

Sape arbor
Bower
shelter

nape/neck

green curls like the
side lady's red.

P. 15
revised
petting
on
shamp

Once Upon A Summer

~~P. 15~~
in look that said
what

I was just six and Jim was eight, that summer, and it seemed I was always looking up when I wasn't looking at my big brother. This particular morning, I was looking at the steam sighing up from the tired train to form another misty cloud in the blue sky. Jim was looking back. He said, "I believe that's our daddy walking behind us." And sure enough, there was a short man light-stepping along the straight dirt road between the white upstairs depot and a tiny white house looked like the place we once went with Granmama Sellers to vote for a governor who would do away with colored people. Along the road shoulders, in front of all the pretty, painted houses, cut grass and weeds dried in the pale sun. Grasshoppers clicked and hopped and shied away from our shoes, and the man behind us walked, staring down at the shy grasshoppers. He looked ashamed, or like he didn't want anybody to see him following us. He had on baggy green pants and a blue-striped shirt and his hair was brown--what was left of it. The warm air smelled of hay and creosote. I remembered him only by how he walked.

A big woman with a big voice was talking to the train man, who handed her down a white canvas bag of mail. A brown dog with a twitchy tail was barking. Two old men on the store porch, other side of the road, said hey to us; we said hey and kept walking and looking

back. Jim was half-dragging, half-lifting the brown suitcase with our few clothes, but all we owned. The suitcase was what was so heavy. Slow-going along the road between the depot and the crossing, up ahead. Across the way we could see Granmama River's big white house just like our mother told us when she put us on the train in Valdosta early that morning. A daddy mocking bird with a striped paddle tail was chasing a crow in the sky above the sun-shot tin roof, while the mama bird with a worm in her beak was flying level as water toward a pomegranate tree in the front yard. A nest of baby birds was wheezing like fire doused with water.

Jim had stopped and set the suitcase down in the ragged shade of an oak, still looking at the man he called our daddy, who had stopped too. Standing there. Jim picked up the suitcase and set out walking in the sun again.

"Mama said he might not have anything to do with us," I said.

"She's just mad cause he hadn't been by to see her new baby," Jim said.

"And because we got put in jail," I said.

"Shh!" he said low. "Mama told us not to tell that."

Going to jail was the most fun thing I'd ever done, but I couldn't think about the baby without recalling the Sunday evening she was born, about a month before, and how I shot myself in the eye with Jim's cap pistol and couldn't tell any grownups cause they were so busy operating on Mama and it was raining and I was blind for the rest of the day. Thank the Lord, I could see now. To test my eyes, I got a good look up the crossroad: green pines, white sand, a colored man in black, knee-high rubber boots lope-walking toward one of the

gray shacks. I covered up my eyes, then took my hands away and the man was gone.

"I bet Granmama Rivers sent him to the depot to meet us," said Jim.

The rested train tooted twice, took in a deep breath, and then we both watched our daddy walk off through the woods on our right before the train chooged up the tracks and we crossed the road. Thank the Lord.

###

Jim had to hold me around the waist and lift up for me to wash my hands at the watershelf on Granmama River's back porch. Then he turned for me to lean and dry on the stiff white towel hanging from a nail on the wall. I could see myself in the square mirror, my blistered face and blond curls. "I'm bout to drop you, Sissy," he said, "hurry." Smells of sweet soap and brassy water and the sour mud of the run-off in the patch of red calla lilies below. But best of all was the smell of stewing meat coming through the screened door to the kitchen, behind us. Spoons jangling on pots and jingling in bowls and katydids ringing. It was almost dark, but across the raked dirt yard you could still see the grapevine with its shelter of green leaves where Granmama sent us to play till suppertime. In the left corner of the white picket fence stood a red brick well with a tin top where we couldn't play because we might fall in and drown, and on the other side of the backyard was a clothesline and a big iron pot with glazy sticks of half-burned wood where we couldn't play because we might get dirty. On the wall behind the watershelf, between the long hall and the kitchen, two shiny washtubs hung side by side, and

you could walk up and bang on them and the whole humming-quiet house of old people and clocks ticking would come alive. But every time I got a good rhythm going on the tubs that afternoon, Jim would make me quit.

He stood me on the wide-board floor.

"Thank the Lord," I said when I could breathe.

"You gotta stop that, Sissy," Jim whispered. "Granmama Rivers and them's gone think you're crazy and he'll send us back to Mama."

But I said it again at supper because the old sicklady with young red hair down her back said it when she asked the blessing. Granmama with her sandy hair done up in a bun sat at the other end of the long table. She kind of smiled first time I said it. The second time she said, "That'll do," and passed the blue bowl of speckled butterbeans to our little uncle in a white shirt, across from us, and he said thanks. No sound save for the fan grinding and churring behind the sicklady's chair. Granmama Rivers was cutting up some of the boiled gray meat for me and Jim, and her thin lips dipped down at the corners. She looked scary not-smiling.

"We went to jail one time," I said.

Granmama Rivers stopped cutting and looked up through her glasses at the old sicklady with young red hair who said, "It's as much his fault as hers. Pass the corn please, Little Ned."

Granmama Rivers passed a white plate with cut-up meat to Jim, sitting on her left, and said, "Pass this to your babysister, and y'all sit up straight."

"May I ask what for?" said the sicklady and cut her pale green eyes at us.

"Not at the table, no," said Granmama Rivers.

The fan sang and Little Ned said, "Well, may I ask for how long we'll be suffering Watson's strays?"

"Suffer the little children to come unto me," Jim said to show what he'd learned at Sunday school, which our other granmama took us to once a week. But Jim looked mad and everybody else looked shocked and I said, "Thank the Lord," because if he could say Sunday School stuff I could too and if I didn't say it we might not get any more stew beef which I loved.

###

Next day, we saw him and the mocking birds again. I don't know if it was the same birds but they looked the same and they would swoop down squawking over the top of the grapevine as I stood looking up through the lapped green leaves and woody vines. This time, the mama and daddy both were looking for worms to feed their babies.

Jim said, "Look," and pointed at the back of the white house with door-sized windows, and I saw our daddy down on his knees by the board doorsteps, feeling behind them for something.

"What's he doing?" I said.

"Shh." Jim put his hand over my mouth. The snuff cans and string Granmama Rivers gave us to play with were in the shadow-flocked dirt at my feet and I kicked one--TINK--to make him let go.

Our daddy turned his head slow, looked at the grapevine, but he couldn't see us, I don't guess, for all the leaves. Then he pulled out a flat brown bottle from under the house, opened it and drank from it, still on his knees.

"It's his whiskey," whispered Jim.

"Like the kind Mama made and we went to jail for?"

"No," said Jim, "he buys his from a store."

"Will he go to jail for that?"

"I don't think so."

"I bet he would if Granmama Rivers caught him and turned him over to the law like Granmama Sellers did Mama."

The mocking birds flapped their wings, squawked, one flew. Our daddy drank on his knees. Capped the bottle. Stuck it behind the doorsteps again.

"Why is he hiding it then?" I said.

"Shh."

I could smell the smut from the wood and ashes under the washpot, the damp dirt and rotted leaves under the grapevine. A train whistle sounded from way off.

Our daddy stood, brushed the dirt from the knees of his green britches. He hitched them higher and went up the doorsteps and on to the back porch with the two shiny washtubs. Then left, through the screen door to the kitchen. It ^{screaked} squeaked when he opened it and slammed when he shut it.

"Stay here," said Jim and ducked low and ran fast from under the shady grapevine^s and across the sunny dirt yard. When he got to the doorsteps, he dropped to his knees and crawled behind them, under the house and out the other side, near the bed of red lilies. Still ducking low, he ran back to the grapevine ^{grapevine leaves} carrying our daddy's whiskey bottle wrapped in the tail of his light blue shirt. He reached up into the leaves and tucked the bottle into a pocket of vines like a basket.

Rumble, clack and whistle of the passing train. It seemed to make the sunshine shake between the house and the grapevine. The daddy mockingbird waved his paddle tail and flew up and straight over the tin roof with a worm in his beak.

###

After dinner, I got homesick and scared we might not get any more food, and Jim let me sit on his lap till I got too heavy, and it was raining on the tin roof of the dim little sideroom where Granmama Rivers let us sleep together in the brown iron bed. She wouldn't let us play in the rain because it might start lightening, she said, but it didn't. Mama told us one time about our daddy, before he was our daddy, sitting with her in Granmama Sellers's parlor and playing the old windup Victrola and Granmama Sellers came to the door and said, "Mr. Rivers, I'd rather you didn't play that and it raining--it might attract lightening," and he said, "Mrs. Rivers, I wonder if it would be all right for me to whistle." Mama said he was real smart--"An ace mechanic," when he wasn't drinking. And I knew that was how come Jim to hide his bottle in the grapevine but not how come Mama who hated his whiskey to make moonshine and Granmama Sellers to turn her in to the law and all of us having to go to jail where the sheriff brought us light bread and weinies and beans because we hadn't eaten in I don't know when. I stopped crying. I thanked the Lord.

When I woke up the sun was shining outside the big, watery window over our bed and I could see Jim under the grapevine playing with the snuff cans and string. He had tied them to the vines overhead, and I could see the brown bottle, a glister, in the sunned wet leaves.

I went out to the hall where the tall clock groaned and ticked and heard Granmama Rivers and the sicklady and Little Ned talking and rocking on the front porch. I could smell the leftover peas and cornbread in the kitchen. I went out on the back porch and started to bang on the wash tubs but went on through the screen door to the kitchen instead. Knowing in my heart I was about to steal and asking God to forgive me ahead of time, but doing it anyway, same as I did with our neighbor lady's cherry tomatoes in Valdosta. Picked everlast one of them from the bush growing along the path to her outhouse. A white tablecloth was spread over the bowls and platters of food leftover from dinner, like the Lord's Supper at church where we could get just a little jig of grapejuice they called blood and a tab of cracker they called body. I lifted the cloth and peeked under to the white light and picked up a wedge of cornbread, let the cloth down and eased out the screen door, across the porch and down the doorsteps, and there was our daddy kneeling in the sandy trench of water where the rain was still dripping off the tin eaves and making dimples. His head was under the house. He pulled back and sat on his heels and looked at me with his spoked gray eyes, and I handed over the cornbread and headed for the grapevine.

###

On Sunday we didn't go to church with Granmama Rivers and our little uncle. We stayed home and kept the old sicklady with young red hair down her back. I guess we kept her because she didn't keep us. She just sat on the front porch and rocked. She was wearing a thin blue duster over a blue gown and blue slippers on her narrow white feet. She smelled of dusting powder and soap. She was combing her long red hair with a big pink comb. The sun was glaring down on the

sandy yard and road, snicking on the tin roof of the porch. The rosebushes in the dirt circle by the picket gate were wilted. Red petals on the dirt like blood of the two chickens after the colored man wrung their necks the day before. He told me and Jim we were the timidest white younguns he ever saw because we ran when the broke-necked chickens started flopping about the yard. So I told him that my granmama and the governor were going to do away with him.

The sicklady parted her hair in back and pulled half over her left shoulder and the other half over her right shoulder and combed slow, not even touching the back where it was webbed on her neck. She was Jesus-pale and had what looked like bruises under her eyes because of "the operation" they said she had.

I sat in the chair next to the sicklady, watching her comb and rock and trying not to think about the chicken Granmama Rivers had fried before she left for church. The sicklady's ankles were white with tiny veins like blue flowers but didn't look operated on. Mama's stomach had to be cut open to get the baby out, Granmama Sellers said, the day I got shot in the eye with Jim's cap pistol.

"Run play," the sicklady said. "But see you don't get dirty; the preacher's coming for dinner."

I was ascaed to go because I would probably steal a piece of that chicken. I was ascaed I'd get dirty. And what I really wanted to do was comb her hair where she couldn't reach in back with that big pink comb. "Where did you get operated on?"

She stopped combing, stared at me with those weak green eyes. "Where's your brother?" she said.

"Out guarding our daddy's bottle of whiskey."

"What?"

"He's under the grapevine."

"Well, honey," she said, looking out at the road and the words slisking between her small white teeth, "somebody better guard the bottle. Because if Watson comes in lit while the preacher's here, somebody's gonna catch the devil."

"Can I comb the back?"

"I guess." She handed me the pink comb. "If you'll go play."

She flipped her long red hair back and sat forward and I walked around behind her chair and set the comb into the thick red hair. It smelled like old paper. I pulled down but the comb wouldn't move and her head snapped back and I let go but the comb stayed.

"Now you've got it hung in my hair."

I tried to pull it out but about a zillion red hairs like copper wire were wound around it.

"Let me," she said and reached up and moaned and put her arms down on the chair arms, but not before I saw the operation up the sleeve of her duster. One whole breast chopped off and in its place more stitches than hair around the comb. I ran to the edge of the porch and jumped down into the nandinas and scooted under the porch, listening to her yelling for me to come get the comb out, till she got quiet and I saw Granmama River's white Sunday shoes coming up the brick walk with a set of black preacher shoes.

###

He is carrying me cradled in his arms and it is raining and I bury my face in his wet shirt where I can see through to his heart ticking like ice when it thaws. He smells like cheese.

I hear mama up ahead saying, "Thank the Lord," and I look up and see rain falling from the muddy sky, and his walking turns bumpy and bounces me. I see his upside-down face, clear through his smoked glass eyes. I look where he's looking, to see what he sees--an old unpainted shack set among the green pines, and then we are inside and I am down on the dusty floor with cracks I can poke my fingers through and touch the rat must. My pretty dark mama is banging a board to the wall with a brick she pried from the leaning fireplace where smut looks like crow feathers and rain drips and ticks like his heart. The board falls, I laugh. She hammers it again and it stays and she says "thank the Lord" again, and again when he comes in with six red-fin pikes, like eels, threaded onto the stem of a palmetto fan. She cooks the fish in the fireplace and makes grits and says "thank the Lord" again and we eat and then Jim and I sleep on a straw bed in one corner of the room and our mama and daddy in the other corner, and I say thank the Lord too because like Granmama Sellers always says, if you don't thank the Lord for everything He might not be so quick to give next time you ask.

###

"Thank the Lord," I said and bit into the crunchy fried chicken leg and the preacher across the table laughed, so everybody laughed with him, all except for Jim. I said it again, to make them laugh, and so I could eat more without them caring. I had never had fried chicken before. The preacher said I was precious, and Jim said shut up to me and Granmama Rivers said "You're excused" to Jim and he got up and stamped out the screen door, slamming it.

Granmama Rivers wagged her head, and our little uncle in a black bow tie said, "Preacher, these children are a trial," and laughed and the preacher said back to our little uncle, "'Suffer the little children to come unto me,'" and added, "You folks are certainly abiding by the Word." He talked so loud you had to hold your ears.

Granmama Rivers told me to put my hands down and passed the bowl of field peas and snaps to the sicklady with the pink comb wound in the back of her hair, and she dipped some and passed the blue bowl on to the preacher. He set the bowl down by his plate and dipped some peas and passed it on to Little Ned, and then forked a piece of chicken from the heaped-high platter and handed it across the table to me. "The pullybone," he said loud. "When you get done eating, we'll pull it and make a wish."

"Thank the Lord," I said and laughed.

"That'll do," said Granmama Rivers, eyeing me cold and started talking about who-all had been sick in Howell, and about the good rain we had last week and I thought about me sitting on Jim's lap, homesick during the rain, and felt bad that he'd been sent outside without his chicken, knowing I'd eat it anyway, as soon as I was done with this piece. I didn't want to make a wish with the preacher.

"Eat some of your potatoes, child," said Granmama Rivers.

"She's precious," said the preacher.

"Yes. Isn't she?" said the sicklady with the big pink comb wound in her hair.

I heard somebody walking across the back porch and turned, hoping it'd be Jim, but it was our daddy. He stopped at the door and peered through the screen with his hands each side of his head.

Granmama stopped talking, put her fork down and sucked in her breath.

I looked at the sicklady. "Somebody's gonna catch the devil."

"You're asking for it," she said with a look that said ~~for~~ what.

Granmama Rivers said, "Watson, come on in and eat."

He opened the door, stepped inside, light-stepping it to the table, and sat in Jim's chair between me and Granmama Rivers. He smelled like whiskey and sweat. His pants were soft with dirt and stains and his brown hairy arm next to my plate was briar-scratched and bloody. He leaned over Jim's plate with the drumstick on it. "What's doing, preacher?" he said in a slurred voice.

"How are you, Watson?" the preacher boomed.

"Feeling no pain, preacher, feeling no pain, I won't lie."

"We were just making over your little girl there," said the preacher and nodded toward me holding the gnawed ~~withbone~~ *ribbone*.

I wished Jim would come get me.

He didn't even look at me, mumbled something, then leaned into the table like he was going to sleep and turned over Jim's glass of iced tea. Granmama Rivers got up and went to the counter under the window facing the grapevine, got a dishrag and came back. Mopping around the plate and under his dingy elbows.

"Oops," he said, about five minutes too late.

"You may be excused, Watson," she said.

I reached over and picked up Jim's drumstick and handed it to him to take out with him. He looked me dead in the eye and said, "Whose little girl is this?"

###

Monday morning, and Granmama sent word to me and Jim that we'd be catching the train home the next day.

Our little uncle ducked down under the grapevine and squatted to talk. The sun through the leaves made running shadows on his bald head. "Your Granmama's not feeling real good, so she's gonna send y'all home tomorrow." He reached up and swung one of the snuff cans hanging overhead and it hit another one and tinkled and the next one tinkled. "That's cute," he said. "Your're both real smart and cute, but Granmama's got her hands full."

Still ducking, he turned and walked out into the full sun, where he stood and wiped one hand over the top of his head before going inside.

I started to cry because I was afraid we wouldn't have anything to eat when we got home. Jim called me a cry baby and sat on the dirt with leaf shadows running over him like some magic spell passed on with the news from our little uncle. I sat down beside him.

In a few minutes, we saw our daddy come walking down the doorsteps, carrying a tall box with orange stripes. He looked pale, sick and squat. He went over to the washpot and set the box down a little piece off from it and went up the doorsteps again and took down one of the shiny washtubs and carried it out to the black pot and set it down ringing right next to it. Then he went to the raft of firewood under the kitchen window and stacked split pieces high in his arms and cradled them over to the washpot and began poking them under and around till the pot looked like some crazy black spider with wood legs. Another trip to the stacked wood under the kitchen window, and he came back with a handful of fat-litard splinters,

stuck all but one into the firewood arrangement under the pot, took a box of matches from his pocket and struck one and stuck it to the tip of the tarry red wand in his hand and the flame bowed and swayed like a jeweled elf and black smoke furled up into the blue sky. He was pale and sweating before the fire caught, but when it caught, it outshone the sun.

Next he went to the well on the north end of the yard and took the metal bucket from the brick ledge and dropped it down inside. The chain rattled, the teackle squealed, the bucket bonged against the brick walls and settled on the water with a hollow splash. Hand over hand, he hauled on the chain till the bucket, brimful of sunfares, showed over the rim of the well. He unhooked the chain and set the bucket on the ledge, then with one arm out and shadowed like a stickman's on the bright sand, he caught it by the bail and lugged it over to the washpot and dumped it. And again. And again. Till the pot danced with sunfares. Then he sprinkled the white soap powder from the orange-striped box into the steaming pot and the sunfares quit dancing.

I crept to the edge of the grapevine and stood on the leaf-stenciled border of shade and watched while he filled the washtub in full sun. Then stepping quick and light across the raked dirt, he went up the doorsteps again, across the porch and down the hall and was back in a flash with a wicker basket of clothes. The sash of my pink striped dress Granmama Sellers made for me was dangling over one side.

Jim stepped up beside me, watching as he set the basket down by the pot brimming with bubbles now, so close it looked like the flames were licking at the wicker, then he went to the porch for the long wood paddle Granmama Rivers called her battling stick.

But when he got to the bottom step, stick before him like a shepherd's staff, he looked right at us. And then he spoke to us for the first and last time I remember: "Your granmama wants y'all to come help wash these clothes to take home tomorrow."

"From the lanes were dandy
in bubbles"

from the dandy

to dandy Bob

and copy to her