"THE FRIENDS OF GOD SUFFER": FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S SHORT FICTION AS METHOD AND MODEL

By

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DEDICATION

Many people have helped to make a graduate degree a reality for me, but this thesis project represents a great deal of effort and support from two people that I cannot fail to mention. First, Dr. Jeffrey Melton, my thesis director, went so far beyond his duty as a professor that he continued to read and make revision suggestions on my fiction even after I moved to Colorado. His wisdom and guidance have always proven beneficial to me, and I am deeply grateful for his interest in my work. Last, but no less important, my husband Tim deserves a medal for giving me his generous financial and emotional support. He willingly ran our household in Colorado while I completed a semester of coursework on the Auburn University Montgomery campus in Alabama. It is with earnest appreciation that I dedicate my thesis to these two men. Thank you both for believing in me.

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INTRODUCTION: O'CONNOR'S METHOD

Flannery O'Connor's life, her writing, and her personal library receive much continuing analysis even amid attempts by a some individuals to stifle or at least slow the abundance of such scholarship. Considering that upon her death in 1964 she left behind a rather small collection of fiction, what more can be said of her work that has not already been communicated over the last fifty years? My own interests have led me to examine and explore O'Connor's work from two different angles: analytical and creative. Specifically, I am interested in how O'Connor crafts her short stories to evoke Christian mysteries. I also want to employ some of her techniques in my own writing. She once wrote, "It has always seemed necessary to me to throw the weight of circumstance against the character I favor. The friends of God suffer, etc." (Fitzgerald 121). I certainly see the impact and value of a conflicted protagonist, and I intend to create such characters in my own fiction. This will not be a mimetic effort per se; rather, it will be an exercise in authorial skill and a creative exploration inspired by O'Connor's powerful fiction.

In order to accomplish my task, I first need to revisit some past O'Connor scholarship. Beginning with the 1950s, analyses have enhanced understanding of O'Connor's work not only through studying the basic elements of fiction and the religious aspects of her writing but also through exploring the development of her thought, the formal and structural patterns of her work, and, most recently, the

phenomenological intersections of her work. In spite of all this study, however, work remains in the areas of both reader response and the author's correspondence.

Most readers are introduced to O'Connor as a preacher of sorts. In Modern Critical Views: Flannery O'Connor, Harold Bloom calls O'Connor a "visionary writer . . . determined to take us by force, to bear us away so that we may be open to the possibility of grace" (3). Patricia Yager's essay "Flannery O'Connor and the Aesthetics of Torture" offers a secularized reading that clearly observes O'Connor's methods and that experiences the fiction viscerally but not spiritually. This theorist forges some intriguing connections between fictional violence and both the author's "sadistic" mentality and the weakening white supremacist society of O'Connor's time. However, I object to Yager's well-written analysis on two specific grounds. First, this theory invites specious criticism of O'Connor herself, for while Yager does hedge her claims with literarily defensible terminology, words such as "sadistic" remain a visible component that encourages readers to associate such perversity with O'Connor herself. At no time in her life did O'Connor manifest an unnatural love of cruelty. Furthermore, the fictional violence in her work is just that: fictional. It is a literary device employed not for the author to gain ego satisfaction but for the author to communicate a religious message. This segues into my second objection, namely that Yager deliberately ignores the anagogical function of O'Connor's work.

I'm proposing a corrective that reaffirms O'Connor's art undermined by certain critics and provides additional context for O'Connor study. O'Connor wrote to the entire individual: body, mind, and spirit. In discussing her fiction O'Connor often used imagery.

Her 1955 letter to "A" refers to O'Connor's unbelieving audience as "chickens." She writes, " . . . the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead" (Fitzgerald 90). O'Connor's 1950 letter to Robbie Macauley clarifies how this insight applies to her fiction: "I am largely worried about wingless chickens. I feel this is the time for me to fulfill myself by stepping in and saving the chicken . . . . I believe in the complete chicken" (Fitzgerald 21). Spiritual revelations are the main point of O'Connor's fiction, and this is precisely the area of my concern. How does O'Connor communicate this anagogical level to readers, and how, precisely, does she craft her work in order to allow for this elevated progression? In the critical portion of my thesis, I extract from her correspondence a theory designating four features that reveal how the author propels the story onto the anagogical plane and moves characters toward the "grace-event" (Getz 27), a moment which dramatizes the redemptive, completing action of the Divine on behalf of the human.

I apply this theory to four of O'Connor's short stories. I selected "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" because most people have read and are familiar with it. "The River" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" together form a chiasmus, and this structural feature allows readers to observe diametrically opposed postures of relationship to God. Finally, the unfortunately titled "The Artificial Nigger" was O'Connor's favorite of all her short stories. She once wrote that it was "probably the best thing [she would] ever write" (Fitzgerald 209). I have chosen to use it for this reason.

By reviewing and reassessing O'Connor's use of religion in her short stories and by applying her fictional technique in part to my own work, I hope both to contribute to our understanding of her work and invigorate a vital element of Southern fiction that remains significant in the twenty-first century. I agree with O'Connor's perception of wingless chickens; however, I am concerned not only with the wingless state but also with humanity's adaptation to it. In a world still struggling to reconcile knowledge and faith, O'Connor's work still has much to teach readers and writers about what it means to fly.

CRITICAL THEORY: "SAVING THE CHICKEN"

O'Connor employs several methods in order to communicate spiritual occurrences to her readers. First, supernatural events happen in the pauses between one physical activity and another. Second, some kind of loss moves the characters toward an experience of grace. Third, the contrast between good and evil probes the nature of evil, and finally, symbolic associations with both obvious natural phenomena and manmade objects isolate moments of supernal recognition. These four features propel characters toward an offer of Divine redemption that frequently results in their salvation.

Exploring the Revelations within Caesuras

O'Connor asserts in her correspondence that "the meaning of a piece of fiction only begins where everything psychological and sociological has been explained" (Fitzgerald 300), and the fulfillment of such explanation occurs before the characters halt their physical journey. Gilbert H. Muller and others have made much of movement or lack thereof in O'Connor's stories, but it is precisely when O'Connor's characters stop moving physically that the anagogical action—the suffering of God's friends—begins. This is the time that the characters' spiritual quests begin in earnest, the time that O'Connor forces them "to confront that religious mystery . . . that felt presence which can never be wholly understood, which exists but is inexplicable" (Muller 54). These pauses indicate a shift from human actions in the temporal world to supernal events with eternal significance, and

the resulting rest promotes the characters' introspections and recognitions of the action of grace.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" provides one example of this outer rest and inner movement. The family's first stop occurs at Red Sammy's where they eat lunch. Red Sammy Butts orders his wife around, demanding that she quit talking about the Misfit and get back to work. Although he sees her conversation as repetitive nonsense and treats her as if she were an imbecile, she possesses more knowledge and wisdom than either Red Sammy or the Grandmother. During the conversation, both Red Sammy and the Grandmother see others as the source of evil. Red Sammy "remembers the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched," and the Grandmother "says that in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now" (142). These two characters see the faults in everyone else, but they fail to see the imperfections within themselves. Mrs. Butts is the only one who realizes that there is not "a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust . . . . And I don't count nobody out of that, not nobody" (142). Clearly, Sammy's wife has the epiphany during the family's initial pause from activity. At this point she alone understands the extent of man's depravity. By focusing attention on Mrs. Butts' insight, O'Connor highlights the Grandmother's ignorance in order to intensify the old woman's revelation experience near the end of the story.

The Grandmother's family members make their final stop after their auto accident. Once they get out of the wrecked car, the Misfit drives up and he, too, gets out of his vehicle. As the Grandmother and the Misfit talk about the Christ, the action shifts from physical to spiritual. Up to this point, the Grandmother's movement occurs on a

physiological plane with dialogue and narrative description revealing her psychology and sociology. For instance, movement initially depicts rather mundane, physical dramatic actions such as a quiet family day at home or telling children a story. Ironic and satirical humor carries the reader along these passages as though one were drifting in the safe ocean shallows on a pleasant day. Everything is visually bright and sharply defined, and the occasional swell lifts the reader with the type of intermittent amusement typical of O'Connor's wit. No matter how much depth one may find in the beginning of a tale, however, the real excitement and meaning in an O'Connor work comes only when the story moves onto the anagogical plane. When everyone stops after the car accident, most further activity originates from God, and the characters' postures of rest shift the focus from their own acts to that of Christ's redemption.

The importance of the pattern of movement and cessation is also reflected in "The River." First Harry/Bevel and the Connin boys stop at the pig pen. The Connins "didn't move. Something seemed to have happened to them" (158). They kindly remark that Harry/Bevel can see the pigs by lifting the board, and when Harry/Bevel follows their directions, the "gray, wet and sour" face of the hog pushes him backward. Harry/Bevel and the pig scramble across the field and stop at the house—the frightened boy inside and the belligerent pig outside. Mrs. Connin tells Harry Bevel a story to calm him and shows him a picture of Jesus driving out demons in the form of "gray and sour-looking" pigs, thus tying the color gray and the image of pigs to the devil. The humpbacked swine reminds Mrs. Connin of Mr. Paradise, and Harry begins to connect figure of Mr. Paradise with the demon-pigs.

Movement resumes again as the small group walks to the faith healing service via the forest where Harry/Bevel "had never been . . . before and he walked carefully, looking from side to side as if he were entering a strange country" (161). When Harry nears the water, people are standing near the water's edge, and the preacher stands in the water. Physical movement ceases by the river; "cars and trucks were parked" (161). Even Mr. Paradise has stopped, and he sits "like a humped stone on the bumper of a long ancient gray automobile" (163). Another spiritual dimension of the story takes place at this point. First, the preacher talks about the river, saying that "there ain't but one river," meaning the river of Christ's blood. He goes on, "All rivers come from that one River and go back to it like it was the ocean sea . . . . It's a River full of pain itself . . . moving toward the Kingdom of Christ" (162). When human beings stop moving, the focus shifts to the natural movement of an actual river representing the spiritual movement of souls toward God. At this point, the preacher baptizes Harry/Bevel, thus performing upon the boy an outward sign instituted by God to give men grace.

Movement again resumes with the boy's return to his parents, and he wanders listlessly around their drab apartment. He begins to think about the river only after he stops moving physically. His expression changes "as if he were gradually seeing appear what he didn't know he'd been looking for" (169). At this still, quiet moment, Harry has a revelation and knows he wants to go back to the river. He retraces alone the steps that he previously took with Mrs. Connin, and once he arrives at his destination, he bounds into the water and stops. Gazing at the water, Harry knows that this time he will "baptize"

himself in the river, and he intends to "keep on going this time until he finds the Kingdom of Christ" (170). In other words, Harry means to lose his life in order to save it.

The ironically named Mr. Paradise follows Harry/Bevel to the river and tries to rescue him, but the "waiting current caught [the boy] like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down" until he "knew that he was getting somewhere" (171). Harry/Bevel purposely drowns himself in the river rather than return to a life of neglect in the apartment. His physical movement ceases completely in death, but Mr. Paradise's grotesque water monster form stands in the river "empty-handed," symbolizing Mr. Paradise's atheism. Losing the boy to the river gives him pause, and he contemplates the action of grace that he has witnessed: Harry/Bevel's soul leaving the world and entering the "strange country" of God's Kingdom (161).

Both "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "The River" depict souls moving toward God only after physical motion stops; however, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" portrays this technique working in reverse. Instead of approaching God, Mr. Shiftlet runs from Him. While Shiftlet works on Mrs. Crater's humble estate, he is surrounded by God's presence, filling the days with the possibility of revelation. For example, the planets and the moon move about as though making a heavenly visitation to the Crater farm, but this testimony to the Creator goes unrecognized. All Mr. Shiftlet can see are the improvements that he has made. His plan to "make the automobile run" foreshadows his desertion of Mrs. Crater's daughter Lucynell and his flight from God into Mobile. Furthermore, Mr. Shiftlet compares his spirit to an automobile: "the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move" (179), thus revealing both his restlessness indicative of a

lack of God's peace and his intention to leave the farm behind. He marries the afflicted Lucynell, taking her on a honeymoon in order to get the car away from Mrs. Crater. When the couple stop at a diner, Lucynell falls asleep. The boy behind the counter recognizes Lucynell as "an angel of Gawd" (181), but the heedless Mr. Shiftlet deserts his deaf and dumb bride at the diner so that he can have the car to himself.

Shiftlet picks up a young hitch-hiker on the way to Mobile, and in speaking of his mother to the young man, Mr. Shiftlet really talks of Lucynell. Recalling the words that the waiter at the diner says of Lucynell, Shiftlet says with apparent grief that his "mother was a angel of Gawd . . . . He took her from heaven and giver to me and I left her" (183). The boy interprets these words literally, and when he sets the record straight, the reader understands the truth in his words: "You go to the devil!" he cried. "My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!" Mr. Shiftlet has fooled nobody but himself by substituting his mother for his wife in the story. In casting off Lucynell, he has thrown away his chance to live "where [he] could see the sun" set clearly behind the mountain peak (173), and thus his restless spirit rushes toward the city and away from God.

Shiftlet feels oppressed after this and prays for the Lord to "break forth and wash the slime from this earth" (183). "The rottenness of the world" is not about to "engulf" Mr. Shiftlet, but the rottenness in his own soul is (183). In answer to Mr. Shiftlet's prayer, a storm breaks with "a guffawing peal of thunder" and "[crashes] over the rear of his car" in order to wash him away (183). While Lucynell rides in the car with him, the "afternoon was clear and open and surrounded by pale blue sky" (181). The sunny weather associates the presence of God with her. After Shiftlet deserts her, however, he moves completely

away from God and into a stormy world. O'Connor employs the tension between activity and rest to move the story onto the anagogical plane and to reflect the human soul's position in regard to the Divine. While Shiflet is in the diner, the waiter explicitly identifies God's presence in the character of Lucynell. As Shiflet confronts the choice of whether or not to bear willingly the cross of Christ by caring for his wife, readers observe the results of the Holy Spirit's invitation to embrace redemption. Shiftlet rejects God and refuses to work out his salvation through being a good husband. Instead, the only thing that gets converted is the locus of responsibility. Shiftlet shifts from conjugal duties to those of vehicle ownership.

Perhaps "The Artificial Nigger" provides the best example of revelations occurring within caesuras. Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson initially move from the farmhouse to wait for the train at the railroad junction, and here O'Connor employs pathetic fallacy to make the passing trains seem fearful of emerging from the dark. After being "hit for a second by the cold sky," the trains "vanish terrified into the woods" (213). In fact, Mr. Head, not the train, fears emerging from the dark and seeing by the cold light of truth. The trains rushing from tunnel to tunnel depict the human proclivity to stay busy, and like human beings, the trains do not "want" to stop because this rest would bring about introspection. Perceiving and understanding one's own humanity is frightening. The train that Mr. Head and Nelson wait for will stop "merely to accommodate them" (211), thus it foreshadows the insight into themselves that the two will gain on this journey.

After disembarking the train, the two keep moving until their walk through the city brings them to stop at a scale. The machine weighs the 110-pound Mr. Head at 120

pounds and the 68-pound Nelson at 98 pounds, thereby overvaluing their weights. Naturally the fortunes that the machine dispenses are incorrect also. Mr. Head is not "upright and brave" and admired by all his friends. He is clearly a racist, a depraved human being who has helped other racists run "a nigger" out of the county (212). Nelson's fortune is similarly erroneous. He should not "beware of dark women"(220); instead he must experience "black forms moving up from his unconscious" in order to begin to understand the concepts of redemption and suffering presented later in the story (Fitzgerald 78).

Their next stop involves an understanding of the physical workings of the underside of the city. The sewer system represents downward motion into a supernatural realm. Mr. Head shows the sewer to Nelson in order to make the boy fearful, but although shaken, Nelson "understood for the first time how the world was put together in its lower parts" (220). First Nelson connects the sewer with the "entrance to hell" (220), but Mr. Head thinks this as well because after he denies his grandson, he feels that he could slide into the sewer and disappear. In "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor writes that the descent into the self will be "through the darkness of the familiar into a world" where one experiences "the beginning of vision" (821). Although in the essay O'Connor speaks of vision in regard to the novelist, applying this perspective to "The Artificial Nigger" reveals Mr. Head's and Nelson's physical descent into the city as indicative of the supernatural discoveries that they will make there.

Upon continuing their tour, they get lost and stop again for directions. Nelson approaches a large black woman and experiences what appears to be his first stirring of

sexual attraction; however, O'Connor's correspondence indicates that she "meant to suggest the mystery of experience" to Nelson through his contact with the "black mountain of maternity" (Fitzgerald 78). That O'Connor wanted to show "black forms moving up from [Nelson's] unconscious" leads one to view the scene as one in which Nelson connects to what Carl Jung identifies as the collective unconscious (Fitzgerald 78). One notes an unusual segue between Jungian and Christian ideology. O'Connor utilizes Nelson's unconscious connection with the black forms to depict the beginning of his comprehension of human unity. Thus at this stop, Nelson learns of his oneness with African Americans.

Mr. Head's and Nelson's lessons continue to increase in significance when next they cease their physical activity. After Nelson insists on resting, Mr. Head accuses him of "grinning like a chim-pan-zee" while the black woman gives directions (224). However the sunlight that reveals everything exactly as it is portrays Mr. Head "[hunching] like an old monkey on the garbage can lid" (225). The story delves ever deeper into the identities of grandfather and grandson, indicating the beastly nature of humanity apart from God's grace.

Immediately after this scene, Mr. Head and Nelson run wildly down the street and do not stop again until Nelson runs into a woman and the collision results in a fall. The visible occurrence of a fall renders an understanding of the event in supernatural terms. Fearful of trouble, Mr. Head denies knowing Nelson, and both experience a spiritual fall into sin, Mr. Head through denial of his grandson and Nelson through the resulting hate for his grandfather. After continuing farther Mr. Head stops at a water spigot and thinks

that he can mend the breach between him and his grandson if they both drink from the same fountain. However, Nelson refuses, and Mr. Head "loses all hope" (228). Nelson's mind "had frozen around his grandfather's treachery as if he were trying to preserve it intact to present at the final judgment" (228). Both characters exhibit depravity, but Nelson feels "a black mysterious form reach up as if it would melt his frozen vision in one hot grasp" (228). This feeling foreshadows the power of the statue to evoke the mystery of the crucifixion.

The final cessation of movement occurs when the two see "the plaster figure of a Negro sitting bent over on a low yellow brick fence" (229). Before the statue, they at last experience the grace-event, and feel the "mystery," the "monument to another's victory . . . . dissolving their differences like an action of mercy" (230). In light of the statue's supernatural reference, the early morning argument between Mr. Head and Nelson about whether or not Nelson had "ever seen a nigger" takes on added significance (212). Early in the story, neither of the two would have looked beyond the surface of an African American's skin in order to see the deeper truth of suffering and redemption. The reader understands that when the grandfather says that Nelson has "never seen anything before" and is "ignorant as the day he was born" (215), the old man actually speaks of his own shortcomings as well. As he stands before the statue, the "mystery of existence" finally brightens Mr. Head's mind, and he replies that "they ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one" (230). After the grace-event, the language of the story ascends in a manner corresponding to Mr. Head's spiritual insight: there are no real "niggers." Both characters experience the grace-event that unifies them with mankind.

O'Connor's work consistently employs the contrast between movement and cessation in order to portray the occurrence of spiritual events. Each of the many arrests shifts the focus from the concrete to the abstract, dramatizing the invisible action occurring in the souls of the protagonists. Each stop leads them deeper into themselves until they recognize their depravity or until, like Mr. Shiftlet, recognition fails them and they run away from God. When Mr. Head and Nelson receive the action of grace, their journey into the depths of the soul effects a gain in altitude that results in a larger view (Fitzgerald 78). As such, this story, along with others, demonstrates the confrontation of religious mystery and teaches "wingless chickens" to recognize the action of God's grace.

Exploring the Function of Privation

Every one of O'Connor's central characters experiences loss and agony that propel him or her onto the anagogical plane because "some kind of loss . . . is necessary to turn the mind toward faith. If you're satisfied with what you've got," O'Connor explains, "you're hardly going to look for anything better" (Fitzgerald 159). In "The Artificial Nigger," Mr. Head loses his way in the city, eventually denying any connection to his grandson Nelson. Before the journey, the old man believed that he "had never disgraced himself before" (227), but after he wrongs his grandson, he loses his delusion that he requires no mercy. He comes to see himself as he is: a soul in need of redemption. Mr. Head also loses Nelson's respect and thereby shares in human misery for the first time. Bereft of hope, Mr. Head feels Nelson's "steady hate, traveling at an even pace behind him and he knew that (if by some miracle they escaped being murdered in the city) it would

continue just that way for the rest of his life. He knew that now he was wandering into a black strange place, . . . a long old age without respect" (228). Mr. Head finally experiences a tiny part of what victims of racism know well.

Realizing his helplessness he cries out for mercy, "Oh Gawd I'm lost! Oh hep me Gawd I'm lost!" (228). Mr. Head, himself a racist who has helped persecute African Americans, now understands the depravity of mankind apart from goodness. He feels directed against himself the animosity and sense of superiority emanating from Nelson whose eyes were "triumphantly cold," having "no light in them, no feeling, no interest" (229). At last Mr. Head understands "what man would be like without salvation" (229), and in his own suffering, the anguish of others begins to have meaning.

After being thoroughly humbled the old man receives an answer to his prayer for help. Only at this point do he and his grandson stand before the statue and receive God's grace. Had Mr. Head and Nelson seen the plaster figure before experiencing bereavement, the effect would not have been the same. These losses motivate them to seek mercy and forgiveness, divine blessings recognized as he and Nelson "stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat" (230). Just as he earlier casts off acknowledgment of his grandson, Mr. Head must finally cast off his pride, humbly realizing and confessing his need of redemption before the grace-event can take place.

"The River" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" form a dramatized chiasmus of loss. In the final baptism scene of "The River," Harry/Bevel finds spiritual life through physical death. Once he returns to the river, he knows that he will "baptize"

himself and "keep on going this time until he finds the Kingdom of Christ" (170). In other words, Harry/Bevel means to lose his life in order to save it. As discussed before, Mr. Paradise fails in his attempt to rescue the boy. Harry/Bevel purposely drowns himself in the river in order to escape a life in which he "didn't even count before" and to embrace a spiritual life in which he "counts now" (165). Mr. Paradise's grotesque, monstrous form stands in the water "empty-handed" (171), therein symbolizing the boy's escape from this world. Harry/Bevel loses his earthly life in order to gain spiritual life in the "strange country" of God's Kingdom (161).

Conversely, Mr. Shiftlet in "The Life You Save" seeks personal, worldly gain. He calculates his every word and action in order to get the old car away from Mrs. Crater, and he stops at nothing to achieve his goal. He lusts for the car so much that he marries the afflicted Lucynell in order to get it. When he says that he would "give a fortune to live where" he could watch the sun set behind the mountain every evening, his "pale sharp glance" has already "passed over everything in the yard," including the "shed where he saw the square rusted back of an automobile" (173). The reader perceives that what Mr. Shiftlet truly desires is self-sufficiency as represented by the old car, not the nearness to God that he sees afforded in the farm's magnificent sunset.

Shiftlet casts off his soul when he casts off his wife Lucynell, and he commits this desertion in order to gain the car and the city unencumbered by the responsibility of caring for his wife. Additionally, both Mrs. Crater and Mr. Shiftlet play each other for fools; therefore, both end up losing that which is most important. The old woman's ravenous appetite for a son-in-law and Mr. Shiftlet's greed for the car lead each of them to devalue

the proximity to God via nature, a closeness which they already possess not only in the farm but also in the person of the angelic Lucynell.

Although in speaking of women Mr. Shiftlet asserts that he "wouldn't have any of this trash [he] could just pick up," and he wishes that "he lived in a desolate place . . . where he could see the sun go down every evening like God made it to do" (175), he is not really interested in living the pristine life that his words indicate. He finally gets the car that he has always wanted, but he gains this material object at terrible cost to himself. He lives only for the worldly, physical dimension of this life. Because he is running from God and His grace, Mr. Shiftlet literally drives himself into the city, a man-made landscape that represents the absence of God. Thus in summary, Mr. Shiftlet, a grown man in "The Life You Save," loses his spiritual life in order to gain the world whereas in "The River," a young boy, Harry/Bevel, loses his earthly life to find his spiritual life in God.

Finally, in "A Good Man," the Grandmother's family is brutally shot in cold blood before the Grandmother recognizes the mystery that the Misfit is "one of her own children" (152). This idea of belonging occurs not only in O'Connor's correspondence but also in her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country." Quoting from Saint Cyril's instruction of catechumens, she writes that everyone goes on the journey to the Father of souls, but to get there each one must pass the dragon (806). All souls go on the same trip, albeit individually. Further, orthodox Christian belief asserts the mystery that Christ became Man, not just a man, and as such, He died for all souls, even the Misfit's murderous one. A person's response to this doctrine does not change the quality of the mystery in any way; therefore, all souls are unified and are at various particular stages of

the journey past the dragon whether they have faith in God or not. This vision of unity strikes the Grandmother at a critical moment: after the deaths of her family and just before her own.

Reaching out to the Misfit in his agonizing battle with the dragon costs the Grandmother her physical life, but the resulting moment of epiphany indicates her movement to a higher plane of existence. Whereas earlier in the story she sees the "cute little pickaninny" but fails to be moved to an act of compassion for the child living in poverty and under oppression (139), later the Grandmother experiences a revelation of her unity with another. Understanding prompted by the Grandmother's own experience of loss moves her to her compassionate act. To a degree, this is what he Misfit apprehends when he says of the Grandmother, "She would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (153). Loss always moves characters toward something better or, as in the case of Mr. Shiftlet, what the characters themselves believe is better.

Exploring the Nature of Evil

In O'Connor's work, evil exists as "the defective use of good" (Fitzgerald 129). For example, the Misfit of "A Good Man" apologizes for not "having on a shirt before you ladies" (148). His good manners are those of a man conscious of particular social mores, but these societal requirements do not change the fact that he is a murderer. He kills the Grandmother's son not only to safeguard himself but also to make himself "decent." The Misfit requires a death in order to make himself socially presentable before

the ladies, but he is unable to accept on faith the death of Christ so that he might be made spiritually presentable before God. Thus the Misfit takes something that God uses for man's eternal good, specifically the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, and employs it in a defective, temporal way.

The Grandmother also employs good defectively. She verbally instructs John Wesley and June Star in good manners and respect for others, but she lacks the very qualities that she seeks to inculcate in the children. On one hand the Grandmother gives particular care to her physical appearance, clothing herself in fine garments so that anyone who might see her "dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (138). On the other hand she lacks the inward gentility that she outwardly effects. She tells the children that "people did right" in her day and points out the remains of a plantation (139), but as previously mentioned, she ignores the racism, poverty, and oppression that she, her generation, and the agrarian system helped to create and perpetuate. At The Tower, the Grandmother upbraids June Star for the little girl's callous behavior toward the cafe's proprietress, but the old woman fails to see and correct her own poor conduct. Without modeling polite, respectful behavior toward others, the good lessons that she communicates to the children have little or no positive results. Here, O'Connor employs the defective use of good as a foil. The Grandmother's hypocritical stance throughout most of the story contrasts sharply with her revelation experience near the end, thus emphasizing the Grandmother's moment of grace.

In "The River" the character that makes defective use of good is Mr. Paradise, a man who epitomizes a huge boar. With the cancerous growth on his forehead and his

large, fat body, he presents a grotesque picture, but he is not the devil per se. He functions much as science does in the life of the Christian believer: he challenges faith. He derides the preacher, laughing when Harry/Bevel says that his mother needs healing from a hangover. Mr. Paradise represents the unbelieving world that ridicules and scorns those who believe in the spiritual realm. However, while Harry/Bevel mentally connects pigs and demons to Mr. Paradise, readers would not automatically term Mr. Paradise bad.

Far from engaging in the outright evil that one usually expects of the devil, Mr. Paradise earns his living honestly and does not go about purposely harming people. However, in this his character deceives much in the same way that evil deceives. Mr. Paradise simply lacks faith in God. He wears his gray hat at a jaunty angle to show off the unhealed, cancerous bulge on his forehead, and he points out that the pitiful, sick woman who stirs the waters of the river and emerges unhealed has "been that way for thirteen years" (163). He believes that neither she nor he has been touched by God because there is no God.

In A Wreck on the Road to Damascus, Brian Able Ragen asserts that O'Connor frequently employs motor vehicles as multivalent symbols, and Mr. Paradise's car represents man's self-sufficiency. Additionally, cars in O'Connor's stories often take the reader away from God. This is true for a time of Haze Motes in Wise Blood who drives around in his auto and says that "nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (64). As already noted, it is also true of Mr. Shiflet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." However, unlike Haze or Mr. Shiftlet, Mr. Paradise is not running from God because he rests, literally, on man's invention, man's provision for his own needs. He sees no need of

salvation and no need to run away from something that he does not believe exists in the first place.

Mr. Paradise exemplifies the defective use of good in that he tries to live an ethical life within the bounds of what he accepts as reality. He embraces only what can be conclusively proven and denies the reality of a spiritual, eternal dimension to life. In "The Catholic Novelist in the South," O'Connor observes this separation of the mortal and immortal realms in not only American writing but also American life. Although in the essay she approaches this supernal/empirical dichotomy from the view of a religiously motivated author, she explores this separation in her fiction as well. Mr. Paradise's character portrays "judgment . . . separated from vision; nature from grace; and reason from the imagination" (864). Again, his reason so grounds itself in nature and what can be empirically proven that he fails to exercise the faculty of his imagination; thus, although he means well in trying to save Harry/Bevel from drowning in the river, his judgment ultimately lacks soundness because he does not consider all the factors involved, specifically the spiritual ones. O'Connor ends "The River" by confronting Mr. Paradise with the action of grace occurring in Harry/Bevel at the moment of death. Witnessing the child's movement from the natural world into the spiritual world challenges Mr. Paradise to recognize and accept the concept of grace, and this open ending leaves both Mr. Paradise and the reader in a moment of recognition that prompts the questioning and analysis of the nature of good and evil.

Mr. Shiftlet also depicts evil as the defective use of good. The work that he does to improve the farm is not inherently evil, but he has his focus so tied to his own

accomplishments that he misses the incredible spectacle of the movement of the planets. He shifts from merely observing the value of nature to ignoring it completely. Shiftlet also assists the two women and thereby does many good deeds, even going so far as to marry the afflicted Lucynell; however, he does all these things not to help others. He seeks to provide for himself. Again, one normally admires those who work to support themselves, but when Mr. Shiftlet accomplishes this task by ruthlessly hurting the Craters, he practices evil as the defective use of good.

Mr. Shiftlet indicates yet another defective use of good in his discussion of the heart surgeon who "don't know no more about [the human heart] than" Shiftlet himself does (174). Science may study the physiology of human beings, but it can never reveal the spiritual nature of man. Shiftlet asks the philosophical question, "what is a man," but his only reply is that he himself is "a carpenter" (175). He sees himself in physiological and sociological terms alone and makes no reference to his soul. Only later does he assert his possession of a "moral intelligence," and for that brief moment, his "face pierced out of the darkness into a shaft of doorlight and he stared at [Mrs. Crater] as if he were astonished himself at this impossible truth" (176). He does possess such an intelligence, but he disregards this epiphany, brushing it aside as impossible. Shiftlet cannot accept what cannot be empirically proven anymore than Mr. Paradise or the Misfit can.

O'Connor's fiction comments further on science and the self-sufficiency of man when Mr. Shiftlet says that "the monks of old slept in their coffins" (176). Of course, the monks carried out such acts to symbolize their dying to this world and God's having prepared them for eternal life in the next. Old Mrs. Crater, however, assures Mr. Shiftlet

that the monks "wasn't as advanced as we are" (176). This tongue-in-cheek humor reveals two realities: a worldly reality in which the monks indeed were not as advanced as the current state of society, and an ironic reality that comments on the so-called advanced nature of man and that emphasizes not man's worldly progression but his spiritual regression. People usually view scientific discoveries in a positive light, but O'Connor challenges the perception that a scientifically advancing society that denies both the soul and its ultimate, eternal destiny is truly advanced.

Yet another treatment of evil as the defective use of good occurs in "The Artificial Nigger," a story in which Mr. Head uses his authority over his grandson, Nelson, in negative ways. Mr. Head wants to accomplish several things with the boy. He wants to diminish Nelson's overweening pride in being city-born; he wants Nelson to behave less impertinently and more respectfully toward him; and he also wants Nelson to be content in the country so that the boy will not grow up and leave home. None of these desires are essentially evil; however, Mr. Head's motivations are rather selfish and immature. For instance, he does not like to wake up after Nelson and thus lose the little game that the two of them play, but he attributes this feeling to the boy instead of himself.

Moreover, Mr. Head initially engages in delusion, thinking of himself as "a suitable guide for the young" (210), as somehow above the boy because of his old age. He determines that Nelson needs a lesson in humility, but Mr. Head fails to perceive his own pride. Additionally, when Nelson does not recognize a man on the train as an African American, Mr. Head denigrates Nelson by purposely emphasizing the boy's ignorance. Time and again, Mr. Head exemplifies prejudiced attitudes for Nelson, thus teaching the

boy racism. Furthermore, he purposely exposes Nelson to the most unattractive parts of the city rather than providing a more balanced view, consequently failing to encourage Nelson to develop a strong ability to evaluate circumstances accurately. Finally, when the moment comes for Mr. Head to accept responsibility for the boy, he denies knowing Nelson. Mr. Head has clearly abused his parental authority, thereby defectively employing something meant for children's good. With all this evil, one might expect the sewer in the story to open its mouth and suck the old man down to hell, but instead the reader encounters a twist to the idea that evil is the defective use of good. Rather than causing harm, evil in this story contributes to the character's spiritual good. By acknowledging his own sin, Mr. Head prepares himself to experience God's grace.

Overall, the short fiction reveals that O'Connor employs the defective use of good as a foil against which events and activities in the spiritual realm may be recognized, but her stories reveal something more as well. The murdering Misfit who agonizes over faith, the shifty Mr. Shiftlet who believes in yet runs from God, the atheistic Mr. Paradise, and old grandfather Head—all these characters commit sin, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Evil appears in unexpected ways and unusual places.

Exploring the Function of Symbolism

For O'Connor, "the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe" (Fitzgerald 128), and these concrete items reflect not only various facets of the spiritual realm but also the mysterious intervention of God's grace on earth. Some compare "A Good Man's" Tower café to Hell and Red Sammy Butts to the devil. O'Connor certainly

portrays The Tower itself as "a long dark room" (141), and just outside the building, Red Sammy has chained a small, gray monkey to a tree. Like the "little pickaninny" chained to his "shack" (139), the monkey's state recalls the physical enslavement of African Americans and points to the spiritual enslavement of mankind who, apart from Christ, is shackled to sin. Chained to her husband as surely as the monkey is to the tree, Red Sammy's wife provides another example of bondage. As discussed before, she leaps to do Red Sammy's every bidding and is treated as though she lacks sense when in reality she functions as the only discerning character in the story until the Grandmother experiences God's grace and reaches out to the Misfit. This particular use of symbolism in "A Good Man" reveals similarities between the degeneration of those on earth and those in Hell and turns attention briefly away from the Grandmother to focus on Mrs. Butts. In this way, symbolic associations contribute to intensifying the Grandmother's moment of recognition.

Another instance of symbolism occurs when the "line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth" (146). This image of death is further dramatized when the wind moves through the trees like a "long, satisfied insuck of breath" (149). Additionally, the Misfit "don't see no sun but don't see no cloud either" (147), much in the same manner that he cannot see by faith whether or not Christ "did what He said" (152). Hence by its absence, the sun becomes a representation of Christ, and O'Connor thus dramatically portrays the Misfit's lack of faith.

In "The River," O'Connor employs contrasting symbols not only to emphasize the physical traits of characters and geographical locations of both good and evil but also to

depict the spiritual state of the characters. For example, the "scum of gray cloud" recalls the gray, wet, sour face of the hog that chased, but did not catch Harry/Bevel. Similarly, in the story of Jesus driving demons from a man's spirit, the demons appeared in the form of "gray and sour-looking" pigs, thus tying the color gray and the image of swine to the devil. The boar-like Mr. Paradise wears a gray hat and sits on the bumper of a gray automobile. Here the use of gray links Mr. Paradise to evil even though he is the character who, at the end of the story, tries to save Harry/Bevel from drowning.

The color gray functions throughout the story, shrouding various objects with a funereal-like pall. For instance, the "almost colorless" sky evokes a gray, cloudy day that dims the sun (164). The preacher's serious gray eyes reflect this sky, and later in the story, the sunlight appears gray when it shines through the dingy window of Harry/Bevel's apartment (168). These items contrast boldly with the vibrant red, orange, and yellow ascribed to the "River of Life" (162), thereby signifying the difference between the heavenly realm and the sick, wart-ridden world of man. Obviously, the gray scum coating almost everything in the story represents the worldliness and evil that tries to shut out God's light; whereas, the brilliant white Sunday sun represents God's presence, a presence that Harry/Bevel does not connect to the preacher or any other human being. Instead, he sees God in the beauty of the river.

As he nears the river, Harry/Bevel gambols about joyfully "as if he wanted to dash off and snatch the sun which was rolling away ahead of them" (161). Here O'Connor employs the sun as a guiding force that leads Harry/Bevel to the river and, ultimately, to his physical death and consequent spiritual rebirth. The sun's reflection "set like a

diamond" in the orange river furthers this idea. Harry sees the sun—Jesus Christ—reflected in the water and decides that the Kingdom of Christ is his ultimate destination. By using color and various objects symbolically, O'Connor creates a landscape that emphasizes the location of the grace-event.

Additional symbols occur in the first baptism scene in which the forest lies on the near side of the river, but the tree line, indicative of spiritual death, lies on the other side. O'Connor utilizes this depiction of two deaths in order to deepen the significance of the river as a conduit from the natural to the spiritual world. In other words, everyone will die physically, but one can bypass spiritual death or the other side, so to speak, by immersing onself in the River of Life, Jesus Christ.

Notably, Harry/Bevel's eyes are not on the river while the preacher delivers his evangelistic message. Instead the child watches yet another symbol: "two silent birds revolving high in the air" (162). Behind the tree line across the river the "city [rises] like a cluster of warts on the side of the mountain," and these two birds, buzzards portending Harry/Bevel's physical death, light on the highest pine on the other side of the river and sit "hunch-shouldered as if they were supporting the sky" (163). O'Connor employs prominent yet common objects and imbues them with such detail and significance that the reader will find these natural phenomena and their resulting spiritual relationships difficult to miss.

The cities in O'Connor's work become a kind of viral infection plaguing the land and separating man from the knowledge of God through the imposition of a gulf between man and the natural landscape. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Shiftlet

remarks that one has to "escape to the country to see the world whole" (175), the antithetical implication being that the city is not whole but somehow maimed or afflicted. Again one recalls that in "The River," the city rises from the landscape "like a cluster of warts" situated beyond the tree line (163). This fungus provides a natural image of decay and sickness. By employing towns in this way, O'Connor indicates the self-sufficient view that humanity has of itself, and she juxtaposes this view with a portrayal of man's need for God. Like Haze Motes, Mr. Shiftlet possesses a good car; therefore, Mr. Shiftlet believes that he has no need for God's grace. He rushes into the city of Mobile in order to distance himself from the supernatural realm.

The gray, turnip-shaped cloud filling the windshield of Mr. Shiftlet's vehicle lends a grotesque and ominous touch to "The Life You Save" as does the raucous laughter attributed to the thunder. The sunlight that represents God's presence in the world has been blocked out by the enormous cloud formations before and behind the car. This contrasts with God's presence in the cloud and pillar of fire that went before and behind the Israelites as they escaped Egypt. Those biblical phenomena revealed the Divine protection over Israel, but the dark and descending clouds surrounding Mr. Shiftlet express qualities associated with spiritual death in that they are "the exact color" of the hitch-hiker's gray hat (183), a color which indicates the dimming of God's light.

Earlier in the story, Mr. Shiftlet's features are juxtaposed with those of the landscape surrounding the Crater farm. During the evening, the sun "[appears] to be balancing itself on the peak of a small mountain," whereas Mr. Shiftlet's features "balance over a jutting steel-trap jaw" reminiscent of Milton's depiction of the maw of hell in

Paradise Lost (172). In the farm's landscape, the sun balancing at the peak of the mountain draws the eye upward toward the heavens and focuses the eye on the light which represents God's light shining over the earth. Conversely, Mr. Shiftlet's features "descend in forehead for more than half its length" (172), placing the emphasis on the spot where his features "end suddenly" in a mechanical, steel-trap jaw indicative of an almost insatiable avarice, a greed which Shiftlet reinforces every time his eyes rest on the Crater's car, the real object of his desire (172).

Additionally, the planets and the moon move about the landscape as though making a heavenly visitation to the Crater farm, but Mr. Shiftlet thinks only of his own handiwork. When the old woman says that she will pay for the car to be painted, "Mr. Shiftlet's smile stretches like a weary snake waking up by a fire" (179). Describing Shiftlet in terms of a serpent graphically depicts his subtlety and further links him with the devil.

Finally, natural symbolism in "The Artificial Nigger" emphasizes the characters' spiritual state. First, the moon silvers everything in Mr. Head and Nelson's bedroom, making everything seem finer and casting a "dignifying light on everything" (210). Moonlight makes ordinary objects seem noble; however, it does not shine on Nelson who sleeps in the "only dark spot in the room" (210). The moon appears "grave"; it seems "to contemplate itself with the look of a young man who sees his old age before him" (210). This "miraculous moonlight" gives Mr. Head's eyes the "look of composure and of ancient wisdom as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men" (210). However, later in the story we find that he is not a great guide because he denies knowing his

grandson when the boy gets into trouble. Mr. Head's "youthful expression by daylight" indicates his immaturity, whereas Nelson looks "ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it" (212).

The moonlight reveals Mr. Head's comforting delusions. Although physically old, he lacks inward maturity. He plays a game with his grandson, seeing who can get up first in the morning, and says that his grandson doesn't like to be beaten. While one sees nothing unusual in an adult playing a game with a child, readers learn that Mr. Head doesn't like to lose the game any more than his grandson does. He plans to take Nelson to the city to prove a point to the boy. Nelson "was to find out that the city is not a great place" so that he would be satisfied to live at home (211). Nelson should also learn that he's not as smart as he thinks, but in the end, Mr. Head learns this lesson for himself as well. In contrast with the stories formerly discussed, the country moonlight of "The Artificial Nigger" exaggerates Mr. Head's value in his own eyes, but in the city, he sees reality.

The moonlight that presides over the first part of the journey provides a foil for the sunlight in Atlanta that "sheds a dull dry light on the narrow street," making "everything look like exactly what it was" (225). Notably, Mr. Head looks like "an old monkey" at this point (225). His being an old monkey attributes a particularly obnoxious racial stereotype to the old man, and this portrayal of him gains significance when Nelson, offended by his grandfather's denial of him, refuses to acknowledge Mr. Head or to drink from the same water fountain as his grandfather. Mr. Head, obviously a racist, incurs

treatment similar to that which he has visited upon others, and he incurs it not because of his skin color, but because he disgraces himself.

The story takes its title from the major symbol in the story, the statue of an African American locked into a permanent position of subservience. The appearance of the statue reveals an attempt to force gaiety on the oppressed, just as white supremacists attempt to force gaiety on the black man in his misery and servitude. The statue symbolizes white supremacist society's desire to keep the black man forever beneath the white; however, that society "has cracked" like the crumbling wall that attempts to fix the statue (229). In brief, O'Connor partially employs this story to comment on the terrible pride of white supremacist society. By confronting such hubris, Mr. Head becomes aware of his need for mercy.

Similar to "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The Artificial Nigger" depicts the Christian mystery of the unity of man. Because all humanity is unified in Christ, the statue also depicts the African American sharing in and helping to complete the suffering of the body of Christ. This symbol serves as a reminder of the redemptive act, and it faces Mr. Head and Nelson "with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat" (230).

Again, Mr. Head epitomizes white supremacist society. After behaving like an unthinking, unfeeling beast, he stands before the statue and finally understands that mercy "grows out of agony, which is not denied to any man," and that this agony "is all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him" (230). Mr. Head sees the depth of his depravity and

understands, too, that "no sin is too monstrous for him to claim as his own" (231). Hence, he realizes the terrible tragedy of racism as a horrible sin committed not only against the African American but also against the self.

Although O'Connor masterfully employs literary devices and techniques, her work gains significance because it responds to other works of literature and to philosophical ideas opposing Christian belief. Secular interpretations of O'Connor's work remain a viable and as yet unexhausted avenue of exploration, but my concern is that such analyses will tangentially embark on a direction of study that may ultimately ignore the anagogical significance of O'Connor's work. The cessations of physical activity, the experiences of loss, the contrasts between good and evil, and the various treatments of symbolic associations in O'Connor's fiction move characters and readers together toward an offer of Divine redemption. Contrary to Yager's view, I am neither being "obsequious in quoting and agreeing to O'Connor's point of view" nor merely converting a so-called "primitive sadism" into "an old and comfortable theology (191). I am simply examining O'Connor's work in an inescapable context. One does not have to believe in or politely accept the religious message that O'Connor communicates, but to ignore the message's presence or dismiss it in any way damages her work's eligibility for the literary canon. Because her writing communicates an orthodox Christian perspective that forms a dialogue with other writings and other ideas on a world scale, O'Connor has crafted more than intriguing regional fiction or merely entertaining stories. She has created notable literary art, one worthy to serve as a complex and evocative model for readers and aspiring writers alike.

The study of her work enlarges my perspective and moves me toward greater awareness not only as a reader and writer of fiction but also as a student of human nature.

INTRODUCTION TO PERSONAL FICTION: TOWARDS A NEW O'CONNORIAN ETHIC

While O'Connor's work uses both the presence and the conspicuous absence of familiar, concrete symbols, the two short stories in the creative writing portion of my thesis, "Potiphar Bought Him" and "My Dear Companion," focus primarily on physically present objects. Specifically, I employ images from a concrete and visible realm in order to reveal something occurring beyond the material world. Additionally, my main characters suffer because it is only through pain or hardship that we achieve growth. Further, I believe that while conflicts can and do arise from without, a person's greatest struggles arise from within; therefore, I strive to craft fiction that depicts the protagonist's inward struggles with outward reality.

Naturally, great differences between my work and O'Connor's exist, a chief contrast being our differing treatments of the protagonist. She once wrote, "It has always seemed necessary to me to throw the weight of circumstance against the character I favor. The friends of God suffer, etc." (Fitzgerald 121). However, while both O'Connor's heroes and mine suffer, I tend to create this effect without subjecting my protagonist to the extremity of death. The potential for such an O'Connoresque resolution exists, but my work does not always require such finality in order to portray what Jefferson Humphries describes as "askesis, a movement towards the Holy" (118). Summarily, in my fiction I attempt to extend O'Connor's theatrical dynamic and to rework her specific approach.

Such a fictional experiment may, I hope, both contribute to our understanding of O'Connor's work and help define my own.

POTIPHAR BOUGHT HIM

Joseph's eyes stretched wide and dilated to take in shapes in the gloom. The air smelled fishy and rank, and the heat lay heavy against his skin, making it hard to breathe. Escape loomed beyond a murky wet slip, and through a gap between two wide-planked doors, Joseph could just make out the shadowy outline of the padlock dangling from its chain. He couldn't reach the lock. Days ago, he had counted off fifteen steps across the base and twelve steps down one side of the U-shaped dock surrounding the wet slip and stretched his arm out as far as possible toward the chain, but to no avail. The river sloshed its secrets gently against the weathered shed, leaves whispered in the breeze, and somewhere in the distance a mourning dove cried.

He hoped Willie wouldn't come back. Joseph wished he were strong enough to pound the blood out of Willie's face. He tried to fight back, but it never did any good. Someday he'd be big and nobody would bother him anymore. Willie would be old, and Joseph would be the strong one then. Until that day he'd keep hoping his mom and dad would find him.

Mom would be praying for him. She always said her prayers at night, and he sometimes snuck out of bed to hear her say his name. He liked that part the best. She would say, "God bless Joseph and watch over him." Maybe God didn't hear Mom. Why else would he be here in this place?

Somewhere far off, a small boat hummed across the water. When he heard it, he felt like a big ol' green tomato hornworm was crawling up the knotty bones of his back, but the worm wasn't on the outside. It was inside, writhing behind his stomach and making him sick a little.

He crouched behind the side wall. "Jesus," he whispered, "you're supposed to be my friend, so if you really are, help me." The engine got louder. Joseph thought he might throw up, but the motor cut off outside the boathouse. He froze, staring at the door and listening for the chain's rattle, his heart thudding in his ears. When nothing else happened, he pressed his face against the splintery wood and peered through a small gap in the wall planks. Dirt and grass stretched back into the trees behind the boathouse. He shifted to look out toward the water and saw a man fishing. Joseph started to yell for help, but he couldn't tell if it was the bad man, Willie.

He stayed where he was and watched to see what he could learn. The man had on a funny hat like the one that Grandpa fished in, but Willie might decide to wear a hat sometimes, too. It didn't look like he was doing anything. He sat there a long time without moving. Maybe he was just fishing.

After a few more minutes, the man's arms started moving, and he threw a pole in the back of his boat. Joseph saw his chance and called out, "Help," but his tongue felt like a big balloon in his mouth. He couldn't get anything around it.

He swallowed hard and tried again. "Help!" This time he was louder. The man would've heard him if the boat motor hadn't started just then. He tried once more, even

though that sick feeling in his stomach told him it was no use. The river swallowed everything whole: the boat's wake and Joseph's cries disappeared together.

Still peering outside, Joseph saw some birds flying in the treetops across the river. He heard the soft noise of some wildlife scratching in the dirt and grass behind, and felt that maybe the whole world was moving on without him. He thought about his mom and dad and wished that fisherman had come to help him. He could've ridden away in that boat before Willie came back. Before he made Joseph do things again. Before he got sick or really scared like when he had peed on himself.

He hated the way Willie bent him over, holding him down with big, meaty fingers, not like Mama's soft touch on his cheek at night. That was love. Mama never made him do things that felt ugly. Even Daddy, who was a lot harder than Mama, never scared the pee out of him, but sometimes Willie did. Joseph hated him even more for making that shame run down his leg to puddle on the floor where he had to look at it.

The more Joseph thought about it, the more certain he became that he had to get away. His chest got tight just thinking about leaving. He remembered an Indian guide he saw on television one time and wished that he knew everything that the guide did.

Indians knew things like the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. They knew about moss on trees and animal tracks. On the show, sometimes the guide looked at the poop an animal left behind, or he smelled and tasted the dirt, figuring out what he needed to know.

Joseph couldn't imagine how any of that would help get him out of the boathouse, but he didn't have anything to lose by trying to figure out what he needed to do, especially

since nobody was around to laugh at him. "Okay," He thought. "I'm out here on the water. I don't know how to swim real good. Maybe I could practice. Maybe I could swim away." A shadow of fear swelled from inside him at the idea, pressing him down, and he longed for Mama and Daddy.

He'd been coming home from Tommy's house when the man had tricked him. He said Daddy had slipped and cut his toe on the lawn mower, and Mama had taken Daddy to the hospital on an emergency, and Joseph should go with him. Joseph had seen the man a couple times before, but didn't know him too good, so at first he didn't believe him. "Mama wouldn't send a stranger for me," he said.

"She didn't want to," he replied. "She tried callin' your friend's house first, but when nobody answered, she figured you were on your way home. Your dad was bleedin' pretty bad, so she didn't have time to call anyone else. I happened to be passin' by at the time and saw the whole thing, so I offered to help out. I could see she was torn, but your daddy was grittin' his teeth tryin' to pretend everything was fine, then he just passed out, fainted right away. That scared her a little, but I told her he'd be okay once he got to the doctor. I helped her get him in the car, and they drove off. She said I should buy you supper. My name's Willie."

Joseph had been worried about his dad, but Willie had said, "Don't worry. I won't hurt you. Everything's gonna be just fine." The part about not hurting him sounded weird to Joseph, but he'd been so worried about his dad that Willie had gotten him in the car, taken him to McDonald's, and bought him a happy meal. Joseph kept saying he needed to go home, but Willie said Joseph's Mom knew where he was, and it was okay.

At the time, Joseph wasn't sure he believed that, but he'd been hungry, so he'd eaten his happy meal in the car while Willie drove away with him. Playing with Tommy all day and eating that food made him tired. The car kind of swayed a bit.

The last thing he remembered was the CV drugstore on the edge of town. They passed it, and he remembered waving at Mr. Hunsacker who was coming out of the store with his medicine. Joseph hadn't seen anybody he knew since that day. Willie had snicked on the radio, and soft music flowed into the small space. The car picked up speed, and Joseph's eyes opened and shut a few times to the rhythm of the car rocking down the highway.

It had been dark outside when he woke up. Joseph had asked Willie where they were, and he said, "I'm takin' you someplace to get your mind off your dad. I'll wake you up when we get there. Go back to sleep."

When Joseph told him that he wanted to call his Mom, Willie said, "Don't worry. I won't hurt you. Everything's gonna be just fine." But he'd lied. Daddy wasn't hurt, and Mama hadn't run off anywhere without her boy. Willie just didn't want him to call anybody. He'd known they were coming to a place that didn't have a phone.

Joseph thought again about running away. Getting lost in the woods scared him, but things probably couldn't get much worse. Whatever had been scratching in the dirt outside was quiet now, but that didn't mean it had gone away. It might still be out there waiting for him. He guessed he could die out in the wild. That would be the only worse thing, dying without seeing Mama and Daddy again.

Maybe they were looking for him. They'd probably been looking since supper time 'cause that's when Mama told him he had to be home. He wondered where they would look first. Tommy's house most likely. He'd been playing over there. After that they'd call Mark's or Gunther's. Dad might think he had walked to the store for a drink or to the park to play. They'd check those places, too, but wouldn't find him. Next, Daddy would look for him in the tool shed. He knew Joseph liked to hide out there sometimes. Mama might call Grandpa's house to see if Joseph went over there without telling them.

If none of those things worked, and they wouldn't, they might check the library cause sometimes he rode his bike there if he didn't have anything else to do. And they'd go see the pastor. He'd get everybody in church looking, and Mark and Gunther and Tommy's parents would call all the people they knew to see if they could find him.

Everybody probably talked to the guys already to see if they knew anything, but Tommy was the only kid Joseph had seen that day. By now, Tommy would've told all he knew. He'd tell what all they did, where all they went. Then Daddy would've called the Sheriff.

Mama would've wanted to do that first, but Daddy probably made her wait. He was like that, always soothing Mama, but before long he'd get worried, too. Everybody would be looking in all the places he and Tommy had gone that day. They might try to see if anyone saw him walking home from Tommy's place.

Joseph wondered if Mr. Hunsacker would remember Joseph waving at him at the CV. He might. Joseph knew Mr. Hunsacker had seen him, but the nice old man had

looked kinda confused. Maybe Mr. Hunsacker had been trying to figure out who Joseph was with. Maybe.

Joseph took a deep breath and sat there sweating. Even with all that searching, they would never find him. Nobody would ever look way out here in this ol' place. It'd been three days already, and the fisherman was the only other person he'd seen besides Willie.

He had to try to get away, but he was afraid. He'd have to swim under the water, and he didn't swim good. He didn't like to get his head wet, especially his face. His friends thought he was a sissy, but Mama said if they had almost drowned, they'd be just as scared of swimming as he was.

Joseph crawled over to the edge of the slip and peered down. He tried to see through to the bottom, but all he could make out in the dark water was his own shadowy reflection. It had to be deep, and he didn't know how far beneath the surface he'd have to go to find his way home.

Maybe swimming underneath the locked door wasn't the only way out. Joseph would have to wait for Willie to come back. He'd open the door to the boat house, then Joseph could see clear across the river. Surely he'd be able to get away then.

As he thought about this plan more, however, the hornworm started wriggling behind his belly again. He'd still have to swim, and he couldn't go faster than the boat. Willie would catch him and maybe do worse to Joseph because he tried to get away. Joseph didn't want to go beneath the surface, but he didn't think he'd have another choice.

The sun sank on the other side of the boathouse, gradually plunging him into a soft black world alive with frog song. Joseph thought Willie probably wouldn't be coming back today, so he curled up on the floor and gave himself to sleep.

* * *

Almost losing his job at the crazy house had worried Willie. He'd been summoned to the director's office and thoroughly questioned about his contact with a Piney View resident. He'd known then that he'd have to give up his friend at work. He didn't blame the boy for telling about their relationship. After all, the kid was special, so he couldn't see things the way normal people do.

Willie had managed to smooth things over with the director, but he knew that in future, he'd have to look outside the residence for companionship. He'd seen Joseph running the neighborhood freely, walking or biking to and from other little boys' houses. There was a doll-like innocence about him that pulled at Willie.

At nine, Joseph was really older than he liked, but Willie thought perhaps those few extra years could be used to bring them closer together. He knew if he could spend time with Joseph, the boy would grow to love him. He hadn't really intended to keep the kid, but when Willie remembered the old boathouse, he couldn't resist taking Joseph to see it.

It wasn't really that far away—just an hour or two's ride there and back. When they got there, though, it'd been too dark to take Joseph back home. The boy's parents might not have understood the situation. They'd probably have blamed him for keeping

their son out so late, then he'd never have gotten another chance to be close to Joseph again.

They might've even called the police. That scared Willie. He couldn't go back to prison. Everyone misunderstood him, but guys in the pen were the worst. When they discovered the judge sentenced Willie for taking advantage of a kid, they shit-listed him. He'd never been sure he would make it outside again, but now that he had, he couldn't go back. As he thought about jail, he knew then he had no choice but to keep Joseph at the boathouse. He'd just have to visit Joseph as often as he could, bringing the boy food and prizes.

Winding his way down river on his day off, Willie assured himself he'd had no other alternatives to keeping the boy. Comforted, he turned his thoughts elsewhere. He felt satisfied with yesterday's purchase of a small aluminum fishing boat with a trolling motor. It wasn't as fast as the impressive boat he'd rented when he first showed Joseph the boathouse, but it would get him where he needed to go at a fraction of what anything else cost.

Willie unlocked the door and steered his small craft inside the boathouse's wet slip. He watched Joseph lying there on the rough dock. So beautiful. His blonde hair getting too long, needing a trim. Shafts of morning sun penetrated through the cracks between the wall planks, shining on the boy like God light in a painting. Joseph made no noise, yet the perception of being watched must have wakened him. The boy opened his eyes, found Willie looking at him, and sat up quickly. "What time is it?" he asked in a small voice.

"It's morning," Willie answered. "Are you hungry? I brought you something." He handed the sack to Joseph and gave him some space to eat. He knew the boy must be starving, yet he seemed reluctant to open the bag. "I had them put some jelly in the bag. It's grape. Do you like grape?"

The boy trembled with hunger, but kept the sack closed. He looked up, and in that moment, Willie saw a wary expression slide down Joseph's face. "Nothing's wrong with the food. I had some myself on the way out here. Try it."

The boy's nostrils flared, and he finally opened the sack. He ate his sausage biscuit slowly as he stared into space. When the food was gone, Joseph carefully folded the wrapping and the paper bag. Willie saw that the kid had nothing else to do, so he spoke quietly to him. "Come over here, Joseph." At first he didn't move, then Willie got tired of waiting and raised his voice a notch. "C'mon."

***

Joseph smelled the sausage inside the sack Willie handed him. He hated Willie. He didn't want to eat anything Willie brought him, but his stomach had a greedy fist in it, clawing at his insides. He opened the sack and pulled out the cold biscuit. Mama's biscuits were always warm and soft. When he remembered her food, the sausage in his hand looked gross, but his stomach hurt bad for something to eat. Finally, he took a bite and pretended he was eating one of Mama's biscuits. He wanted to make the food and the thoughts of Mama last, so he took little bites and chewed slowly. When the biscuit was gone, Willie's scratchy voice broke into the daydream of Mama.

"C'mon," he demanded.

Joseph wanted to fight, but Willie towered over him, crooking a big, meaty finger to show Joseph where to stand. He edged over to the bad man and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on other things. The water smelled murky—not like dead fish—more quiet. Like live fish. Maybe the fish peed in there or something and made the water smell musty.

He felt the bad man touch him gently, big hunks with sausage-link fingers running through his hair. *Don't think about Mama. Don't think about Mama,* he whispered to himself. He clenched his jaw and squenched his eyes tight.

"Turn around," Willie ordered, so Joseph turned. "That's good," he said, and all the blood ran into Joseph's feet.

"My mouth tastes gross. I need to brush my teeth."

"Don't worry. I won't hurt you. Everything's gonna be just fine," Willie answered, and he pressed Joseph down.

The odor of gas tainted the man's old army jacket. His hands smelled like gasoline and looked dirty from oil. His other boat had had a big motor. Loud. Louder than the fisherman's Joseph had seen yesterday.

Maybe the fisherman would come back and save him. Maybe not. He had to keep trying to find a way out on his own. "I have to pee," Joseph said. Willie's hands stilled.

"Go ahead. Pee in the water."

A quiver racked Joseph's shoulders as he walked away a little. He tried to go, but his hands were shaking too much.

"Do you need help?"

Joseph looked up at the man. "I want to go home."

"Later. We're not finished here yet," Willie said as he moved closer. "Don't worry, Joseph. I won't hurt you. Everything's gonna be just fine. You'll see."

Joseph felt that heavy hand on him again, pressing him down, holding him still so he couldn't break free. *This is not happening*, he thought. *I am somewhere else.*

Joseph closed his eyes, but opened them again. He made himself admit the truth. This was happening, and it was happening to him. He felt liquid dripping on his back—the man's sweat, not soft rain like he'd let himself believe the last time. His whole body shuddered. Willie made him feel bad and wrong.

He knew grown-ups weren't supposed to be like this. They were supposed to help you, to teach you good things like his mom and dad did. Mama had tried to tell him sometimes that everybody wasn't nice, but he hadn't wanted to believe her. Everyone he'd ever known had been good. Until he met Willie.

Soft grunts pierced the quiet, then Willie let Joseph scoot into a corner. He was saying something; Joseph didn't know what and didn't care. The fireflies were coming back behind his eyelids, and it was getting dark again. He lay still and let the blackness swallow the tiny lights.

When Joseph woke up, he was alone. The sun was on the other side of the boathouse again. He tried to figure out how long he had slept, but he didn't know. He recognized the smell of gas haunting the still air, and he threw Willie's smelly old army jacket off him, curling himself into a shuddering ball. He didn't want to, but he felt again the craggy hands, the sweat dripping onto his back. He quivered when he heard the heavy

panting, then he realized he was hearing the sound of his own breath. Nobody else was there.

By the time he stopped shaking, he knew he couldn't stand Willie touching him again. Joseph knew he had to break free. He crawled over to the edge of the wet slip and lay flat on his stomach looking down into the water. For a long time, he stared at the distorted image of himself rippling along the surface. He sought the deeps again with his eyes, but the black water kept its secrets, seeming to throw back a silent challenge with his reflection.

He jerked away from the edge, shaking all over. The water would close over his head, and it'd be dark forever. He could drown, and nobody would be here to save him. If he waited, someone might come to get him, but that someone would probably be Willie.

Joseph stood up. His legs felt like wet spaghetti noodles, but he wobbled back to the slip and thought about what he would do. He looked for a way to pull himself back out of the water once he was finished practicing. If he could shimmy up the anchoring post a little, he could probably get right back on the dock.

Finally, he took a breath, held it, and dropped his leg over the side, grazing the top of the water with his toe. The liquid felt cool, but not cold. He let his foot get used to the water; then he swung his other leg over the side. When he flipped over, the rough dock scraped the tender skin at his hips, but Joseph clung tightly to the splintery wood.

He breathed hard like a racer, and inched himself out a little farther. The wood gouged into his waist, making it even harder to breathe, but he stiffened his stomach muscles and waited for the cool water around his knees to warm up. When his belly hurt

too much to stay in that position, he shifted his weight. Holding on with just his arms, elbows digging firmly into the dock and throbbing with the effort, he waited till his thighs adjusted to the water. Finally, he straightened his arms, grasping the edge till his fingers stiffened like when he and Tommy had played on the swings so long their hands got sore. He hung for a second, then no more. The rough wood grazed his finger pads and he gasped, sliding the rest of the way down into the cool, inky depths.

I'm going to die now, he thought. In panic, he flung his arms outward, desperation pushing him to thrash the water in his fight to secure himself. He forgot to keep his mouth closed and choked on a gulp of water. He kicked something hard in his struggle and reached out, finding and clinging to the slimy pole beneath the dock's edge, pulling his head just above the surface and breathing rough. Freedom stretched beyond, water surrounded, and darkness loomed beneath. His chest thumped hard like when Willie was with him, but thinking about that made him angry. Daddy always said a man had to keep a cool head, so Joseph fixed his mind on the moment, hugged the post until his breathing evened out, then took a deep breath and pushed away from the pole.

He paddled furiously like Daddy had taught him and clamped his eyes on the goal. Arms, hands, legs, feet, and heart pumped in time with one another. Taking determined breaths, he worked to keep his head above the surface until he reached his destination.

Stretching out his arm he grabbed on to the door. A second later, elation hit him as he realized he'd made it. He released the door and threw both arms high over his head. Slicing his fists through the air, he kicked himself up in the water and shouted aloud, "Yes!"

On his way back down, he grabbed again for the door, but missed. He reached out again unsuccessfully, again in desperation. Fear replaced confidence, darkness swallowed light, and water cooled his head, burning a trail down his nose and throat. Joseph thrashed, kicked hard, and felt his head break the surface. He gasped, flinging his arms out for a hold and sinking again when they found nothing.

The searing cold caressed his skin, but burned his throat, propelling him upward again where he sputtered and stretched open his eyes, catching a water-blurred glimpse of the distant anchoring post before he slid under once more.

This time as the depths embraced and surrounded him, Joseph remembered his Mama reading a poem about a little girl in the ocean. In his head he heard his Mama say, "Let the friendly water bear you up to face the stars." Joseph opened his eyes then and gave himself to the river.

A frog pushed out of the murk, and Joseph watched it working its hind legs to swim past. Farther beneath, indiscernible shapes waved, beckoning him deeper, promising him another kind of freedom. He saw his hand reach gently toward them, and watched them recede. Like his parents, the door, and the anchoring post, the shapes slipped away. But Joseph rose, born aloft by the river itself. He eased onto his back, watching the gray-green surface get bigger and bigger until, finally, his face slipped through it and a fiery tongue of water seeped inside his chest.

He coughed, forcing water out his nose and mouth, and he gasped for air, feeling certain that he needed to stay relaxed. Liquid washed over his face now and again as he

coughed, but he knew the gentle lapping only played with him. Quiet now, he floated on the surface a while longer, then frogged his way back across the slip.

He reached for the slimy post, resting for a moment before bracing himself with his feet and struggling upward until he could pull his belly over the side of the dock. He swung one leg up hard, then the next, and rolled onto his back. He lay there winded and exhausted, staring at the rusty tin roof until his breathing evened out and deepened into the rhythms of sleep.

Outside a nearby bullfrog broaked the final, full-throated note in his afternoon lullaby before splashing into the water. The hot sun crept around the boathouse, and its radiant heat drew an alligator a short way from her nest to warm herself at the same time that it sent the fish deeper into the cooler recesses of the Conecuh river.

A loud buzzing penetrated Joseph's dreams, jerking him awake. He lay still a moment searching his mind before latching on to the answer: boat! He rushed to a crack in the boathouse and shouted through it, "Help! Help! I'm over here!". His fists rattled the scarred wall planks. "Help me!" he shouted again, "Help me." His voice grew hoarse and, like his hope of rescue, dwindled away to nothing. His arms pounded the wall one last time before he slid to a heap on his knees.

He wanted to cry. God, how he wanted to cry. Joseph looked at the water again and considered staying to fight. The river was still new to him, but there were worse things, he told himself. Like waiting. Waiting to be fed, to be used, to be helped, or to have his neck snapped in one of Willie's huge hands. His mom and dad seemed further

away than ever. He knew they didn't know where he was, or they would've found him by now. His breath caught on a jagged sigh. He was on his own.

Joseph walked back to the edge of the wet slip and looked down. He remembered how the cool, murky water burned his insides when he fought it, but held him up when he relaxed. He'd gone deep, deep inside and found an answer there before. He could do it now, he knew. He could swim under the door and get outside, but he didn't know where to go after that. Finally, he knew only that the river had been the way in here, and the river would be the way out.

He sat down on the edge of the slip and pushed off the side. The water closed over his head, startling him a little, but he held his breath, relaxed, and kicked gently. He gained the surface, slinging hair and water from his eyes and drawing in another breath. He quickly sighted the door, sank beneath the surface, and swam toward the goal with his eyes open. Working his way through the dark light, he caught sight of a shadow. He reached out a hand and felt a line of slime marking the bottom of the door. Joseph dove deeper, pushing hard with his legs and pulling with his arms.

On the other side, Joseph looked up and kicked himself toward the shadow of a floating log. He surfaced, slinging his head back in the sun and gulping in air. He made it! Exhilaration filled him as he stretched his arm to steady himself on the log. That was when he heard Willie shouting, "No!" Joseph froze. Willie hung over the edge of the boat, his arms stretched out as if he wanted Joseph to grab them, then the log came alive, lunging from the water to grab Willie's arm in its teeth.

Joseph saw the alligator pull Willie into the river. It rolled over, twisting Willie's arm and churning the water to a frothy roil. Joseph quickly dove beneath the surface again and swam hard for the shore. Pulling himself out just seconds later, Joseph heard the thrashing in the water behind him cease. He rushed up the bank, fear pumping his heart, and he tripped. He picked himself up. Focusing on the woods ahead of him, he set out in a dead run. Joseph had just cleared the grassy river bank when Willie's cries ripped the air from a distance.

"Oh God!" he sobbed. "Oh God, help me!" Joseph slowed, then stopped running, listening to the man's agonized cries. Should he go back? Joseph wondered. It could be a trick. He'd been tricked before, but this sounded real. The sobs were broken now by occasional grunts, but Willie still cried like a baby.

Using a tree for cover, Joseph peered carefully out toward the water's edge. Willie lay in a wallow of dirt and mud, half in, half out of the river. The water around him had turned pink, and a shape lay on the water's surface. Joseph could see a hand sticking out as an arm floated past him.

He crept back toward Willie. He still sobbed, but his cries had dropped to a near whisper now, "Oh God! Oh God!"

Joseph started and stopped, jerking his way slowly back toward Willie. Finally he saw it. Willie's arm ripped away at the elbow. A vein quivered, spurting blood from the gore and scenting the air with a cloying, coppery odor.

Joseph gagged. The hornworm clawed at his belly, burned a hot path up through his throat, and shot out of his mouth. He heaved until his stomach emptied. "Please," he

heard behind him, "please, you, you've got to help me," he pleaded. "Please, I'll bleed to death if you don't."

Joseph turned and looked down on Willie. His stump jerked because he couldn't control it. He just lay there in a sorry quivering mass begging for help. Tiny rivulets of river water ran down Joseph's face and dripped on Willie's skin, and Joseph remembered.

He thought of being worried about his daddy getting hurt. He thought about asking to go home, or at least to call home, but never getting to. He thought of how Willie lied to him, used him, then left him to squirm and swelter in the hot boathouse with nothing but the river water to drink. Then he thought about leaving Willie there to squirm in his own juices.

Why should he care what happened to the man who'd been tormenting him? "Please, I'm bleeding to death," he groaned. Joseph watched him writhing on the ground, powerless now, and knew that nothing that had gone before compared to the hardship of this moment. The idea of giving Willie what he deserved carried a lot of pleasure, but he knew it was the dirty-good kind. The kind that wasn't pure because it had something ugly attached to it.

He didn't really care what happened to Willie, but he was determined that the man wouldn't touch him again, and somewhere along the way that had come to mean more than just his outside. Daddy was always saying that what happens on the outside could shape a man, but that a man defines himself by the kind of person he decides to be on the inside. He wasn't sure what all Daddy meant, but he figured his inside was the one thing Willie never got his hands on, and Joseph aimed to keep it that way.

He took off his tee shirt and started a tear in it with his teeth, then he ripped it hard, clenching his jaw and eyeing Willie the whole time. He squatted down by the bloody stump and yanked the cloth tight. Listening to Willie's moans, he tied off, and they struggled into the boat. Once inside, Joseph hauled the heavy anchor weight alone. It was hard, but it was the easiest fight he'd won in days. Then he went to the motor and turned it on. He didn't know anything about steering at first, but Willie had managed to hold on to himself enough to explain the workings of it before passing out. At one point Joseph got too close to the river bank, and something scraped the boat, but after a couple more near misses, he grasped the skill and began to cut a straight path up the middle of the river.

With Willie bleeding heavily and drifting in and out of consciousness, neither of them spoke for a while. They trolled up the river toward Andalusia in quiet until Willie broke the silence, "You won't say anything bad about me, will you Joseph? I can't go back to prison," he mumbled. "Can't."

Joseph thought for a long time before answering. Willie had saved him from the alligator and lost an arm, but that didn't make him and Willie even. They would never be even. Joseph didn't really know exactly what he would say when they got back, but he figured he didn't have to study too hard to tell the truth. He thought about saying, *Don't worry, I won't hurt you. Everything's gonna be just fine,* but Joseph didn't care enough to lie. He just wanted to get back home. It would never be quite the same again, but he'd still feel better in Mama's arms.

MY DEAR COMPANION

I remember Mama tellin' me to stay away from crazy ol' Gray Boone. "That man's not the sharpest tool in the shed," she'd always say. "He was born missin' more than two fingers." She said that in reference to ol' Gray's right hand. He had just two little nubs pokin' out from where his pinky and ring finger were supposed to be, and he always wore the same clothes: a blue and white plaid shirt and blue jeans. Every day. My friends laughed at him because of that. Ben Turley from math class said that ol' "Loony Boony" never washed either himself or his clothes. Others maintained that he probly washed the shirt and pants every night but wore the same dirty underwear beneath 'em. I'll admit, he did stink, but I knew the truth. Ol' Gray had seven pairs of the same pants and seven of the same shirts, and he did his laundry at the Cleen-N-Fresh between three and five every Fridee afternoon. I think he scared my friends because of his clothes and because he always eyeballed people, not carin' how the brown stains at the corners of his mouth made him look.

That's why Gray stank to high heaven. He chewed tabac, probly even in his sleep. He actually resembled a twisted brown rope of the sickly sweet stuff. I'd see him malodorin' on the bench by the town square right across from the court house, rain or shine, bitin' off a chaw every mornin' as I walked to school. "Hey Gray," I'd call from the other side of the street. He'd just stare back silently. For some reason unbeknownst to

me, Gray never would say one word in the mornin's. I could feel him watchin' me, though, all the way till I rounded the curve on Main Street.

Sometimes in the afternoons I'd ignore Mama's voice ringin' out warnin's inside my head, and I'd stop and sit a while on the bench with Gray. He was always in the same place. He'd sit there with his legs crossed at the knees like a woman and his good hand warmin' between his thighs, even on sultry August afternoons. I'd see his white sweat socks stretchin' out from the bottom of his hiked up pants legs as soon as I made the curve on Main. He bleached those socks so much I thought they'd either turn blue or glow in the dark–if the weakened threads could hang on through enough washin's, that is. Anyway, I did stop sometimes and sit a piece with him. I confess that part of the reason I liked to do this is that Gray let me do most of the talkin'. He'd just sit there lookin' at me and listenin'. I was one of the youngest of seventeen kids and grandkids who tried to squeeze into the conversation around my Nana's supper tables in the evenin's, so Gray was really the only person that paid my chatter much mind. He never cared what I talked about, but I knew he'd heard and remembered every word because sometimes he'd ask me about how certain situations had turned out.

One day we were sittin' on the bench watchin' folks absorbed with their business when a dull streak roared past. "Johnny Tolver!" If I hadn't jumped at the sound of the car rushin' by, Gray woulda shucked me outta my skin shoutin' that way. He pressed the two good fingers on his right hand up to his mouth and spit through 'em. "Fishhaat." I watched the brown quid splatter a stain on the sidewalk. "Gonna get himself kilt roarin' around in that thing."

"There ain't no way that was Johnny Tolver. Leastways, no way you could be sure, seein' that the car streaked by so fast nobody'd be able to tell who was drivin'." He just cut his eyes over at me and stared without movin' another bone in his body. Gray never contradicted me, but he never gave ground either. I sighed, relentin' first. "What makes you so sure that was Johnny T?" He turned his head and pointed up the street.

"NT7 369," he replied calmly.

"What?"

"NT7 369."

I sat there a few minutes lookin' at him and thinkin' maybe Mama and Ben Turley were right and ol' Gray really was crazy as a loon. I tried ignorin' the entire matter, but he kept on repeatin' "NT7 369" till it got stuck in my head like a bad song they play too much on the radio. I left convinced that I shoulda listened to Mama's warnin's, but the evenin' after that was the beginnin' that changed everything.

I'd been steadfastly ignorin' Gray for two days, except for that cryptic hogwash that kept swishin' around in my brain. NT7 369, indeed. Anyway, Mama needed me to go with her to Brigham's Cee Bee so I could tote home the groceries she bought. I kept my head down, avoidin' makin' eye contact with Gray as we clipped past the court house, and we were crossin' the street when I looked up from the road to see it starin' me in the face. NT7 369 on the tag right in front of me and Johnny Tolver slidin' behind the wheel of the car. Mama jerked me out of the way just before Johnny T burned rubber backin' out of the parkin' space. "You stay away from that boy, Neeta Jo," Mama murmured through tight lips. "He's got a wild hair."

"Mama."

"I mean it, girl."

"Mama, maybe ol' Gray's not crazy."

"I wasn't referrin' to him, Neeta Jo. I was talkin' about that dip-for-brains Tolver boy."

"Mama, could you just listen a minute?"

"Never you mind, girl. You just stay away from the both of 'em, ya hear?"

By now you've figured out that I mostly disregard what I had come to think of as Mama's advice. I don't know why, exactly, but right there and then, I decided that I had a peculiar hankerin' for Johnny T's special brand of charm. I think it all started because I was mad at Mama, but after a while, I did it just for the excitement.

At first, I just acted like he wasn't alive, but wearin' long skirts and knee socks didn't fit the cool, aloof image I was goin' for. I knew Mama wouldn't let me out of the house in pants, so I took to hidin' my low riders various handy places and slippin' into 'em when the coast was clear. Back then, I was still careful not to let any of the women in Mama's prayer circle see me wearin' sinful britches. After I changed my clothes I started leavin' my long hair loose, and one thing led to another until before long, I found myself forgettin' about ol' Gray entirely and sneakin' out to meet a boy I'd never really intended to see in the first place.

Johnny T always had a powerful ability to find trouble in all its forms. When we were about ten or eleven, a bunch of us boys and girls thought to cool off in the swimmin' hole behind Miss Mattie Akin's house. Johnny was there, of course, and dog if he didn't

strip nekked and convince the other boys to do the same. Then he started in on the girls. "We showed you ours," he said. "Now you're obliged to show yours."

"I'll do no such thing, Johnny Tolver!" I shouted, findin' his behavior a mighty wickedness. I wasn't the only one who didn't favor JT's actions, either. Just as Mary Jean and Selma were strippin' off, Miss Mattie charged out the house, white hair justa flyin'. I never knew a woman of eighty could move so fast. Before the rest of the kids could scatter, she grabbed JT by the ear and didn't even bother with the woodshed. She commenced to whippin' on him right there, and I figured I'd better run off quick after all the others before she took a notion to light into me.

That swimmin' hole incident was just one story in a whole book that I could tell you about Johnny. Lordy, that boy was full of mischief, and his nature didn't suffer from advancin' maturity as he gained his teens, either. It was hard to get into much serious trouble in Sander, but JT could always find a way to flout the right.

At first, ridin' in the car with him felt like thumbin' my nose in the face of Death. "Slow down before you hit somethin'," I said to him one day when we were ridin' around. He'd tool down the backroads as if they weren't curved like a dog's hind leg and littered with cows, deer, tractors, and all manner of car-totlin' things, actin' all the while as if he drove an armored tank stead of a car.

I realized that Gray had been right about Johnny's drivin', so I put on my haughtiest attitude and scorned speedin' in favor of crusin'. "JT," I said, "haven't you got a licka good sense? It's almost a sin to hide a car like this in the holler. You oughta be showin' it off in town, crusin' Main Street so everybody could see how cool you are."

Johnny surprised me by actually payin' attention and drivin' me around town. I figured takin' a chance on the ladies in Mama's prayer circle catchin' us together was better than riskin' our necks on the backroads, but we soon tired of the amusement and began to look for somethin' new to do.

Now Sander was a dry county, so once I was comfortable with his motorin' skills, I let Johnny take me to a beer garden across the county line. I favored the smokey, dark atmosphere in Rose's Place because I didn't reckon anyone could tell we were underage even if they'd cared. We got eyed the first time we went in, but after that, most customers busied themselves drinkin' away their troubles or fiddlin' round with women who didn't look like any wives I ever saw.

One night Johnny and I were sittin' at a relatively quiet corner table near the backdoor. Several farmers at the bar were guffawin' over a joke, and a red head in the corner opposite was nekkin' some man hot and heavy. Somebody had just cranked up Hank Williams, Jr's "Do You Wanna Drink" when the waitress sauntered over and asked us "What'll it be?"

"Two cokes," Johnny ordered. The waitress grumbled somethin' about cheap customers and bad tips then schlumped off to get the drinks. We'd just gotten our cokes when the door banged open on the outside wall and in stepped the biggest Brama bull I ever saw. The security light from the parkin' lot shined on his grimy cap. Tanned arms big as my legs flexed ominously, and I knew by the set of his jaw he was lookin' for more than a bar room brawl. Everybody had just turned toward the brute when the red head

opposite finally sensed the change in the room and broke for air to see what was happenin'. "Tom!" the woman shouted.

For a split second, everyone froze and the music blared unusually loud. Then there was a scuffle, a flash of sliver, and a scream. Somebody yelled, "Knife fight!" and the fur started flyin'. Johnny and I snuck out the back door just as the Grier county sheriff burst in through the front shoutin', "Everybody freeze!" After that close call, we prudently decided that we liked our own comp'ny best, and that's when we started hangin' out alone.

We tried goin' back to ridin' around, but after the excitement at Rosa's, crusin' had lost what little appeal it had in the first place, and Johnny hated wastin' his gas money that way. "Whadda ya wanna do, Neeta Jo?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, rackin' my brains for somethin' relatively safe yet fun to do. "Let's just park in the town square till somethin' comes to us" I replied. He grinned at that. Now, I know what you're thinkin', but I wasn't really wild, just pretendin' to be, and I privately thought bein' in such a public place would keep things light. I didn't tell Johnny that, though. I told him that nobody'd suspect any hanky panky of people parked out in plain sight, and that at'chuly turned out to be true.

At first I wanted to laugh at Johnny. He thought he was so cool by makin' a big deal of stretchin' before easin' his arm around me. It was innocent enough that I didn't protest, but next thing I knew he'd pulled me across the bench seat. "Sit next to me, Neeta." He said it like more of a plea than an order, so I gave in, and before I knew it we were kissin' and somethin' was zingin' around in me like flies tryin' to escape a

flyswatter. I tried keepin' real still so all the buzzin' would quiet, but I couldn't get hold of things. The commotion unsettled me so much I finally boxed JT's ears.

"Damn, Neeta Jo! Whaddja do that for?"

At first, I didn't know how I was gonna explain my reluctance and still maintain an aura of coolness, but suddenly an idea came to me. "I got plans, JT. I'm not gonna live my whole life out in the sticks. Soon as I graduate next year, I'm leavin' Sander, and no boy's gonna ruin my plans." Now I clearly had nowhere else to go, so I thought for sure that Johnny T would see through my ruse and dump me like a cow patty, but lo and behold if he didn't want me more. I kept puttin' him off until I had a real crisis on my hands: Johnny proposed to me.

He tried every way a seventeen-year-old boy could think of to entice me. He bought me flowers and proposed. He gave me candy and proposed. He wrote me bad poetry, and when that didn't work, he copied good poetry from Shakespeare and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and signed his name to it—like I wouldn't know.

I denied him more times than I care to remember. The whole affair, if you can call it that, had gone sour for me because Johnny had changed. About three weeks after all that proposin', he got a job baggin' groceries at the Cee Bee, and within a month he had impressed Mr. Brigham so much that he got promoted to stock boy. He kept workin' there, and when Len Tillsley fell ill right before Easter, Mr. Brigham moved Johnny up to assistant manager. All in all, Johnny becomin' responsible wasn't so bad, but when all that didn't phase me, the dirty dog went over my head.

There I was, singin' in the choir with Mama like every Sund'y when the door cracked open behind the congregation and Johnny Tolver sidled into a back pew. Of course, Mama saw him and elbowed me in the side. When I glanced at her, she kept on singin' " The Old Rugged Cross" but raised her eyebrows at me. I shrugged, and she let it go. I thought I might still be able to salvage the situation. That is, until after church when Mama stopped to chat with the women in her prayer circle. JT walked right up to me as I was waitin' discreetly in the background for Mama. The sorry hound breezed past the women, and all the cluckin' hushed when he asked if I'd like to attend the evenin' service with him.

Well, that tore it. All the ladies took on like they'd never seen a boy in a suit before. Mama's best friend, Miz Pickett, was the worst. "Why, Martha," she exclaimed to Mama, "we didn't know Neeta Jo had an admirer. And such a fine one, too!" Then the little group drew in tight and lowered their voices. My face burned as I eyed 'em askance.

"What are you doin' here, JT?" I demanded in a rough whisper. He glanced surreptitiously at my knee socks and grinned. I hated him secretly laughin' at me, and I just couldn't stop myself. I hauled off and popped him right there in front of God and everybody. Mama gasped, two spots of color flamin' high on her cheekbones.

"Neeta Jo! Have you no better manners than to commit violence in the house of the Lord?"

I dropped my head. "I'm sorry, Mama."

"Well, your daddy and I have to visit Mrs. Harper this evenin', so tonight you can just ride to service with Johnny here and repent of your sins."

"But Mama!" I cried, "you said . . ."

"Are you sassin' me, Neeta Jo?" she interrupted.

"No, Mam." I sighed. I knew I'd been whupped. JT just stood there drop-jawed with his hand to his cheek. "Pick me up at 6:15, JT. Service starts at seven, and I don't like bein' late." With that, I huffed off.

After that evenin', JT attended church every time the doors opened. He even got special permission from his boss, Mr. Brigham, to go to the Saturdee mornin' men's prayer breakfast held annually every spring right before the men's yearly fishin' turnament. They all get together to pray in the fish, and they come, too—right off the truck and into the Cee Bee where the men stop to buy 'em for the church fish fry. Anyway, both Daddy and Mr. Brigham thought it impressive that Johnny was willin' to stay late at the store to make up for the hours missed durin' the men's prayer meetin', but I thought I might hit him again when he asked to join the choir.

Now, I'll admit, Johnny did have talent. It just wasn't for singin'. He'd stand behind Miss Suiter who always crutched on Mama to get the tune, and Miss Suiter would soon veer off with JT's horrible caterwaulin' until nearly the whole choir was infected with tone deafness. I thought surely the choir director would ask him to quit before Sundee mornin', but no one said a word.

There we were, standing in the choir loft next Sundee, Dr. Bighouse–or "Big-as-a-house" as my little brother jokin'ly called him–ensconsed in the seat of honor next to the pastor. We opened worship with "Amazin' Grace," and I snickered behind my hymnal when Johnny screeched "how sweet the sound." The congregation faltered for a split

second, then bravely completed the song. At the end of it, Dr. Big-as-a-house was speechless, but I knew his ailment was too good to last.

Pastor thought to spare us by preachin' his sermon first and endin' it early at 11:45 to let the good Doctor speak for about fifteen minutes, but his ploy didn't work. Dr. Big-as-a-house holy-rolled us for two more hours, made a altar call, then asked the choir to finish with "Just as I Am." When we screeched "without one plea," I thought we'd scare the confessors away, but suddenly we all started harmonizin' again. That was when I noticed Johnny had left the choir loft for the altar. Daddy saw him down there all alone and went to aid him in prayer.

Everything happened real fast after that. Johnny, Pastor, and Daddy stood at the door to receive the congregation's handshakes of welcome and approval as everybody filed out to go home. Next thing I knew, it was three pm and Daddy was drivin' away from church braggin' about how he had led Johnny to the Lord and what a fine young man he was and how proud he was a me for witnessin' to other youngsters.

After that, we all had to go to JT's baptism. Mama snapped pictures of Johnny and Pastor in the baptismal, Pastor's hand held high over Johnny's head in blessin'. As far as I was concerned, the biggest blessin' was the choir carryin' a tune because JT wasn't with us. We marched into the sanctuary singin' "The Crimson Stream" acappella, and actually sounded good. The whole ceremony had the Ladies' prayer circle whippin' out their hankies. Even Mama broke down when she tried to snap a picture of Daddy huggin' Johnny after baptism.

Of course, my parents obligated me to date Johnny after his salvation. He'd come to the house to pick me up, comin' in to shake Daddy's hand all respectful-like. I figured he sure did have my folks hornswaggled. As far as I could tell, Mama and Daddy's lamby-pie Johnny had made a few cosmetic changes, but inside the ol' restless bent for danger and excitement still fevered him. Johnny musta sensed I was bored and was about to break it off with him because he quickly made an unusually attractive suggestion: "Let's elope."

Now either I got into the devil or he got into me because I agreed to the runnin' off. I never had the least intention of makin' any vows, holy or otherwise, but before I knew it we were across the county line, gettin' the justice of the peace outta bed. His plump wife straggled in to play the weddin' march, a sheer pink scarf tied around her curlers and her house dress—straight outta the Sears and Roebuck catalog—screamin' for release. I barely recall stranglin' out "I do," but then Johnny was sayin' his vows, and we were hitched. At that point, I woulda been well and truly stuck if my ol' friend Gray had forgotten me as neatly as I had forgotten him.

In the car drivin' back toward Sander, I said, "I don't think we should tell anybody what we did."

"What the . . . Neeta Jo, I've gone to a lotta trouble over you. I've give you my name and made it legal. You cain't back out now! What're you thinkin' of?"

"I'm thinkin' Mama and Daddy's feelin's would be hurt if they knew we'd run off like this."

"Don't you think it's a little late to start thinkin' bout their feelin's now? You never seemed concerned before."

"Well, you hadn't horned in where you weren't wanted before. I knew you weren't serious about bein' saved, but you've got my parents and the resta the folks at church believin' you're sincere. I'm not tellin' 'em it was all a sham. Are you?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"That's just like you, Johnny. You go off half cocked without thinkin' things through. Daddy is really gonna be sore about this, and I don't think we should make our weddin' public."

"You're just scared."

"I ain't scared!" I shouted.

"Then we're gonna finish what we started."

"Not unless you promise me, Johnny. No one can know."

He unclenched his jaw. "All right, Neeta Jo. I'll keep quiet."

"I mean it, JT."

"I won't tell, Neeta Jo, as long as you go through with the rest of this."

And that was how we compromised. I was really dreadin' my part of the agreement, but after a while, keepin' my word didn't seem so burdensome to me anymore. Johnny didn't feel that way, however. He'd pick me up on weekends, like usual, and on Tuesdees, I'd walk to the edge of town to meet him at the Lo-Ra Motel. Before long, Johnny started complainin'.

"I hardly ever get ta see you, Neeta. When are we gonna tell your parents we're married?"

"What?! We cain't tell 'em. You promised to keep quiet! If you say anything, the deal's off!" I fumed.

He stayed angry with me most of the time after that. We fought every time we were together, until one day he just stopped bringin' up the subject, and I did, too. We met in secret a few times after that, but then one Tuesdee, Johnny didn't show. I spent the whole night pacin' the room alone, lookin' out the winda for him, wonderin' if he'd been hurt or maybe had to work late. At 11 o'clock, I walked home by myself and crawled in my bedroom winda. I was worried, so I snuck downstairs and called Johnny's house.

"Hello?" his mother answered.

"This is Neeta Jo," I whispered. "Is Johnny there?"

"He's in bed. Can you call back tomorra?"

"Sure." I hung up, and never called back. That weekend, Johnny didn't pick me up as usual, so I told my parents he was workin' overtime to save money. I went to meet him on Tuesdees a couple more times, but got bored waitin' on him to show. Eventually, I gave up and took to walkin'. It gave me time to be alone and think things over, though mostly I just spent the time frettin'.

It was on one of those Johnny-less, late night walks that I saw Gray. He sat on the bench as usual, the street lamp spotlightin' the corded brown twists of his arms for the mosquitas. I joined him, and we sat silently together, me starin' at my toe drillin' a hole in

the sidewalk and Gray just bein' himself. Soon, the quiet of the night wrapped around me, settlin' me, and in that peaceful moment, I admitted that I'd made a lotta mistakes.

"Guess you know I've been runnin' with Johnny Tolver," I said to Gray. He just looked at me in his taciturn way, but there was a knowin' look in his eyes. I went on. "I hate to admit it, but I did it mostly to spite Mama and ended up spitin' myself." I told Gray everything, pourin' out my foolishness and my unhappiness, and he listened, just like always, until I finally ran down. I sat there hunched over, lookin' at the ground.

"Fishaat," Gray spit. "Lotta cars drivin' through town at night lately. Paper says Harkinson county's holdin' stock car races. Johnny Tolver heads over that way most nights."

"Johnny's racin'?"

Gray turned his head toward me. "You're catchin' flies, Neeta Jo."

I closed my mouth. For a second, I didn't wanna believe Gray. "Johnny's just gotten tired of me," I said, "maybe even found another girl."

"Or maybe he found more than one," Gray replied. "Lotta groupies hang around the track. Johnny always did have a taste for speed."

I sighed. "Guess I'm just not fast enough for him. I reckon I deserve this. Tryin' to live a secret life behind Mama and Daddy's backs." I slumped down into the bench.

"Cheer up, Neeta Jo. You're not the only one with secrets. Ever notice Christine Pickett spends a lotta time at the florist?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"She invites him to her house for supper every week. He closes early Thursdee and opens late Fridee. I don't figure it takes that long to eat supper, so I'm bettin' he gets his breakfast there, too. Miss Mattie Akin rides the bus down to Biloxi once a month."

"That's no secret. She goes to visit her sister," I said. "I know because Mama and I take her food every week on behalf of the prayer circle. Mama says she cain't afford to buy much on a fixed income. Anyway, while we're there, Miss Mattie always talks about visitin' her sister."

"Maybe she does go to see family. But when she gets off the bus here in town, she sometimes drops things—like the casino coupons I picked up off the ground. Miss Mattie seemed a little ruffled when I handed 'em back to her. Could be she wants to keep her gamblin' quiet. Lotta seniors go down there to spend their social security on the boats." I musta had a scandalized look on my face because Gray quickly said, "I'm not implyin' that they're bad, Neeta Jo. Lonely folks lookin' for companionship, I figure. Why, I have a secret or two myself."

I sat up and scooted closer. "Like what, Gray?"

"Fishaat. I'll show you. Come with me."

We walked to Gray's house, and instead of goin' inside, we circled round to the back and approached the old garage sittin' off by itself. From a distance, the moonlight showed the faded wood in a gentler light, but up close I could see the neglect. Mama's favorite sayin', "It ain't worth a toot" rolled around in my head and I eyed the buildin' suspiciously while Gray produced a key from his pocket and quickly unlocked the doors. I helped him push 'em open then waited while he flipped a switch. The light momentarily

blinded me, but Gray moved straight to a pile of old quilts, peelin' 'em back carefully. When my eyes adjusted, I helped him fold back the cloth, watchin' as a shiny chrome bumper, a sparklin' hood ornament, and a compact trunk emerged from beneath the simple coverin'. Of all places on earth. Right there in a tumble-down garage in a tumble-down town gleamed a silver Mercedes convertible. "Gray!" I shouted. "Where'd you get this?"

"Bought it when I was in service."

"It's sharp! Can I sit in it?" He replied by openin' the door for me. "Leather seats!" I ran my hand over the supple interior. "Everything's so clean and shiny."

"I take care of it. Don't drive it much though," he said. "No place to go, really."

I looked up at him standin' beside me with his hand on the open car door. "Will you take me out in it?"

His eyes pierced mine for an uncomfortable second. "Where do ya wanna go?"

"The races. Tomorrow. Will you take me?"

He looked down for a minute. I frowned thinkin' he was hidin' his eyes from me, but he looked back quickly, "Sure, Neeta Jo. I'll take you to see Johnny."

Several cars were already in the parkin' lot when we arrived early next evenin'. My hair wilted in the humidity as we walked to the ticket booth. Gray pulled a wallet from his hip pocket and handed the man behind the counter a twenty. "Two."

The man slid the tickets and change toward us. "Enjoy the race."

We walked through the gate together and stopped just inside to look around. The track lay before us, an unbroken dark oval leadin' nowhere. Men busied themselves in the center of it. A heavy lookin' fella beside us was stuffed into his overalls like meat in a

link sausage. He saw the direction of my gaze and leaned over to whisper, "Wouldn't you love to get in the pit?"

Gray interrupted before I could answer. "You look overheated, Neeta Jo. Let's get a cold drink before the race starts." With his hand at the small of my back, Gray guided me toward the concessions off to our right. He bought us two large cokes then walked me to the stands, seatin' us on the front row near the startin' line. Most of the women wore Daisy Maes and sandals, but like me, a few had on jeans and sleeveless tees. Comradery ran high before the race with a lotta folks shoutin' across the stands to other fans they knew, but when JT pulled into the pole position, everybody quieted down, proud that a local boy had been the fastest qualifier.

I don't know what made me do it, but right before the green flag waved to start the race, I stood up to catch Johnny's eye. I didn't know if I'd be able to make him see me in that crowd, but his head turned toward me as if he knew right where I'd be. I looked straight at him and waved only to see him turn away, his expression obscured by his helmet's visor. The startin' flag cracked in the wind, and the roar of engines ripped through my chest. I could only stand there starin', my arms curlin' around my middle and the familiar scent of Gray's tabac wreathin' me from behind. He pulled me down beside him on the bench, and I watched Johnny speed away from me forever.

CONCLUSION

In analyzing my own fiction, I find that I have utilized many of the same devices and techniques employed by O'Connor while maintaining my own style and integrity. In "Potiphar," the contrast between movement and cessation of physical activity functions to reveal not only the protagonist's insight but also his shift from fear to confidence and his moment of triumph. In the water, Joseph catches a glimpse of the anchoring post before sliding under. At this point he is still fighting against making an inward journey, and his vision is unclear. However, once he gives himself to the river in a total cessation of effort, he opens his eyes and begins his inner quest toward personal insight. His second pause depicts an inner movement toward self-empowerment and self-reliance. He has found strength in his prior experience in the river. Although he once fell prey to Willie's lies and thus allowed himself to be stolen, he discovers the self-confidence necessary to escape. The final caesura occurs at the climax of the story when Joseph looks down on Willie from a position of power. The river water dripping off Joseph's face and onto Willie's skin recalls the sweat dripping from Willie's face while Joseph was still imprisoned in the boat house. The moment brings forth all the trauma suffered, and at this point Joseph overcomes his anger in order to keep his spirit untainted by Willie.

Loss in this story depicts a form of the Protestant work ethic: the idea that God helps those who help themselves. At first Joseph comforts himself with thoughts of home, but soon his hope in friends and family evaporates. He comes to believe that he must help

himself. Losing contact with those he trusts moves Joseph to act on his own behalf by confronting his fears. God does not supernaturally intervene with signs and wonders, but instead empowers Joseph with the courage to face his circumstances and prevail. This is similar to the way that O'Connor employs loss in that the privation moves the protagonist toward something better—in this case freedom.

I probe the nature of evil in the antagonist's character. Willie works with disadvantaged youths, brings Joseph food, and saves Joseph from the alligator. None of these things are inherently bad, but Willie makes them so because he does these things for selfish reasons. By using good defectively, Willie deludes himself into thinking that his actions are acceptable. Although Willie does not deliberately set himself against religion the way that O'Connor's Mr. Paradise does, my exploration of the nature of evil is similar to O'Connor's in "The River." The chief difference lies in authorial purpose. O'Connor created Mr. Paradise as a personification of Nihilism, and the character's actions and beliefs reflect this while also indicating O'Connor's intent to move readers to consider the existence of God. My antagonist's defective use of good results not from his particular belief system, but from a flaw in his perception. O'Connor's focus is religious, but my own, though it contains spiritual overtones, takes a more humanistic approach.

Finally, my use of symbolism bears a strong resemblance to O'Connor's. First, the river is a metaphor for Joseph's spiritual quest. Joseph's submersion in the river also symbolizes baptism by water and fire: he watches the river's surface grow larger until his face slips through it and a "fiery tongue of water seeps inside his chest." Certainly, this recalls Harry/Bevel's experience in the river. Second, sleep, darkness, and death offer

Joseph a form of escape from pain while sunlight portrays reality. For example, Willie once sees Joseph illuminated in God light, a vision intended to emphasize Joseph's innocence to both the antagonist and the reader. I connect shoat images, often rendered in synecdoche, to Willie. I think here of his sausage-link fingers, his grunts, and his lying in a wallow of dirt and mud at the end of the story. The ugly tomato hornworm, of course, represents fear. This creature initially appears inside Joseph, but is recalled at the end of the story when Joseph watches Willie writhing on the ground.

Although I employ the same four features that I have observed in O'Connor's fiction and elaborated on in my critical analysis of her work, in "Companion" I diverge from using them to dramatize supernatural events. Here, these features occur in order to focus attention on Neeta Jo's coming of age. The customers at Rosa's present her with alternative adult role models, though admittedly not very good ones. She experiences her first kiss while parked in the town square with Johnny, and in church Neeta reacts physically to his quiet mockery. However, she does learn from her mistakes. After slapping JT, her future disagreements with him take the form of reasoned arguments that become stronger as Neeta Jo matures. Cessations thus reveal progressions in the protagonist's psychological and sociological growth.

In this story, maturation results from several kinds of privation. Loss of Rosa's as a source of entertainment moves Neeta and JT to find a "safer" hangout: the town square. Parking there leads to a much more involved relationship with Johnny than Neeta previously considered, and when JT appears in Neeta's church, he ruins her plans for getting her parents' attention by outmaneuvering her. Losing the secrecy that she had in

her relationship with him moves Neeta to take the more drastic step of eloping, thereby placing herself in adult circumstances. Although she is physically ready for such responsibility, she is not yet emotionally mature. Loss of the emotional security afforded by her parents and loss of her relationship with JT moves Neeta to analyze her actions and take steps toward more responsible conduct. One loss—that of quality verbal interaction with her parents—sets off a cause and effect chain of events that gradually leads to Neeta Jo's coming of age.

In "Companion" I neither probe the nature of evil nor employ symbols in conjunction with supernatural events. Neeta Jo observes Gray, JT, various neighbors, and finally herself. The resulting comparisons lead her to form a balanced, considered view of what it means to be human and what it means to be an adult. The three most prominent symbols in the story are the automobiles, the county line, and the race track. The automobiles represent aspects of Gray's and JT's character. JT probably drives an old car that he has turbo-charged himself, a vehicle indicative of his taste for speed and his proclivity to recklessness. Gray's sleek Mercedes is fast, but safe—a treasure hidden from public view, much like Gray himself. The county line depicts the border between childhood and adulthood, a line that Neeta and JT frequently cross without preparing themselves to handle the resulting responsibility. And the race track's "unbroken dark oval leading nowhere" depicts JT's chosen path.

In both stories, my main characters suffer because it is only through pain or hardship that we achieve growth. While conflicts can and do arise from without, a person's greatest struggles arise from within. Naturally, great differences between my

work and O'Connor's exist, a chief contrast being our differing treatments of the protagonist. She once wrote, "It has always seemed necessary to me to throw the weight of circumstance against the character I favor. The friends of God suffer, etc." (Fitzgerald 121). Although both O'Connor's heroes and mine suffer, I tend to avoid subjecting my protagonists to the extremity of death. The potential for such an O'Connoresque resolution often exists, but my work does not always require such finality. In my stories, I attempt to extend O'Connor's theatrical dynamic and to rework her specific approach, and I find that this fictional experiment has both contributed to my understanding of O'Connor's work and helped define my own approach to writing.

While analyzing my own fiction feels a bit like self-torture at times, this discipline has become one of the most valuable aspects of my thesis project. Certainly the research, the critical analysis of O'Connor's short fiction, and the creation of my own stories have expanded my mind and stretched my abilities. But examining my work in retrospect affords me a degree of metacognition unattainable by other means. The study of O'Connor's writing has both enlightened and inspired me, and the stellar quality of her art moves me to continue studying not only how I can improve my own writing but also how I can help my students to do the same.

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