

taped for GPR, January 25, 1998

sent to Southern Living, January 24, 1998

The Sitting

In the summer of 1985 we buried Gransallie on a hill surrounded by slow cattle nosing into rank green pastures.

She is buried among her husband's people, on Staten land, eight miles north of the Georgia-Florida line. Hooked-together homeplaces bracketed by the Alapaha River in the east and Highway 129 in the west. Across the river from our homeplace is the homeplace of the Smiths, my grandmother's people. I don't know how my grandfather got her to cross that river in the first place, but here she lies in the last place--another of those tempermental Statens, guardians of their habits, vanities and ghosts.

Northeast of the cemetery, beyond the line of sweetgums and scruboaks that angle with the branch toward the Alapaha, I could see Gransallie's blue trailer glaring in the noon sun while her preacher read the Twenty-third Psalm.

After the service, on the way to our cars, my cousin Jimmie handed me an ancient black Bible that had been in Gransallie's family for who-knew-how-many generations. The rim of the pebbled cover was split and crumbling, and a spot on the back had worn straight through the Book of Revelations. Or maybe the fiery message of God's coming wrath had burned from the inside out.

Above the frayed hole, inside the back cover, Gransallie had written in her jerky hand the names and death dates of her two sons and her husband. Other white filler pages had been torn out or worn out, but tucked between the tissue pages was a small, square photograph of Gransallie as a girl. I had seen it before, but had forgotten--pictures of the living become precious only after they are dead. In abbreviated story form, Gransallie had also told me about the occasion of the sitting, how her daddy had promised he would have her picture made if she would stop holding to a biscuit all day long.

In the coffee-stain brown picture is a stocky young girl wearing a white princess-style dress that flares to an uneven hem just below her knees. Dark stockings and black shoes with ankle straps. Her light brown hair is parted down the middle and braided behind her ears and set off by a large white bow on back of her head. On her square face is that look of nigging impatience that marked us all. She is standing next to a cane-bottomed straight chair against a backdrop bespeaking of poor country people: unpainted wainscotting on the walls, and undressed planks on the floor.

Now, another copy of the same photo has cropped up in post-card form to haunt and remind us that Gransallie was a person independent of her offspring, that she was a girl before she became our grandmother.

Apparently, this post card was put to more practical use later on, because on back, in pencil, is a message from "Sarah"--post marked Jennings, Florida, January 15, 1915--to Mr. J.W. Smith of Lake Park, Georgia: "Dear Papa, I wont you to bring us some meet and lard to Jennings Sat and leave it at cosin Johns store for we aint got none a tall and John cant get off to come after it."

As surely as "Sarah" speaks of hard times in the penciled message on the post card, "Sallie" speaks of the sitting in the picture--the only picture of her before she became ours.

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I don't know who this man here thinks he is, but I am not about to stand around all day in my good Sunday dress while he has his head stuck under that blanket, trying to figure how to work that thing.

My feet hurt.

I want a biscuit.

I promised Daddy.

I want my picture took.

What if we run out of biscuits and I starve because I gave mine up for a picture?

This man can say "smile" another ten times, but I'm not about to keep smiling; he should have took the picture before my jaws locked.

I want a biscuit.

I want to sit.

Maybe the camera's broke is how come he keeps working under there. If it is broke, and he can't take my picture, then it's not my fault, and I can go back to holding onto a biscuit.

But I want my picture took to give to Cousin Sarah.