

slow - 11:05
30 min
need 45

Wrong Season

for JCO

I wonder for maybe the tenth time this evening why that mama wren with the worm in her beak doesn't go ahead and eat it. Why she keeps dipping from the eaves to the shrubbery, cranking her head side to side, watching me paint my nails Flame. Waiting for me to leave so she can feed her squawking chicks in the nest on the rafter above my swing. With all those trees across the highway and behind my double-wide, why did she have to pick this place for a nest? Late summer--not even the right season for nesting. I'm not leaving, not till my nails dry. She can go on and eat the worm. I hold up my red nails and blow them, and the wren on the scrubby shrub kites up to the roof where it's raining with the sun shining.

Almost dry, not a smudge, and just in time: I showered about an hour ago, and I'm starting to sweat; I hear Rambo and Tweety in the kitchen, begging supper. Long as The Lion King is, it never lasts long enough. I hate it when the sun starts shining while it's raining, because then the day seems to start over. If the clearing sky would only stay cloudy, I could put the babies to bed earlier and

call it night time without them catching me in a lie. Then Damon would call, then he might come over, then...

I try to imagine what it'll be like--what it might have been like before Ronnie, my ex, and the two babies, born two years apart. Just me and Damon alone in some room I can't picture outside of this double-wide I've lived in since I got out of high school and married Ronnie. Not at Mama's, two mobile homes up the highway, at the Cornerville city limits sign. Not with my goody-goody brother always dropping by after supper. ^{flash forward} ~~flash forward~~ Alas I can say is, God have mercy on her soul. ^{brother flash forward}

I go through the flimsy front door and hear the wren fluttering to her nest, the baby birds fussing good now. Cooler inside, but not cool. I slide the thermostat lever on the living room wall from 75 to 70 degrees, knowing the air conditioner, steady humming and rattling, won't cool the double-wide to 70. Not in this heat. In the kitchen, dim even with the sunlight stealing through the windows, Rambo is rubbing his eyes and whining "Mama," and Tweety, so named for the cartoon bird she resembles, toddling behind him. Both stunned-looking as Ronnie, who holds the record for watching tv the most hours in a row.

"Juice," says two-year-old Tweety, and holds up her empty bottle with the blistered rubber nipple.

"No more juice till after supper," I say, and she tilts the bottle high and sucks on the nipple, drinking air.

"I'm hungry," says Rambo, tracking behind me to the double sinks stacked with unwashed dishes and pots. "I'm hot!" ^{he says}

I switch on the fluorescent light, banishing the ghosts of sun framed in the twin windows.

"Well, you gone have to wait a minute," I say, and he asks why and I say because I say so--what we both say, seems like, a thousand times a day.

He plops to the juice-stippled tiles on his bony butt, bawling, and I have to step around him to get to the cabinet over the stove, where I plunder among the toppled cans of food for...what? Soup. Chicken Noodle-oo. Which I know he won't eat. Knocking over a jar of Gerber's carrots I know Tweety won't eat either. Well, I'm offering it. Like the doctor said--"Just offer it; if they're hungry they'll eat."

When they don't eat, I salve my doubts with thinking about the Easter egg hunt in my yard last year and one of the pale little girls from a trailer in the park behind mine, who ate all six of the smeary-dyed eggs she found, while Rambo and the other children cracked and mauled and mushed theirs. When they're hungry they'll eat.

The portable phone rings on the food-spackled wall above the garbage can that vomits rotted Styrofoam chicken trays and shit diapers. I hop over Rambo with his bawling baby-turned-boy face to get to the phone before Damon--it has to be Damon!--hangs up. I press it tight to my ear and mouth, walking and talking--it is Damon!--trying to voice-over Rambo's squealing and Tweety's singing. That damned Lion King song! I feel embarrassed about the background racket Damon has to be hearing, laugh loud to cover it, and he stops talking and I know I've laughed too shrill, maybe laughed at something serious. I have only an inkling of what boys like Damon

consider class. Store-owner's son, two years at Valdosta State University, but stalled in his freshman year, whose attention makes me feel above this double-wide and accidental motherhood.

Tweety latches to my right leg and licks my knee. I pat her on the head, that bird's crest of hair, open a can of soup, dump it in a clean-looking bowl from the sink and pop it into the microwave. Suddenly mad at Rambo for bawling.

I hold the phone away and say, "Time out, Rambo! Go to your room right now!" Let Damon know I don't like Rambo either. Let Damon see the solid-sane side of me, my solid-sane mothering. And then he can say how smart I am, how up-to-date I am, that my being a mother is okay by him. I have merit, the kind of woman the tv talk shows and mags boast is acceptable now. In the nineties it's sophisticated and sexy to be a strong mother and career woman. But my new job at the Delta in Cornerville doesn't seem like the kind of career they mean.

Rambo scoots on the floor and springs to his feet, then shambles around the corner by the garbage can, his bellowing squeezed now, his hurt-feelings cry. Down the hall with the seat of his baggy white jockey shorts accusing me of not mopping the kitchen.

Tweety, bowlegged in a clumped wet Pamper, patters after him. "Bubba crying? Bubba crying?" Everything a question, a habit she picked up from Damon maybe. To please me maybe.

I toggle the timer on the microwave and step away, leaning against the stove with its level surface of inset eyes that seems smart and modern to me but probably doesn't to Damon. And I don't know what is sophisticated, what his mama's stove would look like. Whether she cooks even.

"They'll go down in about an hour," I say to Damon. "Right after I feed them."

"I don't know how you put up with it?" says Damon. "All that racket?"

"You know how children are."

"I don't want to know? Too much fuss and bother?"

While Damon tells me about his nuisance nieces and nephews, I listen to Rambo shouting at Tweety, hear her padding back down the hall, Rambo behind her. A Power Ranger doll flies over Tweety's head and lands under the kitchen table, as she wings around the corner, home-free, laughing with her straight eyebrows hiked to her hair line when she spots me, then crying as she crashes into the garbage can, tips it over and sprawls into the waste of bread crusts and jagged cans and mysterious Coke bottles that look empty but dump enough syrupy gook to stain brown the entire white floor.

Bracing the phone to my ear with my shoulder, I help her up and press her face to my left thigh, tears and baby-spit and sweat trickling and puddling in my brown sandals. She shudders, sucks her thumb. Rambo's scared white face peeps around the corner, and I trip through the trash and yank his stick arm, shaking him and walking him half-way down the hall. He cries--his hurt-body cry--and lunges toward his bedroom at the other end. Slams the door. The microwave

beeps. I limp back to the kitchen with Tweety grafted to my leg. I open the microwave door, hot-handling the bowl of parched Chicken Noodle-oo to the counter by the refrigerator. Damon is listening to a Michael Jackson CD, crooning into the phone. I don't like Michael Jackson. I don't like him--child molester--or his music. I act like I do.

Suddenly, "Old man says if I want to stay in college," Damon says, "I gotta toe the line?"

He waits for me to speak.

"What's that mean, toe the line?" I know. I just say that to be saying something I don't have to think about.

"Hell, I don't know. Get my grades up, I guess?"

"Yeah," I say to Damon, then to Rambo, slinking into the kitchen like a hungry puppy and scaling up the skittering high chair,

"Rambo! No! Wait!"

I open the freezer compartment of the side-by-side refrigerator with moldy breath and take a half-circle of ice from the bin. Hold it to my hot throat, then plop it into the soup, splattering my white tee-shirt.

"I don't see how you stand it?" says Damon. "I'd go crazy?"

"I am."

"Why don't you call up Ronnie and make him take them awhile?"

"Weekends. He gets them on the weekends." Meaning just me and you then.

"Two da-ays? That ain't fair?"

"He's got that little trailer, you know." Saying that about Ronnie's trailer makes him seem poor--poor white trash--all of us poor, and sets up a comparison to the Walters family in their fine brick house, south of the Cornerville crossing. "Besides, he has to work night shift at Occidental," I add. "Sleeps all day."

"Well," says Damon--doing something that lifts his breathy voice from the phone--"you work too, don't you?"

He's really into phone sex, and I wonder. I don't ask. I stare out the double window over the sink and see it's getting dark, finally. "You coming over tonight?" I say.

"Might."

"I'm gone have the babies down in about thirty minutes." I unlatch Tweety's sticky arm from my leg, where she's dozing and sucking her thumb, and carry the bowl of watery soup to the high chair and set it on the tray. Then I pick Rambo up and thread him between the tray and the seat. His scraped knees jam against the tray. He screams. I slap his leg, keep listening to Damon. Sprint down the hall with my hand over the mouthpiece to keep him from hearing Rambo. I hate Rambo and Ronnie and my mama, and come close to hating Tweety trailing behind me into my hot, mildewed bedroom, floored with clothes. ~~Sometimes I'd start picking up and couldn't stop picking up and that's when it was most dangerous for the babies.~~ ^{John} ~~I~~ might even start to hate Damon, who hasn't guessed that I'm smarter than he is, but knows for a fact I'm older by two years. In Cornerville, everybody knows all about you, which is why I hate living here. I hate the night stand Ronnie and I bought for antique, which I doubt. Everything else is this plastic house is plastic.

Even Tweety, now curving into the curve of my hip on the romped-on bed, looks plastic. Like a replica of the Tweety Bird. "Well," I say to Damon, "are you coming over or not?"

"I gotta run by the Delta first?" he says, as if he's stretching, cooling, coming to life again. "Take back these movies I got over the weekend?"

"I'll be here," I say and punch the off button on the phone after he has hung up. Never first.

By ten o'clock I figure he's not coming. I've already got the babies down, had it out with Ronnie on the phone before he left for work. I am not giving up my job at the Delta; Miss Houston might be the nastiest woman in Swannoochee County, but she's a cheap sitter, has never killed a kid yet.

Sitting on the blue-mauvey sofa, I watch tv--a news brief about some crazy mama deliberately driving her car into a lake and drowning her own babies--still half-waiting for Damon in my new khaki shorts and white tee with the tomato-sauce stain like blood leaking from my right nipple. The air conditioner is still humming and rattling, but shows promise of reaching the 70 degree mark before maybe midnight. Or before it quits. A blonde women on "Melrose Place" has a shagged, heavy-banged hairdo I like, but I'm afraid if I cut my frizzed brown hair Damon won't like me anymore. Not that he's ever mentioned my hair, but I'm afraid to change anything that might be what attracted him. I feel warm, knowing Damon the Hunk likes whatever he likes about me.

I get up, shoving aside Tweety's lavender plastic doll stroller, and part the curtains on a window over the front porch, scanning the highway for automobile lights. Spread-eyed lights of Damon's slooped Corvette, specifically. A truck passes, a car, heading east toward Fargo. I open the door and lean out into the damp pine air, checking for lights at my mama's trailer, though I know she won't be done at the Delta, where she's the manager, till after eleven. I'll call her then, see if she's seen Damon, who she doesn't have a bit of use for, as she says. Always harping about something--"Young mamas nowadays don't care about nothing but their hair; you all even look alike."

John I wish I could say she done it because she had a hard life, but
who ain't had a hard life? *and John*

I sit again, watching tv, trying not to watch the gold octagonal clock on the wall between twin gold sconces. A matched set from Home Interiors. Over-priced junk supposed to make you feel creative by mixing and matching fake flowers and pictures of fake flowers. Color schemes depending on "what's in" in decorating for a specific period. I can't afford to buy the latest. I'll be seeing mauve and blue as I draw my last breath.

When I hear Rambo whining, I think at first it's in my head, I've heard it so much. Then his whining turns to crying, and I sit here hoping he's crying in his dream. Or if he's awake and crying and I don't go into his room and let him know I know he's crying, he'll give up and quit. After a few more minutes, when his crying links to crying, I know he's on a roll.

I go down the hall and stand close to the wall at his bedroom door, gazing down at my stocky tan legs that could be what Damon likes best about me, and listen. Rambo cries louder, the sound sitting up now. I have to go in before he wakes Tweety in the crib at the foot of his bed.

He's tugging at his left ear; when he sees me he wiggles from beneath the sheet and drags it from the bed to the door.

"What's going on, Buddy?" I say, walking him in his dirty jockey shorts toward the living room. Sometimes tv puts him back to sleep.

"Ear hurts," he says.

"Go lay down on the sofa," I say, "and I'll warm up some ear oil and get you some Tylenol."

He stumbles ahead of me, crying, while I stop off at the bathroom, turn on the light and stare at my face in the mirror of the medicine cabinet: brown hair pulled back in a bushy ponytail with tendrils fringing my round face; round glasses with wire frames--the in-thing, intellectual--worn for seeing. My lying eyes--could be green, could be brown.

When I get back to the living room with the ear oil, Rambo is stamping, thin and white, in the scatter of toys, stooping and squalling and hugging his stomach.

"Come on," I say, "lay down right here." I sit on the blue sofa with its stained mauve flowers and pat the cushion next to me for him to come.

A knock on the front door makes my heart knock. I walk past Rambo, lost in his pain--ear or stomach?--and open the door. Damon is standing on the porch with one hand propped on the pushed-in metal

siding. When he lets go it phoofts out. He flashes his level white teeth and steps inside: tall and tan in a mint polo with a Ralph Lauren logo, skin Levis, and Nikes white as his teeth.

"Hey, fella," he says to Rambo, "thought you'd be in bed by now?" He reaches out to knuckle Rambo's spiked hair.

Rambo ducks and dashes to the sofa and presses his face into a cushion--knobby spine and blue-vened legs, and those dirty shorts gaping around the leg holes.

"He's got the ear ache," I say to Damon.

"Don't we all?" says Damon and covers his smallish ears.

"I was just about to put some ear oil in it," I say, "then tuck him in again."

I go over to the sofa and sit next to Rambo's burry brown head and twist it so that his left ear is up. He wriggles free, screams tearing with him across the living room and down the hall. I follow, sure he'll wake Tweety this time. He scrambles into the chute between his bed and the wall and sits clutching his knees. Tweety is standing in her crib, watching with those huge blue eyes and that twig of hair that earned her the name. I think that the nick-name "Rambo" didn't take, that Ronnie was stupid for thinking it would take. ~~I didn't never once think that; maybe I still don't.~~ I don't want to say that name again; I don't want Damon to think I'm stupid too.

"Get up, Raymond," I say, coming around the bed with the ear oil for the kid who looks like a Raymond for real.

"I want my daddy," he shrieks and scooches to face the paneled maple headboard with his scrawny legs folded.

"Well," I say, "that's too bad." I hope Damon is listening. "Your daddy's gone to work, ^{dam} so you might as well get up here on the bed and let me doctor your ear."

I crawl across the bed and snatch at his right arm. He yanks free and crooks it over his crying face. Not even cute, now that he's four. I drop the open blue bottle of ear oil and it rolls under the bed.

"Alright, dammit!" I say. "I've had it with you!" I slap at his arm, miss and hit him on the head. Too hard. Sometimes I'd start hitting and couldn't stop hitting and that was when it was most dangerous for my babies. My handprint shines red on his silvery scalp. He scoots to his back on the floor, kicking and screaming. Tweety cries. Dropping to the mattress and staring out through the crib bars.

I crawl across the bed to leave and see Damon leaning in the doorway with his long tanned hands loose alongside. "I'll come back another time, Ginger," he says low.

I follow him to the living room, where the duet of crying filters through the fake-wood walls. "If you'll wait a few minutes," I say, "they'll both be asleep."

"I got a test tomorrow, you know?" He stops at the open front door, turns and spells me with those brown fluid eyes. "But I'll see you around, okay?"

"Okay," I say and watch him swagger across the porch, across the yard, watch his moon-struck body merge with the slooped body of the Corvette. Sure and aloof and free.

Daugharty
I didn't plan it. I didn't think about it, I just did what I did next because I couldn't think of another thing in the world to do. I did it to stop the crying. I did it to live.

I wait the next morning till I figure Mama's up, then call her to say Rambo's got the ear ache, I won't be going to work, I have to take him to the doctor. I doll Tweety up in her blue gingham sunsuit to match her eyes. "Mama crying?" she says, "Bubba crying?" I carry her to the hall and stand her by the living room door. "Stay there, baby," I say, "and don't get dirty."

I go to the bedroom for Rambo, who is knotted on the bed, crying in his new tennis shoes and brown shorts and matching striped shirt I bought at Wal-mart for him to start pre-kindergarten next week. I don't talk to him, just scoop him up and cradle him in my arms down the hall and seek out Tweety in the kitchen playing in the garbage can. Trash all around her fat baby feet. I don't speak to her, I don't say "Ank!" I simply walk on through the living room to the front door and open it to the morning sun and tweeting of the wren's chicks, and carry Rambo out to the car, set him in the back seat and buckle him in, crying. Then go inside again for Tweety, lifting her high in my arms to keep my cheek from touching hers, to keep from inhaling the sweet-stale smell of her sprigged hair. I place her in the baby seat next to Rambo, double-check the hitch.

"Bubba crying?" she says, and I say, "Shh!" and shut the door because I don't want him to stop crying and make me stop crying and change my mind.

But I didn't plan it. Call it something else.

I start the car, brimming with crying, back out of the mowed weed yard onto 94, and drive east past Mama's trailer at the city limits sign, all the way through Cornerville without having to stop at the traffic light at the crossing. Cars and trucks at the Delta on the corner and across the road at the courthouse, but none on the highway, none passing or meeting me as I head toward the Alapaha River bridge shimmering white in the morning slant of sun.

First time, I slow down when I get to the rutted ramp, east of the bridge, looking, checking, losing my nerve. Maybe because Tweety is singing The Lion King song, now and then stopping to say, "Bubba crying? Mama crying?"

I drive on west along 94 a couple of miles, sure I'll keep driving till I get to the doctor in Valdosta, but make a quick u-turn on the cross of gravel at the interseccion of 136. A spin of green pines and gray highway and sun. I hear Rambo's head smack the window--he cries harder, his you-hurt-me cry, which is distinctly different from the earache cry I've been listening to all night. Makes it easier for me to go back to the bridge.

I'll do it this time. I sit high, crank down my window and consider plunging the car down the west bank, this side of the bridge. If I go into Cornerville to turn around, somebody might notice. But when I get to the start of the bridge, I see the west bank is too weedy to tell if it drops off or slopes. I drive on across the bridge, slow so I can look down at the river, at the sloping east bank of sand with a jeep-trail leading from the road ramp through thickets of bamboo and willow and tupelo to the tea-tinted shallows flowing over scalloped sand and the sudden pitch of

black water off the west bank where I've wisely decided not to drive the car down. Somebody might have been hurt.

East of the bridge, on my left, I turn in at the cemetery with its bleached headstones and stark sand, back out and veer toward the shoulder this side of the bridge. Dream-listening to the unreal rumbling of the car down the rutted ramp, west along the jeep-trail toward the calm-flowing water, listening to the crying and the Lion King Song in Tweety's tiny voice. Dream-seeing the concrete pylons on my right with the names of lovers painted the red of my nails. Dream-feeling the car's bucking in and out of gullies, wheels digging into the sand and slowing the car, then rushing toward the rushing river and hurling into the shallows with a great splash of water that slides like honey down the windshield, slow as the car inching toward the dark dropoff, the black water.

Rambo's you-hurt-me cry turns to screaming. I don't look back. I don't look back even when Tweety screams too. I just sit there waiting for the car to inch farther out and under, wondering if it will bog in the sand or float free, and when it does begin to float, to sink, I climb through the window and perch on the ledge, feet resting in the water pooled on the seat, and stare north over the car roof at the river funneling between rocks and cry till the screaming in the car stops.

I don't look at my babies. I swim with the current toward the mussel-shaped sand bar downriver, listening to the car gurgle its last, to the crickets and locusts buzzing. The silence of my own not-crying.

I didn't do it, I didn't plan to do it, I guess it's all right
just to dream it up. I steer the car from the shoulder to the
highway, cross the bridge, and head to the doctor in Valdosta.
They're safe again, till the next time.

Anybody out there knows the whereabouts of my babies, I beg you,
bring'em back to their mama. Babies, if you can hear me, your mama
misses you.