The Private Renaissance of J.J. Reeves

Alma J. Watson

Eastern Illinois University

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"The Private Renaissance of J.J. Reeves"

(TITLE)

BY

Alma J. Watson

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master's of Art

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1991
YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

May 3, 1991
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5/3/91
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In Memory of Billie Jean Winston.

Dedicated to my mother, Ira M. Watson. I love you.

Dedicated also to Bruce Guernsey. Thank you for believing in me.
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INTRODUCTION

I grew up on the south side of Chicago. I was sixteen years old when my mother and father separated and later divorced. In retrospect I have to be thankful for the breakup of my parents' marriage, for it was in moving from the south side to the east side that I began to focus on my writing.

Moving from the south side with its drugs, violence, and other problems, to the east side with its manicured hedges and lawns, was a big change. For the first time in my life I found stability. It was a good change, but a very boring one. My friends avoided things like gangs and drugs, but their lives were so clean-cut they didn't seem real. I still spent a majority of my time on the south side. But now no longer a resident, I became more of an observer.

Observation. I have always believed that if I hadn't become an observant person, I would still be back on the old block, making mistakes that could cripple me for life. Having an observant outlook saved me from an environment that - even if I found it exciting - has always offered gangs, violence, teenage pregnancy and another day in the unemployment line. I have seen so many people I've known and
loved fall hard in life and never regain their balance. My greatest concern as a writer is the problems that the black community and other minorities face: problems like high dropout rates, tremendous peer pressure, job discrimination, and the lack of any choices but self-destructive ones. I want the reader to see that some people don't have positive choices, that not everyone who leads a negative life in the ghetto has the opportunity to choose otherwise.

To look closely at any situation means to pick it apart in an attempt to understand it. I believe anyone on the outside looking in at the foreign and hostile world of the inner-city will tend to be judgmental. Having only the mass media to rely upon in focusing on the crisis on black life in the inner city forces them to generalize and stereotype.

As a writer, I try to provide strong characters who break down the stereotypes, and who have justifiable reasons to be in the predicament that they are in. My writings usually focus on the negative situations that minorities face in urban America. I try to write in detail always, because I think it's important in achieving my goals. I believe in holding the reader's hand as we examine the plight of the Afro-American together. I believe that by seeing the details of characters' lives, readers become more sympathetic and
less judgmental. They come to understand that the majority would virtually cease to exist if America offered more realistic choices.

I began writing at fourteen, but without a consciousness of who I was or what it meant to be a black American. But at sixteen, with my surroundings slowly taking me down along with the rest of the neighborhood, I was introduced to the writings of James Baldwin. The first book I ever read by Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, dealt with the incarceration of a young black man from the inner city. Something about this book showed me a realistic view of urban life for blacks who struggled in an impoverished environment. After reading this book my eyes were opened, and I was forced to realize what kind of life I was leading at the time, a life of empty rebellion, hanging out with friends, cutting school, getting high, and drinking. By making me think of the future, the book really calmed me down. It also made me take my writing more seriously, giving me a focus and making me realize that there were potential characters all around me.

I began to read Baldwin's writings on a daily basis, including poems, plays, and other prose. I also began to read a lot of Langston Hughes during this time. Both writers
had a lasting impact upon me during a very impressionable stage. A little later Richard Wright became a favorite, along with Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou and a host of other black writers. It was through these great writers that I learned who I was and what I would always be: a black woman. Previously, I had thought that there was nothing wrong with living in the inner city; now I had a sense of being cheated, a realization that being myself would be harder than I had expected. With this realization my writing took on a conscious focus.

Growing up in an all-black community and attending an all-black grade school and high school, I was rarely exposed to writers outside of my own race. I think the part of the required curriculum at Eastern that gave me most were the two required courses in English, especially English 1002, where I was introduced to the great John Updike’s "A & P." I was never the same again. It was through Updike that I was introduced to what seemed to be another world, simply because the author was now white. Now I could both understand and recognize that people were simply people, no matter what the problem or situation. I went on to read Rabbit, Run, and there, too, I had the feeling that Updike writes exactly what people are really thinking.
It was also in 1002 that I first read William Faulkner’s "A Rose For Emily," which happens to be one of my favorite short stories. Later I would go on to take English 5010 course, reading Absalom! Absalom!, the Snopes triology, and As I Lay Dying, my favorite of Faulkner’s works. In 1002 an even greater impression, one to rival Baldwin’s, was made by Flannery O’Connor. I found O’Connor to be a very humorous writer who could look at life and its situations realistically. Her characters were also unusual. It was through my reading of O’Connor that I discovered that it wasn’t out of the question to paint characters or the situation in a "vulgar and grotesque" manner. My favorite O’Connor story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," is filled with vulgar characters and depicts an unforgettabley grotesque situation.

In addition, it has been since I started reading O’Connor that I have begun to focus on the problem of religion. Religion is never a direct theme in my stories, but something that is a part of the character’ experience. Malcolm X once stated that religion was a sleeping pill for black American, and I believe this to be very true. I was born and raised in a family that emphasized religion, so that later I was turned away emotionally from anything associated
with Christ or the Church. I did not enjoy religion when it was forced upon me. I discovered that the majority of people whom I enjoyed the least in life and who caused the most pain were religious fanatics. Even so, I don’t try to preach against religion; usually it is a good and bad thing in my characters’ lives. J.J. Reeves, in particular, gets something positive out of it.

The key to good writing is to write about what you know. I would like to think that I do know a lot about religion in the black community, but I honestly didn’t consider putting it into stories, focusing more on the religious side of a character’s personality, until I became a fan of Flannery O’Connor. An example of O’Connor’s influence within my writing is displayed through the character Mother Ruth, in "The Private Renaissance of J.J. Reeves." I attempted to make this character’s personality, particularly its religious aspect, as vulgar and grotesque as possible. Her personality and faith are extremely fanatical. I would like the audience to see what I believe happens to people who take religion to extremes, and to their loved ones.

Characters like Mother Ruth are usually the antagonists in the story. The antagonist in most cases is a wall between the protagonist and true happiness. I also usually have a
character who is both a protagonist and an ally to the main character. For example, J.J.'s father-in-law is an ally for the character. Nate is the opposing force against Mother Ruth, because he happens to remind J.J. that he is happy that he is a part of their family. He puts Mother Ruth in her place and questions her God and her actions, something that J.J. has always wanted to do but never does. Nate is also a very affectionate man by nature and he constantly lets his son-in-law know that he is there for him. The actions of this character make life with Mother Ruth a whole lot better for everyone around her.

Not all characters need to be strong in order for the story to work, but I do believe that all should be strongly presented. I feel that I've learned this through the writings of William Faulkner. He had a love affair with each of his characters in all of his works. Although most of his books overflowed with a dozen or more characters, they each had some special quality about them that allowed the reader to close the book and still remember them. I don't care how long I live and read various artist's works, I don't believe anyone will ever create another Flem Snopes, nor a literature trilogy like Faulkner's. I enjoyed most that Faulkner's characters have openness, but also mystery within.
I've also learned from Faulkner that in writing you don't have to paint a factual setting in order to get reality across to an audience. I believe he was able to captivate his audience by inventing an imaginary setting rather than sticking to a factual setting. This allowed him more freedom it seemed.

In "The Private Renaissance of J.J. Reeves," every single street and building is fictional, but some are based on real streets and buildings. I enjoy painting a realistic situation, but in a fictitious setting, because this allows me freedom in deciding what kinds of things will happen.

Whenever I write, I always set goals for each of my stories. In "The Private Renaissance," my goal was to present a strong male figure. J.J. is a black man who isn't caught up in drugs, killings, and the streets, but a brother who is strong and intelligent. My goal is to break down the stereotype or generalization that the average black man can't provide a sufficient home and have a functional marriage.

In my opinion, the crisis of the black male has overshadowed the issue of breast cancer in Afro-American women. There was a need to focus on breast cancer, because I believe a lot of black women are under the assumption that it is a white disease. More white women are diagnosed with
breast cancer than black females, but we have a lower survival rate. I hope that my story encourages more black women, and any woman for that matter to have their breasts examined for cancer. I’m not a doctor, nor an expert on the subject. But my drive to write such a story as this was due to the fact that I lost an aunt to breast cancer. I guess this my way of praying that her death will not be in vain.
THE PRIVATE RENAISSANCE OF J.J. REEVES

I'll bet you when you
get down on them rusty
knees and get to worrying
God, He goes in His
Privy-house and slams the
door. That's what he thinks about you and
your prayers."

Zora Neale Hurston
(Seraph on the Suwanee)

I've come home from my woman's funeral, and I have just
placed three hotdogs in a pot of boiling water. I stand over
the stove staring down into the pot and I am thinking about
every damn thing in the world it seems, but more than
anything else I am thinking about what Mother Ruth said to me
today as they closed the casket for the final time at Coon's
Funeral Home. "Coon's Funeral home: We can make the
departure of a loved one easier on you and your family," the
commercial always says. Then there is the Rev. Coon standing there with that damn smile of his. I don’t feel easy, Coon, is what I wanted to say, but there are no refunds. Thel and I used to see those commercials on television and we would laugh...

I must have watched those commercials with Thel a hundred times, but I never imagined that I would be a customer. I wonder if my father ever watched Coon’s commercials, because my mother’s body was prepared by them also. I don’t think anybody truly realizes the value of life, until they have to bury a loved one. I had not realized that my heart beat and that I could move about until I had to open up the closet door of our bedroom and search for the right dress, the right shoes, her lipstick, and a good wig. I also brought a new pair of panties and a bra for her. I went down to the funeral home with these items inside a bag, and handed it over to Coon.

Coon is a greying man that I have known since forever it seems; I thought I only knew him through the commercials, but while handing him the bag, I realized how much I’ve known him beyond television. Riding my bike down the street and seeing him and one of his workers in the window, handwashing the
black hearse that always sits directly in front; and him rubbing the top of my head at my mother's funeral. These are the things that flashed in my head as I handed him the bag. He is a businessman foremost, and I suppose this is why he greeted me with a smile, but I hated it. I haven't found anything to smile about.

Perhaps today I am a man whose emotions cannot be detected or understood, because Coon invites me into his place of business. His belly hanging heavy over his belt, pants reaching up just above his ankles and sweaty hands that he lays heavy on my shoulders. I feel restrained. I don't want his hands on me at all, but I can't seem to shake them off. Instead I stand still until he drops them to his side and even though he has done this, I can still feel both hands on my shoulders.

He looks at me with that smile still on his aging face and says, "Your wife is in the preparation room, and my boys have finished what they could other than her clothing." While he holds the bag up, I nod my head because my brain refuses to signal me to talk. "Would you like to see her?" he asks. I stand there for a second and finally I nod, and even though I am afraid and I can feel that lump coming on
strong as creation inside my throat, I still follow behind Coon. My brain allows me to walk, but it refuses to help me speak. We enter into a back room that seems to be filled with hundreds of caskets, but once my nerves relax, I realize that less than sixteen are actually in the room.

Then there's this grey door and spelled across it in black, bold letters are the words, "Preparation Room." Coon's sweaty hand grips the doorknob, opening the heavy door, and in my mind I want to believe that this hasn't happened to us. That maybe when we enter into this room Thel will be standing there, staring at me through brown eyes and saying, "J.J., I thought you would never come for me. What took you so long?" But when we enter into this room, she is lying on a table with wheels and a white sheet pulled neatly to her chest. The lump is now throbbing inside my throat as if it wants to jump out and run from this place. I can hear my heart beating in my ear drums, I am afraid.

My brain won't tell my damn feet to halt, but it continues to keep me silent. Zink, Coon's oldest son, is standing over her with plastic gloves on and a blank face. He doesn't say anything to either one of us, just turns and leaves the room. Thel, Coon and me and some other strangers
are left alone. Coon breaks the silence. "You got to excuse my oldest boy, Zink, you know he can't talk. Ain't the same since he come back from the war. Hasn't talked since he been back." Coon smiles somewhat, but this smile is different from his others and I see tragedy in it, and pain. He hurts just like everybody else.

I finally look down at Thel and I swallow down hard the lump within my throat and I can't feel a thing. It's Coon who suddenly hands me his handkerchief and I wipe my eyes. I did not realize that I was crying. "It's alright, son," Coon says, placing his arm around my shoulder. I know he means well, but I wish he just wouldn't touch me. He keeps telling me that everything is alright, but I don't agree. My wife is lying in front of us dead.

Coon begins talking again and he still has that smile on his face. "Where I come from, boy, they had only one funeral parlor and they only gave service to whites. Well, my wife and our second child died during childbirth. I didn't have the money nor the way to get them to the funeral parlor thirty some miles away, so I did it myself." We stand there in silence, both looking down at Thel, and I am wondering why Coon is telling me all of this. But now I have knowledge of
how he got started.

Still smiling, he says, "I was about your age when she
died. I was so angry and just out of my mind with grief. So
griefstruck that I forgot about the son who didn't die." He
stops smiling for a second and seems to lose himself in his
own thoughts. "I know my boy went into the Army because of
me. He wouldn't ever say it even if he could talk, but I
know he did. When my wife and child died I thought life was
worthless and over with, and I didn't realize differently
until they started bringing boys back in body bags." He
suddenly looks over at me and I at him, and we stare one
another directly in the eyes. "I didn't realize that life
wasn't so bad until my son come back home and I took a look
into his eyes and I realized that it was really something... you
know, life."

Before he can finish his thought, Zink comes back into
the room, standing there with no expression on his boyish
face. His hands shoved deeply into his pockets, jingling
loose change and staring at Thel. "Well, we gonna let you
get back to work, boy," he says to his son, who takes the bag
with Thel's things in it and stares down into it. He never
once looks up from it as we leave the room.
Coon walks me to the same door that I first entered through and he still wears a smile. "Ain't life something else, son?" he asks. I look at him and I cannot answer. I feel like he did at one time — that life is worthless. I look into his face one last time before turning to leave. I leave him still wearing that tragic, painful smile.

I was the first person at the wake and the first to look over into her casket, other than the people who got her ready. I kissed her once on the forehead, once more during the funeral, and I took one last look at her before the lid was closed forever.

It is after the burial that I walk all the way home from the cemetery, thirty-two blocks, and it is down Ramsey's Row that I begin to remember everything. My mind races constantly and every mental picture involves our life from the beginning to the end, and as I stand here looking over into the pot of boiling hotdogs, I start for the hundredth time today, from the beginning to the end.

Mother Ruth is Thel's mother and she will bring what is left of my woman to me. Our two girls. They will stay with me every weekend. This will go on every Friday until I get my act together. Mother Ruth and I never really got along,
but it was strange at the funeral, she hugged me. I mean she really hugged me and said, "Son," she called me son. It blew my damn mind, because she had called me everything from asshole to hoodlum to just plain nigger, but this time she called me son. I guess you would have to know Mother Ruth and me to understand what this could and does mean to the both of us. We've got tired of fighting. She said, "Son, we got a lot of days ahead and those kids need us. We can't disappoint my baby, we've got to raise them kids right."

Mother Ruth was being very sincere in her words, and I knew that what she said went beyond grief. It wasn't bullshit. Really. I know my woman and apparently she laid some heavy shit on Mother Ruth before she passed. I can only imagine them staring at one another across the hospital room. Mother Ruth all uptight in the corner, clutching her only weapon, the Bible, in her Christian hands, and Thel sitting up as best she could, dying and listening, letting Mother Ruth get all the negativity out in the open, discussing me like I'm somebody's dog. My woman probably said, "Mother Ruth, I know Joseph has done some disappointing shit, but he is a good man and you got to promise me that you won't cut him down around the kids, because I don't want that for them.
I want them to judge him on their own. He's a good guy and I've loved him since I could remember. I know him and he is going to be on the job. But if you bullshit him, Mother Ruth, he is going to go back to his bullshitting. Just let him love and be with his babies as much as possible, and that's all I ask."

Thel, my wife, has always been straightforward about light or heavy news. She looked a lot like her mother and I guess that's why I promised myself that I would love Mother Ruth, that I would love Thel's father and the rest of their family, because I know that the blood that flowed through Thel's veins flows through theirs. I got the hot dogs on the fire for our kids. I don't really have an appetite, but I will find room for it, because I need to socialize with my babies more. Thel asked me to love our kids and I do, but that isn't enough. I've got to spend time with them.

It's strange, now that I really think about it. They find a lump on her breast and she dies eighteen months later. Sometimes I wonder if I kissed that lump, or touched it. The wild part about it is that I remember her breast, every detail. The way that they both looked the first time I ever saw them beyond the clothes. The way that they looked
after a shower, the way they would seem to shake, rise and fall to our movement, her rhythm, our love-making. Yes, I remember her breast, but I don't remember that lump.
God's Church of Christ Our Savior sits on the corner of Ramsey street, and this is the place where Mother Ruth has spent half of her life, the place that battles with Joe's Tavern on the opposite corner for members and fights hard to sing over B.B. King's "Lucille" on a Sunday morning. It is on these two opposite corners that my bedroom window has always faced. I know that I have looked out of my window and seen the men standing on the outside of the tavern, and some mornings I may see the holy rollers parade past the tavern to their safe haven, all nice and cleaned in their Sunday best, to hear Minister Winslow spit out a sermon like venom and call all the sinners up to the front of the church.

Minister Winslow with his greying sideburns would stand before his congregation in the same blue suit each Sunday and belt out the sins of the community. I would sit all the way in the back of the church with the other boys talking, chewing gum and laughing. I was an active member with my Mother until she died. I never went back, as a matter of fact maybe I lost all faith in the Lord, if I had any in him from the start. I stopped the Sunday classes and services, and my father, Old Davies, never forced me to return. I was ten years old when I stopped attending church, and when I
first met Thel she had no understanding of this behavior from me, nor of Old Davies’ easygoing behavior towards my absenteeism. Mother Ruth attended church four to five times a week, and if not for Thel’s father, Nate, then Thel would have been dragged in each day too. But Nate and Old Davies were identical in habits of sin and Nate did not attend service either.

It was because of my momma’s death that I began to know more about Joe’s Tavern than the Scriptures. So in time I became one of the millions of souls needing to be saved on Ramsey street. It was on Ramsey that I first met Thel and Mother Ruth. But when I think of our first encounter I only think of Thel, and that’s the strange thing about death, that you appreciate the memory after the fact. Now that Thel is gone I can remember everything about that day. I walked out of the house and crossed the street to Joe’s Tavern, looking for my father who hadn’t come in from his Saturday outing. I retrieved him from Joe’s and as we were walking back across the street, I could hear the tambourine. Cling! Cling! Cling! and the singing:

Sinner let God take your soul!
Sinner let God take your soul!

Why don’t you know you have a choice!
Don’t you know you have a choice!
Poor ole' sinner will it be the Lord!
Poor ole' sinner will it be the Lord!

Or will it be the devil down below!
Or will it be the devil down below!

Any other day I would have kept walking and ignored them like everyone else did, but Thel was dead in front, playing that tambourine. Cling! Cling! Cling! She had on a black skirt and a white blouse with ruffles in the front. Her hair was tied up in a ball and snatched to the back of her head, revealing her cocoa complexion and that she was young. As I dragged my father across the street, I stared at her and she stared directly at me. They all stopped their singing and stood in front of my house, each watching me. Mother Ruth stood there with that fire-engine red bible of hers, leading the rest of the holy-rollers in their holy stares and shakes of the head at my father and me. It was Mother Ruth who stepped forward towards me and stood directly in my path.

"Love and respect thy mother and father and thy days shall be longer."

"Amen! Amen! Mother Ruth, preach to the sinner!" they yelled out.

"I do respect my father," I said, staring Mother Ruth, a large woman, into her flaring nostrils.
"Not when you drag his limp body across the street like that," said one dark brother, pointing past me into the street. "And right there is his shoe that has fallen off his feet." I turned and looked back into the street and there lay my father's shoe in the street above the pothole. I turned and looked back into their faces, and I was only a second away from cursing to high heaven when Thel stepped from behind her mother. We looked directly at one another and she walked past me into the street, and we all watched her pick my father's shoe up and bring it back.

Now that I think back, I know that if I hadn't ever seen Thel that day and those eyes of hers, I probably would have gotten in trouble. I had fought several of the brothers from that Church alone, and had found myself down at the station, waiting and waiting for my father to come and get me out. It was Thel's eyes that I think I saw long before her face. It was her eyes that made me look past Mother Ruth who stood still in front of my father and me clutching that red Bible.

"Love and honor thy father and mother, and thy days shall be long," Mother Ruth said one last time, and she moved from in front. It was as if she were Moses parting the Red Sea, because they all lined up in double columns and began to
sing.

Only trying to do the work of the Lord!
Only trying to do the work of the Lord!
Only trying to do the work of the Lord!
I say, Only trying to do the work of the Lord!
Sinner can’t you understand!

I found my father and me in the middle of Mother Ruth and the rest of the holyrollers, and like I said before, any other day I would have told them to go to hell, but I didn’t and God works in mysterious ways. As the holyrollers sang, danced, and cried around Old Davies, who by now was awakened by the tambourine - Cling! Cling! Cling! - as I stood holding him up while he threw up his guts, somewhere in all this craziness I knew and maybe even Thel knew that we would become like the Lord and his son: as one.
I can remember waking up one morning and finding Thel standing in front of the dresser mirror. She was nude and very still, as if studying herself. I looked at her and she turned suddenly and said that one of her breasts was releasing liquid. I don't even remember what I said, or what I even thought, I just remember her sliding back into the covers and kissing me firm on the lips, she buried her head between my chest and chin, we didn't talk anymore about the discharge.

It was after that that I found myself waiting, Thel sitting on my lap, her head resting on my shoulder, waiting for her name to be called. We sat in the waiting room of the City's County Hospital, hoping to see a doctor. We swam in a sea of people who were the same breed as ourselves, the poor. There were people everywhere, standing, leaning, talking, walking, cussing, living, dying and waiting, straining to hear their name called by a nurse or doctor.

In my memory we sit facing several cubicles, each containing a computer. Women and men employed here to deal with us, the poor, tend to treat us like shit. Most of the people around us have some form of color in their skin, they speak broken English, and some have accents and languages of
their own. These people are not just poor, but are also the endurers, enduring that society and its ever changing situations have offered little or nothing to them.

After we waited three hours her name was finally called, and she took a seat inside one of the cubicles, and I stood directly behind her, looking over her shoulders. A heavyset woman with hazel eyes and very shaky hands ran through a list of questions concerning Thel's health, and why she needed to see a doctor. The lady did not look up at me or Thel, but instead stared directly into the computer that sat in front of her. Thel told her that her left breast had been oozing a clear liquid. After this statement the heavy-set woman with the hazel eyes stared up, and it was at that moment that our world began to somersault and shatter. We didn't have to wait five minutes before Thel disappeared beyond the red door into an examining room. In the examination room she met Dr. Hamilton, and he examined her and found a lump hiding under her left nipple. I don't remember ever seeing it and even though Thel would try to show it to me, I could still not see it, but when I touched there I could feel it.

Within two days all the important things in our lives concerned that lump and whether it was benign or malignant.
When Thel told me the difference between the two, we both prayed, believed and became optimistic. We believed that the lump was benign, not cancerous. We were very optimistic as we lay between the rough white sheets, optimistic as the full moon painted the walls of our bedroom, optimistic as we breathed softly into each other's faces, optimistic as the radio softly played. We were optimistic and deep down I was even afraid, but I would not tell her this, and her feelings at that particular moment, during that flash of our life, were her own and she did not share them.
I have yet to meet anyone who can stand to watch an old man vomit. The holy-rollers took one look at my father, who by now had dry heaves, and began to sing louder, but also began to follow Mother Ruth, who by the time I looked up from the ground and realized that puke was on each of my shoes, was headed back across the street to the church. Thel stood still and only the vomit in the middle of the sidewalk separated us. Clutching the tambourine tightly in her hands she said, "I'm gonna pray for you and your father." Anybody else would have simply told her thanks, but I had other things in mind.

"Why you look so old, girl?" I asked, looking her over from head to toe.

"Why is the way I look so important to you?"

"Maybe I wanna ask you out. Take you to a Saturday afternoon matinee."

"I only have room for a Christian man in my life," she said with a very stern face. We could both hear Mother Ruth and the other holy-rollers calling for her, and my father had now begun to struggle awake, and leaned against my shoulder. The dark brother yelled to Thel from across the street, "Come now, Thel. No more wasting time with that lost
sinner’s soul!” She took one last look at me and walked away. I watched her join the holy-rollers, and within seconds they disappeared into the church. I stood there for a second or two and the church bell began to ring loud. I had heard this bell plenty of times, as a matter of fact the majority of my eighteen years. I heard this bell before, but this time I actually looked up at it above the church and noticed that it was very old, and that it had begun to deteriorate. But it still rang, because the people inside that church hadn’t given up on it and still allowed it to ring.

In spite of the other holy-rollers’ lack of confidence in my soul, I still believed that I saw faith in her eyes. I felt them look beyond my soul, and I know it was faith. I believed as the bell made its last chime that she would in fact find time, and make time for this non-Christian, and I was willing to bet my soul on it.

After laying my father across his bed, I found myself running bath water and searching through my closet for something to wear. Black slacks, white shirt, black tie; and I would think about the shoes and jacket after the bath. It was when my body hit the hot water that I finally realized
what I was about to do. I was taking a bath to go to church. The day I stopped attending church, the Sunday that I stayed in bed and annoyed my Aunt Lois yelling, was the day after they laid my momma in the ground. I had given up on the Lord and from that day on everybody, including Aunt Lois, was sure I was bound for hell. For a while they didn’t give up altogether, Aunt Lois still woke me on Sunday morning for Sunday school and would yell as I lay still in the bed, and Reverend Winslow would pay a visit to the house every other Sunday, but I still lay in the bed and refused the Lord. Aunt Lois finally threw her hands up in the air one day during one of Reverend Winslow’s visits and I heard her say, "The day that nappy-headed boy of Davies and Vanessa return to Church, it will be 40 white horses dragging him."

Then Reverend Winslow said, "I bet dear Vanessa, God bless her poor soul, is turning over in her grave." I didn’t think very much about either one of their comments on my departure from the Church. As a matter of fact, I remember shifting the covers that lay over me and dozing back off to sleep. Everything associated to and with the church was bullshit and my heart assured me of this. But then, as I began to get dressed, I realized what Reverend Winslow was
saying. I could feel my mother, somewhere out in Coon's Cemetery "We can make the departure of a loved one easier on you and your family" (turning over in her grave, face up.)
We rode the Third Avenue bus in order to get to Fleece Street, where the County's Hospital sits two blocks over. It was a Saturday and Thel sat next to the window, and with my arm around her and her face buried slightly between my chest and chin, we talked about the mammogram, or X-rays, that she would have on that particular morning. We laughed at the idea of her breast being X-rayed from every angle. Then she mentioned the biopsy, which would take place if the X-ray showed nothing, and at that Thel seemed to bury herself more into my chest. I was afraid too, but too afraid to tell her this, because it just didn't seem the right time to be truthful. I said to her that everything would be fine, and I held her tightly to me. Our hands clasped very tight. She looked up at me suddenly and kissed me firm on the lips and said, "I love you, J.J. Reeves, I really do." I held her tighter and responded the same. The bus bumped and rolled under us as we drew closer and closer to Fleece street.

The mammograph showed cancer, but Dr. Hamilton assured us that the mammograph isn't always reliable. Thel and I decided that she should have the biopsy to be on the safe side. She stayed overnight at the hospital and expected the biopsy in the morning. I remember standing on a crowded bus
during rush hour, heading home to gather up some clean clothes for her to wear after this was all done. Before I left the County Hospital and caught the bus on Fleece Avenue, I found my legs shaking, my hands shaking, Thel had put something on my mind. Before I got on the elevator, she stood before me in a hospital gown, with her arms folded over one another, with a creased forehead she stared at me and said, "I hope this shit works out."

"It will," I said.

"I hope that I don’t lose a breast over this."

It was this statement that hung inside my head like clothes on a hanger, these words that made me step away from the now opened elevator and give her a firm kiss. "You won’t, baby," I said, stepping backwards onto the empty elevator.

On the crowded bus, I began to stare at every woman I saw, and wondered if any of them had ever been in trouble like Thel. I looked at the men and I wondered if they ever had a woman in their life who developed a lump, and if they had ever felt like I did on this crowded bus, sick to my stomach, trying to figure out if I would cry, drink and play records all night, or if I was going to get Thel’s clothes together like she asked me to do.
I looked at the clock on the kitchen wall and it read ten till eleven. Services would begin at eleven. As I straightened my tie, I remembered the throw-up on my shoes. I didn't bother to clean them off, instead I took my father's shoes off his feet and borrowed his best suit jacket. I took a seat in the back of the Church next to a dozen or more of the few men who were a part of this small congregation. A brown skinned brother was seated next to me, and I recognized who he was when he smiled. Two of his front teeth were missing, and I knew instantly that it was Danny Lipscomb from off Row street. He was a member when I stopped attending and I was not surprised to see him this Sunday, after being absent for eight years. Danny lived in a household that was stern and strict, and every Sunday he and his three sisters were starched, pressed and ironed, and they were told by their mother to sit in this Church and "Wait on the Lord."

When he recognized who I was he gave me a firm handshake, and we laughed. "Long time no see, brother, I thought you would never come back to this place," he said, laughing, his boyish face shining, his dimples revealed.

"Me either, brother, but I want to meet this girl. Get to know her. Take her to a movie or something." I scanned
the crowd. He suddenly laughed and asked me if the girl I was talking about was Thel. I only nodded and within five minutes I knew everything I wanted to know about her. He said that every man and dude from Ramsey to Fleece Avenue wanted the same thing I did, and like these guys I didn’t have a chance according to Danny. My list of obstacles included Mother Ruth, Thel’s father, and the dark brother that I had seen earlier, who sat in the front pew next to Thel.

"The only secret to getting that girl is to be a man of God," Danny said, tossing a piece of gum into his mouth, and then handing a stick of it to me. I chewed slowly on the gum and told him that Thel would be my girl. He laughed again and only shook his head. "Well, if that’s gonna be your lady then you better get holy soon, because so far that dark brother next to her seems to be the closest to your fantasy."

We laughed and the service began. Reverend Winslow walked slowly to the podium and began to deliver his sermon, but I only saw his mouth move, I was too busy looking at the back of Thel’s head. I guess I kept this up for some time, because she slowly turned and stared back at me, while the dark brother glared. I winked at her and she blushed. She
turned her head back, facing Reverend Winslow, and I was somewhere on cloud nine, while Danny was in disbelief, and the dark brother mad as hell. But looking back on that moment, Thel and I were embracing one another, and thinking what it would mean to be as one. Reverend Winslow said: "Come. Won’t you come forward and join. Join not only God’s Church of Christ Our Savior, but join and trust God. Can I get an Amen?"

As the congregation yelled, screamed and cried "Amen!" I found myself standing in front of Reverend Winslow. I was baptized that same day and forgiven for my sins. The Reverend said to me that he was almost sure that Aunt Lois was looking down from heaven, smiling on us all.

I found myself in Church every Sunday, morning and evening, giving up five dollars for a plate of dinner that the women had cooked. Thel, Danny, me and Fletcher, the dark brother, would sit together at these dinners. There in the basement of the Church Thel and I would talk about everything and nothing, and it’s sad to say that it took me till the age of 18 to experience what everyone called puppy love. We would hold hands, exchange ideas, take long stares at one another, and live just to see one another, even if it was
only in church. It would take seven months before I could be alone with her, and this happened because we were both assigned to sell Bibles door-to-door.

It was on these one to three-hour Bible selling trips that we first kissed, but Thel would always push me away after only a second or two. One day after Bible study had ended I realized that I was very frustrated, I wanted to talk about my feelings, but she was more interested in doing the work of the Lord. I asked Thel to forget about the Bibles and instead take in a movie with me at the Ryan Theater. She looked at me and started to tell me that I was beginning to become a sinner. I began to lose it.

"Damn, you live like an old lady," I said, slinging the Bibles to the ground.

"I live the way the Lord wants me to live," she said.

"You could have fooled me. I thought you was living the way Mother Ruth want you to live!" She tried to speak but I talked over her. "The way your Mother wants you to live. Don’t you ever just want to place God on hold some of the time and be a eighteen year old? Don’t you know how to live beyond that old-fashioned blouse and black skirt? Don’t you ever let your hair out of that damn ball?!" Her hand fell
hard upon my face and I could only see stars, and hear her shoes, click, clack, click, running away from me.

I gathered up the Bibles and begin running after her. I didn't see her anywhere, I could only hear the thunder in the distance, it would begin to rain soon. I ran down Fleece street looking like I had lost my best friend, searching for her.

The rain began to pour down buckets and I remember calling out her name over and over again, praying to God that she hadn't caught the bus without me. I found her drenched and crying under an over-pass, waiting on the bus. When she saw that it was me, she tried to run again, but dropped the Bibles and this time I pulled her to me. "I'm sorry," I said, kissing the top of her head, as she cried and buried her face between my chin and chest. I kept whispering in her ear and asking softly if she ever wanted anything other than God. I told her that I had a desire to be with her and that I needed to know how it felt to be with her outside of God's Church. It was strange and I will always remember that day, because we didn't sell the Bibles, nor did we go to the movies. We went back to my place, and we both knew that we had at least two hours and a half to pretend that we were out selling Bibles.
I sat in the dark, in a kitchen chair that I had brought into the living room, and sat directly in the front window. Thel never liked when I did this, but the night before her biopsy she did not scold me. We talked on the phone for over two hours, and this would be a ritual that would continue until her death. Me sitting in that kitchen chair with the flower print, looking at the people walk by and listening not only to my wife's voice, but to every breath and pause she took, everything.

One thing I will always remember about those nights in front of the window, in that kitchen, was that Thel always blew a kiss to me over the phone, and I would say, "Thank you, baby. I needed that." Then she would tell me that she needed only me. I would hang up the phone, grab a beer, put some music on and then I would get this feeling in my chest. The first time I ever felt it was the night before the biopsy, and I felt it on that crowded bus, and after having this feeling in my chest, I would get a lump in my throat, and the tears would fall.
When we entered the apartment on Ramsey Street, we were soaked and wet. Thel looked like an innocent child whenever her hair was wet. I kicked my shoes off at the door and we stared at one another for a second. Then Thel took a seat on the couch, I could tell that she was nervous, her hands shook and she avoided all eye contact. I knew that I was also nervous. I don't care what any man says, when you find a special girl that you really care about, all the experience that you had with the other girls seems to be lost. Everything at that moment and time seemed to matter, because I wanted her to love me after all was said and done. I knew deep down that this would be the woman I'd marry.

I found myself walking over to her, taking her hand and leading her into my bedroom. It was there that we sat down on the bed, and I pulled out a photo album filled with pictures of my mother. Thel told me that my mother was a beautiful woman and I remember nodding and then telling her that I loved her. She got up and walked over to the mirror and said, "I think everybody at some age loves their mother."

I told her that people don't just love their parents and just God, but they love somebody outside of themselves. I put the photo album away and went over to her and gave her a
kiss. "I love you," I said, kissing her neck and face and touching her. She began to cry and I stopped. I asked her if she wanted to go home now and she looked into my face and touched my lips and said no.

"I'm crying because I want to stay and I don't really know why," she said with tears swelling in her eyes.

"Do you love me, Thel?" I asked and she told me more than Christ himself, at times. We began to kiss again and this time I took her shirt off, then her skirt, and laid her on the bed. She suddenly got under the covers and asked, "J.J., do you want my panties off or on? Or do you want to take them off?" This question she asked would live with us forever, because we would reminisce, and we would say together sometimes, as we lay in bed at night, "J.J., do you want my panties off or on. Or do you want me to wait till you do it?" And we would laugh until we couldn't anymore. But that day I only smiled at her and got undressed. My nude body slipped onto hers and we began to kiss, our tongues danced, and I bit hard on her neck and breast. I stared her in the face. I could feel myself at her entrance and I slowly went inside, I was hers for the first time ever, and I could tell even more by the tightness, and the way that her
nails clawed down my back. Sometimes she would moan and say no, and I would place my mouth fully over hers and continue. She began to grip me tighter, cry, yell and call out my name. I began to go faster and she began to thrust harder against me.

My plan was to pull out immediately, because she was not on any birth control, and I wasn't wearing a condom. But it just happened. My back arched and we both moaned, and her legs clasped tightly around me, and we held one another. I could feel all of me inside of her. It's strange, with all the other girls I pulled out, but with Thel I could not let go. Two months later we were married at City Hall, and Danny was the best man. My father and Thel's father were witnesses. Mother Ruth and the Church of God Our Loving Savior refused to be a part of us. We were sinners and going to hell in a handbasket, and Thel and I were perfectly content with this, because we would be together.
When I brought Thel’s clothes to her, I found Dr. Richards asking her one last time if she would like the removal of the breast, if the lump happened to be cancerous. Thel told him no and my eyes told him the same, as a matter of fact they stared him from the room. I often wondered to myself after she died if we should have let him take it all right then and there, or if it ever mattered.

It was an early morning when they wheeled her through the swinging doors, and it didn’t seem long before she was transferred from the recovery room to her own room again. I sat in the orange chair, holding her hand, until I saw her eyes open fully. I stood over her looking down into her round face, and I kissed her lips, and she gave me a sleepy grin, sat up and we began the wait. It would be another 24 hours before Thel and I would know that the lump was cancerous.

The day that Dr. Richards told her, she screamed. Then she began to cry like a child, and I began to shake all over. "Call my momma and daddy. Call my momma and daddy," is what she yelled at me.

I don’t know where my mind was, but my heart was somewhere in my throat, and all I could think of was doing
what she asked me to do. Making the phone call. Although a phone sat on a table to the left of her, I found myself in the lobby of the County Hospital, searching for a quarter and trying to remember the number. We had never told them about any possibility of breast cancer, or that Thel had ever found a lump, until I made that phone call.

I don't really recall what I said, but Nate had answered the phone, and when my heart feels as if it's in my throat, then I know if I swallow I am bound to cry. I fought not to swallow, but apparently I did, because a total stranger walked up and gave me a piece of tissue.

When Mother Ruth and Nate arrived, Thel had become calmer and I had taken a seat in the orange chair, holding her hand. Most women and little girls have a strong affection for their mothers, but not Thel. She hugged Mother Ruth that day, but it was in her father's arms that she wept. Mother Ruth always had that type of air about her that didn't allow you to be close to her. I'm sure that all her kids loved her, but if they liked her is another question. I know deep down Thel loved Mother Ruth, but she didn't like her. The only wrong Mother Ruth ever did was that she loved Jesus more than life itself. It meant excluding all things that
life held, and these things included family, friends and anything other than Christ himself. But Mother Ruth had no concept of anything other than Christ, and she stood over Thel chanting and holding that red Bible of hers in the air. Then Nate suddenly slapped the Bible from Mother Ruth’s large hands. I watched the Bible fly, hanging in the air for a half-second before it hit the window hard, falling to the floor.

Nate told her to hell with her Jesus dude and she began to cry and yell out Scriptures, and it was Dr. Richards who called for peace, while Thel and I stared at one another. Dr. Richards turned to Thel and asked her if she wanted to discuss everything in privacy. She shook her head and began to cry again, and I held her in my arms. Mother Ruth, who had by this time picked her Bible off the floor, said, "No tears and no doctor can help you, baby, only Jesus!" Nate, who was still standing by his wife’s side, turned and suddenly slapped her hard across the face. He had basically done what I wanted to do at that moment. Blood began to pour from her flaring nostrils onto the floor. Dr. Richard’s clipboard fell to the floor. Dr. Richards grabbed Nate’s clenched fist as he stood there crying and looking at his wife with hatred.
in his eyes and his voice shaking. "These doctors can do more for your daughter than that fucker of yours named Jesus!" Mother Ruth threw out a religious rebuttal and didn’t bother herself with the blood that still poured from her flaring nostrils, and which began to paint the front of her blouse and the floor beneath her.

Nate struggled away from the doctor and got directly in his wife’s tear-stained face and said, "If that Jesus motherfucker you been bragging on for years so great and powerful, then call the son of a bitch right now! Cause I want to see him and if he can’t perform a miracle today, then I’m gonna bust him in his motherfucking mouth. Then you an him can bleed together an’ be as one!" Mother Ruth stumbled back a little and called Nate the devil, who still stood with clenched fist insisting that she call the Lord into Thel’s room. He asked her if she had ever touched him, had she ever felt him move through her. "Where is your miracle, woman?" he asked, yelling into her face.

She suddenly snatched open her white blouse and her bra held a false breast. Her left breast was missing. She touched the scarred area and began to cry, "This is my miracle! This is my miracle! They thought I was gonna die,
you remember Nate, but we prayed. We prayed together and I'm still here! I'm still here!"

Thel fainted in my arms and Dr. Richards had a nurse come in and escort both her parents from the room. He returned with his boyish face and stood at the foot of Thel's bed, looking around the room, and apologized, saying that he should have handled it better. I could tell that he wanted to burst into tears, but I guess in medical school he not only learned his profession, but how to stay on the other side of the fence, because he sat down heavily in the orange chair and began to rattle off options.

It was not easy to make a decision, but we came to one. Thel had no idea that her Mother had been through the same shit and survived. But her survival was obviously due to the fact that she let them take a part of her womanhood, a breast. She would have a simple mastectomy, the removal of the breast.

After Thel signed the consent forms, I found myself throwing up all night in the toilet, and having a bucket at the side of my bed, where I attempted to sleep. I lay in bed that night and Thel and I didn't talk very long over the phone, she needed her rest, besides she didn't sound in very
good spirits, but who would be, so I didn't take it personal. I told her that I loved her and she kinda sighed and then said the same. I told her that I would have to go through Malone Peters in order to get the day off from the job at the car wash in order to be there during the operation. She quickly told me that she didn't want anybody to know why she was in the County Hospital, nobody, and I made the promise. We said good night, but I didn't sleep because I had so many questions flying around in my racing mind. I wanted badly to ask Nate if he threw up whenever Mother Ruth undressed in front of him.

That night, as I slept heavy, I had a dream and in this dream Thel and I were making love, and she still had both breasts. Right before I felt myself reaching the climax, she suddenly pushed me off her and said, "J.J., you son of a bitch, if I didn't have both would you still feel the same?" She slapped me and my nose began to bleed like Mother Ruth's. I woke up in a cold sweat, and a puddle of semen lay on my bare chest and between my legs.
Mr. Manny is from Greece, born and raised. He is a short man with olive skin and shaky hands, and he has owned Ray's Car Wash as long as I can remember. It was Mr. Manny that I needed to speak with, but according to the other workers he was asleep in his back room. I walked over to Malone Peters, who was standing at the front office, watching the other workers, smoking on a cheap cigar. I used to feel Malone had a personal hatred against me when I first took the job at the car wash, but this was untrue, because he treated us all the same.

The day I walked up to him, I found myself remembering what Thel had made me promise, and I knew that I could not tell him the truth. I asked him in a very nice way if I could leave work on my lunch hour and return early the next day. He looked at me through dark sunglasses and nodded his large head, I stood there for a second in shock, then I walked away. I was shocked only because Malone was the double "s" in asshole, he loved being supervisor and he used his small power as much as possible. Malone was a black man and every worker at Ray's Car Wash was too, with the exception of Billy, who happened to be a Latino from the West End. We could never consider Malone's attitude and low
tolerance of us as racism, so we were left to settle with the possible fact that he enjoyed power.

Not only did I not believe Malone's sudden act of kindness, but nobody else bought it either. After soaping down and washing three cars, the time came for me to leave and I headed towards the locker room. Before I could even make it there Malone stopped me.

I remember staring him in his face and reminding him of his promise, but he just looked at me through those glasses and pointed towards the cars. The other workers began to yell out their disagreement, but Malone threatened to send them all home. They all went back to work and I still stood staring at him. "What the fuck do you want? You better get back to work!" he said, pointing back towards the cars. There was that damn lump in my throat and it seemed so large that I thought it would explode, and that I would die where I stood. In fear of this thought, I swallowed the lump and the tears began to fall. Maybe Malone asked me if I was okay, but I found myself jumping around in front of him, slapping my chest and crying out that I was a man. I was not only a man, but a madman at this point, I wanted to break his neck. It was Mr. Manny who tried to calm me down. I sat in his office
hearing him ask me over and over again what the problem was, but I couldn’t tell him about Thel’s operation. I had promised.

Within fifteen minutes my father-in-law, Nate, arrived. He was dressed in oily overalls and a baseball cap was tucked into his back pockets. He looked at me and rubbed the top of my head. I could see his brown eyes consuming me, but I would not look up at him. He and Mr. Manny went outside, then Malone walked up and joined their small circle. I could only imagine what Nate had to say. Popping a piece of gum in his mouth, he stared at Malone, who still stood tall and looked at both of them from behind his sunglasses. Nate said, "He’s a man too, Malone. A man."

"Like I don’t know that," Malone said, taking a quick spit to the left of him.

"He is a man. Meaning that when he get up in the morning he puts on a pair of pants. When he come home at night he takes them off. Goddammit, he do the same as you."

Malone still stood there without an emotion in his face and it was Mr. Manny who grabbed him by the arm and said, "Any other man would have knocked your teeth down your throat by now, but these men here need their jobs. There are no
challenges here, but there are definitely men and sooner or later this job won't mean a rat’s ass to them when they bash open your head."

Malone turned and walked away as if he didn't care.

"He will die soon if he keeps that attitude," Mr. Manny said. He and Nate stood facing one another. I could tell that both were interested in what each man had to say. I never asked Nate, but I know he told Mr. Manny about Thel's operation. Mr. Manny walked back into the tiny office and took some money from the cash register and gave it to me. "I'm sorry," he said with red eyes. "I hope everything goes alright for you. Take off and come in anytime you feel like it." He shook my hand and walked away. Although he never said it, I knew that Mr. Manny knew about Thel.

Nate threw an arm across my shoulder and we began to walk, we didn't look at anybody, but I could feel every eye upon us. When we reached Lexington Avenue, Nate turned and kissed the side of my face. Although I am a man and he is a man, I was not ashamed to hug him tightly, and not ashamed when he kissed me gently on my face. He is a warm man, it is his way. He consumed me with his dark brown eyes and spoke in his soft voice. As we stood waiting for the light to turn
green he said, "That Malone sure is a motherfucker." I agreed and for the first time in a long time I honestly smiled. I remember looking over into his face and seeing my wife's smile, and realized what I knew all along, seeing Nate was always like seeing Thel.

We walked down Lexington and Westchester, which are both located on a hill. Ramsey street is located in the belly of the two. Between Lexington and Westchester all walks of life have to deal with one another. On Lexington and Westchester there are people everywhere, standing, leaning, talking, walking, cussing, living and dying. On these two streets people are forced to deal with one another, the achievers rubbing elbows with those who struggle. On these two streets we can see the Ramsey Street tenements raising up mean above the city's sky.

We walked over to Ramsey Avenue and got the bus that takes us to Fleece Street. Nate told me in a soft voice, with his arm still around me, that Thel's surgery was over. I looked over at him and nodded, I turned and began to look out the bus window. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't imagine anyone really hearing me.
It wasn't till four days after her surgery that Thel and I had a serious conversation. I sat in the orange chair and I had never been so afraid in my life, because I knew that up under the bandages there hid a change. It was also something about that day and it had taken me a long time to figure out exactly what it was and now I knew. Thel and I both knew somewhere in the back of our racing minds that she would die. It didn't surprise me when she said, "I've only got the past to talk about lately, because I just might not have a future." I began to shake my head as if to disagree, and the damn lump began to take shape in my throat, but Thel only nodded and said, "But Joseph, I put my last red dime down that you have one and it's important that we talk about it."

Once the ice was broken she began to speak again. "J.J.," she said and this time I knew that she was about to get real serious, because she looked me directly in the eye. "J.J., it's a chance that I might not be around one day and that leaves you. That means that you will have to really take care of the girls, and you are a good father, but you have to remember that, you and nobody else, because Mother Ruth ain't nothing but their grandmother. She can't be me and Lord knows she don't want to be you."
I don’t know if Thel could tell, but I was afraid of her and the I.V. and the bandages, the shots and her swollen arm. I kept having to look her directly in the mouth in order to concentrate on what she had to say. "I love you and the girls do too, but there’s some shit that you’re gonna have to learn and it’s gonna be hard at first, but you’ll get used to it. Mother Ruth is going to have the kids and you can visit them anytime. They are yours on the weekend. They wouldn’t have it any other way." She laughed a little. "I think it’s best, because you wouldn’t know what to do with a two-year-old and a four-year-old." My stomach flipped and I nodded, she was so right. "Promise that you will take the babies on the weekend." I nodded. "Cause I don’t want them always under Mother Ruth and all that holyroller shit."

"Amen."

"Amen," she said, smiling. "Lord knows I love Mother Ruth and the Lord knows I love him too, but I don’t want our babies every day of their lives to be a Sunday in church. I don’t want that."

I nodded in agreement, because at that moment in my life, I was very angry with the Lord. Thel loved me and she knew me, which I’ve always known to be a fact, and it did not
surprise me when she said, “I know you probably going through some trip with God about now, because this cancer and shit. But I want the girls to know him and to sit in his house sometimes. You might be angry with the Lord for the rest of your days, but let it be your anger, leave the girls out of it.” I nodded. “I was mad at God for a long time, but I got over that shit. We never really discussed him a great deal anyway. So why try to put the blame on him,” she said, sinking back down in her pillow. I could tell that she was tired. We stared at one another until her eyelids closed. I still sat over in the orange chair trying to convince myself that one day we would look back on this conversation and laugh at it.
When you think that you are out of the woods, you find that you still got trees, bushes and mountains to get by, and this is something that Thel and I learned: that it's almost impossible to be home-free. In spite of the fact that she gave up a breast, there was still more to be done. When I first heard the word "chemotherapy" from the mouth of Dr. Richards, all I could think of was one of those charity shows that you stumble upon at night, asking for money for people who have lost their hair and don't look like it would matter if you sent a donation anyway. The people who are fighting for their lives. "Won't you help.... Won't you please help," the ad would say and of course I would flick to another station before the toll-free number ever appeared on the screen. The mention of this word and thought made me stare up towards the ceiling and I asked myself, or maybe God, if this was my punishment for not donating my tips from work towards cancer research.

Cancer was still in her body. Thel looked at me once before she nodded her head and signed the consent forms again. She began to cry and shout at Dr. Richards, "I can go home soon? Right?" He nodded. "I haven't seen my babies and they need me!"
"We will put you on pills and that way you can take your treatment at home, and come to see us so that we can test you and see if it's working at all," he said, taking his glasses from his face and fumbling around with his clipboard. Thel was released a week later. Neither one of us was really happy, but I tried to be strong and understand her mood swings, and she had to deal with mine as well.

Dr. Richards sent a woman to our home named Leona, a sister from the West End who had had both of her breasts removed. Shaking her hand and going to our bedroom to leave them alone to talk, I kept thinking to myself that this woman didn't even look like she had been through breast cancer. Not only was she beautiful inside and out, but she was cheerful and maybe that's why I was thrown the most. It was Leona who told Thel where she could purchase a breast form. And although I did not want to go, I found Thel and me walking hand and hand up Lexington and Westchester to Louis's Department store. The department store clerks were each in their early twenties. A skinny freckle-faced girl with reddish hair took Thel to one of the dressing rooms. After thirty minutes, I watched the skinny girl with the reddish hair walk out several times, and each time her face turned a
different shade. I could tell she had seen what I hadn't, at that time, and that it had scared her. The other two clerks
looked at me and over at the dressing room, and they whispered. Thel finally came out, smiling, and she was
always naive in that way, never really looking or caring about the things that went on around her. I guessed that she
was wearing the breast form, because the freckle-faced girl toyed with the cash register, and I laid the money on the
counter.

Thel and I were walking down Lexington and Westchester when she discovered that she had left her purse on the
store's counter. I told her to keep walking and that I would go back and get her purse. I kissed her and promised that I
would catch up to her before she got to the second street light. When I entered the store again, I could hear the
freckle-faced girl, telling the other clerks about Thel's scar. They didn't notice me until I was reaching for the
purse. They each looked startled, and the freckle-faced girl began to change colors again. I don't remember kicking the
front of the glass of the display counter, then bringing both of my fists down on the top and feeling them break through
the glass, and slicing.
I didn’t even run. I grabbed the purse and left the three women screaming. I tucked the purse under my arm and stuffed both of my bloody hands into my jean pockets and caught Thel at the second street light. She held tight to my arm, and I could tell, she knew that something had happened. We took a back alley in order to get home, and in the distance we could hear police sirens. My heart beat in my ears, but I was not afraid of being picked up for that because I knew that I would blend in with the thousands of other black men down Ramsey’s Row.

It was at the front of our doorstep that Thel took her purse from me and discovered that blood was on it. She looked up at me with teary eyes and said, "Please say you ain’t done nothing crazy to those girls?" I shook my head and took my cut hands from my pocket. She looked at them and began to cry. She took me to the bathroom and began to run water over my hands and dressed them in bandages. I didn’t tell her what happened back there, only that I broke some glass, and she didn’t ask me anything else, she just began to cry, and that night for the first time in a long time she lay in my arms buried between my chest and chin.
Leona tried her best to offer her advice to Thel and me, but nothing seemed to help us. One day we just stopped talking to one another and I stopped going to the hospital with her. I began to put half of my life into Ray’s Car Wash. We stopped discussing this drug and that drug, and although I wanted to see that scar, she wouldn’t allow it, nor would we make love. When she would get undressed at night, I would leave the room until I could hear her hide safe under the covers. I think it was more or less respect for her privacy, or just fear. Sometimes when I look back on it all, I wish that I would have been more demanding, I can’t help but feel that I missed out on a lot of hang time with my wife.

But I knew that none of those pills nor what Leona had to say to either one of us really mattered. I knew on those nights when I would sit in the corner of our bathroom watching her throw up in the toilet, and finding strands of her hair on the pillow and in the sink that it couldn’t possibly be working out for us. It took an incident on Christmas Eve to break down the walls that we had built around one another. Thel and I had been grocery shopping all day on Christmas Eve, and our girls lay in the next room
sleeping, waiting for Santa to make his way over to Ramsey Street. Thel had asked me to take the jar of salad dressing from the refrigerator and while doing this simple task, I dropped it.

It was as if I could hear Thel talking to me, but I didn’t really hear her. I saw her mouth moving rapidly, and I saw the anger in her eyes, but I didn’t hear a word. I looked slowly down at my feet where she was pointing, and a broken jar of salad dressing lay at my feet. It covered my shoes and was sprinkled on my pants leg. I bent down to pick it up, and she rushed down to my side, and when we were face-to-face, I could feel her breath against my face, the anger in her eyes. I suddenly grabbed her and pulled her up with me, and I began to shake her. She screamed suddenly. I let go. She slapped my face and then I heard a voice to the left of us, it was Rachel and Ruth standing there staring. Rachel asked, “Has Santa come yet?” Maybe Thel shook her head and said no. I don’t remember. I found myself gathering Ruth up into my arms, who had begun to cry, and taking Rachel by the hand. I put them both in their bed and sat on the side of it. The tree blinking off and on, the salad dressing in my nose, the smell of Thel on my hands, the feeling of her on my
hands, her crying as softly as possible are all the things I remember about that night. Rachel asked one last time if Santa was still coming and I said yes. I kissed them both and closed the door slowly behind me, the salad dressing still clinging to my shoes and pants leg.

I didn’t look at Thel when I came out of the room, and maybe she didn’t look at me. She was too busy trying to control herself. I put on my coat and a baseball cap and closed the door slowly behind me.

I found myself walking down Ramsey’s Row on a Christmas Eve, my hands shoved deep into my pockets, my mind telling me that I was at my lowest. I neared the Church and Jessie’s Tavern. I could hear music coming from both places, but I ignored the distant amens and entered the tavern. It was partially empty with only some of the usual faces in the crowd. At a table in the abyss of Jessie’s place, I saw my father dressed up, laughing loudly and a woman in his arms. I waved to him and gave him a half-ass smile, but I guessed he didn’t see me near the doorway, because he didn’t wave back, he and this woman kept drinking and laughing. I took a seat at the bar. It seemed that night I could hear only his laughter, and I began to remember one Christmas when he and
my mother sat in our living room, all dressed up, laughing loudly and cradled in one another’s arms, together.

It was after my third or fourth beer, when I felt a soft arm slip around my shoulder, and I looked the woman in her face, and I recognized her from my earlier years. Jackie Reese. She kissed me softly on the lips and took a seat next to me at the bar. I bought her a drink. We talked half of the night away, and although this was all innocent to the naked eye, I felt like a no-good husband. And although I knew in the back of my mind that Thel would kill me if she knew I was spending our money on another woman, I found myself ordering another round. Although I felt guilty, I still enjoyed each time she leaned against me laughing and whispering in my ear. I found myself laying some money on the bar and helping her with her coat. I could hear my father laughing loudly, he and that woman, and I took one last look at him, and I realized that I was more like him than I cared to admit. I knew I was wrong, but I still followed Jackie Reese to her apartment down the street. As we left the bar I could still hear my father’s laughter and the distant amens.

In the small, cramped apartment she put a record on the
player in the corner and Marvin Gaye began to sing, "Can I Get A Witness?" And it was in this small, cramped apartment that she grabbed my penis, and we wrestled in the dark to the floor. I held, kissed and bit hard on her breasts, but I called out Thel's name. Jackie Reese pushed herself away and stood up over me, and taking off her skirt and blouse she said, "Anything you want, J.J., anything. If you want to call me Thel, then that's alright. You can call me Thel. Just tell me what you want." She said this falling back on the floor next to me, grabbing my penis and biting in my ear. "Just tell me what you want." After this I came to terms with what was about to go on. I suddenly placed my hands over my face and the lump began to form in my throat.

"I just want my wife. I just want my wife," I said, standing up and fixing my pants. Jackie Reese's eyes were wide in the dark and Marvin still sang, "Can I Get A Witness?" as I scrambled from her apartment, down the steps, into the empty street below. I ran fast, as if I was trying to escape what had happened and what had almost happened. I neared Jessie's Tavern and passed the Church, I ran all the way home, but when I got there Thel and the girls were gone.

I found them at her parents' house. I entered Nate's
house through a rear door and Aunt Sybil was in the kitchen, sitting at the table and picking string beans, and a beer sat nearby. She spoke and continued to work. Nate kissed her on the jaw and went on into the living room. I was about to follow him when Aunt Sybil stopped me with a stare, looking me in my eyes. I stopped in my tracks and she spoke. "Boy, if you don't take that hat off in this house." I quickly took the baseball cap off my head and rubbed my fingers through my hair. "Just as I thought! Your head just as nappy as a sheep's ass." She took a sip of beer and shook her head in disgust.

I started to go directly by her, but she grabbed my arm. "You know Mother Ruth sure can't stand you. She say you ain't nothing but a no-good nigger. And I tell her, better to have a nigger that care then nothing at all."

I nodded and simply said, "Yes ma'am." I entered the living room and Mother Ruth was the first person I saw, and our girls slept soundly on the floor. We didn't speak, but Nate greeted me laughing and led me to Thel's old room, and I went inside and shut the door. It was dark in the room, but I saw her dark figure sit up in the bed and pull the covers up close to her. I sat on the edge of the bed, and I began
to cry and so did she. I told her about Jackie Reese and what almost happened, and she began to cry and scratch at my face. I held her tightly and it didn't take very long before she stopped struggling in my arms. Maybe we sat this way for an hour or so before I reclined her back on the pillow and began to kiss her. I touched her chest and she tried to push me away, and I remember biting hard on her neck and kissing her ear and saying, "Please... Thel. Please, I need this. I need you." She tried to mumble something to me that night, but our mouths became inter-locked, and I began kissing not only the one breast, but the scar also, and it was all the same to me.

As we held one another tight, and the moon painted the walls, we could hear Mother Ruth and Nate arguing. Mother Ruth wanted me to leave the house, because she never gave us her blessing and as far as she was concerned we were not husband and wife. Therefore, we were committing a sin against the Lord. I could hear Nate raise his voice and say, "I'm going down to Jessie's Tavern, and when I get back that boy better still be here, or you and your Jew got an ass kicking coming! You hear me, woman?" he asked, storming out the back door. Thel and I fell asleep in each other's arms,
as Mother Ruth paced outside the room reciting Scriptures and crying. But what Mother Ruth thought did not matter. The breast cancer didn’t matter. The poverty didn’t matter. Thel and I could find some good in all this mess. For a change we understood all that had happened to us. The good being that we were still together and in love.

I found myself sitting in that orange chair and reciting in my mind the things she had asked me to do, and watching her die. The last day with her, I refused to believe that it was her. Her eyes rolling up into her head, her hair gone, and her body thin. Nate, who looked as if he would go with her, sat across the room by the window, while Mother Ruth stood over her with that red Bible, crying and saying the Lord’s prayer. She pulled me from the orange chair and made me look into Thel’s face. “Come with me, J.J., to the church tonight. You can’t do nothing for her in this place, but the Lord can deliver a miracle in his house.” Nate dropped his head down between his knees. I found myself taking one last look at Thel, and following Mother Ruth.

Mother Ruth and I walked into the God’s Church of Christ Our Savior, and she led me to the front by the hand. We sat among what seemed to be a hundred older women dressed in
white. The tambourine beat loud in my ears, and the choir began to march in:

    I stepped in the water!
    Water!
    The water was so cold!
    So cold!

    It chilled my body naturally!
    But did not rest my soul!

A brother, sweating heavily, stepped to the front of the pulpit and yelled:

    Whatever the problem the Lord can fix it!
    Whatever the problem my brothers and sisters!
    The Lord can fix it! Whatever, the great Lord
    the Almighty can fit it!

I began to sweat, as the tambourine beat loud in my ear. My mind began to race and it went back to the first time I ever laid eyes on Thel. In the middle of the street. My father throwing up, the holy rollers singing, crying and fainting. The craziness and Thel and me becoming one like the Lord and his son. The brother, sweating, yelled again:

    Whatever the problem the Lord can fix it!

We all got to our feet and it was as if I were in a trance, I only stared ahead at the brother sweating and yelling at the congregation.

    Whatever the problem the Lord can fix it!
Mother Ruth turned my face to hers and said, "Ask and he shall provide. Just ask." She led me to the front of the pulpit and each step I could only see and think of Thel. I felt her calling for me. I felt her. Not the Lord... A brother, clutching his Bible, pointed his finger at me:

Whatever the problem the Lord can fix it!

I yelled back at him, sweating and crying I said, "Please don't let her die, God! Please don't let her die! She is all I got in this life!" I fell to my knees and onto my back. I could still see Thel, and in my mind I heard her say over every noise in that place, "I'm sorry, J.J., but I can't wait." I grabbed my chest and screamed. Darkness. The holy rollers still sang and the tambourine beat in my ears. My eyes opened and one hand was stretched out from the circle of holy rollers, and he pulled me up to my feet. But the holy rollers still sang, clapped and danced, I looked over my shoulder and my body still lay on the floor. I walked with this man to the back of the Church. We took one last look at everyone and walked out.

It seemed after only ten paces we stood on Fleece Avenue, and this man had not said a word to me yet, but I was
content with being around him. "Who are you?" I asked, staring into his dark face. He did not say anything, but looked up the street and then back into my face. "I feel like you are Christ, or somebody. If you are, why have you done this to me? Why are you taking my wife from me? Something that is sacred to me?"

We suddenly end up on Ramsey's Row, but it was different this time. There were flowers of all kinds planted along the streets. Each flower had a face on it and he began to pick some of them.

He picked a flower that had Malone's face on it, and I did not understand what it all meant. Then we walked on and there was a bushel of roses that had my family's faces painted on them. He pulled the one with Thel's face on it. The man turned to me and said, "This was my child long before she was your wife. I gave her to you and now it is time that I take her back."

"But why now?" I asked, crying.

"Because she needs me more now than ever before."

"Then why give her cancer?"

He seemed to grip the flowers tighter in his hands and a tear fell from his eye.
"I did not give her cancer. I gave her life. You see, everything in this world has not gone the way that I planned it. I gave man a brain and he has created so many things that eliminate him. I gave her life. Now she lies in a bed and although she is dying, it is a slow death. And I think that it is a slow death that Thel does not deserve."

"But she was my wife and sacred to me like a rose. What gives you the right to take her?"

He looked at me and touched my face, "But son, it is my garden. My garden of life that I took her from. Now I must put her back. Please try to understand, the longer we wait, the more she suffers. I made a promise to all humans that they would never have to suffer for very long, as if they were nailed to a cross."

We were suddenly back on Fleece Street when he turned to me and said, "I must go now. I have to go and tend to my garden."

"So all along you were black," I said looking into his dark face.

He turned to me and said, "My son, I am whatever you wish to see." I watched him walk down Fleece Street and disappear. I did not wake up on the floor of the God's
Church of Christ Our Savior, but I awoke on one of the street corners of Fleece Avenue. My momma used to say a long time ago, "James Jr., never question the Lord," and I didn't. I never told anyone what happened between Christ and me. And to be perfectly honest with you, I don't think he cared if I testified or not.

I ran down Fleece Avenue with the sun breaking through the clouds at the back of me, running, running, trying to see Thel one last time, and God did grant me this. When I made it to her hospital room she was still alive. Nate sat sleeping in the orange chair over in the corner. I grabbed Thel's hand and kissed her softly on her chapped lips. And for the first time, I buried my head between her chest and chin, and I cried.
The hotdogs are done and I can hear heavy, slow footsteps outside my door. The knock is hard and heavy and it is my father. He throws his arms around my neck and he is drunk. As I drag him to my bedroom, I remember the time I held him up in the middle of the street. The first time I ever met my wife. We reach the door of the bedroom when we both suddenly stop, and for the first time in a long time my father and I honestly look at one another. I have his eyes, his nose, and the same mole planted on his chin. We have both been crying and he says to me suddenly, "I really will miss her, son. I feel real bad for you. Daddy really feels bad for you."

"I know. Daddy, I know," I say, dragging him into the bedroom and laying him down on the bed. I begin to take off his shoes when he tells me that he is getting old. I look at him lying there in my bed and I realize that in a matter of years he will have a head filled with grey hair. I look at him and say, "But ain't it something, Daddy? Ain't it something to grow old?" He doesn't reply. I watch him close his eyes, I walk over to him and I kiss him firm on the lips. "It got to be something, Daddy, to grow old," I mumble to myself, as I place his shoes in the corner and close the door.
behind me.

Standing in the living room is Mother Ruth and what is left of Thel. I look into the faces of my daughters and I see their mother, and for some reason in my heart, when I look into their brown eyes, life isn’t so bad. It is truly something.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


