

Brittany

Driving up the lane, I can see Brittany waving from the front yard. She's my great-niece, a couple of generations removed by blood but closer to looking like me than my own children or grandchildren. Except for those brown eyes and a natural ease and effervescence. I have always either seized up in company or talked to cover my discomfort. Brittany is eleven--not ten and not twelve--neither woman nor child. She is blond and perky and wears fashionable clothes, which seem her mother's idea because she never mentions them, and because she climbs barbed-wire fences in Guess jeans and bundles blackberries in the tail of her Gap shirts. Today she is wearing blue-denim overall shorts with a rose-plaid seersucker shirt. Her mother, a nurse, is at work and can't do much about Brittany shedding her shoes anywhere she takes a notion in my daddy's back-yard fields and pastures. Her toenails are painted pink, and her pretty feet are dirt-pied.

"Granny's gone and her quail's out," she says, meeting me at my car. "We gotta get em back in."

"Granny" is my stepmother, who raises quail for plantation birdshoots. When the plump, speckled birds reach flying-size, grown men set them free to kill. Brittany loves the quail, but accepts their fate with a farmgirl's understanding of life and death.

Hieing a white net on a metal pole toward the various outbuildings and bird pens on the south section of yard, she leads me through heat shimmering like gas fumes off the spotty grass and dirt. She stops and points to the hoop shade of the pecan tree at the east end of the flight pen, and I spy about a dozen bobbing heads camouflaged by dandelions. Brittany tiptoes from sun to shade and begins hazing them toward the half-acre pen, covered top and sides with chickenwire. It is bedded with brilliant white sand that seems to draw the sun.

The birds flock toward the pen, then separate as Brittany gets closer. Raising the net overhead, she sprints and swoops it down over a single bird, and the others flush with a whoosh, flying up, over, and around the pen. Feathers flutter in the blue sky and float down like ash. Brittany squats with one graceful tanned leg angled behind her and cups her left hand over the netted bird, and with her right hand removes the bird from beneath the collapsed net. "Got one, Aunt Janice," she calls. "Come take him to the pen."

Searching for snakes in the high grass, I walk over and take the cheeping bird in both hands. He is warm and bony, smells feverish. I feel his blood pulse. His wings beat against the top of my hands. I go to the flight pen to set him free, while Brittany with her net heads along the north side, in hot pursuit of another clutch of birds bunching along the unpainted board at the bottom of a chicken coop.

west of the pen. "Aunt Janice, hurry. One's standing right over there in the corner." She is after the biggest covey, can't let up to go after a single quail, but can't take her eyes off him either. I hurry slowly along the pen, where inside hundreds of birds move and turn like plowed earth. The air smells acid and ripe. From the open fields over the wire fence come the ^{clean noted} bob-white calls of freed quail. They are ^{pure} everywhere and nowhere. When I get to the west end of the pen, with Brittany on my right, hovering over the frantically chirping covey, I see gray dirt and brown weeds where the wire meets tin, but no bird. "Where, Brittany?" I ask.

"In front of you, Aunt Janice. Get him!" Her covey splits, and birds spirit end to end of the board. Her net swoops to the ground. Got one.

Finally, I spot the fat, sullen quail in the weeds, start toward him, and he flies up. Gone. Brittany's feet fly. Dirt-pied with painted pink nails.

She's a sunray. She's as close to perfect as I'll ever get.