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TIN LIZZY,
WHERE'D YOU LOSE YOUR TRACK?

KATHERINE S. MILES

Tin Lizzy,
Where'd You Lose Your Track?

by
Katherine S. Miles

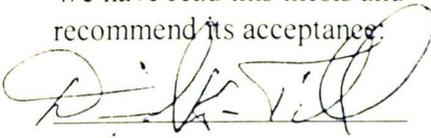
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**Tin Lizzy,
Where'd You Lose Your Track?**

A Creative Thesis
Presented to the
Graduate and Research Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Katherine S. Miles
August 1999

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of
Rudy the Root Hog,
may your curls forever dance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks go out to Barry Kitterman, whose patience and kind criticism guided me to this point. I would also like to thank Dr. David Till and Dr. Susan Calovini, the other committee members, for spotting the mistakes I failed to see. Thanks are likewise due to my mother, Ginger Miles. I couldn't have completed this work without her help. She has served as a very forthcoming critic, a tireless reader, and has motivated me at the most crucial times. Finally, I wish to thank my father, Bill Miles, for recognizing the importance of my education. More importantly, I want to thank him for making me laugh in the midst of pulling out my hair.

ABSTRACT

My original intentions for this story were to focus on the seemingly stagnant aspects of any given family. However, as the tale of Libby's family progressed, the term 'family' began to breathe, came alive, and created for itself an identity. Each member is affected by, and contributes to, his or her collective history, opinions, and decisions. Only after Libby attempts to abandon her family, out of self and familial disappointment, does she recognize the futility of such action. The limitless boundaries that hold her family together are too intricately woven for Libby to successfully sever. As she glides between fact and fiction, Libby finally comes to understand that her family is similar to Harriet's porch, "claustrophobic with a closed in sense of safety." Yet, her most profound self discovery is her own perception of truth and all that it entails. Since her truth is embedded within the family structure, she is forced outside those limits to examine the truth of her life. As Libby and I both discovered, a simple word or phrase can distort or reshape perceptions, changing one's life in an instant.

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King Solomon's Mine

Death has a smell,

as distant fields
wave curing tobacco
through crevices; embedding
the herald of fall
deep within my porous sense.

The like during merrier seasons,
with brisk, dry, breezes bringing
purification by stately pines
while a spiced kettle brewing
nurtures the process.

Hail the brave crocus
budding my spirit with buttery
scents of anxious cups;
pursued by friskier days
of warmth exuding from bare skin,
feverishly simmering all sense;

stifling stench
of the dog days howling growl
years
for the impregnated fields
to be once more barren.

So too does death's aroma
invade and soothe
the seasons of my soul.
As a hound, I trail the source
gleefully returning to live and love,
knowing that season is yet to come
but the preparation
a gruesomely glorious life.

Nobody knows why my cousin Lucy ran off with that druggie. Everybody in my group had varying ideas for it. Janie figured Lucy was born with a joint in her mouth and a needle in her arm. That's not how Harriet saw it. She said all kids was born good, just some get turned around more than others. I like to see it that way too. All the same, Lucy's drugs was one of those family disgraces that I wasn't supposed to know. We all got to meet her druggie the summer before they split. Mama says she knew he was no

good from the get go, but she didn't say nothing. In a family our size, there's no room for secrets, but they hang everywhere and nobody seems to notice. Kind of like when Nanna farts in public and Aunt Boo has to turn up Nanna's hearing aid so she'll know they aren't silent. Lucy was headed for trouble, but everyone figured it wasn't their place to straighten her out. Poor Aunt Jettie had a pot of worries to stew over, so Macy and Lucy just had to make do. Macy was born before Aunt Jettie could graduate high school and Lucy followed two years later. They were only 4 and 6 when Uncle Rudd left for a young checker down at the new Kroger. Mama says they struggled to meet ends. Jettie even went on the welfare for a while until Uncle Tooney gave her a job renting port-o-potties. That only lasted long enough for her to save money for a lawyer, then she lived off the alimony and child support.

We only get to see everybody once a year, so by the time trouble tips the surface, it's best to go on and buckle down because most likely there's a mountain floating on up. We rented the same cottages by Kentucky Dam every summer and the entire family got invited. Uncle Tooney, being the head of the family since Grandy died, rallied everybody together while Mama and Aunt Boo tended to details. Aunt Jettie would show up for a free ride, even though she's the oldest and should've been taking charge. Tooney always rented the A-frame cabins close to the marina. They had two stories and dark stained wood. We usually had to rent three to keep from sleeping on the floors. All four of Nanna's kids got two of their own. These gatherings was like summer camp with no rules. One cabin got set aside for a meeting place, and it was normally Uncle Tooney's. He brought the liquor for happy hour and Boo supplied the snacks. I got Shirley Temples with real cherries.

Inside there was a loft that overlooked the den, dining room, and kitchen. All the bedrooms were upstairs and that loft was a great spot to listen in to what we shouldn't have heard. The first couple years after we found the spot, there was nothing us kids didn't know. Aunt Jettie would really get going after a couple of her famous Rattlesnakes. The summer Rudd left, she told how she found strange panties in his coat pocket and marched herself down to Kroger. Jettie waited in the girl's checkout line with two bottles of Tom Collins mixers and tried to pay with the panties. The poor thing almost got fired cause Jettie started dog cussing her over the microphone. Jason don't believe she really did it. He says her nerves was too liquified to pull off a stunt like that. I think she could have done it, on account of her love for cussing and carrying on.

The summer I got poison ivy up to my eyelids saw the end of our spying days. Lucy had got a learner's permit to drive that April and drove herself into trouble by May. Aunt Jettie done kicked back a few Rattlers and was working hard on the gin when she started in. Now, there's something to be said about Jettie's story telling. She don't sit still during a tale. Most times she's standing center stage with a drink and a prop, yelling so as us kids didn't need to strain none to hear. That year she was louder than ever. Jason says it was on account of Uncle Rudd having Macy that weekend for a trip to Myrtle Beach with the checkout girl. But I think she was more mad at Macy for wanting to go. Her words stung my ears that night. It could've been the poison ivy, but I wished I'd never heard it all the same.

"I'm telling you," Jettie said, "that gal's nothing but a pill. Why, not a month after she got that blame permit, I caught her out at Sentry Cuts past curfew."

“What in Sam Hell was you doing out at that hole?” Ever since we was old enough to listen, Tooney’s harped on us to steer clear of that old strip mine. It was nothing but a big hole cut deep in the ground. It was close to the county line. That’s why kids, and some grown folks, like to head out there since it had plenty of parking and lots of secrecy. The dangers at that strip pit is probably the only thing my Daddy and Tooney agree on. “That’s no place for you to be nosing about, specially after dark.” Tooney was getting real upset. “Don’t nobody listen to what I got to say.”

Mama piped in with, “I never been out there Toons.”

“Sugar.” Tooney shook his head. “Looks like you’s the only one. Too bad Jettie don’t got the sense of a jack rabbit.”

“You’d best hold it Tooney.” Jettie started waving her hand and her drink. “I was out there checking on my youngest.” She glared glassy eyed at Tooney.

“Who you fibbing to Jet?” Tooney was laughing. “I never knew you for one to force a curfew on nobody but me and Boo. And only if you thought we’d get a skinned hide for it.” Boo and Mama started laughing. “You know what?” Tooney kept on. “I’ll bet you was out there hooking up with that old Roscoe Bumpus.” Now everybody was busted up with laughing. Even I’d heard a few drunk tales about old Roscoe.

Aunt Jettie had just about all she could handle. “This here’s my story, and I tell you I was checking on my youngest.” She was still standing. “It’s a shame I didn’t go sooner to keep Lucy out of that darkie’s back seat.” She pointed her drink at Tooney. “That boy’s got a nerve thinking he can just knock up my baby and go on without so much as a by your leave.” She tipped the last of the gin down her throat. “I don’t care if he is a big football hotshot. A scholarship up at Lexington won’t do us no good. I’d be

willing to bet that he was in on that murder down there.” Everything got real quiet and my ears was itching like the dickens.

Uncle Tooney stood up. “Now Jet, don’t nobody want to hear about that.” He put his arm over her shoulder to try and lead her to a seat.

Aunt Jet shrugged Tooney’s arm off her shoulder and kept running her mouth. “It’s not some big, huge secret, Tooney. Hell, Tamara had it coming. She’d suck start a Harley if she thought she’d get a fix for it.” Tooney kept trying to make her sit down, but she shoved him back with her empty glass in his chest. “The Duprees,” Jet said, trying her best to act snobby. “The Duprees deserved every bit of it.” She waved her glass in Boo’s face, “You see, that’s what happens when you go around acting like you’re better than everybody else.” Tooney gave up trying to make her set still, so he took that glass and filled it up again.

I got to scratching so hard, Jebadiah nudged me in the ribs. But I couldn’t stop scratching for nothing, so he slapped the back of my neck and my head smacked against the banister. That was the last time we went spying, in that spot. Aunt Boo was up the stairs in a flash. Boy did we get it.

After Mama had done with all her ranting, she came to see me and Jebadiah into bed. She wandered real nervous like about the room, then started in. “Y’all know not to say a word about all that talk tonight, don’t you? We can’t have our business all over Hopkins county.”

“Sure Mama,” Jeb said, as he crawled in bed. “I won’t tell nobody about Aunt Jettie being a drunk.”

“That’s good, Sugar.” She pulled his quilt up. “But it was Lucy’s tale that worries me.

“Mama?” I couldn’t resist. “Is Lucy getting married?” She sat on my bed. “And what’s a darkie?”

She pulled my covers up and sighed real loud and long. “Oh, Libby. I don’t know what’s going on with poor little Lucy. You know how your Aunt Jettie likes to stir up trouble.” She sighed again, tucking stray blonde hairs up under her headband. “Let’s just pray she’ll land on her feet. Now you two go on to sleep.”

Mama was on her way out the door when I remembered. “You forgot to tell us what a darkie is.”

She stopped and turned around real slow. “You kids hear more than you ought to. Jettie’s got no business talking like that, and I’d better not catch either one of you with that word in your mouth. Just so you’ll know, it’s an old fashion word for a black person.”

“Does that mean Marsha’s a darkie?” I’d known Marsha since kindergarten.

“No Libby, she’s not a darkie, she’s black. And, I’d be willing to bet she wouldn’t be your friend anymore if you was to call her a darkie, or any such name as that.”

Jeb sat up in bed. “Why don’t Aunt Jet just say black?”

Mama took a while to answer. “That’s just Jettie taking on airs. Sometimes she thinks she’s Scarlett O’Hara.”

“But Mama,” I said, “Scarlett don’t drink gin.” She was grinning on her way out the door.

The last time any of us had seen Lucy was the summer before, when she showed up with that new boyfriend. I remembered she wasn't toting no baby on her hip that summer, so I figured Aunt Jettie was just blowing air.

Mother,

have I told you lately
you're beautiful,
especially stumbling and lost?
Stately woman fumbling
Past a society
Of feeble minds,
Guarding your dignity
Wearing your honor.

Setting a majestic table,
"Naturally, effortlessly."
But I see you
Crashing through a kitchen –
I see you.

Mama had to be at the cabins Friday afternoon, since she brings dinner. Jeb and I would ride up with her and play at the marina while she organized her feast. It was usually chili over Fritos with sprinkles of cheddar cheese. She never made it at home so it was always a big treat. She would run me and Jeb off as soon as we got there so we wouldn't be in her way. Papa came just in time for dinner, saying he got bogged down at work. Mama says he has the most patience of any man she knows. Only at these reunions did she have to remind him. "It's just one weekend, two days. You just have to hold that smile until Sunday."

In the sixth grade I finally got to leave all the kids in elementary and go to a school that's just for three grades. We got lockers and everything. But, Jeb said he wouldn't let me wear his clothes anymore, seeing as how we was going to be at the same school. The ride up to the lake that summer was nothing but arguing. Mama had to divide the car for us, so she could keep a watch on the road. Jeb would put one finger over the line and stare out the window, like it wasn't nothing. I complained for a while, until Mama swung her arm over the front seat and slapped us both on the leg. "Quit

being piddly,” she said. “And Jeb, you’d do good to stay on your side.” I could’ve sworn she had bionic eyes. We were three exits away when she dropped the big news. “Your cousin Lucy is bringing her boyfriend this year.”

A boyfriend? Nobody ever brought boyfriends to the reunions. Uncle Tooney brought some girl one year that Papa said was a hot ticket, but never boyfriends. Jeb nudged me and started in. “Do they get to sleep in the same bed?” I could tell that Mama was ready for all of our questions. No, they weren’t married so they couldn’t sleep in the same bed. Yes, they probably would be smooching in front of us – yuck. No, I couldn’t bring my boyfriend the next year (I didn’t have one, but it was nice to know just in case). Lucy was ten months shy of her eighteenth birthday and I’d heard her talking about boys since she was thirteen. It seemed okay to me, but the way Mama was acting, I couldn’t wait to meet him. Me and Jeb couldn’t get any information out of Mama. All she knew was that he was from Muhlenberg county, his initials were L.B.J. (Lonnie Bert Jernigan), and he played football. I imagined he’d look like Roger Staubach, tall with big muscles and an arm like a cannon. I was wrong.

Aunt Jettie and her clan got there last that year (not counting Papa). All us kids were on the porch listening to David Bowie on my new tape player. Jason was trying to explain *Ziggy Stardust* when Jettie’s van pulled in front of the cabin. Macy got out first, not looking a bit chipper. Then I saw Lonnie. He was tall, but the lankiest football player I’d ever seen. His face needed to be cleaned with a brillo pad, his hair was too long, and he smelled like a campfire. Lucy was all smiles climbing down from that van. Lonnie gave her butt a light brushing as Jettie yelled at everybody on the porch. “Come on over here and act decent for Lucy’s friend.” Lucy couldn’t wait, so she and Lonnie

strolled up to the porch in the middle of *Space Oddity*. Jason turned the music up, but Lettie wasn't having it. "Jason, you get on down here and greet us proper."

"Hey Macy," he yelled, as she was going inside.

"Hey there Sport. How about your Cowboys?" She smiled at the rest of us.

"Hey everybody." She waved as she went inside.

Lonnie started to put his hand out, but Jason turned to Lucy. "This your squeeze Luce?"

"This here's Lonnie," she said. "He played football over in Muhlenberg county, a quarterback. He just graduated."

"You didn't fair too well this year," Jason said. "Me and Jebson over here went to the Madisonville game. You remember that one Jeb?" He didn't have a chance to agree. "I think you fumbled a few times, and that sack in the fourth really must've hurt."

"Yeah, that was a tough one." Lonnie shoved his free hand in his pocket and kept on. "Y'all had a good team, but Muhlenberg is looking sharp next season."

Lucy interrupted. "Lonnie, let's get on in the house. There's still lots of folk to meet."

Poor Lonnie. Jason's nothing compared to his daddy. Uncle Tooney's run off a whole mess of people, including his wife. Lonnie looked relieved to get away from Jason, but Uncle Tooney's good opinion don't come easy, and Lonnie was banking that it would. He grabbed Lucy by the waist and smacked her a kiss, then shoved her away with a slap on the butt.

It was a madhouse inside, bodies everywhere and every mama yelling. Jebadiah and Jebson worked as a tag-team trying to steal nibbles of Nanna's coconut pie. It didn't

take long before Aunt Boo figured what they was up to and put a stop to it real quick. Aunt Boo got a Jebson and my Mama got a Jebadiah. It's a real sore spot with Papa, seeing as how he'd planned on naming Jebadiah after his brother before they'd even married. Aunt Boo liked the nickname *Jeb* and beat Mama to the finish line by a year. So I have three Jeps in my collective family and Papa sure does have patience. When I was a little girl I thought Jeb was short for everything, so my dog was named Oliver, but I called him Jeb. It don't confuse me no more. Mama also picked Anna Grace as my name, but that's a longer story, and I didn't get it. People who don't know no better walk into a family like ours and think Jeb's one awful hellion, little knowing that there's two of them. Lonnie thought that since they was cutting up he could do the same. What he didn't know was that their routine was a practiced side-show and the yelling was all a part of it. After watching the two Jeps' success with Nanna's pie, Lonnie oozed on in to the kitchen and scooped out a spoonful, sweet talking Aunt Boo the whole time. Can't nobody sweet talk Boo. She cut a glance at Mama saying real calm, "How's about we put that pie in the fridgedaire before there's nothing left for dessert?"

Lonnie just stood there, dumb to what was happening. He kept up the babble, not even noticing that nobody was listening. Mama and Boo was about fed up with having to step around him. If not for Uncle Tooney yelling, "Boy, get on out of that kitchen," he'd of eaten all our supper. "There's no need for you to be getting underfoot. Set yourself down and watch this fight."

Lonnie took a beer from the ice chest and sat on the sofa next to Lucy. "Who's fighting?"

I was sitting next to Nanna and heard her giggle as she put her hand over her mouth. Tooney turned around real slow, then rolled his head and eyes back to the TV “Ali and Quarry. We’re coming up on the fifth.”

Lonnie didn’t want nothing to do with that fight. Lucy had her leg hiked up over his and he was rubbing her knee like she sprained it or something. Mama kept calling for Lucy to help with supper, but Jettie kept hushing her up. “Leave her be to watch the fight. We’re making do.”

“She don’t give a flying flip about that fight,” Boo said. “That girl needs to be in here when she’s called, and not off ignoring her own.”

Before they could really get into it, Nanna tugged my shirt. “So where’s that new poem you was supposed to bring me?”

Nanna loved reading my poems, and I liked writing for her. “I think I left it in the car.” I jumped up and we was walking out the back door as Aunt Boo was giving Jettie a ration for allowing Lucy to act loose. “Nanna, what does a whore mean?”

“Never you mind about that, Honey,” she said resting her hand on my head.

“Lucy’s just been given too much pasture time. Let’s get to that writing you promised.”

I flipped through my travel pack. “This one’s different than the rest, it’s a song.”

“Well then, I’m going to need a tune to read it by.”

“It goes along with that song *Waterloo*.” I started humming. “Do you know it?”

“It’s those Swedish couples, isn’t it?” I agreed and she started to read, bobbing her head up and down.

*Tonight
My sugar snap grooves to the moves of another.*

Hold Tight

*We'll soon be gliding smooth across that dance floor as we
move.*

*You got just the right touch baby,
that always drives me plum crazy.*

*Sugar Snap
I'm lonely at night when you're not at home.*

*Sugar Snap
Don't leave me so blue and so all alone.*

*Sugar Snap
Love your tootie bootie so come along.*

(Repeat)

Nanna kept reading it over and over. I leaned over and started to point to a part I wasn't sure about when she gently grabbed my hand and looked hard in my face. "You sweet child, what on earth do you know about tootie bootie's and such? How did you get these thoughts in your head?"

"You don't like it." I let my head drop.

"That's not it, baby doll," she said as she put her hand under my chin, raising my head. "I like it an awful lot, but these are grown-up feelings and you're such a young little thing." She paused, looking serious. "You don't have boyfriends already, do you?"

"Oh, no Nanna. Boys don't pay no mind to me, I don't even need my bra yet. Plus, they're silly anyway, always kicking dirt. I just pretend like I'm Deborah Kerr waiting for Cary Grant to come and cart me off."

Nanna started laughing. "You crazy child, all those old movies aren't going to do you a lick of good. But that's my favorite too." She glanced back at the poem. "You know, Cary's going to be a long time coming."

“I don’t care if he never comes. At least I know he’s out there, and it sure beats settling for that old Richard Denning.”

She looked at me real hard, then smiled. “And where did you ever learn such language? Really Libby, if only you could speak the way you write.”

“Good grief Nanna. Did you forget about those books on writing you gave me on my birthday?” I could tell she hadn’t forgot.

“You just keep on using them and promise you’ll write me another poem about Cary. It almost reminds me of your Grandy. You know, we used to do a little grooving on the dance floor ourselves.” She swayed in her chair.

Nanna started to let her mind wander. I could tell she had a story to tell, but the headlights from Papa’s car interrupted her thoughts. His car had a loud rattle to it and Mama had been after him to get a new one, but he wouldn’t have it. Papa was proud of that Lincoln Continental. Mama called it his first grown-up car and every week he’d be out there washing, waxing, and fiddling. After six years it still had that new car smell, probably because he never took the plastic off the seat belts. Papa started hollering as he slammed the door. “Where’s my Pookie.” I ran over for my hug and the Little Debbie cake he was sure to have in his pocket. “Hold on to that till after we eat. Your Mama’ll jack me up if she knows I spoiled your supper.” It was too late. Before he’d finished speaking I’d already torn the wrapper off and run inside to let Mama know we could eat.

Lucy was setting out the plates when I went in and Lonnie looked miserable. Mama was on her way to the table with the chili when Uncle Tooney started yelling. “It’s a knock out.” He jumped out of his chair. Mama almost dropped the chili, and did a

little yelling of her own. "A TKO in the seventh," he carried on. Then he noticed Papa. "You missed a hell of a fight," he said, reaching out for a handshake.

"Damnit Toons," Boo hissed. "Watch what you're saying around these kids. Turn that thing off and start rounding up for supper."

Feeding time was serious business in our family and when the time came, wasn't nobody polite about it. I weaseled my way to the front of the line and sat down at the grown-up table. I almost got away with it, but Lucy decided it was time for her to join the big table and there was only one seat left. I didn't care if Lonnie had to sit at the kids table, but Mama wouldn't have it, so I got booted to the lower ranks. Lucy rubbed Lonnie's leg under the table all through supper. She even straddled her leg on top of his, something I didn't think I'd ever understand. I asked Mama about it while she was cleaning up. Her eyes got real big. "She did what?" So I told her again. "I better not ever catch you acting like that in public." I tried to explain that we wasn't in public, but all she said was, "That's acting tacky, and I didn't raise no tacky little girl." I figured I'd best scoot out of the kitchen before she put me to work. I had to investigate what *tacky* was all about anyway. I noticed Lucy wasn't helping with the dishes. Anna Grace was the only one of us helping, poor thing. She always ended up in the kitchen.

Come to think of it, she was always milling about the grown folks. Most times it took some fancy talking on Jason's part just to get her to help with our pranks. The best one ever was pulled off without her. The one Christmas we all gathered at Tooney's, we all crammed around the tree and sang *Away in the Manger*. Only, Nanna's one-boobie-bra was hanging from a branch, with baby Jesus in the empty cup. Mama wasn't a bit happy with us. Nanna just laughed and called us a hoot. I caught Anna Grace snickering

at that one and felt bad that she didn't want to help. I always wondered how Gracie could be so mellow with Aunt Boo for a mama, since she was the loudest of the bunch. Everybody wanted to sit next to Boo at dinner. Her jokes and stories kept us all in stitches. I think sometimes Gracie got embarrassed, since the jokes were usually nasty ones. I told my best friend, Marsha, one of Boo's jokes and she called me a pervert. I had to look that one up, so I won't repeat the joke. But Gracie sure could keep her mouth shut. She never once ratted us out, even when she saw me follow Lucy and Lonnie out the back door with my new tape recorder tucked under my arm.

They got a good head start on me because I had to find a new blank tape. By the time I stepped off the porch there was a dark car slithering to a stop in front of the cabin. It looked like the Dukes of Hazard car, but it wasn't orange and there weren't any numbers on it. The whole thing was so dark I couldn't make out who was in it, but I figured it was Samp, one of Tooney's friends. Sometimes he would come by to help Tooney cook his famous ribs. Samp always said he didn't trust Tooney with his barbecue sauce recipe, so that was why he had to come down and oversee in person. But Tooney said Samp would use any excuse to get out of his loneliness. So I waved. "Hi, Samp. You're late. We just finished supper." By the time I got close enough to see who was in that car, I was sorry I'd gotten so close. "I thought you were somebody else," I said.

I turned to run away as fast as I could, but a voice made me turn back around. "Get over here," the man said. His voice was scratchy and deep. A voice I didn't dare turn my back on. The only voice I've ever heard that could harelip the Devil. "I got to ask you something." He had his arm stuck out the window motioning for me to get closer

and it had an Uncle Sam tattoo that stretched from his elbow to his wrist with a banner that said 'We Want YOU.'

I was so scared I knew that if I ran I couldn't run far enough. I inched a little closer. "What?" I asked. I was trying to act real brave. Marsha told me once that dogs could smell fear.

"Where's Lucy?" He had long dark hair and a full beard. His eyes and teeth were yellowed and his breath stunk like it was sent straight from the pits of Hell.

I wasn't about to tell him anything. "I'll go ask," I said, then scrambled back to the cabin. I burst through the door yelling, "Papa."

He and Tooney were playing blackjack on the kitchen table. He took one look at me and threw down his cards. "What happened? Where are the boys?"

"Papa, the Devil stole Luke Duke's car and now he's looking for Lucy." I threw my arms around his waist and tried to catch my breath. "Lock the doors. We got to lock the doors." Uncle Tooney stood up and peeked out the window.

"Is there somebody out there?" Papa asked.

"She's right," Tooney said, as he motioned to me. "It's the Devil all right. Joe Grainger."

Papa took my arms from around his waist. "Libby, go sit with your Mama," he said. Looking through the blinds he asked Tooney, "What does he want with Lucy?"

"He needs to answer that to the police," Tooney said, taking a step toward the phone.

"I can take care of this," Papa said. He was about to open the door when I started crying and threw myself around his leg. "Hey now," he said, lifting me to my feet. "I'm just going to ask him to leave, politely."

"You don't want to go messing with him," Tooney warned. "He's the worst kind of trouble."

"Then that's all the more reason to make sure he doesn't get near these kids," Papa said, then strolled out the door.

I stared at the door as it closed behind him, thinking I'd never see him again. When I looked up at Tooney he put his arm around me. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll keep our eyes on him."

We watched my Papa waltz up to that car and exchange a few words. Then Joe got out in a quick hurry. He wasn't no taller than my Papa, but he was more puffed up. Next thing I knew, Papa had Joe by his shirt collar and was shoving him against the car. Then he was waving his finger in Joe's face. It looked like Joe was saying something, but Papa started waving that finger again. Finally, Papa stretched both his arms out, palms up, and took a step back. "I'll be damned," Tooney said when he saw Joe get back in his car and drive off. "I will be damned," he repeated. I had never seen anybody so brave. Even still, he wouldn't let me step foot outside until he thought it was safe.

By the time I got back outside Jason and the Jebbs were long gone from the cabin, but it didn't take nothing to find them. After dinner there was only one place to settle a stomach, down to the lake for rock skipping. Lucy and Lonnie were hugged-up headed toward the marina. I high tailed it to the water. I forgot my shoes and flashlight, so dodging fish hooks was tricky. I wanted to brag about Papa when I found them, but

Jason already had a plan. He knew I'd bring the shiny new blue tape recorder I got for Christmas and he'd figured out a way to plant it. I was hoping, since the recorder was mine and all, that he'd let me do the honors.

"You can't plant it Libby." Jason never let me do anything. "They'd know something was up. We're passing this football." He threw the blue and silver nerf to Jebadiah. "Jeb will tuck the recorder in his shirt and go long, all the way down the dock."

"But here's the clincher." Jebson was waving his long arms. "Jason throws it in the water, you see, causing a distraction. Then Jeb," he motioned to Jebadiah, "he'll slip the tape deck, all quiet like, behind that big cleat holding the *Blew Bayou*."

"Why couldn't we play keep-away?" I was dying to be in on it. "I can distract too. I could pretend to push Jeb down." I gave Jeb a little jab. "Push him down by the cleat. Then they won't suspect nothing. And Jason, you won't chance losing that Cowboys' ball." I couldn't believe it, but Jason scratched his head then looked at Jebadiah, who shrugged his shoulders, then he agreed to let me help. Everything was going great, until me and Jebadiah were running down the dock and I stubbed my big toe on a loose plank. I lurched forward with my head and arms getting tangled in Jeb's legs. He fell face first and that shiny new blue recorder bounced out his shirt and in that murky water. I didn't know what hurt worse, my big toe, or losing that recorder.

I was walking in circles on my heel while Jeb was yelling at Jason (who was still running toward us). "Libby tripped me." He stopped to check out his scratched elbow. "She tripped me and we lost everything." He bent down to blow on his knee.

Jason didn't pay no mind to Jeb's woes. He was watching Lucy and Lonnie. "What you got there Luce?" We all turned to see Lucy putting a cigarette out real quick and careful. She climbed off the rental pontoon boat while Lonnie wrestled with his pockets for a stick of gum.

"Lucy, you smoking a cigarette?" I stepped a little closer. "What kind is that?"

"That ain't no cigarette, Libby." Jason said as he grabbed the back of my shirt.

"Let's get on back to the cabin."

Mayday

My Anchor has flown.
It descended on a sunny Tuesday;
one hook pierced my chest,
water so heavy I couldn't breathe.
Now I tow its frayed line
and doggy paddle through life.

I didn't figure out what kind of cigarette that was until years later. Not until I joined this group. They say to go back as far as your mind will let you. Some start whimpering and snorting when they tell their stories. I think they're picking the wrong ones to tell. Like Janie started in at the first meeting about how her ex-husband used to make his dog attack her on command. She started shivering all over just thinking about that dog. But it wasn't that poor dog's fault. He was just following orders. Crazy Janie had no business in the same house with that husband of hers. I tried to explain that to her, but our group leader, Ms. Tyndale, glared at me while she cradled Janie, telling her she did the right thing.

Sometimes I do feel like I been touched, but most times I know I'm normal. The only reason I joined this group was I thought maybe I could meet some new people. Friends don't come easy in a strange town. I've only been calling the Queen City home for a little over three months. Cleaning rooms at the Winner's Circle up on 41A just puts me in contact with people who don't want to be known. The job really stinks. There's something not right about cleaning the same room two and three times a day, but I get a room of my own for free. Samp runs the place from his Lazy Boy. He had the wall knocked down that separated the check-in desk from his den. The yellow shag has indentations from his recliner, so you can see how it progressed further away from the

TV and closer to the desk. Samp has trouble getting around in general. He's like a big heap of skins-on mashed potatoes. He waddles around the place every couple of hours in his sweatpants and blue T-shirt that has *#1 STUD* written in neon on the front, with a neon stallion on the back. He had a mess of those shirts made, thinking he could sell them on the side, but that didn't work out. I can tell when he hasn't done laundry, he'll start wearing the mediums and smalls.

Uncle Tooney has known Samp for years. They were old Army buddies. Now they just go to the Derby every year. Sometimes I wish they weren't such good friends, then I wouldn't have to wash dirty sheets all day. When Tooney found out I was wanting to leave Madisonville he had Samp come up to get me in his pickup truck. I don't like the job, but Samp's the only friend I got now, so I can't be complaining. When I first got to town, we'd play rummy all night and sleep until the lunch rush. He'd say, "A little thing like you just get all dirty out running the streets." Then he'd pause to drag on his cigar like he was plotting a revolution. "You'd best stay put till we figure this thing out." Samp hasn't lived with a woman since his mama died, but I think he's done real good. None of them soldiers come sniffing around me anymore. One tried to lay his hands on me and Samp had to knock him out. I'd never seen Samp move so fast. Since then, hardly any at all will even look me in the eye. It sure makes my job easier. Once, I asked him if he had any lady friends. "Ain't got no use for one," he said. "I been caring for myself coming up on fifty-nine years without a meddler about."

"But Samp," I cautioned. "I mean for me. A girlfriend for me."

I think I hurt his feelings something awful. He just said we'd work on it, then acted like he was tired so we'd quit playing cards early. But he finally agreed to take me

to church the next Sunday. He came to my room in a pair of jeans and an old gray flannel. I imagined it was the only button-down he owned. "Let's go make you some friends." Smiling nervously he held his elbow out for me. He'd even slicked his hair back in a pony tail. He practically dragged me back to the truck after church, cussing and mumbling. "Tooney's niece needs better?" Speeding the whole way home. "What they know anyhow. I provide for you just fine, don't I?" he asked, but didn't give me a chance to answer. He ripped the flannel off to a small T-shirt as soon as his feet hit the pavement, still mumbling. "Better off working for him, he says. It'll be a cold day before I'd let that happen." He started hollering. "Mine's an honest living." Then he turned to me. "Libby, our church going days is over," he said while spreading his arms out like an umpire. I stood dazed in the empty parking lot, watching Samp pull his hair down as he stomped inside. I liked my class. They was mostly older and married, but nice all the same. There weren't many 20 year old church goers, so maybe Samp was right. It didn't make a difference, we wasn't going to church any more. I had to quit fretting over friends. I didn't think Samp's condition would tolerate it. So, I followed him inside and gathered up those blue T-shirts for a washing.

I figured the whole idea was done with, but a few days later Samp shuffled to my room with the classified ads tucked under his arm. "Come on down to the kitchen with me," he said, standing in the doorway. I worried over those classifieds as I slipped on my shoes. I just knew I'd ticked him off with that whole church stunt and he was busy finding me a new job. Or worse, he was probably finding me a new place to live. I took my time dragging to that dreaded kitchen. But when I got down there, Samp was making

orange juice and that newspaper was spread across the table. "Take a look at them ads." He pointed at the table.

There were bright green circles all over the paper. The first one I saw read, 'Don't be a Victim of Date Rape, Come join our friendly group for Counseling and Support.' I cut my eyes at Samp and hollered. "I've never been raped Samp. I've barely been on three dates."

"Hold it. Hold it," he stammered. "Now hold on." He plopped down in the seat across from me and propped his elbows on the table. "This here is how you're going to make some friends," he said as his index finger landed on the paper. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, so I just stared at him. "You just pick one of these groups here and start going to the meetings." I kept staring. "You pick any one you want. Like this one 'Surviving Divorce.' I bet there's some younger girls in that one. Or this one 'Living with a Death in the Family.' You'll get a whole range of folks in that one." I put my head in my hands. "Hey now," he said reaching over and pulling my hands down. "The 'Death in the Family' group is a sure bet for folks trying to fill an empty space." When I looked up, seeing how excited he was, I motioned for him to keep reading. "What about this one? 'Take a Step away from Alcohol.'" I gulped my orange juice and started swaying in my chair with juice running down my chin. Samp started laughing so hard tears were running down his face. I didn't think it was all that funny. "Wait, here we go... 'Fight Back against Domestic Violence.'" I pretended to be hit and fell out of my chair. He was doubled over laughing so hard you'd think he'd been hit. His face turned a bright crimson. Seeing those chubby cheeks all puffed up with laughter was too much for me. Pretty soon we was both caught up in the giggles.

After our little laughing spell was over, we both just sat there, trying to catch our breath. I was trying to figure out what was so funny. Then I got to thinking about the different groups. “No, but really Samp, I can’t join any of these groups. What would I say if they asked me why I was there?”

Samp stood up to get more orange juice. “I done a lot of thinking on this, and figure the best way about it is for us to come up with a story. You can just *act* like you got problems.” He was getting excited again. “You sure play a good drunk.” He started laughing again.

I got to thinking back when I was a kid, Marsha had come up with what she thought was a great way to make a lot of money. We’d just gone to see Nanna at her summer campground on Barkley Lake and decided we should buy a camper. Marsha wanted a Streamline. I thought it would be better to get a Winnebago, so we wouldn’t have to spend more money on something to haul the Streamline. Anyway, we needed money. So Marsha decided we would have a March of Nickels. We decorated a Hellman’s jar and set out with a spiral notebook. I had to go to the first house. Everything went fine until Mrs. Dupree asked me what the cause was. When I said it was for a Winnebago, she laughed and said I was breaking the law. She didn’t give us a nickel, even though she was the richest woman in town. We were counting on that nickel from her. We only went to her house because her daughter, Tamara, used to play with Lucy. Marsha figured it was a done deal. So I knew that if I couldn’t squeeze a nickel out of old Mrs. Dupree, then I sure couldn’t act the drunk to get a couple of friends. “I can’t act drunk Samp, or battered. And I’m sure not an unwed mom.”

“Here’s what you do, don’t say nothing at all. Say you can’t talk about it yet. You just too undone over the whole thing.” He brought me some more juice. “Or, say you just searching for some friends. They’ll all think you’re crazed, but they won’t kick you out.”

So that’s how we ended up down at United Way the very next Wednesday. They were sponsoring a support group convention. Every problem I could imagine laid claim to a sign-up booth in the hall. There were over-eaters, under-eaters, beaters, druggies, and even a lone man wearing pumps. Me and Samp spent an hour watching all those people. We would pick someone and try to figure out what group they were signing up for. It’s not real easy trying to peg someone according to their problems, but the drunks and druggies are the easiest to spot. They’re the ones that are always rubbing their hands together and shifting their eyes about the room. Samp said I’d just been around too many of the kind, but I was still right. By the time I got around to signing up, the ‘Death in the Family’ group was already full, so my name was put on a list. Meaning, I could have waited for a drop out, or I could hope enough stragglers showed-up for a second group. Neither of the options happened.

When it was all said and done, there were seven of us left over, all looking for differing solutions. Ms. Tyndale, being the Assistant Director, decided to stockpile us into one group instead of leaving us out altogether or crowding the other groups. At our first meeting we all had to stand up, state our names, and tell why we were there. Janie stood up first and told for 20 minutes about how her ex-boyfriend would beat her up if there was dirty dishes in the sink when he got home. When she sat down, someone in the back of the room started clapping. Then slowly everybody got to clapping, but we were

all looking around wondering why we was clapping in the first place. Ms. Tyndale stood up and asked the man in pumps to speak next. We clapped for him before he'd gotten a word out.

George McRae was a cross-dressing accountant with a wife and two girls in Joelton. He was a well built, nice looking man. His face was one of those that I knew I could tell anything. He had a manly mustache, but what gave him away were his Bambi eyes. They were milk chocolate warmed over. He was nervous the whole time in front of the group. He told what needed to be said then sat down real quick. The pumps bothered him. I could tell because he had his ankles crossed under his chair, like he was trying to hide them. I figured he was banking on a whole group of cross-dressers. He needed help too bad to go home when he discovered he was the only one. Or maybe everybody else was too chicken to wear their pumps. I stood up and started clapping. Somebody in back stood up too. George crossed his legs and looked around at everyone real appreciative while bowing his head. Ms. Tyndale motioned for the man beside George to go next.

Mr. Lisenbee was pushing ninety, but drove himself to the meeting. His cane had a silver embossed handle and he lived alone in the house he bought two years after his marriage, the same house that raised his three sons and daughter. The house even witnessed his wife's death. He told how he lost her sixteen years ago to a freak accident involving a newspaper and a pack of dogs. He didn't go into detail. That was why he was in the group, on account of losing his wife. Not so much because he couldn't deal with it, but more because he's so lonely. He lost his middle son in Vietnam, and the oldest lives in Lompoc, California. The daughter teaches second grade in McMinnville

and his youngest son lives in Dover, real close, but never comes to visit. He said he just couldn't stand rattling around that big house alone. He admitted to wanting to meet a lonely lady. He was real disappointed the Senior Group was full. Janie spoke up when she heard Mr. Lisenbee was looking for love. She had a great aunt that had never been married, but was always up for a blind date. The two of them were exchanging phone numbers while Ms. Tyndale decided it was my turn to speak up.

I didn't know what to say. I'd never stood up in front of a group of people before, not even my family. It was really strange, but while I was listening to everybody else telling their stories, it never occurred to me that I'd have to stand and speak also. I got up real slow, but when I opened my mouth all this information just poured out. I didn't even mean to tell all about Lucy, or that I hadn't spoken to my folks since I'd been in town. It was a real shocker to hear myself say I didn't believe in church because they weren't as friendly as they put on. I didn't even know I felt that way. When I thought I'd carried on long enough, I sat back down to a round of applause. Ms. Tyndale was motioning to the couple beside me to spill their guts when this voice from the back spoke up. "Tell us why you're here, Tin Lizzy?"

"Libby." I turned to see who was talking. "It's Libby. My name." I stopped short when I saw the face behind the voice.

"Tell us, Lizzy, why you're really here?" A face twenty years older than the voice it represented. The hard lines breathed with every word. Her hazel eyes looked heavy behind the puffed-up, wrinkled flesh. I found that I couldn't answer. She had fixed her eyes on me and I couldn't respond. Her grayed hair was wound in twists all over her head. For a minute I almost thought those twists would twine right through me,

twisting my thoughts. It was forever before she let me go with a quick glance around the room. I sat down to another round of applause, but it was different. Ms. Tyndale announced we were running out of time, so the last three members would only get a few short minutes. The couple beside me stood up together.

Kim and Kevin Connell held hands through their short story. Somebody had told them to get counseling before they got married, so they came to the convention. Kevin looked a lot older and seemed to be the one who really wanted to tie the knot. Kim was a cute, young, country girl who acted a lot older than Kevin. She didn't want to be married and strapped down with five kids like her mama. She still wanted to cut up with her friends, but Kevin's cutting-up days was long over. I sure was glad they hadn't gotten married yet. I was sorry they only had a few minutes to speak. Mainly because it was entertaining to hear them argue over the disadvantages of married life. But, I knew that when they sat down there was only one member left to go, and I didn't think I was up for it again. But that didn't stop her from speaking her mind, and for as long as it took.

Harriet Holcombe was a mass of flesh and energy. Her breath didn't come easy, but her words danced with music. She told about her third divorce in such a way as to make you want to laugh with her instead of cry for her. She didn't sound so scary anymore, so I turned around in my chair to get a better look. When she laughed her shoulders shook the loose flesh on her massive frame. Those twists caroused on top of her head. What a sight when set in motion. Her brown skin shone like it had been polished, and it was covered with chocolate chips. If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought her arms were whittled out of birds' eye maple and sanded to a high glossed golden honey. Her fat was soft with layers of satin folds, not bitter and stocky. She was

beautiful, except for her face. It was the face of a woman who'd seen Satan, and it spoke of living in Hell. I was tempted to ask why she was really there, but thought better of it when I saw Samp waiting for me in the hallway.

We all started gathering our stuff when Ms. Tyndale stood up and waved her arms. "I haven't given you all the homework for next week." Everybody looked at everybody else wondering what we'd gotten ourselves into. She started passing out small notebooks with blank pages inside. "These are journals," she said, holding one up. "Write down whatever comes to mind and we'll discuss it next week."

"You mean, we're to write down whatever we want discussed next meeting?"

"That's right Janie, you can continue with your ex-husband, or start somewhere new. Remember, healing can't finish without a beginning. So, reach back as far as you can."

I told Samp about my homework, but I wished I hadn't. As soon as we got home, he made me write down what I had told in my journal. He said I ought to keep a record of everything to chart my progress. Speaking Lucy's tale and writing it down turned out to be two different stories altogether. Standing up all nervous in front of strangers made me forget some important facts. It was easy to remember that my cousin dabbled in drugs, but all the fine tuning that led up to the heroin only came with a pencil and paper.

The Essence of Bridge

They want to drive an anvil
into my selfish heart.
Gladly do I bare my chest,
but my soul they trump in parts.

I quiver just a moment ,
until I'm all sucked dry,
then claw my barren chest
as singletons skip me by.

"Take it all," is my demand
"half is not worth Jack."
For a bid is a lost one
without a spade on spirit.

They circle and confer
about my sovereign state.
Decidedly , they gnaw my brain –
devouring discards of my fate.

A heartless, bid-less, idiot - that's me.
But selfish I remain,
because I crave my attitude
trapped inside the dullness of their brains.

The summer I got my period everything changed. As soon as everybody started showing up for dinner I could tell that things was going to be different. My new boobs were poking out all over the place and my nose needed a zip code, along with some skin to go with my new pimples. A lot of people have said that things can change over night, and I hardly paid a mind to them before. But after that first maxi-pad, my body was distorting with every cramp. Jebadiah really got a kick out of it. He'd say my cycle was backwards, since I was in a bad mood three weeks out of the month. He's never been more right. He just didn't understand that the reason I couldn't be a witch that one week was because I was too busy doubling over with the pain. The thing is, I'd been looking forward to it ever since I took a home economics class in fifth grade and they passed out free samples. I had a whole drawer stockpiled with supplies just waiting for it to happen.

But in all those pamphlets and books, not once did it mention the pain, or tell you how to pop a zit without it scarring.

I tried to act like nothing was different, but that was real hard with a pimple on the tip of my nose. I got extra hugs from the women folk, and the men acted all standoffish. Jebson slapped me on the back and congratulated me. That was when I knew that someone had leaked the info about the river I'd forged into womanhood. I didn't even care. My skin was so uncomfortable. Jason took one look at my nose and asked, "Does that thing glow in the dark?" I put one hand on my hip and rolled my eyes while rolling my head around. It was fast becoming my signature move. Marsha helped me with it. Hers was just like mine, but she threw in a 180 twist with a stomp. It worked on my teachers, but not my kin. Jason and Jebson copied my move, then started prancing around me. Jebson asked if it meant I could have babies. "Your mama sure did raise a fool," Jason said. He locked arms with Jebson. "She can't get a baby with the North Star dangling in front her face." They both laughed and prissed around in a circle.

"Don't you pay them no mind," Jebadiah said. "It's not all that big." I guess my zit turned a brighter red because he could tell I was getting upset.

Jason quit prissing around. "Hey, sorry Libby. Just fooling around. Okay?" I nodded my head. "Man, I hope you're normal by tomorrow." With that, all three of them left me alone for the rest of the night, and I felt lonelier than I'd ever felt before or since.

Not until I sat at the big table for dinner, did I notice Lucy was missing. She was missing, but I seemed to be the only one to notice, besides Aunt Jettie. For once she'd reached a drinking level that actually shut her up. Nobody mentioned Lucy. Either that,

or I was too busy covering up my boobies and avoiding eye contact to notice that everyone else was not noticing. Uncle Tooney couldn't stop talking about Secretariat. It wasn't a big deal to hear Tooney carry on about a Derby winning horse, but this crazy stallion had to go and win it all. Which meant that I had to hear about it all weekend. Tooney told everybody how since he was a personal friend of the groom, he got to watch the rub down before the Stakes. He even had a picture taken with that horse and passed it around like he'd had a grandchild. It was the prettiest, most powerful looking horse I ever laid my eyes on. Jason even got in on the excitement since he won twelve hundred dollars off him. That was enough money to buy himself a used car when he turned sixteen. I'd been hearing about that horse since before the season started, but at least nobody argued every time his name was brought up. All I had to do was ask anybody what they thought of Watergate to get things heated up.

"Impeachment won't do him no good," Aunt Boo said. "He needs a little jail time to clear his rattled head. That ought to bring the truth tumbling."

"Boo, you mean you're going to sit there and convict a man with no facts?" My Daddy sure liked leveling out all the facts.

"Sometimes you just don't need all the facts." Tooney could be a bit hotheaded.

"Yeah," Mama said. "He's got the shiftiest eyes I've ever seen. It's like when Grandy used to take us to the races. You remember that Toons?" Tooney nodded his head. "He'd take us to the paddock and look over all the horses before he'd place a bet. Everybody else down there was checking their joints and wrappings, but Grandy would look straight in those horses' eyes. He said he could see through to their spirit."

"He was a hell of a betting man," Tooney said.

"It wasn't just that Toons." Mama kept on. "There were a couple of times he'd take us down there without a cent, but we'd still be down at those paddocks."

"You don't remember right." Tooney shifted in his chair to face Mama. "One of those times he took us down there empty handed we had to run home for betting money before the 11th race."

Mama started laughing as she remembered. "Grandy saw that shaggy thing with a white patch over one eye. I remember. I remember him saying that that ugly horse was going all the way, because her pride was shooting out her eyes like lightning bolts."

"She did it too," Tooney said. "She won us almost three hundred dollars."

"But the thing is, her eyes is what told Grandy she'd win," Mama said. "And that Nixon's got the eyes of a liar."

"You mean to tell me that you'd accuse a man because his eyes might be sensitive to the lights of a TV camera?" Daddy usually didn't disagree too much with Mama, but that summer everybody disagreed with everybody else.

"You really can't judge on account of somebody's eyes," Boo said. "I don't care how much money Grandy made doing it. Looking at somebody's track record is the only way to judge in these type situations. And everybody who ever had any doings with old Dick is jinxed. His people have been dropping like flies all year." Boo turned toward Daddy, real matter of fact, and cocked her head while adding, "How's that for proof?"

"God Almighty, I don't understand why you all got to get so wound up." Nanna never spoke bad of any president. "It's no call to be fighting."

"Then tell us your opinions Mother, and maybe we might settle it." Boo was always trying to coax Nanna out of her opinions.

"I think it's the worst show on television, is what I think." Nanna stood up and started clearing dishes. "It's not for us to decide anyway."

With that, everyone started getting up from the tables. Jason and the Jebbs headed out the back door without asking me to join them. I wasn't up for their teasing anyway, so I plopped down on the sofa next to Papa. I hadn't rested ten seconds before Mama was yelling for me. I walked in the kitchen thinking she just needed a small errand, but I was so wrong. She wanted me to help clear, clean, and fix for Saturday's breakfast. "But I'm going to watch Papa play cards, or see what's on TV" I protested and gave her my signature move, but nothing worked.

"Listen here," she said, "You belong in here with us now." She put her hands on my shoulders. "Don't let me see you throw a fit, or stomp around, or pout. It's something you got to do." She kissed my forehead. "Now, go help Gracie clean those dishes." She turned me toward the sink and Gracie, then gave me a light shove.

That was when I realized that the boobies, and the pimples, and the bad moods were just the beginning. I inched closer to the sink and further away from where I was dying to be. No more pranks, no more skipping rocks, no more fun. I was entering a land of boredom with every step closer to that sink. I looked over at the back door, then glanced at Mama. She was slicing the country ham, but had an eye on me. She saw what I was thinking and smiled as she shook her head. "Hey Gracie," I said when I finally got there.

"You can dry if you want to." Gracie was always good to me, but I still couldn't believe that she liked being cooped up in the kitchen, instead of out by the lake. I had to listen to Aunt Boo explain to Mama how to burp a Tupperware bowl, while Gracie tried

to tell me that it would get better. "Just wait until we're done," she said. "You'll see." She winked at me and kept on washing.

When it was over, I had only broken one plate and a pyrex dish. Mama said the plate came with the cabin and the pyrex was really old, so I must have done pretty good. Plus, I only got a small cut in between my index and middle fingers when I tried to catch the falling pieces of the pyrex that broke after I dropped it on the counter. When the cheese grits were made, ham sliced, juice squeezed, fruit salad chilling, and Aunt Jet had passed out we all walked out the back door to take our seats on the porch. Nobody said a word. I can't remember who took off her apron first, but that was all it took. One apron, then all aprons were off. When the aprons came off, that was the cue to head out back for bridge, coffee, and cigarettes. Nobody said a word as we slipped out that back door, but once it was shut behind us, Gracie was right, it got better.

Everybody took their seats around the table, except me. Mama said since it was my first time I had to be a floater. What that really meant was that I had to just stand around looking at everybody's cards. Mama started talking by telling everybody about how she had to bring me a whole new outfit to school on the day that I got my period. Then I had to hear all about everybody's first period. Aunt Boo really grossed me out when she told how in the old days they had to use old rags torn in strips. They even had to wash and reuse them. The funniest story by far was Gracie's. She got so embarrassed, Aunt Boo had to tell it. It probably wouldn't have been as funny if Gracie told it anyway. Poor Gracie had to start during the heat of summer and wouldn't consider using nothing else but a super maxi. Aunt Boo said she tried all she could to talk Gracie into a tampon, but she wasn't having it. So Gracie marched around the swimming pool with a maxi pad

bulging underneath her suit. "That wouldn't have been so bad, if it hadn't been so hot." Boo was starting to laugh. "Y'all should have seen this sweet child with sweat pouring down her face cause she was too scared to get in that water." Boo stood up to go and stand behind Gracie with her arms resting on the back of her chair. "Her suit was already sopping with sweat, so she figured she might as well go on and get in."

"Only because you wouldn't take me home." Gracie was smiling as she leaned her head back to look at Boo.

"That's the weekend Jebson was in that scramble with Tooney. You remember that. I couldn't leave with him stranded on the course." Boo tossed Gracie's hair then kept on. "Anyway, she had to get in that water. I mean, she would have had a heat stroke. Well, she decided to go off the diving board of all things."

"There weren't as many people in the deep end," Gracie said.

"Oh, you're right. And wasn't that a good thing." Boo nudged Gracie before she went on. "Cause as soon as she came floating up out of that water, here came that maxi pad, just floating along beside her." Even Gracie started laughing with everyone else.

"Nobody would have known if you hadn't yelled, 'Hey Grace, watch out beside you.'" Gracie tried her best to imitate Boo's crackling voice. "Then you ran over waving your arms, still hollering, 'Don't let it get away.'"

"I just wanted to make sure you saw it before everyone else."

"But you were the reason everyone else saw it in the first place." Gracie gave Boo a play thump on the arm.

"I don't believe I'll ever stop recollecting when poor little Lucy got her first." Nanna folded her cards and put her head in one hand and the other hand was waving

smoke out of her face. I noticed everybody looking to the ground and shuffling their feet like they'd never seen feet nor dirt before. Then I remembered. It was the first time Lucy's name was spoken. "I should have done something then. One of us should have done something." She looked at Mama and Boo. They were still watching the dirt under their feet. "I just knew it would get better. But my old heart broke in two when that sweet bare-footed child stood on my stoop with blood trickling down her leg." Boo started to say something, but Nanna motioned for her to hush up. "I didn't know it then, but Lucy wasn't the one that needed tending to."

Boo couldn't stand it. "You can't rightly help a woman who winds up in the drunk tank on the eve her child walks across town for a tampon. And why don't you just tell me what might we have done? Were you up to raising those two girls?" She looked at Nanna who was tracing the wood grains in the table with her middle finger. "Were you?" She looked at Mama, who shook her head while shrugging her shoulders. "Those girls was past the fixing age before any of us knew something was broke."

"It don't make any difference now, but we sure shouldn't have turned our backs on any of them," Nanna said.

"Exactly how much are you willing to give?" Nanna was quick to look up and shake her head for Boo to sit quiet. "Why can't they know about Lucy? She's gone now, and it's not likely that she'll be back." Again, Nanna tried to keep Boo quiet. "Is it the stealing? Or the way she pushed you to the ground going after that druggie and his dirty needles? Maybe it's the fact that she drained Tooney's savings for that New York trip to rid herself of that black boy's..."

“Now that’s all these two kids is going to hear out of you tonight.” Nanna stood up grabbing Gracie’s hand and then mine. “I won’t have you slinging that trash in front of these girls. Maybe you and Jet’s more akin than you put on.”

Nanna was leading me and Grace inside when Mama apologized for Boo. “There’s no cause for the girls to go inside just yet. Especially on Libby’s first night.” Nanna stopped with one hand on the screened door. “Boo, you watch what comes flying out of that mouth of yours. You got a slice of Grandy’s temper and that can’t be helped, but I won’t stand for it in front of the girls. Not yet.”

Boo turned to Nanna. “Come on back mother. Gracie’s heard Lucy’s tale twice over.” Then she turned to my Mama. “I sure didn’t mean to spoil your Libby.”

Spoil me? So what if Lucy had got tangled up in some drugs. Marsha’s mom’s sister had joined a cult the year before and moved off to some island. She left her kids and everything. Marsha’s mom had to take them in. Marsha didn’t mind, on account of her being an only child. She’d always wanted brothers. And I had known about Lucy’s stay in the hospital for that drug disease. Jeb and I heard Mama on the phone the day after Lucy had been to see the first doctor. And that black boy, I’d never heard of any trip to New York. Marsha got to go to New York once, right before her daddy died. She even got to ride all the way up to the top of the Empire State Building, but it was too cloudy that day to see anything except a hand in front of her face. I thought I’d already heard all there was to tell about Lucy and that druggie. I could even remember when they showed up at our house a month after they split. That was the first I knew about their running off. Jeb and I heard Mama on the phone with Boo the night after they pulled out of our driveway in their VW van with multi-colored curtains. “Well that’s what she said,

rent money...Yes, rent money...She must've taken me for a fool to think I'd give her rent money when her house is parked in my driveway...Of course not, I didn't have that much on me...A twenty...They can't buy anything with twenty dollars but gas...You should have seen how skinny they were...I didn't think to check, hold on." Mama set the phone down then ran to the jewelry box on top of her dresser. She rummaged through it, and rummaged through it again. Then she dumped the whole thing into the floor and scattered every loose earring in front of her. She almost started crying when she walked back to the phone. "Boo?...It's gone...My diamond and ruby... Yes I'm sure. I wore it just last weekend to the Hobson's engagement party...No, I took it straight off when I got home...Oh, I'm going to be sick...No thanks, why don't I just call you tomorrow."

Mama did get sick that night. She cried and rummaged through that jewelry box, then kept on crying. Papa didn't know what to do, so he mainly stood over her shaking his head. "We should've known." We didn't hear from Lucy after that. Aunt Boo told Mama that Lucy hadn't kept touch with anybody. Aunt Jettie could only guess her whereabouts from the postcards she sent every few weeks. Poor Aunt Jet was a wreck that summer. Uncle Rudd said Jet wasn't fit to be a mother, so he took Macy to live with him and that checker girl. Jettie didn't have a soul in the world to look out for, or to look out for her. She was out of control and Uncle Tooney was mixing the drinks. I could only pray that Lucy would come home before Jet drank herself into the ground.

Not Again

A sluice box
claims my haunt,
sloshes my thoughts
through ordained degrees,
smashes down
the splintered structure

recycled again
and always again.

Grateful for my breeziness –

as others settle huddled
herded for the smelter
melted, molded, polished
into golden hollowness –

yet yearn for a craggy brook
white water or eddies
I decide,
but the ride exhausts
while my spirit collapses

again.

The group loved my stories, especially after one of Janie's tales. Sometimes I had to wonder if she was just making all that stuff up. The way she'd get in front of our group and tell about that ex-husband of hers made me wonder if she was really upset, or really proud way deep down. After the first couple of meetings she started acting like we were big buddies on account of her ex-husband being a druggie too. I tried telling her that Lucy never once came close to laying a hand on me, but it didn't do a bit of good. Janie had it in her head we was going to be friends, and there wasn't no telling her otherwise. Since I didn't have a friend in the whole of Queen City, I figured I couldn't be too picky. But a conversation with her sure was awful boring. All she wanted to talk about was how Dean done her wrong (that's her ex). He'd steal their baby's formula so

he could get the refund to spend on drugs. Once, Janie was on her way to work and saw Dean strolling their baby's empty stroller down the street toward the pawn shop. She got fired up over that one. He even sold her TV and radio, then stole the car for a four day high. He came back home with a fresh arrest and hadn't a clue where he'd parked that car. She finally found it in the Music City Public Parking Lot, some fifty miles away. It had five hundred new miles under the hood and two blown gaskets. She didn't leave him, even after all that. It just didn't make sense.

So I'd made a new friend. She started sitting by me in group, then she'd follow me outside during break. Mostly, I just listened while she rattled on about how she couldn't stand Dean, when it was obvious that she still liked him. Samp was real excited that we were buddies. He felt like our plan had worked out great, for both of us. It didn't take long before he asked me to go shopping with him for some new clothes. He got a couple new pairs of blue jeans, a pair of Dingo boots, and some real nice western looking shirts with mother-of-pearl buttons. He would always drive me to group and pick me up, but after he got them new clothes he'd wait in the hall and sometimes even bring us all snacks during our break. I thought it was kind of strange the way he'd get all dolled-up for group, he'd go so far as to slick his hair back and I suspected that he even got it trimmed. I figured out what he was up to when I saw him walk Ms. Tyndale to her car. He was so sweet on that woman he couldn't even tell that my new friend was driving me crazy.

I had gotten used to tuning Janie out by writing in my journal while she talked. But one day I got to group early and set to writing as soon as I sat down. I got one of those flashes like somebody was standing behind me and I figured it was Janie, so I

scooted my journal around to the other side and kept on writing. Then I heard that dancing voice. "Why don't you write something about yourself in that journal?" I didn't want to turn around. "Don't you think we've heard enough about that cousin of yours?" Harriet sat down in Janie's chair and stared at me while she cleared her throat, waiting for me to answer.

I put my pencil down and swung my legs over the side of the chair facing Harriet. "I am writing about myself. That's all I ever write about."

Harriet reached over for my journal. "May I?" I nodded my head. Everything in there was a tale already told. She glanced through it flipping the pages. "This doesn't tell me about you. Why, it's as hollow as a rusted out Tin Lizzy. I want to know about you, maybe as much as you do."

"What do you want to know?" I took the journal out of Harriet's hands. "What is it you're needing that isn't in this notebook?" I asked, as I flopped the journal on the table.

"I want your story, not some second-hand tale." Harriet leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms.

I opened my journal and looked through the pages again. Harriet reached over real soft and pulled the journal away from me. "You aren't going to find it in there." She asked me how I felt about what Lucy had done to the family. When I told her that Lucy hadn't done a thing to us, Harriet cocked her head to one side and arched her bushy eyebrows. "Then why can't you get your mind off her and start talking about yourself?"

I couldn't tell her how awful I felt when Lucy was eased out of the picture. How I figured families wasn't as tight as most put on, and how sometimes families was a mess

of trouble. "If you're looking for me to sit here easy comfortable like and spill my story like I was taking out the trash, then you'll be waiting for an awful long time." I thought maybe that little outburst would make her go away. She rared back in her chair like she had corn to sell and glared with those moon pie eyes till I couldn't take it anymore. "It's not so much what Lucy done," I said. "It was more the way everybody looked at her after she done it that bothers me. They glared at me the same after the funeral." I knew I'd gone too far because Harriet raised up in her chair and leaned forward. "But I really got that glare when I had my first brush with booze."

I started rambling. I told Harriet how Marsha and I were barely old enough to drive when we decided to raid the liquor cabinet. We poured Papa's Jack Daniels, Smirnoff, Two Fingers, and everything else we could get our hands on in a quick hurry into Mama's old olive and pimento jars. I put it all in a bag and was heading over to Marsha's to spend the night when Mama heard all the clanging as we walked through the kitchen. "Are you aiming to raise the dead with all that noise?" She made a move for my bag, but I side-stepped her real quick. "Don't you weasel away from me," she said with both hands on her hips. "I'm not sending you over to Marsha's with a bag full of breakables." She stepped closer to us.

"It's nothing Mama, just some new make-up we was going to try out." Before she could answer I grabbed Marsha's elbow and dragged her out the back door. "I'll see you tomorrow," I yelled as the screen door slammed shut behind us, leaving Mama puzzling to herself.

We had to wait for Marsha's parents to go to bed before we could start to drinking. They always watched a movie on Saturday nights before they went to sleep.

Most times they were snoozing before it was over. We set out all those little bottles on the coffee table in the basement, sat down on the floor, and took the tops off to smell them. We figured it would be best to save the whiskey for last, since it stunk so bad. "Are we suppose to just drink it?" Marsha asked after the Jack Daniels turned her face sour. "I mean, maybe we should put something in it to make it taste better."

"I've seen my Uncle Tooney put tonic water in his gin before. You got any tonic?" Marsha shrugged her shoulders. "How about some Kool-Aid?"

"We don't have no Kool-Aid, but I think we got some Tang." Marsha stood up. "Let's go see." We tiptoed up the stairs and rummaged through the fridge. There was only a swig of Tang left, but Marsha's momma had bought a whole half gallon of chocolate milk to go with the cinnamon rolls for breakfast. Marsha grabbed the milk and I got extra chocolate syrup and a red, plastic APSU cup that had 'Let's Go Peay' stenciled in white. We poured it almost half full of Two Fingers. "We're gonna need extra chocolate for this one," Marsha said. She was so anxious I had to pour the syrup. "It smells like Pine-Sol." I poured more syrup then filled the rest of the cup with chocolate milk. Marsha stirred and took the first lick. Her whole body started convulsing. "You try it," she stammered in between coughs. "It needs more chocolate."

I took a sip and started coughing so bad it sloshed all over her Momma's new gold shag before I could set the cup down. After our coughing fit was over we both sat and stared at that red cup. "Why don't we make a milkshake," I suggested. "Then we could pour more chocolate in it." We crept back upstairs after the blender, then headed out to her Daddy's tool shed. We figured it'd be best to get drunk in a quick hurry, since it tasted so awful. In went all the liquor we had with a splash of chocolate milk and the

rest filled up with syrup. We took turns drinking out of the pitcher. At first I had to hold my nose, but halfway through I couldn't taste anything at all.

Next thing I remember Marsha was poking my shoulder. I had passed out on her Daddy's riding lawn mower. "You'd better go on and get up," she said. "We're busted." Come to find out, she'd gotten so drunk she puked all over the living room. Then she tried to get to the bathroom, but took a wrong turn in her brother's room and puked all over his letterman jacket. Then she braced herself in the doorway of her parents' room and told her Daddy she was drunk. He told her to take two aspirin and go to bed. My parents got a call first thing the next morning, and they were none too happy.

When I had done with my tale I thought my rambling had worked. Harriet was leaned back again nodding her head. I was hoping she'd get the hint and leave me alone, but she reached on top of her head to smooth down some stray hairs and said, "That's an interesting story Lizzy. But what's that got to do with right now?" She shifted her weight and that smooth skin shone in the florescent lights. "Where's all those friends and family now?"

"They're right where I left them, and where I want them to be." I stood up to leave, but she blocked my way.

Harriet put both hands on my bare skin, they were so soft and strong. "Honey, can't you see what you're doing?" I must have looked a bit dazed. She cradled my head in those billowy hands. "You got to live now, today. You got to quit muddling up your pretty head with stale stories. It won't do nothing but crowd today." She placed the journal in my hand and let me pass. "I'll see you next week, bring me something worth telling."

I left Samp sweet talking Ms. Tyndale and headed out to the bus stop. By the time I got to my room my eyes was flooded with tears and I hadn't a clue why. My room seemed smaller, like the walls was caving in. I felt like Princess Leia in the garbage shoot, but without a R2D2 to save me. I was glad my folks couldn't see me, blubbering like a idiot. I could just picture the look in their eyes, sad and disappointed with a touch of disgust. By the time Samp got home, group was over and he'd invited Ms. Tyndale to supper. I wasn't about to bear witness to their love-making stares and giggles, so I lied and said I'd already eaten. When I asked Samp to borrow his pickup, his eyes rolled on me from under his brows. "Don't you go running the streets," he said.

I stretched my hand out for the keys. "I'm just going to a friend's."

He put the keys in my hand while his eyes brightened. "Yeah, which friend?" He seemed surprised. Even Ms. Tyndale lifted her eyes from her cross-stitched horse to wonder at me.

"Just a friend," I said. Then skipped out the door to the truck. I had to sit on the edge of the seat to reach the pedals. I really didn't know where I wanted to go, so I just went. I drove down across the river and cruised through town. I stopped for a coke and some cigarettes at the speedy mart. I near about had a wreck trying to smoke, shift, and drink while perched on the edge of the seat, so I shoved the smokes in my pocket for later. After I'd done circled the town twice I found myself on Seventh St., right in front of Harriet's house. Her yard was chock-full of concrete cherubs, fountains, and cherubs in fountains and the porch was covered up with hanging plants, potted plants, and more wind chimes than Wal-Mart. It was all aglow on account of the neon sign next door that read 'Apostolic Faith Church...Guests ALWAYS Welcome.'

I sat mesmerized in the truck for a good while until I heard that milky voice call, "I had a hunch I'd be seeing you tonight." I near about jumped out of the seat. "Come on over here and let's take that edge off." I strained out the window trying to see where the voice came from, but all I could see was the fronds of those ferns wisping in unison with the wind. "I'm over here child," Harriet said. I followed the voice and saw the enlarged ember of her cigar. I hopped out of the truck and started making my way up the walk. She had old bricks lining the path that looked like a Domino game gone real bad. Every spot that didn't house an angel was planted thick with flowers. I started to wonder if she ever had to mow, probably just once a year in the fall. Every inch of her porch was taken up with knick knacks. There was a rusted out watering can with ivy spilling over the edges, two worn wagon wheels on either side of the front door, and a weathered church pew under the left window. Harriet was humming in her swing hanging on the right. The plants created a jungle-like claustrophobia, but there was a closed in sense of safety at the same time. She motioned for me to sit in the rocking chair to her right while she kept on humming. I sat down and waited. She finished with a sigh that shook her head and shoulders. "Do you know about Billie?" she asked. I shook my head. "I'm guessing that's your problem. Everybody got a right to sing the blues," she said.

"I don't got anything to be blue about. Besides, my Nanna says there's nothing worse than wallering in your own pity," I said.

"Your Nanna's a slick one alright. But I still say you got to let yourself feel the blues before you can appreciate a healthy smile." She took another drag off her cigar. "It's the same with a good cut of beef. You can't appreciate the poetry of Charlie's Steak House if you never eaten a T-bone at the Waffle House."

The wind started picking up, ringing those chimes through my head. "I've eaten at Charlie's once," I said. "But what's that got to do with the blues?"

"All I'm saying is a dose of the blues here and there does nothing but good. That's the secret. Some folks live blue all their life and forget how it's suppose to be. Others never give in to the blue side and live in a world of plastic smiles. The trick is to have a little of both."

"What do you suppose would help me?" I couldn't resist asking.

She chewed on that cigar a spell before she answered. "I don't rightly know. I suspect you won't know till you find your way back on track, Tin Lizzy. Can't nobody live off the track God gave them. Even you," she motioned with both arms. "Look at you, rattle-trapping around, alone, rusted out, and hollow." She quit swinging. "When are you going back to that family you can't quit talking about?"

I froze. I hadn't told her anything, but she knew. I didn't want to think about it, but the images flashed over everything I looked at. My first car, a red sporty little thing, and Jebadiah sitting next to me, his curls dancing from the wind through the open window, I didn't want to see it. I didn't want to see that doe standing in the curve on Memorial Extension. I put both hands over my eyes to block the visions, but they came. "The telephone pole came so quick," I cried. "I couldn't even put on my brakes. Jeb was yelling 'don't hit her.' I didn't hit her," I stopped to catch my breath. "I didn't hit her," Harriet kneeled in front of me with her hand on my convulsing leg. "She must've run off. When I came to I didn't see her. I saw Jeb, and a man leaning in the window with Jeb's arm in his hand. The man saw me and yelled, 'She's alive. Somebody get to her.'"

I tried to reach out to Jeb, but my arms were pinned under the steering wheel. He was so crooked, and still.”

Harriet took my hands away from my face and wiped a tear off my chin. “What if Jeb had been driving?”

“I wish it had been me,” I stood up with a jolt. “Everybody does, all those stares. I knew what they were thinking.” I turned my back on Harriet.

“Now I see,” she said. I turned to see her worn face catch the neon light. “I could tell you a hundred reasons why it’s no fault of yours, but you’d not believe me. I got told the same and I didn’t listen either. But I will tell you this,” she leaned into me. “If you don’t get off this detour, it’ll eat you more hollow than you are right now. And you won’t just be empty, you’ll be as bitter as a crab apple before the first frost. Now let’s get you cleaned up.”

Harriet led the way through her dim house. It stank of an attic and stale cigars. She had a grandfather clock inside the door that vibrated the dull, wood floors with each tock. Every lamp in the room had the fringe of a New Orleans whore house and only put out 10 watts of light. The dust had a confined dampness that left me gasping for air. When Harriet reached the bathroom the light came on with a deep thump, flooding the hallway with light. My eyes had to adjust before I darted into that light, happy to be in the crisp, cleanliness of her pink and brown tile bathroom. She had more lace than my Nanna. It covered the window, the shower, and drooped off the toilet. She even had a lace footrest, so you could relax while sitting on the commode. I splashed some cold water on my swollen eyes and dried with a white towel trimmed in lace. I could hear the clink of glasses mixed with Harriet’s humming. As I put the towel on the rack, I noticed

a picture staring at me. It was a little girl, familiar, but not. She looked about six, with one front tooth completely gone and the other only half grown in. I turned to the wall beside the door. There glared the same little girl about a year or two older, still familiar. I looked on the vanity to find three more little pictures, one at Christmas under the tree, one on a swing-set half covered up with a crepe myrtle, and one snapped in mid-laugh. There was no mistaking who that little girl was. I could almost see a young, thin Harriet with that same jostling giggle. The girl even had a dozen little braids that seemed to flop around, just like Harriet's mobile twists.

I scanned the pictures again. Harriet's eyes peeped through every one. Stepping into the hallway, I was faced with the same little girl, but older. To my right, I could see Harriet atop a kitchen stool, rummaging through a cabinet, still humming. On my left lay the stretch to the living room with more pictures lining the long dark path. Harriet was in some, holding the little girl. I could see her growing into another Harriet with every step. In the den there were dozens of them, on the walls, end tables, secretary, and mantle. She was grown in this room. There was one beside the grandfather clock that spoke Harriet's worn, sad eyes, but she looked to be about my age. My hand reached up to stroke those eyes. "Why you snooping around in here?" I jerked back in surprise and my elbow bounced into Harriet's billowed gut. She doubled over with a moan, knocking her forehead on my shoulder. "Lord child, you sure are dangerous when you get spooked." She straightened up, rubbing her head. I wondered how I didn't hear her coming. "Follow me," she said, then turned toward the hallway. "I got something to take the edge off, both of us."

"I didn't know you had a daughter," I said. I kept following her to the kitchen and I didn't get an answer, so I figured she couldn't hear me. "She looks just like you. What's her name?" Still no answer, I didn't like being ignored. "Harriet," I demanded.

She spun around in a flash. "Don't you go digging all that up. I thought we was here to let go of your past, not bring mine back." She turned back around and kept walking to the kitchen. Standing on the other side of the island, she slid a shot glass my way. I must've looked upset. "Don't go thinking I'm mad at you. I just had my guard down is all." She lifted her shot glass in the air, "Here's to tomorrow." She clinked my glass as I picked it up.

My throat was coated with the warm, smooth drink. "What was that?" I asked, licking my lips.

"My grammy called it a hot toddy, but mine's got more honey than most."

I held my glass out to her. "Can you make some more?"

Harriet snatched my glass, laughing. "It don't work if you have more than one." She turned to the sink and rinsed out the glasses. "Grammy use to say 'if a toddy can't cure it, there ain't nothing that can.'"

The grandfather clock rattled the walls and my head. It was eleven. "Is that clock right?" Harriet nodded her head and I started toward the door. "Samp'll wear me out for staying gone so late."

"Did you tell him where you was going?"

"Only to a friend's house."

“It’s not like you got a handfull of them,” Harriet said. We both laughed at that one. “I bet he isn’t too worried.” As I was running down the walk she yelled, “See you next week?”

“Sure.”

Samp was asleep when I got back, and Ms. Tyndale’s car was still in the lot.

Coming

Who was that
lurking about my sleep
peering into me,
as I wander away
gazing back?

Harriet wasn't at group that next week. Ms. Tyndale was on a rampage to get talking. I didn't know what all she wanted me to say, so I just rambled on about the last time I saw Lucy. It was right before I left town. She came strolling home toting two little boys, and Lonnie was long gone. Nobody ever mentioned him. It was like she'd never known him, except for those two boys. They both looked just like him. It sure was a shame, since Lucy used to be such a cute girl. Mama said Lucy's prime came and went quicker than anybody she'd ever known. When she came back, her bones were poking out and she looked close to fifty. Aunt Boo said those boys didn't stand a chance because they were so slow. She said they got a learning disability from the drugs Lucy was taking. I told Mama what Boo thought and she said, "Well, it's not like your Aunt Boo's operating on a 100 watts herself." She told me not to ever repeat it.

Nanna helped get Lucy a job as a secretary at the Trover Clinic. Everybody said she had a rough go of it at first, since she didn't know the first thing about medicine. It was on account of her that mono had such a good year. (She didn't know to wash the cups out.) After that, they decided to use disposable ones. Mama said if it wasn't for Tooney being golfing buddies with the Administrator, Lucy couldn't have kept that job. Good thing Lucy never found out. She wasn't having much to do with anybody but Macy. I never figured that out. Mama even went so far as to paint her front porch. She said it looked tacky with the paint chipping off, and since Lucy was busy working Mama

did it for her. We were all the time taking hand-me-downs over for those little boys, but Lucy never let the boys wear them. Aunt Boo said it was a disgrace to let those kids run around town in cheap, worn-out clothes, but Lucy didn't want anybody helping her. I figured she was just stubborn like her own mama.

Aunt Jet was having a banner year. She got thrown in the drunk tank three times in two months. Mama got called out of her sleep one night to go carry her home. She had been on a bender with Roscoe Bumpus, but he left her sitting on a bench outside the courthouse. He got scared when she started puking up blood, saying he couldn't afford to get arrested again, but at least he called Mama to see about her. When Mama got to the courthouse, Jet was slumped down on the bench with vomit all over her front side. Come to find out, it wasn't blood she'd been hurling, but the punch they'd used to mix with Roscoe's homemade shine. Mama brought her back to our house because she was scared Jet might choke in her sleep. The next morning, Jet sat up at the breakfast table like nothing had happened, but you could still see the traces in her hair. She even took the last two pieces of bacon that always go to Papa. Aunt Boo said Jet was venting her frustrations. Since Lucy turned her back, Nanna said Jet got lost in her own misery. I suspect that's why Mama has tried to help so much.

"Why would Lucy give up on everybody?" Ms. Tyndale interrupted.

I'd never been interrupted during group before, so it took some composure time until I could answer. "I imagine she was ashamed of what she'd done. Aunt Jet had no business telling everybody in the county, I don't care if she is a drunk."

Ms. Tyndale scratched her head looking real confused. "I'm afraid I've lost you Libby. What exactly did she do?"

Janie never missed a chance to speak up. “Why Ms. Tyndale, she done told us when group got started up that Lucy went off from home to kill that first baby of hers. And personally, I think what she done was smart. I wished I’d done the same, instead of letting Dean beat mine plumb out. I knew something wasn’t right. Then those expensive doctors told me I couldn’t have...”

“That’s nice Janie,” Ms. Tyndale said. “We’ll get to that after Libby’s done.” Ms. Tyndale turned back to me. “Libby, you don’t think that’s what happened, do you?”

I nodded my head. “That’s what Aunt Jet’s been spreading.”

“She never killed any baby,” Ms. Tyndale said leaning forward. “I know you like telling stories, but you can’t go around making up facts.” I was dumbfounded and couldn’t think of a response. “You didn’t know?” All I could do was sit there with my brain churning a thousand miles a minute. “Oh, my.” Ms. Tyndale got antsy and cleared her throat a few times before turning toward Janie. “Now, what were you talking about?”

I listened to Janie for a while, but I really didn’t hear. In a flash I knew what I needed to do, so I slipped out of the room. Samp was waiting out in the hall going over a racing form. I startled him. “Come on Samp, we’ve got to go,” I said.

He pulled all his forms together and stood up brushing his hair out of his face. “Shouldn’t we wait for Evelyn...I mean Ms. Tyndale?” He was straining to see her through the tiny window in the door.

“She’ll come later.” I grabbed his arm while walking toward the parking lot. “I’ve got a lot to do.”

“What happened? Did something happen?” Samp asked. “We can’t just leave. Evelyn and I were going to take you out.” I wasn’t responding, but I kept dragging him

toward the truck. "Didn't you hear me? We had plans. I can't go yet." He started fumbling for his keys. "I should at least leave a note or something."

"Why did Lucy leave town?"

"What?" He dropped all his forms, scattering them under the truck.

I leaned down to help him pick them up. "Ms. Tyndale thinks she knows why Lucy left town. How would she know something like that Samp?"

He unlocked the truck and held the door open for me. He had gotten it together by the time he pulled out of the lot. "She wants to help you Libby."

"What did you tell her?"

"She was asking an awful lot of questions, so I told her what I knew, which isn't all that much. She only wants to help."

"What about Lucy? What happened to Lucy?"

"You know what happened to Lucy, it's all you talk about in group."

"But Ms. Tyndale said I was making up facts. I didn't make anything up. I heard Aunt Jet plain as day gabbing about why Lucy left, saying it was over that black boy's baby."

"Didn't Toons tell you about that?" I just stared at him out of frustration. "He was just helping the other detectives."

"What?" I was actually calm, but out of disbelief rather than genuine calmness. He almost wouldn't tell me, saying it wasn't his place. He thought since Uncle Tooney told him, that everybody else knew. (I filled him in on the way our family relayed information.)

"I guess everybody just figures that when a young girl up and leaves home it means she's with child. I suppose your Aunt Jet helped everyone along in that line of thinking. Hell, Tooney was just glad she was out of town."

Lucy was in trouble when she left, but not how everybody thought. She had been at Sentry Cuts that night, but she wasn't there making a baby with Demond. Aunt Jet had seen Lucy sitting with Demond, but only to talk him out of a fight. His sister got knocked up by Joe Grainger. When Lucy saw Jet and Roscoe, she jumped out the car and hid behind a brush pile until Jet gave up and went home. Samp wasn't real clear on the details, but he knew that once Joe started waving a gun, Demond and everybody else took off in a quick hurry, leaving Lucy all alone. Joe was trying to shoot Demond's car, but the bullet landed in Tamara Dupree's head. Samp said even he'd heard of Tamara back then. She was the worst kind of junkie in Kentucky. Probably slithering from car to car selling herself for dope or money. Nobody was surprised that she ended up with a bullet in her head, so Joe almost got away with murder. But Tamara had a family. The Duprees could trace their roots back to the founders of the state. She even had a distant second cousin in the state senate. Joe Grainger wasn't going to run free if they had anything to do with it. The thing was, nobody wanted to testify. Even the people who saw Joe with the gun didn't want to risk a bullet in their heads. Joe had friends that wouldn't think twice about slitting a throat or two. Lucy thought it was all up to her. When Tooney told her his plan to get her out of town, Lucy didn't like it, but it was the only way to keep her safe. Aunt Jet couldn't be counted on to keep her mouth shut, so Toons didn't tell her the truth. He had no idea she'd smear her own daughter's name with no proof. Nobody thought it would take so long. The testimony she gave put Joe in

jail. Two weeks before the trial, he got out on a technicality and Lucy was running for her life.

“How do you know all this?” I asked when Samp was finished.

“Toons told me most, but Lucy filled me in on the rest.” We were getting closer to home.

“When did you ever meet her?”

“Toons brought her here for the first few weeks, until Joe was arrested.” We pulled into the Winner’s Circle parking lot. “I guess she got tangled up with that druggie before Joe was turned loose. After that, nobody would’ve believed the truth.” Samp parked the truck, got out, and opened the door for me.

“Where is he now?” I asked.

“Joe?” I nodded. “Last I heard, he died a free man over a poker game gone bad.” I started to ask another question, but Samp stopped me. “Why don’t you ask your Uncle Tooney the rest, okay? Now go on to your room and get changed for supper. We’re going out.” I climbed the stairs to my room and lay down on my bed for a good while. When Ms. Tyndale finally got there, she and Samp came up to get me. Samp opened the door to find me packing my suitcase. He was in a panic. “Where are you going? Toons will kill me if I let you leave.”

I picked up the suitcase and set it down at his feet. “Tell Uncle Tooney I’m coming home.”

VITA

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