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You Gotta Move: Three Short Stories

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YOU GOTTA MOVE

THREE SHORT

STORIES

By

Lori Freshwater

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

The Department of English

The School of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2010

My Daddy Could Have Been Mac Davis

*So Biff came to stay in the tree house tree. And long days came without end
For the boy and the toy and the purple bear. And serious games of pretend ~ Mac Davis*

The biscuits were way too dry that day. Not at all like the usual goodness served up at the Central Diner. But I didn't care, because it gave me an excuse to order the white-pepper gravy to smother, and I mean *smother* them with. While I waited for the gravy, I sat and watched my mother. Her hair was perfect, as always, and sprayed to stay that way. She was wearing a bright-green sweatshirt with a sequined Christmas tree on the front. It was late-September. I had the day off from school and Crystal Gayle cooed *Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue* from the jukebox. So far it had been a pretty good morning. But as soon as the waitress left the table, the smile drained from my mother's face like water at the bottom of an old tub.

I looked down at the diner's wide plank floor. It was nicked by twenty-five years worth of shoes moving across it, and it sloped downward toward the back-wall for no apparent reason. My eyes moved to the windows. They were covered with cheap and yellowing lace curtains. I'd always thought that any window in the world could be made to look fancy by ordinary lace curtains. I shifted myself in the wooden booth. It was nothing even close to comfortable, especially because of the way it forced me to sit straight up against the tall backboard.

"Can't wait to get the gravy for these," I said to my mother. She nodded in silence. "Supposed to be real hot this weekend," I said. She nodded again.

Bonnie had been a waitress at the Central Diner forever. She came to the table with a pitcher of sweet tea. She wore Kool-Aid blue eye-shadow and a trucker cap pinned to her teased-out and frosted blonde wig. She had a tight red shirt on that said, *Central Diner – Good food round the clock*. “Ya’ll need anything else?” she asked.

All of a sudden my mother became animated, loud, and full of joy. She smiled a great big smile at Bonnie and said, “Whew, just keep that tea comin’ cause it’s gonna be hot this weekend.”

“Lord don’t I know it! It ought not to be this hot in September for goodness sakes!” Bonnie squealed.

The two of them laughed and talked a little more before Bonnie moved to another table. In the quiet space Bonnie left behind I could hear the jukebox.

Music is love, and love is music, if you know what I mean. People who believe in music are the happiest people I've ever seen. So clap your hands and stomp your feet and shake your tambourine.

My mother’s voice broke into the song like someone throwing heavy rocks into a still pond. “You know Mac Davis wrote that,” she said.

“No, I didn’t know,” I said, not interested.

“You know Mac Davis fell in love with me,” she said, looking off into some place distant, like she saw something clear as day that I couldn’t see.

“I know, mom. You’ve told me the story before.”

“Well, I am so sorry to bore you, Ms. Dawn Cavanaugh.”

“Was he nice?” I asked, trying to seem interested because I didn’t want to set her off, especially not in a restaurant with people all around.

“Yeah, he was nice. He was nice and handsome. Oh lord, he was so handsome. And he loved your mama, he sure did.”

“How did you meet him again?”

“I was down seein’ your cousin in Texas who was about to be sent overseas. We went to a concert, I believe it was Merle Haggard and that “No-Show” Jones. I got backstage and met both of them. They were drunk, and their hair was all greasy, and they stunk. Then I met Mac, and he was beautiful. It wasn’t five minutes before he asked me for my phone number. And I gave it to him. Sure did.” She puckered a sour face, threw her wadded-up napkin down on top of the eggs that were still left there, and pushed her plate forward like someone was trying to poison her. After she finished she sat straight up again and said, “Don’t forget I got offered a chance to be in Playboy when I was down in Atlanta.”

“You’re really beautiful, mom.”

“Anyway, me and Mac talked after that and he begged me to come see him. But I was about to marry your daddy, and if he had found out he would’ve killed that man no matter what. So I just stopped callin’ him back.”

“Well, it all worked out for the best, cause you got me,” I said, kind of joking.

“I don’t know if I’d say that or not. If I had only decided to go see him, things would have turned out different. Mac Davis could’ve been your daddy,” she said shoving the words across the table at me.

I forgot how determined I was to keep the peace and said, “Well I don’t want Mac Davis to be my daddy. I want my daddy to be my daddy.”

She poured herself more tea. Like a bug heading straight for a windshield, I kept going. “Just makes me wish my daddy was still alive. And I wish I could have met him more than a couple of times.” Her lip curled up on one side like a demonic Elvis. “What, Mom? What’s wrong with that?” I asked, knowing the answer to the question.

“Your wonderful daddy, who you never even knew, who loved his new bratty ass kids more than you?”

“Yes, I know he wasn’t around a lot and all that,” I said trying to calm her down before taking another bite of one of the biscuits, and wondering where the gravy was.

“Wasn’t around a lot? What the hell does *a lot* mean to you, Dawn? Because in my world, in the world of *reality*, what you would say is that he was *never* around.”

“Okay, I know, but he’s still my dad and I love him. And I can still miss him. Can’t I?”

“I cannot believe you, Dawn.” She crossed her arms in front of her and squinted her eyes into dark slits and became still, still as a stone.

“Well, I’ve got some news for you, girl. I don’t think...He might not, he might not even be your *real* daddy.”

Slow, like molasses, the words dripped into my mind. I had just taken another bite of biscuit and it felt like I was trying to churn wet cement in my mouth. I chewed and chewed. Finally, I was able to swallow the last of it. “Mom, what are you talking about?”

“I said I don’t even know if he was your real daddy.”

I took a long drink of tea and looked at her. I tried to beg her to stop with my eyes, with everything, everything. But she didn’t stop.

“I’m sick and tired of you putting him up on that goddamn pedestal of yours. I’m sick of hearing how he would have done this or that,” she hissed. “And I can *not* take one more minute of you worshipping his sorry ass.”

I stared right at her, “You’re just saying all this because you’re mad at me again.”

“What? Why the hell would I do that?” She un-crossed her arms and leaned back, “Girl, you have got some *real* problems. You know that?”

“*I’ve* got problems??”

“That’s right.”

I felt the floor slope up and down in the other direction. I felt frozen, strapped on an amusement park ride with no escape even though I knew it was going to kill me. I tried to breathe, but realized I was already doing it and just couldn’t tell. I felt the wet heat of tears. I tried not to let them drop.

Bill White appeared at the table. He was about fifty years old, and he was wearing khaki pants and a golf shirt that got tight around his belly making it look like a blue balloon. He was grinning ear to ear at my mother. “Hey there! How ya doin’ honey? How’s the finest beautician this side of the Mississippi doin’ today?”

“Hey Bill, how you gettin’ along these days?”

I watched as he took a toothpick and started digging between a couple of his teeth in order to free a visible piece of collard greens. “Oh, you know, I’m a gettin’. I’ve got two houses under contract. ‘Bout ready to roast a pig for the company pig-pickin’ this weekend. You come by if you can. Cold beer and beach music all day.” He smiled

again, the piece of collard greens still lodged in his teeth. “Maybe even some shag dancin’, too.”

“Oh yea-ah, that sounds like a *fine* way to spend an afternoon. Maybe I’ll call in sick and spend the whole day,” she said as she began to play with her necklace.

Bill seemed all happy with this idea, his eyebrows almost lifted off his head. “Well now, that’d be just fine with me,” he said before trying once again to suck out whatever food may still be left on his teeth.

My mother, winking at him, said, “Alright then.” And with that, Bill was gone.

After a few minutes of wondering if Mr. Collard Greens could be my father, I got the nerve to ask, “Who is?”

“Who is what?”

“My real daddy?”

“Why the hell does it matter?”

“Of course it matters, Momma.”

“It doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Mom, please, it means something to me.”

“Well, I don’t give a flyin’ flip.”

She looked away and started watching another table across the room. There was a family of four sitting there. The mother and father were laughing too loud at something one of the children had done. “Idiots,” she said under her breath. After a few minutes of being quiet, she looked back over at me, and said, “All I know is that it’s either him, or a sheriff in Georgia named Dewey.” And then, matter-of-factly she said, “Or a door-to-door knife salesman from West Virginia. His name was Larry.”

“Larry? Dewey? Oh my God.” All I could do was shut my eyes, really tight.

“Everyone in the family thinks it wasn’t Tommy. Cause he wasn’t a very handsome man and look at you.”

“Everyone in the family? Oh my god, what are you saying Mom? Everyone in the family knows? How could you do this to me? Mom... oh my God I feel sick.”

“Your cousin thinks it was the knife salesman ‘cause he was lanky and you have his hair and green eyes.”

“But I have Daddy’s eyes, too.” Then it hit me that now I didn’t know for sure. “Don’t I?”

All of a sudden Bonnie came back to the table, now in an apron that had a big rooster on the front, with a small cream-colored ceramic boat full of piping hot white gravy. It clanked against the mismatched and chipped saucer underneath it as she set it down on the table.

“Here you go, honey. I’m sorry about the wait, but Alice had to fix up a fresh batch. Should be worth it, though. Smells worth it, anyway.”

My mother took her hand and fanned the hot scent toward her nose. “Sure does. Mmm, I may have to steal me some of that.” I looked back from my mother to Bonnie and back again. I could feel my own head nodding. I looked up toward Bonnie, but only saw an apron. A headless rooster apron talking to my mother. A headless rooster apron laughing with my mother. My mouth was cotton. I couldn’t move my hand toward the Mason jar full of sweet tea that sat two mile-long inches away from me.

After another minute, another lifetime, had passed, my mother and I were alone again. She looked across the table at me and put her hand over mine. Her anger had

started to drain as fast as her smile did earlier. “I love you. Go ahead, ask me anything you want to know. I’ll tell you,” she said.

“You’ve always told me you were never loose with the boys. So I don’t understand how this could be true,” I said, feeling a little hope she’d tell me this was all just a mean joke.

“Well, you know, I was separated from your daddy... from Tommy... when I found out I was pregnant with you. So I had a few months of sowing my oats as they say.”

“A couple of months?”

“Yes, a couple of months. But during that time me and Tommy got together at his apartment over by the Four Corners to do our taxes and the next thing you know...”

“Okay. I get it.”

“I mean, like I’ve told you, we loved each other, we just couldn’t get along.”

She stopped and looked toward the window as a cloud slid over the sun.

“Especially when he was drinking and got jealous.”

I could tell by my mother’s voice, by the way her face sank now, by the way she moved her body now, the things she did with her fingers, how her eyes lost track, I could tell she was changing again. I had gotten so used to predicting her highs and lows that I was hardly ever wrong anymore. And I had gotten so good at managing her that I could tell this was one of those lows that would mean I would need to take care of my mother. Like I had been taking care of her since I could remember. Because no matter what, taking care of her had to always come first or I would end up alone on the wrong side of

my mother's locked door where she would be with her pills, telling me she didn't want to live anymore, for hours at a time. "I know, mom," I said. "It's okay," I said.

"Anytime he thought I was even lookin' at another man," she said, her eyes beginning to redden.

"It's terrible. I'm sorry," I said.

"But he only felt that way cause of how much he loved me. He just loved me too much. I'm not tryin' to say he wasn't a good man deep down."

"I know, Mom."

One of the other waitresses stopped at the table carrying a couple of bottles of ketchup. She smiled at me. "Do you mind if I take that ketchup?"

"No," I said.

My mother, now smiling again, completely engaged with the waitress, gave me a look and said, "No *ma'am*, Dawn."

"No *ma'am*," I said.

The waitress looked at me as I handed her the bottle off the table. "Do ya'll need anything else?"

"No thank you," I said.

"How is everything?" the waitress asked me. It's normal, I thought.

"It's just fine," my mother said.

"Fine, thank you," I said so my mother wouldn't look at me like I was being rude again. Because being rude was a sin.

The waitress walked away with bottles of ketchup tucked under one arm and one bottle in her other hand.

As soon as she was gone, my mother said, “Good Lord Dawn, look at your face. I hope a rooster don’t crow or it’ll freeze that way.”

She seemed like she was okay again, so I asked, “Mom, is there anything else you think I should know? Is there anything else you want to tell me? Like, does Dewey or the knife salesman know anything about me?”

“No! Why the hell would they know anything?”

“Mom, it’s okay. Please,” I said, looking around the restaurant to see if anyone was noticing us.

“Look, I knew I was going to raise you and I knew I was going to do it by myself and I didn’t want any help from anyone. We’ve never needed anything from anybody, especially not no man. I never went on welfare, or food stamps. I managed to take care of us just fine. No matter how tough it was. No matter how much I had to do without. It’s always been me and you. You never wanted for anything. And we’ve been just fine.”

“Mom, do you think they are both still alive?”

“I don’t know. Why do you care? *You’re* still alive.”

I felt my whole body caving in, deflating. I looked down at the gravy boat on the table, still full. “You’re right, what does it matter? Why should I care? I’m still me, right?”

“That’s what I’m sayin’. You’re smart and beautiful and you can do anything you want with your life. And you know how much I love you. More than life itself. I’ve loved you more than life itself since the minute I found out I was pregnant with you. You

got to stop being so sensitive. You've always been that way, too sensitive. You need to toughen up your skin."

"I love you, too," I said.

I waited for my mother to finish the piece of pie she had been saving for last. She savored each bite like a little morsel of a last supper. Bonnie came and went a few more times, and we paid the bill and walked outside.

The sky looked as if someone had taken a Bowie knife and sliced open a storm cloud, all the way across, causing the rays of sun to spill out, reaching for the ground. The traffic on the main drag was humming by. A delivery truck was unloading at the Central Diner's back door, and a family was organizing itself out of their station wagon in the parking lot. My mother walked a few steps ahead. "Would you hurry up?" she said.

"I'm coming."

"I've got to get over to Lisa's. I'm giving her a perm and I do not want to be late."

"Will you drop me off at Sarah's house?"

"No, but I will drop you off at our house."

"Why not, Mom?"

"Because it's not on the way."

"Yes it is, you drive right by her street."

"I want you home," she said.

I slowed down as she gradually pulled ahead of me. "Please."

She kept going. "I said no, are you deaf?"

I stopped. "Then I'll just call a taxi."

This was the first thing to slow my mother down and after a few steps she stopped and turned around. She knew I had never taken a taxi by myself before. “Fine. You go on with your bad self.” And with that she kept walking toward her faded gold sedan.

I wanted to run after her. I wanted to run after her so bad. I always did. No matter what she had shattered. She needed me. I wanted to hug her and tell her I was sorry. I was sorry for whatever it was that I had done to make her tell me she didn’t know who my father was. I wanted to tell her not to feel bad about telling me. I wanted to tell her not to worry, she would never be alone, that it would always be me and her against the world. I called out after her, “I’ll be home later.”

She opened the door to the car and yelled back, “I don’t know what you’re so upset about. You didn’t even know the man. It’s not like this changes who you are.” She got into the car and stopped for a minute, like she was waiting for me. But I didn’t move. So she cranked up the car, cranked up the Dolly Parton song on the radio, and turned around, crackling the loose gravel in the parking lot as she tore out.

I wanted her to come back.

I felt in my pockets to see what kind of money I had. I pulled out four crumpled dollar bills, a dime, two nickels, and three quarters. Enough for a phone call and a short taxi ride. At least I thought it must be enough. I walked toward the payphone in the gas station parking lot next to the Central Diner. When I got there I opened up the barely attached half-soaked phone book and found the number for the only taxi company in town. I dropped a quarter into the slot and dialed the number.

“Hello, Rainbow Cab.”

“Hi, I need a taxi please.”

The woman on the phone coughed. “Yep. Where are you?”

“Well, umm...I am right now at the Central Diner on Northwoods Avenue. Oh, actually I’m at the Shell station next door to the Central Diner in the parking lot on the pay phone that’s right next to the Central Diner.”

“Last name?”

I just stood there. I had no idea what to say.

“*Hello?* Last name please??”

“Davis,” I said, “My last name is Davis,” and I hung up the phone.

Petrichor

The fabled musk deer searches the world over for the source of the scent which comes from itself. ~Ramakrishna

The neighbor lady had moved in over the winter and the first poking-through of a daffodil sprig had started her bragging. Some would think she was a master-gardener, the kind that had the perfect remedy for every problem. Some would think that, but not Irma. Not Irma because she knew her little square of earth and she knew all the things that would show up trying to kill whatever she tried to grow there. And sure enough, the neighbor lady planted near a hundred dollars worth of seeds and sprouts, only to have them all gnawed down to the spindly little stems by the whistle-pigs Irma had come to think of as her near equal, clever foes who stood as the opposing force in an epic battle for some of the food on Macumber Drive.

It was late August with humidity that felt like a dog's mouth, in the part of North Carolina completely starved for mountain air or an ocean breeze. The part that stretched out flat, and still, and slow. Irma had been tending the garden and had brought in a bucket full of summer squash. She sliced through one, quartered it, and put it in the pan with the oil, onion, and garlic that were already starting to jump and spit. She dusted them with salt and pepper and after a couple of minutes she turned the softening yellow pieces onto the other side. She looked at the stairs, half-expecting to see Karl coming down, because the smell of dinner cooking used to get him into the kitchen pretty quick.

But lately he had not been coming down on his own, so she called his name to let him know dinner was ready.

Irma Scanlon had just turned forty-four years old. She had been married to Karl, the only man she'd ever been to bed with, for twenty-four of those years. It was just the two of them. Karl didn't want any kids. They lived in a small, brown, two-story modular duplex, in a line of small, brown, two-story modular duplexes along Route 11, otherwise known as Gum Branch Road. Karl had picked it out a few years ago so they could be closer to his mom and dad. Irma was average height with a rectangle-shaped body. She certainly wasn't what most people thought of as beautiful, pretty even, but like most women she did have those few years where she had a strut about her. She had never worn make-up. Karl thought women were better without it. Her fashion choices had not changed much at all over the years. She still wore comfortable cotton tops, no-wrinkle shorts or slacks, and her favorite double-strap Dr. Scholl's sandals. Except when she worked in the garden, where she had a few of what she called her garden outfits that always included a wide-brimmed and floppy hat that made her feel a little bit like Katherine Hepburn.

Karl and Irma were sitting at the table eating dinner, same as they did most every night. They never really talked a whole lot, but she did kind of like the way he never failed to get a run-down on what she had done with her day while he was at work down at the food-processing plant where he had made a career out of making Slim-Jims.

“So where did you go today? The Chevette's tank's a quarter gone,” he said.

“I just went to the Family Dollar and to the phone company to pay the bill.”

“Oh,” he nodded, taking another huge bite of cubed steak.

“But remember I had the meeting at church last night. I had to help the pastor’s wife write the newsletter for next month. Sometimes I forget how far we have to travel for God,” she said as her eyes went upward.

“Well, I suspect it’ll be worth it someday.”

“I suspect it will.”

There was a long pause before Irma asked, “Hey, did you see the moon last night?” as Karl gulped down the last of his sweet tea.

“Nope.”

“Well it was pure magic. I was driving home from church, and when I went over the bridge it looked like the moon was draggin’ diamonds across that old muddy river,” Irma said looking out the window, toward the place in the sky where the moon had been the night before.

“Hm,” he said and went back to his dinner.

The next morning Irma called Rosemary Hawkes, a very nice lady from the dentist office who had been her Avon lady since she and Karl moved into the neighborhood. Irma normally bought some soap and deodorant, the kind that she had used for years, along with Skin-so-Soft to wear out in the garden when the bugs were bad. But on this morning, for some reason, she asked Rosemary if she might put a few samples of other things in the bag when she made the delivery. When Rosemary asked what kind of samples, Irma simply said to surprise her.

That afternoon, Irma thought she would treat Karl to one of his favorite meals, chicken n' dumplin's. She always knew fresh quality ingredients were important, so she made sure she had them on hand. She put the chicken into her biggest stew pot and added some broth. As it simmered she kept skimming the foam away from the top. She did this for a couple of hours, until the chicken was as tender as Karl liked it to be. She de-boned the chicken and got rid of the skin and innards, and cut the meat up into pieces. She used her hand mixer to mix the milk, salt, flour, egg, and butter until it made a ball and from that she formed the dumplings. She boiled the broth and dropped the dumplings in, gently one by one, making sure they were well covered. She added more butter. She added the chicken back in. She simmered, and waited for Karl to come home.

He was late, but he had a grin she knew he meant to make up for it with. She still thought he was the most handsome man on the face of the earth. But for some reason the smile didn't make her feel better this time, and she said, "You know Karl, I do a lot to have your dinner ready and I don't like it when you're this dadgum late and you don't even call me to let me know and I wait and wait, and wait."

"Oh really. Well I am so sorry, Miss Thing. One of us has got to work or that pot of yours would be empty."

"I just wish you would call," she said, looking at the stove.

"You wish I would call?"

"Yes, that's all."

Raising his voice, Karl said loud and sharp, “Well *today* my boss kept me late cause he thought maybe I would like to apply for a promotion coming up. I like to died...”

“Okay, I’m sorry. It’s alright,” Irma said.

Louder now, Karl kept yelling, “He never even so much as pats me on the back and here he was sayin’ somethin’ that might mean a lot to us...*us*, U and S, *us*, Irma.”

“I know, Karl. I know you are only tryin’ to do what’s good for our family. No need to keep yellin’. Settle down and I’ll fix you a plate. Chicken n’ dumplin’s, just like you like it.

“Well I’m not hungry any goddamn more.”

Irma’s feet felt planted, concrete. “Karl, please.”

Karl turned around and went upstairs with no intention of ever eating the meal she had worked so hard on.

Irma felt like someone had shoved a rag down her throat, and she wanted nothing more than to throw up so it wouldn’t feel like that anymore. She felt something coming apart inside. She looked at the pot and had no idea what to do. She slowly turned round and round. At some point the stuff coming apart scared her, so she decided to get busy doing something with her hands. She decided to put the dinner away, even though it was too hot for any of her big Tupperware bowls. She worked with her jaw open and tight, trying to fight what wanted to happen, and she worked as best she could with one hand because the other was holding onto her stomach, with her fingers splayed like they were trying to keep it from falling out.

When the Avon order arrived a few days later, Irma took out the items she had purchased along with the new Avon book. She looked down into the white paper bag where she saw two tiny, tiny, lipstick things, a small square of foundation, and three different samples of perfume in shiny packets with racy names. Irma brought the samples up the stairs to the bathroom. She knew she had two and a half hours before Karl would be getting home from work.

First she opened one of the miniature tubes of lipstick called *Pink Flamingo* and started to move it across her lips. Her eyes widened with the sight of the hottest pink she believed she'd ever seen, and how it seemed to make the rest of her face all but disappear. There wasn't anything left of Irma but hot pink lips.

She put the packet of foundation between her teeth and ripped it open. It squirted out all at once, so she put it down and started using the sides of her fingers, now covered in *Sand Beige*, to smear the color across her face. With each addition of color the pink lips receded and seemed more right. In a few moments time, Irma looked at herself in the mirror, and she didn't see the poorly applied lipstick or the curving uneven lines of make-up, she saw a woman, and beauty, and it excited her.

She looked down at the perfume sample with the sinuous swan against a bleeding purple background, and with far more care this time, she opened it and breathed in the bouquet of sharp and unnatural balsamic sweetness. Then she took it and rubbed it on all the parts she had seen the women in movies rub it on, until there was nothing left, not a trace of perfume. She closed her eyes and took a breath of herself.

For the next little while, Irma did her work, but she moved around the house in a different way than she usually did. She stopped in front of the window to let the sun rest on her face. She cut into a lemon for the sweet tea and enjoyed the sensation the juice left on her fingers. Every time she bent down to pick something up, she came back up in a slow deliberate curl, and all of her steps seemed sleepy and rhythmic.

But Irma wanted to leave herself plenty of time before Karl came home. She did not want him to know what she had been doing. She headed back up the stairs and washed her face clean of sand and flamingos, leaving her pale and monochrome, and ready to start dinner.

Irma found a place in the bathroom linen closet to hide the remaining samples, on the lowest shelf behind a stack of clean sheets that had been dried on the line the way Karl liked them. Because she knew Karl never had anything to do with changing the bedding, she figured he would never have a cause or reason to look down there.

Later in the evening, Irma and Karl were having a dinner of vinegary pulled pork with a pile of slaw on top, corn-on-the-cob and hushpuppies. Irma was watching Karl's mouth, greasy and wet from the pork that would sometimes seem to be trying to fight its way out of his mouth before being taken by his will and swallowed up, so she concentrated real hard and tried not to see a cow chewing cud. Even so, she found herself less annoyed with him than she sometimes got, and at some point he seemed to grow darn near uncomfortable with the fact that she kept looking at him and smiling.

Irma lifted the ear of corn to her mouth, perfectly buttered and salted, but instead of corn she was hit with a faded musky flower. She had forgotten to wash the perfume off the hollow place on the inside of her elbow. She knew Karl only liked to smell her

natural smells. Her comfort went away and she and Karl sat and ate the rest of the meal in silence. When they were done, Irma went over to take Karl's plate, but she knew she needed to be quick in order to keep him from catching a whiff as stress was heating up her body temperature more and more and the scent seemed to be coming alive more and more. When Irma reached her arm down she watched his face. He looked at her, and he said, "That was a good meal, a damn good meal, Irma"

Karl was driving to church one Sunday morning when Irma picked up a strong whiff of skunk odor as they turned onto Route 5. As the stink filled the car, and the car got closer and closer to the source of the stink, Irma watched Karl. He didn't say anything about anything. He did not wince, he did not crinkle his nose, he did not even notice the skunk curled into a sad fetal position on the side of the road. But Irma had drawn a bead on it and watched and smelled it as they passed the dead rancid thing, leaving it behind for the flies and the heat. "Mercy, it must already be a hundred degrees," Irma said looking straight ahead.

"Well, it is August,"

"Yes, you're right, it sure is. Maybe some day we'll get some rain around here."

"Maybe someday," Karl said as he made the left hand-turn toward church.

The next morning, about three minutes after her husband pulled out of the driveway to go to work, Irma headed up and retrieved her magic paper bag from behind the sheets. She took out her last perfume sample, a spicy orange called Noir, and rubbed

it up and down her arms. When it was nearly gone, she placed the packet between her breasts and moved it in and out of her fleshy cleavage. Breathing in, breathing in.

Tuesday was the day Irma *usually* went to the Piggly Wiggly for groceries, but she figured she may as well pick up a loaf of bread in case Karl wanted to have a sandwich before bed. She also figured she might as well go to the pharmacy to pick up some aspirin for Karl's morning headaches. She didn't want to waste gas, so she walked the half-mile from Piggly Wiggly to Eckerd drugs. Irma had started noticing old people a lot more, and as she was walking along the sidewalk a man, an itchy-bitsy old man in a tan outfit, walked toward her, his few pieces of gray hair barely noticeable up against the white skin of his shiny scalp, rosy cheeks that didn't match his worried eyes, and a hurry she couldn't quite figure out. But the real curiosity was the tinny music which grew louder as he scuffled closer, an old, old, song, maybe from the forties like they would have played at sea on a ship with homesick sailors, and it leaked out louder and louder from a small transistor radio he had folded under his arm like a woman holds her prized rhinestone clutch bag. It was like he had escaped from a wooden box buried somewhere, and was trying to outrun the thing trying to track him down. Irma turned after he passed, and watched him for a good while.

Once she got into the drugstore she picked up Karl's aspirin, and she walked to the side wall of the store where there were bottles of perfume locked in a glass case. She loved the different shapes they came in, the way the glass had tints of amber and icy blue, and the way some of them had little tassels and ribbons around the necks of the bottles. She stood there studying them for a while, and she pondered what it would be like to

smell each one of them in order to decide which one was the most beautiful and which one she should buy. But her nerves got the best of her and she picked one based only on the name. *Ciara*. She loved the sound of it. She wished it was her name. She went over and asked the check-out boy to help her get it. He unlocked the case and she saw the bottles were kept in boxes underneath the display ones, and she felt drunk with anticipation as he pulled out the sun-yellow box with the word *Ciara* scrolled in curvy letters straight up the side.

Irma was in the garden on her knees in front of the cherry tomatoes. The soil was dry from so many weeks without a good rain, and it seemed no amount of water from the spicket could keep it moist after any amount of time underneath the relentless Carolina sun. But even here, where things sort of go from brown to green and back again, Irma could feel the fall settling in. She could hear the sound of ocean in the trees and see the dead-leaf green everywhere, and all of a sudden she could feel the difference in day and night. Even though it would surely be hot for a while to come, soon her garden would go to seed, left to the squirrels and the crows.

But her new interest was not winding down at all. In fact, Irma was now as dedicated to finding the perfect fragrance as she had been to trapping the groundhog that had threatened last summer's vegetables. She smelled everything now. Every flower outside, every bottle of lotion, and even the tube of toothpaste and container of dish detergent were rediscovered. And she started buying perfume. She bought the ones that were on sale, so she could slip them into the grocery budget. Soon she had glass

containers filled with floral and citrus and vanilla and spice, and exotic mixtures that went from low tones to sharp ones.

Irma Scanlon was hoarding scents. Hiding them in the same spot as she'd started, on the bottom shelf behind the clean sheets in the bathroom linen closet. Bottles were crammed into the small space. And every day when Karl went to work, she would take them out and line them up on the table. She would pick one out for the morning and then she would wash it off and choose another one for lunch. Sometimes, she even changed it in between.

But the best part for Irma was picking out the one she would be wearing when Karl came home. The one she would spray on the back of her neck, or spray right on the hot pulse points, or rub into the little hidden pocket behind her earlobe, or even occasionally, daringly, the one she would use to trace her breasts with the perfume's applicator or tickle the inside of her thighs with a gentle mist.

When Karl came home, she would carry on as if nothing had changed. She began to love the power of being around him.

Irma had spent a good part of the afternoon in the garden. She brought in a few of the tomatoes and some greens. She had cooked dinner and waited for Karl. But as sometimes happened, she ended up eating alone. When Karl finally did get home, he was carrying a single grocery bag and he was tipsy. She thought he looked like the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz. He came over to hug her and said, "Hey baby, sorry I'm late but someone got lucky in a poker game and Audrey and Tom and Jeff kept buyin' rounds till I damn near fell over."

“I’m not worryin’ bout it,” Irma said as she caught a whiff of perfume. A perfume that she owned, but had not put on that day.

He held up the grocery bag and handed it to her. She looked inside and saw a half-gallon ice-cream box that had begun to melt and leak out into the bag.

“I brought you home some butter pecan ice cream,” he said, shifting his weight to the other side, like he was on invisible crutches.

“Thanks, I’ll have some later when I’m watching TV,” she said as she took it over to the sink in order to pour the melted ice cream down the drain.

One day Irma got a wild hare. Karl was sitting out back working on a part from the lawnmower and she pulled over a lawn chair and sat down next to him. “Karl, I’m thinking of buyin’ some perfume. Some nice thing with a little somethin’.”

“Look, I don’t care what you do Irma. It’s your life. But there’s women who are plenty attractive without smellin’ like a Paris whore. Look at Audrey from work. All the guys talk about how good-looking she is all the time, and she ain’t walking around smellin’ like she just crawled out of some magnolia bath.”

“She’s not?”

“Nope, sure ain’t.”

“Oh, well, I reckon some women might just need a little somethin’ from time to time.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re some women, Irma. I think you are my wife, and I like the way you smell just fine.”

“Okay,” she said.

“We’re done with this,” he said without looking up from the coil of metal he was holding in his hand.

Irma went back inside the house. From underneath the kitchen sink she took the bottle of Windex and the jug of Clorox bleach, one in each hand, and went upstairs. She put them down on the bathroom floor and sat down on the edge of the tub. She looked out the window at the cloudless sky. After Irma sat like that for a few minutes, she went to the pantry and took out two bottles of her perfume. She poured what perfume was left into the sink. She washed the bottles out and sat them on the back of the toilet. She unscrewed the spray top of the Windex, and filled one of the bottles with it. She put the top back on the Windex and the perfume bottle. And she did the exact same thing with the bleach, filling the other perfume bottle all the way to the top. After that bottle was sealed up again, she put them both behind the other perfumes on her secret shelf. Way in the back, hidden behind the hidden.

Sometimes Irma would take walks in an old neighborhood back behind her road. It was an older neighborhood that had big well-developed trees and houses that all looked different. She liked it back there and thought it must be nice to have such big yards and open space. One day on the way home, Irma noticed an old woman standing in her front yard. She seemed frail against the breeze. Her soft teal sweater hung like silk on a skeleton. She was looking at her big sunflowers as they towered and bowed over her. She seemed to be lost in time somehow. Irma started wondering how old she was. But the sky was beginning to look like a storm was coming, so she figured she better start toward the house.

It rained and rained after she got home. For a good half an hour it was hard to even hear anything else because the noise was so loud. She watched out the back window as the water at first bounced off the ground then started to disappear into it.

Karl came home and he was soaked from the walk to his car in the big parking lot at the plant. He went straight upstairs to find a towel to dry his hair, and in a few minutes he was cussing about not seeing any clean ones. Irma was watching Wheel of Fortune and started to get up, but hesitated when he hollered down at her that she couldn't get something so simple done right. She realized then that she needed to get up there, real quick, and get him a towel, so she started toward the stairs. She took a few steps, each one coming quicker than the next.

But then it went completely silent, which made her realize the rain had stopped pounding the house. Irma felt like it was the strangest silence she had ever known. She moved backwards with her hands behind her kind of like she was feeling her way in the dark. She sat back down on the couch. It stayed quiet for a minute, and then Karl's voice came from upstairs and smashed into the living room. "What the hell is goin' on here! What the hell is this?" Irma heard the first bottle break as it shattered sound through the house. "Girl! What the hell have you been doin' in my goddamn house?"

Then the next bottle.

"What is this shit!"

And the next.

"Goddamn you!"

And the next.

Irma sat quiet as a church mouse and listened as he destroyed her collection of perfume bottles. She put her hands over her ears and stared straight ahead.

Irma heaved inward, and she felt a terrible heat come over her. She felt sick from the acid, from the force of her own heart beating in her chest. She got up from the couch and slipped on her sandals as another burst of sound came from upstairs.

The house began to fog with the stink of rotting flowers and burning chemical.

Irma walked out the back door into the yard. There was only a sliver of a moon in the sky. She was taking short shallow breaths. The frogs were moaning in the distance. She noticed a clean and pleasant metallic aroma. She wondered if there was a word for the way dried out dirt smelled after a hard rain.

Going to See the Blues

You may be high, you may be low. You may be rich, child. You may be poor. But when the Lord gets ready. You got to move. ~Mississippi Fred McDowell's gravestone

I always tell people there are two types of places in the Delta. There are honky-tonks and there are juke joints. Both have liquor, music and dancin', but honky-tonks are white and juke joints are black. The honky-tonks yell and the juke joints howl, and they've been howlin' since the days when cotton was picked by hand and men were bought and sold. Howlin' with riffs, twangs and vibrations, with songs of missed starts and bitter ends that moan like a hungry dog in the cold, cold rain.

Frannie's is the name of my juke in Yazoo County Mississippi, and a couple of weeks ago I found out there's a man from Jackson called Mr. Terry who wants to buy it. He don't want to carry it on, but he wants the land, and for what I'm not exactly sure. But I'm not gonna sell the place, even though it's gotten near impossible to make it with nothin' but the last of the regulars and a few big-city tourists trollin' the Delta lookin' for authentic.

The man from Jackson wants me to just pack the place up and go on my way. But I'm not sure how I'm supposed to fit years and memories and history into brown cardboard boxes. I reckon there will come a time to start figurin' it out. Maybe I won't have any choice. So much business has been lost cause of the harvester machines and those casinos they've plopped down right in the middle of the corn and cotton fields. Big ugly turquoise buildings with signs sayin' Hollywood and Oasis and Bluesville, that all seem

like strange spaceships landed in the wrong place. Just about everything in the Delta has changed since Frannie's best days, some of it is the good kind of change and some of it isn't.

A couple years back, a young lady came round from the *Rolling Stone Magazine*. She was travelin' all over the place tryin' to figure out if the Blues is dead. Asked me if I thought there really was a crossroads where Robert Johnson met the devil. I told her that was pure foolishness, that man didn't need Legba to learn to play like that. Asked her if she knew bout Charley Patton, the real trickster that put fire in Johnson's fingers. Asked her if she knew that boy was white and black *and* Cherokee, and could play white hillbilly music long with anything else he set his mind to. Ain't that somethin' I told her, the Blues was born in a skinny little mutt of a man, a half-crazy trouble-makin' man who wasn't afraid of nothin'. That's why the music don't just belong to the Delta, that's why it belongs to all of us. It was just born in the Delta, that's all.

The land in the Delta is board-flat – so flat that when you stand still you can't hardly believe the world is round. Standin' on that level ground, Frannie's looks like it's slanted to the left – so much so that a lot of people just say, "Let's go to the Tilt," or "I got drunk at the Tilt last night." On the front of the building there are two windows high up, and each one has a duct-taped air-conditioner that hangs out like a heavy rock on the verge of tumblin' down a steep cliff. The whole place is painted a dirty beige color, more like no color than anything else, but the roof and the door are lined with the bright crayon colors of big-bulbed lights that have been there for longer than I can remember. There's a narrow front porch, but I never did keep any chairs on it. Right next to the front door hangs a sign I wrote in magic marker that says *No drugs or rap music*. There's parkin' in

the gravel lot on the left of the building, and there's cotton puffin' up in the field on the right of it.

I've owned the place almost forty years. But I am tired, and my body is gettin' rounded, like it's all tryin' to get lower to the ground. Between my arthritis and the pain in my feet, I think I hurt all over. It's gotten so bad that I usually sit and rub my fingers that are startin' to stiffen into a curl, hoping by force of will that I can make them better. I don't know a lot of things, but I know I ain't got much left.

When I got to Frannie's this mornin', I went in and turned the sign in the window from *Closed* to *Open*. After that, the first thing I did was start the air-conditioners, but as they grumbled on I knew they were fightin' a losin' battle with the high-water mark of a Mississippi summer. It was already near ninety degrees with the kind of Delta humidity that makes it a chore to move, or to breathe. The kind of humidity that makes it feel like the miles of cotton somehow got into the air itself.

I had told Mr. Terry he could come by, and sure enough he showed up right on time. He came in the smallest car I've ever seen, and watching him get out I didn't understand how he had ever fit himself into it. He wore shiny brown shoes that had pennies in a slit on top of them, and tan pants with ironed pleats in 'em. His shirt was the color of an unripe peach, with the long sleeves rolled up just below his elbows. He tossed his car keys in his hand as he walked up to the front porch.

"Mornin' George," he said as he shoved his hand out toward me.

"Mornin' to you," I said as I reached out and shook it.

"Thanks for lettin' me come by one more time. I'm here to see if we can't sweeten the pot a little bit and get you to come around and sell me this place."

“Well I reckon you better come on in then, there ain’t no sense in standin’ out here and baking while we talk.” I opened the front door and motioned for him to have a seat. He looked around the place for a few seconds, and settled on one of the small tables near the front. I followed him over and we sat down.

“George, like I said, I am here to make this work for both of us. There’s no reason a man your age shouldn’t at least entertain my offer and listen to what I’ve got to say. I need this land, and I think you could sure use some money to retire with. You’ve worked hard your whole life, so why not take some time for yourself and relax? Go on and get some rest, George, you’ve earned it. I am prepared to give you that chance.”

I looked at him as he was talkin’. There really was somethin’ genuine in him, in the way he couldn’t make sense out of the fact that I hadn’t given him a yes and a thank you sir the minute he showed up here two weeks ago. And the truth is, I do think in his mind he thought he was offerin’ to put me out of some kind of misery, not offerin’ to put me out of my life.

“Mr. Terry, can I get you somethin’ to drink, or somethin’ to eat?”

“No, no, George, thank you but I am fine,” he said, lookin’ kinda sad I was even askin’.

“Okay then, but I’ve got to have somethin’ in my stomach in the mornin’ or I’m done for the rest of the day. Especially in this kind of heat.” He nodded and turned up his tiny lips into a smile, one that’s just put there to hide the way you really feel. I said, “Why don’t you come on back to the kitchen while I fix something? We can talk and you can let me know if the sight of some food changes your mind about breakfast.”

“No, no, thank you George, I best be goin’. I just wanted to stop by and tell you that I’m not leavin’ town until the mornin’, so you’ve still got time to change your mind,” he said as he was pullin’ his deep brown wallet out of his pant pocket.

“Well I certainly do appreciate that, Mr. Terry. But I’m afraid it’s been years since my mind’s changed about anything,”

He pulled out a card from his wallet and put it on the table, leavin’ his finger on it like he was nailing it down. “I tell you what George, I think you’re a good man, and I think you deserve to finish out your years free of worry, so I’m gonna go against my own interests here, and I’m gonna add ten thousand to my original offer.”

“That’s mighty nice of you, Mr. Terry. And I do appreciate your kindness toward me. But I’m afraid you’re gonna just have to wait till they put me in this ground before anyone else gets to own it.”

“Just give it a day. Give it a day, George.”

“Okay then, alrighty then,” I said as he got up to leave.

After he managed to mash himself back in that little car, Mr. Terry was on his way again. I went over and sat down at the table where his card was, and I looked up at a framed black and white photo on the wall. It was my Sadie, my wife who I lost to cancer a few years ago. In the picture she sat in a chair with a sprawl peculiar to Delta women, all her parts settled into the others, limbs crossed and hangin’ everywhere, like comfort taking a physical shape.

Sadie used to help me at Frannie’s when she could, but she also ran the church choir up at First Baptist for twenty years, and that kept her real busy. She loved the church. Everyone was her brother or sister. Sadie used to say that in the Delta, other

than the rich folk, everyone has some black church in 'em. It don't matter what color your skin is, you got some righteous uh-huhs and amens.

I think about things Sadie used to say an awful lot now. But lately I've been thinkin' on a lot of other things, too. Like about ten years ago, when somethin' had been building and building inside me until I felt trapped behind my own eyes – like I was constricted, bound up.

It seemed to start when I went down to Biloxi. I was visiting Sadie's cousin, and I ended up at the beach a couple of miles down from her house. It was my first time going there. I looked at the wide sky. The clouds were like shelves, stacked on top of each other, until they disappeared into the water, into the straightest line I ever saw. I looked at the white hot gulf sand and thought about how it looked like the sun was throwin' diamonds across it. I forgot anything else other than what I was feelin'. My world all the sudden became something it hadn't been until then.

I could feel my senses tryin' to measure it all up. The seagull's sharp bark pinchin' the deep bellow of the tide. The salt air, the water. The rot of a washed up fish in the August sun. The dryin' seaweed, alive green all the way to so dark that it went straight on to black like collards cooked an hour too long. The happy screams of children I could barely even see. The taste on my lips. The dry on my eyelashes, and skin. An ocean breeze that carried relief, like nothin' I had ever felt in a breeze before. The sand, sinkin' me down into all of it. I just stood there for a while and tried to take in the bigness, the openness, the mighty potent force of the stretchin' out of an ocean.

Since I was a little boy, I had been fightin' little things inside me. I would always imagine how people lived in those cities up North. I would think about going to other

countries some day. Somewhere with mountains and lakes and snow. But life kept comin' at me, keepin' me in motion. Keepin' me in a circle. I had Frannie's. I had Sadie. I had friends, and my harmonica. But after Biloxi, I couldn't fight the little things anymore. They got loud, so loud that some days I would take my lawn chair off my front porch and put it right next to the ditch and sit there for hours listening to the crickets and the frogs, or strainin' to hear the train going down the Yellow Dog Railway, wonderin' about who was on it and where they were going. Sometimes I would just get into my old burgundy Delta Eighty-Eight and drive for miles and miles, weavin' around the two-lane roads in the country, like they might would open me up again, like Biloxi did, like the blue of that great big ocean did.

At the same time Frannie's started gettin' smaller and smaller, and the people at Frannie's started gettin' less and less easy to take. The way I was a little good at a lot of things, that started gettin' to me, too. I could play the blues, but never as good as most everybody else that played at Frannie's. Sadie would tease me and say that I was a jack of all trades, master of none, but I started wishin' more and more that I could've mastered somethin'. Before long, I got to the point that I was raw nerves and anxious all the time. Even those old blues songs started wearin' on me, and stopped givin' me what they used to every time someone picked up a slide-guitar and took to the low wooden stage on the side wall of Frannie's.

Sometimes I wonder if maybe part of my problem was just gettin' worn down and worn out. I spent the first eleven years of my life in the state home. I always thought it was funny the way they called it the state *home*, but I reckoned they just used home cause the state house had already been taken. I was taken in by a family of sharecroppers a few

days before my twelfth birthday, but it was only cause I was old enough, or strong enough, to work the cotton fields and pay my own way.

I always knew Sadie grew up real poor, a lot of hard times and all, but her family was made of love and her momma and daddy never missed a day of wrappin' their arms around her and tellin' her how much they loved their only girl. But I never resented Sadie for this. I just knew there were things about me she could never understand. I knew she had pain, and sorrow, but I also knew that when she woke up every day, she could just be a person, living a life, and that was all. But I couldn't wake up like that. I had to earn my spot on the earth. I had to earn everything. Everything. I had holes, lots of holes, so deep and so empty, holes that could never be filled, not by Sadie or Frannie's, and not by me, no matter how hard and how much I filled and filled and filled.

Then one Saturday night at Frannie's, not too long after Biloxi, it all caught up to me. I was in the middle of one of my bad spells. I was feeling all kinds of sorry for myself. I was getting real petty, too. Snappin' at people when they came up to the bar to get their pints of whiskey or buckets of beer. It was a busy night. There had been a big boom of a thunderstorm, the kind that sounds like it's gonna split the whole earth wide open, so the first band had to play loud enough to compete with the darts of rain frammin' onto the rust-red tin roof that seemed no more than a foot away from the top of their heads.

I walked out back for some air, some after-rain air. Sadie was out there, weeds coverin' her ankles, wearing my favorite dress, the one with the dainty white flowers strewn all over it. But she wasn't alone. She was with Levon Jones, the guitar player from one of the out-of-town bands I had hired, and she looked a little strange. Her way

of standing wasn't right, wasn't Sadie. But before I could even start to figure anything out, Levon cupped her elbows in his hands and he leaned over and kissed her on the left cheek. It was quick. But it was. My heart punched my chest. I felt so many things at once that it froze me, right there where I stood, in plain sight of my wife and the man I wanted to kill with the tire iron in the trunk of my car. But after what seemed like a slow hundred years, something made me just turn around and go back into Frannie's.

I walked straight to the bar and started lookin' around the place. Folks always wore their best clothes to the juke on Saturday nights. The colors were loud red and purple, green-green and artificial blue. They wore their best jewelry, too. Thick rope chains and big round and dangly earrings that made the whole place light up and sparkle gold and silver. I leaned up against the bar and looked at the dance floor. It was full. Full of people all jammed together, pieces of their clothes stickin' to em' from the sweat, easin' up and down each other, doin' the slow drag or just pressin' their parts as the bluesman on stage closed his eyes to it all, real tight, like a little child does when they're scared there's a monster in the room. And for about half a minute, it made me forget what I had just seen. But then it all came back, loud as the freight trains that whistle and wail through Yazoo County. Right then the bartender tapped me on my shoulder and said real loud, "Hey, Sarah T. says there's somethin' wrong with her fish."

I turned around and told him, "There ain't nothin' wrong with that fish."

"She says it's raw."

"That fish ain't raw. What the hell she talkin' bout?" I said, gettin' more frustrated.

"I don't know, she seemed pretty sure of it."

I turned to the bartender and snapped, “The damn fish is fried! How can a thin little piece of fish be raw after it got dropped in hot grease until the batter turned to a brown crust?”

“I don’t know,” he said back, loud enough to be heard over the music, and high-sounding enough to let me know he wanted to be done with the whole thing so he could get back to his bar customers.

I just shook my head and said, “All right, all right, send her another fish and tell Isaac to cook it till the darn thing looks burnt up.”

The bartender went off to take care of Sarah T.’s catfish, and I went straight for the front door, still needin’ some air in a bad way. I was standing out front, but not underneath the streetlight, cause I wanted to be alone in the dark. Not more than a minute later, Sadie came down the front steps of Frannie’s and she made a bee-line straight over to where I was standin’. My stomach jumped and jerked, and my heart was beatin’ in my ears.

Sadie put her hands on those lovely hips of hers and cocked herself to the left, the way she always did, and said, “What are you doin’ out here?”

I loosened my tight jaw enough to say, “Nothin’.”

“What do you mean, *nothin’*?”

Now I was stallin’ for time, cause I didn’t know whether to bring up what I saw or leave it till later. I looked at this person, who suddenly seemed like a stranger, and said, “What are *you* doin’?”

“I’m finding you,” she said, her face gettin’ a little strained now.

I was able to get it together in my head that I wasn't going to say anything right then, but I still kept diggin' just the same. "I looked around for a while," I said, "but I couldn't find you. So I figured you musta off and left me and went somewhere else."

"Hush your fuss, George Dowd. In all the years we've been together, when have I ever done anything like that?"

"Never, I suppose," I said, wanting it all to just go away. "Now let's go back inside, the bugs are gettin' bad out here."

"For a man usually so good with words, you sure do pick funny times not to have any," she said shakin' her head side to side.

For the next few hours and the next few days, I didn't say anything about what I saw. Partly because I was tryin' to deal with all the stuff goin' through my own head. It was like everything was rollin' back up around me. The whole ocean and the cities and the countries with the big mountains, they were all snappin' back on me. My world that I had started to live in out there, it was all pain and scared feeling like a bunch of dark doors you want to shut and wish you had never opened. I started feelin' like it was my fault that man had kissed Sadie. If I had never left her and wandered around in my mind, she wouldn't have been out there, standin' close enough to another man that it was possible for him to reach her, to reach her like that.

It was like life was going from all stretched out to one pinpoint, and in that pinpoint was all the real earth that I had to stand on. And if it went away, I'd have nothin' to keep me from just floatin' off all alone to some terrible place, some place that was like a terrible empty nowhere.

Levon never did come back around, and after a while it never even crossed my mind to bring him up again. The only thing saving me was not sayin' it. Because sayin' it would make it real. It would make it a thing besides a thing in my head. So I just figured out how to live in the pinpoint. How to stop the rest from gettin' in or gettin' out. Every time my mind started to wander to the places I wanted to go, or to the other things I would wish for, I'd just remind myself of that time when I felt everything in the world that I had being jerked away from me. I decided right then and there that my life was goin' to be Sadie and Frannie's, and I was going to cling, and clutch, and squeeze it so hard that it could never come that close to gettin' away from me again.

Never again would I let myself ever want anything new, just a window painted black with one tiny scratch where light could smack through. I would keep my feet right where they were, on my little spot of ground, the solid ground made up of the dark, dark, soil of the Mississippi Delta. There would be no movin' George Dowd again. No, sir. I was right where I was going to be, and that was exactly where I was still sittin' with Mr. Terry's business card.

That lady from the *Rolling Stone* had asked me why I kept on runnin' Frannie's. Why I had never sold it and done somthin' else. I just told her I had to do my best to keep the juke and the music from dyin'. And then I said, "Besides, if I closed up people wouldn't have anywhere to go after a funeral." That's what I told her.

With my stomach speakin' to me again, I walked back to the tiny kitchen in the back of Frannie's and took out an iron skillet seasoned with years of Crisco and fatback. I had a hankerin' for a fried bologna sandwich with some yellow mustard, even though I knew that seemed near crazy this early in the day. I could smell the stale beer that always

greeted me in the mornin', after it had been hidin' all night in the dark places behind the bar. But that didn't make me any less hungry because to me this is the smell of home. I opened the door to the old waist-high and dented-up refrigerator and I took out a disc of bologna from the plastic wrap.

When I put the piece of the bologna into the pan with a couple pats of salted butter, the meat started hissinn' and spittin' and curlin' up into itself. I turned the burner down a little and flipped the pieces over with a fork that was missing one of it tongs. It was the fork I used specially for this very thing. I wiped off the tip of the French's bottle, where the mustard had gotten hard and brown, and circled loud yellow lines of it on Sunbeam bread. I put the meat on top, and closed the sandwich, makin' it all wet with grease and butter. I put my plate down on the bar and pulled up a stool, wincin' at the noise it made as it clawed across the floor.

After I had finished eatin' my sandwich, the air was thinned out just a little bit by those old window units, and the scent of the bologna had taken the place of the musk of liquor and beer. I walked over and pushed play on the stereo, causin' the cassette tape to start turnin' with the sound of Muddy Water's low and dirty voice. I sat there thinkin' 'bout things, all by myself, while the whole tape played. I didn't even notice when it stopped playin'. Then, real slow, I walked to the front. I turned the sign around to *Closed*, I hung it back up, and I went and locked the door.

I walked back over to the table where Mr. Terry had left his card, took it and walked back behind the bar and picked up the phone. I struggled a little bit with the dial to call the motel number he had written down on the back of the card. When the operator answered I asked for room 10, and she put me through, but it just kept ringin'. Finally

she came back on and asked if I wanted to leave a message. I told her my name and asked her to tell Mr. Terry to call me when he could, and that I would wait at Frannie's until he did.

Underneath the cash register, there were four drawers built in. I pulled one of them open. It was full of old tabs that people still owed from the times when they didn't have any money to pay at the end of the night. Some of 'em went back ten or fifteen years. I scooped them out of the drawer, and I turned and started throwin' them into one of the trash cans under the bar. When the drawer was empty, and the tabs were cleared, I lifted up the loose piece of shelf paper that was layin' in the bottom of the drawer, and I took out a flattened-out map of Biloxi that I had put there years ago. It was startin' to turn brown in places, and one of the corners was stuck together where it must've gotten wet. But I was able to pull it apart, and I was able to open it back up again.

I put the map down and I started to turn my wedding ring around and around. I started to try and work it up little by little. I bit down hard as I got it past my crooked knuckle. After I finally took it off, I lifted it to my lips and pressed it into them. I felt a kind of joy, a joy like somethin' I reckon I ain't never felt before. Somethin' pure, deep down. I took the ring from my lips and held it on my chest, "I love you, Sadie," I said, with my eyes wet and warm. I put the ring into the drawer, and closed it.

After that I stood there for a while, right by myself, and looked around the place. I looked up at one of the water stains on the ceiling. At the dance floor. At a guitar case leaning up against the wall. I looked at the ghosts. I looked over at Sadie's picture again, and then I took my calloused hand and ran it across the bar, feeling every splinter of wood catch on my fingers.