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(1974) Directed by: Mr. Fred Chappell. Pp. 51.

The two stories which comprise this thesis are paired for several reasons. First, they demonstrate a breadth of writing styles. "Gift" offers a more lyrical and descriptive prose whereas "Possum" evinces a lighter narrative style.

Thematically the stories are similar although each story maintains its own integrity by virtue of the manner in which the themes are related. Conflicts of youth and age, the clashing of the values of tradition and modernity, the struggles of love and death both motivate and complicate the major characters of the stories.

In these stories I have dealt almost exclusively with women of the rural South. The grievances and desires of these characters are scarcely limited by geography. I have attempted to portray characters who are unique without being freakish, familiar without seeming stereotypical, and, most importantly, sympathetic in their involvement within universally appreciated situations.

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TWO STORIES: "GIFT" AND "POSSUM"

by

Marianne Gingher

(1)

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Approved by

Paul Chappell

Thesis Adviser

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Adviser

Fred Chappell

Committee Members

Royal Kropp

W. J. Kirby-Smith

Fred Chappell

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NOTE

"Gift" was previously published in the Carolina Quarterly, Spring, 1973. The story received second prize in the magazine's annual Young Writers Fiction Contest.

GIFT

Not ten days before the delivery of her child, Kitty June Perdue had sat rocking on her great-grandmother's front porch. Her feet were propped against the porch railing to drain the ache of her legs which were spidered blue and purple by varicose veins. Kitty June's swollen stomach spilled onto the tops of her thighs, and, as the subtle August breeze puffed beneath her yellow cotton shift, she thought of her body as a giant ripened grapefruit.

Ol Ma Creevy was snapping beans. Every once in a while she would slip one of the beans under her lip and gum it vigorously as if she were teething. The beans crackled in her fingers as she broke them into the large colander gripped between her knees. She didn't talk much when it was a hot day. She said when the temperature went beyond her age it was too hot for words. She was ninety-eight years old, and the SMOKE CAMELS thermometer beside the screen door read 102 degrees. Kitty June listened to the sound of beans, live like crickets, and she closed her eyes and rocked. Tendrils of pain uncoiled in her legs, and the heavy heat enfolded her, smothering. A shadow suddenly hovered against the thin shell of her closed eyelids, and a breath like raw beans and

old rags soured moist against her skin. Ol Ma Creevy's face poked into her own. Sweat slicked the old woman's upper lip as if she had greased it, and her mouth was stretched wide and wormy thin in a smile that wriggled wet across the rust-colored face. Kitty June squirmed. Her peace was violated.

"It's goin' to be a little baby girl," Ol Ma said. There was a certain weight in her words, importantly isolated in the hot calm of the afternoon. The sunlight hammering against her shrivelled face forged the pupils of her eyes into bright black beads. "It's goin' to be a little baby girl 'cause I seen it just now."

Kitty June sighed and rocked, lacing her small pink fingers tightly against the grapefruit belly. "It kicks like a boy," she said.

"No it ain't. No it ain't." Ol Ma Creevy shook her head violently. "I seen it. Potiphar caused me to see it. Potiphar said: 'It is time!' And my eyes was opened up, and I seen it. Through your dress. Through your skin. I seen it."

Ol Ma's husband, Potiphar, had been a preacher with the divinely bestowed gift of being able to spy on the future. That is what the old woman claimed. And she believed that with his death Potiphar's portentous strength had passed into her own brain and taken possession of it. Whether the powers of prophecy were a blessing was not easily reckoned, Ol Ma said, for when a vision was upon her, her eyes became

twin sieves through which were squeezed and sifted pieces of the future.

"You ain't seen nothin', Ol Ma," Kitty June snapped. Her voice was edged with weariness. The old woman's visions irked her bone-deep. The visions had no dignity, no mystical pageantry. There was supposed to be a mincing light from heaven, wind whipping the treetops, a burning bush. But Ol Ma's revelations came on with the complacency of a yawn.

The old woman shuffled back to the rocker and sat down with her beans. "I tell you I seen it," she muttered, pouting.

"You're guessin', Ol Ma. It's a fifty-fifty chance your bein' right. But Gerstle says Perdue women always have sons." Kitty June tried to soften the irritation in her voice.

"You ain't no Perdue!" The beans popped angrily against the sides of the colander, and Ol Ma didn't look up. "Potiphar knows I seen it."

"All right, all right," Kitty June grumbled, the heat flashing suddenly in her cheeks. "But why'd he wait till now to let you in on it? How come? How come he didn't let you know any sooner so I could've chose pink instead of blue like I done?"

Ol Ma Creevy raised her head up from the beans. Her face seemed suspended, separate from her small body, the skin sucking at the bones underneath like withered orange peel

clinging to its fruit. Her eyes were hot and black as buckshot, and her nostrils pinched and fluttered slightly. She seemed suddenly condensed, drawn up tightly as if summoning a violent energy from every resource of her body. "Potiphar is God's own messenger," the old woman hissed. "Potiphar serves the will of the Lord. To question Potiphar is to doubt the Lord." She gripped the arms of the rocker until her knuckles blanched.

Kitty June felt disgust coursing through her like a poison, crippling her thoughts. In her mind she went tumbling out of the rocking chair, a big yellow ball rolling down the porch steps into the liquid dark beneath the gardenia bushes and clematis which ringed the porch. Submerged in the cool shade, she peeled away the layers of her skin until she disappeared.

"The Lord in His great wisdom seen fit to make you fertile for seed. And that is enough. Do not ask favors from the Lord who shined his eye upon your womb and made it ready to receive His most blessed gift." The voice, dry as husk, rattled out of the crackled orange face. The words gathered up the pieces of flesh scattered under the porch and rolled the ball back up the steps and into its chair. "Potiphar come to me and said the time is right. The seed is ripe and it should be knowed. The Lord tended the seed till it was ripe, and just before it's plucked is time enough to know." Then the old woman's voice softened, and the fire went out of

her eyes. "You still got some time to prepare," she said. "The vision ain't come too late to do somethin' about it."

"I got blue p.j.'s and booties and a blue room fresh painted," Kitty June said sharply. "And there ain't nothin' to do about that. 'Sides, ain't nothin' goin' to change Gerstle's mind it's a boy. Perdue women always have boys. So the vision's come too late, Ol Ma. If it even came at all."

Ol Ma's jaws flexed hard against her anger. "You just tell Gerstle that Potiphar come to me in a vision. Gerstle remembers. He remembers the night Potiphar healed his mama from the gout. He's seen the true power." Gerstle was Kitty June's husband. He drove a feed truck for Orbert Weems' grainery. He was twelve years older than Kitty June which put him on the other side of thirty. Ol Ma decided that the wisdom of his extra years might be helpful in conjuring some sense into Kitty June's head.

Kitty June's face suddenly tightened and a cruel smile wrenched her mouth. Her teeth glittered mean and hard. "Ol Ma, what you goin' to do if it ain't no girl? What you goin' to say then? 'Cause when it happens I'm goin' to be around to laugh you right down in the face. Say, Ol Ma? What you goin' to do?"

"I got to get these beans on," Ol Ma grunted.

Ol Ma disappeared into the brown shadows of the house, the screen door clucking behind her softly. The sun claimed less than half the porch now, falling in hard white blocks

across the bleached wooden floor. Mud daubers and wasps, appearing from under the eaves, slapped at the porch ceiling. They were dizzy with heat, their tenuous legs dangling, their wings slowly strumming the thick air. Closing her eyes, Kitty June thought she could feel the movement of their wings, fanning, lifting the hairs on her arms. She wondered why she lingered. Why she sat rooted to her chair while the old woman picked at her, probed. But she had been rooted all her life. Strangely attached to what devoured her. Sucked on like an old bone. First by the old woman who had reared her after her father died. And now the child. It sucked, too. The old woman and the child, they were alike that way. Sucking her, sapping her. It would be so easy to go home. She felt the mass of her body spreading, consuming the spindly arms and legs so that soon she would not be able to walk or feed herself. Gerstle would roll her up and pack her in the back of his feed truck, heavy and helpless, like a round sack of corn. The sound of the wings churning the air prickled her skin. She felt the closeness of the insects, hovering above the yellow belly, ready to drop like darts.

Ol Ma Creevy shuffled back onto the porch, trailing the odor of the cooking beans which gasped and wafted through the screen door. A fly sucked at the middle of her forehead, but she did not seem to notice.

"I brung you some ice tea with mint," she said, offering the glass to Kitty June who took it and drank thirsti-

ly. "Day this hot makes you want to sit naked front of a fan." She rustled stiffly into her chair.

Kitty June watched the fly on the old woman's forehead. It was the sparkly green of glitter you could buy at Woolworth's. "It ain't so hot if you sit still," Kitty June said at last. As she said it, she felt her dress cup sticky as melting chewing gum about her shoulders. The fly on Ol Ma's face moved round and round in a kind of excited dance, as if it had suddenly discovered a tiny hole and was going to crawl inside.

"What you goin' to name the little thing?" Ol Ma said with the abruptness of one of her visions. Kitty June shut her eyes tightly. She felt more tired than she had ever been in her life. Revulsion darkened her inside and out. She sensed the curious beady eyes skimming her body, probing, perilous as the insects. She wanted to crawl outside of herself, watch what the other eyes watched. In her most insidious thoughts she became the woman she and Gerstle had paid fifty cents to see at the Zebulon Fair. QUEEN OLGA BROUGHT FROM THE AMAZON. CAN YOU STOMACH THIS HORROR MADE BREATHING FLESH? THIS WOMAN WAS BORN WITH NO PORES IN HER SKIN, BODY AND LEGS LARGE AS AN ELEPHANT'S. A SPECTACLE OF UNBELIEVABLE OBESITY. RIPPLING, FLAKING SKIN THAT SHEDS LIKE A SNAKE'S ONCE A YEAR.

She and Gerstle had entered the tent to find Queen Olga seated on a plain wooden chair in a gray petticoat, her

flesh a sabulous crawling pink. She sat with the monumental poise of a figure carved in stone. Only her eyes, glistening red, moved, flickered hot in her face. And her lips, rubbery crescents of pink, parted and closed slightly with the involuntary frenzy of a gasping fish gill. The body and legs were puffed to an inhuman corpulence, and the skin sagged in wrinkled hunks about the knees and elbows, uniformly mottled by a salmon-colored crust. The face, though it was meaty and the chin dissolved layer upon layer into the thick neck, was pathetically ordinary. Framed by curlicues of meringue-colored hair, it was a face that might have pressed wearily against the glass of a bus window, unnoticed, whipping past in a blur of anonymity. The face did not startle. It did not amaze. Fastened to the misshapened mass of flesh, it offered heart-breaking proof of Olga's humanness.

Kitty June had dreamed of that face, separate from the diseased and bloated body. It floated freely, regenerating new slender limbs which unfolded stiffly, wet as insect legs, from the sides of the head. A narrow membraneous ribbon, the body unpeeled itself, dropping through space, waiting for the legs and arms to socket themselves and carry it away.

"Say what? Say what you goin' to name the little thing?" The voice had the brittle chink of wings tapping a glass bottle.

"I was thinkin'," Kitty June answered vaguely.

"Thinkin'? Child, it ain't but a week away. You

mean to say you've had nine months to think and you ain't come up with no name yet? That beats all!" Ol Ma slapped her knee. The fly had vanished from her great-grandmother's forehead, and Kitty June decided it had squeezed inside the hole it had discovered and was fluttering around in the brain having the time of its life.

"I got plenty of names. It ain't that."

"Well? Well what then? Give out with a few and I'll tell you what I think."

"I'm thinking," Kitty June said slowly. Her face was very rigid and pale, her voice was detached. "I'm thinking, what if I just decide not to have this baby? What if it comes out dead? One dead lump. That's what I'm thinkin'."

"Oh my! Oh my!" Ol Ma cooed, and her hand beat at her chest like a spindly fan.

"Well, that's what I'm thinkin'!" Kitty June huffed. "Then there wouldn't be no name at all."

"Oh my! Oh my goodness!" The old woman rocked harder in her chair, and the orange drained out of her face leaving it a pulpy white.

"Well, could happen. You know it, too, Ol Ma. It runs common with Creevys. And you say I ain't no Perdue." Kitty June's voice was tinny and shrill, and she was breathing fast.

"Your ma. I knowed it. I knowed sooner or later you'd go pinnin' her misfortune on yourself." Ol Ma shook

her head sadly. "But you got to remember that she weren't no Creevy except by marriage. When she married my grandson, your daddy. Just like you ain't no Perdue 'cept that you married one of that name."

"The name Creevy's on my mama's grave stone!" Kitty June cried.

"It don't matter."

"Just like the name Perdue'll be on mine."

"Don't matter." Ol Ma's head was bowed and bobbed loosely on her chest. "It don't matter what you say 'cause Potiphar has seen it."

"Potiphar seen my mama die givin' life to me, too," Kitty June hissed, "and you know good as me, Ol Ma, it's Creevy women who either give birth to what's dead or die themselves givin' out life."

"It don't matter what you say." Ol Ma raised her head. Her eyes glistened violently as if they had been waxed and burnished. "Potiphar has seen it, and it's goin' to be a little baby girl and you better think of a name fast 'cause it's comin' anyday now." The words, honed with deliberate separateness, bristled the air between the two women.

"Potiphar is dead, Ol Ma."

"Potiphar lives in me." The old woman's voice was bright with fury. "And I ain't dead yet. I ain't no vision." The whir of the words and the drumming of insect wings were mingled, confused.

Little spokes of light, white-hot needles, shot down her eyes, and Kitty June blinked. A dark shape suddenly gathered on the colorless edge of her waking and hovered, rimmed by the stabbing light. She did not understand the shape. In her mind she tried to prod it into its place of memory like a dislodged piece of dream. It did not fit. It did not come together at all until a drone fell out of the shape and the darkness peeled itself away in patches.

"It's me, Kitty June," Gerstle's voice was so fuzzy that she was reading his lips. The darkness of the shape he had been receded into the pits and hollows of his rough, sun-raw cheeks. Everything about him seemed enlarged to her. The nose was swollen and lumpy as a knot on a tree, and the nostril hairs whistled fiercely in their caves as he breathed. His eyebrows, like one long bristled cat's tail, clung to the massive red cliff above his eyes. The lips lay wide and flat across his face as if they had been ironed on. "It's me, Kitty June," the lips said. "Honey, it's me."

She felt more tired than she had ever been, capsuled tightly in a dead drying used-up body. A hull. Her brain felt as if it had been stung to death. The hospital room poured its whiteness over her, the walls and ceilings pounding her skin with the blinding color until she felt that certainly she was invisible against the sheets.

She had dreamt of mirrors. Long gleaming slabs in which her image wavered. In the brilliant glass her body was

flat and angular, her breasts almost concave. The glass rippled like molten metal as her hands moved downwards, rejoicing to feel the close ladders of ribs beneath her breasts, cupping the hard round bones of her hips, crossing the soft deflated belly. And she had sensed the return of her youth, being rid of a burden which in her dream was nameless.

Gerstle's face with its flappy grin hung solidly against the starched white light. It floated and hummed to her. The lips moved and grew very large until they almost seemed to be swallowing her face. And the lips told her that the child was a little baby girl. Doc said she came out smiling, so maybe they ought to name her Happy. And the Perdues sure were proud to have a daughter born into the family after so many years.

"Ol Ma be tootin' her horn," Kitty June mumbled. She did not care that the child was a girl nearly as much as she regretted the old woman was right. It galled her to have been beaten, and a bitter dark laugh wrenched her mouth. She could see the old woman's lips spreading and the hot black eyes writhing with delight.

Gerstle's lips said that Ol Ma didn't know yet but that he'd go by and tell her as soon as it got light.

Kitty June tried to imagine what Ol Ma would say. Probably that she knew about the baby already. That Potiphar had come to her in a vision with the news. She would rub it in, that was certain. She would not let Kitty June forget

the prophecy which had come true.

III

At dawn a little Negro boy was on his way to Ol Ma's house. His name was Robert Elon Lee and he came by her house each morning to buy the extra eggs her hens laid which she saved for his mother. Always the boy entered the house with some trepidation. Sometimes Ol Ma met him at the back porch with the eggs in a paper tote. But often she lurked in the dim recesses of the house and might pop around a corner without the slightest warning as he entered. He noticed, as he climbed the porch steps this morning, that the screen door was ajar. As if someone, another visitor, had come before him.

As he entered the porch, he could see Ol Ma in plain view, and he was relieved. She was seated at the table in the kitchen. As he crossed the small passageway between the porch and the kitchen, he was aware of a great stillness upon the house, and he shook the pennies in his pocket nervously. All the windows in the house seemed raised, and Robert Elon felt the rush of the wind rumbling through the deep brown innards like a purgative. The wind amplified the largeness of the house, swelling the curtains at the kitchen window, hooting faintly down the hallways. His bare feet squeaked on the linoleum as he approached Ol Ma, and he spoke her name softly and jingled the pennies. He noticed that her head and shoul-

ders were slumped across the table and decided that the old lady had gone to sleep in her chair. He did not want to make her angry by waking her abruptly. He remembered the whippings he'd received for disturbing his own mother while she slept, and an odd discomfort crawled in his stomach as he urged his small voice forward.

He was patient at first, talking so low that his voice barely scratched the silence which had grown over the kitchen like a thick skin. He was patient because he was frightened by the old woman. He half expected her to be playing a trick on him, keeping quiet, playing possum, and then wheeling around sharply and grinning up at him like a skull. But as he talked, the silence beating back at him, barring him from an accomplished errand, seemed an even greater danger than the old woman. He grew braver, irritated, until his voice was full and grainy. And at last, in a fit of desperation, he poked her. The hard gelid flesh sucked at the warm finger as if drawing him into all the mystery and terror of every nightmare he had dreamt. Into the tremulous finger a shadow coursed, spreading like a dark poison through him. Without looking he knew that there was a smile on her face, loose and sloppy as jelly.

He fled the house, whimpering at first, screaming as he neared his own shack. As he ran, drawing himself up against the chill that bit his bones, his hands stabbed his pockets and brushed the pennies which had turned icy as pieces of flesh.

POSSUM

Whether the groundhog had seen his shadow or not, February second we started counting six weeks till Cousin Mamie would come to visit. And about the time the Judas tree in Grandma's front yard was drooping purple and the tulip leaves were edging up through the ground like knife-blades, Grandma would get the postcard, mailed just the day before, saying Mamie would be in on the ten o'clock bus. And if it was a Saturday, and it seems to me now that it always was, Grandma, Ernestine, and I would walk down to the bus stop to wait for the big gassy Trailways that came from Raleigh punctual three times a week. Ernestine was the colored girl that lived with Grandma and looked forward to Cousin Mamie's coming as much as anybody, mainly cause she could make a half-dollar toting Mamie's bags back to the house. Cousin Mamie was always free with her money like that. Grandma said it wasn't her own money she flaunted; it was her son's. He made Tampa Jewel cigars in Florida and sent her money regular just to keep her out of his hair. Grandma said it was barely enough money to keep body and soul together, from what she knew about it, but that Mamie had managed things all right by living in a boarding house instead of keeping up her own place after her husband died. To

hear Grandma talk you could tell she didn't think much of Cousin Mamie's son. His name was Sylvester, and she said it hard and slick with her tongue. Hearing it always made me think of lizards.

We never had to wait long for the bus, because it always came at ten. Grandma said it was a good thing we got our mail at nine. Folks across the town didn't get theirs till just before noon, so it was lucky for us and Cousin Mamie, too, that we had an hour to spare after the arrival of her postcard.

Cousin Mamie always climbed down from the bus backwards. Grandma said it was her personality, that she didn't like to meet you face on, and she didn't want any fuss, kissing and hugging, while the bus driver sat gawking. So we'd let her back down the bus steps, watching and not saying anything or helping, as if we were just strangers coming to see the bus roll in for the fun of it. We'd wait for her to adjust her little white cotton gloves and re-pin her traveling hat with the black net that webbed in her face clear down to her nose. All the while she'd never look up. Just keep fidgeting like there was all the time in the world. Then the bus door would gasp shut behind her and she'd look up. A smile would glide across her face and her eyes would jiggle from one of us to the other. Ernestine would step out and say how she had come to carry the bags. "Ain't but two, Ernestine. Ain't but two this time," Mamie would say.

It was always two bags, but she said it like usually she had more or should have had more. And I knew as well as if I had packed them myself what they contained, because I had been helping her unpack ever since I could remember. In the smaller suitcase that Ernestine liked to balance on her head, pretending she was a native in the jungle, were Cousin Mamie's clothes--several long thin flannel-feeling dresses that were mostly gray and brown and smelled like mothballs. And there was an extra pair of the sturdy ripple-soled Oxfords she wore which I called her ground-grippers. Also there was a nightgown and robe that smelled of bacon grease and a jar of cream she never used on her face, just her elbows. Her face looked like it had once been wet cement a chicken had scratched in.

In the other suitcase, the big leather one, she carried her Project. Cousin Mamie always had a Project going, and Grandma said it was because she was a very ambitious woman deep down inside. One year her Project had been making pictures for Christmas cards. She told me that she had found a booklet of matches in a street gutter and the cover on the matches read: THE INSIDE OF THIS MATCH COVER COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE. She figured that fate had singled her out to find that book of matches. She said it was the kind of luck you usually only read about. Inside, the matchbook told about a Howdy-Hi Card Company that was looking for artists to draw pictures the company could put on the front of greeting cards.

If you sent them a dollar, they would send you a paintbox and special artist paper so you could put your drawings down and send them back. That March Cousin Mamie spent most of her evenings painting pictures of snowmen and little redbirds she copied out of the World Book. She said the snowmen were easiest because they were just three little balls on top of each other, and anybody could make the eyes and nose and stick a pipe on. The redbirds gave her trouble, but I thought they looked real nice when she finished. The next Christmas I looked for her cards in the drugstore. I didn't find any of them, though there were plenty of snowmen and redbirds all right. And the next time I saw her she didn't mention the cards but was writing stories instead.

I didn't get to read the stories because Grandma said they weren't the sort I'd understand. But Cousin Mamie told me about some of them and how she knew they would sell because a manual she'd sent off for had said that sort of story always was popular. She said the manual told you just how to write one and which magazine to send it off to. All you had to do was pick some terrible news out of the newspaper to write about. Like a fellow backing into an airplane propeller or some lunatic locking up babies in an ice chest until they smothered. She told me the best newspaper story she ever found was the one about the crazy man who caught pretty girls and stripped their skins off to upholster his furniture with. She was writing about that one at the time

and figured she could most likely sell it for close to \$300. But if it got printed, she said, I wouldn't find it in any of the magazines at the drugstore in Potecasi. Those kind of magazines were sold only in big cities like Raleigh and New York.

Nobody knew much about Cousin Mamie, including Grandma, who made it her habit of nosing things out about everyone, whether they were kin or not. All we knew was that she was a blood third half-cousin of Grandpa's, and that made her close enough for family. We knew about her living in the boarding house in Raleigh and about Sylvester and her Projects. But that was all, because she was private about herself and quietly tended to her own business. It wasn't until Ernestine talked to me about Cousin Mamie's strange ways that I started seeing her in a different light.

"Miz Mamie is sho' peculiar," Ernestine had said, her mouth pinched up in a plump pink o, dead serious. And then she told me about the night she had heard a clatter in the kitchen and had gone to see if it was Grandma needing something. Ernestine slept in a little sideroom off the back porch where she could easily see the kitchen, and she said the first thing that struck her funny was that whoever was banging around in the kitchen hadn't bothered to turn the light on. "So I flicked the switch. And then I seen what it was, a-scootin' and a-huffin' under the table. Ol' Mistuh Possum what had slid hissself down the chimley for a bite to

eat. But that ain't all. It was Miz Mamie, too, down on her hands and knees a-scuffin' after that possum, talkin' to it sweet as you please, sayin', 'Here, possey, here, possey. Ain't nobody gawn to make a possey-pie of you.'" And when Ernestine imitated Cousin Mamie's voice, I had to bust out laughing because Cousin Mamie had a terrible voice that popped in her throat like cellophane being balled up. Ernestine did it perfect, too, only high and whiney. The whole time she was telling the story, Ernestine kept on that pokerface of hers and looked at me straight with giant eyes that didn't bat once. "I'm tellin' you, it sho' was a strange sight," she said. "Ol' Mistuh Possum and Miz Mamie going 'round and 'round under the table and Miz Mamie cooin' at him like he was kinfolk. Ain't nobody that's right about their head going to talk with a possum in the middle of the night." Then Ernestine told how Cousin Mamie had said to cut the light back out, that the possum was jittery because of the light. She'd make him to leave peaceful and didn't want to scare him no more than was needful. "And after I got back in bed," Ernestine said, "I couldn't get to sleep for seein' the two of them a-scuffin' back and forth in the dark. And it struck me how they was lookalikes somehow and might be sayin' strange things together that normal folks couldn't hear. Making sounds like them dog whistles do."

I had to agree with Ernestine that Cousin Mamie did take after a possum in looks, but I doubted if there was any

secret talk going on between her and the possum. Anyhow, Ernestine and I took to calling her Possum after that, just in private. It was mainly on account of how she looked which hadn't struck me till I heard the story.

Now if you've ever looked a possum in the eye, you haven't looked into much because they've got scrawny bitty eyes that gleam red at you day or night. Cousin Mamie's eyes were like that. Tiny pink and watery dots framed by flesh-colored spectacles fading against her face so that she didn't seem to have on glasses at all. And a possum's face is drawn up like a little old man's. So was Cousin Mamie's, and with not too much hair on top neither. But the nasty thing about a possum is its teeth and the way it grins those little teeth at you when it's mad. I never saw Cousin Mamie mad, but she sure could grin her teeth like a possum. And they were possum teeth all right. Like bits of brown and yellow seedcorn scattered across her gums. When she grinned the large gums took over her whole mouth, flashing so slick and solid that you sometimes forgot about the teeth. But they were there just the same--little ground-down nubs. You could tell she was proud of still having her own the way she was always grinning to show them off.

I was fourteen that March Ernestine and I started calling Cousin Mamie "Possum" behind her back. Ernestine and I had gotten to be real chummy since I had let it slip to her how I was sweet on Buster Weems who was two years older than

me and drove a convertible. Mama had just bought me my first tube of Tangelo lipstick and my first straight skirt, and Ernestine told me that along with those two things all I needed to hook Buster Weems was to eat a fourleaf clover every day. She took pride in being let in on my secret feelings about Buster and offered to dig me up the clovers herself if I would eat them. So most every afternoon after school, I would walk by Grandma's to eat the clovers that Ernestine could find fresh anytime I wanted them like a miracle. She told me that it was her special talent, finding fourleaf clovers so easy. "Comes natural," she said. "They jes' jump to my eyes." And she believed that if I ate enough of them it would work a spell on Buster Weems and cause him to invite me to the highschool prom.

I hadn't forgotten it was March and that Cousin Mamie was coming. I was just too busy thinking about Buster Weems, I guess, to give it much thought. Anyhow, one Saturday morning Grandma called and said Mamie would be at the bus stop in an hour and asked me didn't I want to go along to meet her. I said yes, I'd go, but it was habit and not my heart saying it. Me and Sugar Wooters, my best girlfriend, had planned to go down to the drugstore for a Co'cola that morning. Buster Weems worked the fountain on Saturdays and Sugar's boyfriend spent his Saturdays reading funny books there. I had it all planned how we'd sit in the back booth and Buster would bring me a cola and I'd put the dime in his hand, not just lay it

on the table. Then, maybe I might ask him about his convertible since it was brand-new and everybody asked him about it because he was so proud. Ernestine told me that was the way to catch a man. Ask him about the things he liked and pretty soon he'd be talking away about other things that might include yourself. But when Grandma called, I said yes because it was something I had always done and yes because I figured I could go to the drugstore later.

It was a fine windy day as I walked to Grandma's. It had rained the night before and every yard was the bright green color of Easter basket grass. As I turned into Grandma's I saw that the Judas tree was budding out purple, the little fluttery petals clear and sweet-smelling as grape jelly.

Ernestine met me at the door with her lips spread wide as her whole face in a pink-and-white smile. "A possum's come to town," she whispered, and we both giggled. I don't recollect it was out of meanness that we laughed. A laugh just tends to make you feel close to a person when you're both on the inside of a secret. I told Ernestine that I hoped it wouldn't take long to fetch Possum at the bus stop cause I had made plans to go with Sugar to the drugstore and see Buster Weems. "And you better eat a clover 'fore you go, too," Ernestine said.

We watched the big muddy Trailways roll up to the curb, and Grandma looked at her watch and said, "Ten o'clock

and right on the button." Through the dark, steamy-smudged windows we could make out the black and hunkered movement of someone poking down the aisle. "I see her. There she is now!" Grandma said, as if it could have been anyone else. The door of the bus flapped open and it was Cousin Mamie all right, grinning straight on at us and coming down the steps frontways this time, almost prancing with her head held high like some Hollywood star dancing out of a Cadillac. It took me a minute to get used to her coming off the bus so sudden, eager and full of herself like I had never seen before. I had somewhat gotten prepared for seeing her backend before her face and having time to think how I'd say my "hello's" while she took time to twist around and primp herself ready. But this time she was hugging and kissing on us before the bus driver had even got the doors shut. We were all surprised, especially Ernestine, who hadn't even gotten it out that she'd come to carry the bags home.

"Well, now," she said. "Ernestine, there's only one bag this time." And there it sat by the curb. The big battered leather suitcase she always carried her Projects in. The first thought I had was that she'd forgotten her clothes.

"Jes' one, Miz Mamie?" Ernestine asked, blinking.

"Yes, but it's heavy. So perhaps you and Elly best carry it together," Possum said in her dry crackly voice, smiling at me.

Grandma and Possum walked ahead of us, arms linked,

chattering. All the way back to the house Ernestine and I didn't say a word, lugging that heavy suitcase between us. We were both thinking too hard to talk, knowing all along what was going on in each other's heads, thinking how it must be that Cousin Mamie started going just a bit loony the last time she came to visit, talking with the possum and all, and this trip she had come to finish up the job. It was certain she wasn't acting a bit like herself.

When we got to Grandma's, the first thing Possum did was fish down inside her big black purse and hand both Ernestine and me a crisp new dollar bill apiece.

"Gawn and take it, now," she said, seeing how we were gawking at so much money being parcelled out for just one bag. "And I'd 'preciate it if you'd take it on upstairs and do the unpacking for me, seeing as I'm kindly wore out from the trip."

"I'll make some tea, Mamie," Grandma said. "Elly, you and Ernestine take the suitcase up and hang the things in the hall closet."

I had planned to leave at once and meet Sugar at the drugstore, but with that dollar bill sweating in my hand I figured I'd better do for Possum what she wanted done. I couldn't ever remember her being so bossy before.

"There ain't too many clothes this time," she called after us as we struggled up the stairs with the bag. "What cain't be hung up just lay out on the bed and I'll tend to

it later. I got me a trunk coming soon with the rest of my things."

Looking back at her, I saw her grin those rotten little teeth at us. Her eyes darted back and forth from me to Grandma like she was expecting us to ask what the trunk would be coming for. But neither of us did.

What made the bag so heavy was the books. About a dozen recipe books and one on etiquette and a big old family Bible that had shredded all over the sassy new dresses we lifted out. The dresses were silky feeling and printed all over with dainty little polkadots or flowers. None of them smelled like mothballs. There were three pairs of new pump shoes, too, with heels pointy as nails. I didn't see any ground-grippers at all.

"Now what she want with all them books?" Ernestine asked, shaking her head.

"I reckon she's fixing on studying cooking and manners this time," I said. But it was all the pretty dresses that made me curious. "Looks like a row of dyed Easter eggs," I said to Ernestine as we hung the dresses in the closet.

"She sho' had herself a shoppin' time," Ernestine laughed.

"Maybe she struck it rich." And I wondered if her story about the crazy man had gotten itself in print.

"Could be," said Ernestine, waving her dollar bill at me.

We unpacked the rest of her things--mostly face creams and perfumes and a heavy jewelry chest that was locked. At the very bottom of the suitcase was a new unopened makeup kit with a see-through lid. There was everything you could think of for doctoring up a face: powder, lipstick, rouge, eyepaint, and two pairs of fake eye lashes with a little bottle of glue for sticking them on. "I ain't ever even seen her wear lipstick before," I gasped.

"Maybe," said Ernestine, "jes' maybe she took a good look in the mirror glass and seen herself clear for the first time. That happens, you know, when folks is going crazy. Things come clear to them all of a sudden. Jes' maybe she done seen herself and decided to do something about it."

"I guess so," I said, thinking how terrible it would be to be going old and crazy and not know it until one day you looked in the mirror and your face jumped out at you like a wrinkled rotten stranger's and scared you half to death.

"Wouldn't look so bad if she kept from grinning them teeth," Ernestine said.

"Yeah, and there isn't any make-up kit going to fix those teeth." I shuddered inside with gladness Possum's head wasn't on my body, or it would be impossible to catch Buster Weems fourleaf clovers and all.

I knew I was running late and that Sugar wasn't going to wait all day at the drugstore for me, so I decided on the

way downstairs I'd just poke my head in the parlor and say good-bye without getting all bogged up in the talking. Ernestine said she'd run fetch a clover before I left. I decided if Grandma wanted to know why I was leaving so soon, I'd say it was an errand that needed getting done quick. When I walked into the parlor, the talk suddenly died down. Grandma was nodding, and Possum was grinning and grinned even wider when she saw me.

"Come over here, Elly-girl. My! My! But you sure are growing up tall and pretty as your mama." She held out an arm which she intended to hug around my waist as soon as I was close enough.

"I came to say bye for right now, Cousin Mamie." I didn't budge from where I stood.

"Elly, we got some tea made. You needn't be running off so soon," Grandma said, patting the cushion beside her on the sofa. "Your Cousin Mamie hasn't seen you for a whole year, and she's got some exciting news to tell, ain't that right?" Grandma was smiling almost as wide as Possum.

"I got to be running down to the drugstore on an errand now," I said.

"An errand can wait. You listen to what Cousin Mamie's got to say." Grandma's voice was firmer, but her lips were still soft in a smile.

"Come on in, Elly-girl. I ain't seen you in a whole long year," Possum said, as if I were deaf to what Grandma

had said. As if her being company gave her an edge on Grandma.

"It's a pretty important errand," I said in my most polite voice, knowing I'd pushed as far as I could.

"Here. I'm pouring you some tea. What Mamie's got to say won't take all day." Grandma had on her bossy tone, so there was nothing to do but sit down. All along I was thinking of Buster Weems in his stiff white sodajerk cap and how if I didn't make it to the drugstore soon the high school crowd would be in for lunch and Sugar would leave and I wouldn't have the nerve to go in alone. My only hope was that Possum would be quick about her news which I had figured out all ready as being that her story about the crazy man had brought her alot of money and she was planning to take a trip to Hawaii or some other foreign place. Else why would her trunk be coming and all those pretty dresses and shoes be upstairs? She had money now, lots of it, and she was going to take some fancy trip. But I would be polite and maybe miss a chance to talk with Buster Weems just so she could tell me what I already knew.

"My, my, Elly-girl, you sure look pretty in that blue dress," Possum started off, trying to make me glad I'd stayed. "She's getting some shape to her now, ain't she?"

Grandma nodded, smiling.

"Them legs that used to be so puny is getting some calf on them. Ain't two sticks no more, no sir. And she's

getting a bosom on her, too. Why I declare, Elly-girl, you're growing into a reglar little woman in just a year's time." The voice scratched at my ears like a bunch of splinters, and I felt as if I could've been sitting there naked for what all she was saying. I hadn't ever heard her go on so much about nothing. In my mind I could see Buster Weems setting a Co-cola down for Sugar and her looking up at the wall clock and wondering where I was. "Looking more like her mama everyday, ain't she? How old are you now, Elly-girl? Fifteen, sixteen? Lawsy me, it's sure hard to keep track of the years."

"She's fourteen, Mamie." Grandma said. "Had a birthday in January."

"Well, I declare. And here I was thinking you was sweet-sixteen-and-never-been-kissed!" Possum's grin busted full wide to let out a raspy loud laugh. I could feel myself getting hot in the face and madder by the minute. I gulped a swallow of tea and put the cup down in its saucer. "Bet you got a beau now, ain't you? Pretty gal like you's got to have a little billygoat a-chasing after her."

"Elly ain't got no interest in boys yet, have you honey?" Grandma had a proud sound to her voice like she was tooting a horn.

"I don't have a boyfriend," I said, looking down at the carpet, knotting my toes inside my shoes, thinking give me a little bit longer, Sugar.

"You will 'fore long, Elly-girl. You will 'fore long," Possum said, pinching up both eyes and trying to wink. I decided Ernestine and I had been wrong about Mamie going crazy. It was pure-t silliness and that was all. She was simply forgetful and silly and right that minute she was working on being mean, too, without knowing it. When I looked at her, I saw the meanest, most crumpled up old face I'd ever known, spitting out words that were as useless to me as that brand-new makeup kit upstairs was to her. Every slow and useless word hammered at my ears like the thump of some giant clock beat, whirring away the minutes. And then I was telling her how the family was because she asked; and then about school.

Finally Grandma said, "Well, now Mamie. Tell Elly your big news." And I couldn't believe she had said it. I had been thinking any minute I would ask her, interrupt the dull humming voice myself, anger aching me all over, stirring up my nerves. Then, I realized Possum had planned it this way--talking about me, catching up on my news so as to get it over with, hoarding her own till last like dessert.

When Grandma spoke, Possum's face, ordinarily the dried-up color of navy beans, pinkened as if it were cooking.

"Well now, just how to begin." She moistened her slivers of lips, holding them tight against the grin that was ready to bust out any minute.

"Just say it out plain. Tell it like you told me,"

Grandma said. I could tell it must be interesting news if Grandma wanted to hear it twice.

Possum opened her mouth as if to say something, but stopped because the grin split her face wide open.

"Blurt it on out, Cousin Mamie," I cried, irked it should take her so long with us being so close to the point. She was like a little child sitting there, hunched forward in her chair with excitement.

"I'm getting married," she said.

II

She went on and on about the man named Willard Scroggs and how they had met at the Pic-n-Pay shoe store where she bought her shoes regularly and where he worked. She said they had been like two magnets drawn together and it had been love at first sight on both sides. The more she talked about it, the more I could feel something inside me curling up. I could hardly look at her face which had gone soft and mushy as her words. I fell to only half-listening to the happy crackling voice drone on and on about her plans, thinking how I couldn't wait to tell Ernestine.

"Course I want you to be in the wedding, Elly-girl," Possum said. "Way I see it, a wedding ain't a wedding without bridesmaids. Willard ain't ever been married before, so he wants a nice ceremony with candles and flowers and all. His brother is going to be best man so he needs a pretty

young gal to walk out the church with."

I said I would do it and that it was mighty fine news. All the while I kept having to bear down on my teeth to keep from laughing. Then she asked me what my favorite color was because she had to pick out a color for the bridesmaid dress. I told her it was fire-engine red.

"That ain't no color for a springtime wedding, Elly," Grandma laughed.

I said no, but fire-engine red was my favorite color.

"Well, we'll settle on it later. We got three or four weeks yet." Possum paused to take a swallow of tea and I saw my chance, a little hole in the net of words I could squeeze through. I stood up real quick and said that it was almost lunch time and I had to run that errand. They let go of me easy since all the important news was out, both of them nodding and smiling and sipping their tea. I wanted to see Ernestine at once and tell her about Possum getting married and eat that clover I knew she had waiting. But I figured if I was going to catch Sugar at the drugstore, it was time I got down there in a hurry.

Two blocks from the drugstore I saw Sugar Wooters come huffing up the walk and I knew I was too late. Her face was red and rotten mean.

"Where you been, Elly Jenkins? I've been sitting in that booth two dang hours and you ain't ever showed."

I told her about Possum and how I had been trapped

and couldn't get out of it. "But please go back with me now, Sugar. Please."

"You're crazy as you look. I done drank six Co'colas waiting for you to show, and now I'm sick on my stomach and I ain't got no more money neither. "Sides," she asid, "me and Billy is broke up and I don't want to see his ugly face not one more time. And it's down there poked in a comic book. So that's that."

Billy and Sugar broke up every other week, so I figured I could get around that easy. "Please, Sugar. Emereda-Dem-eredda-Sweetpotato-Creamatata-Carolina-Bostwick." I said it to remind her we were best friends and that was our secret motto.

"Elly, it won't do no good anyhow."

"What you mean? I've been planning this for days. Don't let me down. He's there, ain't he? Buster's working today, I mean."

"Yeah, he's working all right, Sugar said with a grim mouth. "Working on being a stuck-up creep."

"Well, let's go then. Come on, Sugar, I'll buy you a hotdog. We can eat our lunch there. Come on before the highschool crowd takes all the booths."

"No, Elly. It ain't worth it. Oh, I might as well tell you. It's that Loretta Boone. You know, the one my brother says is hot as a firecracker. The one that wears them French lace britches in the girls' locker room. Got

all that proxided hair hanging down like Marilyn Monroe."

"Yeah?"

"Well, she's been in the drugstore all morning, wearing these tight white slacks you can see them britches through. Sitting at the counter, sipping soda after soda, breathing down his neck every chance she got, batting them made-up eyes at him. You could smell her all over the place. Had on some cheap perfume like the kind Billy gave me last Christmas only I threw away. I swear she must have taken a bath in the stuff."

"Go on," I said, weak feeling.

"There ain't much to go on about, 'cept she sat with them red-painted toenails hanging out of her shoes and letting that long yellow hair dangle down over one eye when she bent to sip her soda. I'm telling you, it was enough to make me throw up. And the worst of it is that I think she's got him hooked, cause when I left I heard him say something about taking a ride in his new convertible."

"You ain't making it up on me cause you're still mad, are you Sugar?"

"Come on, Elly! Emereda-Demereda."

"Okay," I said, feeling all bruised up inside like I had swallowed something heavy and hard and sharp. I hadn't counted on Buster Weems making me feel so hurt, putting a sadness inside me that had no purpose, that couldn't go anywhere but just lay hard and heavy as a rock. I felt a stinging

behind my eyes, thinking it was all Possum's fault. How she'd gone on with those useless words while the time ticked away and Loretta Boone made her move. I thought about myself sitting so polite and still in the parlor listening to an old dried-up voice talk about love and marriage and weddings which it didn't belong talking about in the first place. An angry tight feeling stirred around in my stomach on top of the sadness. She hadn't even left me time to eat that clover.

III

I put off going by Grandma's three or four days, hoping Possum would wear her mouth out in that length of time. Always before she had been quiet, working up in her bedroom on those Projects of hers. This time it seemed her Project wasn't a private thing. Instead it was something she needed to air her thoughts about and include all of us in. It was on the day the high school started the prom ticket sales that I went by. The prom was still three weeks off, but I had given up hope about going with Buster Weems as I had seen him and Loretta Boone cruising down Main Street every afternoon in his flashy car. The sadness was still heavy inside me, and I figured if anybody could cheer me up it would be Ernestine. A visit with her would be worth a run-in with Possum.

Grandma came to the door with her head wrapped in a terry cloth tea towel, a dustcloth slung across her shoulder.

"Good gracious, Elly, I'm sure glad it's you." She

said it like she had been expecting the Fuller Brush man and didn't have time for a mess of talking. I could smell Sunday roast all over the house and it was only Wednesday.

"Is he come already?" Possum's voice hollered from the kitchen.

"No, Mamie. It's Elly. Mr. Scroggs is coming to dinner this evening," Grandma said to me. "Called just an hour ago and said he was leaving Raleigh that very minute. We've been working like pack horses trying to get things set for him. Mamie's doing the food, and Ernestine and me are cleaning house."

"Well, I'll be going then, so as not to get in the way," I said.

Just then Possum's head peeped around the corner. "Hello, Elly-girl." She grinned, screwing up her tiny eyes and trying to wink.

"Hello, Cousin Mamie."

"Willard is coming to dinner tonight. How about that?"

"I know. Grandma just told me."

"And you'll get to meet him face to face." She sounded as if he was a famous movie star or the President.

"Oh, I have to be going now."

"Nonsense, Elly-girl, nonsense. I've got a five-pound roast in the oven. You stay and have dinner with us cause I've told Willard all about you and how you're going to be his brother's bridesmaid and what a pretty youngin you are. He's

just dying to see you for hisself."

"Maybe I can come back later," I said, moving fast as I could for the door.

"I won't take no for an answer, 'specially since I'm cooking up his favorite dishes and you ain't tasted my cooking yet."

"It'll be all right," Grandma said. "You just call your mama so she'll know."

"I got lots of homework, Grandma," I said.

"You can study till supper." She saw I still had my books, having just come from school.

"You know what Willard said when I told him you wanted the bridesmaid dress to be fire-engine red? You know what that rascal said? He said, tell that Elly-girl fire-engine red is my favorite color, too. How about that? You and him, you'll hit it off fine." And she threw back her head and wheezed out a hard dry laugh that made me shudder just to hear it.

"It'll be rude not to stay, Elly," Grandma whispered.

When the doorbell rang sharp at seven o'clock, Grandma told me to get it while she put in the biscuits. "He's come, Cousin Mamie," I shouted at the foot of the stairs. Possum had been upstairs getting ready ever since she had burned the carrots and Grandma had had to take over the kitchen.

"Well, howdy-dooddy, you're sure a cutie!" boomed

Willard Scroggs, laughing as I opened the door. And I stood looking up at a big handsome man that might have just walked off the screen at a cowboy movie. Under a big-brimmed hat which he tipped and then removed was a face as red as ham and bright black eyes sparkly as mica that crinkled at the corners when he smiled. He wore a string tie and under his plaid jacket one of those Western shirts with curlicue stitching around the pockets. I stood there staring, and he must have seen it because he finally said, "I'm Willard Scroggs, and this here's one of my dogs. Say hello, if you will, to the pretty gal, Pecos Bill." And from one of his huge coat pockets he took out a brown cur pup which he set on his shoulder. Pecos Bill cocked one ear forward and let the other droop. Then he whined like he was warming up and yipped twice. "He says hello," Willard Scroggs said proudly. "He's housebroke, too, so don't let it worry you."

"Come on in, I'm Elly," I said. And I just couldn't get it through my head that he was Possum's Mister Scroggs who was going to march her down the aisle. "Have a seat in the parlor, Mr. Scroggs, and I'll get Cousin Mamie."

"Aw now, Elly, if you and me is going to be cousins soon, you go on and call me Willard. Go on, say it now.

Willard. Cousin Willard."

"All right, Mr. Scroggs," I smiled.

"Willard."

"Willard," I said, feeling my cheeks get hot.

"Cousin Willard," he said, flashing a set of fine white Hollywood teeth at me. I hurried upstairs to knock on Possum's door, thinking Ernestine's eyes are going to roll out on the floor when she sees Mister Scroggs.

Possum called through the door, "You come on in and fasten me up, Elly-girl, and I'll be all set." I opened the door and what I saw then liked to cause me to say I got the wrong room. It was Possum in there all right. I could tell by the grin but not by anything else. For a minute I thought it could have been Loretta Boone aged about sixty years. There she stood with one of those slinky new flowerdy dresses on, the one that was the color of wild strawberries. Her cheeks were rouged glossy but looking more like she'd been belted good, and her mouth was smeared greasy red. I thought at first it might be bleeding. But the part that made me gasp and slap my hand across my mouth, her looking on and everything, was seeing what sat atop her head: a hunky wig of shiny curls the color of scrambled eggs.

"Surprise, Elly-girl, it's me," she laughed, flouncing around so that I could get the pictures at all angles. And when she screwed up her scrawny eyes at me and tried to wink, I saw she had got those fake lashes on and hadn't done too good a job at it either. Above her washed-out little eyes they jutted and fluttered big-looking as crow feathers. About the time I was thinking that, one of them popped off and floated to the floor.

"Oh, there goes that silly thing again," Possum said, huffing after it. "You cain't get them glued on right for me, can you, Elly-girl?" I said no, I didn't know much about fake lashes. Very carefully she peeled the other lash off and put both of them on the dresser. "Guess that might be overdoing it a bit anyhow," she said. "Sides, every time I blink it makes me feel I'm about to lift off." I hooked her dress thinking I didn't know which was going to cause the biggest stir with Grandma and Ernestine: Mr. Scroggs looking half Possum's age or Possum trying to look half his.

"Well I'll be pea-turkey proud," Willard Scroggs exclaimed when Possum came strutting into the parlor. And he hugged her and kissed her smack-loud on the cheek. What I had thought was funny before I didn't think was so funny now, seeing him taking her get-up so serious. It made me boiling mad to watch him lovey-doveying a dried-up old woman who didn't know her place any more. What it was was her making him a fool, having him believe she was young and still had lots of hair. It made me sick and mad to watch the two of them, her clinging to his arm and batting those eyes she must have thought still wore the fake lashes. I guess I had half-expected him to bust out laughing when he saw her, and it would have given me the excuse to do it, too. But there he was, holding her hand and saying over and over how fine she looked and didn't she smell sweet as a dandelion. Then he made Pecos Bill sit on his shoulder for her and say hello.

All through dinner I kept trying to catch Ernestine's eye. But she bustled in and out of the dining room, busily dishing out the food, and never once looked my way. Most of the talk was about the wedding and how they decided it should be in Potecasi since Cousin Mamie's only kinfolk lived here except for Sylvester, and Florida was too far to go. They finally decided on pink for the bridesmaid dress. Willard Scroggs did most of the eating, too, telling Possum what fine cooking it was after she had volunteered that she had fixed it all. Grandma was quieter than I had ever seen her, her mouth drawn tight as a string.

After supper, Willard Scroggs scooted his chair back a bit, patted his belly, and took out a toothpick. "Pecos Bill will take it kindly if we save him the scraps," he said. Then he announced that he and Possum were going to a movie, that he never missed a John Wayne and there was one playing down at the picture show he had seem coming into town, After the two of them had left. Grandma sat quiet in her chair, shaking her head. "I just don't know," she sighed. "I just don't know what to make of it." Then she got up and went in the bedroom across the hall and picked up the phone.

"I don't know, it ain't so unusual if she's come into some money and he knows it," Ernestine said as the two of us were washing dishes. "My gran'mammy what is ninety-three years old has been through four husbands and wasn't but one of them more than half her age."

"But it ain't only that," I said. "It's her fooling him. Painting up and hiding her real self."

"She's got him, though, ain't she?" Ernestine laughed. "She's got her man. And did you see? Clinging to him at the table like a possum to a tree?"

"It ain't fair," I said. "He can't be all that blind. Anybody can see it ain't her hair. Anybody can see it."

"She's got her man," laughed Ernestine.

IV

The wedding was on the first Saturday in April, same as the prom. Slipping the sugary pink bridesmaid dress over my head, I was thinking how it should have been the prom I was going to, not Possum's wedding. I remembered the day I had sat listening to Possum talk about Willard Scroggs and had missed my chance with Buster Weems. I decided that right about now Loretta Boone was taking her orchid corsage out of the icebox and stepping into those black lace britches I hoped would show clean through her evening gown. It gave me a pain deep down when I thought of him being took in and flaunted by her like some trophy cheated for and won.

Mama came and rapped at the door. "The music's started, Elly. You ready?"

I said yes, I guessed I was, and she cracked the door a bit to peep in. "That's too much lipstick, Elly."

I wiped it off and she handed me a bouquet of pink and white baby roses. "There. You look real sweet. Step out in

the hall and you can hear Mrs. Tandy." I didn't have to step out in the hall to hear Mrs. Tandy. Already her voice and the organ were fighting it out and she was coming out loud and strong on top. The little fluff of pink netting clipped to the top of my head trembled.

"Where's Cousin Mamie?"

"Grandma's helping her to fix her veil. You go in, too. She's got a bad case of the jitters. You tell her good-luck."

"Has Mr. Scroggs got his brother here yet?" I asked. I had imagined lots of times since seeing Willard Scroggs that maybe his brother was about my age and handsome, too, and that's why they wanted me to be the bridesmaid.

"No. Mamie said he went to fetch him at the bus-station around ten. Now you go on in and see her."

When I opened the door of the little dressing room, I saw the reason Possum had the jitters. She looked real fine till you got to her face which was scrubbed and plain as an old potato. She didn't have one speck of face paint on and was wearing her own hair screwed up in gray little coils stiff and crisp as bed springs.

"Here's your glasses, Mamie." Grandma said. Possum put them on and looked her old crinkled self again. I hadn't seen her that way for over two weeks, and as far as I knew Willard Scroggs hadn't ever seen her without her being all rouged up and blonde-headed. I figured it was Grandma who

had talked to her private about not looking like a hussy on her wedding day. Grandma had a way of talking folks into things and setting them straight. So I guessed Possum had the jitters on account of her having to face Willard Scroggs looking her true self. And I wondered what would happen if right down there at the altar in front of everybody Willard took the notion to say "I don't" instead of "I do." There she stood in that long cream-colored dress, poking at those kinks of hair that looked to be freshly unwound from bobbie-pins and talking about how nervous she was. Watching her like that, her seeming so helpless and unsure and wanting to know if her veil was on straight or if the back of her dress would wrinkle too bad if she sat down to catch hold of herself, I felt myself going soft inside. Soft like when me and Sugar was mad at each other and then one of us would break and say the Emereda motto. But it wasn't exactly that simple either. It was something guilty and sad way down deep that I couldn't touch but wouldn't go away, rubbing and sort of a nuisance like a cat winding in and out between your legs. Right that minute I wanted there to come a miracle that would change her little Possum face into a regular face. Not young or pretty exactly, just regular and nice like Grandma's. I wanted to be able to give her a boost, tell her she looked nice, but it wasn't in me to say it just yet. So I stood there watching, letting that melty feeling work a shame in me.

Then Grandma said, "Well, that does it. Here's the

Bible and the orchid." Possum had wanted to carry her family Bible, that big tattered thing she had brought in her suitcase. But Grandma had said she'd need at least a wheelbarrow to get it down the aisle. So Possum had settled on a little white Bible that belonged to Grandma and had a lavender ribbon pressed between the pages which she said would match her orchid.

Mama tapped on the door and said it was time that she and Grandma took their seats because Mrs. Tandy was into the last hymn before the Wedding March. Grandma squeezed Possum's hands and said, "Smile at Willard when you walk down. You look real fine."

Possum nodded and I saw she wasn't smiling at all. Not the least little grin threatened her mouth. It was clamped tight shut and the corners were all trembly. I patted her arm and said, "It'll be all over before you know it, Cousin Mamie."

I gave the organ a little time to get into the Wedding March before I started down. It was playing soft for me because I wasn't the main attraction. I walked real slow in a little two-step Mama had showed me and had time to count the backs of seventeen heads and recognize some of them. Up front of the church were two big sets of candles and a big spray of yellow roses that had been sent along with a telegram from Sylvester. Standing off to the side of the candles was Willard Scroggs and his brother, both of them looking dark and slick in their monkey-tails. The brother didn't look a thing

like Willard except for his ham-red face. He was bald and fat with three chins hanging over his bow-tie, and I figured my luck just had to run like that. I flickered a little smile at the two of them after I had crossed in front and settled myself on the chalk spot marked in the carpet. Willard whispered to his brother, loud enough for anybody to hear, "That's Elly-girl." Then, I held my breath and waited while everybody craned their necks to see what would come next. I prayed, "Let it be a miracle, Lord," while the organ boomed and the pink and white baby roses sweated against my gloves.

The night before at practice Possum had said she had the two-step down perfect. But being jittery like she was, I guess she forgot, because she came practically leaping down the aisle with her veil streamed out behind her like a flag. The whole time Willard watched her, his eyes black and shiny, his mouth flashing those Hollywood teeth. And when she bobbed up to him, he grabbed her tight like he could have eaten her up. And the whole church must have heard when he whispered, "Well, I'll be pea turkey proud."

That night I lay awake for a long time, my brain swimming with the wedding sights and cake cutting which had been held in Grandma's back yard. I could see Possum plain as day, flouncing around the punch table in her flapping long dress, grinning and sure of herself as ever, feeding a piece of wedding cake to Willard. The photographer took a picture of them

posed like that. And I had finally got the nerve to say and halfway mean how nice she looked, knowing all along I was too late with it. That it didn't matter and never had mattered and this time it was me with the useless words and inbetween and in the way all at once.

V

Possum and Willard moved off to Alabama which is where he had kinfolk and a better job lined up. I didn't think much about them after they had gone. Except every once in a while I'd see Buster Weems and Loretta Boone and it would all come back to me. But then, after a bit, that stopped too. It was the next January when Grandma got Possum's letter. It came two days after the funeral, telling that Willard Scroggs had died of a heart-attack. Along with the letter was a newspaper clipping that told he was forty-seven years old and a member of the Rain City Shriner's Club and went to Free Lord Baptist church where he sung bass in the choir. It seemed strange getting to know him all over again from a clipping that said he was dead. I hadn't known anybody who had died before, except Grandpa. That had been when I was little and I couldn't remember much about it except seeing him laid out kind of yellow-colored in the coffin with roses up to his chin. I remember how it scared me, looking down on him. I had never seen him lying down, and he was so still and yellow and small-looking. Grandma must have known how I felt because she had touched my shoulder and told me not to worry about it.

That it wasn't Grandpa I was looking at. It was just his body. She said his soul is what made him Grandpa, up and walking and laughing, but that his soul had gone away except for the little piece of it she was going to keep inside herself. She said that when folks loved each other, they exchanged little pieces of soul for keeps, like gifts. So when I wrote Possum a note to tell her how sorry I was about Cousin Willard, I put the part in about her always being able to keep little bits of his soul. Somehow, though, it was harder to imagine Willard Scroggs as being just a soul than Grandpa. I couldn't picture him all laid out and waxy-faced, and I didn't want to. I figured Possum was crying her eyes out and had a right to, and that was the strangest part. I hadn't ever seen her without that sassy grin on her face except the one time before her wedding. And I thought how so much changing went on in so little time. How things you thought you finally understood or wanted to keep the same moved on past you, different, and you were supposed to be ready for them but never were. Change was something you only half-expected, and when it happened, it was like a balloon bursting in your face.

After the letter about Willard we didn't hear from Mamie for a good while. Then, one Saturday morning, Grandma called up and said she had gotten a postcard. It was mid-March and the Judas tree was blooming again.

On the way to the bus-stop I tried to plan it out in my mind what I'd say to her. I decided I probably wouldn't

say anything about Cousin Willard since the letter I'd sent her had done all that. I figured she'd be all teary-eyed and mopey when she saw us and him dying would be the last thing she'd want to be remembered of. But if I did say to her how sorry I was that Willard was dead, it just couldn't come out like that. I'd have to find a softer way to say it, use some word that kind of skimmed around the big black hole sound of death. Over and over I said the word to myself, listening to how it whispered cold and hard against my teeth, an ugly hateful sound like the way Grandma said Sylvester. Only quieter and with more breath to it. When I said it to myself, I could picture Cousin Mamie all red-eyed and pucker-faced, but I couldn't picture Cousin Willard at all.

She came off the bus midway between backwards and frontwards this time, pulling at the bags we couldn't see. Ernestine moved to help her but Grandma said, "Not yet, Ernestine. Give her time." And so we waited as she climbed down and adjusted her hat and tugged at her gloves. Then, she turned a wide and wobbling grin on us and I saw she had Pecos Bill in a cloth satchel hung on her arm.

"Say hello to the ladies, Pecos Bill," she said in her dusty voice, and he yipped twice. You could see his tail thumping through the cloth bag. We all hugged her, and then she said there were three bags this time, one of them being a guitar in a case. "Willard's guitar," she said, not a tear in her voice. When she said his name so cheerfully, like he

might hop off the bus any minute, it slapped me hard. "I wish you could have heard that man sing!" laughed Cousin Mamie. "Why he sang like there was a valentine stuck in his throat." And all the way back to Grandma's she told us about what a fine duo they had made and how they had written a bunch of songs between them. She said that with a little bit of luck and the right contacts she bet she could get those songs published in no time.

"Well, Mamie, if anybody can do it, I reckon it's you," Grandma said.

Later, Ernestine said how we should have known that when a possum falls out of a tree, it picks itself up and climbs right back. Somehow, her saying it was a comfort, and I was glad this time when Mamie asked me did I have a boyfriend I could still say no, meaning it, watching her beam and grin like always.