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Breaking and Entering

JOY WILLIAMS

JOY WILLIAMS'S
BREAKING AND ENTERING

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BREAKING
 *and*

ENTERING


J O Y
WILLIAMS

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For Elisabeth Williams and William Williams

For Caitlin and Rust

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*Then the strangest questions
are asked, which no human
being could answer: Why there
is only one such animal; why
I rather than anybody else
should own it, whether there
was ever an animal like it
before and what would happen
if it died, whether it feels
lonely, why it has no children,
what it is called, etc.*

—Franz Kafka, “Cross Breeze”



Willie and Liberty broke into a house on Crab Key and lived there for a week. The house had a tile near the door that said *CASA VIRGINIA*. It was the home of Virginia and Chip Maxwell. The house was two stories overlooking the Gulf, and had been built with the trickle-down from Phillip's head screw money. Willie achieved entry by ladder and a thin, flexible strip of aluminum. Crab Key was tiny and exclusive, belonging to an association that had an armed security patrol. The houses on Crab Key were owned by people so wealthy that they were hardly even there.

Liberty and Willie saw the guard each morning. He was an old, lonely man, rather glossy and puffed up, his jaw puckered in and his chest puffed out like a child concentrating on making a muscle. He told Willie he had a cancer, but that grapefruit was curing it. He told Willie that they had wanted to cut again, but he had chosen grapefruit instead. He talked quite openly to Willie, as though they had been correspondents for years, just now meeting. Willie and Liberty must have reminded him of people he thought he knew, people who must have looked appropriate living in a million dollar soaring cypress house on the beach. He thought they were guests of the owners.

Willie did have a look to him. People would babble on to Willie as though, in his implacability, they would find their grace. Willie walked through life a welcome guest. He had a closed, sleek face that did not transmit impressions. He was tight as a jar of jam. People were crazy about Willie.

The guard said, "The doctor says to me, 'Say you want to see the Taj Mahal. You travel the way to the Taj Mahal, but then you don't go inside. You don't pay the little extra to make the trip worthwhile.'"

"What was he talking about?" Willie asked.

"Me! The Taj Mahal was the inside of me! They go inside there to see what's up, and when they're inside they shine their light in all your corners. They take out whatever they want besides. Haven't you ever talked to a doctor? That's the way they talk." The guard sighed and looked around him. "If I were young, I wouldn't be here," he said. "The big show is definitely not out here."

"The big show is in our heads," Willie said.

Willie and the guard got along famously.



In the house, Clem was lying in the air-conditioning, before the sliding glass doors, his breath making small parachuting souls on the glass. Clem was Liberty's dog, a big white Alsatian with pale eyes. His eyes were open, watching his vacation.

The guard said, "You know, I'll tell you, my name is Turnupseed."

"Pleased to know you," Willie said.

"That name mean nothing to you?"

"I don't believe it does," Willie said.

The guard shook his head back and forth, back and forth. "How quickly they forget," he said to an imaginary person on his right.

Liberty said nothing. She supposed they were about to be arrested. She and Willie were young, but they had been breaking into other people's houses for quite some time now. The town was a sprawling one on the Gulf Coast of Florida, and there were a number of Keys offshore. Everywhere there were houses. There was certainly no dearth of houses. They had their own that they were renting, but it didn't seem to suit them. Anyplace they saw that appealed to them, and even some places that didn't, they just went inside. They seemed to have a certain freedom in this regard, but Liberty thought they were bound to get caught someday.

"My nephew, Donald Gene Turnupseed, killed Jimmy Dean. You know, Jimmy Dean's car ran into his car."

"Well," Willie said, "1955."

"It seems like a long time ago, but I don't see what difference that makes," Turnupseed said. "We are talking about something immortal here. Young girls have made a cult of Dean even though he was a faggot."

"Life is not a masterpiece," Willie agreed.

"Life is a damn mess," the guard said. He seemed genuinely outraged. He looked at Willie. "I'm somewhat of an expert on that incident. Ask me a question about it."

"There was something definitely sinister about the Porsche," Willie said.

"There sure was!" Turnupseed said. "A mechanic had both legs broken when the wreckage fell off the truck—a Beverly Hills doctor who acquired the engine was killed using it—another racing doctor using the drivetrain was seriously injured when his car turned over—the wreckage, with admonitory notices declaring THIS ACCIDENT COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED, WAS TOURS by the Greater Los Angeles Safety Council, and it was at such a show in Sacramento that the car fell off its steel plinth and broke the hip of a teenage spectator ..." Turnupseed was out of breath, wheezing heavily. "Coincidences are a hobby of mine," he panted. "Another hobby I got is reading cookbooks."

Turnupseed enjoyed reading cookbooks. In inclement weather, he could be seen sitting in his patrol car, poring over colored plates of food. He and Willie would speak with fervor about chili and cassoulet and pineapple-glazed yams and pastry sucrée.

"I guess I've read just about every cookbook there is to read," Turnupseed said. "I get a big kick out of it, not being able to eat much myself. I only got one quarter of a stomach. They really don't bother me much. It's nice just looking at the pictures. Now Mrs. Maxwell has had a cystostomy, but she's chipper as the dickens about it, I don't have to tell you that."

"She's always been a very chipper lady," Willie agreed.

There were indications in the expensive house that an unpleasant operation had recently been endured. The Maxwells were subscribers to the *Ostomy Quarterly*.

"She's a scrapper, Mrs. Maxwell," Turnupseed said. "You know, after she come home from the hospital, she called up the paper and wanted them to send out a reporter to do an interview with her, but the paper wouldn't do it."

"The media prefer not to handle the subject of excreta," Willie said.

"Ain't that the truth," Turnupseed said. He removed his hat and his thin hair fluttered startled. "She got herself a Windsurfer. I've never seen her use it, but it's the attitude that

counts is my belief.” He looked at Liberty, his chin trembling gently. “Your wife looks sad.” Turnupseed said to Willie. “Has she had a loss recently?”

“She’s just one of those wives,” Willie said.

“What do women want, let me ask you that,” Turnupseed said. “My last two wives always maintained they were miserable even though they had every distraction and convenience known to modern times. Number Two had a four-wheel drive vehicle with a personalized license plate. Every week she’d have her hair done. She died of a stroke, at the beauty shop under the dryer.”

“Liberty isn’t distracted easily,” Willie said.

“What would our lives be without our distractions,” Turnupseed said, “that’s the question.”

Liberty excused herself and went inside. She stared at the Gulf, which was always there every time she looked, filling the windows. Clem was lying on his side, his legs shuddering like a dream. Perhaps he was remembering the mailbox he was stuffed into as a puppy, by unknown persons, before Liberty found him, barely breathing, years ago.

Liberty wandered through the house. Breaking into houses caused Liberty to become pensive. She would get cramps and lose her appetite. Stolen houses made her think of babies all the time. She supposed that was common enough.

The house on Crab Key had chocolate-colored wall-to-wall carpeting covered with Oriental rugs. It had five bedrooms, four baths, two kitchens, a liquor closet that contained eleven half-gallons of gin, and one piece of reading material on a polished oak coffee table, a notebook containing Mrs. Maxwell’s philosophic musings. *The advantages of a cystostomy are myriad, one of the musings stated. Each new day brings me increased enjoyment. Sunrises are more radiant, sunsets more glowing, flowers more brilliant. And even the grass is greener!*

The handwriting was round and firm. It appeared likely that it was not Mrs. Maxwell who was the drinker.

Liberty looked down at Willie conversing with Turnupseed on the beach. From above Turnupseed’s head looked like a vulnerable nest. Willie was wearing a sweater he had found in the Maxwells’ closet, a green and white sweater covered with daintily proceeding reindeer. Willie loved living in other people’s houses and sleeping in their beds. He wore their clothes and drank their liquor, jumped in their pools and watched himself in their mirrors. Breaking into houses and living the ordered life of someone else appealed to Willie.

In the large walk-in closet off the Maxwells’ bedroom, there were mirrors and cosmetics. There were shoe boxes and garment bags. There were hats and ties and shoes. Everything was neatly categorized. *Cruise Wear. Ethnic Shawls and Dresses. Daddy’s WWI Uniforms.* As in the other homes that Willie and Liberty tended to occupy, the absent owners were hopelessly acquisitive, and fearful of death.

Liberty selected a white terry-cloth robe from the closet and lay on the blue satin coverlet of the king-size bed. She dreamed of fishing, her feathered hooks catching squirming rabbits. She dreamed of rowing down the streets of a flooded town, rowing into a grocery store where they were selling ten unlabeled cans for a nickel. She woke with a start and took on Mrs. Maxwell’s white terry-cloth robe.



Liberty and Clem took a walk along the beach. They passed women searching for shark

teeth. The women had elaborate tooth scoopers made of screening and wood. They had spotting scoops and dip boxes. They were dedicated and purposeful, and hustling in and out of the surf they knew what they were about. Liberty admired them. They knew the difference between a spinner's tooth and a lemon's. They were happy women, ruthless in their selections, rigorous in their distinctions. In their bags they had duskys' and blacktip and nurses' and makos' teeth. They loved those teeth. In their homes, lamplight glowed from glass bases filled with teeth. On their walls the best teeth were mounted on velvet and framed behind glass. The more common teeth spelled out homilies or were arranged in the shape of hearts.

The women ignored Liberty. And they regarded Clem with downright unease as though fearing he would squat on their fossiliferous wash-ins. Liberty felt that the women were correct in not introducing themselves and being friendly. She, Liberty, was a thief and a depressive. She and Willie had been married by a drunken judge at Monroe Station in the Everglades. The bridal couple had eaten their wedding supper in a restaurant that had antique rifles and dried chicken feet mounted on the wall. Their meal consisted of a gigantic snood which Willie had miraculously caught on a doughball, and a coconut cake that the cook had whipped up special.

The women on the beach, holding their bags full of teeth, probably saw Liberty's problem just written all over her.

As for Clem, they avoided him like shoppers swerving from a swollen can of bouillabaisse. Liberty strolled back to her stolen home. Willie was on the beach, roasting potatoes over a little fire. Turnupseed stood nearby, his hands on his hips, his back toward the water, surveying the row of expensive houses under his protection.

"Them houses are filled with artwork and jewels and all sorts of gadgetry," Turnupseed said, shaking his head. "It gets to be a burden just responding to it all. I've tried to respond to everything that's been presented to me all my life, and I am just now thinking that I could have saved myself considerable time and effort. Response has been my bane. Number Two and I once went to Niagara Falls. You know we put on them slickers and got wet? Three days, two nights and seven meals. We slept in a heart-shaped bed. You ever try to sleep in a heart-shaped bed? Number Two said I was as exciting as a bag of cement."

Liberty looked around her, at all that was being guarded by Turnupseed, a man obsessed with woks, dead wives and movie stars, and armed with a floating flashlight and a tire iron. He was obviously not in the best of health. His eyes looked like breakfast buns spread with guava jelly.

Willie said, "All worldly pursuits and acquisitions have but two unavoidable and inevitable ends, which are sorrow and dispersion." He rearranged the potatoes in the pit.

"Yup, yup, yup," Turnupseed said, shaking his head. "But each one of us has to find the way out for himself." He turned to Liberty and politely said, "That certainly is the strangest white dog I've ever seen. Nothing unfortunate is about to happen to you, not if that dog can help it."

"I don't know," Liberty said.

"Thank God it ain't a black dog. Black dogs are bad luck."

"Thank god," Liberty said. The thought of a black dog! Black as dirt and filled with blood. She would never have a black dog.

Liberty and Turnupseed gazed at one another. It seemed as though they could never build up a dialogue.

“Where’d you get that dog?” Turnupseed asked, cranking up again, his voice hoarse.

“Found him,” Liberty said.

“I’ve never found a thing myself,” Turnupseed said. “I try not to dwell on it.” He gazed at Clem, not knowing how to salute him.

Turnupseed lived on the mainland in a little cement block house on land sucked senseless by the phosphate interests. Every time he tried to plant a tree in the queer, floppy soil, the tree perished.

“I’ve had three wives, and each one of them died,” Turnupseed confided. “Isn’t that a ghastly coincidence?”

“In continuity there is a little of everything in everything else,” Willie said when Liberty just couldn’t seem to pick anything out of the air. Willie and the guard seemed to have a way of conversing that was satisfying to them both. Liberty guessed that Willie enjoyed a simple deceit more than just about anything in the world. The words he exchanged with Turnupseed rocked gently in her head, unwholesome crafts on a becalmed sea.



Liberty and Willie sat in one of the Maxwells’ several tubs. She sat behind him, her legs encircling his waist, writing words upon his back with soap.

“WIZ,” Willie said. “SKY. SEA.” Liberty erased the invisible marks with her hand and splashed water upon Willie’s shoulders. She put her lips to his warm back, then drew away and wrote a *U*, then an *5*. “WITHHELD,” Willie said. “INCARCERATE.”

Purple, monogrammed towels hung from hooks. Liberty got out of the tub and patted herself dry with one of them. She was tanned and high-waisted. Pale hair curled from her armpits. At her throat was a soft scar that looked like a rosebud. She put on a man’s black bathrobe, rolled up the long sleeves, cinched the belt tight. She imagined Mr. Maxwell standing in this robe, breathing heavily, looking around his house at his things in it.

“Poor Chip hasn’t been able to cope very well with Mrs. Maxwell’s maiming,” Turnupseed had told Willie. “For twenty-five years she was his little singing bird, you know what I’m saying, and then she had that operation and she became his cheerful mutilated wife. She doesn’t have a morbid bone in her body, but Chip proved to be more delicate. I found him once on the beach at midnight, the drunkest man I’ve ever seen, crying and trying to stab himself with a spoon.”

“Turnupseed’s heart is going to break when he finds out what we are,” Liberty said.

“Friends are what we are,” Willie said.

Liberty went downstairs and sat alone in the living room, which was arranged for conversation. Clem lay in the kitchen, the same color as the refrigerator, his legs straight up in the air. In the living room was a fireplace containing a screen that, if plugged in, would project a fire burning. Liberty did not want the illusion of a fire burning. Liberty loved Willie. She believed in love and knew that every day was judgment day. It didn’t seem to be enough anymore. If someone loved you, Willie said, you became other than what you knew yourself to be. He did not want to become that other one. Willie was becoming a little occult in his attitudes. His thoughts included Liberty less and less, his coordinates were elsewhere, his

possibilities without her becoming more actualized. This was marriage.

“Why don’t you and Willie have a baby?” Liberty’s mother demanded frequently when she phoned them at home. “What are you waiting for! If you had a baby I’d come and take care of it for you. I saw a cute little quilt for its crib the other day in town. I do wish you’d have a baby, Liberty, I’d like to have someone to eat ice cream with. Your father can’t eat ice cream as you know. He swells up. They have some very exotic flavors these days like Hula Pie. I don’t think it would be wise to start the baby right off on Hula Pie, though. I think something simpler would be in order, like French Vanilla. How soon would it be, do you think, before the baby could have a little cup of French Vanilla ice cream?”

Liberty looked out the windows at the sunset colors rushing, funneling, toward the horizon. It was a good sunset. When it was over, she curled up on the couch and turned on the television. On the screen there was a picture of a plate with a large steak and a plump baked potato on it. The potato got up and a little slit appeared in it, which was apparently its mouth, and it apparently began talking. Liberty turned up the sound. It was a commercial for potatoes, and the potato was complaining that everyone says steak and potatoes instead of the other way around. It nestled down against the steak again after making its point. The piece of meat didn’t say anything.



Willie and Liberty went to a party given by the Edgecups of the Crab Key Association. Turnupseed had reminded them to go. He was surprised that the Maxwells hadn’t told them about it. The house was pink, and shuttered in the Bermuda fashion. Everything was pink. The phones were pink, the statuary and chaise longues. The balloons bobbing in the swimming pool were pink. The punch was pink.

The hostess greeted them with ardor. She was standing beside a gentleman wearing bathing trunks which were imprinted with flying beach umbrellas.

“You two are just cute as buttons,” she said. “Are you related?”

“We’re brother and sister,” Willie said.

“That’s adorable,” she said. “I had a brother once but he was ...” she fluttered her fingers. “... one of those. Very into the Greek tradition. He stole away all my boyfriends.” She looked down at Clem, who stood beside them chewing on an ice cube. “What,” she asked, “is this supposed to represent?”

“It’s a dog,” the gentleman suggested. “A pet would be my guess.”

“It certainly has peculiar eyes,” the hostess said. “My, I wouldn’t want to look at them every day. They sure remind me of something, though.” A memory knocked, then tramped muddily through her otherwise fastidious memory rooms. “Goodness,” she said excitedly. “I haven’t been this broody in years!... Have you tried the pears stuffed with Gorgonzola? I want everyone to promise me they’ll try them.” She wandered off.

“What’s your line of work, son?” the gentleman asked Willie. He was drinking a martini from a jar. He would unscrew the cap of the jar, take a sip and screw the lid back on again. After each sip, his jaws would go slack, giving him a meaty look.

Willie shrugged.

The man nodded. “I don’t believe in work either,” he said, and laughed. “It’s my money that believes in it.” His laugh had bubbles and clots in it. He probed delicately at one of the

beach umbrellas tipped at the crotch of his bathing trunks.

“I’ve saved a few people recently,” Willie said. “If you call that work. It’s what’s been coming up recently.”

“What are you, one of those Witnesses? Sneak up to a place with those little booklets trying to make a man change his ways? A stranger comes up to my door, I greet him bare-ass dick out, pistol ready.” He narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not doing what you think,” Willie said. “This wasn’t your redemption stuff. This was minor. Material stuff. Isolated events. Drowning. Shock.”

It was true. Willie had been saving people, though he knew it didn’t have the feel of calling.



The first person Willie had saved was a young man struck by lightning on the beach. It was late in the afternoon of a stormy day, and they were watching the surfers enjoy the high troubled Gulf. The sky was the color of plums and the water pale, and the surfers were dancing on their bright boards. The boy had been hurled out of the water and thrown twenty feet through the air onto the beach by the force of the charge. His chest had been badly burned. The burns were delicate and intricate like the web of a spider. Willie had administered cardiopulmonary resuscitation. The young man’s name was Carl. He was small and blond and looked ferocious even when he was unconscious. A few days later his parents had come over to the house with a box of chocolate-covered cherries. The parents were old and grateful. They had had Carl very late in life. They said he was a wild boy whom they had never understood. They thought he had a death wish. They were old and Carl was young. They couldn’t understand his hurry.

While they were at the house, Carl’s father, Big Carl, who was an automobile mechanic, gave their truck a tune-up. Carl’s mother found a tick the size of an acorn under Clem’s chair and disposed of it without fuss in the toilet. She confided to Liberty that Carl had once called her a bugger and made her cry. She never cried about anything, she said, except her little Carl.

Willie had saved two people next, an elderly couple in a Mercedes who had taken a wrong turn and driven briskly down a boat ramp into eight feet of water. Willie had been there to pull open the door. His hand had first rested on a man’s bearded face, and for an instant Willie said, he thought he was going to get bitten. The old woman wore a low-cut evening gown which showed off her Pacemaker to good advantage. The three of them stood dripping on the ramp, staring at the fuchsia pom-pom on the Mercedes antenna, all that was visible on the surface of the bay. They had been going to the opera.

“You’ve always been a fool, Herbert,” the old woman said to her husband.

“A wrong turn in a strange city is not impossible, my dear,” Herbert said.

To Willie, he said, “Once I was a young man like you. I was an innocent, a rain-washed star, then I married this bag.”



“Herbert’s lived in this town for years,” the man with the beach umbrellas flying over his bathing trunks said when Willie recounted the incident. “They love accidents, those two. Ge

their blood going. Puts the sap in old Herb's stick."

The old couple had given Willie a thousand dollars, all in twenties, delivered by messenger.

"It's good work, but it doesn't sound steady," the man said, clapping Willie on the shoulder. "Ruthie!" he hollered, gesturing wildly to a woman on the other side of the pool. "Come over here and meet this grand guy!" Ruthie made her way toward them, plunging her fingers into the soil of each potted plant along her route.

"She never waters anything," Ruthie complained.

"Meet these two here," the man said. "Ask them if they've got a Mississippi credit card."

"Oh, I know that one," Ruthie exclaimed cheerfully. "That's four feet of garden hose siphon gas, am I right?" She looked at Willie slyly, then turned to Liberty and showed her teeth.

Ruthie wore a great deal of jewelry. She glittered, resembling a chandelier. Willie declared his admiration.

"I always wear my jewelry," Ruthie said. "All the time, everywhere. Life is short."

"Do you know why people are interested in jewels?" Willie asked. He touched a large red stone at the woman's wrist. "It's the way the visionaries experience things. Their world is a dazzling one of light. Everyone wants to see things that way. Materially, jewels and gems are the closest thing to a preternatural experience."

"Come over here a sec," Ruthie said and led him away from the party.

"What kind of drugs you got?" she asked, smiling. "I'm your lady. I'll buy anything. I want to bong myself to the gills." She clutched a little purse.

"I don't have any drugs."

"What's all this lapis lazuli stuff?"

"I was just giving you some background."

"You're the youngest person here by at least twenty years. You don't deal?"

"Nothing."

"No? I can't believe it. You think I don't know? That I'm too old or ordinary to know?" She was still smiling. "They gave my husband heroin when he was dying. He kept telling me how profoundly uninteresting life was."

"Good," Willie said. "That's good."

"You're a creepy kid," Ruthie said.

Liberty watched, from a distance, Willie speaking. He looked back at her, scanning the space between them like a machine. How long would it be before they were caught, Liberty wondered. Caught, they would be separated. Separated, the contradictions between them would disappear, would vanish. No one would catch them then.

They had not fallen in love as though it were a trap, not at all. Love was not a thing that merely happened. Love was created, an act of the will, something made strong in the world surviving the world's strangeness and unaccountability. But Willie was inching out, his eye on something, the angling of some light coming from beneath some closed door.



All one day at CASA VIRGINIA, Willie took pictures of Liberty. He had found a camera in the house and a few rolls of film. Willie took shots of Liberty eating from a can of peaches. He took shots of her in her mildewy bikini. He took shots of her with a sea oat between her teeth. He

took her hip bone, her nipples, her widow's peak. Liberty saw that her life was being recorded in some way. Nevertheless, she was aware that her moments lacked incident.

Willie put the rolls of film in an antique brass bowl on the floor in the middle of the living room. Liberty took them outside at noon and broke the film from the cartridges. She would give the film to Little Dot, a child she knew. Little Dot found uses for useless things. She might attach the coils to her headband and pretend she was a princess from the planet Utynor. The sheets of film would be her face. Things had purposes for which they were not intended certainly. That's what enabled a person to keep getting up in the morning.



At last Willie decided to move along. They saw Turnupseed staggering along the beach with an enormous Glad bag filled with empty beer cans.

"There's enough aluminum on the beaches of Florida to build an airplane," Turnupseed said.

Turnupseed looked tired. He was tired of the responsibility. "Looking back on it," he said, "if I had to do it all over again, I just don't know if I could."

Willie said, "We can't disown the light into which we're born."

In the uncaring light, Turnupseed gave a smile rather like a baby's.

"You've got a lot of my first wife in you, son. What a sweetie she was. Number One was the one I really boogied with, if you know what I mean. She said that being sad separates a person from God."

"She said that?" Willie wondered.

"I believe she used those very words," Turnupseed said.

"We've got to be off now," Willie said. "We're leaving."

"Leaving this radiant place?" Turnupseed said. "Well, I don't blame you. Last night, you know, in town, I just could swear I saw my last wife in the laundromat. She didn't speak to me."

"Well, the dead can't disappear," Willie said. "After all, where would they go?"

"I like your manner son, I'm going to miss you," Turnupseed said. "Take care of that wife of yours. She seems to be living in a world where this don't follow that, if you know what I mean."

Later, when the Crab Key Association discovered that Turnupseed had been on such excellent terms with the besmirchers, an aneurysm would smack into the old guard's head with the grace of a speeding bus touching a toad. Liberty could still see him waving good-by.



Willie and Liberty and a locksmith stood outside the Umbertons' house on Featherbed Lane. Willie and Liberty were not acquainted with the Umbertons, who had been away now for several weeks. Newspaper delivery had been canceled, the houseplants placed outside in filtered shade, the phone disconnected, and several lamps of low wattage had been left burning dimly at night and invisibly by day. The Umbertons were away, in another state, in a more vigorous climate, in a recommended restaurant where they were choosing with considerable excitement items from the dessert cart. They were absorbed and concerned by the choices offered—the napoleons, the lemon tarts, the chocolate-dipped strawberries—much as they would be weeks later, after their return home, in cylinder rim vertical deadbolts, hardened shackles and electric eyes.

Willie had noted that the house had no alarm system, so he had called a locksmith from a phone booth.

“Locked yourself out, huh?” the locksmith said.

“You know what happened to us?” Willie said. “Our keys were stolen. Keys to everything were stolen.”

“That’s awful,” the locksmith said. His name was Drawdy. “The stealing these days is just awful. People will steal anything. My sister came home one night and somebody had dug up every dwarf pygmy palm in her yard. She’d just had some landscaping done, and there were these four dwarf pygmy palms, except when she came home that night, there was just four holes there. Those holes were so neat she didn’t notice at first that the palms were gone. Never seen neater holes in my life. It was like little men from outer space came down and just plucked up those dwarf pygmy palms.” He looked at the lock on the front door of the Umbertons’ house. “You know what I’d give you for this,” he said to Willie. “I wouldn’t give you fifteen cents for this.” He went back to his truck and got his tool box. “I’ll tell you,” Drawdy said, returning. “You’ve got to think like a burglar these days to protect yourself. You’ve got to look at everything just like a burglar would.” He set to work on the door. Cleo walked around the corner of the house and sniffed the locksmith’s leg. “God in heaven,” Drawdy said. He grew rigid, then slowly smiled. His smile was fixed and gray, lying on his mouth like a cobweb he had stumbled into.

“That’s just Baby Dog,” Willie said. “He’s one of us.”

Drawdy turned his smile on the door’s lock and picked away at it.

“Before I got into locks and such, I sold light bulbs,” Drawdy said. “I worked for a store in Mobile that sold nothing but white light bulbs. Now I bet you think that a white light bulb is nothing but a white light bulb, that white is white, but that is not the case. In Mobile I personally dealt with and *sold* Soft White, Warm White, Deluxe Warm White, Cool White, Deluxe Cool White, Daylight, Design White, Regal White, Natural White, Chroma White 50, Chroma White 75, Optima White, Vita-Lite, Natur-Escent, Verilux and ...” he pushed open the Umbertons’ door with a flourish “... White.”

“Thanks,” Willie said.

"I would say that animal was close to a Chroma White 50," Drawdy said, staring at Clem.

"How much do we owe you?" asked Willie.

"Twenty-five dollars," Drawdy said.

"Could you bill us?" Willie asked. "I'd appreciate it."

"Sure," Drawdy said, squinting at Clem. The Umbertons' name was given and their address

Drawdy wrote it down.

"I bet y'all don't know how light bulbs are made," Drawdy said.

"We don't," Willie agreed.

"Light bulbs are made by feeding glass in a continuous stream to the bulb-making machine," Drawdy said somberly. "Don't y'all want some keys made?"

"We'll be in touch," Willie said.

"Right," Drawdy said. He watched Clem. "If I had that animal I'd teach him something maybe."

"Like what?" Willie asked.

Drawdy looked puzzled. He rubbed his jaw and looked. "Like how to play an instrument," he said. He picked up his toolbox, walked back to his truck and drove away.

The Umbertons had many possessions. The house was heavily furnished. They had glass torchères, leather couches, massive sideboards, thick carpets. And then the house was cluttered with small objects. The objects were of a different quality, as though the Umbertons had bought them for somebody else and then took them back after a quarrel. The kind of objects intended for a recipient who died before the occasion of giving.

On the leather-topped desk in the living room was a framed photograph of the Umbertons on their wedding day. They were standing on marble steps, he one step above her. He had a crew cut, her dress a long train. Their round faces were set resolutely toward one another. On the desk too was a picture of a large orange cat in front of a Christmas tree. It was obvious that a superior choice had been made that year in the selection of the tree, for in an album photos of many previous Christmas trees were mounted. The kitchen cupboards were filled with an assortment of nourishing and sensible canned goods. Large clothes hung in the closets in predominant colors of blue and beige. There was a cabinet off the bath that was filled with nothing but toilet paper.

"This is how some people prepare for nuclear attack," Willie said, staring in at the treasure of white two-ply.

The Umbertons could be imagined as tall. The sinks and counters were set several inches higher than usual. Perhaps they had even become giants since their wedding day. The beds were oversized, the coffee mugs. Everything was heavy duty.

The Umbertons could be imagined as loving games. In one of the rooms was a pool table and a pinball machine. On the walls of this room hung a series of coconut shell heads, loonily embellished. An entire community of coconuts, masculine and feminine, mean and happy, hanging on the wall, contemplating the Umbertons' life of leisure. In the kitchen it was clear that the Umbertons loved their Cuisinart, for which they had many attachments, and the orange cat, who had a box full of toys. Clem looked the box over. He selected a rubber pig which squealed, and went off with it.

The sofas had pads under the legs to protect the rugs. The toilets had deodorant sticks to protect the integrity of the bowls. There was plastic on the lamp shades to protect them from

dust and on the mattresses to shield them from nocturnal emissions. The Umbertons were waging a sprightly war against decline. They protected their possessions as though they had given birth to them.

“How about cutting my hair?” Willie asked Liberty. “Just a trim.”

She knew his intention and shook her head. He would gather the hair up and put it in the middle of the rug when they left, or on the table, in the center of something. Nothing would be missing, nothing out of place, but addressing the Umbertons when they returned, would be a mass of hair.

“You can’t read my mind,” Willie said. “I just wanted my hair cut.”

“It doesn’t need it,” Liberty said. “It’s fine the way it is, it looks good, I like it.”

“I could write your diary,” Willie said.

“That’s a terrible thing to say,” Liberty said. Then she said, “That’s not true.” Finally she said, “I wouldn’t keep a diary.”

Beyond the windows the bay winked greenly. It was sick, filling up with silt. Each day there was less oxygen in the water than the day before. It labored against the cement wall the Umbertons had erected between them and it.

Liberty went into a sewing room off the kitchen. There were patterns and folds of fabric, a sewing machine and a dressmaker’s dummy. The room was snug and painted a placid peach. A calendar on the wall showed tittering bunnies and kittens playing musical chairs in a wholesome meadow. The room was obviously Mrs. Umberton’s tender retreat from the large life she shared with Mr. Umberton. Liberty sat on a hassock covered with a cheerful chin and felt the top slip slightly. Removing the lid, she found inside a well-thumbed paperback with a torn cover. *He plunged his head between her spread thighs, Liberty read. Lunging and licking, he thrust his tongue in her sea-smelling channels and velvet whorls tasting the wine which fermented by desire. He drew back and she whined in pleasure as she saw his glistening shaft ...*

Liberty threw the book back into the hassock and went into the living room. Willie was holding his hands above a spray of plastic flowers in a bud vase as though he were warming them there.

“What are we looking for here,” Liberty asked, “just in general?”

“You know, when anesthesia was first invented, many doctors didn’t want to use it,” Willie said. “They felt it would rob God of the earnest cries for help that arose from those in time of trouble.”

“Anesthesia,” Liberty said. “You can’t rob God.”

“I keep having this dream,” Willie said. “It’s a typical prison dream. I’m wandering around doing what I please, choosing this, ignoring that. And then I realize I’m locked up.”

Liberty looked at Willie, who was turning and folding his hands. Her own hands were trembling, and her mind darted, this way and that. Once, on a sunny day, much like this day, she had been driving down the road in their truck and she had seen a male cardinal that had just been struck by a car. It lay rumpled, on the road’s shoulder, and the female rose and dipped in confusion and fright about it, urging it to continue, to go on with her. Liberty’s mind moved like that, like that wretched, bewildered bird.



During the night, it rained. The rain came down in warm, rattling sheets. It pounded the

beach sand smooth, it dimpled the bay, it clattered the brown fronds of palms where rain lived. It entered the lagoons and aquifers and passed through the Umbertons' screens. Willie was playing pinball. Liberty could hear the flap of the paddles and the merry bells. She lay on her stomach on a rug in another room, glancing through the only other reading material in the house, a newspaper, several weeks old.

The local paper was highly emotional and untrustworthy. Truth was not a guarantee made to the paper's readers, but certain things could be counted upon. One could expect, on any given day, a picture of a lone, soaring gull, a naked child holding a garden hose, or a recipe for a casserole containing okra. The editors took paragraphs from the wires for international affairs and concentrated on local color and horror—the migrant worker who killed his five children by sprinkling malathion on their grits; the seven-car pile-ups; the starving pet pony with untrimmed hooves the size of watermelons. In this particular edition, there was one article of considerable interest, Liberty thought. It was an article about babies, babies in some large, northern city.

A nurse had made the first mistake. She had mixed up two newborn babies and given them to the wrong mothers for nursing. A second nurse on a different shift switched them back again. The first nurse, realizing her initial error, switched them a third time, switched the little bracelets on their wrists, switched the coded, scribbled inserts on their rolling baskets. At this point, the situation had become hopelessly scrambled. Three days passed. The mothers went home with the wrong babies. This was not a Prince and Pauper-type story. Both mothers had nice homes and fathers and siblings for the baby. Four months later the hospital called and told the mothers they had the wrong babies. They had proof. Toe prints and blood types. Chemical proof. They had done the things professionals do to prove that a person was the person he was supposed to be. The mothers were hysterical. They had fallen in love with the wrong babies and now they didn't want to give their wrong babies up. But apparently it had to be done. It seemed to be the law.

Liberty put the paper aside, closed her eyes and listened to the rain. It rang against the glass like voices, like the voices of children screaming in a playground. Children's voices sounded the same everywhere, a murmurous growth, a sweet hovering, untranslatable, like wind or water, moving.

Liberty and Willie were wanderers, they were young but they had wandered for years, although through a wilderness, staying for days or weeks or months in towns with names like Coy or Peachburg or Diamondhead or Hurley. Then larger towns, cities, still as though through a wilderness, for there was no path for them or way—West Palm, Jacksonville, Sarasota. There was always a little work, a little place to stay, and then there was this other thing, this thing that was like an enchantment, this energy that kept them somehow going. This adopted, perverse skill of inhabiting the space others had made for themselves. For themselves were not preparing for anything, they were not building anything, they were just moving along, and Liberty was aware that this house thing, this breaking and entering thing—time for the thing, they'd say, let's do the thing—became more frequent, accelerated, just before they left a town.

The rain increased, it fell in shapes, its voice children's voices.



Liberty and Willie had not been in this town long, six months, she knew two children well. Teddy and Little Dot. In a way they were her children in this town.

Tee, Little Dot called Liberty. There was always a scrape on her cheek or a cut on her arm for she hurt herself often and was unaware of it. Her eyes were deeply set and dark. "Tee Little Dot called, something glittering on her wrist, something shining that she loved something cheap, bright and useless that Liberty had bought her from a gum machine. Little Dot had been brain-damaged from birth, for her parents had been heavy dopers, no reformed. Her mother, Rosie, had been junking up so long she hardly knew she was pregnant and when she finally acknowledged that she was, she was twenty-three weeks along. The doctor said they probably had just enough time to slip in the saline, and that it was just as well since Rosie was so toxic that the baby would probably be a very unhealthy one. As Rosie lay on the table and the doctor was preparing to do the abortion, Little Dot slipped out. She just pushed her own way out, bawling, a little bigger than a lady's hand. "She's a keeper," the doctor said. "Can't do anything about this one now." And no one could. Little Dot lived in a world of her own, in mindscapes no one could know.

It had been Liberty's first night in town and she had been walking with Clem on the beach when she first met Little Dot. The child was all alone, a broken rope around her waist.

"I like to pee on the sand and look at the stars," Little Dot said.

"Well, we all like to do that," Liberty said.

She wore a dog tag with her name and address stamped on it, and Liberty took her home. It was just across the beach in a rundown shopping center where her parents, Roger and Rosie had a pottery shop called *Oh!* They lived in their shop and in a van that was parked out front. Behind the shop was a kiln and a tepee, where Little Dot slept.

"Oh," Rosie said, "you must think we're awful tying a little kid up, but it's a long rope and you can feel how light it is and if we don't, at night she just goes over to that beach. My baby's just mesmerized by that beach, aren't you baby? You're my little turtle, aren't you Rosie's little turtle. You just love those bright lights."

Rosie's eyes filled with tears but then she drew them back somehow, they didn't fall.

Liberty sees Little Dot all the time now. She takes her to the supermarket and to water-ski shows and roller-rinks. She buys her crayons and Big Gulps. But Little Dot hurts herself more and more. She goes for days without speaking. Little Dot is her own small keeper, and she alone with an aloneness so heavy that her self can hardly bear its weight. Liberty is not like her mother to her, Liberty knows that. She may even be adding to the terrible weight. Sometimes Liberty thinks that each moment she spends with Little Dot is like a stone she gives the child a small stone added to other stones.

It is Teddy to whom Liberty seems like a mother. "You could be my mother," Teddy often says to Liberty. They both have brown eyes and are allergic to tomatoes. Liberty could easily be his mother, Teddy reasons, because he needs one and they like each other. His own mother is in California where she is in love with another woman, and Teddy lives with his father, Duane, his father's four restored Mustangs and his father's latest girlfriend, Janiell. They live in a modest cement-block house with an extensive attached garage on the same street along the same narrow river where Willie and Liberty live. Liberty first saw Teddy high in the banyan tree in their yard the day after they had moved into the house. She had wanted to rent the place because of the banyan tree, a tree of such magnificence that it had

extinguished all vegetative life in its vicinity. The banyan was awesome with its many ceme-
gray trunks and its pink pendent aerial roots. It was so beautiful it looked as though
belonged in heaven or hell, but certainly not on this earth in a seedy, failed subdivision in the
state of Florida.

Teddy had played in the tree for years.

“There are twenty-eight places to sit or lie on in that tree,” Teddy told Liberty. He was to
old now to play in the tree, he said, but he used it as a place to think. He would crawl around
and think, or sit and think. Teddy is seven. Liberty sees him mostly at night, almost nightly
for Duane and Janiella like to go out. They like to get drunk, dance, and drive around.

“Put this pony to bed at nine,” Duane would say, instructing Liberty in Teddy’s car
slapping his little boy on the back with such enthusiasm that the child would spin sideways.

“Don’t let Little Dot play with that bowl and spoon too long,” Rosie would say, “it gets her
too excited.”

Teddy and Little Dot, they are Liberty’s children in this town, for this moment. But she and
Willie will be moving on soon, and there will be another town, although she cannot visualize
it. Another place has no shape for her, it is still nothing to her.



The rain fell, swelling the Umbertons’ yard. A tree limb toppled with a crack.

Liberty opened her eyes. A single light glowed dimly in the room that was papered with
silver flowers. Clem had become bored with the pink pig. He dropped it back in the box and
selected a squeaking carrot. Liberty could hear the jingling and clashing of the pinball
machine. She went to the doorway and watched Willie playing. He stood with his arms
clasped over his head while the ball, sent forth but undirected, continued to rocket off
bumpers, to plunge down channels that would not have it, its ultimate fall checked again and
again.

“This thing is rigged for an awful lot of free games,” Willie said.

“I want to get back tomorrow.” She pushed her hip against the machine and it stopped.

“Don’t you like it here?” Willie asked.

“Here? In the home of the tricky, comfy, rank-hearted Umbertons? Of course not.”

“You have no feeling for reality,” Willie said. “I’ve suspected it for some time. You have
real contempt for it.”

“This is someone else’s reality.”

“I’ll find the place,” Willie said. “You’ll see.”

She reached toward him and ran her fingers through his hair. She wanted to kiss his
cheekbones, hold him tightly, feel him once more. She feared that they both had a longing for
discovery, capture. And the longing to turn oneself in was, she knew, a fascination with the
buzz saw, the stove’s red electric coil, the divider strip, the fierce oncoming light.

Willie pulled her hands away and held them in his. He rubbed them as though they were
cold. They were not cold. In another room, a bed loomed white and vaporous in the
darkness.

“Lie down with me,” Liberty said. “Let’s comfort one another.”

“Comfort takes twenty minutes for old hands like us,” Willie said. “I’m talking average
Growing excitement, passion, fulfillment, despair. Twenty minutes.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Liberty said.

“Not that? What comfort then?”

“I meant that actually,” Liberty said.

“I’ve always loved you,” Willie said.

Something in the Umbertons’ house ticked, as though expanding.



At daybreak, it was still raining. Rosy-fingered dawn bloomed elsewhere, in higher, purer altitudes perhaps, where the heart beats more slowly. Liberty was dreaming the things she dreamed in stolen houses—churches and flowers and suitcases, bowls and water and caves. She stirred, and felt that Willie was standing over her, staring at her. And that was part of the dream, she thought, for Willie to be studying her so solemnly, as though he were choosing something. She was a woman in a house, sleeping. She looked at Willie, safe in her sleep, looking. She looked at him and saw herself, the form he would have her assume, a woman in a house, sleeping.

Later, she opened her eyes and saw Clem’s muzzle aimed at her, several inches away, his tail wagging slowly. She knew Willie had gone. When he hadn’t returned in an hour, she and Clem left too.

The Florida sky, the color of tin, squeezed out rain. It fell on stone and seed alike. Across the street from the Umbertons, a neighbor’s lawn consisted of large white stones dumped on black vinyl. The rain fell on that. It fell on a sheriff’s car that drove slowly past. The deputy was opening a Twinkie wrapper with his teeth. He grinned at Liberty as though she shared with him the criminal goodness of Twinkies. The car went around a corner and the street was empty. Heat rose like smoke from the damp pavement.

Clem chose a hydrant painted yellow, a garbage can and a clump of ginger lilies and made them his own. Walking out of Featherbed Lane (JUNGLE LOTS YOUR PIECE OF FANTASY WITH CENTRAL SEWER AND WATER) they entered an area bristling with garden apartments. There were gun shops and establishments that dealt exclusively in sandwiches. There were auto body repair shops offering reasonable rates where gypsies who had roamed the streets denting cars with baseball bats the night before hammered out the dents today. There was an open-air laundromat where surfers were gloomily drying their blue jeans. They sat in plastic chairs and stared at the heaving washers, all vacationers in this expensive resort that is life.

“Oh-oh,” a surfer said, “I didn’t mean to put that shirt in there.” A screaming red presser against the soapy glass and was pulled back.

Liberty and Clem continued walking, over to the Trail to hitch a ride home. The Trail had once been a meandering Indian footpath over coral and limestone rock, but it was now a murderous six-lane highway that gobbled up small animals for breakfast, dreamy old geezers in walkers for lunch, and doped-up young honors students in their developer-dads’ Jeeps for dinner.

Liberty stuck out her thumb. Cars poured toward them and past. Then, a pickup truck pulled over sharply. It was Duane, Teddy’s father.

“Hey, Liberty,” he called. “Why you hitching? Old man kick you out?” He grinned. Liberty attempted to match his grin with one of her own. Her jaws began to ache. With a grin like that, Duane must drool some, Liberty thought. He was short and compact, with thick

graceful eyebrows, a ruddy, healthy, milk-and-spoonbread look. He was a genius with engineering blocks. Other aspects of life puzzled him and frequently pissed him off.

“Hey!” Liberty chanted back. “Where did you get this truck?”

“It’s my buddy’s truck. I’ve been helping him with some tree work for the telephone company. Let the dog sit up here too. I’ve got my saws in the back.” He pushed open the door on the passenger side. Clem squeezed in front and settled himself. He looked like rising bread there.

A card taped to the windshield said NO ASS NO GRASS NO GAS NO RIDE.

“Don’t pay no attention to that,” Duane said gallantly. He popped the clutch and the truck tore off. “Guess who I saw today?”

“Who did you see today?”

“Everyone I looked at,” Duane said, grinning. Then his face grew somber. “You know the bitch, that wailing thorn-in-my-side bitch, the lezzie bitch I once revered as a wife, well she served papers on me yesterday.”

“I never met your wife, Duane,” Liberty said.

“Yes, she surely did. Seven-odd months to the day she left. She and her bitch girlfriend found a lezzie lawyer and they served me papers. Don’t want nothing, she says, just wants to get away from me. Can you believe that? My Teddy’s momma, my sweet boy’s momma, lezzie. There was so much deceit in that woman! Like she used to go on about my hair all the time, talking about my hair, how much she loved my hair, how wonderful my hair was. Well what was that all about? My hair for chrissakes. Then she comes up to me one morning seven-odd months to the day and says, ‘I’m leaving, Duane, I want a divorce, Duane. I’m living a lie, honey, and I’m so bored and unhappy, my face is getting bumps.’ It’s true she used to have the nicest skin. Every night she’d put her face in a bowl of ice cubes. But she was getting bumps.”

Duane stopped for a red light. He rubbed his eyes, then looked at Clem. Clem was looking forward with distaste, his ears flattened against his skull. “You know that dog smells like peaches,” Duane said. “When I was a little boy, I just loved peaches. I’d eat peaches till I puked.”

“Peaches,” Liberty said. Clem was always reminding people of things, possibilities, better times, imagined pleasures, suppressed woes. Clem stimulated the meridians. The highs, the lows. Peaches.

“I had a dog like that once,” Duane went on. “He hung himself. It’s the truth. I had him tied up inside a shed because he was a rambler, you know. Rambled all around. So I had to tie him up, and I tied him inside a shed because he was a rambler. Rambled all around. Roamer. So I had to tie him up and I tied him inside a shed and he jumped out a window there and the rope wasn’t long enough to reach the ground and the poor guy hung himself. Actually he didn’t resemble your dog at all, but I get reminded, when I see a dog, I see rope. Now when I see a rope it don’t remind me of a dog. Funny.”

A headache cupped Liberty’s skull. The light still shone red.

“God damn light,” Duane yelled. He gunned the truck and danced it halfway through the intersection. He looked at Liberty and smiled. “Do you know anything about lesbians?” Liberty asked.

“I can get out anywhere along here,” Liberty offered.

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