casual look around the bar, which was small, shiny and kind of tacky it seemed to me. The actual bar had three sides and was long--I bet 30 people could have sat there. All sorts of shoes were hanging on the walls and ceilings, to help you remember the name of the bar. A few kitchen tables were placed in the open areas behind the bar and walkways, and there was a pool table near the back wall. Whoever decorated had less taste than me, and I don't have much. At least it was clean--and the four or five people inside looked friendly, even though they hadn't talked to us.

Drink, drink, drink. We ordered Cajun french fries with ranch dressing, ate it all. Soon we were sitting shoulder to shoulder and talking very quietly, mostly about

ourselves. My first big shock about Sarah was that she used to take heroin. I didn't believe her at first.

"I was fourteen," she said. "Isn't that sick? Me and this guy I was dating, he was about seventeen. He was my first boyfriend and I was too damn stupid to tell him I didn't want to shoot anything into my arm. Can you believe that? The things we do for love--sickening."

"Pretty crazy, girl." I found it very easy to look at Sarah--she had a very warm, kind, nice-girl face even if her life wasn't matching the face she had. I kept listening, very interested.

Sarah's life story was moving toward the present, slowly. "College didn't change the way I acted. There were freaky people--freaky-deaky people there. I was hanging out with the theater crowd, all actors. They were very talented and very crazy people. I didn't fit in completely because I was studying Medieval History, but there were things I had in common with them. We all liked to party 'cause in a way we were trying to escape the real world. But you can't, you know?"

I had a hard time imagining this calm, pretty little girl with the bunny nose hanging out with the hardcores. "Is that where you met the dude who used to hit you?"

When I said that Sarah got this 007 look on her face. "I'm gonna tell you something," she said in her lowest tone.

"If I tell you do you swear you won't tell anyone at work? If they find out the shit's gonna fly, cause my aunt will be kickin' me out."

"You know I won't tell, Sarah," I said.

"All right." She showed her teeth and found her playful look, while keeping her voice as quiet as it had been. "I hope this doesn't freak you out, Willie, 'cause you're a great friend. Let's stay that way, okay?"

"Sarah, don't even worry about it. You've already told me that you used to take heroin and I didn't run away, did I? Tell me. I'll listen."

"Okay, Willie." Sarah dropped her eyes for a half-second then took my shoulder and talked straight at me. "I told you about the person I dated that used to hit me, right? Well, I never did tell you which sex that person is, did I?"

"No, I guess not," I said.

"Right. Well?" Sarah wanted me to understand what she was saying, but I didn't yet. "I never told you what sex my lover was. There's two sexes, you know."

"Wasn't he a man?" I asked.

Sarah laughed while I thought things out. The truth came to me in a minute or so but it didn't make sense. I asked her to explain.

"You don't want to know this bitch I just broke up with," said Sarah, with sadness and anger coming into her



voice. "This woman used to beat me whenever she got a little mad, like whenever her job or her parents or any damn thing put her in a bad mood." From her voice, it sounded like these things had happened the night before. "I lived with her for about a year--don't ask me why. I guess it happens when you're desperate and stupid."

I tried to listen to what she was saying, but all I could think about was that she was a lesbian. I'm sure I hadn't met a lesbian before, and Sarah was a person you would guess to be one, at least I wouldn't have guessed.

"You broke up with this girl for good, didn't you, Sarah?" I asked. "I hope so."

"Yeah, I finally did, Willie. But that was after she pushed me down the stairs and broke my arm. And you know what I did after that? I sued her."

"Really?" I was amazed that all these things could happen. "Did you win any money?"

"No way, Willie. I took it to criminal court but the case got dismissed. Not too many people wanna hear about a fight between dykes." Sarah relaxed a little bit and started smoking again. "My family had a bad reaction, too, because they never could deal very well with the way I was. I got sick of hiding it from them, and they got sick of knowing what I was doing. That's why I moved down here, I suppose. My aunt knows too, but she's cool about it and wants me to be happy, so long as no one around town knows

about it. That's why I can't let anyone at work find out. My aunt knows all those old ladies that work in the main office."

We kept talking for a long time before I called Natalie. She wasn't mad at all--in fact, she was glad I was having a good time. I promised I'd be home by eight and that we'd drive slow. Sarah already had her suspicions about Natalie and me, and I ended the mystery by telling her what had happened.

"How's the pussy?" said Sarah, drunk and trying to be funny.

"You sound like you need some yourself," I said, feeling kind of embarrassed by what she was saying.

"I do. I'm horny as a dog," Sarah said. "Got any other cousins?"

After that I had to laugh at her teasing. Being so darn nice, Sarah had the right to laugh at me anytime. We left the bar in a very happy mood, tipping Jody five dollars. "Night, you two," she said in a friendly voice. "Drive that girl right home now." She winked at me as she finished speaking.

Probably Sarah drove better after she was drunk, maybe because she didn't light a cigarette. "Jody thought you were going to take advantage of me, Willie. Imagine that."

"Sorry, I'm taken," I said, with a smile and a nod. "And it feels great."

"I'm jealous. It's been a long time since I've had anything that seems like love. Friday used to mean something to me. Now it's just another day to go sit at my aunt's house."

Sarah was totally cute. Her being gay didn't bother me at all because I don't think I really believed it. I asked her if she ever had any boyfriends besides the heroin freak. She acted surprised by the question.

"Once in high school I went out with this older guy, about 25, while I was 16. It sounds weird but there really wasn't anyone else I liked, since I went to a girl's school. Why do you want to know, anyway?"

I was too shy to tell her I had a crush on her. It's a hard thing to work into a conversation anyway, so if you're going to say it you have to just yell it out. "Just curious," I said, and we drove on.

After giving Sarah a little hug and giving her my phone number, I hurried up the gravel road to the trailer, skipping Bee's place to go straight to Natalie. I could see her through the blinds as I got close to the house, and Soda started barking to announce me. Natalie met me with a hug and kiss in the center of the room, like she always did. I was feeling drunk and frisky, grabbing a nice handful of ass while we hugged. She stopped kissing and looked at me.

"You been saving something all day long, huh beer breath?"

"Do I really smell like beer?" I said, a little bit embarrassed.

"You smell like the Miller factory, honey," she said. "I don't care. I been waiting for you all day." Instantly she grabbed my hand and started pulling me down the hall. I was practically drooling already.

I think we both jumped to the ceiling when we heard the knock at the door. Just hearing a knock is strange around there, where everyone feels they live at your house. We dropped hands and tried to come up with an everyday bored look really fast. I don't think we did too well. Also, that's the moment when I realized how drunk I was. Not being what you would call a heavy drinker, it was hard for me to act sober when I was drunk. It seemed like half a minute before Natalie remembered to say, "Come in."

Keesha walked in, more slowly than she usually does. "Auntie wants to know if you guys want to come by," she said quietly. "She made some food if you're hungry, Willie."

"Who's over there?" I asked, trying not to sound drunk. Keesha's got a strong nose--she can practically tell what you've been doing that day from the way you smell.

"Auntie Carol and Auntie Mona are over there. Mona says she really wants to see you, so you probably should come over."

"We'll be over in a little bit, Keesh," Natalie said, and Keesha was gone in a flash, leaving Natalie and I to wonder how much she saw. There wasn't much to do then except wonder.

After a quiet moment Natalie drew me to her and gave a nice warm hug. "Someday they'll know, Willie, so don't freak. They won't believe Keesha, at the worst they'll think we're being friendly. Everybody knows how close we are. That's no secret."

I let her keep talking, too confused to answer. Then I rushed to the bedroom for casual clothes and cologne and toothpaste. Much as I wanted to see Mona, it didn't seem like the right time to greet a long lost relative. The intense hours with Sarah were almost totally forgotten--I felt like I wanted to drop dead without waiting one more minute. What a certified pain in the ass! I looked at myself in the mirror hating my lips and hair, knowing that it was too late to change anything even if it could be done.

I walked back to Bee's house in the country--night darkness, stumbling and swatting mosquitoes, getting at least 25 bites, I'm sure. When we got close to the house I could see Mona's car, a definite part of her--a classic

Monte Carlo SS with tinted windows. Sometimes she drove fast because to her driving was play. The fastest I've ever gone in a car, 100 miles per hour, was with her on this county road with roller-coaster hills. It felt like we were lifting off the ground coming over the steepest climbs, but the car rode smooth as skis. In the cool of the wind, beside my Aunt Mona, it didn't feel like 100 m.p.h.

Thinking about those old times made me want to talk to Mona more. The alcohol smell was gone. I hoped she wouldn't be able to tell that I had been drinking. The kitchen door was right in front of me.

Mona was sitting in Bee's spot in the middle of the kitchen table when I walked in. She had on a red blouse with big shoulders, a knee-length black skirt, and a black hat of a style that was probably popular when she was a girl. Of course, she had to get up and come hug me right away, like all of my aunts do. Usually I don't mind, but Mona came at me with a power charge and practically knocked me over.

"Long, long time, Willie." Mona always had a very pretty face, light brown skin, perfect features with red lipstick always, and straight hair that was usually tied in the back. She reminded me of an actress or an artist living in France who knows exactly how to dress and walk and speak. Not that she's fake because she isn't. She's

very friendly, more so than most people because she says exactly what she means. I don't have too many heroes, but Mona is one.

She's always fixing my collar or straightening my shirt while she talks to me. This time she started tucking in my shirt. "I've got a man for a nephew now, a handsome, thoughtful young man. Now how the hell have you been, Willie? I wish I could have gone up to see you graduate. I miss everything. I bet you looked so good in a suit."

Mona spoke very softly but I always heard every word. I got lost in listening to her. "I missed my sister's funeral. She's buried now, and I wasn't here to bless her on the day of her passing. I could cry, Willie, but I'll spare you the sight. Let me bless you and Natalie instead." She kissed me on the head, then went over and kissed Natalie. Then she was back at her chair, inviting us to stay and have some coffee. I wasn't nervous anymore. I took a seat next to her with a man-sized mug of black coffee, needing it much more than she could know.

Her visit didn't last long, unfortunately. "Work is killing me, Willie, too much time, too much travel, too much hassle. Chuckie is leaving me now, getting ready to live on his own. He's off to New York City any day now."

Chuckie always talked about moving back, but I didn't think he ever would. He lived in New York till he was 12, when his mother was transferred to the "Raleigh regional

office of Avis, Incorporated." The way Chuckie would say that you knew how he felt--his life was over being forced to move south to that "sorry white cow town." I never minded Raleigh but he did, and he was the one who had to live there.

"Does he still have his job?" Natalie asked.

"No. He quit just the other day. I tried to bring him down with me today, but he's out somewhere."

We talked for a short while about California. "Sad situation," she said. "I didn't even know what happened until the day Sarah was buried. There's a lesson for you youngsters. Always tell your people exactly where you are. 'Cause you know, the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, and it's not always going to fit your work schedule. Remember that, Willie."

"Amen to that," Carol said, Bee nodding behind her. I noticed Natalie wiping her eyes.

Finally, Mona stood up in that smooth, casual way she has. I'm sorry, Willie, I have to leave you now. Be kind to your Aunt Mona and give her one more hug."

I hugged her and whispered goodbye. "Tell Chuckie to come down before he goes. I might not see him for a long time. New York isn't too close."

Mona laughed. "No, that it's not. I'll tell him you want to see him. Come see us yourself, in Raleigh, so we can have some time." She kissed me and gathered her purse.



All of us followed her to the door to give our last hugs and wave before she pulled from the driveway in her black Monte Carlo.

"Are you hungry, Willie?" Carol was poised to reheat. My stomach was still at war with the drinks on top of Cajun french fries. I said no.

Carol looked concerned all of a sudden as if I was terminal. "Feeling sick? You have to watch what you eat for lunch, Willie."

I told her I had a few drinks, which made her look a little less worried. Too bad Carol didn't have any children of her own, 'cause I think she'd make the right kind of mother, who's not afraid to let you know who's boss, but doesn't sweat the small stuff too much. Then again maybe she'd be too nice for a mother, the kind whose kids never realize what a good deal they have and end up going wild.

Walking back with Natalie I was feeling very bad, but at least I didn't have to act sober. We were going back to our little house on the prairie--a four-room trailer with an old woman's decorations. It was July and the mosquitoes were thicker than rain. I had spent six weeks in North Carolina, working my job and loving my cousin. High school in Des Moines was seeming duller by the minute.

We took a bigger risk than usual that night, making love and sleeping late. I don't know how I did it, drunk

as I was. One of us got the idea of moving Soda to the front of the house, where he would bark at anyone coming too close. Both of us were late sleepers, and we could use the extra protection.

Saturday was a lazy day. We ate a late brunch at Bee's, talked to the cousins for a while, went back to the trailer and watched rerun after rerun. For a change we watched college football too--North Carolina vs. Duke. It was a sorry game. I fell asleep with my head resting on Natalie's leg. About a dream and a half later the phone rang, which didn't happen too often in that house. My head bounced when Natalie leaped off the couch yelling, "I'll get it."

"Hello...hi, Sarah," I said in a scratchy slow-motion voice. "No, you didn't wake me up."

Listening to Sarah brought me back to reality. She seemed very down--everything was wrong, according to her. The problem was her aunt, she said, that her aunt wasn't as understanding as she used to be, making Sarah feel unwelcome in the house. Sarah didn't have any family in Forest Hills, besides that aunt. It's easy to understand why a young lesbian woman interested in Medieval History wouldn't fit into the Forest Hills social scene.

I invited her over without asking Natalie, thinking she wouldn't mind, and she didn't. Company was something we didn't have much of, even with all the nearby relatives.

While we waited for her we sat together on the front porch watching the moon rise over the trees by the cemetery. I tried to pull myself back to the memories that made me go back to that town. Everything seemed quieter than it had been. Clayton was gone, and so was Aunt Sarah. Chuckie was moving to New York. Shit happens, that's what they say.

I used to catch frogs with a whole gang of kids only five summers before, right in front of us in the field between the two houses. For some reason I was always afraid of the tobacco plants beside us, next to the woods. Tobacco always looked like plants from another world, and besides there were twice as many spiders, snakes, and six-foot beetles in there. I'm normally not afraid of those things, but you also see black widow spiders and every once in a while a rattler or a black racer would pop out of nowhere. Seeing those critters made me lose some of my love for nature.

With one of my long-sleeved shirts pulled over her sundress, Natalie looked very comfortable. She was petting Soda, who was sitting still at her feet for a change. I grabbed a weed and stuck it in my mouth to chew like I used to do. It made Natalie laugh. "Quit! We've not that much like hicks, are we? Or is that what people do in Des Moines?"

"No, I get this way from being here. I'm living close to the land. All I need is a good woman and a weed to chew on and I'll do just fine."

The wind picked up a little and bent the weed sticking out of my mouth. This was the first night since I got there that stood a chance at passing for chilly. I didn't notice any mosquitoes, strange for after dusk. The wind made it less quiet than usual. We waved at Carol, who had suddenly appeared from behind the house. It was Saturday, Carol's day to do housework. I wondered why no one ever bothered us or visited unexpectedly. They used to.

An impulse hit me to call Mother. I went inside and called her. She wasn't home.

For another half hour, I suppose, we sat on the mini-porch staring silently at nothing until we saw headlights approaching the end of the gravel road, past Bee's driveway. We yelled to get her attention. Sarah parked her car and walked on back to the trailer. Carol poked her head through the back door to see who it was, then closed the door again.

In the front yard I made the introduction. Then we went inside. Sarah was wearing a basic light blue blouse (never a bra) and white pants, but as I've said she was pretty enough to make simple things look beautiful.

"Got any booze?" Sarah asked, after about a minute.

"Do we?" I asked Natalie, who shrugged her shoulders.

Soon we were rummaging through cabinets to see what we could find.

There was nothing in the cabinets by the stove, but when Natalie moved to the refrigerator, she found two quarts of beer. "I can't believe we never noticed these," she said, holding them up. "Nobody drinks in this house. They've probably been in there forever."

"Put one back in and grab some glasses," said Sarah. I could see the light in her face. She didn't sound half that happy on the phone.

In the hallway pantry I found a green bottle with a cork, staring me right in the face from the second shelf. The girls cheered when I pulled it out. "This ain't soda!" I did a little bow for them, and we started the ceremonies.

We took three tall glasses and a dusty shot glass from the cupboard, and cleared off the living room coffee table to set everything out. All of us were nervous and excited, especially Natalie. She kept squirming, next to me on the couch. Sarah pulled up a chair on the other side of the coffee table, filled our glasses, and began the first toast.

"For the first time since I left Cedar Rapids I can say that I'm glad to be here. Thanks for making me feel this way. Here's to friendship."

Sarah sounded drunk already. Soon we were all feeling as loose as her. We drank down a couple of shots of

whatever had been in the green bottle, which none of us recognized for sure. Natalie said it was brandy, the only liquor Aunt Sarah ever really drank. It reminded me of dandelion wine I had one day that we ditched school and drove to the Amana Colonies, an old German town in Iowa where they make good food and bad wine. Sarah said it tasted like whiskey. Who knows? We were blowing dust off the bottle, so maybe it aged too long for whatever it was. It was nasty stuff.

Before long we were talking loud, acting like fools. I would compare Sarah to a prisoner who was let out of solitary, she was so wound up. I suppose I didn't know her yet, still not used to her being so crazy. I tried hard to get drunk, too.

"I love you," Sarah said to me as I was putting more ice in her glass. She was leaning back in her chair and nearly fell, but kept talking. "No offense, Natalie, but I love your cousin."

"Is that supposed to bother me?" Natalie said with a serious look, drinking beer from a crystal wine glass.

"No I guess not." For the first time that evening Sarah didn't have a smile, swirling the ice in her drink. Then she straightened up and energized all of a sudden. "I can't stand it. I'm jealous. I have to go."

"Wait a minute. Jealous of what?" Natalie said.

Sarah looked at me with puppy dog eyes, like she was

apologizing. "Should I tell her?" She was asking me for permission to tell that she knew my secret, as if there were some way of keeping Natalie from knowing that she knew. I laughed because everyone was acting so ridiculously serious.

"Natalie, Sarah knows what's going on with us," I said. "I told her last night. Sorry. Hope you don't mind."

"That's all right." Natalie's face didn't change--she was watching Sarah with an intense look. "What are you jealous of, Sarah?"

Sarah answered like an actress. She did a five-second sigh, threw her hands in the air, moved closer and leaned into us with a drunken sway. In a way she was like Mona--a very deep and honest person who could do things that usually annoyed me, but coming from her I knew it was the inner self talking. With her drunken face, Sarah looked older, and for some reason I kept noticing her eyebrows when she talked.

"You are both so beautiful. I've always wanted to be beautiful so people could look at me and love me. I wish I knew what it was that makes me ugly. I want to be in love with someone, you know? It's so hard not to be in love with anyone. I die when I'm alone." When she finished she gave another five-second sigh.

I felt sad for her again, remembering the things she told me at the bar the night before. To break the silence I

told her I really thought she was very pretty, which was true. Natalie said she was pretty too, and that made her smile.

"How about a toast?" said Sarah. All three of us thought it was a good idea. We raised our glasses, with everyone looking jolly. Natalie looked relaxed and pretty, too. I had forgotten to be horny for a couple of hours, but I remembered as I watched her make the toast. "Here's to a beautiful new friend and a beautiful new friendship. We love you, Sarah." We drank. Natalie had turned pro at toasting already.

Never having seen Natalie drink, I couldn't believe how much she could hold. She wasn't wobbling like I was or babbling like Sarah was. I had a feeling she was working up to a speech though, judging by that serious straight look she gets when she thinks hard. Seeing her like that reminded me of the way she looked during Aunt Sarah's funeral, looking like nothing could ever change how she felt. "I know you're thinking, Natalie," I said. "Aren't you?"

"Yes," she had to admit.

"Go ahead and say it. This is the time and place to say whatever is on your mind. We won't care, and we won't spread it."

"I might spread it," said Sarah, but I was used to her obnoxious sex comments and I ignored this one.



Natalie was catching one of those deep, long-lasting breaths. "You may not like what I have to say, so you might be sorry you asked. When it comes to what I really think, I say exactly what I mean."

Sarah was getting giggly. "Tell it, lady!"

"You know what I hate," said Natalie, "everyone assumes they know who you are. They look at you, they assume. Your mind doesn't count, or as a matter of fact you don't have a mind. Nothing gets me more than somebody looking at you like they know exactly who you are, and you are nothing. You know what I'm saying?" She paused to look at us, and we both nodded our heads yes.

"Who treats you like that?" asked Sarah. "You shouldn't put up with people that don't appreciate you."

"What if it's your family?" Natalie said, her hands talking also. "Like my Uncle Billy. He's a god damn drunk, he judges people, and he thinks he knows who I am. Every bad thing I've ever done he remembers, and he's always talking to Carol about it, like it's his business. Next time he smarts off to me I'm slapping that man, watch me, Willie."

From her tone I knew she would, 'cause Natalie never curses unless she means it. Without thinking I moved in a little closer to comfort her, patting her thigh for a moment.

Natalie wasn't finished. "You know, I'm jealous of both of you guys, for all the things you've done. Like Willie, I'm so glad you came down here 'cause I love having you around, but you know I have never done anything that compares to what you did--leaving, changing, doing something. Sarah, you can't stand this town, nobody can. But I haven't done anything about it. I'm still here."

She stopped talking and let me kiss her. Sarah got up and sat on the other side of her, taking her hand and whispering in her ear. In a while everybody was feeling high, relaxing together, filling another drink, as if we needed one. After a couple of sips I had to say, "No more," because I don't like getting sick. I still felt the alcohol from the night before, too, a little bit at least. Natalie and Sarah were going at it hard and strong, talking at over 200 words per second. I get dizzy trying to listen to women sometimes.

They made some food later on, some really nasty stuff with corn and macaroni and cheese and paprika, which I didn't touch. Unbelievable, they ate it right down, and I went for the Alka-Seltzer myself because they reminded me that my stomach was upset. Sarah didn't take any but I finally convinced Natalie to take some because we needed a clear head in the morning for church. For some ungodly reason we had agreed to go to church with Bee that Sunday. With a sad face I looked at the clock and saw that we only

had 8 hours till we had to be there. After discussing whether we should finish it or store it, I decided to put the bottle back myself, leaving about three shots for getting started the next time.

Sarah left at 1:30. I remember because the moon was full and Carol was peeking out of Bee's kitchen window while we walked our drunk friend Sarah across the field to her car. Try as we did, we couldn't get her to stay at our place, because of what her aunt might think, she said. I wondered if it would look any better for her to stagger into the house totally smashed, at 2:00 in the morning. When she started the car I think the whole neighborhood woke up since it was completely quiet till we started that noisy ass car.

At last it was bedtime for me and for Natalie, who proceeded to get sick while we were walking back. Much as I hate to hear the sound of someone puking, the choking and the splashing and the coughing, I stayed out there because it was my girlfriend who was sick. Next minute Soda started barking, Carol's head kept reappearing in the window, but she never came outside. If I was her I wouldn't have come out either, seeing what Natalie was doing. It took half an hour before she was composed enough to pull her strength together and hobble into the house.

When we finally got inside she washed up, then I tucked her in and lay down beside her, thinking about our night of

drinking with Sarah. Finally it was quiet and peaceful in the house, I wasn't ready for sleep. I like those late night quiet times, and so does Natalie, those moments when the world is just a thought and nothing is actually happening, but it's a great time for remembering. Maybe I was born old for liking things like that--Chuckie says so, anyway. He was having wild nights in Raleigh while I was reminiscing in Forest Hills.

While I was lying there staring and thinking, I felt Natalie's wet lips on my cheek. She was awake--I thought for sure she'd be passing out right away, but she didn't. Instead we were lying in bed enjoying the feel of a naked body at night. We were lying close together, half asleep, loving each other.

Near dawn, we were still squirming and whispering. It was like part two of our talk from the night before. Natalie was speaking in a soft voice, straight from her pillow. "I've never taken a chance in my life, Willie."

The way she said it made me feel sad, so I tried to make her smile. "Here you spend all night getting drunk and humping your cousin, but you never took a chance. Sure, sure."

Natalie tried to look mad at what I said, but she started giggling sure enough. A few more smooches and she began to talk again, surprising me with what she said.

"I'm ready to leave, Willie," she said. "I'm ready to leave with you."

"Where are we going?"

"I've been dreaming about Des Moines. I want to see it, Willie. I had a dream that I was happy there. Would you want to go back?"

For a moment I didn't believe what I was hearing. When you leave a place, especially a balanced-breakfast town like Des Moines, it's not somewhere you rush back to after you leave. After thinking, though, I realized I was living in her world, a world that was suddenly a very different place. Then I understood why she wanted to leave. The idea of going back didn't sound too exciting, though.

"It's boring in the winter time," I said, "and you might not like wearing snow-boots in March."

"Don't tell me what it's like, Willie," said Natalie, full of energy for 4:30 in the morning. "Wait until we get there. Then I'll see. Right, love?"

I was too sleepy to answer her again.

### Planning a Change This Time

It was dawn before we got anything that can possibly be called sleep. Somebody was watching over us too, because there's no other way that I possibly could have managed to get up at the first light and crawl over to my own room, remembering to put on my clothes. Doing that saved us from a much bigger hassle than we ended up getting, when I heard a kiddie knock on my bedroom door and Keesha was standing in front of me in the awful sunlight. She was wearing a yellow dress with the works, looking like she had gotten plenty of sleep and a good breakfast. My guess is I didn't look as good.

"You stink," was the first comment I heard after deciding that I wasn't dreaming. "I know you guys drank beer last night. You smell like Billy."

I didn't try to deny what she said--no use. Once Keesha finds out about something it's not a secret anymore. To make things worse, I remembered our promise to go to church just at that totally depressing moment, and time was obviously short because Keesha was fully dressed.

"Keesha--you better tell Auntie Bee that we can't go. Natalie and me are very tired this morning."

"You shouldn't get drunk," said Keesha, "then you wouldn't be so tired." Why are kids so damn logical sometimes?

I was glad to see her go, hoping she'd forget about what she saw before she told anyone. At first I thought Bee or Carol might come by, but either they didn't or I was sound asleep when they did. I took about two breaths before I was out again.

After what seemed like ten minutes, I woke up again to a quiet house. The wall clock said 10:45--church got out at 11 or so. Feeling better but still shaky, thirsty, and a little dizzy, I sat up in bed slowly. There was no time to wait. Bee would be less upset if we were up and about and looking presentable for Sunday brunch. I swallowed some bad tasting spit and went to the shower quickly, cleaning up and dressing in less than 15 minutes.

The time came for waking up Natalie. I didn't think it would be easy, but it was. With my first soft little knock on the door she woke up, asking if it was me because she was still naked. I gave her the fastest of kisses, resisting an urge to get something sticky started. I don't think she was up to it anyway. From the way she looked, she wasn't exactly enjoying the bright sunshine of a brand new day. "Good morning," I said as she crawled out of bed and dragged herself to the closet for a robe. "You look tired today, Natalie."

"I am tired." Even with her wild hair and eyes that weren't working yet with that rising-from-the-dead blurriness, Natalie was cute. She gave me her smile, though it looked more painful than usual.

I picked out her clothes while she showered. She didn't take long, not being one of those girls who has to pick at every eyelash before she leaves the bathroom. I chose my favorite sun dress that Natalie had been wearing the first day I came back. Brunch at Bee's wasn't a formal thing, just a clean one.

When Natalie was dressed and ready, we gave each other a casual morning kiss and hug. Her bedroom clock read 11:30, perfect timing. I was ready for a nice morality lecture because we weren't going to lie. The truth was we got drunk, stayed up late, and missed church after promising to go. Nothing we could do could change that.

We walked into Bee's place through the kitchen door. After a minute or two we heard cars outside. Soon the house was full of rowdy children and adults trying to keep them under control. Only four children were there--Nikki, Mike, Keesha and Aaron--but when four children are loose in the house they can make it seem full. The adults were Bee, Joanna, Carol, Natalie and myself.

Joanna was very quiet and never seemed to say much, even to her kids. She was pretty with a smooth face, light skin, round glasses and a curl. She was also slim and had



an actress walk like Mona, but her kids are a lot younger than Mona's. Looking at her you would never guess she was 34.

Bee acted like she was glad to see us, wearing her tan dress and walking around in her socks. I was glad to see her too--I hadn't seen much of her because she worked nights and her days off were always changing. She hugged and kissed me in the living room and didn't mention church, making me feel worse than I would have if she had scolded us. No one in my whole life has ever made me want to be religious except Bee.

While Carol and Joanna were in the kitchen I acted silly, chasing Keesha and Nikki around in their Sunday dresses. The aunties tried their best to tolerate the kids running in the house since they couldn't go outside in their nice clothes. Normally you don't do such things in Bee's house, but for some reason that day the adults weren't feeling strict and the kids weren't feeling destructive. They were told not to break anything, and they didn't.

Meanwhile Natalie was sitting quietly on the couch with Mike and Aaron beside her, watching some strange program on the Disney channel. By looking at those blank, hazy eyes I could tell how bad she was feeling. She was trying to sit straight but was slumping forward without knowing it. Feeling sorry for her, I walked over to the TV and turned

it down some, leaving it at half volume. Aaron told me not to turn it down. I couldn't answer as the two giggling girls charged at me from around a corner and almost knocked me over. They screamed and squealed as I chased them into the back bedrooms, filling the house with happy sound.

At ten till one we sat down to eat, with eight swivel chairs and a high chair around the table. Mike was small and never minded sitting in the high chair, sitting beside me at the table. Bee chose Natalie to say the grace, which she gave in a scratchy, tired-sounding voice that caused Bee and Joanna to ask if she was sick. I felt sorry for her.

Conversation was slow but the eating was good. My mouth was chock full of food when Bee spoke to us about the service we missed. "Reverend Price told all the young men in the audience to come down and stand in the front to be blessed. They all looked so good standing there. Our men ought to be less proud and show their faces at church. It's not just the religion, it's being a community. All the strength and beauty that we have within ourselves comes out at church. It hurts me to think of how we ourselves away."

Bee wasn't talking directly about us, but I felt guilty hearing her. "I'm sorry, Auntie Bee," I said. "We were up too late last night to dress in time for church. I

want you to know that I'm sorry, next time there won't be any excuses. We're always glad to go with you."

Bee smiled at what I said, but still looked concerned. "I understand you don't always want to be up with the sun like I am, Willie. Don't let what I'm saying get to you. You're a fine boy and an intelligent one, too. It's not you that needs guidance so much as the young men who wouldn't even think of working like you do, or coming all the way from Des Moines to spend time with us and take care of his cousin, or anything like that. You're Christian in your ways, Willie, even if you did sleep through church today."

I bet we stayed at the table for over an hour, stuffing our faces and talking about nothing. Everyone ate as much as they could except Natalie, who usually eats a lot but wasn't feeling so good, still. After eating the whole child crew left the house so Bee could have some quiet before she went to work. Natalie and I went back to the trailer without any of the kids following, a small miracle but I was glad. Sundays are a great day to kick back and not have to deal with anything or anybody that might possibly get on your nerves.

I set Natalie up on the couch, with a soft pillow, a cool drink, the works. With the weak smile of a sick person she thanked me and gave me a kiss. I started picking up the beer glasses and other crap that made the

living room look like a sty. "You don't have to clean, Willie," she said in a voice that sounded more Southern than usual. "Since I'm not working that's my one job. You can relax so you'll be ready for work tomorrow."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "With the job that I have I really don't need to rest anything but my fingers and my ass."

All afternoon I took good care of Natalie. By six-thirty she was up and around, making a funny promise not to drink as much next time. "Sarah's a party monster," she said. "Wonder how she feels today?"

"Maybe she'll call." I had a feeling that her aunt had "noticed" how drunk Sarah was, as late as it was when she left for home. I took a seat on the couch beside Natalie. We curled up to be comfortable and kissed for a bit.

"When are we going to Des Moines?" Natalie asked while we were holding hands. "I saved up some money when I was planning to move to New York."

"Nooo...you were moving to New York?"

"I almost did. Then Chuckie and I got real busy and all of a sudden we stopped talking about it. I had saved a lot of money from my job at the cafeteria last year. I never spent anything."

We talked for a long time until I figured, what the heck, we might as well move back. I wasn't too excited, but at least I had gotten 2 months away from home. Natalie

and me could get out very own place, and wouldn't that be a new twist on the old scene. "Should I call Mother?" I asked.

"Call her tonight," Natalie said.

I kept thinking about Des Moines--new apartment, a new job, and all that change of location stuff. We could stay in my mother's house for a while. I could get my old job back if nothing else came up. Maybe there were some better jobs to be had, too.

Later that night I called Mother and we talked for about an hour. She was glad to hear that we were moving back. Natalie even talked to her for a while, which was good since they barely knew each other, really. The last time Mother was down Natalie was twelve, and though to me it seemed like Natalie hadn't changed much at all, it's always hard for older people when us kids become grown-ups.

We went to bed early to have extra time to make love and talk without losing much sleep. Details about moving didn't seem to hard to figure. I had saved up a good chunk of money from my Blue Cross job. Natalie had money too--between the two of us, we were set. The big question was what everybody would think about us moving together, all of a sudden. Neither one of us knew how that was going to work out.

"Let's talk to Carol," Natalie said. "She won't get as mad as everyone else would. I think she knows what's going on already."

"Should we tell her everything?" I asked Natalie.

"No. Let's find out what she knows first."

I hate loaded conversations when you try to hide something from the person you're talking to. Being a Boy Scout for two years got to me. "It might be hard to lie to Carol," I said. "We should decide what we're going to tell her before we go talk to her."

Then we agreed not to tell her, figuring that if she already knew it wouldn't matter what we said, but if she didn't know we could keep things simple by not telling. Once we got to Des Moines we could do what we had to do, since we had plenty of time to decide before then. We also decided to talk to Carol as soon as we could, not knowing how, when, or what we were going to tell her.

Monday at work was no challenge whatsoever. All day long my mind was on a distant planet but I still finished 174 files, more than anybody except Jenny, who finished 181. She always did more than me, but that's because I didn't try as hard. Jenny worked through both her breaks, but still only finished 7 more than me. I don't know why anyone would work so hard to finish a few extra files, when it didn't make a damn bit of difference in how much we get paid. But that's just me. With all those yakky girls

talking about men it's hard to concentrate on work, and when I listened to them I slacked.

Sarah called in sick that afternoon. When she wasn't there work was annoying, not only because I had to ride my bike to work. I had no one else to hang out with during lunch. When I started that job the other girls were friendly, but none of them liked Sarah very much and they started keeping to themselves during break because of her.

Oh well.

At a quarter to five it was time to put stage one of the Des Moines plan into effect--giving the boss notice. With a boss like Jayne, it's not easy to leave, 'cause she really is a sweet person. I went to her at the end of the day carrying my files. She smiled at me like always, telling me what an excellent job I was doing in so short a time. People are trained to say things like that to make life more difficult after you've made a tough decision.

"Jayne," I said in the quietest voice I had, "I've got to give you notice."

"What?"

"I said I have to give you notice." I hate having to talk loud in a quiet place. Everyone turns their head to look as if it's their business. "I'm moving back to Des Moines in two weeks, so I'll only be working until then."

"Oh, Willie." The way she said that made me feel bad that I was leaving, but good that I actually mattered to my

boss. "You do such good work. I was just getting used to having you."

I dropped my files into the alphabet piles as I spoke. "I hate to leave this job, but I feel like I should get back. I'm moving back to Des Moines with my cousin."

"Well, that's nice. Thanks for telling me, Willie. You're the kind of boy who will do well anywhere. Good luck!"

Riding my bike home took longer than usual. I was tired. Usually I didn't need much sleep, but too much sex and drinking can change all that. Luckily I got to the gravel road before it started raining. Southern rains can be bitchin'. I parked my bike at Bee's house just in time to keep from getting completely soaked.

Nobody was home but Bee. She was dressed in her institutional whites and was heading for the door, stopping next to me in the hallway to kiss me on the cheek. "Someday we'll get a chance to talk again, Willie," she said. "You got to be just as busy as I am, between your job and your cousin."

"I try to keep busy," I told her, which was the last thing we said before she took a raincoat from the closet and swished out the door, umbrella in hand. Her car started and she was gone. Wondering where Carol was, I went to the kitchen and checked the refrigerator. No sign of supper.



Instead of going right over to the trailer, I took a seat in the kitchen to watch the rain and think. I stared through the big picture window that let in sun and gave the room its old country home look. There was no sun to watch as I sat there, nothing but a hard rain turning the field into a frog's heaven. I love rain, so I sat looking out the window for a while, glad that no one was there to ask what I was thinking.

When I heard another car outside the house I knew it was Carol, late compared to usual. She came into the kitchen looking tired and wet, wearing sweat pants and a jacket that wasn't slick enough for the rain. It's so rare for Carol to look tired that I was surprised. Her hair wasn't combed back in the way she liked it--it looked totally undone. She noticed the way I was looking at her and gave me a nod, taking off her coat. "I can't always look pretty, Willie. Not after a day like I had at work, and this weather. Did you eat yet?"

"No. I'm just sitting here." She didn't give me a chance to offer help or tell her to relax. Food was heating in the oven in nothing flat. She made it seem like it was challenging her to offer help. This time I was determined though, having eaten in that house about 200 times without helping to cook.

"Sit down, Carol," I said in a fatherly voice I saved for times like that one. "It's my turn to cook. Everything's made, right?"

"Yes, Willie." Carol acted surprised, but relieved. I pulled out her chair and patted her shoulder, then set out place settings and dishware. "What a nice young man you are," she said, watching me as I worked. "I guess all men aren't bad."

"Of course not, Carol." It was fun to play the domestic role, for ten minutes anyway. Carol looked comfortable settled in the white, cushioned chair that was custom made for hard working people to eat in. After I set the dishes of food around the table on potholders she was all smiles, relaxed and thankful.

We said our prayers and ate dinner very slowly, without talking much. I'm quiet after work, and so was Carol. During my second helping I remembered that Carol didn't know we were leaving, and needed to be told. Setting the table for her must have made me feel bold.

I set my fork down. "Carol, I wanted to tell you that I'm going back to Des Moines soon. I just gave my notice at work. I'm sorry I have to go."

Carol paused from eating but didn't really stop. "It's all right, Willie. I understand you want to be at your real home. I'm glad you could come and stay. You sure

were great to have around, with everyone still hurting from losing Clayton and Sarah. Have you told Bee yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Tell her soon so you two can spend some time together and have a special dinner. We can get Mona and Chuckie down, too. You'll be here two more weeks?"

"Yeah, something like that." Only half finished telling the news, I was losing my nerve, something I didn't want to do, so I let the big one loose as if it wasn't important.

"Natalie wants to come too, Carol. You think she'd be okay in Des Moines?"

I don't think Carol took me seriously at first because she didn't stop eating. "She's been wanting to go somewhere since she was six years old. I don't know that she'll ever prepare herself to leave. In a way I hope she does leave, 'cause that's what she wants. It makes people sad sometimes to follow their heart, but we've all got to do it."

I took a breath and got ready with the truth. "She's already decided she's leaving. I think she made bus reservations today."

"You're kidding." Carol's face showed surprise on its way to becoming anger.

"She said she's moving for sure. Last night when I called my mother Natalie got on the phone and asked if she could come. Mother said yes."

Carol switched to her direct assault pose, fork down, food swallowed, mind on the topic. "So Diedre gave her permission, is that right? I suppose she thinks she's Natalie's mother now, for reasons none of us can know in this life. Does she understand the words 'legal guardian?' That's what we are, Willie."

Carol hardly ever gets mad. She puts up with so much it's hard to prepare yourself when she really lays into something. All of a sudden I didn't want to argue. "Mother didn't mean to get involved. She just said it's okay for Natalie to stay for a while, not to stay forever."

"Uh-huh. And like always, she doesn't ask ANYBODY else, not even when she has no idea about what's going on with Natalie or with us. Pardon me, Willie, for speaking like this about your mother. You know I don't like to sound this way. But Willie, she's not thinking. She doesn't know Natalie. Are you sure she knows that Natalie's staying for more than just a few days?"

"Yes, she knows." I was waiting for Natalie to walk in right in the middle of all this.

Carol stood up quickly. "If it ain't New York, it's Des Moines, maybe Atlanta next week, don't get me wrong, I love my niece and I want her to be happy. She's just like

your mother, though--can't ever say what she's going to do, just does it and nine months later, maybe you'll find out what she did."

Two weeks, I thought to myself. A lot of arguments can go down in two weeks. Here was argument number one, and Natalie hadn't even said her part yet.

I think Carol must have heard my thought. "Where is Natalie? Did she eat already?"

"She might have. I haven't been over there yet."

"Can you go get her, Willie? She needs to explain what she's planning to do. Is she going through something, or what?"

I couldn't answer, feeling bad for Carol. I wanted to tell, but I kept quiet and shook my head.

"Willie, can you go tell Natalie to come over here? Or maybe I should call. It's still raining, isn't it? Just a second, Willie."

Right after Carol left the room I saw Natalie leave the house, wearing her yellow raincoat. I wanted to shout at her to go somewhere else. She was walking fast, the rain coming down in streaks and sheets. I moved closer to the window. She saw me and waved with a happy face. Then she saw the look on my face and the smile was gone. I opened the screen door for her. Her feet landed on the kitchen floor, along with about two pints of rainwater.

Carol stomped in like it was the last day of the world, and Natalie got defensive quicker than I thought she could. In a split second the room was filled with the rude, loud sound of angry words that I didn't want to hear. Carol started out madder but Natalie held her ground. I decided to leave, grabbing my coat and backpack and moving toward the back door without a word.

Natalie tried to follow, with Carol still arguing. "What are you running from?" Carol said, the sadness in her voice coming through loud and clear. "We're your family."

"You're not my family," said Natalie in a voice so harsh it made me blink. "I don't know where my family is."

Natalie had hurt Carol. I felt bad and thought about staying, but I couldn't. Natalie was pulling me out the door, into the rain. The screen door banged shut. The field was sloppy with mud; it looked like the grass couldn't hold any more water. Soon we were running toward the trailer, Natalie crying with all her energy.

I held Natalie's hand as we sat on the couch, like on the day Aunt Sarah died. It's depressing to sit with a hysterical person who you know you can't help. What could I do for Natalie? I wondered how Bee would react--not good, I figured. The worst of it all was thinking about two more weeks of listening to all the arguments.

"Willie," said Natalie in a sad throaty voice, "let's leave. How about tomorrow?"

I felt sick. "Natalie, we can't go now. Bee doesn't even know we're leaving."

"But I can't stay here, Willie."

"Why not?"

"You heard why not!" Her voice was ragged and thin, but got softer when she spoke again. "Carol's not a part of me. You're a part of me, Willie. I want to go somewhere. And be a part of you."

At that point, sitting in a dark room with Natalie's cold hand and warm body as close as it could get, I couldn't say no. For better or for worse, this was our time. Des Moines didn't seem far away any more, a cab ride and a bus ticket, that was all. I promised Natalie we'd be on our way before the end of the week. Neither of us jumped for joy, but she did squeeze my hand and tell me she loved me. It was beautiful to hear, even though she was crying.

We talked out the situation as far as we could, and after that she started to pack. Already she had her mind on Des Moines and it made her a busier person than I had seen before. She had made a decision, that was easy to see. What else was there to do?

My mind focused on Carol and Bee, wondering what I could POSSIBLY say to keep us from leaving on bad terms. Natalie didn't seem to care, but I did. I truly hate family arguments. Why I couldn't stay out of them I have

no idea. I've been in that position a lot without learning how to do better.

Carol called in less than an hour, asking to apologize to Natalie, who wouldn't come to the phone. Carol said she was coming over, but Natalie didn't pause from packing. I didn't want to tell her what Natalie was doing yet because all hell would break loose. I told her Natalie was still crying. Carol said she'd come out of it soon and when she did, to send her right over. If Bee found out what was happening, Carol said, she wouldn't take it well.

I hung up the phone wishing we were on the bus.

For the first time since she was walking towards me in the heavy rain, Natalie was quiet, looking relieved. I made sure to pull down the curtains and lock the door so nobody could see in case we kissed. If ever there was a time to keep quiet about our affair, that was it. Slowly and sadly, I started packing myself. I had a big suitcase, an overnighter, and a backpack.

As I was settling back to watch Natalie finish packing, Sarah called. She talked in a whisper, sounding a little sick. I told her we were leaving. She couldn't believe it was happening so soon. I told her about the argument, and we decided to have a goodbye dinner at the Neon Goose downtown. They had excellent fried cauliflower, Sarah said, plus a lot of other food too. Natalie agreed to go



very quickly. She hardly went anywhere at all, it seemed to me.

Time passed slow that whole night. I finished packing fast, and had plenty of time to stare at the door and wonder if every sound was Carol knocking. She didn't call or knock any more for the rest of the night. Nobody did. The rain outdoors stopped, but the wind kept me jumpy. We watched a couple of boring television shows and went to bed, nothing else to do.

Around 11:30 I kissed Natalie good night and we went to sleep separately. I still wasn't feeling completely comfortable in Aunt Sarah's room, even with most of her stuff was gone. I thought about Sarah and Clayton while lying in the dark. Too bad Natalie wasn't there to kiss and feel close to, I thought to myself. Then before I went to sleep Natalie knocked on my door, waiting naked for me to answer. We went to her room and made love before going to sleep.

Getting up for work was a serious challenge, and it wasn't any better to ride across muddy roads and wet fields to get to the main drag. Fenders help you stay dry, but not completely. All in all my luck held pretty good--not once had it rained while I was actually riding to work. For a guy with nothing but a bicycle, that's luck.

I typed 139 claims that day, with Jenny complaining in my ear all day about her boyfriend and her pet chimpanzee.

Jenny could be strange sometimes but she could afford to be, with rich parents to buy her funky pets and take her on cruises. She kept saying how she wanted to be a veterinarian, but I doubt that she could spell it, let alone be one. Pardon me for telling the truth. I hate airhead chatter when I'm all worn out, trying to forget there are people that silly. If I was a rude person I'd have told her to shut her mouth.

Late in the afternoon Sarah came up in conversation. Of course Jenny wasn't tired of hearing herself yet. "Sarah's weird. I hope she doesn't come back. She's some kind of radical punk."

"No, she's not. She's nice," said Judy, a new girl. She was a little older than me, with round fluffy blonde hair, a sharp pointed nose, and clothes that reminded me of June Cleaver. She had a small-town girl personality too, simple but not too proper. I don't think anybody liked her but me.

I decided to pull the string just for fun. "Yeah, she's not a radical. I went out with her last Friday. She's a lot of fun."

All three of the girls stopped typing to stare at me. "You're kidding me," said Jenny, with that semi-pout, semi-sowl that was supposed to make her look cute.

"We went out for drinks," I said. "It was no big deal. I thought we could use a cold one after work."

Jenny was still staring. "She doesn't have anybody else to go with, does she? You're too nice." She went back to typing, giving up trying to figure out the world.

"Come out with us sometimes," Linda said, breaking in a word. "We like to drink, too."

"Come, but don't bring her." Jenny did a fake shudder complete with sound effect.

At least the day passed fast. I had to fly on my bike to meet Sarah and Natalie at the trailer by six. The weather was sunny and hot and the roads were dry. I tried not to sweat, but it didn't work. By the time I got to the gravel road, the ol' armpits were good and soggy. Visions of the car I would own someday flashed in my mind.

Seeing Sarah's white Rambler next to Bee's car, I took a shortcut to the trailer, through the field. Sarah sat on the front porch waiting for me, waving. "Hello, stranger," she said, greeting me with a little kiss. "How was the ride home? You look wet."

"It was all right. You didn't miss a thing at work. Better be glad you didn't go." I let my bike fall into the mud, making Sarah laugh. "I assume you'll be giving me a ride to work tomorrow?"

"I guess. I'm still sick, but I'm also poor. Way things are going with my aunt I'll be needing some cash. Pretty soon I'll be hitting the road myself."

We walked into the living room, where Natalie sat on the couch in her thinking mode. She looked pretty with a black flowered dress, but her eyes were sad. She tried to smile and hug me, shaking a little bit as she did. Realizing that I knew something was up, a totally painful look came onto her face and she settled into full cry. Sarah didn't look surprised so I figured it wasn't the first time she had done this that afternoon. Very quietly I took her hands, kissed her and asked what's wrong.

"I don't know, Willie. Let's just go." She pulled away and took her purse to the bathroom. I looked at Sarah, who gave a little shrug.

"I got here right after she got into it with your aunt. You'll be hearing about it, I know. She needs a drink."

I wished I could be as casual as Sarah about a problem, solving it with a drink and a little laugh. It wouldn't be that way for Natalie. Carol is the last person in the world you want to argue with, especially when she gets her energy going. Even when you think you're right, she makes you feel like you're not. Once when I was seven I stayed at a friend's house until eight o'clock, without calling to say where I was. When I got back Carol didn't touch me at all (she would never spank 'her sister's child') but after she got done lecturing me I was crying my eyes out, sorry as a child could be and promising not to do it again. I walked outdoors with Sarah. We stood there staring

across the muddy field at the trailer with the neat flower bed and woods beyond it. I always liked being in the country, or anywhere you can see lots of trees. All through my life I've had a favorite spot, even if it's somewhere along the railroad tracks by a big street. If I'm sad I go to that spot to wonder and think about life. Standing on the porch with Sarah, the whole town of Forest Hills seemed like one of those spots.

Natalie looked happier when she joined us on the front step. I took her hand and Sarah's, and we went skipping across the grass. Natalie laughed when she saw Sarah's push-button ignition. I sat in the middle of the front seat between the two women.

We got to the Neon Goose very quickly, thanks to Sarah's New York rush hour-style driving. She had a charmed life, I swear, with the way she could speed, tailgate, change lanes without a signal, and still miss everybody. It helps if you have an ancient junk car that most people are so scared of they stay away from you. Too bad her driving had to be wasted in a pioneer town.

The Neon Goose was very well-lit, which meant that you could see the worn-out floors and gritty tables. They didn't card us at the door, at least. We walked right by the bouncer, who obviously didn't give a fuck about who came in. We could have been Boy Scouts and still gotten in.

My favorite drink, margaritas, was right in the center of the menu. I didn't know too much about types of drinks. Except for a short, idiotic semester in high school I've never been a drinker. So of course, we had to order a pitcher of strawberry margaritas.

Sarah broke the quiet after we ordered. "Did you guys have fun last weekend? I had too much fun."

"We noticed," Natalie said in a kidding way. "You had more fun than I did. We never made it to church after all that drinking, but we needed to."

"My aunt wants me to go to church, too," Sarah said. "I have a few thousand disagreements with the so-called Catholics. I'm not like you guys. I won't do things I don't believe in doing just to make somebody happy."

"Are you saying we're don't believe?" I said. Sarah shook her head, but I kept talking. "That's not the reason why I don't go. I hate to get up on Sunday morning. It's the last day to sleep in before you have to go to school or work or some other boring place. Why do I want to drag myself out of bed, put on some clothes that I don't like to wear to begin with..."

"We get the picture," said Sarah. "You're too damn lazy."

"That's right," I said. "If church were at 3:30 I'd probably go. With church at 10:30, forget it."

"Be a Catholic." Sarah said. "You can party all night, sleep all day and then go to 6:30 mass on Sunday. Or, you can go to 6:30 mass on Saturday and go party after that. It's perfect for people to do whatever they want and not have to feel guilty about it."

Beside me I noticed Natalie sitting very quiet with her eyes looking down. I put my arm around her and gave her a squeeze to try and get her to smile, and she finally did.

When the pitcher of margaritas came we ordered some appetizers--fried cauliflower, mozzarella sticks, a large order of nachos--to go with our drinks. I love to eat that way. Since it was our goodbye get-together, we drank like there wasn't going to be a next time. Sarah made the first toast. "It's been so long since I've had friends that I forgot what a great feeling it is. Thank you so much for being friends with me. A solemn toast--to a beautiful couple and two beautiful friends, Natalie and Willie."

We clinked our glasses and drank. Natalie was in rare form like she was the Saturday before, downing about half a marguerite right then. I had visions of carrying her across the field to the house.

After drinking like fish, we ate like pigs. Natalie intercepted the plate of mozzarella sticks and had a funny little fight with Sarah over the last two. Sarah knocked a marguerite into Natalie's lap. I started laughing with a big blast of air and blew out the candle. That's about the

time the waitress came over. She was a round woman with black hair and corny black glasses, and didn't think what we did was funny.

"Finish up and get out," she said in a voice more manly than mine. "You think this is New Year's Eve?"

"No, it's July 27," Natalie said as the waitress walked away. I don't think she heard, lucky for us. Natalie and Sarah immediately started the "hee-haws" again.

"We better leave," I said. I don't think I was quite as drunk as they were. Almost, but not quite.

"Why? Because of that fat waitress?" Natalie said in a super loud voice I'd never heard from her before. "We paid to eat here. She can kiss my ass."

Sarah was surprised by what Natalie said. One of the bouncers looked over at us, too. "Let's go," Sarah said, putting a twenty on top of the check. Quietly I explained to Natalie that the situation was getting out of hand and she kept quiet till we were outside. She didn't yell "Fuck you!" until we were right by the car. It was just about dusk, on a partly cloudy day. The sun was shining red and orange above the downtown store fronts. The only two places that looked open were the bar and a liquor store across the street. I saw Sarah's eyes light up with that neon brightness they get when she thinks about something fun.

"Let's get some beer," she said. "You guys stay here. I'm going across to get some more." She ran across the



street before I could tell her that I didn't want to drink any more on a work night.

"Get a case," Natalie yelled. It scared me to think of what bad shape we'd be in if we drank a case, but it made me laugh how Natalie had turned into a party animal overnight. It was only Tuesday. We had gotten drunk on Friday and Saturday.

Sarah came back with a case of Miller and a little bottle of Southern Comfort, which she showed us when we got in the car. "The man in there asked me if I'm buying this booze for myself or for those minors across the street. I told him it was for me, and he didn't even ask for I.D. How's that for luck, guys?"

"How old are you?" asked Natalie.

"Twenty," Sarah said. "I'll be 21 in 2 or 3 months, so I can buy anywhere, anytime after that."

We decided to find a spot by the river to drink where no one would bother us. I volunteered to buy some "Off" first if we were going down there. The only store that was open was a 7-11, and when I saw the price I was sorry I said I'd pay. \$5.99 was what it cost for some god damn mosquito spray. "Next time we go halves," I said to Sarah when I got back in the car. She put the car in gear and we drove off.

We parked a little ways off the country road and cut the lights. Sarah looked at the woods with eyes that were

scared and surprised. "Don't tell me we're walking from here to the river. Through there?"

"There's a pretty good path. Me and Natalie came down here once."

"You're serious," Sarah said, looking across me at Natalie this time.

"It's no big deal," Natalie said. "Pass me a beer, don't you see mine is empty?" She chucked a bottle out onto the trees, and made us both laugh.

Sarah laughed the hardest. "Natalie, you were born the wrong sex and the wrong color. You'd make a perfect good ol' boy."

"Pass the damn Off," I said, "Let's get the fuck out of this car before we end up in jail." I tried to push away thoughts of missing work and grabbed a beer. With more cursing we crawled out of the car, booze, mosquito spray, and a blanket in hand. We locked purses and wallets in the trunk and tied the key on Sarah's shoestring.

Natalie pointed the way to the trail. "Come on behind me. I'll lead you to where you need to be." She moved quickly with a lot of noise. It wasn't pitch black, but we couldn't see much. All I could see was thick branches and the girls. Since we were there the time before the grass on the path had grown and came past our ankles. All kinds of frogs and grasshoppers appeared out of nowhere as we walked. It was all strange and kind of funny because we

were smashed. There were water noises, bird calls, and crashing, cracking sounds of three drunks, traipsing down the path.

When the ground started feeling mushy I knew we were close. The girls broke out of the scrubby trees and after the last scraggly branch had snapped back in my face all three of us were standing in front of the Tar River--calm, bubbly, and filled with musky river scents. The air was daytime warm without wind. The only moving thing was the slow current that barely waved the weeds. All of a sudden everybody was quiet.

The blanket was one of those vinyl "space blankets" and it could stand moisture pretty good. We spread it on the short grass about two feet from the edge of the water. The ground was very wet and we were sinking, so we took off our shoes and socks and set them further back. Then we went back to the business of drinking.

We took swigs from the bottle of Southern Comfort, and practically bathed in mosquito repellent. At first we could hear and see mosquitos constantly--they were flying around our heads and buzzing in our ears--but between the booze and the Off they got the idea that we weren't good feeding. Either that or we forgot about them.

Before long the singing started. As I remember we ran through "Bingo," "Old Macdonald Had A Farm," "The Star-Spangled Banner," "Bridge Over Troubled Water," "This

Land Is Your Land," and "Beat It." There were more but things were getting hazy by the time we got to the last few songs. After that Sarah suggested we go skinny dipping and before we could answer she was naked and in the water. Natalie went next and it wasn't a tough decision for me to get naked with two women. I even went over and gave Sarah a big hug and kiss to have a chance to touch her body. She liked her hug but Natalie got jealous and led me back to the beach where we ended up doing it right in front of Sarah, who was still out in the water, watching I guess.

Right after that I sorta came out of the state I was in and put some of my clothes on again. Sarah stayed out in the water naked for a long time, floating and swimming. Natalie told me not to watch. "I won't," I told her, but I still did. We fell asleep for a little bit, all three of us on that blanket with legs trailing in the water.

I don't know who finally had the sense to say, "Let's go," but the walk back to the car seemed about three times as far as the walk to the river. We were muddy and tired, with headaches and still half drunk. Natalie still seemed to know where she was going but stumbled a lot. Sarah seemed tired or depressed like she was walking in her sleep. I was scratching about 20 mosquito bites and getting sick and tired of branches whipping back in my face. After what seemed like an hour walk we spotted the

road. Sarah's beat-up dingy white Rambler looked like home.

I had to nudge Natalie to wake her up when we stopped the car and gave our sloppy goodbye hugs to Sarah, all of us too tired to get emotional. Then we trodded past Bee's car on our way to the trailer. The kitchen light was on, but I didn't see anybody when we turned. I couldn't be sure that no one saw us or heard Sarah's car, which made me nervous even in my comatose mood.

That night we went to bed in our own rooms. It didn't take long for us to go to sleep, for sure. I didn't even set my alarm. I might not have made it up if not for the doorbell, which rang about dawn, it must have been. It kept ringing. I felt like absolute shit but it kept ringing. Somebody had to answer it. Slowly I got up, threw on my shorts and went to the door.

Carol stood on the front stoop, with her robe and bare feet. She had a poker face which seemed totally calm, but made me worry about what was wrong. "Hi, Willie. Dressing for work?"

I strained my brain for a decent excuse. "No, I'm not feeling that great today. I was planning to call in and stay home."

"That's too bad." Carol is not a sarcastic person, but when she said that it sounded like she was getting smart.

"Can you come over for breakfast later?"

"Sure. When do you want me over?" Trying to sound cheerful was a lot of work.

"I think we'll eat about eight. Bring Natalie." She looked hard for another minute but then I noticed the softer eyes of the old Carol. Her voice became quieter and less angry. She moved a little closer to me. "We need to talk things over, Willie. I know. We're a pain. We can't help it, so help us, please?" She gave me her auntie smile. "Is Natalie up yet?" I told her she wasn't.

"Well, when she gets up bring her over," said Carol. "I've already got the coffee made. Help us, Willie. Tell her we're not trying to take away her rights. I know that's what she thinks, isn't it?"

I had no choice but to say yeah, my headache growing. I also felt depressed and a little nauseated.

"I figured." Carol laughed softly, more and more herself. I realized how angry she had been at first. "Tell her she doesn't have to fight us, okay Willie? Blood is blood, but kin is kin, you know? It doesn't do us any good to fight. I'm sick of it."

"I'll bring her over by eight if I can, Carol."

"Do that. I'll talk to you soon." Carol did a turn and headed back to the house. I headed for the bathroom, the stale sour taste of alcohol in my head and on my breath. There's no way Carol couldn't have noticed. No way, I thought to myself, puking.

"Dammit!"

I was wiping the last of the puke off the rim of the toilet when Natalie staggered in wearing her nightgown. One look told me that she wasn't feeling too well herself, so I left her in the bathroom and went to lie down again. I couldn't sleep, no way. My head was pounding and I still felt sick. When I finally had the will to go back to the bathroom for Alka-Seltzer, Natalie was just getting out. I couldn't say who looked worse.

The red digital numbers on the clock beside my bed blinked: 8:21. The alarm clock was on radio and was turned way down. I needed to call work and wake up Natalie. I didn't especially want to, but I did.

Natalie was dressed in a halter top and shorts, and sitting on the edge of her bed when I went into her room. No good morning kiss this time. I sat down beside her to snuggle up, and I could see her thinking. She looked at me with tired eyes, but as cute as ever. I told her about my talk with Carol early that morning.

"Let's leave today, Willie," she said. I checked her eyes closely to be sure she was serious. I looked around her room. It was missing some key items like make-up, pictures--the packing was already done. She waited for an answer.

"What about the house?" I asked.

"They can find someone," said Natalie. "We have to go, Willie. There's nothing we can say to them. We'll get caught if we stay here. Don't you think it would be better to go?"

"They'll freak out."

"They'll freak out either way. Plus, they'll freak out at me, not at you, 'cause all you're doing is going home."

I nodded my head. I didn't have much to say against leaving, so I went along with her. We collected our bathroom supplies and put them in my backpack. I called work to give an address to send my last check. Natalie called Sarah, who was just as hung over as we were. Sarah said she was sorry we were leaving. All three of us cried and we promised to write each other. Natalie and I dug our bank papers out of a suitcase to check on money: I had \$738, Natalie had \$805. We could have taken a plane.

Last arrangement to make: we called a cab and told him to be there in an hour. From downtown we could walk to the bank and the bus station. That gave us a time limit in talking with our two aunties, which I knew would be very depressing anyway.

We walked across the long yard with our suitcases, with Soda barking at us, ready to leave Forest Hills, and in a way I was glad. I followed Natalie through the kitchen door of Bee's house without a word.



Sitting quietly at the kitchen table, Carol and Bee saw our suitcases and met us with a cold cat stare. Instantly I was pushing second thoughts about leaving out of my head. I kept quiet because of Natalie, who strutted up to the table and sat right down, like she was going to demand breakfast or something. Everyone was so angry and tense it was unbelievable. To top it all off, we still had practically an hour till the cab was due to come.

Bee stared at Natalie and our suitcases with that hopeless way she watches the 6:30 news with--you get the feeling that she's sad because nothing she can do will change what's going on. It was the same look she had that day when Natalie was tired and depressed and didn't show up for brunch. I turned away from her eyes. Fifty-four minutes.

Carol spoke first. "So you're going to Des Moines, are you Natalie?" Her voice sounded firmer than I had ever heard it sound.

"Yes, we're leaving today," said Natalie. "We're catching a cab downtown. The bus leaves town at 1:30."

Carol kept talking, sounding more impatient. "And you feel like you can take off to somewhere you've never been without our permission, without telling us when you'll be back. Is that what you're going to do, Natalie?"

Natalie didn't speak. I noticed the flies that were buzzing behind me at the pane of the picture window. The

room was hot and quiet, and stayed that way for longer than I thought I could stand.

"Did you talk to her?" Carol said straight at me in a cracking, hopeless voice. "Did you tell her that she doesn't have to run from us, that she belongs here, for the love of heaven, Willie, did you tell her?" I was quiet. She went on. "Before she gets on that bus and takes off to Iowa, Willie, can you tell her to think about what she's doing?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm leaving," said Natalie, sounding twice as determined than she did before.

Carol drew closer to Natalie, sliding her swivel chair right up to her. "Then why are we the last to know, Natalie?" she said, very quietly now. "Do you think we're going to scream at you, hit you, force you to stay? We can't make you do anything. Don't you know that, Natalie?"

Bee was quiet, staring at nothing and not moving an inch. I went up to her and asked if she would talk with me in the living room, trying not to sound as sad as I felt. We sat down in that room with all those old memories and good times racing through my head, that small white-walled room filled with objects that seemed huge when I was a kid, and I never forgot. I hugged Bee and we cried on each other for a minute, tears coming down too fast to count. For a moment I wondered why I was leaving, but then I remembered.

"I'll be back, Auntie Bee. I'll make sure Natalie's with me, too. I'm sorry we made you sad."

"Everybody has to leave home," she said. "I don't want Natalie to leave, but she it's up to her. I trust you, Willie. That girl needs love, every day of her life. Make sure you give it to her."

Advice. I hadn't thought too much about what it would be like to be staying with Natalie, away from everybody. We figured it would have to be easier being away from all that family.

"Let's get back to the kitchen and tell those girls to stop arguing," said Bee. "We barely have time for a bite before you both leave. Later on we can cry all we want."

The voices in the kitchen were low but sharp. I went with Bee to set the table and get the hot dishes served while Natalie and Carol ran out of words and sat pouting. Bee sounded almost cheerful when she shook the little cowbell and said, "Okay, children, let's eat fast."

I stuffed myself, which helped me because I was totally hung over and I needed something in my system besides booze. For being mad, Natalie ate pretty well herself. Carol ate the least out of us four, and didn't say much during the meal, either. I had a nice conversation with Bee, though.

"Where do you think you'll get a job in Des Moines, Willie?" asked Bee.

"I know I can at least get my old job at Banker's Life," I said, "but I might go to school at Grandview College or somewhere if I can get the money together. I don't know how much of my life I want to spend typing forms."

"I'm so glad to hear that, Willie." Bee sometimes talks with her mouth full when she's giving advice. "Natalie, you follow his lead, too, and work on getting a good job. Don't spend all your money right away. Get a job with plenty of vacation so you can come down and see your aunties every week."

"Right, Aunt Bee." Natalie looked more relaxed, finally. I decided to apologize to Carol.

"Carol," I said, "I'm sorry I'm taking your niece away. But that's less laundry for you to do, isn't it?"

She didn't notice the joke, speaking low. "It's not your fault, Willie. If she has to go, she has to go. I can't spend my time worrying about what's already done."

No more was said about it for the rest of the meal, and soon the cab pulled up and honked. Time for our last hugs. Bee walked me outside with her arms around me. Carol and Natalie followed behind, with suitcases, setting them beside the trunk. I ran back inside to get the last two, which the greasy-haired cabman took from me when I got back. He looked like he needed a tip.

For a minute I stood there hugging Bee while Natalie and Carol watched. Then I hugged Carol while Bee and Natalie took their turn. "I'll miss you, Willie--come back, okay?" Carol said softly into my ear. She looked very tired, almost like she wasn't even awake, watching me with a soft stare. Bee whispered a last word of advice and kissed us before we slipped into the back of the cab. It sounded like Sarah's Rambler and moved slow in reverse. The dust from the road rose higher and higher when we pulled away. In a second I could barely see Carol's dressing robe and Bee's daytime greens, waving with sad little smiles until we turned the corner and I couldn't see them anymore. I cried a little again, snuggling close to Natalie, who was crying too.

### A New Home in the Old Corn

"Folks goin' down to the Greyhound dee-poo?" In the rearview mirror I saw the cabbie's two eyes looking at us with a smile, like he caught us doing something. It was almost rude, the way he looked. "Yes, drop us there, please," I said. While we drove I sat there quiet with my eyes on the trees and trailers and tobacco fields, wanting to bring them with us. Even though tobacco is a devil plant it's still twenty times better to look at than corn. The leaves are so feathery and wide, chest high and soft-looking. Corn is just corn, but tobacco is a plant. I took a long, hard, quiet look.

Arriving downtown, both of us quietly went about doing what we had to do that day--taking out all our money in traveler's checks (which made us both feel rich), buying tickets and waiting for an hour in that dump of a station, which was like a run-down, smoke-filled trailer with one big window and vintage 1844 vending machines. I swear the same people were sitting in the station as when I first came. Maybe they lived there.

The bus came almost on time, with "Memphis" as the destination in the window. Once we got on some old white ladies in the front did a seat trade (I guess 'cause they

thought we looked cute) and we were able to sit together. All the way to the first stop, Raleigh, they looked at us and smiled but I didn't say too much. Too many loudmouths on the bus as it is, making it hard for people like me who would just as soon sleep all day.

We passed through Raleigh, Durham, other cities I don't remember. Natalie looked at everything, smiling, asking where I had traveled to before. I told her all about Omaha, New York, Cedar Rapids--that's about the only places I've been to other than Des Moines and Forest Hills. The way she listened to me I might as well have been Marco Polo. Girls are great to bring on bus trips. If you have to sit so close to someone it might as well be a girl. Trouble is you get horny but there's not much you can do about it.

It was sundown when we got to Asheville, North Carolina, with those big hills, fluffy trees and smokestacks. We had 45 minutes to wait. I walked with her around downtown trying to find real food--there's no way you can go from Bee's meals one minute to bus station microwave cheeseburgers the next. We found this tiny little restaurant called the Pasta Palace that had two windows to order from and two round tables with stools. The kitchen was bigger than the restaurant was, and it seemed like the whole family was working there, with the cute little black-haired girl up front. I ordered my favorite

sandwich, Italian sausage, with plenty of cheese and a cold drink. Natalie got a hamburger, which I gave her plenty of bother about, but she just stuck out her tongue and kicked my stool.

Bus rides take too damn long, even when you don't have to sit for three hours in Memphis. At least the bus wasn't crowded, the time being 7 a.m. We took a seat in the very back, where you have 3 seats instead of two. Trouble is, we smelled piss every time the door opened, and the door wouldn't shut all the way unless someone went inside and locked it. All in all we didn't pay too much attention, spending most of the time kissing and touching without anyone staring. That's about all we did during the SLOW bus ride through the tip of Arkansas into Missouri. We stopped at every single town the bus driver could think of, whether it was north, south, east, or west--what's an extra 20 miles out of the damn way when people are trapped anyhow? We learned to fall asleep no matter how many naps we already took that day.

I remember stopping in Cabool, Missouri, which isn't a place most people remember. We were bored, staring out the window at the "Caution: Cattle Crossing" signs along those narrow state roads, counting down the last 48 miles to Cabool because we were totally thirsty and there was nothing else to do. The next thing we knew we passed the sign: "Reduced Speed Ahead" and there was Cabool, two grain



elevators, a junkyard, a couple of banks and a big gas station. We stopped at an overgrown ice cream stand with a 12-foot neon cone in front, the kind of sign nobody in their right mind today would put in front of a two-bit store on Rural Route 2. Every kid in town was sitting on his bike near the outdoor tables when the big crowd of strangers rolled in. They backed up a little to watch the action.

I ordered a huge 95 cent vanilla cone dipped in chocolate, the best thing in the world for the middle of summer, and fanned like hell to keep the bugs away. I started sweating while eating ice cream, standing in front of a wall map talking to Natalie. The map was posted right by a hot air vent. There's no humidity like Southern humidity, that's for damn sure.

Natalie was staring at my cone. "Can I have a bite?" I hate sharing things like suckers and ice cream, but I couldn't say that to Natalie. I gave her a bite.

She pointed to North Carolina on the map. "Look how far we came. There's Forest Hills, way over there. Here's Cabool, way over here." It was time for a short, messy kiss with ice cream lips.

"We don't get back to Des Moines till tomorrow," I said. The bus was routed through Kansas City, where we were supposed to get an express. I don't know why we had to go through K.C. when it's way down southwest of Des

Moines, and we were coming from the southeast. Whoever draws up bus routes has to be drunk.

Natalie was all smiles for the first time in a while, looking at the map and realizing how far she was from home. I showed her where Des Moines was and she looked even happier. We ran to the tiny grocery store across the street to buy a couple of oranges before we went on. I love small town stores, because everything's cheap and you never know what they're going to have. They sold all sorts of penny candy that I hadn't seen since I was a kid.

Cabool was history in a few seconds and we were riding towards--Joplin, somewhere. All of a sudden there was too much corn, and I could tell we were closer to home. Natalie acted like seeing corn was the greatest thing in the world, as if she'd never seen it before. It took me a long time to figure out why they grow corn all the way from Nebraska to Pennsylvania--to feed cows. I told Natalie. She looked even more excited, staring out the window and looking back at me with the absolute dumbest looks. I had to laugh with her. I'd never seen anyone get so excited about going to Des Moines. To Natalie that day, it might as well have been Egypt.

The rest of the day and into night I did a lot of sleeping with my head on Natalie's lap. I don't think she dropped off at all until after dark. All afternoon I'd doze, then wake up confused and there she was, still

staring at the corn. She had on her blue berets with her blue dress and looked pretty as could be. Every once in a while she'd look down, see me awake and give me a nice kiss. After dark her head sagged back onto her seat cushion and she was in dreamland. My neck was sore by then so I sat up and read a boring newspaper until I fell asleep again.

All night long it rained, sometimes so hard that we could barely see out. There were sheets of water rinsing across the road. Coming down one hill we hit a huge puddle, shaking the bus and waking up Natalie. She screamed and embarrassed herself. I pointed straight at her when the people in front of us looked back.

Luckily we got to keep our seats until Kansas City, where we had to change buses. It was early, early morning. I went out to make sure they moved our bags to the new bus while Natalie got in the food line. She was almost in front when I got back. The cafeteria smelled very bad. Even the obnoxious plastic pictures of food hanging above our heads looked bad, all of it overpriced. I went for two doughnuts and a carton of old milk. Natalie got the same. Then we found an open corner of that extremely crowded station and sat on top of our suitcases to eat.

Ten minutes after we finished "breakfast", we heard the call for the express to Des Moines. The bus driver drove like a madman through rush hour traffic. We got out of

town quick, about 10 after eight, then it started to rain again as soon as we were out of suburbia. I could feel us sliding when we changed lanes.

Natalie was nervous, looking out the window. I put my hand on her arm. She kissed me. I could feel her arm against mine and it was jittery. "I guess you know I'm scared, huh?" she said.

"Yeah, it's kinda hard not to know." A little clock was turning in my head. Mother was meeting us at 1:10 at the Greyhound station. I wondered what she'd think of Natalie. It had been so long since Mother went down to the Carolinas.

"What is your mother like?" asked Natalie, still nervous.

That was a tough question to answer. "She's a mother," I said. "You'll like her." How can you describe your mother to someone who's never met her?

"Sure she won't mind having a daughter?"

"You're a niece, not a daughter, Natalie. Don't even worry about it."

The bus zoomed on. The bouncing was getting to me and I drifted back to sleep while Natalie was still looking out the window. Each time I woke up I saw rain streaks and glass and her. In the fields around us it was corn time again, no reason to stay awake for that. We did do some semi-serious smooching, thinking it might be our last

chance for a while until we could use the house while Mother was at work. Later we could get our own apartment. Yeah!

The rain kept coming down the whole trip, but when I checked my watch we were right on schedule. At 1:00 we merged onto Freeway 235 and headed east toward downtown Des Moines. The old familiar signs made me feel pretty big. I pointed out the exits next to the places we used to go. Natalie's eyes got totally big, like she was in Disneyland.

To get to the bus station, you have to make a big circle from the freeway and go up a really steep hill. When the driver came on the microphone I looked at Natalie.

We will have a 10-minute comfort stop in Des Moines. Change buses here for Iowa City, Chicago, and points east. That coach leaves at 1:45. If you are continuing on to Ames, Minneapolis, and points north, reboard this same coach for departure at 1:25. Please remain seated until the bus has come to a complete stop.

I got excited listening to the driver listing all the places we could possibly go. When I was little I would see the buses with "San Francisco" and "New York" on the front, while we were just going to C.R. or Omaha. I always wanted to get on a bus with one of those faraway places on the front, and I had finally gotten a few chances. It was Natalie's turn now to put her feet down in a different place. She acted almost too shy to leave the bus. I followed close behind her, with luggage in my hand and on my back.

There was Mother, right there on the platform, wearing a raincoat over a cotton dress that was flowered and fluffy. She has a silly look on her face, like she was waiting for a boyfriend or something. Mother looks so young to be 37 that sometimes people think I'm her younger brother. It makes her feel good because she actually cares about things like that.

She saw us start down the bus steps and barely gave us time to get off. "Willie! Natalie!" I dropped my two bags and gave her a big squeeze and a kiss.

"Where's your raincoat, William?" was the second thing Mother said. "Didn't you bring one?"

"It's in my bag, mama." She gave me this look that said to me how could I possibly not be ready with the coat. I knew I was home again.

Mother opened her big umbrella, and we all hustled across the street to the car, a brown Impala that she wouldn't sell for anything. What a rusty car, but it ran great. That's one thing I definitely have in common with Mother--loving old cars. She even liked to drive fast like Mona. We drove up Grand Street quickly in the rain. Natalie sat up front next to Mother.

"Did you have a nice trip?" said Mother to either of us. "You sure took the long way around on the bus."

"It wasn't so bad, Mrs. Jackson," Natalie said. "I haven't seen this state at all."

Mother looked very calm and friendly. "Call me Dee Dee, Natalie, or Aunt Dee. You don't have to call me Mrs. Jackson. Don't treat me like a person you have to respect, please."

Our old house looked pretty good. Turning into the driveway, I realized how sick I was of moving vehicles. The house wasn't exactly a castle--off-white, a porch that sagged, weeds around the base that were threatening to take us over--but it was the first house we ever had, and cheap. Mother was paying on the 5th year of a 15-year mortgage. That made her very proud.

We walked to the side door and up the little steps to the kitchen, getting soaked by rain. Immediately the two cats were at the door, Apollo and Zeus. They remembered me well because they were basically mine, even if Mother took care of them most of the time. They sniffed at Natalie and followed us up into the Mother-sized kitchen, the yellowest room I have ever seen in my life--bright yellow walls, a table with a yellow print top, and a floor that seemed like it was designed to match the table. You could spend a whole afternoon in there looking at walls and waiting for chili.

There were a couple of kitchen pictures on the walls--a flower, a sunset, some of that giant wooden silverware above the table. One of the sunset pictures said, "Peace is seeing a sunset and knowing who to thank." It didn't

seem like a kitchen picture exactly, but it followed us wherever we went, moving from apartment to apartment the whole time I was a kid in East Des Moines. Seeing the kitchen made me glad to be back. Natalie was impressed, putting her bag down and staring at the room with bug eyes. "Wow! Did you guys choose this color?"

"We painted the walls," Mother said. "Willie and me. The tile and the table were here so we took it one step further. They're going to make this room into a museum someday."

"I hope not soon," I said. "I want to live here for a while."

"I know." Mother sounded a little impatient like we had just finished arguing. Then she looked at Natalie. "He's eighteen. When my oldest gets this old, I like to remind him to think about the big move." My god, it was great to be home.

"Take her bags downstairs," Mother said. I picked up the bags and answered "Yes, sir."

"Can I go?" said Natalie in a childish high voice.

"Of course," Mother said. "You both are going to be sleeping in the basement. There's plenty of room down there. Give her your room, Willie."

"You know it," I said. Two bags apiece, we disappeared down into the basement, the best part of the house. There was a big washroom with cold cement floors, and an



unfinished ceiling with pipes between boards between pipes. This was Mother's area, where she could do laundry and hang it out to dry all day and all night if she wanted to. The kitty litter was in a corner of that room and I had to keep it clean always--no way I could let anything smell in her part of the basement. The second room off to the right was the biggest--it went the entire width of the house, in fact. It was combination storage/playroom. Green and yellow linoleum covered about half of the floor, but that was it for finishing. On the far side by the furnace and a dusty window was my electric train set, complete with the landscape I spent about five years constructing when I was a kid. The other half of the long room had more childhood toys--old radios I used to play with, a red toboggan I won in 4th grade math class, a green trunkful of toys, footballs, tennis balls, games on the floor--I suppose I had a little bit of eight-year-old left in me, not wanting to get rid of all that old stuff. I took Natalie through there so she could get a good laugh. She did.

"Were you a nerd when you were a kid?" she said to me, laughing.

"No," I told her. When I think about it I probably should have said yes, but who wants to admit to being a nerd?

"So this is where you're sleeping at, I guess," she said. "When are you showing me to my room?"

The two cats appeared as we walked through the corridor toward my bedroom. She picked up Zeus, a very long-haired albino Siamese with white fur and brown markings. I got her when I was in sixth grade, and someone down the street was giving away kittens. I made up this fish story to tell my mom that it was lost and dirty and wandered up to me out of nowhere. She didn't believe it, but must have thought it was too funny to say no. My other cat, Apollo, was totally black with a white diamond on his throat. They were both tough cats around the neighborhood but calm around the house. I picked up Apollo and petted him as I walked through the bedroom door.

My room downstairs was the best thing about home. It was big, with two ground-level windows that needed to be washed. On the far wall there was an old green couch that sat flat on the ground, with long, stiff plastic cushions for a back. Mother gave me the old house TV which we had for as long as I can remember--a TV with a tan cabinet made of real wood, and a big speaker. The picture was completely fuzzy. It took about a minute and a half just to warm up, but it was mine. There was an old desk and a few radios scattered around. I'm not the cleanest person on earth but the room wasn't too messy--just cluttered with piles of things in corners and magazines lying around. I think she was kind of impressed. "This is nice, Willie. I wish I had a room this big."

We tossed everything onto the floor. Natalie fell out on the bed. I found the bean bag chair for a little relaxation. Amazing how tired you can get just from a bus ride. We kicked off our shoes and were half asleep lying there. Being in the basement, that room was always cool and not as damp as the other two rooms. After North Carolina the air seemed dry as a bone.

"Turn the TV on," Natalie said, just as I was getting so comfortable I didn't think I'd ever move again. There was nothing on but soaps. She likes them. Me, I get absolutely bored to death. It didn't bother me that time since I wanted to sleep. Both of us were snoozing out in nothing flat.

"Willie!" Mother's voice has a way of creeping through cracks and getting at you no matter what you're doing or where you are in the house. It didn't help if you try to ignore it--that's when she got louder. "Willie! Time to eat!"

I pulled my lazy self up, feeling on the dizzy side of groggy, Natalie flat cold on her back snoring, the news droning on the TV. I felt a little bit sick from bad bus station milk, maybe. It's great to wake up from a nap feeling sick.

"Willie! Let's go!"

"Okay, Mama." I nudged Natalie and she greeted me with a serious little hug and kiss. "Time to eat," I said to her quietly. "Let's get that sexy body out of bed."

She was worried about how she looked but I told her it was no big deal. When it came to guests at least, Des Moines was like Forest Hills. All you had to do was relax and enjoy yourself--no need to get uptight.

She stayed downstairs to brush her hair for a minute. I went up and sat down at the kitchen table which was set for three. "Where's Addie?" I asked, still not seeing my eight year old sister.

Mother was stirring at the stove. "She's down at Simpson with the drill team for this weekend. Maybe tomorrow we can go down there to see them."

Mother had made homemade macaroni and cheese, string beans and tuna salad. We set the dishes out. Natalie came out of the basement door still looking tired but with newly brushed hair. The cats scrambled into the kitchen when she came in, begging like a couple of puppies. "Grab them for me will you, Willie?" Mother said. "Then you two can go wash hands."

I tossed the cats back onto the landing and showed Natalie to the upstairs bathroom, which meant walking through Addie's totally wooden bedroom. The bathroom was small with no shower, only a bathtub. That was one of the

few things I never liked about that house. It was always a pain to set aside time for a bath in the morning.

Walking out, I showed her the living room, which had the same shaggy blue-green carpet as the dining room. We had an old furniture set that was plaid, but somehow looked good with everything else. We had a portable color TV about 19 inches, the first one we had ever gotten. Mother and I were both pretty happy about that one.

There was a piano, too, that Natalie plunked a few times. "Can you play?" she asked. I told her that I really couldn't, but I could do some things by ear that I had heard Mother play. Mother was a pretty good player, from music or else not. In fact, I liked a lot of cheesy old songs like "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" from listening to her. Not too many other people like songs like that.

Mother appeared in the living room. "No one's hungry, is that right, you two? I suppose I can feed my tuna salad to the cats since nobody else wants it, right?"

I gave her a dirty look and Natalie laughed. We both followed her into the kitchen this time and sat down at the table to eat. We said our short prayer.

"God is good, God is great,  
Thank you for the food we eat. Amen."

I've never been crazy about tuna, but by that time I was mature enough not to whine about my mother's cooking. The only things I can cook are eggs, hamburgers, and chili.

"I hope you like our house," Mother said to Natalie. "In the basement there's plenty of room. Do you mind having the cats down there?"

"No," Natalie said. I like cats. Who thought of their names?"

I cleared my throat and smiled. "Now if we can just get him to change that kitty litter," Mother said. "Willie's not real sensitive to smell, you see. Maybe having two full-grown women in the house will help him remember."

"Thanks for letting me sleep in your room," Natalie said to me with a pretty smile. "Sometimes we can trade and I'll sleep in the big room if you get homesick for your own bed."

"You must not get too homesick as long as you stayed down south," Mother said. "I thought maybe you got lost in the woods. How were Mona and Chuckie?"

"Fine. Mona's doing great at her job, she keeps moving up and up. Chuckie's moving to New York City for college. He still thinks Raleigh is a cow town."

"He never had to live in Forest Hills," Natalie said. "That's a real cow town."

The room was hot because the only air conditioner was in the living room. "How come you moved the table into the kitchen?" I asked Mother.

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"I got tired of cleaning the carpet," she said. "I don't know why, but it seems like Addie went into her second babyhood, spilling things--milk, Kool-Aid, whole plates of food kept falling off the table at least once a week. It got better when I moved the table in here and started making her clean it up. Cleaning it yourself isn't half the fun of letting Mommy do it."

"You're right on that." I was finished eating, and stood up. "Here's another chance for you to clean up after us children." I dropped my napkin and pushed in my chair.

Natalie looked at Mother, waiting to see how mad she would get. "I'll take care of the kitchen today, it's all right," Mother said in a low voice. "Your lazy cousin will get his chance tomorrow."

"Thanks for the food, Auntie Dee." Natalie spoke like she was talking to a minister. "Sure you don't want us to help clean up?"

"Oh, you're a sweetheart, Natalie, but I'll do it. Thanks, baby." She looked at me as I backed slowly toward the basement door. "See how nice your cousin is, Willie? Why can't you be like that? I guess I should have taught you some manners. Go on. Quit acting silly."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I was through the door and down to my room in no time. I don't know why I wanted to leave all of a sudden, except I had this impulse to unpack after living out of suitcases for practically two



months. I could actually put some clothes in my drawers. Really, there wasn't much to put in since most of my clothes were dirty. I picked up the room fast and cleared out a corner and a couple of drawers for Natalie, listening to my favorite old radio. It was about the size of a toaster, with a pointer in the front which showed the channel. It was made of stained wood and sounded great, with about as much bass as a regular speaker. All it had was A.M. but I could get radio stations as far away as Kentucky and Texas. My favorite station was in Chicago, WLS, which had a good oldies show. None of my friends liked listening to that, but me.

After a while I went over to the big room carrying bedsheets and opened up my cheesy little cot with a hollow steel frame and a thin green cushion. I would rather have slept on the floor of my own room where Natalie was, but I knew better than to ask Mother about that. She has this idea that women need space away from men to keep them from having sex too young, I suppose. It was too late in Natalie's case, but rules were rules. I put about five blankets on top of the cushion to make it firm enough so the metal didn't press into your back. I never liked sleeping in that room--it's too musty and there was all kind of noise from all the shit down there. It's like trying to sleep in a factory.

While I was fixing my bed I heard Natalie talking to Mother, along with running water and clacking dishes. I was glad they were getting along--one less problem to worry about. Natalie came down just as I was settling down in my favorite bean-bag to watch my Cosby re-run. I noticed that she'd washed up and the bus hangover was basically gone from her appearance. She had washing habits like mine--clean, but not so worried about it that she had to take a shower three times a day. I like girls like that.

I got an idea thinking about Kevin. "Let's go for a walk," I said to Natalie. "Want to see what the neighborhood is like?"

"Sure."

"Let's check out some of my friends. Everybody lives close. We can hit a few houses."

I yelled at Mother that we were leaving, and she yelled something back that I didn't catch. Both of us were wearing our standard summer wear. I had on a T-shirt, gym shorts and flip flops. Natalie had on my favorite dress with tied straps that always made me want to untie them and let her top fall off.

We lived on a steep street with older wooden houses, all with front porches and basements and two stories. The sun was falling so it was actually cool in the soft light evening makes. Everybody knew everybody on that street, especially the teenagers and little kids. The old folks

wave at you, too. We barely got out the door when Miss Kinsey called out to us. She was a nice lady who always gave a treat to the kids or the local cats, even if she was completely bitchy about her lawn. People took advantage of her by always knocking on her door for candy, as if they didn't have twenty cents to buy it themselves.

She was old and white-haired, the old fashioned grandma type of woman with a shaky voice. "Look who's back! Did you have a nice trip, Willie?"

"Sure did," I said, "and I even brought someone back. This is Natalie, my cousin. She just came up from down south."

"Hi, ma'am." Natalie had the perfect shy voice for talking with old folks. It made Miss Kinsey smile, sitting there in that white porch chair, the solid kind that old-time porch sitters prefer.

"Well, you certainly are a pretty young lady. It's nice to have you up here in Iowa. Do you like it so far?"

"Yes I do. Auntie Dee is very nice to me. So is Willie."

"That's good. It's good to see both of you." She gave us a little wave.

"Good night, Miss Kinsey." This was her last hour to sit on the porch, when the tree shadows started hanging over the house. By dark she'd be inside and most of the

little kids would be, too, leaving the neighborhood for the teenagers to rule.

Kevin lived a couple of blocks up the street so we walked slow going uphill. Everybody waved who was out on the porches or in the yard. This skinny girl named Koko came down to talk to us for a bit when we passed her house, a white stone house that looked odd on our block. I don't know if she was Japanese or Mexican or what because she looked a little like both. She was completely skinny, a little younger than me, and always wearing tube tops which didn't show anything.

"Hi, Jack," she said. "Been a long time. I didn't think you'd ever get back. Is she your girlfriend?"

"No, this is my cousin, Natalie. This is Koko."

"Hi. Nice to meet you," Koko said. "Welcome to 16th Street. How long are you staying?"

"I don't know," Natalie said. "If I like it well enough, I'll stay here for good."

"Serious?" Koko moved her nose, something she did better than anyone else I've ever seen. "Wow! Are you gonna stay down there with Willie and Addie and Diedra?"

"Probably. Till I get a job, I guess."

"We're going to Kevin's. Feel like going?" I said.

"I'm on restriction, Jack. I'm lucky I can come out on the porch. That's as far as I can go."

"Huh. All right then. You're gonna miss some fun times. Ain't that right, Natalie?" I smiled at her. She smiled back.

Koko looked us both over with a sad smile. "I'm history. Nice to meet you, Natalie."

"Nice to meet you, Koko. Bye."

"See ya." I took Natalie's arm out of impulse and walked down the street that way. It was faster because everyone thought I had a date and waved instead of talking to us. I must know every person between our house and Kevin's, cause there was a lot of waving to do before we got there.

Last winter Kevin's dad bought a funky new security system, meaning practically all you had to do was breathe hard to trigger it. He lived in a two-story house that was newer than ours, but smaller, too. Their porch was cement, too small for a chair, sorta like the stoops down in Carolina. We walked up to the barred front door and pushed the lighted doorbell, half waiting for someone to greet us with a .22.

After a minute Kevin's face appeared in the square little window, wearing his trademark basic black glasses and smile full of teeth. There was the sound of about six locks clicking open and there he was, shaking hands and trying to look muscular in a tank top and shorts. He was

definitely strong for his size--in a lot of athletics he could beat me, except in football, of course.

"Now this is what I want to see--a pretty young woman and a fugly young man." He waved us in with a little bow. "Come into my humble abode. My father is out for the night. You may sit down in the living room if you like."

Natalie threw me her confused happy look and followed me into the living room. We sat down on the big comfortable couch facing the picture window, which had a perfect view of the crabapple tree in the front yard. It was nice in the fall, the leaves turning dark red. And it was always nice to sit in Kevin's living room, with the thumpin' stereo and funky furniture, all the tables and lamps metal and glass, with thick cushioned seats around them. No one else we knew had a place as nice as that.

Kevin put on some jazz fusion nice and low--I think it was the Yellow Jackets, from his dad's happenin' collection. Natalie liked it, too. I didn't think she would. It seemed like nobody liked jazz except for Kevin, his younger brother Kiki, and me. We were just starting to bop a little to the beat when Kevin walked in with three wine glasses on a tray.

"And from our finest vineyards, a little Ernest and Julio Gallo..." We had to laugh at that. He quit playing the role after he handed out the gasses. "Jack! I didn't think you were coming back, dude. I thought you got a job

pickin' cotton and couldn't leave. What the hell's going on, man?"

"Not much." We gave each other the long handshake with the 4 parts we worked out. Kevin was a very good friend from 9th grade on, when I first moved into that neighborhood. If I had really thought about it, I would have missed him when I was down in North Carolina. Seeing him brought back the feeling that I was home.

"Who's your lady friend?" she asked, walking over and giving her a kiss on the hand. "I'd like to meet her."

"This is Natalie, my cousin. Natalie, Kevin."  
"Pleased to meet you, Kevin." She nodded at him with her cute smile. She was happy.

We toasted to old friends getting together, and had a casual glass of wine or two. Next thing Kevin pulled out a joint. Natalie looked very surprised, like she'd never done weed before. I'm not a stoner but with Kevin around you couldn't help but do it every once in a while. Weed was his thing.

He lit it and passed it to me. When it got to Natalie she took the tiniest little baby hit. "Go ahead, catch one, girl," I said. She was making me laugh, coughing. Kevin got up to turn up the music and fill the glasses again, and we were on our way.

For a long time we buzzed in that room, listening to music and watching the sun go down. After dark we lit up

some candles and incense, just like Kevin's dad does. I have a feeling his dad didn't care too much if we partied. We got away with too much smoking in and around that house for him not to know.

Natalie and Kevin were tripping worse than me, especially Natalie, who made the mistake of telling Kevin she wasn't used to being high. Kevin talked in silly voices and waved fingers in front of her face until I was totally sick of it, but Natalie kept giggling away with her Mickey Mouse laugh. I wasn't jealous but it got so I couldn't concentrate on the music. I still had fun though, tripping off the tree and the way it moved when the wind blew. Leaves were starting to blow off a little bit. I sat there and stared until they asked me what was wrong. I don't know if they believed me when I said, "Nothing." It was a weird night. I suppose I relate to trees in a way that most people don't, especially when I party. Kevin definitely doesn't. He likes to get high, play silly games and eat cornnuts. I'd rather go out and be in a quiet place, with lots of trees. Am I strange or what?

Kevin's dad came home about 10:30, and we tried to play it like we hadn't been drinking. He could probably tell from our breath or the way we acted, judging by the way he was smiling. I don't get nervous talking to him when I'm high because he's such a radical-type parent--the same size as us with his smooth voice, bearded face, hip style,



half-bald head, and intelligent mind. Successful urban black family man who hasn't forgotten who he used to be. His wife was as proud and together as he was. They acted younger than my mother. but I don't think they are, just younger in the mind, that's all.

After Kevin's dad got home Natalie started looking uptight, so I figured we should go. Kevin walked us to the door to say goodbye with a handshake and a slap on the back. "Later, chill," he said, and we walked outside, looking back for a moment to wave goodbye to the face staring at us from the small square window in the fortress door.

"Where to now?" said Natalie, with a shaky walk.

"Home, but we'll take the long way," I said. I steered her in the direction of Little Mac's, the opposite way from our house. We had to cut through the lot of Holy Name School, a set of old brick buildings and a new chapel. All the poor Catholics that couldn't afford to move out of our neighborhood go to school there, so at least their kids can be away from the "niggers" during the daytime. The public school was better, but the Catholics paid to go to Holy Name and it made them feel good.

On the far side of the lot, you had to cut through somebody's back yard to make the shortcut to Little Mac's. I don't know the name of the girl that lives in the house even though she hangs out on our block sometimes. They

don't have a dog or a fence so it's a natural place to cut through. It was a huge brick house with three stories and a back yard that goes way back to some bushes beside the path. The whole walk I was playing kissy-face with Natalie, so somehow we both got the idea that we wanted to do it right then. We had been waiting for a few days so we were both ready. We did it the quick way on the grass, just pulling down her straps and pulling up her dress. I was on top.

We had a blast till a room light on the lower floor came on. Then a woman's voice screamed out, "Get the hell out of my yard! Right now!" It took a moment or two to untie ourselves, but we were running by the time the woman stepped out of the back door. All I saw was her dress. We didn't stop for a long look, that's for damn sure. She was still yelling as we ran off down the path. "Don't you ever come back through my yard!" That's the last thing I remember her yelling before we came into the parking lot. That lady scared us straight.

"You don't know that lady do you, Willie?" Natalie asked me in a nervous voice.

"I know her daughter, but not that well. Good thing I don't hang out over there or she'd be on the horn to my mother."

Natalie looked back and then tugged at my arm to keep me moving faster. "She won't call the police, will she?"

"I doubt it." I couldn't say for sure because at other times, people called the police on us for the smallest things, like playing kick soccer and knocking the ball into Mr. Stoogey's lawn one too many times. The cops were always cruising our neighborhood, hassling kids like us for no real reasons. Maybe they thought they were keeping trouble from starting, but it's not like we were hoods, playing kick soccer in the street like idiots. We weren't angels, but then again we weren't hoods.

The one good thing about going back to our house after partying is the side door, which opened soft enough that Mother usually didn't wake up. Our luck held and the house was dark when we went around back and let ourselves in quietly. The cats were meowing so we picked them up and took them to my room downstairs. The room looked mighty good after spending the night before driving through Missouri on the bus.

About 11:30 we hit the lights. I decided to live dangerously by crashing in my clothes in the beanbag chair on the floor. Natalie kept her clothes on and slept in the bed. Zeus came and curled up with me--he was the comfort cat, and I bet he got nothing but abuse from Addie when I wasn't around. In a very short time I had no thought of anything and fell sound asleep.

The first time I sleep somewhere different, I either sleep a long time or practically not at all. Since it was

home, I slept long. The basement stayed cooler and darker than upstairs, and I had a very dark curtain which kept the room shady in case I slept late. That night, I didn't move a muscle till a sound made me sit up and look around. It was 10:45.

I heard the washing machine start and knew it was Mother downstairs. Natalie was still sleeping. Usually Mother went out shopping by 9 or 10 o'clock Saturday. I figured she had waited so we could all have brunch together or something. I grabbed some clothes and went upstairs to take a shower, hoping she wouldn't say anything about our sleeping arrangement.

As I thought she would be, Mother was cooking. On Saturdays we usually had a big breakfast with Mother making eggs and bacon or something like that, which we never had except on weekends. Sunday was pancake day. I always looked forward to those big breakfasts with the three of us--Mother, Addie and me--at the table. Nothing like that yellow kitchen to make you feel wide awake on weekends.

"Good morning, Willie." Mother was dressed nice in a white and blue flowered top and a blue pleated skirt--it didn't seem right for her to be cooking in an apron while wearing those clothes. She's short, with a build not quite as thin as Mona's or a chunky as Carol and Bee's. She seemed to be in a good mood and I was glad of that. "Did you and Natalie have a good time last night?"

"Yeah. We went over to Kevins's and took a walk. We didn't stay out that late."

"You were in before midnight, weren't you? I didn't stay up to see."

"Yeah, we came in about a quarter after eleven and went right to bed. Sorry we slept so late. Hope you weren't planning to take us to town today."

"It's all right." Mother lifted two more pieces of bacon from the hot skillet and set them on a plate. "I wanted to ask if you two were going to Indianola with me to see Addie drill." She saw me looking at her with my Mother-are-you-forcing-us-or-what look. That got her to laugh. "It's all right. I don't plan my life around you two slug-a-beds or else I'd never do anything, except kick your door in the morning and wait for you to come out of the dark. Be thankful I made you breakfast. Go on, take your shower and quit gawkin'." She turned back to her bacon.

I took a quick shower and practically ran downstairs to get Natalie, feeling hungry and wanting to eat before Mother had to leave. Natalie was up when I got back to the room, sitting on the bed with her head in her hands, looking a little on the green side. I tossed my dirty clothes in the direction of the closet, went over to Natalie and leaned over close to her. "You look sick. Are you all right?"

"I guess," she said in a very low, unsure voice. "I don't know if I can go up right now. You think your mother might notice something?"

"I don't think so, tell her you're sick. What's wrong?" She looked like she had more than your casual tiredness, and Natalie's the kind of person who hardly ever got sick.

"Let me tell you in your ear, Willie," Natalie said in an even softer voice. I leaned closer and she put her lips to my ear. "I can't smoke weed, Willie. I'm allergic to that stuff."

"Really?" I turned as I spoke and got a little louder. She put a finger to her lips to quiet me. "How come you didn't say that last night?"

"I like to," she whispered. "I have a lot of fun whenever I do it. It's just the next day...I get dizzy and my stomach goes crazy. I'm glad my stomach doesn't hurt today but I...still feel like I've been spinning around. It'll go away pretty soon."

I felt something like anger. "Don't get high with us anymore, okay? I won't get high either, all right?"

The upstairs door opened and Mother's voice called down. "Come on up. It's time to eat. Mother can't wait until Christmas for you two." She still sounded in a good mood.

"I'm sorry, Willie." She turned her eyes toward me and gave me a sloppy good morning kiss. "I don't want to do anything that makes us argue. I love you too much for that. "Sorry," she said in her lowest, breathiest voice.

I couldn't hold anything against her then. We almost never used the word "love" talking to each other, but I know that's how we felt. I loved to hear her say it. It slowed me down and made me forget about breakfast for a minute.

"Willie? Natalie?" called Mother down the stairs again. She was tired of waiting. "Come up and eat. It'll be dinner time soon."

"I'm going up," I said, standing. "Change clothes and come up. Mother has to drive to Indianola this morning. I'll be upstairs, okay?"

"Okay," Natalie said, trying hard to smile.

We had a casual meal that took almost an hour. Mother and me enjoyed it more than Natalie did since she was sick, so maybe it was rude of me to keep her up there for so long. I was hungry--that was my excuse. Plus I was laughing with Mother for a change which made a pleasant atmosphere. Natalie didn't eat much compared to the usual, and looked very glad as we started picking up dishes.

"Here's your last chance to go to the meet," Mother said as I passed her on the way back from the sink. "Addie

would be thrilled to see you both there, plus you can keep Mother company. How about it, you two?"

"It won't work, Mother," I said. "Natalie's sick today. She couldn't go if she wanted to."

"Are you sick? What's wrong, honey?" Mother said, sounding concerned. "Don't even try to keep up with that boy. He'll wear you out."

"I know about him," said Natalie with a smile that wasn't as innocent as it looked. "I am sick, Auntie Dee. I get sick every time I ride on the bus. As long as we had to ride, I'm glad to have made it."

"Willie," Mother said, "don't be runnin' that girl around like you run yourself. She's from the country like me, smart enough to know what's good for her. You better start listening to what she says even if you don't listen to me. Learn what it's all about."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, to keep her quiet. "Do you want to take a nap downstairs, Natalie?"

"Okay," Natalie said, sounding tired. She got up and followed me toward the basement door.

"I'll get the dishes, Ma," I said, holding the basement door open after Natalie went down. I pushed the cats backward with my foot. "You look very nice today, too nice to be washing dishes."

Mother looked at me like I had just saved her life. "Thank you very much, Willie. I am running late. I'll be



back after supper so you might have to eat what you can find. Does Natalie have the flu or something?"

"She might."

"There's Contac she can take if she thinks it'll help. There's plenty to drink in here, too. Keep her well watered, okay Willie?"

"I'll try."

She gave me a hug and a kiss goodbye and yelled, "See you later, Natalie," down the stairs. Then she went into her bedroom for the keys, and the car was starting up soon after that. I went back to the basement to see Natalie, who had changed into a blue T-shirt and some blue shorts that were really too small for her, but she looked great wearing them, from my vantage point at the tip of the bed, at least.

I couldn't tell if she was asleep, but looking between her legs made me want to get closer, so I squeezed onto the bed beside her. She turned away, surprising me. Her face looked confused when I saw it. She really did look sick, eyes blurry and not really focusing, not even half awake.

I whispered into her ear anyway. "Are you awake?"

"No."

I moved my hands over her chest and squeezed a little--her breasts felt soft since she was lying down. I tried to pull up her T-shirt. She started wiggling all of a sudden and pulled it back down.

"Do you mind? I'm sorry, Willie."

"Are you all right?"

"Not--exactly." She opened her eyes and turned around to face me again. "I'm sick. I need to sleep. Last night wasn't exactly what I'd call sleep--drinking wine and smoking and fucking in somebody's back yard--do you know what I mean? I need sleep." She put her head down and squeezed my dick, which was harder than a rock. "So put that thing away, okay?"

It was weird to hear her say no. "I dig."

She kissed me on the forehead like a child and rolled over again, turning her back to me. "And don't go grabbing my tidies again, either," she said in a softer voice that sounded more like her. "You can grab them later, okay?"

"Sure."

She settled into her pillow. I knew she'd be out cold in a matter of minutes. I'm a light sleeper, but she is not. Sometimes we could lie in the same bed all night and she'd never notice that I was there. I'd have her on my mind all night, being a compulsive non-sleeper to begin with, and having a woman in my bed made it worse.

I got out of the bed and went to sit in a chair, like I always did when giving her space to sleep. I couldn't help but look at her though, making it harder to relax and think about other things. Whenever you try to force yourself not to think about something, you're fucked 'cause your mind

won't cooperate. I wanted to get up and go somewhere or do something, but nothing I could think of seemed worth doing. I thought about television, food, basketball--nothing could distract me from thinking about Natalie.

I couldn't sleep, so I went into the washroom and played with the cats for awhile. They were glad to have somebody out there with them--for old cats they were pretty kittenish. Zeus still liked to run around after pieces of string, keeping us both happy for a few minutes. Apollo was the "cool cat," lying in the dirty clothes hamper and looking at us like he was bored. Seeing my cats again, I realized I missed goofing around with them.

Next I decided to see what was up with my bike, an old Huffy 3-speed, pea-green, with cheesy upright handlebars. People used to call my bike "The Greyhound". I seriously knew how to ride, though. One time I beat all the kids we hung out with in a race around the flat blocks down the street. Our course was about four blocks long altogether, with some hellacious turns. I had the advantage of guts going for me, my natural advantage, taking the turns fast and passing up a couple of people whose bikes said "Panasonic" and "Schwinn." No one laughed as much about my junky bike after they couldn't hang on the race track.

Bored as I was, I got involved with the brakes and worked for a long time, not accomplishing much but losing myself in what I was doing. When Natalie walked in quietly

I was ready for a break. "Fixing your bike, eh?" She was looking more awake and healthy than she had been all day, even with her wild wake-up face.

"Yeah," I said, involved in pulling the end of my brake cable with a pair of pliers. "This thing is a serious ride. I win when I'm on this."

"I see." She pulled an old kitchen chair from out of a corner. "Is it safe to sit on this?"

"Probably."

Natalie sat down on the chair and relaxed. "I feel better finally. Was I a bitch this afternoon or what?"

"You were," I said, "but that's all right. After a long night I don't expect you to be as tough as me."

"Listen to you! You're not so tough." She stood up and took off her T-shirt. "Stop acting tough," she said, walking toward me.

I stopped working and went over for a nice long kiss. We didn't have a chance to start though, because we heard the door upstairs. Natalie was dressed again in a flash. I walked to the far side of my bicycle and stood there, looking.

"Do you know what time it is?" asked Natalie in a low voice, sitting down again.

"About six-thirty," I said.

There were two pairs of feet on the floor upstairs. Natalie and I noticed that at the same time. "Your sister's back," she said.

"Yeah," I said, "Get ready." One set of steps was moving faster, then I heard the basement door open. In another second the little feet had run down the stairs and Addie appeared in the doorway of the room. "Willie!" I stepped out from behind the bike to hug her. She hung onto me for a long time.

"Little Dee, Little Dee!" That was my nickname for her. She was a lanky little child, getting taller every day. Her hair was done in a batch of hanging braids. She had medium brown skin about the same color as mine. We didn't look that much alike other than that, maybe because she was my half sister. She's one of those kids who's always curious, but every once in a while can even leave you alone.

"I love you, Willie." She was wearing a silly-looking drill team outfit, with the hat lying where she made her first step charging at me. I pushed her braids back and kissed her forehead.

I'm not sure if Addie even saw Natalie when she first rushed in, but she noticed her right away after our hug was over. "Natalie?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm your cousin," Natalie said, walking over to give Addie a mini-hug.

"You don't know Natalie?" I asked Addie.

"Of course not, Willie. You guys never took her down, remember?" Natalie broke in. "You should have took her down yourself."

"Right." I could just imagine asking Mother to take Addie to North Carolina. I always wanted her to go, but it could never happen.

"Are you going to stay with us?" Addie said in her cute childish voice. She has about three different voices, it's strange.

"I think so," Natalie said. "I have to find a job. If I like it around here I'll stay, and I'll probably find an apartment with your brother."

"Why?" said Addie, with big round eyes that told us she'd rather have us there.

Natalie didn't have an answer, so I broke in and spoke. "We're getting older, ever notice that, Lilly Dee? It happens when you get older, you move. You have to. That's why I went down south for so long."

"Oh," she said.

Mother came into the room asking us if we wanted to go out for pizza. All of us said yes, but our mistake was letting Addie pick the place. She decided she wanted Show-Biz Pizza, which is a living nightmare of a pizza place. Adults shouldn't let their kids have so many choices because they usually choose wrong. Older people

have a preference, but they don't say anything when kids are involved.

We piled in the car and went to Show-Biz, a big place with about half the space for video games and skeetball, and half to eat in, right in front of their singing mechanical puppets. I hated that place even more because of one time we went there after one of my drinking nights in high school. A week before I had told Addie that I'd drive her and three of her friends to eat pizza that afternoon, and when you make a promise to your kid sister you can't back out no matter how bad your head hurts. I was feeling extra bad walking in there with kids, then seeing all those screaming kids and blinking lights and ringing bells and beeps and clicks and sirens--I wanted to pass out but I couldn't even if I wanted to with all the noise. Then the worst part of it comes when you sit down with your bad doughy pizza and just before your first bite the stage curtain opens, lights come up, and the next thing you goofy computerized puppets start to sing. I barely got through two pieces and almost threw them up.

This time it wasn't so bad with Mother and Addie and Natalie, especially when I didn't have a hangover and Natalie looking pretty. It took a while for the pizza to get made, so we bought Addie some video tokens and she was in hog heaven. Mother was in a good mood, smiling a lot and even asking if we wanted to drink a beer with her.

Natalie said yes, but I stuck with red soda strawberry pop.

"You should have seen little Dee," Mother said, relaxing with her beer. She gets drunk easily--she never has more than three drinks. "She was so cute. The last competition was today--came in third. That's good, don't you think?"

"Sure is," I said.

"The competition got over with today, but they were supposed to stay till tomorrow, only Addie didn't want to. You know the reason why?"

"Why?" asked Natalie.

Mother pointed at me. "For some reason that I will never understand, she wanted to see him. Couldn't wait--even if she had to miss the party. She waited on you for a week, Willie. I barely got her to go to the drill meet."

I smiled at them and we all had more to drink. The pizza and Addie arrived at the same time. We all grabbed a piece, and right on schedule before the first piece was gone, the puppets started to sing--a Michael Jackson song to start. I hated the wooden way they moved. Of course Addie was all smiles and all eyes every time they came on.

We got home around nine, tired. Everybody looked like they were sleepwalking. For about half an hour we sat up in the living room staring at the TV and pretending not to be asleep, except for Addie who was out cold. Mother sent



us all to bed when the local news came on. I didn't have enough energy to even argue that I was 18 years old and didn't need to be told to go to bed. I followed Natalie downstairs.

We decided against any monkey business, kissed, and went to our separate rooms. Apollo came to my bed and curled up with me. Zeus was the renegade, staying out all night to catch moths and party. I always thought it was amazing how he could spot a bug halfway across the floor in the dark, and pounce on them. He was the kitten who wouldn't grow up.

For a long time I lay there on the bed awake with Apollo purring in my ear, the way cats purr under their breath when they're sleeping. The air was cool and musty but I liked that. Basements have always been my favorite place in a house, even though I get scared sometimes hearing the thumps and rattles and creaks that you never can recognize. I like staring into nothingness like I did in that room, though. Every blank space of doorway was like a tunnel to somewhere you couldn't see. I lay there and let those dark tunnels play tricks with my mind.

Just before going to sleep I saw Zeus creeping across the linoleum. He sprang and landed still, quiet and quick. I wondered what he caught as I drifted off.

Sunday we didn't do much, except think about where to go looking for work Monday. I decided not to apply at

Banker's Life at first--any place would be better than going back to where you used to be. The paper didn't have much, but I wasn't worried since I've never had a problem finding jobs. I've always been able to speak well when I have to.

Nobody went to church. The whole family ate a late breakfast together and then got into little projects. Mother started the laundry. Addie, after Mother convinced her not to bother us anymore, tried to finish this gigantic Leggo project she had going, which she says is a housing development in Miami Beach. That girl had more Leggos than any boy in Iowa I'm sure, the way she saved her allowances to buy Leggos and asked for more every year at Christmas. In her room she had a piece of cardboard about 3 feet square that was the "foundation" for her project, which she had been working on since May. It looked pretty damn good, I had to admit. The girl was born to be an architect.

Kevin called and I said we'd walk over, but we never did. Natalie wanted to, but I didn't, 'cause we usually partied when we were over there, and I didn't want to look for a job in the morning feeling like my head was floating. After lunch I showed Natalie the parts of the house she hadn't seen, the attic and backyard. The attic of that house was roasting hot and dusty all summer, with bare insulation between the long floor slats. The first time I ever went up there when we first moved in I saw a black

widow spider hanging in front of the window, the only one I've ever seen, except for the ones in Carolina. They usually stay hidden, but this one was hanging right down in the sun, that red mark clear as day. I never liked being in that attic after that. We never found the spider again to kill it.

I took Natalie to the back yard and we played golf for a while. It was fake to play with a baseball bat, but at least I had a golf ball. The tee was at the edge of our yard by Mr. Archer's bushes and the shrub trees Mother always wants me to trim. The hole was by the house, about 30 feet away. I made a lot of hole-in-ones, and one time I shot a 48 for 18 holes, beating the hell out of the all-time record. I didn't do as well the day I played with Natalie.

The back yard wasn't all that big, but there was enough room to play catch if you felt like being casual. What I hated about that yard was the shrubs and the little trees that kept popping up right at the base of the house. They were too thick for the edge trimmer, so you had to play Marco Polo and hack away with shears and a sharp knife. The worst time was when we first bought the house and it looked like NOBODY had ever CONSIDERED cutting those things down. I was young and stupid enough to enjoy cutting them down the first time. My naive little mind didn't realize I was being forced into a chore. I'm older and wiser now.

The golf game was fun, sweating as we were. The weather was hot--a lot of sun and damp air but no breeze. The only type of tree in the back yard was the obnoxious kind too short for shade in early afternoon, so we sweated. We played around out there till dinner time--cutting into the runaway weeds after getting bored with the golf game. Natalie was good at yard work, maybe because she used to live on a farm!

At 4:30, Mother called us in for an early dinner. Sweating like a pig, I had to change clothes and wash up before Mother allowed me to so much as look at the table. As a matter of fact Mother and Addie were dressed up pretty, in summer skirts and blouse tops. The smell of ham was rising from the big black baking dish. On the table I saw a dish of scalloped potatoes, green beans, and hominy. Usually we have a big meal on Sunday but I wasn't expecting one like that. I was happy about it, though.

We said our prayers and started eating, Addie in the seat next to mine. Her hair was done up with yellow berets and yarn, very cute. "Welcome back, Willie," she said as all of us started to eat. Turning to look at her, I saw a relaxed smile on her face.

"We want you to be nice and healthy so you both can find jobs tomorrow," Mother said. "I can't wait to see what you two are buying me for letting you stay."

"A new car," I said, chewing. "First paycheck I get I'm buying you a new car."

"Don't be rude, Willie," Natalie said. "You could at least thank your mother for letting us stay here."

"Thanks, Mother," I said, my mouth still packed. "I don't know what I'd do if you weren't letting us stay here." Then I noticed Natalie looking a little upset. I didn't think I was being any more obnoxious than usual.

"Are you applying at Banker's Life tomorrow?" Mother asked in her normal voice. She wasn't mad.

"Not tomorrow," I said. "If I can find somewhere else first, I'll do that. I don't really want to work there again, Mom."

"Suit yourself," Mother said, taking a knife to her ham. "I suppose I can't say I blame you, all things considered. You worked there for almost two years, didn't you?"

"Sure did," I said.

"Well, it's a shame to lose seniority, but that's all right. You're never going to get rich working there unless you go to school."

"You're going to college, Willie?" said Addie.

"I don't know. Maybe Grandview," I said. "Whether I do or not I need to get a job."

"Want me to get you up when I get up?" Mother asked. "If you drive me to work you can use the car."

"Maybe." I kept at my food with a real man's appetite.

It turned out to be another long meal--we were at the table over an hour, and didn't even try the lemon creme pie. To make Natalie happy I thanked Mother for getting up early to cook us that meal. Natalie still had a witchy look on her face, after I volunteered to clean up, sponged off the table, and took out the garbage. That's when I figured out she wasn't mad because of me.

After cleaning I walked her downstairs, hurt look at all. I sat her down on my bed and gave her a long back rub. Before long she started crying. Hearing that made me feel even worse. I asked her what was wrong.

She shook her head. "I'm all right." She could barely say the words, crying so hard. That's another amazing mystery of life: why do people go to their graves denying something is wrong when you can see from a mile away that they're not okay? That makes no sense at all.

"Are you homesick?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, sniffing.

"Do you want me to call Auntie Bee?"

"Yes," she said. I walked her up the stairs to the phone, passing Mother and Addie in the kitchen, who were surprised and wanted to know what was going on. "She's just homesick," I said to Mother, who followed us into the living room.

"Are you all right, child?" said Mother, tossing a dishrag onto the coffee table.

"I'm all right, Auntie Dee," Natalie said. "I want to make sure everything's okay at home." She tried to stop sniffing, but couldn't.

For about an hour Natalie talked to Carol on the phone, seeming to do more listening than talking. The whole time the rest of us stood and watched with a confused look on our faces. Addie and I took a turn talking to Carol, who sounded concerned and happy to hear from us. By the time Mother got on the phone Natalie had come back to her senses.

"Sorry," she said. "I hope I didn't upset everybody."

Since it was Sunday, bedtime came early. I decided to sleep in my room on the bean-bag, asking Mother if I could this time. She said yes, of course, and we went downstairs right away to get clothes ready for job hunting. I looked through my closet trying hard to find something that didn't need ironing. Natalie smiled at me from the bed, watching.

I held up a light brown shirt with flower prints and other designs on it. "Is this too loud?" I asked.

"Almost," Natalie said. "What are you wearing with it?"

"These." I held up a pair of dark brown pants. "They go together pretty well, don't they?"

She said they did. I laid them on the back of a chair and pulled brown socks out of the clothes pile in my closet. "I saw that," Natalie said. "Don't you believe in doing laundry?"

"Not if I don't have to."

"I'll do some for you tomorrow morning."

"Okay." I thought for a minute after she answered.

"Aren't you looking for a job tomorrow?"

"Where?"

"Anywhere," I said. "What kind of job do you want? There's places you can walk to not too far from here. Do you mind riding buses?"

"I don't know."

I took off my shirt and walked over to her for a good night kiss. It lasted for a long time and felt great. She whispered to me to turn off the light, and I did. The room was dark and a little musky like it always was. We made love and almost forgot where we were. The hardest job was tearing myself out of her bed and going back to my bean bag.

She pulled up a cushion beside me so we could talk and touch. Her hands and her lips were soft and a little damp. I loved the way her body felt when it was damp like that, and in the cool night it felt even better. I didn't want to think about having to job-hunt, but the later it got the more I thought about it, another case of the subject you



don't want to think about becoming the only subject you think about.

"Are you thinking about tomorrow?" Natalie asked, reading my mind. "I'm starting to. I guess it's past time to really put it off, huh? Are you tired?"

"Sort of, not really," I said. "If it wasn't for tomorrow I wouldn't be."

More lips. She pressed her whole body into me along with her lips. I started wishing there was a lock on the door, but there wasn't much use in wishing. There wasn't one.

"Natalie," I said, not knowing where my voice was coming from. "We should go to bed."

"Why?" she said. "All we're doing is lying here talking about jobs. Two cousins can do that, can't they?"

I had to laugh. "I suppose we can, as long as nobody knows. It's okay if two cousins love each other. Haven't you ever heard about kissing cousins?"

"Yeah."

The light through the window was turning a slight bit blue.

### Why I Learned to Love the Files

We did manage to separate ourselves by the time Mother called, dragging ourselves upstairs for cold cereal, bananas, and toast. Neither one of us looked very awake, but then again we never did, even if we woke up at 11:30. Mother was usually quiet in the morning, going about her business like she's already at work. She and Natalie dive into that first cup of coffee like they're dying of thirst. I don't drink coffee. Personally, I don't see why it's so bad to wake up slow, since it doesn't matter most of the time whether or not you're totally awake in the morning. Mother offered me the car, but I said no thanks. To me it was just as easy to catch the bus and go to one area per day looking for a job. Traffic in Des Moines isn't that bad but I've never been big on driving. Too much responsibility when it's someone else's car.

Mother kissed us both, wished us good luck and left with Addie, who was spending her week at the babysitter's. Natalie and I stood at the living room window and watched them pull away. When the loud noise of the engine faded, it became quiet as it should be at 7:15 a.m. I turned to Natalie and we gave each other an unrestricted kiss. I knew I should look for a job sometime that day, but we both

took the chance to be naked with each other for a while, with no chance of getting caught. When we got dressed and ready to go, it was almost ten. The phone rang but I didn't answer, thinking it was Mother.

I thought Natalie looked great that morning in brushed jeans. She had on a pretty blouse, too. "Looking like that you'll get a job anywhere," I said to her. "Don't forget to smile and tell them how hard you'll work."

Natalie gave me a sad look as I kissed her and played with her collar. "Do we have to go today, Willie?"

"It's all right," I said. "We'll go downtown to look for a couple of days, okay? We can stay together that way. Does that sound good to you?" Looking at her expression, it didn't seem to.

In a short time, we caught the #7 bus going east on Grand Avenue. The crowd on the bus was not huge, but grew with every stop. The traffic wasn't that heavy although the bus traveled slow, since people were waiting at almost every stop. Natalie sat by the window seat, looking out at the brick houses on the upper part of Grand. That's the neighborhood I'd like to live in if I had money. I pointed out some of the landmarks along the street: Greenwood Park, the Botanical Gardens, and the art museum. I told her we'd visit those places as soon as we got settled into a job. Meanwhile, Natalie kept staring.

Every once in a while she'd turn to look at me, but most of the time she didn't seem to be listening.

Close to downtown the city gets a little older and raunchier, not nearly as bad as most cities, though. The main section of downtown is about a mile and a half square. There's a big office center that has two buildings across the street from each other, connected by a glass skyway. That's one of the newer buildings. The Civic Center is at the eastern edge of downtown, not too far from the state capitol. I like the Civic Center because it looks modern, and has a goofy giant metal umbrella sculpture in front of it. Another nice thing about downtown is the Des Moines River, which has trails that you can walk along while you hold hands with your girlfriend.

We got off the bus right by the skyway. Around there were a lot of offices, including Job Service. I decided we should go there first. Natalie followed me through the revolving doors into the huge open corridor of the main lobby. We took the elevator to the sixth floor.

Lucky for us, there weren't too many people waiting, so we got called in to talk pretty quick. I took a couple of clerical tests and talked to my interviewer for longer than I thought I would. I got a line on a good temporary job at the Core of Engineers, a 12-week job with the chance to go full-time with the government. I wanted to do that--it seemed like it would be easy to just file all day

long. I shook hands with my interviewer and went to meet Natalie, who was sitting in a chair by the door, smiling.

"You look happy," I said to her. She stood up and joined me and we went to the elevator. "They do you right in there, or what?"

"Yeah," she said, holding up her card. "I have a chance to get a job in two day care centers. One of them is close to here, by the capitol. The other one is on 23rd street, your neighborhood, he says. I have appointments tomorrow and Wednesday." She smiled real pretty for me. "Maybe we'll both be working soon. What did you get, Willie?"

"I might get a filing job for the government today," I said. "They're looking for people right now for this project. If I'm good I might get to stay with them after the project's over."

In the elevator we gave each other a handshake and a kiss to celebrate good luck. We decided to apply at a couple of other places downtown, being dressed for job hunting. The walk to the federal building covered about six blocks, so we applied at three places apiece. I filled out an ap and took a typing test at one insurance office, a travel agency and a law office. Natalie put in aps at two restaurants and a clothing store.

When we got to the federal building I kissed Natalie and left her waiting on the 1st floor, on one of those long

ugly couches that probably cost \$7,000 since the government bought it. The building was practically new, spotless, and shiny dark brown. The offices were nice and cool, but some of the people I saw were dressed pretty casual, I thought, to be at work. Quickly I found room 602 and knocked on the door, Job Service card in hand.

The woman inside looked like she was expecting me. "Are you William?" she asked. She was a scary-looking woman, small-eyed and grey-haired with black glasses at the tip of her nose. The peach-colored suit she had on was perfect for scaring people. "My name is Heloise. Take a seat."

I sat down in one of the orange-colored chairs beside her desk, taking the application she handed me. It looked like the one I had filled out at Job Service. "Fill out every section completely," she said. "We want to know all about you." I looked up and noticed she was smiling. That's exactly the kind of joke you'd expect from someone named Heloise.

I finished fast. She looked the application over just as fast. "I don't see any problem with this," she said. "You've had good work experience for someone as young as you are."

"Thanks," I said. "I like to work. It's something that always pays you back when you do a good job."

"Good, good," Heloise said with a nod. "Keep on thinking that way and you'll do fine. What do you know about the position you're applying for?"

"Well," I said, "I know it involves filing and it's second shift. That's about it."

"That's fine, William. It's not a difficult job. What you'll be doing is working with personnel files--putting them in chronological order. It's a temporary position, but it should run about 12 weeks. When the project is over, we can computerize the files and destroy the hard copies. That's how we save space. Do you know the pay scale?"

"Sure do," I said.

"Great. Are you interested?"

"Sure."

"Glad to have you, William." She entered my name and address on a large card she had on her desk. "You're the 37th person we've hired, only 3 more will be chosen. Be glad you didn't wait another day."

"Boy, that was close," I said in a voice that Kevin would've laughed at if he had heard me. "I'm glad I got here in time. When do I start?"

"Wednesday. Wednesday at 4 p.m., be here. No tennis shoes and no jeans."

I rose, shook hands and said good day to her. Smiling as I punched the elevator button, I was enjoying that

intense good feeling which comes after a good interview. Maybe it's the control factor that made me feel so good after getting a job, but I really don't know what it was. Seeing Natalie sitting there waiting made me feel even better.

"I got the job, Natalie!"

She hugged me. I told her all about the interview on the way out, then we both had more to be happy about. Instead of going home right away we walked down to the river, stopping for a soda on the way. With all the heat of midday we walked nice and slow. There was no hurry to get anywhere at that point.

When we got to the river park we took a nice rest in the grass under a tree, watching the water. In the Des Moines River the water flows slowly. It's brown with all sorts of little whirlpools. There were more trees on the opposite side than where we were. On our side the trees were sparse--sometimes growing in bunches of twos and threes, but no thicker than that. Being there isn't like a major outdoorsy scene, since you can see about three bridges with traffic going downtown right beside us. Still, it's always nice when there's something natural in the middle of a city, even if it's a dumpy river that's too muddy to see into. It made a nice place to relax.

I don't know how long we were there, but we both fell asleep, having been up so late the night before. After



waking up we had to brush the grass and ants out of our nice clothes. Both of us had a laugh doing that.

We got back to Mother's house about 2:30, time enough for sex and a pre-dinner snack. I let the cats upstairs to run around for a while. They meowed like crazy when Natalie opened a can of tuna for them. After that they kept meowing at everything. They purred and begged and rubbed our feet the whole time we were eating.

Mother and Addie got home at 4:30, finding us sitting upstairs on the couch and happy to tell the good news. Addie stayed to hear more as Mother went to change out of her uniform. I told Addie all about the day. At the last minute I ran to put the cats in the basement before Mother came out of her bedroom and had a fit over them.

Supper went by too slow for me that night. Mother was in one of her glaring moods, when it seems like everything you say makes her stare. She worked a tough job taking care of old folks at a home; I'm sure that's part of the reason why, but sometimes I never could understand what brought on those moods. Even Natalie knew to be quiet at the table that day, after being there less than a week.

I have a feeling that Mother was starting to suspect something about Natalie and me. I thought we were being careful, but that's hard to do when you've been with a girl for two months. The whole time we were alone together for a long while each day. I had never dated anyone like her,

and it wasn't easy to hide. We went crazy fucking each other sometimes. It had to seem strange for cousins to hang out all the time and not go out or do anything much. I'm sure it was on Carol's mind a long time before she did or said anything. Maybe she dropped an early hint to Mother.

I watched the clock throughout our quiet dinner. Addie and Natalie seemed invisible. It was just Mother, me, the yellow walls, and blackeyed peas with ham hocks. Every time I looked up Mother was staring.

"I start work Wednesday, Mom," I said, after telling her once already. "You'll have me out of the house on weekdays again. What a deal, huh?"

"That's good news," she said, sopping bean sauce with a piece of corn bread. "Now if I can train you to do your own laundry maybe Natalie can have a little freedom." She didn't smile at all when she finished talking.

Downstairs, we felt safer. Both of us took our lounging positions: Natalie on the bed, Willie on the bean-bag. I clicked through channels, seeing nothing but news and bad re-runs. "Anything you want to see?" I asked Natalie.

"Not really," she said.

I turned off the television and took my position. Cool air was blowing in for practically the first time that day. In the front of that room next to the door was a

window opening leading to the other rooms, big enough to run a small fan. There were blinds we could lower to keep the cats from crawling in and to keep people from seeing in, but on hot days you had to let them up. We couldn't be naked in the daytime or else anyone walking by could see us.

About the time we were both in the groggy stages right before sleep, someone knocked on the door. "Come in," I said. Kevin walked in, wearing a huge smile and a sharp jogging suit that looked brand new. "All right!" I tried to pretend I hadn't been sleeping. "You came over here just to style on us, huh?"

"Yeah, Jack, that's right," Kevin said in his cool tone, signaling that he was stoned or he was trying to impress. "Somebody has to teach you how to dress. So why not learn from the master of fine linens, Mr. Kevin Edwards." He set one foot forward and held out his arms. "Would you like for me to walk, Mr. and Mrs. Jackson?"

"Go ahead." Natalie was out of her trance by that time. "Show us how it's done, Kevin."

Watching him walk was almost embarrassing, but funny too. I decided that he must have been stoned, the way he was so totally into this pimp walk routine. Really it got on my nerves pretty quick, except he looked like he was having a lot of fun. Thus, I decided not to tell him to stop.

When he finished he was standing next to Natalie, talking to her directly. "You know this is all just for fun, don't you, Natalie?"

"Oh yeah, I know that, Kevin." She started to laugh.

"I came by to break up the boredom I know you have to be feeling, doing nothing other than looking at this ugly face every day." He pointed at me. "I mean, what on earth type of dude would bring his beautiful cousin up from North Carolina, then lock her in the basement? Des Moines is not exactly New York, but it's got a little life in it. Don't you want to see some of that life?"

"I sure would," Natalie said, then she looked at me. "Yeah, cousin, what's the big idea of keeping me locked up down here? Afraid I'll run away or something?"

"Yeah," I said, "I'm afraid."

"So this is the way you thank me, Jack," Kevin said, "after all the good times I've showed you. Remember the first night you got here, Natalie? The fun time we had? It doesn't have to be the last time. All it really wass is the first time. Right?"

I had to laugh at that. "Kevin, you are totally full of shit. What the hell do you want?"

Kevin waved me off with a big hand gesture. "You don't know. You won't ever know. Lay down there in your bean bag chair and watch that TV. A person like me is way beyond a person like you, and will always be."

"I see."

"Natalie," Kevin said, getting a little closer to my cousin, "I apologize for Jack over there. He's a very intelligent young man, but sometimes he forgets that a young lady needs to get out and see the world. If you would like to--accompany me, I'd be glad to show you some of the neighborhood. Like I said, Des Moines is not a big city or nothing like that, but we do have a park."

"A park!" Natalie started laughing loud. "No kidding, this town has a park?"

"No kidding, it does," Kevin said in the same silly voice. "It's called Greenwood Park. It's only about six blocks from here and it's a very beautiful place. There's a building called a planetarium, which you can go into and hear about the stars and constellations and all that." He touched Natalie to keep her from answering. "Most of the time it costs two dollars to get in but don't worry about it. Kevin will pay this time."

"Is that right?" Natalie was still playing along. "What else do they have at this park, Kevin?"

For one thing, they have a lake with ducks, and baseball fields, and places you can walk and talk to a young lady or a young man. It's a very nice park. Don't you think so, Jack?"

"Of course, Kevin. It's got to be one of the best parks in the state. Ask anybody."

Kevin made a foot-forward palms-out gesture.

"Straight from Jack, and your cousin isn't going to lie, is he? Is he?"

He asked the question louder the second time, so I answered to keep him from shouting any more. "No way would I lie, Natalie. You know what an honest person I try to be."

"There you go, Natalie," Kevin said. "Would you like to take a little walk with me to the park? Maybe we could even have a smoke, for a really good time. What do you think?"

I expected Natalie to say yes and I was almost hoping she would, thinking it could start a household rumor that she wanted to be with Kevin. Then we wouldn't have to be so paranoid. I felt almost disappointed when she said no.

"I'm kinda sleepy tonight," she said to Kevin. "I have to say no right now but you better ask me again." She grabbed his arm. "Next time I'm not tired we can take a walk to that exciting park. All right? Don't forget."

I don't know if Kevin was a child actor or what, but then he went into this rejection routine that was three times as cheesy as what he was doing before. "Don't worry, Natalie, I won't be the one to forget. If anyone forgets it'll be you, since it's no big deal for a dude like me to ask you to go someplace. When you find the time give me a

call, okay? Jack has my number." He walked away from the bed and toward the door, face down.

"I'm just kidding," Natalie said, but Kevin didn't raise his head. "You know that, don't you?"

That was funny. Both me and Kevin couldn't help laughing over that. "Natalie, don't mind him," I said, "or he'll end up selling you Chicago for a dollar."

"Oh." Natalie laughed with us, a little slowly as if she didn't want to laugh. "I knew you were kidding."

"Yes, you did," said Kevin, in a voice so flat it kept me laughing. "I know you did."

The conversation didn't get any deeper than that. Kevin offered to take me out and smoke me up for a while but I said no, curious about what Natalie thought about Kevin's offer to her. We all sat around for chit-chat for an hour or so, enough time to watch a couple of game shows on the tube and make fun of them. All of us did a lot of laughing. In fact, it seemed really quiet when Kevin left. Natalie still had a smile. "He's a trip," she said. "He's crazy like Sarah. Are all your friends like that?"

"I don't know. You could have gone with him to the park," I said.

"Yeah, I know I could have."

"Why didn't you?"

Natalie propped her head up on her pillow so she could talk to me better. "I don't even know that boy, Willie.

Besides, he might think I'm trying to start something. I don't want that. You don't want that either, do you?"

"Of course I don't," I said.

"So aren't you glad I didn't go?"

"Yeah." It was kissy-time after that, cut short by Addie, who came down very quietly to ask if she could watch TV with us. She was too cute to ever say "no" to. It made her day when we let her stay down there. As the room grew cooler with evening turning to night, everything down there was quiet except for the voices on the TV. The soft blue light made us all sleepy.

"Addie, come to bed!" The voice surprised us. Waking up Addie took a few minutes. With a sleepy voice she told us good night and felt her way upstairs. Natalie was awake by then too, but not very awake. It turned out to be another all-nighter. Neither one of us had the strength to say no.

Tuesday Natalie got a job at Debbie's Day Center, six blocks from Mother's house. It was part-time but they said it might become full. A lot of people start working at places like that and then quit because they can't handle kids but Natalie's the firm type, a person you need to have around for a group of brats. Even Addie respects Natalie and obeys her a lot faster than she obeys me half the time. Natalie has a determined look, always ready when she needs it, a look that works with kids and with me too, sometimes.



She'll stare straight at you, her face muscles not moving at all. Her eyes don't move either, like there's nothing in her mind except you and whatever she expects you to do. She said she learned how to do that living in Forest Hills, where you'd be up to your ass in relatives if you didn't learn how to protect yourself.

Her job hours were 12-6:30 in the afternoon and mine were four in the afternoon till midnight. With Mother out of the house and Addie off to school by eight, we had the mornings to fuck ourselves into oblivion. I liked that arrangement. It was like having one of those three hour motel rooms every night.

My first day of work was Wednesday. I caught the bus and walked in about ten to four. The office was on the sixth floor, where all the regular employees looked like they'd worked there for years. To me they looked like slackers--tired, forty, and badly dressed. My clothes looked better than most of theirs did, and I'm no Gucci dude myself. Some of them were mumbling about us as we walked in: "Where are they putting all these people?" "Better hide your jewelry." "I know one of them will end up at my desk." Everybody had something to say. The office itself was a big forest of orange partitions that you can see over if you're standing, but not sitting.

Heloise met us at the front and split us into groups. My section was in a corner of the office, very near to a

nice big window, giving us an excellent view of downtown.

The job was simple enough for a complete idiot to do, no problem. At the beginning of the day, we grabbed a hefty pile of file folders from a group supervisor. Inside the file were all kinds of papers, some separate, some stapled or paper-clipped together, some stuck together with unknown sticky shit, some torn, you get the picture. Our job was to take them all apart and put them in chronological order. Usually there were 10-20 papers in each file. Every folder took 3-4 minutes. I swear, there were enough files in that building to cover Des Moines under three feet of paper--the cabinets took up practically the whole floor. I didn't think we could finish the job in 12 years, let alone 12 weeks, at the rate people worked. That's the government for you right there.

There were five people in our group, and it wasn't long before all of us were talking. The most interesting person was Stephanie, a friendly college type chick on summer vacation, your basic brown-haired slightly chunky Iowa girl with glasses. She was extremely nice though, sitting next to me and asking about everything in my life. I talked to her much more than I usually talk to anyone, even in the first few days of work. It helped the others relax and soon we were all talking, the only relief we had from a completely boring job.

The other three people were Barbara, a high school senior who went to Catholic school and was trying to save up college money; Cliff, your redneck sort, a big greasy blonde dude with yellow teeth, 35 or so; Kathleen, a sweet lady about the same age as Cliff--she was teaching in a Catholic elementary school, but was working jobs for extra money. Being stuck together made me learn all this about everybody in the first week on the job. By the time we came back to work after the first weekend we were practically like old friends.

On Monday I ran into Barbara first, in the elevator. "Hi, Willie," she said in her squeaky voice. She had pigtails and tight looking braces, making her look younger than she was. "How was your day today?"

"Fine. How about yours?"

"Okay. My boyfriend was in a bad mood, though." She never talked about anything but her boyfriend and college. "He wouldn't meet me for lunch today like he usually does. I had to eat by myself."

"That's too bad."

"I know. All because he thinks I'm working too much. I told him I'm trying to save money for college. I told him a hundred times. He doesn't care. He doesn't even listen."

Heloise nodded as we walked into the office. All the bored faces around us made me feel tired. I saw Stephanie

walking towards our area and waved at her. She smiled back with this open-mouthed smile she has that's very cute, but makes her look a little like a fish. She was so sweet I hate to talk that way about her, but being nice can't keep you from looking silly.

In ten minutes we were all sitting at our places, shuffling through files, getting our staple removers ready, about to start an exciting evening's work. The worst part of that job was the first three hours, especially if I was sick and tired or something. The thing about the government jobs I've had is that nobody cares how hard you work. It doesn't matter if you're one of those people who works hard no matter what, soon you give up trying because watching everyone else makes you wonder what's the use. At that job I saw people file their fingernails like on TV, fall asleep, eat meals, or just whatever while getting \$7.50 an hour. Why would you work hard if somebody else is getting paid to eat?

Our group worked the hardest I think, and we had the most fun, too. Stephanie had a nice tune box but not too many tapes, so I brought in the music, sticking to rock and roll. Another group was always blasting rap and a lot of the white folks spent most of their nights complaining about it. From our party days senior year Kevin and me picked up a taste for a few rock bands, mostly the Doors, the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Yes, the Who, people like that.

Cliff was totally into my music--he said it reminded him of better times. Times when there were better drugs, he told me once when the girls were out.

Everybody was quiet for a while that night, maybe because it was Monday after a long weekend so we had to adjust to being bored again. Then we started swapping weekend stories. Nobody had much to say except Cliff, who always had a lot to say. He told us all about tubing on the Iowa River.

"Once we got further down, it was bad news, man. You might as well say we were hiking, 'cause the water was barely up to our waist. The only thing that stayed wet was the beer. The rocks were sharper than heck on our feet, and we left our shoes back in the god damn car. I was getting cut, burnin' up in the damn sun, but I kept going like a fool. We ended up sitting on the riverbank at City Park in Iowa City, drinking beer and walking around. Last time I go tubing in that river." He took a long drink out of his Mountain Dew like it was a beer.

The hours kept dragging on. Stephanie was sitting next to me like she always did. She started talking to me in a quiet voice. "Did you decide about college yet, Willie?"

"No." I lay my head down on the files, feeling a little on the dizzy side looking at all the tiny little numbers. I was worn out from staying up late with Kevin

smoking dope, then coming back for a little "TLC" with Natalie, if what we did counted as "TLC". Meantime, Stephanie was still watching me, so I kept talking. "I haven't thought about it too much these days. I'm trying to save up money."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked me.

I thought about it for a minute. "No."

"How come it took you so long to answer?"

Stephanie was always asking questions like that, and I hated it when she did, tired as I was most of the time. I gave her an I-don't-know shoulder shrug, trying not to get mad. I suppose I shouldn't get mad over little things like that. "I'm a space, Stephanie. Don't pay no attention to me."

"Why not?" she said, almost laughing.

"Stephanie," I said, but now I knew she was getting on my nerves on purpose, which made it a little better. "Go jump in a lake, Stephanie."

She was laughing. "I like to tease you, Willie. You always come in here looking like a truck ran over your kitten. You deserve a hard time for that."

"Yeah," said Kathleen, jumping in. "What would this place be like if we all walked in with a frown on our faces?" She winked at me, like she did all the time.

"Anybody else?" I said. "You have anything to say on this topic, Barbara?"

"Yeah, Willie," she said, flashing her braces. Really, she looked cute with her braces and curly hair. "You need to smile every once in a while, Willie. Don't be such a crab."

"How about you, Cliff," I said. "What exciting words do you have to add to this topic?"

"Is it Friday yet?" he said, and all of us laughed at that one.

During the days I hung out with Kevin a lot, after walking Natalie to work. Being with him was different than before, though. I'm not sure that I can explain exactly why. We did about the same things--hang out, listen to music, party, shoot the hoop every now and then--but it seems like we didn't have too much to talk about. He was into Natalie, which didn't bother me at first, but I got tired of hearing what he wanted to do with her. I guess you could say it was the usual boy talk, but it kept going on. One day we were lying around in his living room smoking up, listening to the last song on Gilligan's Island. I hate that show but Kevin liked it. He could watch the same ones over and over.

"How come Natalie doesn't want it?" Kevin said, completely out of the blue.

"She wants it. She just doesn't want it from you."

That made Kevin look at me. "Dude, you're hard. You don't have to say it like that."

"Well, it's true."

The theme song of F Troop started playing. "Who's she gettin' it from?" Kevin said.

I knew he was going to ask that. "Kevin, you don't want to know, so don't ask."

"You always say that."

"Why do you keep asking?"

"Cause I know she wants it. I don't see why you don't help me get it. Is it cause she's your cousin, or what?"

"Yeah, that's it." I tried not to look mad, but it was getting harder not to.

"Look," Kevin reared up on the couch, a sign that he was about to do his cheesy dramatic routine. "What is it to you who she fucks? She's a lady, see? Eighteen years old. She can fuck whoever she wants. You're not her daddy, Jack, what she does is her business, not yours."

I blew out a long breath of air through my teeth.

"Kevin. Listen. I've said this to you about 10,000 times. I am not keeping you from fucking Natalie. It ain't no thing on me one way or another. The truth is, apparently she does not want to fuck you. Otherwise she would. Am I correct to understand that you have asked her to go out with you? More than once?"

"Yeah, no shit."

Kevin was sulking, but once I get started I don't stop. "What did she say when you asked her?"



"She said no, asshole."

"So therefore, my brilliant brain assumes then that Natalie does not want to go out with you, because of the fact that she said no when you asked her out. It wasn't me who said no, it was her. So DON'T blame me cause I don't decide who she goes out with. Like you said yourself, I'm not her daddy."

"I know that. I understand. You can shut the fuck up now." He threw me a hard look, shaking his head. "Man, what is up with you? You didn't used to act like this. Son of a bitch, man, we used to be partners."

I didn't have an answer, but I apologized for going off. Kevin was still mad, though, I could tell. "I suppose, dude. She is your kin but you don't have to be so evil. You didn't used to be this way, man."

I walked out of his house soon after that, dressed for work and ready for the bus. I must have looked crabby as ever walking into the office tired, depressed, and stoned besides. To make it worse, it was another night for Stephanie to play twenty stupid questions. She made me get rude toward her. All I really told her was to leave me alone, but I was harsh about it. When she got this hurt look on her face I knew right away I had fucked up.

"I'm sorry, Willie." She went back to her work. The rest of the gang was quiet, and Cliff was absent.

I went back to my work, but then I started thinking about what I had said. I looked at Stephanie. She was working very busily like she almost never did, with a frown on her face. I saw her eyes getting wet. I couldn't believe it.

"Stephanie, I didn't mean to snap at you," I said.

She kept on working, then a tear fell down and she had to wipe her glasses. Son of a bitch, I thought to myself. Now this crazy girl is crying over me. I looked at the clock. It was 7:30--half an hour till break.

After Heloise came in to break us, Stephanie took off fast. I had to run to catch up with her. "Stephanie, need a pop?"

"No," she said.

I took her arm, softly as I could. That was the only way I got her to stop moving. "Please?" I said. "I want to make up with you for what I said. I'm stupid. I'm rude. Sorry, okay?"

She was looking down at first, but she raised her head and looked at me again. We were standing by the doorway to the hall and people were walking around us. I noticed all that, but she didn't. "Why are you so mean to me, Willie?"

She had the kind of face that couldn't ever be dishonest. She couldn't lie to anyone, I'm sure. "You know Stephanie, if I was being mean to you I didn't even realize I was." I put my arm around her and we walked

toward the break room. "Sometimes I go through the day and act like I feel like acting, and don't even think about what's going through other people's minds. I know you're not like that, but I am. I wish I wasn't that way, but I am."

"That's no excuse, Willie," she said. "You hurt my feelings. Maybe you should try thinking a little more."

"You're right, you're right," I said quietly.

We walked arm-in-arm to the soda machine. A couple of black girls gave us dirty looks and made a rude comment, which pissed me off again. There I was again trying my best to look like my blood wasn't boiling. "What kind do you want, Stephanie?"

"Strawberry," she said.

The rude girls walked right behind us as we were getting our pops. I don't think Stephanie heard, but I heard exactly what they said about us.

"There's somebody for everybody, I guess," the tall one said.

"Yeah, somebody or something," the fat ugly one said. Hearing those remarks about me and Stephanie totally pissed me off. I heard the same thing in high school when I went out with this white girl named Sarah. I almost hit this one rougish girl who said, "Is that all you can get?" It's one thing to say something like that to me in private, because I'll take care of it, no problem. I just feel

sorry for the people like Sarah and Stephanie who have to listen to all that bullshit. It's no wonder people of my skin color get stereotyped when somebody acts that roguish toward a person they don't even know.

Thinking about all that, I was mad as fuck when I sat down on the couch with Stephanie at the far corner of the room where nobody goes. Stephanie noticed my mood, like I hoped she wouldn't. "What's wrong now?" she said. I tried to play it off like I wasn't mad, but she wouldn't let me. "Why can't you tell me, Willie? Is it me?"

I looked straight into her eyes and noticed for the first time that she liked me. She had a crush on me. She was leaning forward against my arm, staring at me like I was the only object in the world. It was kind of funny the intense way that she was staring, but she was as serious as could be. All of a sudden I couldn't be mad, and I realized how dense I had been, too. I moved forward slowly and kissed her on the cheek. I took my time in doing it so she'd know I meant it.

Her eyes got softer and happier. We did some hugging and kissing back there on the couch, not wild but exciting. Then we went back to work walking hand-in-hand. I was kinda glad we didn't see those two stupid black girls again. We were five minutes late getting back. Heloise shook her head, but didn't say anything to us. We went and

took our seats with the other three, who I think already knew what happened. They didn't say anything.

Usually I hopped the last bus back home after work, but that night Stephanie gave me a ride instead. We spent a few minutes kissing before I went inside. Stephanie lived in Urbandale, which isn't far from West Des Moines, so I didn't feel guilty about taking her out of the way. Both of us started feeling a little warm, together in the car.

"Give me your phone number, Willie," she said, putting her glasses back on. "Can I tell you tomorrow so we can do something before work?"

"Sure." The word was out before I could think about my answer. Then I was kissing her through the driver side window of the car before she took off. I went inside the house quietly, a little later than usual.

Natalie was awake when I got in. "About time," she said. "Just cause you got a woman doesn't mean you have to keep her waiting."

"Sorry." I pulled off my shoes. She was naked on the bed, waiting. I loved coming in at night because at first I could only see the outline of her body, but once I lay down and we started touching I could see everything. Her body felt extremely good, as always. It was about five, I think, when I dragged myself over to the bean bag and put

on my sleeping shorts. We looked at each other one last time and I blew her a kiss.

Morning came fast, with the sound of footsteps upstairs. Mother's voice called down the stairs to us. "Willie! Natalie! Come up and get fed if you're hungry." Her voice sounded a little mad. I don't think she liked Natalie and me sleeping in the same room, plus she might have heard me walk in late. I decided to make up a few points and get up early to eat. I nudged Natalie but she waved me away with her arm. Both of us usually slept till after they left.

"Late to bed, early to rise," Mother said when I came into the kitchen from the basement. "What does that make?"

"You tell me, mama," I said, sitting down. I noticed the killer breakfast menu--Cream of Wheat and cinnamon toast. "Hi, Lilly Dee," I said to my sister.

"We haven't seen you at all lately, dude," she said, sounding funny like a little kid. "What have you been doing?"

"Everything," I said.

"Everything but staying at home," Mother said.

"Is there a reason I should stay at home?" I said to Mother.

"Yeah, the rent's cheap," Mother came back. Being smart is a lot of fun for her.

"Do you want me to leave, Mother?" I said.

"Don't leave, Willie," Addie said in her regular voice. "Mother really wants you to stay. She loves all of her children."

"She doesn't really," I said, "she just says that." Mother gave me a mad look.

"You love both of us, don't you, Mama?" Addie was a smart kid but you could tell her practically anything and she'd believe it. Mother walked over to whisper to her and give her a kiss. Then Addie started smiling again.

They were leaving before I finished eating. "I know I don't have to ask you to clean those dishes," Mother said, walking toward the door with her purse. "They'll be plenty clean by the time you finish eating."

"What?" I said through a mouthful of food just to tease her. "Clean the pots?"

I stuck with one bowl of oatmeal, cause I don't like it that much, but I had plenty of cinnamon toast, which I do like. After eating I let the cats upstairs and played with them for a while on the living room floor. The phone rang right at 8:30. I figured it was a bill collector. Those are the only people who call at certain times of the day.

"Hello," I said.

"Is this Willie?" said a girl's voice, one I thought I knew.

"Sure is."

"Hi, Willie. Do you know who this is?"

The voice was high and a bit silly. I imitated her with my own voice. "No, please tell me."

"This is Stephanie."

"Stephanie!" I had already forgotten that she was calling. "You wake up early. I don't get up till ten unless I'm hungry."

"I always get up at eight. I can't help it."

We laughed and talked for a bit. I was glad there wasn't a phone in the basement, for Natalie's sake.

"You've already had breakfast," Stephanie said at the end of a long laugh. "Where am I taking you for lunch?"

"You're taking me to lunch?" I said. "Don't you have it backwards? Aren't I supposed to be taking you to lunch?"

"Yes, but I don't want to ride the bus, Willie! You don't have a car."

She had a point. "Does that mean you'll pay, since you're taking me?" I asked.

She paused for a minute to let me wonder. "All right! This one time and no other time I will pick you up, take you out for lunch and pay for your food like a man is SUPPOSED to do for me. Don't you have it rough, Willie, making a woman do all the work for you."

I thought about Natalie. "Can you come over about 12:30?" "11:30. How about that?"



"Fine," I said. "I'll see you then."

I hung up the phone and herded the cats into the basement, then I went down myself. Natalie was naked again, and just waking up. I couldn't keep myself from her--not that I ever could. That was part of our problem.

After we made love I told Natalie most of what was going on with Stephanie. I left out the kissing part, but I told everything else. She surprised by not getting mad right away, as if she didn't seem to mind me going out to lunch with her. A while later toward the time I was leaving her attitude changed. While she was dressing for work it was 20 questions time.

"She's not the kind of girl you want to just...do it with, is she?" Natalie asked, pulling her bra down over my hands, which were attached to her chest.

"No," I said.

"And if I meet a fine dude, you'll act the same way, right?"

"I doubt it," I said. She gave me an evil look. "I mean, yes."

"For a minuted I thought you meant no," she said, intense. She ended up leaving for work early, saying she wanted to get out in time for me to meet my other girlfriend. I kissed her goodbye a little longer than usually, taking time to smooth her hair and tell her I loved her. She had a deep, quiet look in her eyes on the

way out the door. I grabbed her hand to stop her and told her one more time that nothing was going to change.

"I love you, Willie," she said in a low voice. Then she was gone.

On the way downstairs I stopped to look at the kitchen wall clock: 11:25. Five minutes till Stephanie was supposed to be there, and I had walked Natalie upstairs with nothing on but sleeping shorts. The doorbell rang about ten minutes later. I answered the door with bare feet and untucked shirt. "Hi, Stephanie."

"Hi." Already it felt like a reflex to kiss her. "Nice house," she said, stopping to look over the living room.

"It's all right," I said, feeling a little uncomfortable. She started walking toward the piano. "Do you play?" I asked her.

"A little bit. I took lessons." She sat down and played a little bit of "The Entertainer." "Do you play, Willie?"

"Not really."

"Play some."

I walked over to stand beside her, cracked my knuckles, and started the bass line to "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy." Snapping along, Stephanie made me smile. I went ahead and sang the words. She liked it, but she was easy to please.

"That was great!" She clapped for too long. "More, more. Please."

"I don't know too much more," I said. I played a couple more boogie woogie tunes. I'm not good. Stephanie thought I was, though. It's cute to have an audience clapping for you, especially it's only one person.

Holding her hand, I gave her a walking tour of the house, telling her some things about my family. She was very curious about Natalie. "She lives down here with you?" she said when we went to my room.

"Yeah, she does," I said. "She's my cousin and my best friend, too."

"Your best friend is a girl? That's weird."

"You think so? Why?"

"I don't know." She let my hand go and bent down to pet King Arthur. "Girls like to have their privacy so they can be slobs at home."

"What does that have to do with being friends with a girl?" I asked.

"I don't know. Nothing, maybe. It just seems weird to me. How do you guys get along?"

"Good. We don't even argue."

"Hmmm. That'll work. I just can't see living in the same room with my cousin." She ran out of questions, and I was glad of that.

After some hot kissing on the living room couch, Stephanie drove us to Taco Town, a Mexican place with better food than the name sounds. It's in the middle of downtown, not far from work but closer to the Civic Center. It looks run down, with a long bar in the middle, plus a lot of booths. We sat down at a booth by the window with an exciting view of the parking lot across the street. The tacos are very big and are deep fat fried, making them DELICIOUS. The first time I went in there in high school we were in a hurry because we were ditching school during lunch and had to get back. When I first saw that it was \$1.55 for one taco I about shit, but that was before I saw the size of the tacos. I had gotten two, so I had to snarf like crazy to get finished in time. They were damn good.

The waitress was an older Mexican lady in a funky orange uniform. She was short and wide like somebody's grandma. I don't think anyone there spoke English besides her, and she didn't do it all that well. You had to talk loud and slow when you ordered.

"I'll have two beef tacos and a large orange drink," I said. Two of those tacos could fill me up.

"Thank you. And you, miss?" said the waitress.

"I'll have a bean burrito, soft. Don't fry it, please. Then I'll have a large iced tea."

"Try the tacos, Stephanie, I said. "They're great."

"They have meat in them, don't they?" she said.

"Of course they do."

"I don't eat meat, Willie."

That one made me think for a second. "Why not?"

"It's gross. I stopped eating it when I was ten."

I had never met a vegetarian before. Stephanie didn't look like I figured one would look--she didn't look anything like a 1960's flower child. With all the cows in Iowa why be a vegetarian?

"Is that okay with you, Willie?" she asked me.

"Of course it is. It's not even my business."

I felt a little bad that she wasn't having the same thing as me because my food was excellent, like it always was in that restaurant. The tacos were hot, full of meat, cheese and onions, crisp outside and soft inside, spicy, greasy enough to leave your chin dripping, and delicious. In that place I never even used sauce, the spices they cook with were so good. Such a waste watching Stephanie bite her cold little bean burrito. I don't think she even liked it. Watching Stephanie eat reminded me of another reason I liked Natalie--she wasn't too girlish to enjoy her food.

"How's your taco?" Stephanie said as I was taking my second and biggest bite. She should have been able to tell I liked the taco from the way I was eating.

"It's good," I said after a monstrous swallow. "How about your burrito?"

"It's okay. Yours looks better, except for the meat."

"It not only looks better, it is better." I chomped another bite to emphasize my point.

"It's not really better," she said. "It's dead rotten animals. When a person dies a doctor can tell if the person was a vegetarian or not from the way the stomach smells. Meat rots in your stomach and it smells really bad when you die. That's how you can tell who the meat eaters are."

She stopped and started to laugh. "I fail to see the humor in this, Miss Stanton," I said.

"Well, you're a dud then, cause it's funny." She kept on laughing. I kept on eating.

"Want to smell my stomach?" I said when I finished, wiping off my lips with the napkin.

"Get out of here," she said. "Nobody wants to smell your stomach. Not even buzzards are going to want your stomach after all that Mexican mystery meat you ate."

"Like I care," I said. "Like I'm going to give a fuck after I'm dead."

We stayed to have an extra drink after that, and talk. Then I looked at my watch. "It's 1:30. What do we have time to do before work?"

"Let's go back to your house," Stephanie said. "There's less people there than at my house."

"Sure. Let's do it. We have two hours to chill still."

"Yeah," said Stephanie, "too bad we have to work. I wouldn't mind driving somewhere."

The idea of a drive sounded fun. "We could ditch," I suggested.

"You think they'd figure out we couldn't both be sick?"

"So what if they did? No one cares at that place anyhow."

We worked out the plan by the time we got to the car, calling work from a phone booth to say that we were stuck on the road, coming back from Indianola. Heloise wasn't there yet but we left a message. Either it would work or it wouldn't.

"Where are you going now?" I asked as she pulled back onto Grand Avenue like she knew exactly where she was going.

"Back to your house so you can change clothes, Willie. Don't you understand anything?"

At the house I put on some light blue pants that were wearing out, and some swamp-mucker tennis shoes, old Ponies that were perfect for the great outdoors. We, or she, had decided that we were visiting some friends of hers in Lamb's Grove, Iowa, a town that's not even big enough to be on the state highway map. It's right outside of Newton,

Iowa, a town famous because Maytag washing machine headquarters are there. I guess you could call Lamb's Grove a suburb of Newton.

We had a comfortable drive over all the hills, taking a county road northeast. The road was narrow with two lanes, and a car passed every five minutes or so. We passed the corn fields, pig lots, and little wooded places between them. The houses were old but had the look like they'd never be gone. Most of the barns were old with chipping paint, big trucks beside them. I never get tired of driving on those county roads.

"What are your friends like?" I asked Stephanie. The car passed a sign that said "Newton--5 miles."

"They're real nice but a little bit different. Hey--you know what, we should stop and get some beer."

"Where are we gonna get beer out here?" I said.

Stephanie pulled into a local 7-11 type place, not a Casey's General Store but something like it. The small ones are better than the 7-11's because they have good things to eat for cheap. I'm an expert on that subject. All through high school we used to party late and go to the late night stores totally drunk, to eat microwave burritos. After we started partying in the sticks, we figured out exactly which truck stops had the best deals on food.

The place Stephanie stopped at was close to Interstate 80--we could see the freeway from the parking lot. The



store was down the road from Colfax, Iowa, another unforgettable place. From the lot you could see a bunch of flat fields with big trees and cornfields in between. Right between the freeway and the store there was a big industrial pond that didn't seem to have a purpose, beside a grain elevator. The parking lot was huge with trucks, trailers, a super tall metal sign, and gas of every kind. We pulled up by a regular pump.

"Will they let us buy beer, you think?" I said, slamming the car door.

"I know the lady on this shift," Stephanie said, smiling. "She lets me buy all the time."

Sure enough, Stephanie's friend was there. She was a run-down looking country style blonde lady with a cigarette in her hand, the kind of woman who probably thinks that all truck drivers are cute. She had a blue blouse with her name on it: Betty. It seemed like the right name for her.

"Where have you been, Stephanie hon?" she said. She could talk, smoke, and ring up stuff on the register all at the same time. "You give up on the scene after school?"

"I guess I did," Stephanie said. "Since I got this job I haven't been doing much besides work."

I watched the two talk. In a way they didn't seem to belong together. Stephanie looked so healthy and clear-eyed compared to Betty. I wondered how they met.

While I was thinking this, Stephanie took my hand.

"Betty, this is my friend Willie. Willie, this is Betty."

"Hello, Willie. You like my store?" She had this intense way of looking right at you when you talked. "You got good taste in beer." She took the twenty I offered her for the 12-pack of Michelob.

"I guess I do," I said. "When you drink for a while, you learn what's good."

Stephanie put her arm through mine and tugged on me a bit. "Grab the beer. Let's go," she said to me. "Betty, I'll see you next time."

"Anytime. Come on back by. You know when I'm here."

Stephanie had pulled me to the car by the time I could bring up the fact that we left the change, but by then I figured out what was up. "At ten bucks a shot I'd sell beer to us, too." I said. "Where did you pick up a friend like that?"

"She knows Craig and Patty," Stephanie said. "Betty lives in Lamb's Grove, too."

"Must be a happenin' place."

"Come on, don't get smart," Stephanie said in a motherlike voice. "We got some beer, at least. I don't hear you complaining about that."

"Next time we'll to the east side. I bet we'd get it cheaper there."

"All right, all right." She pulled to the edge of the highway. "I'm not very good at doing illegal things. Find another girlfriend if that's what you want."

We held hands, then I snuggled up nice and close to her. The car she drove was an old Newport with plenty of room for two people to get cozy. That's exactly what we did. With a beer in my hand I'd kiss her, sometimes making the car swerve. Good thing it wasn't a long drive from there to Lamb's Grove, about four miles from the truck stop with the bargain beer prices.

The road in Lamb's Grove is paved, but we had to drive across gravel to get to the house. I don't know if you can call that paved road the main street. It would be more correct to say that town has no main street because there's not a post office. Matter of fact, it was barely a town.

The house we were going to was sort of a side house beside a huge farm, with pigs and everything else in a back yard that was big as football field. The house was small, white, and a little run down, but it had a swing on the porch where two people were sitting.

The girl was short and skinny, with black hair and curled bangs. The dude was small, not much taller, with dark brown hair and a very friendly looking face. They walked right out to meet us when we parked.

Patty got to the car first, leaning into the window to hug Stephanie. "Where you been hiding lately? Haven't

seen you in so long." With her halter top and cut-offs she looked like she belonged in the country. She was friendly like a country girl, too. "Glad you came out. Come on in."

Craig opened my door and offered his hand. "I'm Craig. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Willie." We stood and looked at each other for a minute. I felt relaxed, or else I'd say that we were sizing each other up.

Inside, the house was clean and full of old furniture, all through the small, very wooden living room and big windy kitchen. Craig set me up with a cold Michelob in the living room while Stephanie and Patty walked off to talk. He pulled a joint from a wooden box and went to his pile of albums to shuffle through for some sound. "Anything you want to hear?" he asked. He was wearing cut-offs too, and a plain white T-shirt.

"Got any Hendrix?" I asked from my lounging place on the long stiff couch. I hadn't heard Jimi for a little while.

"Sure do. You like him too, huh?" Craig seemed happy that I asked for Hendrix. "Which one do you want to hear? I've got War Games, The Cry of Love, Smash Hits, and Live at Monterey."

"Play Live at Monterey," I said. That's my favorite. The best song is a live version of "Like A Rolling Stone",

a tune he does better than Dylan if you ask me. He gives it more guts than the Dylan does, even though Jimi didn't even write it.

We rocked out, turning up the volume of his thumpin' system until we could feel it through the floor. We smoked the joint and had a beer before Patty and Stephanie came in and saw us two standing up, playing air guitar to "Wild Thing". It made them stop walking right at the door.

"Well, ain't this something," Patty said, hands on hips. "Leave these boys for a couple of minutes and the party's already started. I suppose you two already smoked the joint."

"Maybe we did and maybe we didn't," Craig said, then we went into a laugh that gave away the answer.

"Listen at you two," said Patty. "Just like a man to snarf all the smokes and then say he didn't."

"There's more," Craig said as the album ended. In a flash he ran into the kitchen and came back with a blue water pipe that must have been six feet long. My jaw and Stephanie's jaw hit the floor. It was the longest pipe either one of us had ever seen.

When you smoke out of a "bong", you're supposed to suck until the tube is full of smoke and then clear it out, but when you try to do that with six feet worth of tube it's impossible. All of us gave it the old college try. Craig could just about do it, but even his strongest tries

ended with him coughing his lungs out and beating his chest, same as we were. Things got silly and hazy fast. I never could handle booze and bongs together, so I was even worse off.

I had never seen Stephanie fucked up before, and I didn't like the way she acted. Sometimes she would sit and stare at nothing and it was pointless to try talking with her. Other times she would keep going on and on about nothing--like when she started describing her grandma's house and everything in it except her grandma. She told us one intense story about babysitting her nephews, too. She got mad at one of her nephews, Gene, and locked him out of the house till he could act right. He proceeded to smash all the first floor windows with a metal pole, screaming and crying at the top of his lungs the whole time. So she ended up calling her sister from work to help calm him down, which nobody could do so he ended up in the children's ward at the hospital. The whole strage story seemed to take an hour to tell. Patty whispered to me that Stephanie always lost control when she got stoned, and said I should drive when we went back.

It was 9:30 or so when we got back to the car, and we were pretty awake considering how hard we partied. I decided to take Stephanie to my favorite outdoor spot by the Skunk River, where we used to party in high school.

The spot was nice and shady, only a couple of dirt roads away from Lamb's Grove.

I pulled the car almost completely off the gravel with Stephanie's wide green eyes watching me. She was through telling her life story, which was all right with me, and was leaning heavily against my arm, smiling. Definitely a good sign.

"Come on," I said, looking into her face. "Let's go for a little walk."

"All right. Why don't we?" She kissed me on the lips like she was hungry.

We got out of the car and grabbed an old natty blue blanket from the trunk, then hopped over the small fence into the field beside the road, a field of stripped corn, low stalks. About half a mile away we could barely see the farmhouse at the crest of a hill, too far away to worry about. We held hands and tripped through the old corn going toward the thick line of trees by the river. It was a little scary to walk there in the dark, with the sounds of the river and the wind. Stephanie held tight to my hand and kept me walking slow. I think smoking all that weed had something to do with feeling scared.

The brush was thick between the trees but there was plenty of mostly dry bank close to the water. I guess the bank stayed pretty clear because of how the river floods; our spot was right by a sharp bend, where the river was

shallow, leaving sand bars in the middle of the current. The water in front of us was about 12 feet across, not looking very deep or fast. Plenty of times before we had gone in for a late night swim. As long as you went out at night it was prime partying territory.

We spread out the blanket and lay down together, staying close to keep warm. The wind was chillier than we thought it would be. With our shorts off it was even harder to keep warm, but we tried our best. Her body was softer than Natalie's but still a lot of fun to play with. When we were hugging, though, I could feel her body shaking. At first I thought it was just cold, then I wasn't sure.

"Are you nervous, Stephanie?" I said softly into her ear.

She seemed glad that I asked. "Yes. How about you?"

"A little bit."

"Why?" she said.

"I don't know. It's weird being out here with you. Are you cold?"

"Yes. Can't you tell from touching me?"

"No, cause I'm cold, too."

Through that whole conversation we were whispering, which is silly when you think about it, whispering when the only thing that can hear you is a couple of coyotes. It seemed like the thing to do at the time, though.



I kept kissing her, wanting to see her naked. She snapped her pants button loose so I could feel her pussy. That's as far as we got, though. If it had been a warmer night we might've done it right then. It felt like 40 degrees out there, plus wind. We zipped up and headed back to the car pretty quick.

Walking back made me feel drunker, maybe because I was so tired by then. I didn't want to drive but Stephanie was looking wasted again. Like a gentleman I let her in on the passenger side before getting in myself.

First thing I saw was the clock: 10:35. "We gotta get back," I said. "Usually I get home right after 12. My mother doesn't even like me to be out after midnight."

"Yeah. We got time, don't you think?"

"I don't know. Time for what?"

"Time to drive slow." She snuggled up to me and we played kissy-feely some more.

We took a breath break after a long kiss.

"You're not disappointed, are you Willie?" she asked me all of a sudden.

"Disappointed about what?"

"Cause...I mean you might be wanting more than what you got. You know what I'm saying?"

I gave her a soft kiss, holding her flanks at the same time. "I couldn't be disappointed, Stephanie. I love to touch you. It feels so good."

"I like you, Willie," Stephanie said in the same soft voice we were talking in before. "I don't want you to think I'm a wild girl. Usually I don't do this."

"Neither do I," I said.

"I can tell. You're so nice, Willie. Some people won't even stop when you ask them to. You did."

"I knew you didn't want to do it," I said. "I don't want to give it to you until you want it."

"How about tomorrow?" she said. "No, I'm just kidding."

We got back on the road right after eleven. For the way back we took I-80. It puts you right on 235, the road that goes by our house. We stopped by a 7-11 for some breath mints so we wouldn't smell like booze. She pulled up in front of my house just before midnight.

"Lunch tomorrow?" she asked me, in a playful voice.

"You sure we should?" I said. "Never know, we might miss work again."

"Maybe."

Behind her I could see my mother's light flick on in her first floor bedroom. "I'll come by at 3. That way you won't have to catch a bus to work. Is that okay?"

"Sure. Sounds good."

She kissed me again. I couldn't concentrate on her too much because I thought my mother might be looking. Later on I found out that she really was looking.

"Goodnight, Willie," Stephanie said. "I had a very nice time today. How about you?"

"Of course I had fun. How could I be with you and not have fun?" I put a big smile on my face at the end of my heart warming compliment.

"I love the way you smile, Willie. Will you smile for me some more tomorrow?"

"Yes, good night."

"Good night."

Stephanie pulled away and the light went dark in Mother's room. I walked quietly around to the side door like I always did, trying not to wake up the whole house. Instantly, the cats were at my feet, following me down the half-flight of stairs. I petted them but not for very long. Then I was lying naked with Natalie.

### Work, Women, and Weed

Mother knew something. I can't say exactly what, exactly when, or how, but secrets were hard to keep in that house. Maybe the late hours or the noises or something got to her. I didn't want to wait until the whole scene fell in before we made our move, and Natalie felt the same way. In a way she was worse off, because she didn't have any friends in town and spent most of her time alone in that basement when I wasn't there. She had to live with all the negatives more than I did.

About the time I started seeing Stephanie, Natalie and I were looking for a place. One day we were lying on the living room floor looking at want ads, thinking about buying a car so we could actually get around without having to bus it. "Let's get a Monte Carlo like Mona's," Natalie said. "Then we can cruise. Are they expensive?"

"I don't know if we can find one like hers." We moved to the car section of the paper. "Look for a 1975 Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS. See, there's not even one."

"How about a Cutlass Supreme?" Natalie said.

This went on until Natalie was on her way to work, and I was still sitting there staring at the paper. Saturday we were planning to look around the neighborhood for a

place close to Natalie's work. I didn't want to be too close to Mother's house, in case she decided to drop in more often than we wanted her to.

Stephanie stopped by about 2:30 with a house finder pamphlet. She gave me a soft kiss on the lips when she came in, which felt good. Kissing always made her smile, and she'd start staring into my face expecting me to smile back. I went ahead and did it, not feeling quite as happy as she was.

We lay down next to each other on the floor and read the ads, my arm across her back. "Now we need a car and a house." I said.

"Really?" She talked in a fake British accent every once in a while. "That should be quite nice, having your own flat to invite your friends over for tea."

I saw an ad that looked good. "2-bedroom apartment, 25th St, all appliances plus, \$275. The nice price."

"Do you want to go see it?" Stephanie said. "We have plenty of time before we have to be at work."

"Why not? This might be the deal." I stood up slowly and helped Stephanie up, too. "Natalie wants a house but I don't care as long as we get out."

"Is it so bad living here?"

"Not all the time." She followed me, listening, while I headed downstairs to put on my monkey clothes. "Maybe

not even half the time. But when Mother bitches, she bitches hard."

"Poor boy," Stephanie said. "My heart goes out to people who live in big houses like this and eat their mother's cooking every day."

"So your heart goes out to yourself," I said, kind of annoyed with her. "Cause you don't exactly suffer."

"Of course I don't. Who said I did?"

"Nobody." The argument got silly fast. "Let's go, okay?"

Getting to the apartment did not take long at all. It was a clean little two-story brick building, clean on the outside at least. Inside the main hall was it was skanked out, musty and darker than it should have been. The stairway went up about a flight, and down half a flight, past the mailboxes and to the manager's door, which was right beside the laundry room. Both of us felt shy about knocking. I eventually did, very quietly.

"Who is it?" The voice was loud, coming through the door like a shot. It was a woman's voice.

"We're here to see the apartment." Stephanie tried to sound cheerful. There was a shuffling, and the sound of two or three locks and chains moving, then the door opened.

The landlord could have been my old boss Jayne's older sister: curly dark hair, late forties, plumper than Jayne was but not fat. Matter of fact, she was almost cute for

an older lady. She had on a blue and yellow-striped tennis shirt that was probably just right to turn the old guys on. She looked healthy, too.

"You're here for the 2-bedroom vacancy, I assume. Are you together?"

We looked at each other for a moment. "No," Stephanie said, "he wants to move here with his cousin. I'm just driving him around."

"Yeah," I said. "I don't have a car."

"I see." The landlord had a silly smiling face, but her smile looked natural. "What do I care, so long as you like the place, right? My name is Janet."

"Nice to meet you, Janet." We shook her hand. She nodded at each of us.

"So," Janet said, talking to me this time, "you and your cousin will be the only ones living in the apartment?"

"Yes."

"Let's have a look then. Maybe I can save you some runaround time, huh?" She reached to a nearby table and grabbed a set of keys. "The apartment is nice and big for the price. It's a good deal. Is this your first apartment?"

"Yes. My name is Willie."

"Willie. Come this way."

We followed her to the second floor. The air was stale up there. It was hot, hotter than it was outside.

We stood behind her while she shuffled through door keys.

"Here's the one. All these keys look the same, you know?"

The apartment had a very wide living room with bright blue carpet. Bright blue, with a greenish tint. Looking at it got to be painful, but then again it was kind of neat, too. It was the same color throughout the whole apartment, even in the bedrooms.

The best part was the living room, with the big picture window and a view of Birch Street and all the buildings that looked just like the one we were in. There was a sort of counter that separated the kitchen from the living room, so really the whole place was 3 rooms if you count the two bedrooms. The cabinets were too dusty for a place you were just moving into, I thought. I was used to places that have mothers or aunties to clean them.

Stephanie liked the place better than I did. "It's really big, Janet. How much do you charge for deposit?"

"Well, tell you what. It hasn't been fully cleaned, so I can accept \$150. Usually I charge a full month's rent, but if you're moving in soon I can let it go for less money. That's \$425 to move in."

Stephanie was more excited than I was, much more. "Not bad. Otherwise it would be \$550, right?"



"That's right, \$550. It's not a luxury apartment but there's nothing wrong with it. Nothing's going to jump out of there and bite you, Willie."

She must have seen my expression when I was looking in the oven. "The last people here didn't clean too much, did they?" I had sarcasm in my voice.

"I suppose they didn't. What was your first clue?" Stephanie laughed at me. "You look like an my grandma when she comes to our house, looking for dust."

We stopped by the Janet's office apartment for a soda before leaving. Janet gave us a tall iced glass of Coke and we sat at the edge of the couch looking nervous for 10 minutes or so. I filled out a form covering information about my job and all that, even though I still didn't think we'd be moving into the place.

Natalie changed my mind that night.

I walked into the basement after a short kissing session with Stephanie. Things with that affair were already cooling off. Stephanie could be very predictable and I can't stand that about a person, when I know what they're going to say before they say it. Plus, she could be dopey and not listen sometimes. I suppose that eight hours a day was too much time to listen to Stephanie, sweet as she could be. I also realized how lucky I was to have Natalie.

"Tell me about the apartment." Natalie and I were still naked after making love, and that was the first thing she said. I suspected there was something bothering her, but she's the type who doesn't say much about her problems.

"It was all right," I said. "It was your basic apartment. Second floor, too damn hot."

"Did it have air conditioning?"

"Yeah."

"How much was it?"

"\$275."

"How much for deposit?"

"\$425."

"Let's take it, Willie."

I told her it was dirty; she said she would buy the biggest can of Lysol at the store and clean it all herself. She was determined, and ready to move. Soon she had me convinced, too. With all the money we had saved and all the miles we had come, we had to give a shot at a real place.

The next morning we got up in time to eat breakfast with Mother. Natalie was all smiles. Mother wasn't. I prepared myself for "rag" time.

"So you found an apartment," she said. "Does it have walls?"

° "No, Mother, it doesn't have any."

"See that they put some in before you sink all that money into a place. I don't want to see them taking all your money."

"Mom, I thought you wanted us to move out," I said.

"You know, son, it's up to you," she said, moody and short, another reason why we needed to move.

I ate about four pancakes, very slowly, feeling wind in the kitchen, another cold day for the end of August. Through the window the wind kept blowing in and making the blinds rattle. I sat there until Mother and Addie were gone.

"Let's go," Natalie said as soon as the others were out the door. We dressed and ran out of the house. Janet said she'd be in her office at 8:30. We pulled up in front of the building at 8:27, beside Janet's a sky blue Chevy Caprice Classic with the white top, an easy car to spot. We sat in the our and snuggled up, wearing the matching windbreakers we had bought at the mall the week before. We both had on jeans too, and Nikes. It was fun to dress alike some days. Janet came about ten minutes late, with the contract on her car seat. After a hard struggle I got Natalie upstairs to look at the apartment before we signed. Of course she looked around with stars in her eyes and didn't even catch the smell like I did. Janet remarked on how cute we were together, and I think she forgot that we

were cousins instead of girlfriend and boyfriend. Or maybe she just wanted our money.

On the way home Natalie kept grabbing my arm and squealing like a pig. She was happy again. We went home and made up for the "TLC" time we missed by leaving home so early. I walked her to work a little late, arm-in-arm the whole way. We passed Kevin's house, but I didn't care anymore if he saw us.

He did.

I was expecting Stephanie to show up at any moment when there was a knock and it was Kevin. Ten after one and I was dressed for work, sitting at the piano and practicing one of my songs. Kevin had on his shorts and tank top as always, lounge wear for the unemployed.

"Hey, what's up," he said, flopping onto the couch.

"Kevin," I said. "What's the word? Long time no see. Where you been hiding?"

"Nowhere, dude. You the one that's been hiding. I figured I'd stop by and chill, smoke a doob with you man, like the old days. No worries, just a little smoke."

"Oh yeah?" I left the piano and sat by him on the couch. "You got one twisted, or what?"

"Hold on, home," he said, digging through his sweat sock and pulling out his stash. "God damn! Time I say I got a doob and you're ready to smoke. Is that how you are? Don't even want to know what's up with your partner, yo."

"Kevin!" I was mostly kidding with him but he sounded upset. "Take a chill, dude, I'm playing. You remember how we used to play, don't you? We say things we don't mean. For fun."

"I remember, man." He pointed a finger in my face. "And I'm glad you remember, cause I don't forget as quick as you do. You forgot about your whole crew. Least we your friends, or else we'd be long gone."

Kevin was an expert at rolling joints. ° He was done by the time he finished talking. It was no pinner, neither, time for a buzz.

"So why don't you drop on by sometime in the morning?" he said, the joint smoking in his hand.

"No time, dude."

"So you ain't got time for your friends, is that it?"

"Some people work, dude."

I didn't mean for that to sound rude, but it did. Kevin didn't like it so well. "I got it. You only hang out with the rich from now on, huh? If a nigga ain't got a job he can't run with you, huh?"

"Come on, I don't mean it like that. Quit bitchin'," I said. "I can get a bitch to do that."

"I bet you can," he said.

I didn't say anything, tired of arguing. Pretty quick he got to the subject of Natalie, a subject I had told him straight out not to talk about. He finished the joint,

eating the roach and putting his stash back in his sock again. "Does the name Natalie mean anything to you?" he said.

"Yeah," I said. "She's my cousin."

"Are you bonin' her?" he said. I didn't answer.

"I guess you are, then," he said. "I guess the way you are it's hard to find somebody. Besides your family."

"How would you know?" I was mad, trying to control it. "You don't have nothin'."

Kevin laughed. That's the worst thing someone can do to me when I'm starting to get mad is laugh. I feel like getting madder so they can respect me being mad. I almost freaked on Kevin right then and there but I kept my cool. It wasn't the time or place to fight.

"For your information, she's my adopted cousin," I said.

"Whatever," he said. "You coulda told me that the first day I got here. What was I gonna do, run to your mama and tell her? What got into your head, boy?"

There were a couple of tears I had to wipe away without seeming like I was crying. "I don't know, man. I got stupid for a while. I mean, some things you don't want to tell the world."

"So when you tell your best friend something, that's the same as telling the world. Is that what you're sayin'?"

"No. Quit thinking for me, Kevin. You're not me."

"You got that one right," he said. "I'm glad I'm not."

The doorbell rang. I went to the peephole and saw it was Stephanie. She was waving at the eyehole like a silly girl. I let her in and she hopped on me for a hug.

"Hi!" She kissed me and then sniffed the air. "You been partying already today? Hi! Who's this?"

Kevin was looking very surprised when I made the introduction. "Kevin, this is Stephanie. Stephanie, this is Kevin."

"Nice to meet you," said Stephanie. "I hear you're Willie's other best friend, besides his cousin."

"You could say that," Kevin said, grinning. Inside, I was still hopping mad.

Stephanie looked at both of us, showing the confused stare she's famous for. "You guys are a riot. I can tell you're friends."

"How can you tell?" said Kevin, with his stereotypical white voice.

"Cause you talk the same and you act the same," Stephanie said. "Just like a couple of clowns."

"Clowns, huh?" Kevin and Stephanie laughed and Stephanie took a seat. Kevin offered to twist one but no one else wanted to smoke any more. I was still buzzing from the first one, as a matter of fact, feeling kind of

shy with Stephanie snuggling up to me on the couch. Kevin gave me a nod behind her back, then he stood up. "I suppose I better be moving along," Kevin said in his white person voice again.

"It's been very nice meeting you, Stephanie. I hope to see you again soon."

By then Stephanie knew she was being made fun of.

"Shut up, Kevin. I hope I DON'T see you later."

"Later, 'cuz!" Kevin went out the door with a slam. Stephanie looked at me and laughed. I managed not to blow up, but I don't know how. We kissed around on the couch till 3:30 came, time to button up and leave for work.

That night while filing I had a sudden intense impulse to tell Stephanie I couldn't see her anymore, and that's exactly what I did. I told her right before break, whispering in her ear while the rest of the crowd was talking about gang violence or something. The nice thing was she didn't freak out as much as I thought she might. I don't think she really wanted to keep going herself, deep down. She got a little crude on me when we got to the break room.

"So all you wanted was to fuck me, huh?" she said as we sat alone at our table. Her stare was so cold she just about froze my pop.



"I wouldn't put it that way," I said. "I would say we both wanted something but we didn't want exactly the same thing."

"Whatever," she said. "I guess it's my fault, too."

"It's nobody's fault. Didn't you have a good time?"

"Yeah," she said. "So that's all I'm worth to you is a good time?"

"Stephanie." I stayed reasonable as she was getting louder. I also managed to keep my rudeness inside, figuring it was the last time I'd have to do that for her. "Why are you acting this way? You know you meant more than just a good time, right? C'mon. Why else would I always be calling you and going places and meeting your friends?"

"I don't know," Stephanie said, pouting just a little. "Maybe you just wanted something to do."

The bell for break rang just as we were running out of words and the few that did come out weren't helping at all. Both of us spent the rest of the night being quiet and fed up. At the end of the night, though, we did give each other a kiss, and Stephanie said she'd still drive me home if I needed a ride. I took the bus anyway, but it was a nice thing for her to offer, and it kept us from starting to hate each other. We still got it on a couple more times on nights she was out of control. What can I say except she got hers and I got mine!

Meantime, Natalie and I moved into our new apartment, and for the first time we didn't have to be sneaky about getting down. Let me tell you, we took full advantage of the situation.

Sex for hours, sex for days. The first weekend we were there I only left the house once, to go out to an afternoon movie with Addie. Even that wasn't the coolest of scenes, because Addie and Mother basically interrupted us in the middle of something. Mother gave me a strange look when I answered the door in a T-shirt and gym shorts.

"Are you just waking up, Willie?" she said. Addie ran around me to gawk at the apartment. "Where's Natalie?"

"She's asleep, ma. I've been up just reading."

"Reading? Reading what?"

"Comic books."

"It figures." Mother was looking around the apartment and didn't seem to like what she saw. "Didn't you guys unpack yet?"

"Not really, ma."

Natalie crawled out of the bedroom, looking a little fresher than me with her tight jeans and a clean blouse. Right away she ran into Addie, who had made her way halfway down the hall, and they hugged each other. "Lil' Dee!" she said. "I didn't know my cousin was going to visit."

"Hi, Natalie," Addie said, in a cute, shy voice. She liked Natalie a lot, which made her shy whenever they were together. "Willie's taking me to a movie today."

"Oh, yeah," Natalie said, walking Addie arm-in-arm into the living room. "That sounds like a good time. Maybe next time Willie will take me, too."

"Yeah," Addie said. "Maybe next time."

Mother nodded to Natalie. "Enjoying your new place?"

"Sure am, Auntie Dee. Nobody makes us breakfast anymore, though."

"Come on over next Sunday. I'll feed you. Be glad to." She turned to Addie as she gathered her purse. "Take good care of your brother now, okay?"

"I sure will. Bye, mama."

"Bye. Take it easy, you two." She left, with Addie getting more hyper than ever. I whispered goodbye to Natalie and headed down to the corner bus stop with Addie.

We were going to the Merle Hay Mall, which had three very small theaters. Addie loved to ride the bus and hold my hand, making comments about people that we passed. She was totally talkative the whole way to the movie theater.

"So you gonna get straight A's this year again?" I asked her. We were sitting together in the very back. "Your mom says you're doing good so far."

"Yeah, I guess so," Addie said. "School is kind of boring right now. Our teacher is mean to us."

"Really? What does she do?"

"She doesn't let us talk."

I laughed. "You're not supposed to talk in school."

"I know, but she never lets us talk. Not even if we whisper. You're supposed to be able to whisper."

"Naah," I said, laughing a little. "If you were doing your work you wouldn't need to talk, right?"

"What if you're finished with your work?"

"Ask for extra credit. That way you can be sure to get a good grade, right?" Addie looked at me and shook her head, but didn't argue.

The bus pulled up at the Merle Hay Mall and we headed into the theaters. Sunday afternoon they were having special films for tykes, and the one we saw was Invaders from Mars. We got plenty of snacks and sat way up front like kids always want to. Both of us got lost in the movie at first, munching loud and laughing at the scary parts. When they first showed the monsters Addie got spooked.

"They're ugly," she whispered to me, snuggling. They were strange monsters, looking sort of like E.T. on steroids hopping around on kangaroo legs. "I'm scared, Willie," she said, squeezing my arm.

"It's only a movie."

"I know."

Soon we were laughing again at the supposedly exciting part of the movie. Then we sort of lost interest and went

walking around the mall, stopping by the pet stores and toy stores, of course. On the way back home we took a detour to Greenwood Park to see the leaves and hang out by the lagoon, which was drying up and had a solid layer of algae on top of the water. We threw some rocks and watched them get sucked down below the algae level. It was funny.

"Beat you to the swing!" Addie yelled, turning and running at full speed. She was fast for a little kid, but I beat her there.

"Yoooo!" Being with a kid all day makes you damn silly. "This is scary, Lilly Dee!"

"I can swing higher than you, Willie," Addie said, and she could, too. She had some power in those skinny legs to bring her up so she was even with the top pole. I slowed down to watch her, she was so high. "See, Willie, I'm better than you."

"You sure are." I jumped out of my swing and landed on my feet. "But you can't do that."

"Yes, I can." She didn't spend much time slowing down before she dived out of her swing and hit the ground on all fours.

"I was better," I said, teasing.

"No you weren't."

We were almost at the edge of the park when Addie noticed that we were leaving. "Where are we going now, Willie?"

"Home," I said. "It's almost eight. You still have to get ready for school, remember?"

"No, I forgot," Addie said, sounding very sarcastic.

"Come on now." I took her hand as we were walking, like I've done since she was a child. "School's not that bad, is it?"

"No. Willie, why did you move?"

"I had to. I'm too old to stay with Ma."

"No you're not." Addie pouted. "Don't you miss the cats? They miss you?"

"Do they? Did they tell you that?"

"Yes. Zeus did."

We crossed 63rd Street hand-in-hand and grabbed a soda at the Kwik Trip. By the time we finished drinking we were sitting on my mother's porch, Addie's head on my lap. The cats were cruising around in the yard. The sun was setting in front of us too, a perfect September night for talking to your little sister.

"I love you, Willie."

The words took me by surprise. "I love you too, Dee."

"You won't come live with us? You can bring Natalie."

"I'm sorry, Dee. I have to stay where I am."

"Why, Willie?" She sounded more adult, like she did whenever she got serious. "I never get to go places with you. I thought we'd do more things when you came back from Forest Hills. Now you only stay with Natalie."

Addie has this way of getting through to me when my mother didn't have a chance. For a short second I wanted to go back again, take my old room and watch hockey with Addie like we used to do. It couldn't happen, of course, but then again I couldn't explain it all to her either.

"Can I take you out next weekend, Lil' Dee?"

"Yes, Willie. Come eat with us tomorrow. We're having chicken. You want to come?"

About that time Mother started yelling for Dee to come in, so I gave her my last kiss. "Good night, Addie. I'll see you soon, okay? I'll call tomorrow."

"All right. Bye, Willie." I had to kiss her one more time. She was sad and so was I, almost like we knew what was going to happen. Maybe we did.

### **The Place, the Party, and the Price**

Natalie didn't party much after we left Sarah in Carolina, but I took up the slack once we got the place, partying with Kevin and Stephanie. More and more of the people I knew from the old days started showing up. Along with Kevin and Kiki, who were always over, there was Sheila, Dennis, Nikita, and a couple of others. With stoners like Kevin and Sheila around, I started getting high at least once a day. Natalie didn't ever hang out when I had guests. When I was sitting with my stoner friends in the living room listening to drug music and smoke was filling the place up, Natalie would disappear. The first time it happened it really bothered me. I left everybody and went to the back bedroom to see what was wrong.

I got there and Natalie was sitting on the bed, staring. "Mind if I sit with you?" I said.

"Of course not," she said in a sad voice.

I put my arms around her and kissed her. She smiled like she was about to cry.

"Do my friends get on your nerves, Natalie?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm just jealous. I don't have any friends."



"You can be with us," I said. "Everybody loves you, Natalie. You have to be friendly and talk to them."

"Really though, Willie, how do I fit in?" She had a new intensity in her voice. "You get stoned and talk about Valley High School. I don't get stoned. I didn't go to Valley. What am I supposed to say?"

"We talk about more than just Valley High School," I said. "We talk about everything."

"No you don't, Willie. I know because I listened. You're too stoned to remember."

I didn't feel I was wrong that time, but I apologized. Meanwhile, our apartment was steady turning into a party place, and Natalie kept disappearing when my friends came over. I asked her what she did by herself all those times, and she said she took naps or read or thought about the future, a topic we never seemed to talk about. She started calling relatives a lot. We talked to Mona, Carol, and Chuckie every week. Chuckie was getting us both excited about New York, sending us postcards and telling stories about what he saw.

New York. What a trip! Could it ever be a place you could call home?

Three weeks after we moved to the apartment, we had a housewarming party. This meant cleaning up the place, something we were not in the habit of doing. When we got started there were boxes sitting around like we just moved

in. The electric blue carpet had a gritty trail leading from the front door to the hall closet. Cleaning the carpet meant moving the two old couches--a long soft couch with orange-flowered cloth, and a scratchy brown sofa-bed that weighed a ton. It was pretty good for sleeping even though it had a big lump in the middle. When you were lying there you could see through the big picture window, one nice thing about the apartment at least. Saturday afternoon we even got around to cleaning the window. That was after a good six hours of cleaning.

All afternoon Natalie was very quiet. I tried making a lot of jokes but she didn't laugh much. Matter of fact everything she said that afternoon was bitchy. She even bitched about having to clean.

"This isn't my party," she said as she was wiping the counter. "I don't know why I'm cleaning for it."

"'Cause you're so sweet and loveable," I said.

She didn't think it was funny, and stayed on the subject of the party. "I bet I'll be cleaning after your party, too."

"If it bothers you don't do it," I said, getting tired of being the only one in the house even trying to be in a good mood. "Don't have me putting you through no trouble. Am I allowed to socialize?"

"Willie, don't be like that. Chill out and do whatever your little heart wants. That's what I'm doing."

We stopped cleaning and took a seat for a minutes so we could talk--sarcasm was Natalie's sign that she needed to chat. "Something's on your mind, babe," I said to her, squeezing her hand. "Let it out."

"What if it's none of your business?" she said.

I didn't have an answer for that, so I just stared. She stared back at me. "Do you have to know everything?"

I was mad but tried not to show it. "No, I don't have to know everything. If you don't want me to know then don't tell me."

"You know what it is already, Willie," Natalie said.

"What? Tell me."

"All right." She stopped for a minute and then went on. "You got all your little party friends coming over to drink beer and smoke your little joints and act funny. What'll I be doing all that time? I'll be hiding in my room reading a book 'cause I don't smoke pot and I don't feel like hearing Kevin runnin' his mouth like you know how he does. It's my weekend just like it's your weekend but I don't get a break. That's the way I feel so if you don't like it you can blow it out your ass, buddy."

A strange question popped into my mind. "How do you like Des Moines?" I asked.

"I can't stay here, Willie."

"Why not?"

"'Cause there's nobody here but you."

"Huh." I wasn't in the mood for an intense depressing conversation, but I felt one coming on. "So, what do you want?" I said.

"Come again," said Natalie.

"What do you want? Who do you want? If I'm the only one here but I'm not enough, what else do you want?"

"I need a friend. It's not you, babe, you're my main thing. You know that, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm serious. Honey--baby, don't be that way. You know I love you. Otherwise I wouldn't be way up here in Des Moines giving you my vagina every day." She smiled when she said "vagina", making me smile, too. "See? See how you are? Give a dude everything, I mean everything, and it still ain't enough. He wants you to think just like him, too. I can't do that, Willie. I gotta be me, right?"

"Right."

"And I tell you what, Willie, I can't stay in your Des Moines for too much longer. I gotta get out."

"Why?"

"Why?" Natalie lowered her head and looked harder at me. "What have I just been telling you? I don't fit in this place. It doesn't fit me. Think about it. I don't like to party like yawl like to party. What can I do for myself while your entire school is drinking beer and smoking weed in my living room?"

I shook my head. "You know what, Natalie, I'm not the only one who can have friends, right? Is there a law against you bringing your friends over? Why don't you bring some people over from your work?"

"There's not a black face to be seen at work," she said, making me laugh. "No crazy white folks like Sarah, either."

"Sarah. Too bad she can't come over tonight," I said. "You and her could have a good time together."

"Yeah. Babe, you know what? We should go to New York. What do you think? Willie, let's go."

Whenever she talked to Chuckie it made her talk about going, and since he called every Saturday, every Saturday we talked about New York. "It'll just be me and you, babe, and Chuckie and everybody he knows, and anybody we meet in New York City. You won't need to spend your money on weed, Willie, 'cause the city takes you away. Why don't we go?"

"I want to, Natalie. How we gonna get there, walk?"

"Buy a car. We could drive."

"Buy a car. With what?"

"With money. Any an old car will get us there. Once we're there we can ride the subway. Think about it, Willie."

Eventually, we got up and started cleaning again with party time getting closer. Meanwhile, between Natalie and Chuckie I had New York on the brain, with Addie and Mother

calling me from the other side of the fence. As always I was caught in the middle, the last one to decide. The thing is, when I really started thinking about what's really important to me, the choice was very easy to make.

We had four cases of beer on ice in this huge trash can that looked like a barrel. We also had a little booze on the counter and in the fridge, things like vodka to mix with fruit juice to make punch. No matter how many people showed up, there'd be plenty to drink. Kevin and Kiki were the first ones to come, about 5:30. I popped open a beer and we all stood smoking a joint by the window for a while, cranking some Doors.

Right when we were finished smoking, the phone rang and it was Bee. I made excuses not to talk with her. Natalie took the call in the bedroom and talked for the longest time. I was already too wasted by then to talk to Bee, and I felt guilty for a while before the buzz and the party atmosphere took me away.

"Nobody's here but us," Kiki said about 6:30, leaning back on the flowered couch in total relaxation. He looked like his brother Kevin, only two years younger and bigger--totally muscular and super strong. As a sophomore he started at linebacker for Valley. The boy was smart, too. You could tell by his thick glasses!

"I'm not worried," I said. "No one shows up on time for a party. It's not a job."

People started coming fast about 7:30. Sheila and Dennis came in first, together as always. They started going out in high school, when we all used to hang together. Along with Kevin and Kiki they were the crowd I ran with when we first started partying. The whole night was like a reunion party. While Sheila and me made the punch, tunes were cranking hard across from us in the living room, with a couple of people starting to sway with the beat.

"So you finally got a woman," Sheila said. She was a strange looking girl, kind of chunky with huge eyes, dark brown skin on her face that's really rough, not ugly but definitely not cute.

"I'm gittin' it, that's right," I said, "even if I did have to go a few miles to find it."

"Hey, whatever works," Sheila said. "You get it any way you can when you ain't got it."

While we were still in the kitchen Julie came in, a white girl from our old neighborhood. She showed up by herself, like she always did. All through the time I knew her she never had that many friends, maybe because she didn't try but there were other reasons, too. She was strange, one of those people that you never knew what was on her mind. To me she was really cute, tall, blond, all chest. Her hair was stringy and sometimes she looked old, but those things never kept her from looking good. When

she walked into the kitchen I decided it was one of her prettier days, with her short skirt and tight yellow top. She carried a cigarette in her hand, something she always did.

"Hey! What's up?" she said to me before I got my hug. "I guess this must be you."

"I guess this must be me." That was the joke we always made when we saw each other. Sheila looked at us like we were insane.

"How you been, boy?" Julie said. "I thought you dropped out of society, found a better way, or something." Julie would've fit in in the sixties. Too bad for her it wasn't the sixties anymore. "You find a woman or something down there in the Old South?"

I looked at Sheila, then I looked at Julie again. "Yeah, you could say that."

"So where's the booze?" Julie said. I poured her a glass of punch. She was happy.

By ten o'clock the house was mostly full. The beer didn't go too fast but the punch did, so we made more. The stereo cranked all night. I kept switching the music between hard rock and soul to keep everybody happy. Things stayed under control for a long time really, before getting loose.

About 11 o'clock, big Mike started getting loud with this dude named Tiko, the crackhead. They were at it like



wild men. Tiko's not a dude you want to fight cause he throws a fast punch for a little dude. Big ass Mike was on the ground and bleeding before we had a chance to pull them apart. I told Tiko to take a hike, which he did without any more trouble. He's the kind of dude I wouldn't have over if someone else didn't invite him.

We had to take care of Mike, good old Mike who could sing like a bird in the school chorus but couldn't fight. He was a heavy dude with a wavy curl and clothes that were too tight for him. He was smart too, but he had a mouth. He got into fights cause he'd talk, and talk, and argue with the most roguish niggers at school, ask 'em if they were going to college, if their mama cared about them, if they'd ever get a job. That was Mike, looking dazed leaning against the counter, Derrick and Nikita wiping the blood off his face. Mike was cool, but at the same time, he was the kind of dude that needed a lesson in common sense.

I talked to Derrick for a while after the situation was under control. I didn't meet Derrick till senior year. When I first saw him I could have sworn he was Mike's little brother, cause he was smaller than Mike but that was the only difference. He was a very smart dude, and sloppy like smart people are supposed to be. He was dark-skinned and big-lipped, which made me feel sorry for him because everybody at school called him by a different rude name. I

got to know him senior year in Economics class. You could tell he was smart because he always got his homework done in class. I had Econ homework every night that semester.

We walked outside to get away from the rude crowd for a minute. "Want to smoke a joint?" I said to him, sitting on the curb outside.

"Sure," he said. I didn't think he'd be into it, but he was. Guess you never know. That weed was pretty good, too. We sat and stared at the trees and buildings across the street for a couple of minutes. Then I looked at him, and he had the stupidest stoned look on his face. I had to laugh.

"Dude, what's been happening," I said. We had a good long handshake. "You hanging around this town all summer?"

"You know it. Had a job loading trucks at Nabisco. Easier than school. A box of Ritz crackers doesn't weigh too much."

"Dude," I said with a silly laugh, "tell me you're lying! Did it take you all summer to load one truck?"

"What do you think?" Derrick could do the authentic white man's voice because he was smart. They used to make fun of him for that, too.

"I bet you're gonna ace college," I said. "You were always the one with the grades. Are you gettin' out of this state, man?"

"Yeah. I'm going to the University of Arizona."

"Arizona! Way the fuck out there, huh? You must can't stand Iowa, gotta get AWAY from this place. Isn't that right?"

"Nobody's gonna argue with that."

I looked at him again, sitting there with a beer, going back in time to when I first saw that dude, in third grade. All those years I didn't really know him, but it seemed like I did. What a trip.

"What you do down in North Carolina, Jack?"

I shook my head. I still hadn't told most people the exact truth. "Saw my family. Fucked this bitch every day, that kept me down there. Had a boring ass job for a while. Partied. It was a good time, but nothing to keep me down there."

"Tell me about the bitch," he said, with that stoned smile.

"Aw, dude." I was worried cause we were talking loud, and I didn't want Natalie to pop out while we were talking about her. "Man, I don't even know how I got into this. It's one of those things that got totally out of control. I'll tell you, man, but you ain't gonna freak on me, right?"

Derrick laughed a little bit. "Now you know I ain't no freak."

"Yeah, I guess you ain't," I said. "All right. Here's the word. You know my cousin Natalie up there, right?"

"Right. The pretty one. That's your lady, huh?"

I damn near dropped my beer. "You know about it too?"

"Who doesn't know? That's old news, man. I thought maybe you had another one down south."

"Dude!" My beer was tasting warm at the bottom of the bottle. "Is there any of my business that you don't know?"

"I doubt it. Apparently you forgot how this place is. There ain't no secrets between us around here. News gets around quick."

"You ain't lyin', Derrick."

When I got back upstairs I saw how toasted out people were. Some of them were starting to leave, at least. I couldn't help but be glad of that, but there were still about 20 people drinking and acting stupid.

I talked to Nikita for a while, another girl who went to our high school. She was short and kind of chunky with one of those old-fashioned mini-fros. Everybody liked her cause she was one of those people who was always up, no matter what the situation, not much of a drinker but still a party animal. What she did best was play basketball. At our high school she was the star guard, short and unstoppable on the drive or the jump shot. She was going to Drake U on a scholarship, that's how good she was. But

you couldn't tell she was good at basketball if you were leaning beside her on the kitchen counter with a drink in your hand. I was about a foot taller, but she could beat me on the court.

"Hey shrimp," I said, about to hand her a glass. "Are you tall enough to reach that punch bowl on the bar? Pour me a glass if you are."

She gave me a hands-on-hips look. "That's how you ask and you expect me to answer? Better think again, Mr. Jackson. I ain't nobody's maid."

"So you ain't, huh?" I gave her a little bow. "My apologies, Ms. Thomas. Would you please be so kind as to hand me a glass of mojo juice? I would appreciate it very much."

"I'd appreciate it very much if you'd move your lazy ass over and get it yourself." She walked away, turning back to smile as she rounded the corner into the living room.

"All right," I said, pouring the juice myself. "I'll remember that."

"I bet you will," she yelled from the other side of the room.

I followed her and took a seat between her and Julie on the couch, a good place to watch people try to dance. Kiki was out there with some strange-looking woman with leather pants and a hair-spray dome on top of her head.

They were getting into some kind of down under dosey-doe African mating dance. It was scary.

Julie was sitting and smiling, smoking a cigarette as usual. I wondered if she'd been hanging out by herself all night. "How are you doing?" I said, pressing myself closer to her. Even though I was extremely buzzed, I could tell she was drunker than me.

"All right," she said. "I'm sitting here seeing all, knowing all. You know me."

"How come you don't get out there and bump and grind with everyone else?"

"Cause I can't bump and I can't grind."

"C'mon." In my drunken mood I grabbed her by the arm and pulled her up, and in a minute we were getting wild in front of the bar. She was a fast learner when it came to doing the wild thang, sexy, warm and close. My hands were on her ass and she was on my leg, going up and down, up and down. If Natalie had walked in I think she would've shot me. We must have been really getting into it because I heard a couple of people hoot and holler. For a long time we kept it up, too. I was getting hot and sweaty out there.

We should have won first prize. She grabbed my hand and kissed me when we sat down on the couch. I had to remind myself that my girlfriend was around, living in the

same house. Where was Julie the other 17 and 1/2 years of my life? Nothing like that had ever happened before.

The party calmed down after that. Julie got tired as me after that dance. To chill we sat in one place and sipped drinks for a while. Then Kevin came up to me and leaned up close for a word.

"Yo, Giovanni! You better take care of your old lady."

"Why, man? What's up?"

"While you're out here smokin' weed and cATTin' she's having a rough night, sitting in the room by herself. I just talked to her."

"Where is she?"

"In your bedroom, stupid ass. Better take care of your shit, man. I can't do it for you for the rest of your life."

I grabbed a tissue on my way to the bedroom to wipe my sweaty forehead. Before I knocked on the bedroom door I took a second for a breath break. Sure, it had been a long time since I talked to her at the party. I didn't even know how long. I looked over my reflection in the long mirror on the bedroom door--I doubt that I looked any worse than usual. I knocked softly and then went in.

Natalie was sitting in the middle of the bed with her robe on, looking very sad. There wasn't much in our bedroom except the bed and a big chest of drawers, which

made the whole scene depressing cause it was like seeing her alone in a motel. She looked up when I came in and smiled barely enough that I could tell she was smiling.

"Hello, Willie. Did you miss me?"

"Yes." I sat down beside her. We kissed and I took her hand. "I thought you went out or something. That's why I didn't look for you."

"You didn't look in your own bedroom. You must've thought really hard about where I might be."

She was right, and I didn't have an excuse. "I never said I was smart, Natalie. But I'll keep trying. What's the deal? Even though I'm stupid I don't like seeing my lady sad."

"Willie, you can't help me on this one. Sweet as you are, babe, I can't stand all these people in our house. 'Cause if they weren't here it would just be me and you."

Hearing that made me feel like telling everybody to fuck off and go home. I couldn't think of what to say. "Don't you like my friends?" I said.

"Yeah, they're all right. But I can't even keep 'em straight yet."

"You know Derrick and Nikita and Kevin and Kiki. They've been over here enough."

Natalie nodded her head, but I could see that there wasn't too much I could do. For about 15 or twenty I sat



there till I started getting nervous about the people in the living room.

"Natalie," I said. "I love you."

"I love you too, Willie."

We kissed again, then Natalie's face got a more serious look and she whispered the news to me. "Bee's on to us, Willie. She knows, and Carol knows."

Drunk as I was, I hurt over that one. Of all people, I really didn't want Bee to know what was happening. "How did they find out?"

"She put two and two together, between what Carol knew and your mother knew. They want me to go back now."

"Are you going back?"

"Why should I?" Natalie's voice was so cold I felt it. "I don't know. Let's talk about it tomorrow, okay?"

She was ready for bed. I kissed her and turned out the light. Then I carried the last of the coats to the living room. The party was smaller, but still raging.

Kiki was still out dancing with Miss Leather, with a few people clapping and everybody wasted. It had gotten to be that time in the party where things start to look ugly, cups and cigarette butts on every chair handle. When the hour gets late you have fun only if you're on a roll with whatever you're buzzing on, or if it's somebody else's house. If it's your house it's hard to be happy.

The living room was dark except for a yellow light bulb somebody had put in the corner floor lamp. The survivors were down to about fifteen--everybody else had the sense to leave by then. Other than couple #1 doing the blues dance, Julie, Derrick, Mike, and about five other people were still there.

When it came to drinking Julie threw you sometimes. One day she would have a beer and act like she drank a case, the next day she would drink a case and act like she had a beer. She's the kind who looks better after a few beers, while everyone else looks worse. "How's your girlfriend?" she said, with her cigarette pose.

"Trying to sleep," I said. "Did you get a chance to talk with her?"

"Yeah. She's a warm one, I can tell. She's warmer than I am."

"Not that warm," I said. "Not hardly."

"Oh, yeah? If you feel that way why are you going home with her instead of me?"

"Cause I live with her." Julie liked to make silly propositions, but she never meant it.

"So that's all your woman means to you is somebody to live with," she said. "I bet you don't say that to her, do you?"

I wished she'd drop the subject at the same time that I kept on talking. "We don't have to say everything. I tell her what she needs to know."

"Do you tell her that you love her?"

"Who are you, Oprah Winfrey?"

We finally started laughing. That's what happens when you're drunk and you get into serious shit, either you hit each other or you laugh. I got up off the couch after that, though. As friendly as she sounded, I was tired of people getting into my business, especially when it included Natalie.

I hid out in the kitchen with Nikita and Derrick till about two, then we told the last few to go home. Kevin was the last to leave. I was glad to hear the echo when he yelled "Later!" up the stairs and was gone.

"Whew," I said, slamming the door. I turned out the living room light and kicked over someone's cup with someone's forgotten drink and a cigarette butt. The house was plenty stale-smelling. On the way to the bedroom I cranked up the vent.

Natalie didn't even move when I came in. She was snoring. I figured maybe she had one drink too many, sleeping the way she was. I was drunk but not that sleepy, meaning all I could do was lie and stare at the ceiling, thinking like I am now. Neither one of us woke up until way after dawn. Then we made love.

### Taking the Ball

Julie called me about 2 or 3 o'clock that afternoon, asking if she could help clean up. I said yes at first, but Natalie made me call back and tell her no. That made me mad, but I didn't say anything until after I told Julie not to come. I was severely hung over. "What's wrong today?" I said at Natalie as I hung up the phone. You get to choose my friends now?"

"No," she said. "I just want to choose who I have in my house. Do I have that right?"

"Not really," I said. "It's not just your house. It's my house, too."

"Yeah, that's right. But if I'm the person you like the most and I need my space, do I have to put up with your party hoes every day?"

I looked at her and thought about it, trying to think clearly through my splitting headache. "You know I love you, Natalie."

"How did you get so many friends?" said Natalie, mopping.

"High school," I said. "The same people I hung around for the last ten years. No biggie."

"I went to high school, too. I had a few friends, but they're gone. I didn't keep them nearly as long as you did."

"So nice to be special," I said. "I'll tell you my secrets someday."

We got about six phone calls in the next hour, meaning I was in a worse mood when Mother called. We barely had a chance to get everything picked up. I dropped a garbage bag full of cups and other junk to answer the phone.

"Hello."

"Is this Willie?" From her tone I knew this was the last word.

"This is me," I said, wanting to lie. "How's it going, Mom?"

"I need to talk with you. Can you and Natalie stop by later today?"

"Of course. Why not?" I asked. "Be over soon."

I told Natalie what Mother said. No more slow-motions smiles. We took showers and aspirin and started walking. Somewhere between our apartment and Mother's house I remembered that I hadn't talked to Mother much since the last time Addie came by. Seven blocks to walk--Natalie and I had never been so quiet.

We walked fast. A couple of people waved, but we didn't stop. Three months of dating had made us bold enough to walk hand-in-hand. Being with Natalie like that

made me feel loud and proud, with no shame whatsoever. All the way to Mother's house we held hands, but then I decided it would be less painful if we didn't force the issue quite to that extent. So we knocked on the door like normal, being casual. It felt strange to knock on the door of a house I lived in for so long.

Mother answered the door in her cooking apron. "Come in." We followed her into the yellow kitchen. It was warm in there, chili cooking on the stove. That was always one of my favorite foods dishes she made.

"How are you doing, Auntie Dee?" Natalie said. In return, she got a smile from Mother that passed for nice. I felt sorry for Natalie trying to relate to Mother--she seemed just as nervous as she did the first day we got off the bus.

"How's it going, Mom?" I said, taking a chair.

"Where's Addie?"

"She's at a friend's house. I only made dinner for three today."

I got up for a second to help her set the table, but she waved me back down. "You never helped me before. Now you're trying to help me as a guest?"

She was kidding. Sure. I looked straight at her as she set the silverware in front of us. Soon the cornbread was in the middle of the table and the first servings of

chili were in the bowls. We bowed our heads for the prayer.

"God is good, god is great.

Thank you for the food we eat.

Amen."

The meal was mostly silent, with once in a while Mother asking me about the boring stuff, starting with "How's work?", the single most unnecessary question a person can ask, especially if they worked the same type of jobs I did. Work at the federal building was 100% as boring as work at the Blue Cross office--repeating itself endlessly. I decided to give her a straight answer anyway. "Work is all right, Mom. Only three weeks left on the project."

"Then what are you doing?" Mother asked.

"I don't know. Work temps if I can't find anything. Next place I'd like to have the possibility of someday maybe if I'm lucky having something to do other than play with forms."

"Don't complain. It pays your bills, doesn't it, Willie?"

I nodded my head at Mother through bites of chili. "You need to be out there looking for a job now. It takes time to find a good one."

Meanwhile Natalie was sitting totally quiet at the table, stirring her food more than eating it. She had a

disssatisfied, worried face, the same moping look she had at the party, sitting by herself in the bedroom. I thought maybe it was just her headache. It made me kind of worried myself.

Mother didn't notice too much, asking me about job possibilities as I ate. Then she talked about Addie's schoolwork, and the awards she got for being in the school play and running track. I kept wondering when the bomb was going to drop. Not until after we ate, I figured.

Sure enough, as she was clearing the dishes she started to talk. "How's the new place treating you two? Being on your own any different than being at home?"

Natalie wasn't going to answer, so I did. "It's not that different, except you can stay up later and leave the dishes longer."

"How was the party?"

"It was your predictable sort of teenage party, you know, cokes and everything." I don't know where the sarcasm came from. I suppose I couldn't make up a real lie, hung over as I was, wondering how she even knew about the party.

"Auntie Dee!" Natalie hadn't spoken in so long she surprised us both. "Are you going to tell us we have to move? You might as well."

"Of course not." Mother sounded like she had already thought out her answer. "I want you to think about what



you're doing. I want you to decide what you want the way adults have to."

"So we're not adults." Natalie was ready for the big fight. "But we do have to act like adults."

"Of course you're adults. That's why you have responsibilities to work out before you decide what to do. Like a lease. If you walk out of a lease, you're legally responsible to pay on an apartment you don't live in. That's why I can't tell you to move."

"But you want to tell us."

"Yes, I do."

"Is it your business?"

"Yes." Mother was angry by then, practically spitting her words out. "This IS a family, Natalie. There's more than one person involved in making decisions. You ought to know that."

"So you decide for him. Are you more than one person?" Natalie was cold, angry, determined.

"If I do it's none of your damn business, Natalie! Did you ever think of that?"

"Yes. Come on, Willie." Natalie walked toward the door. I followed her automatically.

Mother caught me and spoke once more as the front screen door slammed. "You call me TODAY and talk about this, Willie," she said right into my face.

"All right," I said, wanting to escape. I practically ran out the door and had to keep running to catch up with Natalie, who was starting down the block. She barely looked at me as I fell in beside her. "Slow down!" I said. She acted like she didn't want to, but she did.

"I'm moving," she said. "I'm not taking any more damn lectures from any of your damn family. Are you coming?"

"I don't know, Natalie." I was feeling angry and still hung over. "I have to talk to my mother first."

"Talk to her today," she said, and that was all. It was a quiet walk back home, too.

When we got back I was on the phone forever, talking to Sheila the longest. She's pretty good at giving advice, and she told me not to go. "Find another bitch," she said. I told her Natalie wasn't a bitch, and she laughed.

Natalie spent a couple of hours sulking in the bedroom, but finally came out crying and said she was sorry for how she was acting. "I'll stay, Willie, if you're staying. I can't leave you." We hugged and kissed each other, and it felt better than usual on that intense day.

I camped out in the bedroom with about two quarts of orange juice, ready to do some thinking. I even got a few "z's" in lying there, my mind working kind of slow but working, at least. Depending on how you look at it you could say that my decision was already made, since I knew I wanted to stay with Natalie. No question, none. I'm old

enough to know that when you find a lady to spend time with, you don't just walk away. You know why? 'Cause you never know, this could be your chance at having something that matters. Sure, I'm young, sure, I'm stupid, and I'll be the first one to admit that. I'm smarter than a lot of people give me credit for, though, that's the thing. I'm smart enough to make a decision about my life without somebody holding my hand and telling me what to do. That's god's truth, I swear!

The thing is, while I was lying in my bedroom I was thinking mostly about the hard part, meaning what exactly could we do in New York. I guess we really won't know the answer until we get there, but you gotta figure we'll just get a job, like we got jobs in Des Moines. What's the big deal? I kept thinking that over to myself, talking to Mother in my mind. You can't keep a bird in a nest, it's got to fly. That's what it was meant to do. Think about it. Isn't it crazy to tell your son to face reality and then try to hide from reality yourself? Life was never more real than it was this summer. Like when my auntie died, and I had to be there day by day to face it. I admit I had a reason to stay there and I wasn't just brave like Aunt Bee thought I was, but that's part of the point, too. You have to deal with the bad, and go for the good. That's all I'm trying to do. I'm not trying to turn my back to the family because Natalie's just as much family as Mother

is, maybe more than Mother since Mother's been spending all her time lately trying to run my life or run me out. Well, she got what's coming to her, that's all I have to say, 'cause it's my life now. Case closed.

When I left the bedroom, Natalie was sitting on the couch as quiet as a mouse, watching TV. I walked up beside her and told her the news. "We're going, Natalie," I said. "New York. I want to see it with you."

"You think we ought to?" Natalie said, excited and bouncy just like that. "Do you think we ought to break the lease?"

"Let's talk to Janet," I said. "We're going, Natalie. They couldn't find us even if they tried to sue us."

Making the decision made us both happy. We still had all sorts of things to work out, like for instance buying that piece-of-shit Ford to get there with, saying goodbye to all those locals after I just got back, leaving Addie to grow up in Des Moines without me. The last one wasn't easy. It almost kept me from leaving. Late that night after calling all my friends to say later on, I almost decided not to go because I didn't feel right going without giving my baby sister a hug. I wanted to call so bad. I sat by the phone at about 4 in the morning after boxing up our little belongings. Natalie went to bed after that so it was just me sitting up, wanting to call so bad but knowing that I couldn't, 'cause I knew Mother would get on

the phone and start some out-of-control argument about family responsibility. So I finally just walked away. I didn't get much sleep that night, thinking about everything. I was never so glad to see a new day come as I was then. I needed all of Natalie's kisses that morning.

**Interstate 80--The Road Back Home**

It's getting totally sunny in this restaurant, meaning that morning is moving along fast. I suppose I'll have to call home pretty soon, maybe when we get to Cleveland. Yeah, Cleveland. There's no way that mother can con me into driving back home by then. Not after we packed the car and drove all those miles. Not even for Addie. I won't do it. It's too late.

"What are you thinking about?" Natalie's talking to me again. "Are you thinking about me?"

"No way." I can lie like a sonofabitch when I want to. "I wasn't thinking about you."

"Good. I wasn't thinking about you, either. I'm waiting on you to get your shit together so we can go. Can you drive?"

"Probably."

"What does that mean, Willie?"

"It means if I do drive most likely we'll get there."

"Uh-huh. How 'bout some coffee, Willie?"

We have time, I guess, so I'm going to order some of that old-fashioned java stuff that all the old folks drink. I've got a big job ahead of me, bringing my lady and myself to the big city. I got my sleeping bags for those hard

dorm floors they have at college. And for real, once I taste the atmosphere of the educated folks, I won't stop, 'cause I've got a mind and I'll never be dumb. Not with Natalie. She's my lady, my friend, and my cousin. I love her and I want her to know it. Matter of fact, when the bill comes around, I think I'm going to pay for her coffee. She'll like that.