

“Don’t he look natural?” Aunt Lavinia proclaims, staring into the mahogany box that holds the flesh and bones that used to hold my father. “Why do people say that?” barks Aunt Helen. “Who the hell looks natural when they’re dead?”

“Hush,” says Aunt Lavinia, glancing quickly over to where I stand in the corner placing a bouquet of white and red carnations on a table. Her distress increases when I clap my hand over my mouth. “He looks good,” she says, trying to fix Aunt Helen’s outburst.

“He looks dead, I imagine,” Aunt Helen says just as loudly, ignoring her sister’s efforts to shush her. Helen is stone blind and makes up for it in decibel level. “When I die,” she continues, “I want the undertaker to put me in upside down, so everybody can kiss my . . .”

“Helen!”

“Butt,” she finishes smugly.

There is no help for it now. The laughter bubbles out of me as Aunt Tiny and Aunt Lavinia each grab an arm and try to move their sister down the hall where they think she can do less harm.

Much of Covington and Smith counties have gathered here to mourn my father. This is far less impressive when you realize that my relatives make up most of the populace of this part of Mississippi. My family mourns death much as they celebrate life—right out loud. They cry, they laugh, they hug, and they eat. It has been accurately said that food is the love language of the South.

“Remember when Cletus and Joseph took Helen up on the barn roof when she was a baby and gave her chewing tobacco?” asks Aunt Tiny, who apparently has given up on making Aunt Helen behave with decorum.

“Probably what made me go blind,” adds Helen, and they are off on another round of family stories.

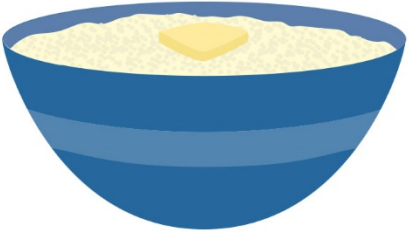
The laughter feels good and right, but it doesn’t cushion the hard, cold fact that Daddy is gone. I am an orphan, I think. A forty-four-year-old orphan.

I look around and am startled when I catch sight of myself in the gilt-framed mirror on the far side of the room. I don’t feel like the woman I see there. She is poised and fashionable, though rather strained. I look away and see Uncle Cletus checking a spray of peonies for hidden microphones in case the government or some alien civilization has tracked him down. I smile, remembering the many times I aided and abetted Cletus in his on-going war against all those who are “out to get

him.” That’s better. I recognize this Evangeline Tanner; the one in the mirror is a stranger to me today.

After the graveside service, we all go back to the house for lunch. It’s my house now, but it has been home as well to Aunt Lavinia, Uncle Calvin, and Uncle Cletus since my mother died. Aunt Lavinia felt it was her Christian duty to stay and help Daddy raise me, so she and Uncle Calvin moved out of their house in Mount Olive and in with us. Uncle Cletus apparently just never got around to leaving, and the five of us lived in the big blue house in Collins until I grew up and left them to carry on without me years ago.

When all the friends, neighbors, and family—except Aunt Helen—are gone, it is midafternoon and I go upstairs to change clothes and lie down. When I hang my black skirt and jacket in the closet of my old bedroom, I see, pushed into the corner of the long, deep shelf, the faded and ragged forty-ounce Whitman Sampler candy box in which for years I put mementos of events as far ranging as my second-grade Christmas program to Mama’s funeral. I pull it down and place it in the middle of the bed, remembering that day long ago when it came into my possession.



THE PROPOSAL

“Shift.”

Whump! I fell out of the sagging double bed seconds after the mumbled command. Rubbing my head, I looked up into the untroubled eyes of my cousin, Linda Sue. “I said, ‘shift,’” she said.

Shift meant turn over, but I was as yet unused to sleeping in a bed with two or three other girls, and ignorant of the lingo. At home, it was just me and Mama and Daddy, and I had a bed to myself where I could turn right over whenever I wanted to. Uncle Brantley and Aunt Tiny just had a two-bedroom house, so my four cousins had to share a bed, and in order for one to turn over, all had to turn. Well, technically, the oldest, Caroline, had a little single bed up against the wall, but she refused to sleep in it ever since Linda Sue hid the rubber snake under the covers. But it was hers, and nobody else dared to sleep in it. Not even Linda Sue. Tonight, since we were visiting, her mama made Caroline sleep there and put me in the big bed. The youngest two of us got the outsides.

That meant that the youngest got short shrift when it came to back scratching. Before we fell asleep, everybody scratched the back of the person on their left and then, “Shift,” and everybody turned over and scratched the back on their right. Well, that meant me and Abbie, she was six, only got our backs scratched every other turn. It didn’t seem fair, but it was more than I got at home, so I figured I shouldn’t complain.

I got up rubbing my behind where it had hit the wood planks. It was summer, so my shortie pajamas didn’t provide much padding. I climbed back in bed and turned my head as far as I could to talk to Linda Sue behind me.

“Want to know a secret?” I whispered.

“If you tell me, it won’t be a secret.” Linda Sue could be kind of a smart aleck sometimes.

I turned my head forward and plumped my pillow and closed my eyes.

“Well?” she asked after a few minutes.

I made a big deal out of yawning and said as sleepily as I could manage, “Well, what?”

“What’s the secret?”

“If I tell you, it won’t be a secret.”

“Come on, tell.” Linda Sue shoved closer and I felt myself moving toward the edge of the bed again.

“Cut it out.”

“Tell.”

“It’s not really a secret, I don’t guess. Just something I heard,” I said airily.

Linda Sue was having none of it. “About what?” she asked, starting to nudge me again.

“About . . . Caroline’s marriage proposal.”

“Whaaaa?” gasped Linda Sue. “What are you talking about? Do you mean Alton?”

I yawned and stretched as much as it was possible to on my little dab of mattress to keep the suspense up. “Come on, give,” she demanded.

“Would you two girls shut up?” Caroline mumbled sleepily from the other bed.

I froze and waited a minute for Caroline to start breathing deep again, then slipped out of bed and pulled on Linda Sue’s arm to get her to follow me. We tiptoed down the hall to the kitchen and closed the door.

“Come on, tell,” she said, opening the refrigerator door so she could see my face.

“Well, maybe I shouldn’t. I’m not supposed to know,” I said and looked toward the ceiling like I was seeking guidance from the Lord.

Linda Sue pinched a blue place on my arm and repeated, “Tell.”

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to get violent.” I scooted closer to the refrigerator and told.

“When I got back from the store today, I heard Alton talking to Uncle Brantley out in the garage. He asked for ‘Miss Caroline’s hand,’” I said, doing a fair impression of Alton’s long, deep drawl. We started giggling, but then remembered we weren’t supposed to be up in the middle of the night telling secrets in the refrigerator and got serious again. “Your daddy said it was fine by him and Alton started pumping Uncle Brantley’s hand up and down and thanking him until Uncle Brantley said, ‘By God, man, you’re gone break my arm.’ Then Alton said he was gonna come over here today and ask her before he got too scared to. Uncle Brantley told him y’all were going to the river about three and Alton said he’d be here directly after lunch. No later than 1:30, he said.”

“Well, poor old Alton. I hope he knows what he’s doing,” said Linda Sue.

“I plan on watching it,” I said.

“How?”

“Well, a long time ago when we were playing hide and seek, I found this little knot hole in the living room paneling. If you get in the hall closet, you can see and hear everything going on in there. I’ve never seen a proposal before, and you know I plan to be a writer or an artist and I need to know about these things.”

“Hmmp,” Linda Sue snorted and then she kind of shivered. I thought maybe it was because I had encouraged her to think about the deep, romantic things in life, but then she said the ham for tomorrow’s dinner was poking into her backside and was about to freeze her to death. “You watch if you want to,” she said. “I’m supposed to go to Donna Johnson’s after lunch, but you can tell me about it when I get back. Or maybe you can draw it for me.” She kind of sneered when she said that, and for a minute I wondered why I had always thought of her as my favorite cousin. Just like everybody else, she didn’t believe I would ever be anything but a housewife.

We went back to bed, but I didn’t sleep real good. I didn’t want to miss a “shift” and end up on the floor again. The next morning I hung around Caroline and tried to find out if she knew Alton’s intentions. She was real crabby, calling me a nosy pest, so I figured she did know and was

nervous about becoming a fiancée. That's what they call engaged women. I learned that when Edna Ross got engaged last year. Daddy said it should be called the fiancée, in her case, and poor old Joey Hargruder is the financier.

Caroline was as closed mouthed as a snapping turtle clamped down on a stick, so I gave up and went looking for crawdads with Linda Sue until lunch. Neither me nor Caroline ate much of the turnip greens and cornbread Aunt Tiny cooked. I figured Caroline was too excited to eat, but I just hate turnip greens. They're right up there with liver on the "Do Not Eat" list. Why would anybody want to eat something's liver? And turnip greens? Just taste them.

I offered to help with the dishes and Daddy gave me a little pat on the head like he was proud of me for being so grown up. I felt a little guilty about operating under false pretenses, because the real reason I did it was I wanted to have an excuse to be close to the hall closet come 1:20 or so. But I wasn't guilty enough to change my mind. I drug around real slow, and then told Aunt Tiny I'd finish up so she could rest. She eyed me like I was a horn worm on a tomato plant for a minute and I thought I'd overplayed my hand, but then she went on out to the front porch swing with a glass of sweet tea.

I finished up the rest of that kitchen faster than the Tasmanian Devil on the Bugs Bunny cartoon and slipped into the hall closet with my own glass of tea at 1:25, just seconds before Alton came walking up the front steps. Apparently Caroline didn't have any idea that this was her big day after all, because when Aunt Tiny let Alton in and yelled to Caroline that he was here, I heard Caroline say, "Darn it," which in Mama's opinion was a by-word and was almost as bad as a swear word. But since Mama wasn't there to hear it, nobody did anything about it and after about ten minutes Caroline finally showed up in the living room. I leaned closer to the knot hole, thinking I'd have to open it up a little more for a better view, and wishing I'd thought to bring in a stool or something to sit on. I had to hunch over under the shelf and lean forward to see.

I just got in position when I heard something scratching at the door. For a minute I thought I was found out, then I heard mewing. Linda Sue's black-and-white cat, Little Joe, was trying to get his paw under the door. (Linda Sue loved the TV Western *Bonanza*, and Little Joe Cartwright in particular.) I opened the door and tried to shoo the cat away, but that just got him yowling like I had dunked him in ice water, so I opened the door enough he could see me and that shut him up.

"What you doin' here today, Alton?" Caroline was asking real grumpy like when I got back to the knot hole. "I was getting ready to go to the river."

Alton kind of slumped over, I guess because he was so tall Caroline had to arch her neck backwards to look straight at him. He kind of screwed his face up—which wasn't a good idea, considering he already looked a whole lot like Freddy Baker's three-legged wiener dog—then cleared his throat. He leaned toward Caroline, then leaned back away, then cleared his throat again. "What IS it, Alton?" Caroline said, finally plopping down on the green vinyl couch right under the front window. Alton followed her over and stood beside the couch. They were directly across from the peep hole I had made in the hall closet through that paneling knot. It was like wiggling the rabbit ears on the television. I could see perfect.

"Uh," Alton said. "Ah, Miss Caroline, there's something I want to say."

“Speak on, Alton.” Caroline was studying a spot on the arm of the couch. She wet her finger with spit and rubbed the vinyl, while Alton shifted from one foot to the other.

“Ah, it’s more like there’s something I want to ask you.”

Caroline sat up straight, dirt spot forgotten, and stared at Alton. I think the picture was coming in clearer for her, too.

“What, Alton? What do you want to ask?”

“Go for it, Alton,” I whispered and took a sip of tea. The ice rattled so loud I thought sure they’d come dragging me out of that closet any minute. I stood stock still until I couldn’t hold onto that cold glass any more. But Alton and Caroline were apparently deaf, so I set the glass down on the shelf over my head.

Alton took a deep breath then got down on one knee beside the couch. He stayed that way a minute, like he was as frozen as my right hand, then he reached out, kinda jerky like, and grabbed her hand. The same one she had spit on.

“Miss Caroline,” he finally began, “we’ve been stepping out together for some time now and I think you know how I feel about you.”

“No, Alton. How do you feel?” Caroline asked. She wasn’t going to make this easy, it seemed.

“Well, I think you’re a fine girl.” No response. “And I think you’re a good cook.” Caroline was quiet. “You keep a good house,” Alton tried then. Caroline began to stare at him, stone faced and silent. She didn’t even blink that I could see. Of course, I was way across the room and looking through a knot hole.

Alton turned beet red and I think the eye on the side I could see started twitching. It was hard to tell from that distance, but I know it does that sometimes when he gets nervous. Like that time Caroline threw the milk shake he brought her right in the middle of his shirt because he hadn’t ironed the shirt before he came over. Caroline could be like that.

My back was beginning to ache and I straightened up before I thought and smacked right into the shelf, knocking my tea over and making a goose egg the size of Texas on my head. I knew there was no way they didn’t hear that, so I jumped out of the closet and stepped right on Little Joe’s tail, setting him squalling like he was killed. I had just picked him up when Caroline and Alton came around the corner.

“What in tarnation is going on?” Caroline asked.

If I had any creative genes, now was the time for them to manifest.

“I, uh, I came to get a drink of water and Little Joe must have gotten locked in the hall closet,” I said. *Not bad.* “I heard a racket in there and opened the door and there he was. Poor baby. He must have been so scared.”

I put my face down in Joe’s fur and looked out of the corner of my eye at Caroline. They turned and went back out. *Yes.*

I made a point of leaving the kitchen noisily, put Joe outside, then quietly made my way back to the closet. I was just in time to hear Alton say, “You’re the purtiest girl in three counties and I want to marry you and I want you to be my wife and cook for me and keep my house.”

Caroline kept staring at him a few minutes like she was waiting for more, then she looked at her left hand, then back up at him, then cocked her head to one side like she was considering. Then she said, "Isn't there something more you'd like to do? To give me?" All the while she was holding her hand out like she wanted him to kiss it. Alton looked at it for a minute, then he jumped up and nearly hit the living room light fixture. Looking as excited and relieved as a coon dog that's just been let out of his truck crate, Alton reached behind the couch and grabbed a huge box wrapped in brown grocery-bag paper, dumped it in her lap, and said, "I have brought you a token of my affections." Then he dropped back down on his knee, while Caroline stared at the box.

Finally, he reached over and tore off the paper, revealing a big yellow box. "I love you, Miss Caroline, and I'm asking for your hand in marriage." Caroline picked up the box, then stood up, looking like she had tasted something nastier than turnip greens or liver.

"Candy?" she yelled. "Candy? You don't propose to a girl with a box of candy!"

Shoot. Even I knew that, and I had never been proposed to even once.

"I thought you liked candy, Miss Caroline. Especially these Whitman Samplers, and this one's the biggest I ever seen." Alton was even redder, if you can imagine it, almost purple. He was about to get up, but fell back on his knee when Caroline smacked him on the head with the candy box.

"Candy . . . is not . . . an . . . engagement ring, . . . Alton," she ground out, then flounced out of the room. I had heard people talk about flouncing, but I had never really seen it before. When she got to the bedroom door, she turned and heaved that candy box back down the hall. I could hear it hit the wall and bounce off.

Alton stood up slowly, rubbing the side of his head, and mumbled, "I sure thought she'd like that Whitman Sampler." He opened the front screen and stepped out, muttering, "It's the biggest one I ever seen."

I came out of the closet real slow to make sure nobody saw me, then picked up the Whitman candy box. "Hey," I yelled, like I didn't know where anybody was. "There's a big old box of candy in the floor. What should I do with it?"

Caroline slammed the door open, stared at me and the candy and said, "Throw it in the garbage. I never want to see a Whitman's Sampler again," then slammed the door shut.

"Done," I said, then I skedaddled with the candy before she could change her mind. I headed over to Donna Johnson's to tell her and Linda Sue all about the proposal.