

# "Going Home"

If it didn't rain or grow dark; if ~~the~~ Bobby Van & that woman didn't show up, or if she didn't lose her courage, she would go this evening.

She toddled to the window & ~~pleating~~ <sup>pleating</sup> the ~~curtain~~ <sup>curtain</sup> ~~aimlessly~~, peered out at the sun spread evenly across the luff <sup>five</sup> straw. Nodding a brief okay at the empty drive, she turned back to the lace stenciled room, padding in her light way to the table where her Bible & bedroom slippers waited. She could hear her heart beating in her ears as she gathered the slippers, dropping one with a murmur which ~~broke~~ <sup>broke</sup> ~~with~~ the drone of the refrigerator.

She hurried now, tucking both slippers securely under her arm, bracing the Bible against her heart to appease the thud, thud...thud, thud...thud, ~~thud...thud~~, thud...thud. It'll go... it'll go... it'll go! At the ~~screen~~ screen door she checked again, through the screen, like dusk, for Bobby Van's car which might swerve into the drive. She even listened, adjusting her hearing aid a notch, which brought on a swarm of ~~ominous sounds~~ <sup>ominous</sup> noises: a dastardly ~~mocking~~ <sup>mocking</sup> bird imitating a robin, the clock on the ~~mantel~~ <sup>mantel</sup> rattling of time, and ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> Emma Lou scraping a chair across the front porch, like thunder.

She waited, still, so as not to add to the world's chaos, frantically turning her hearing aid down, eyes pealed on the <sup>suspicion</sup> breeze in the pines. Starting back to her chair, she stopped, turned again & this time made it through the door, one foot, then the other, <sup>like</sup> cat feet tipping. The door's creak

2

produced only a slight grating sound in synchrony with her heart which pummeled at the Bible.

She saw that ~~Miss~~ Emma Lou insisted on sitting on the porch looking out on her gardenias, satisfied like the ~~scents~~ fragrance propelled her rocking, that of her busy little head.

Miss Valley stood rooted to her spot on the porch, thinking, thinking, trying hard to think, a blue car ~~puttered~~ <sup>zoomed</sup> past & she busied herself with stripping dead leaves from her ~~Hand~~ Fern & Biddee plant on the edge of the porch. It passed; she watched it go, heard it die in the distance.

Shuffling on, after much debate, she stepped gingerly down the steps, one step & then another, finding the concrete walk too firm beneath her feet. The rail Bobby Van had ~~braced~~ <sup>tacked on</sup> for her to rest to the yard - only the yard - steadied her. But it was cold, was metal, not wood like the banister at her old house.

Her old house. Her house where she had ~~given~~ birth to ~~eight~~ <sup>seven</sup> children - one of them while Ike Cap <sup>was</sup> drunk on the next bed. It was white - her old house - after the boys got around to painting it. It also swagged cob webs like fish seines from the tall ceilings which she couldn't sweep down. Ike did get her a cone fishing pole for that purpose, though, to his credit. The new ceilings could be swept down with a brush broom, real compact, real cozy, if you could just breathe.

He sold it! Bobby Van, <sup>recounted</sup> ~~recalled~~. Sold my house, he 3  
said. Wasn't worth the \$2,000 he got for it, he said.  
~~Consp they hauled it off!~~  
Ten years ago today. June 6. D-Day! They didn't come  
back Jimmy, Cooley, Buck & Buster. War & men. Then  
& war. Said they died fighting for their country. I can't  
~~remember~~ recall their faces! But I ~~remember~~ recollect their manner!  
That woman took up with Bobby Van, said I was ~~gotten~~  
touched! Blasted woman! Bont the one got shed of my  
house for me. No. Bobby Van was married back  
then. Moved me out & sold it off to the first  
mister come along!

She shuffled to the grass feeling the soles of her shoes  
sink. Hunkering behind the hedge, she sneaked - unaccustomed  
to sneaking, as she was - finding security behind a brood  
juniper. The ant hill she skirted ~~contained~~ was too tall,  
like a mountain ~~was~~ alive with busy men, all hurrying  
toward nothing with their bent burdens of sand. She  
poked her snout face around the juniper, finding herself  
eye to eye with Emma Lon. Bravely she stepped out &  
lifted her face proudly to emphasize her independent spirit,  
to leave no doubt that she was bent on a mission &  
a mission which she was quite capable of, thank you, mam!  
"Miss Vallege, how're you today," said Emma Lon. "Come  
sit a spell & smell my gardenias."  
"Not today. I got a little business to tend to," answered  
Miss Vallege with her ~~eyes~~ <sup>eyes</sup> keeping focus on the sidewalk  
stretched ahead like a silver ribbon in the sun. ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> ~~speaking~~  
~~kept~~

4

"Where you off to, Miss Valley? To spend the night with somebody?" ~~Miss~~ Emma Lou said in her <sup>usual</sup> <sup>or</sup> placative tone.

"Just tending to business," she said, checking her mouth before the words could ~~spill out~~ <sup>spit back</sup>. "Some folks oughta tend to their own."

"Bobby Van know you're out by yourself a-strolling."

"He know!" she answered keeping her eye on the ribbon spooling out as she ~~struggled~~ <sup>strained</sup> to ~~reach~~ <sup>see</sup> the end.

"Now Miss Valley!"

She walked on hearing the voice fade ~~at her back~~ into the crickets at her sides.

The old school gone, she thought, pausing to peer across the street at the vacant lot where a swing set still squatted. ~~The chain~~ ~~Dangling~~ ~~chain~~ ~~held~~ ~~across~~ ~~dangled~~ the <sup>new</sup> seats just scraping the ground, just barely. Beneath them troughs, where little feet had purred & skittered, grew goat spurs. It was gray, & bleak & empty, even the old oak tree bench where she had sat contently grading papers with an eye on ~~the~~ her students at recess.

She thought she smelled her bologna <sup>5<sup>th</sup></sup> sandwich & her apple, but it was some mud in the ditch in front of a ~~brick~~ flat brick she couldn't recognize.

She looked back to see if she was lost & saw her tiny yellow house — her ~~new~~ <sup>new</sup> house — ~~blinking~~ waving in the sun. In the sun that was going lower, she warned herself, looking at it closing behind the pines.

She walked faster than she could, growing tired & the side walk stretched on. Should she turn back she wondered.

5

Just as a car crossed the intersection she thought she ~~recognized~~ <sup>recognized</sup>. She ducked behind a trembling elm & stopped breathing. It passed & she, still holding to the smooth trunk, ~~inched~~ <sup>inched</sup> out, inching along, wondering if she had headed back. No. She saw the intersection again, looked back at the house, seeing that she was over the half way mark which she had not ventured in the ten previous years, the halfway mark which she frequently planned to make. Good she would go on. She would! She would see for herself if ~~the~~ her home was gone. And if it were ... And if it were ... If it were she would ...

The sign near the intersection drew nearer. She couldn't read it yet, the black & white lettering. But she knew it said Crossroads: ~~the~~ Crossroads, Georgia, plain as day. Oh! not the Georgia, of course. They never get that on signs. They knew you knew by the form & pecan & the low flat land. Well, south Ga. anyway & that was the only Ga. she knew.

She thought she hummed "Go on my Mind" from the Lawrence Welk Show. But she didn't, not with her mouth, but it sang on in her soul & made her happy. She forgot being tired - oh! so tired she had been a moment before, but not any more.

The song rang on in her trembling head & she didn't mind the new house like her own, the ~~featureless~~ <sup>featureless</sup> little chortles concealed with cherry paint & the neat, pruned yards where nobody sat under the skinny, purposeless trees.

6  
The Nix heart skipped like her feet - which only shuffled, really, as she thought about the little store where she <sup>at the intersection</sup> bought her salt & flour & bacon, sometimes in the past. It would be there. She knew it would. And all the old men would be perched on their benches in their easy camaraderie, spitting tobacco on the bleached sand, their old bones creaking like the loose planks. Uke! Uke would be there, and old man Eke. Mr. Abe Jennings, he'd be there drinking a sodie water. And the little ~~pick~~ pick'ninner would come up ~~clutching~~ <sup>clutching</sup> pop bottles to their pop bellies. A car came & she didn't care. She even waved, bold as you please. Her boss came up a little late, like a flag on a mail box after the mail has run.

Almost there, almost. The lettering is clear,  
CROSSROADS.

She strained her eyes toward the site of the county store, looking hard left & right at the high way, over the highway back to the corner where concrete flared around a squat brick ~~store~~ building. "Seven-Eleven."

Her heart made the Bible jump too hard, so she lowered it to her side, letting the slippers drop like pebbles behind her. Across the ~~road~~ road, across the road. Another <sup>or</sup> squat building hindered

her view. U.S. Postal Service. A woman —  
a strange woman appeared from nowhere &  
slid through the <sup>door</sup>. She had to duck left to  
right to see behind the traffic that kept  
a steady pace now, like a string pulled then  
the tiny cars. She

After much deliberation, her fingers growing  
numb & her face, she crossed the highway between  
the strings of traffic, moving hastily toward the  
spot behind the post office sandwiched between the  
railroad tracks & the highway.

She ~~found~~ as she reached the side of the  
post office, feeling drained. ~~It was gone~~  
"Utah gone!" she said, waiting like it might  
appear. Still clutching the Bible she ambled  
over to the purple hydrangea on the gray  
dirt where the front porch had been. She  
stooped & dropped one, <sup>sticking the stem</sup> ~~putting it~~ in the button  
hole of her dress. She thought how <sup>dreary</sup> ~~sad~~ that  
the unstoried dirt under the home lay exposed  
to the world. Bending, she dropped the Bible,  
retrieved it & wiped it on her apron, tucking it  
again under her arm & looking at the familiar  
dirt shade on her apron. She sniffed it &  
allowed its dusty scent to fill her nostrils.  
She knelt to it & sifted it through her hands,  
seeing the ~~thing~~ worn gold ring on her hand, her  
wedding band. She removed it & scooped a dirt bowl

placing it in the center & brushing the dirt back over it. She found a crusty penny, turned it over in her hand, shiny polished it with saliva & ~~proceeded~~ placed it in her pocket. A broken piece of crochery, a blue pattern she knew from her kitchen, stuck up from the dirt; she took it folding it in her hands & placed it with the penny, hearing the clank.

She  
consciously

Knowing ~~something~~ ~~there~~ in some inner <sup>held</sup> ~~part~~ of her <sup>body</sup> ~~mind~~ how foolish she appeared, she scratched like a dog, ~~scraping~~ raking the dirt back on each side of her knees finding a leather sole gone ~~back~~ stiff, a ~~rough~~ piece of molibar - maybe from the old chimney.

The dirt grew from orange to gray but still she dug until no more light revealed the treasures there. Treasures she knew were there if only she dug. The dirt was cool & sweet & kind & night didn't matter, nor the thunder in the west. She thought she would stay, but she didn't. Finding herself walking in the right direction toward home she was amazed.

She saw the car lights in the drive & the porch light, even the huge circle. Bobb Van's heavy feet were stamping regularly through the house while he yelled, "Ma! Ma!"

~~When~~<sup>As</sup> he bounded back onto the porch with  
his head down