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This Day and Age

It was about the same time Gransallie got sick that she started sending money to Oral Roberts.

She had a bad leg. Usually up and about early each morning, making toast in her Sears toaster oven and boiling water for her Postum, Gransallie was now limping about her little blue trailer at ten A.M., wearing yesterday's print cotton frock. The blinds on the facing double jalousies in her living room were still drawn against the spring sun and produced a sick-room light. Her blue-gray hair looked like a dust mop--lint from her bedding and even feathers from her down pillow.

My mother found her that way on Friday morning and sent me over on Saturday to help out. Gransallie was unusually fussy, hopping from her closet-sized bathroom and up the narrow hall, while I was putting on a load of towels, bathcloths and underwear in her washer next to the pink toilet.

Her TV was tuned in to one of those local morning shows that feature chiropractors for dogs and such. I could hear her settle into her chair, which divided the living room from the kitchen, then get up, lope-walking and mumbling, to change the channel on the TV. Gransallie didn't have a bit of use for dogs. While she was up, she came to check on her washer. Had I put in one-half cup of Tide? I had. What about Clorox? she asked, sidling past me. Lifting her skirt and dropping her great white drawers, she wedged into the toilet

space between the bathtub and the washer. Done, she unrolled some tissue and set the roll on the corner of the washer, holding onto it as she heaved herself up. I started out, leaving the lid up on the washer for her to check behind me.

In her dim, wood-panelled bedroom, located between the bathroom and the living room, I made her bed. I fluffed the down pillow that smelled of her stale, unwashed hair--Gransallie was generally clean and smelled of soap. She stood holding to the flimsy door jambs, instructing me on how to make her bed, hospital-style.

Oh my aching leg! She hobbled back up the hall, to the living room, and settled into her chair again, watching a TV news report on President Kennedy. Who she didn't have a bit of use for either.

While the washer went through its spin cycles, the whole trailer shook as if it were being towed up the highway. I was wiping bread crumbs from the kitchen counter tops. Tea grounds were always in Gransallie's doll-house sized sinks, along with her black castiron frying pan.

She was sitting with her bad leg propped up on a pillow I'd arranged in one of the kitchen chairs, at relative peace now, reading her daily Bible devotion. The toenails on her propped foot were yellow and grained but clipped square and neat. I'd opened the blinds and spindled sunlight lay across the white tiles of the living room floor. In the drifting dust squiggles, I saw a tiny white feather from her hair.

I was almost done, almost free to spend the rest of my Saturday sunning and listening to my red transistor radio on the low flat section of roof over the screened porch of our ranch-style house. I went into the pink bathroom with its silver-spangled mirror on the

left wall and began taking clothes from the washer on the right and heaping them into the red plastic laundry basket. The white towels, bathcloths, and underwear were clumped with mushy flakes--either undissolved soap powder or paper. Yes, paper. Stuck to the bottom of the perforated, blue speckled washer tub was a soggy long irregular triangle of cardboard. I took it out, looked at it, tossed it into the trash can between the toilet and the bathtub, then picked up the basket of wash and headed out the hall door facing the bathroom.

Good to be out in the warm piney air where blue jays streaked from the ivy-draped oak in Gransallie's yard to the surrounding pine saplings. I carried the clothes around the south end of the trailer, to the clothesline in her backyard with its neat rectangle of mowed smut grass that defined Gransallie's yard. From there I could see the sun glinting on the brown roof of our green house in the middle of the circular dirt lane.

While I hung towels, Gransallie watched through the west window. In a minute, she cranked open the jalousie and yelled, "Shake 'em, honey. Shake the wrinkles out." She closed the window, sat again, reading again.

I shook a towel and the blue air filled with flurries of white. Like snow. I shook another and it snowed harder. All the way up the line, I shook and hung the clothes and when I was done, I looked back, and it came to me--Gransallie had knocked the roll of toilet tissue into the washer.

I took in the clothes I'd just hung and rewashed them, hung them out again and spent my Saturday sunning time raking Gransallie's backyard. She had pulled her chair up to the window and clacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and shook her head.

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On Sunday morning, Gransallie got up, turned on the TV and started watching Oral Roberts. Since she'd retired as a practical nurse in St. Augustine, Florida, and moved back to our South Georgia farm to live, she had never missed going to the Methodist Church in Statenville.

Monday morning, on my way to meet the school bus at the end of the lane, I mailed her first check to Oral Roberts in the mailbox at the highway.

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On Wednesday, I stayed out of school and rode with her to see her doctor in Jacksonville, Florida. I was fifteen and had my learner's permit and could drive with an adult in the car, but she wouldn't let me. Anybody'd wash the toilet tissue with the clothes didn't have any business behind the wheel of a car.

We left early, and she drove slow, east up the long straight stretch to Fargo, then south, southeast, through the North Florida woods. Two hours of lonesome roads and crickets whirring in the flowering weeds along the roadsides, and suddenly we were caught up in fast city traffic. All zipping around Gransallie's banged-up blue Chevy--BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP. She talked to them, all of them, about their driving, till we got to the arched bridge over the St. John's River, which seemed to require her utmost concentration because as soon we reached the end of the bridge we would have to make a quick exit to

the right. On the left side of the expressway, straight ahead, the stacked graystone medical building towered above the glittering water which was the same sun-leached blue as the sky.

That was not my first trip through the heart of Jacksonville with Gransallie at the wheel--I'd already seen her through two cars---so I scooched low and braced my tan knees on the dash and held to the strap above my door. Picking up speed on the downgrade of the bridge, she missed her exit--BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP--and had to take the next exit and meander back along the side streets and beneath the six lanes of frantic traffic--SCHONG SCHONG SCHONG. Finally, she whipped into a parking lot between a boxy maroon Ford and an orange VW Bug.

She gathered up her pink dress cardigan and her black triangular pocketbook and got out. The fact that she was carrying her winter pocketbook and not her white spring one was proof she wasn't herself. Proof maybe that she expected to die and no longer had to worry about her reputation. Like her sending money to Oral Roberts and no longer having to worry about her soul. Yet, here she was, going to a doctor after she'd already made her first installment to Oral Roberts for healing her leg.

A short, middle-aged man with Paul Newman eyes sauntered across the black-top lot toward Gransallie's car. He had on a white shirt, low-riding black pants and white bucks. Gransallie was holding to the hood of her car, waiting for me to help her across the parking lot to the tall gray building next block over.

"Good day, ladies," he said, coming around the front of the maroon Ford. When he got to Gransallie's car, not two feet from where she was standing with her back to him, he slapped the dented hood, then kicked the left front tire. "I gotta hand it to you, granny.

Ain't everybody'll drive around in a ole trap like this, not in this day and age." He laughed, hitched up his pants-- "Anybody get hurt?" She turned, glared at him, grabbed my arm and set off walking between the double rows of parked cars.

He followed. "Just take your time, look em over, and I'll take what you'll give me." His lips were flattened out in an eternal grin.

Gransallie didn't have a bit of use for men, unless it was Ike Eisenhower or John Glen--a man who had done something first or something last or something worth remembering. "You wasting your time, buster," she said without turning. "I've give all I'm gone give for a while. I ain't that bad off."

Suddenly she added a proud little giddyup to her gait and yanked down on my arm. "One of them," she said low. "Florida's eat up with nuts. Just keep walking."

The man stopped in front of a celery and rust Buick and placed one white buck on the bumper. "Now this here's a car built like a tank. You run into em with this, granny, and you gonna drive off without a scratch."

I was helping Gransallie up the street curb to the clipped green grass where the shadow of the tall building heaped under the noon sun. I looked back and saw the man still standing there, scratching his sandy head, and then behind him, above the door of a small triangular building on the other side of the lot, I spied a sign that read KEN'S USED CARS.