

Crimes Against Nature

If you're going to Big Mama's, I says to Roman, you better be ready to eat. That's what they do there. My whole whopping family. I laugh. Me, nervous cause you never can tell how Roman, being from a little family and his daddy a hot-shot lawyer, might take the Walkers. Well, if he is so set on marrying me, he bout as well get used to us. But still and all, me and him's liable to walk in on a hornets' nest, cause Mama and two of her sisters--what my daddy calls "the clan"--are on the outs with the oldest sister, my Aunt Wannie Mae. Course, they are just as apt to be in a loving mood this morning, depending on which side of the bed they got up on, and generally you can count on that--inside the family, that is--and they'll fight a outsider says ary word against one of the Walkers.

This business going on amongst the sisters has something to do with my Cousin Doug, Aunt Wannie Mae's boy, who is home from New Orleans for a visit. He's been gone for the past many years, and I'm beginning to catch on that you can come to be a outsider quick once you leave Swanochee County, blood-Walker or not. Anyhow, from what I been able to gather from listening to Mama on the phone with Aunt Lovie and Aunt Rosie, they're about half-sorry for Aunt Wannie Mae about this new business with Cousin Doug, but mad with her too for

taking advantage of Big Mama, which is what started it all in the first place and what inspired Aunt Rosie, who works for the sheriff's department, to run a check on Cousin Doug.

Course, Roman don't have a inkling nothing is going on, but from the time we drive up and I see my mama and Aunt Rosie and Aunt Lovie huddled on Big Mama's front porch, I know which side of the bed they got up on. And I figger Aunt Wannie Mae ain't come over yet but her ears are burning in her new blue trailer on the other side of the picket fence; though for a fact, she ain't no prize, has not lived a pure life and has been a example for me--got pregnant and had to get married, got divorced and moved off to Atlanta and went broke from gambling and had to come home. I'm getting a education--Early Childhood--and I'm saving myself for my wedding night.

Daddy is done propped up in one of the rockers on the other end of the porch and that is a bad sign. I know he's come to Big Mama's for Sunday dinner just for me, but he is doing me a disservice and don't know it. I go to itching evertime he comes around the Walkers. Course, he has a lot of respect for Big Mama, that's how he puts it. Ain't a lazy bone in that woman's body. She works at the sewing factory over on Troublesome Creek and keeps the rest of the Walkers in pocket change (Daddy talking), feeds them good on Sundays so they can get by the rest of the week. I've seen her drop her drawers and pee in the backyard with the rest of 'em, but if Daddy ain't, I ain't saying nothing. Reckon that's the Walker in me coming out: standing up for my family.

"Y'all get out and come on in," Big Mama hollers from the hallway, and us done out of Roman's red Corvette and up to the doorsteps. She wipes the backs of her rough hands on her navy knit britches.

"Hey, Big Mama," I say and step up to hug her. "This here's Roman, my boyfriend." I come in a wan of saying "new boyfriend."

Roman, long-legged, sandy-headed and sharp, steps around me and sticks out his hand to shake, but she hugs him up to her big fluffy bosom, then holds him off by the shoulders, staring him in the face. "Sally got her a pretty one this time," she says and cackles. Not her fault; she don't have no way of knowing Roman is jealous.

Then here comes Mama and them to hug him too, Aunt Lovie, skinny as a tadpole and her asmoking, and Mama broad-arsed like Big Mama, acting like she loves Roman to death, when this very morning she told me how uppidy he is. He just stands there till they let go and then gazes at their big breasts, maybe figgering that's where I got mine from. In my health class at college, we been learning about nursing babies, like that's all breasts are for, but if that's the truth, Roman ain't been weaned yet.

Daddy eyes us all. You can tell he thinks Roman's the trick, him being from a rich family, by the way he smiles and rears back in the rocker with his feet up on the porch post. He's done seen Roman this morning, so he don't speak, just sets there with his silver hair shining. Mama's been after him to get some Grecian Formula, get rid of that gray. And he ain't no old man for sure, just grayed early like the rest of the Hughes, which Mama calls high-class trash.

Big Mama is going on back up the hall to see to her cooking, and it not but eleven o'clock, you can already smell her baked ham and fried chicken.

"Here she comes," says Aunt Lovie to Aunt Rosie, and they gaze off across the shady dirt yard at Aunt Wannie Mae's trailer in the corner of the cow pasture. She toddles down the doorsteps and heads towards Big Mama's old farm house, her gold heeled mules bogging in the mowed bermuda grass. The sun beats down on her burgundy hair, bringing out the pink, and glances off her gold bracelets and necklaces and earbobs and rings. All dolled up in pancake makeup and rouge spots and drawn-on eyes, wearing a silky red jumpsuit done went out of style and come back in. Her big as one of the liveoaks, sucked in with her breasts hiked.

Aunt Rosie, dressed like a Christian on Saturday, says, "Poor olething, what she don't know."

"Her own boy!" says Mama.

Me and Roman goes over and sets in the porch swing, and till yet he ain't said a word.

When Aunt Wannie Mae gets to the picket gate, Mama and them go to scattering out, Aunt Lovie filing her fingernails and leaning on the post by the doorsteps, and Mama, in new blue jeans, flopping in a rocker and sending off whiffs of Avon Gardenia.

Aunt Rosie prances her butt on off up the hall like she ain't into this.

"Well," says Aunt Wannie Mae, "looks like the Geeks have gathered." She brushes her gold shoes on the doorsteps, gratefruit bosoms wobbling. Don't no more know what Geek means than the rest of

Daugharty 4

us. You can tell Roman does though by the way he sucks in. And then I catch on that where the rest of us is done used to Aunt Wannie Mae's long pointy red fingernails and her smutty eyes, he ain't.

"Wannie Mae," Mama says cold, to show us she ain't cozying up to her sister while at the same time keeping on her good side.

"Where's Cousin Doug at?" I say and get up to give Aunt Wannie Mae sugar.

Aunt Rosie either burps or groans. Filing her nails to the quick.

"Showering off." Aunt Wannie Mae is taking in Roman, who is glowing like a new blonde doll. "He'll be on."

"This here's my new fellow, Aunt Wannie Mae." Oh, shit! I said new. "Roman Rawls."

"You from around here, Rawls?" goes Aunt Wannie Mae, shaking his hand and jangling bracelets, necklaces and earbobs that dangle to her boobbs.

"Valdosta," he says, setting up with his long fingers laced over his crotch--horney as usual.

"We met at college, Aunt Wannie Mae," I say.

"One of them, huh?" She teeters up the hall in her gold heeled mules, old floorboards just acreaking.

Aunt Rosie watches her go and waits till she's good and out of hearing distance before she speaks. "Some things we just better off not telling."

Daugharty 5

"Some things you ain't s'pose to be knowing neither," says Daddy, getting up and unbogging the walnut birthday belt I give him from his gut. "Like what's a matter of police records." His old gray gabardine pants look funny with the fancy belt.

She eyes him mean as he passes down the doorsteps to the sunny brick walk. "Hot already," he says and ambles out to his rust-patched pickup, which looks sorry and sad next to Roman's red Corvette. He lifts a long streaked watermelon from the back of his truck, ambles to the porch again and sets it on the edge. It is pale green with a whitish patch on the bottom and dark green streaks like rickrack sewed end to end. Then he walks off around the high-floored house where you can hear chickens clucking and my little cousins squealing. Birds tweet in the pecan trees off the bleached sandy lane, and way off, a cow lows. Could be behind the cypress swamp on the north end of the pasture or east of the briarberry patch where

sun fairies are dancing over berries turning from red to black. In the sun-blared sky a plane drones, blending with the locusts in the liveoaks.

I am dying to know what is going on, but not in front of Roman. "You wanta go for a walk?" I say to him.

When we get back from Thistle Hammock, where Roman nearly bout tore my new sundress off, Cousin Doug is smoking in the porch swing with his legs crossed and his white socks shining, and Daddy and Uncle Bum are setting on the other end of the porch, talking low. I hug Cousin Doug and introduce Roman, and Roman sets down beside him while I go on and hug Uncle Bum. He is wearing them awful beach knee

Daugharty 6

britches with splashes of red flowers and a neon green shirt, which you could tell if you knowed him is Aunt Rosie's idear of dressing him up for Sunday; generally he's got on a pair of old jeans that ride low on his skinny butt below his gut. He has nappy white hair like wool and glittery blue eyes.

"How you Uncle Bum?" I say and stoop to love his neck, and Daddy's red face turns redder. Not my fault--that Uncle Bum business. Daddy always calls him a bum and I picked it up when I was little. Now, I can't no more quit calling him Uncle Bum that I can quit calling Daddy Daddy or Mama Mama. It's branded in my skull under manners, along with Mr. or Mrs. for anybody older.

Then I go on back and set in the swing between Cousin Doug and Roman, glad to have at least one man Roman ain't jealous of.

Out walking, we'd just got into it over me saying new fellow when I'd introduced him to Aunt Wannie Mae, and I'd swore up and down

it was just a saying like old. You know: old house, old woman, old place. Course, we made up, hot as Roman is. I know how to play him, but I'm losing ground--saving myself for my wedding night--and have got to where I let him feel my breasts. Boys don't understand a girl "saving herself," specially nowadays.

My boy cousins is chasing Big Mama's chickens and you can hear them squawking and fluttering under the house and her ahollering from the backporch and Mama and them clanking pot lids in the kitchen where the browned flour smell of baking biscuits carries along the hall on a lift of summery green air.

"How you like New Orleans, Cousin Doug?" I ask.

Daugharty 7

"Awright," he says and twitches his tan moustache, bloodshot brown eyes set on a papery dirt-dobber nest above the hall doorjamb.

"I bet it's a sight."

Still, he don't look at me. He sucks in smoke and blows it out and crosses his other foot on his knee. K-mart docksides. Roman's wearing the crinkly soft Italian kind, no socks. And I feel sorry for my cousin and plan to get him some like Roman's for Christmas if I can come up with the cash.

"I bet Cornerville's some kind of dull after New Orleans?"

Cousin Doug laughs, muffled. "It's different."

"What do y'all do up there for fun?"

He reaches across me and thumps his cigarette butt to Big Mama's periwinkle bed and the white hens scuttle from under the house and peck at the live coal. "Oh," he says, "mostly read, I reckon."

"Roman reads some too," I say. "Don't you, Roman?"

Roman snorts. "When I have to."

I wish I'd got to knowing Cousin Doug better when we was growing up and then I could talk old times with him now, but he was a good ten years older than me and, as Mama said, drug from pillar too post by Aunt Wannie Mae. I could get Cousin Doug and Roman talking hunting or fishing--which Roman loves with a purple passion and which is the reason in the first place that I figgered Roman was gone take to my uncles and other cousins--but Cousin Doug don't do neither one to my beknowest. "They say out in New Orleans, they bury people on top of one another. That so?"

"Something like that."

"Dinner!" hoots Big Mama down the hall.

Daugharty 8

And it's like Uncle Louis, my Aunt Lovie's husband, can hear her calling from their little board house up the lane, as Daddy would say, for here he comes in his old waxed white Lincoln, purring with the crickets and churning dust to the pecan trees either side of the parched sand road. The sun, teetering overhead between morning and evening, shatters the blue of the sky with its white hot brilliance.

Daddy stands up, stretching, and mopes with Uncle Bum toward the hall.

"Roman," Daddy says, "y'all come on, son." He's just gone to calling Roman son, and I know he's playing up to him so he'll marry me.

The way it works out, Roman has to set by Uncle Louis at Big Mama's long eating table. Uncle Louis is big and beafy with red hair--what's left of it--and bored nose holes sprouting hair. Ears too.

He's all dressed up in his powder-blue sports coat and white bucks cause he's been to church that morning to politic for county representative. When he finds out Roman's a lawyer's boy, he goes to putting on the dog. Bragging about who-all he knows from the capital building in Atlanta. You can believe about half of it, and he's lost more elections than he's won.

Roman don't pay him one bit of mind, just goes on eating with his skint blonde head bowed over his plate. Looks like he can't get enough of Big Mama's chicken and dumplings--the rolled kind, wax-paper sandwiched and chilled overnight--and she falls head over heels for him. Keeps pushing food--field peas, speckled butterbeans, steamed okra, creamed corn, sliced fresh tomatoes, bread and butter pickles, baked ham, fried chicken and chicken with rice--and pouring

Daugharty 9

him more tea from a glass pitcher with sugar and tea dregs on the bottom. She never sets to eat with everybody else; she stands over the table with her tea pitcher and fly flap. She'll get mad at you for not eating.

From where I'm setting, between Roman and Cousin Doug, I can see the children's table on the back porch, where I used to set till just a couple of years ago. My boy cousins are chuncking beans at my girl cousins, who squeal out for Big Mama. Soon as she heads that way, the boys set up straight and go back to eating. She swats each on the head, lectures them about living during the Great Depression, then waddles back to the main table.

"Here, son," she says to Roman, "try this blackberry pie." He does.

I think he's gone bust a gut. Course, I been knowing Roman is a big eater. When he ain't eating, he's wanting to neck. I've gone as

far as I'm going by letting him feel my breasts, which he calls knockers. No more. The rest can wait till after we get married. That's what I tell him when he says if he knocks me up, we'll get married. That's how all them TKEs talk. And I'm satisfied that I'm the last girl left at Valdosta State University Roman ain't tried to knock up. One big hormone's what he is.

"You Baptist, boy?" Uncle Louis bellows at Roman.

"Episcopalian." Roman chomps down on another wedge of glazy brown cornbread, starting over on the main meal after he's had dessert.

Everybody looks up then. "Episco-what?" goes Aunt Rosie at the other end of the table between Daddy and Uncle Bum.

Daugharty 10

"Palian," says Aunt Wannie Mae and flicks her sharp red fingernails.

"That's like Catholic, ain't it?" says Uncle Bum, who is smoking crosslegged and considering Roman like a freak.

Roman shrugs.

Aunt Wannie Mae nudges Cousin Doug, who is thumping ashes to his half-eaten food. "Tell 'em, Dougie."

"It's not Catholic." Doug sets his bleary brown eyes on his mama.

"Well, that was smart!" she says.

"You asked." He muffles a laugh with smoke.

"If ary one of mine was to pop off at me like that," says Big Mama, "I'd wear her out." And she swats a fly by Daddy's plate, then refills Roman's glass with tea.

"If the law had been like it is now," says Aunt Wannie Mae,

"you'd be in the pen for child abuse."

Uncle Bum laughs with his nappy white head back. Roman's clear green eyes roll up and he stops chewing. Big Mama struts off to the children's table on the back porch.

"I don't reccollect Mama being all that bad mayself," Aunt Lovie says loud so Big Mama can credit her.

"You always did have a bad memory," says Aunt Wannie Mae.

Mama pipes up loud too. "Well, I ain't all that good a mama my ownself."

"Amen," says Aunt Wannie Mae--meaning my brother who got caught for stealing hogs. I hope. She could've seen me and Roman necking in the swamp this morning and mean me.

Daugharty 11

"Least Onni ain't raised no youngun that would commit crimes against nature." Aunt Rosie.

Cousin Doug blows smoke to the ceiling, one hand under his armpit.

"Crimes against nature?" says Aunt Wannie Mae. "What crimes against nature?"

"What is crimes against nature?" I go.

"You tell 'em, Lovie." Aunt Rosie again.

"You the one started this," Aunt Lovie says.

"I say we get the dishes done and go to the mall in Valdosta." Mama gets up with her plate.

Daddy clicks his fingers on the table.

Bout time for another walk with Roman.

"Man!" says Roman. "I can't get over that with your cousin

Doug."

We're walking out of the field where the sun has wilted the high grass and down the ferny slope to Thistle Hammock and the shade of the whispering sweetgums.

"Oh, they always going on like that. Aunt Rosie checking people out. I feel sorry for Cousin Doug."

"Damned if I do!" says Roman and laughs and mashes me up against a tree where the rusty fencewire has growed into the trunk. "I bet you anything it was a fish."

"A fish?" What is crimes against nature?

"Yeah," breathes Roman, getting bored with my breasts and sliding his hand lower. "I know a bunch of boys likes fish."

Daugharty 12

The frogs in the slew over the fence are cheeping, begging rain. Giggling frogs could be a crime against nature; shooting deer and quail and ducks could be too. Roman would as soon night hunt as day hunt; no qualms about killing, long as he don't get caught. Actually, throwing out a cigarette butt for the hens to peck is a crime against nature. Even chasing them under the house could be, depending how you look at it. What about running down your own sister, or prying into somebody's personal business, or Daddy calling Uncle Bum a bum, or for that matter, everybody eating till they're sick when other people's sick from not eating? Or me, letting Roman feel my breasts, then stopping his hand on my stomach.

"Not yet," I say.

"You don't love me."

"Yes, I do."

"You don't trust me."

"I do."

"Then why don't you let me...?"

"Not till after we're married."

"Dammit, Sally!" Her snatches his hand away, stalks off and stops, tugging at the stuffed crotch of his jeans. "How many times do I have to tell you, we're married in the sight of God."

"Not me, no sir."

"I got a rubber." He sticks his hand in his back pocket and pulls out his wallet, easing back. "Lamb skin."

Another crime against nature? "I don't even want to see it," I say and cover my eyes, peeping out.

Daugharty 13

He cusses again and pokes his wallet back in his pocket. His face is red, his eyes greener. "Y'all the craziest bunch of people I've ever met."

I drop my hands. "You better just watch it!"

"Well, fuck you, Sally! Here I been putting up with you and your bunch all day, and for what?"

"What was you doing it for in the first place?:"

"For you."

"For me?"

"Yeah, you couldn't wait for me to meet the family. Well, I met 'em. Boy did I meet 'em!"

"I thought you wanted to meet them before we get married; I want to meet yours."

He held up both hands, backed apiece. "Hold it a minute! Mine ain't ready for this. My old man would die if he even thought I'd

mentioned marriage before I get done with college. Then I got law school."

"Well, how were you gone marry me if I got knocked up?"

"Hell, Sally, you take everything so serious!"

"You didn't answer that."

"You won't get knocked up." He felt for his wallet again.

"If my daddy so much as thought you'd showed me something like that, he'd run you off. So, you better just go."

Roman gazes across the field toward the porch where we can hear everybody quarreling. "I bet it was a dog."

And then I knew

Daugharty
Daugharty 14