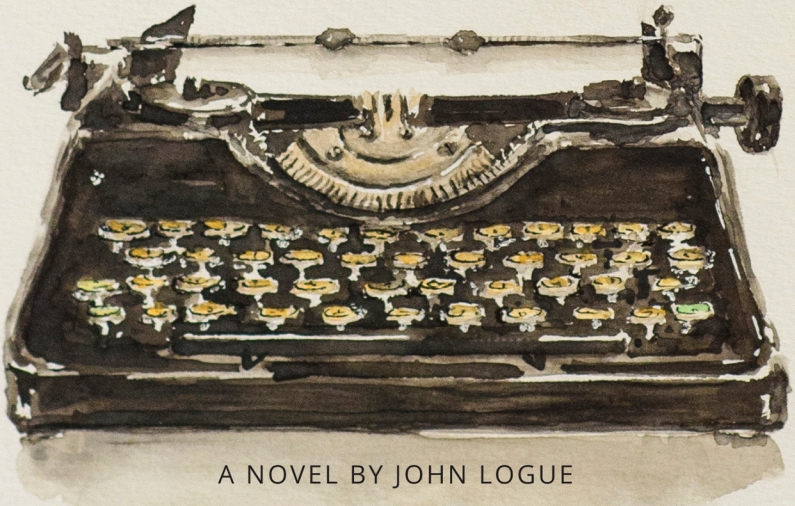
LIGHTNING'S CHILDREN



A NOVEL BY JOHN LOGUE

Lightning's Children

(A Novel)

By John Logue

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To Helen

Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant—
Success in circuit lies
Too bright for our inform Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With Explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

Emily Dickinson

Atlanta, March 1972

Chapter One

Alec Spotsworth moved in his pain as familiarly as a bird in his feathers. Sharpening a pencil, entering a length of paper in his typewriter, he unconsciously tested the limits of his mobility against the ache tethered in his back like a magnetic field.

He typed out two words.

A hand reached over his typewriter in advance of an arm, taking his just-sharpened pencil. All three disappeared from the round window of his vision as if they had dropped beyond existence.

The tall, bony religion editor worked the pencil up and down over her triple-spaced copy, wrecking words and letters above and below the lines. Her pinched under-bottom barely held her from sliding off his desk. He would not have seen her fall. He would have been surprised when her sharp tailbone hit the ruined hardwood floor.

"It's true. Preachers will hush to pass the plate." She spoke in measured words as if she were quoting from her copy.

Spotsworth did not look up. His longish brown hair swept around his high forehead and half over his ears, which threatened to stick out amusingly.

She frowned at her copy through her un-trapped hair. "At least some preachers look down your boobs at communion." She dropped the pencil back into the window of his vision and walked off, not having to squeeze between

the jammed desks, her flat chest advancing below like a napkin. She would have jumped if he had answered her.

Everything about her was not quite tidy, except her proofed copy. Her typed pages were scarred with indecision, but the sentences, when gathered up, read precisely and in true faith beyond the scope of nouns and verbs. A year ago, she was entirely pregnant.

The chief copy boy, P. W. Cato, obscenely bald and age fifty-seven, took up a collection, saving the looks on their faces in the newsroom as carefully as their money. "Looks like a garter snake around a door-knob," he repeated to everyone. His bad teeth cut all the office news into words. If you were dying you could be sure his yellowed, blackened stumps would bite out the details.

Louise did not object. She needed the money and posted a notice: "Please give to the Louise Bennett Pregnancy Fund. The father has made his only contribution." She signed her name and title: "*Atlanta Observer* Religion Editor." She kept the baby, of course. She occasionally brought him by the paper and sat him in her outbox.

Spotsworth examined the two words he had typed: Skeebo Wescott. It was not such a marvelously unfortunate name. The only way he could possibly get rid of it was to write it down. It had come in the Wednesday mail in a letter from a Democratic poll watcher in the Fifth Precinct. He was complaining that his precinct had been deprived of an entire voting machine in the last election. He signed his name seriously. It was possible to use it in his column because of the *III*. *Skeebo Wescott*, *III*. What men could you imagine as the I and the II? Or any of them as Democrats?

Getting the name was lucky. Still, Spotsworth faced the infinite possibilities of a blank length of paper. Writing was like going to sleep…if he thought about it, he could not do it. He was not moving, even typing, and the pain in his back was there. It was not down his leg today. It might be when he got up. Some days it flowed stronger, but it was always present. He gave into it but kept going. He had eliminated those movements that were impossible, including all tennis.

The players at Bitsy Grant Tennis Center had loved to imitate his slices and cut shots that he launched with his knees flexed outward under him as though their purpose was to either lower him or shoot him directly up intact,

his racket and empty hand angled away from his body like the old daguerreotypes of John L. Sullivan posing in his championship belt. He was tough to beat. He seldom made an error, and you had to overcome the sight of seeing him play.

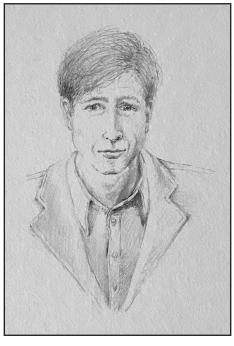
He ruined the disc reaching for a poorly hit forehand by an inferior player, a medical student, if you like irony. The surgeons would not operate on the disc so long as he could stand it. It had been nine years. The pain had ended his youth at once, had gotten him over into middle age in his movements. When he was tired, he felt old.

The line of pain he lived with was also sensuous because it was only absent, totally, when his permanently stiffened body accommodated itself over the length of a woman, as if the aching were drawn out in other spasms. How long had it been? Since he had lain with a woman? He began to count back, but fortunately he looked up at the clock. He had not typed a word in thirty minutes.

Thinking of the length of a woman, remembering the white panties on the morning bus was the sight that sent him limping into the dark research room to seek out the Sunday lingerie ads in the *New York Times*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *Miami Herald* and his own *Atlanta Observer*. What he saw set him typing, with no transition:

Spotsworth

Skeebo Wescott, III. The smooth, bone under skin of her legs and the deep, rising altogether softness of her body joining inside the rare, thin, swollen, breathing elasticity of soft white



panties. Night-drugged inflated balloons of panties that have rolled me in my sleep since adolescence. All the color glimpses in French class and up the bus steps eighteen years later under miniskirts. The unimagineable ease of helpless bands of faint elastic that made it all possible. One instant I was twelve. I kicked rocks into culverts to hear them gurgle down in dark

echoes, stripped pyracanth of their berries like round cool fire in my hand and threw them against window screens to hear them snap, slept before I could remember being in my bed.

One light-second impulse and my quietly rolling universe was an upheaval of white limbs, a geometry of breasts, a rounded hell of softness and iron; the plain of long, timeless wonder that had filled my imagination exploded in wet layers of white heat.

Color coordinated bra and brief lace trimmed bikini Non-Cling™ Antron nylon anti-static Tricot (Tricot!) elastic-leg briefs reducing cling-causing electricity for the life of the garment.

Imagine all the non-anti-static nylon satin cotton silk clinging high above the leg riding up the skirt. None of them anti-static to the electricity of sliding fingers.

The new step-easy, brief in yellow pink beige or all-white with every possibility of absorbent double fabric. In weightless thrones of panties women may not only rule but own the world.

This chemistry of theirs is fixed in me. No distance or closeness can escape it or empty it for long. It moves ahead of my imagination, waiting and overtaking me at once in church pews. Eating I taste white straps of hope, drinking I taste round nipples of wild desire.

Swung above in Demi-cup, front-closure, plunge front, contour styles! Save tomorrow in foundations, Downtown, second floor; Branches.

Assorted styles in nude, white. S-M-L. D-Junior sleep wear! Lingerie with its own language. And men live kingdoms in their minds of sheer fabric, rounded as with helium, and under them without weight. Not down around the ankles but always up snug to the waist over deep mounds promising everything. Half of the city moves and breathes in Diorissimo

Sandal-foot pantyhose without mercy: Suntan, Clissique Beige, Crème Crepe, Sand-mist, French Taupe or Black Orchid, and the rest of us dream worlds in our hands with our eyes open.

Or taste with our mouths Apricot and the gentlest of greens

on white rayon, pillage in the street, and unholy culottes that move easily in and out of sleekest sports cars in our minds.

And you reader, in your anonymity, with your fingers on page 11-C: Vivid in super pink, mint green or Wedgwood blue; Camisoles, fetching, lacy bodice tops peeking out from sheerest blouse with nylon stretch lace straps, white trimmed in blue or pink trimmed in pink, wouldn't Mother love one?

Caught up in a breeze of halter-bare polyester chiffon, Lenox Square's Lollipop cotton panties, Annual sale by Modern Globe, in white only to make your mouths water.

Elegant as the Parthenon, Grecian flowing chiffon into watery Sea, $1.60. They know your minds who write the words. But these line-drawn ladies in advertisements, arms akimbo, braceleted wrists, flowing on the page in cool shadows of ink and all indifference, are beyond imagination.

Let us make a revolution of halter bras, Josephine Bareback in lush, lined lace with straps that cross low on the back and fasten at the waist, escape into Crepes hip-huggers, buy three and save. Save what? Ourselves? Can only those who wear them be free of them?

Or will the split-instant come with age when all the riot of flesh-linen is again one distant level landscape of wonder, Time only a puzzle of old men?

I cannot say, readers. I am obsessed with the round, latent tracing of waistline, breathing in and out, free of the soft discipline of elastic; the skirt, tight knit, pulled, stretched down over that perfect fading impression, that last low hurdle of modesty.

"Naked in the quick dead middle/Of the night"

The Poet.[1.]

Of course, the ending. Always from *The Poet*. Mailed locally. Never a name.

Spotsworth ran a pencil down his copy, marking paragraphs. Habit corrected the most obvious typing errors. It was not unusual for him to draft

briefly what he had seen or heard or imagined. He had done it often in seven years as a reporter and feature writer as an exercise to warm up his mind for the degree of truth *The Observer* was prepared to publish. Eight years of writing a local column five days a week had not made it any easier to get started. He had never-before typed only and exactly what he thought all the way to the end of a subject. Always he ripped out the copy paper and balled it up after a few sentences. He would not even read what he had written.

Spotsworth laughed, rather highly, and queerly, ricocheting little bursts of sounds off the roof of his mouth. It was the result of a man chuckling who had not practiced it in fifteen years. He looked nakedly about to see who had heard him. The large square room was jerkily alive with abbreviated motions of typing, quiet pools of editing. No one had heard him over the concatenations of the Teletype machines.

Spotsworth looked down at the veins on the backs of his hands. He had not realized how they were already climbing and bulging with premature age. He was the only man in the room who worked in his suit coat; the resident cynic, the keeper of trivia, the translator of local travelers to Inverness in search of the Loch Ness Monster; the editor of recipes and pioneer herbs, hair setting compounds from boiled quince seeds. It was as if typing this unexpurgated column of spontaneous thought had fixed in him an insoluble element of self-examination: *…Always snug to the waist over deep mounds promising everything…*

Spotsworth lifted himself out of his chair and removed his suit coat and thumbed it, unnaturally, over his shoulder. His shirt was an unhealthy white in the room of stripes and colors of the early 1970s, all of the sleeves clumsily rolled. Trailing him in his right hand was his usual length of copy paper. It was only 4:00 P.M. He was nearly an hour early.

Walking toward the copy desk, he felt exposed, ridiculously, as if every editor were watching only for him; he did not stop walking. It was two hours before the first deadline. He had plenty of time, after coffee, to write a substitute column.

Edward Metcalf watched the paper fall on his copy desk and roll up inside itself. He looked at Spotsworth as if he had written it and dropped it into his semi-circle of judgment as an act of hostility. Only two of his copy

editors were coming in tonight. He did not admit to himself that Spotsworth's knowledge of language exceeded the bloody rim's when it was intact—intact of ignorance and indifference. *How the fuck would anybody know if old Spotsworth misspelled the Christian name of somebody's Aunt Eloise whose cat had kittens with six toes?*

Metcalf looked down at the column as if it were set in lead and could not be lifted. He raised it with his eyes and his shoulders back into Spotsworth's hand. "We're up to our neck in Red China…"

"The red ass," mumbled one of the two long, bony men on the rim: one too old and the other too young, as if there had been an unfortunate flaw in editorial replacement parts.

"We'll check the proof," said Metcalf, not pausing, as if the other voice on the desk that had spoken was disembodied.

It was a familiar cop-out. Spotsworth's column was not copy edited two days a week. He made few errors. But they were errors. With his coat unnaturally over his shoulder, Spotsworth did not like Edward Metcalf. He did not like the sloppy way he ran the copy desk. He did hot like the Prussian crew-cut he had on his head. It was an unnatural emotion for Spotsworth, and he was sure that it stood out on his face.

Metcalf looked dully back at the UPI copy he had in front of him. He had looked at Alec Spotsworth for fifteen years and never really seen him, no more than to see him limping, on certain days, across the newsroom while he himself quickly inventoried the copy desk to decide if they would screw with his column.

"You do that!" Spotsworth sneared.

Metcalf looked up then, at the startlingly severe way he said it. All he saw was Spotsworth's back with 550 words in his left-hand, which Metcalf would have read more closely than any 550 words from mainland China.

Spotsworth crossed to the sleep-walking assistant copy boy at the pneumatic tube station. He dangled the pages in his face as if it were contagious. Finally, the boy—P.W. Cato's assistant who constantly paid for his indolence in indignities which only plunged him deeper inside himself—took the copy and squirreled it into a plastic capsule and shot it to its fate.

Spotsworth waited for the quick sucking action, which signaled that he was maybe through for a new, nonredeemable day. He walked past the

unmanned reception desk…unmanned for eleven years. The elevator opened-up empty, as if he were the last passenger. He felt uneasy out of his suit coat and pulled it on again, careful to button it. *The composing room will never set the column into print*, he told himself. *They would tube it right around. He would come back. He would have a good hour to rewrite his column for Thursday.*

When the elevator door opened again, Spotsworth walked out. He had no pain down his leg. His back was unlimbering as his body heat increased. It only hurt if he lifted his feet too high. He skated them carefully in front of him. His coat was now snug against the March wind, which was not taking itself seriously. It was quite pleasant to keep walking. He never considered stopping for coffee or going back.

Forsyth Street angled into Peachtree Street, leaving a corner of awkward proportions, like a wedge of pie cut with a notion of economy. It was a geometry of failure. In fifteen years, Spotsworth had seen here a consecutive decline into bankruptcy, from a jeweler of inferior reputation to a stand-up doughnut shop. Crowded or sparse, the corner's sharp proximity to traffic made the people walk faster.

Spotsworth hurried across Forsyth Street to the narrow point of the intersection; he tested one foot on the raw asphalt of Peachtree Street while traffic struggled desperately in front of him, then cast himself into a moving gap between vehicles—reducing any hope of dignity in his crossing—into a wildly swiveling action of the head and body, thrusting his legs stiffly forward to protect his back. Spotsworth came up over the curb, as if for air.

Watching for his bus, he did not catch the eye of any of the people who waited with him. The women who were not young held packages and looked anxiously for the bus. The young female secretaries and clerks balanced easily on their wide heels of the season and looked at each other and at the men, who smoked; some of the men read the rival afternoon *Journal*; all of them watched the legs of the secretaries and clerks and for the bus without giving away anything of themselves.

The Peachtree Street bus pushed its blank face, like a great mask, out of the traffic alongside the curb. Spotsworth held the correct change, which was all the driver would take for the meter to discourage thieves. Gripping the

exact coins made him feel as if the city had been threatened by the buses themselves and not the passengers.

The bored driver did not waste a hostile glance in his direction, though he stood longer than necessary in the door. Atlanta was gone. It was all city now. He made a note of those words. It was all right with him. He had been only a spectator in the original Atlanta. All that remained of that time were dogwood trees and certain clubs. The clubs were changing. Watching the city now would be more evil, and, of course, more interesting.

Spotsworth put both palms on a seat and handed himself into a sitting position. Two of the secretary-clerks in the rear of the bus watched him; he looked like a spare old hen lowering herself on a clutch of eggs. They saw each other looking at him and laughed together. Spotsworth did not hear them.

Peachtree Center slid by him and over him. He did not see the Regency Hyatt Hotel or imagine its lighted elevators climbing the inside of the walls like time-capsules or look down into the sunken skylight of the Midnight Sun Restaurant. He might have been riding by the old, low brick buildings that had stood at that site for half a century and were now gone. Spotsworth, his raised arms draining his back, put down his newspaper; he suspended his mind and it rolled with the bus out Peachtree Street.

It was a short run. Spotsworth ignored the other passengers and the stops; he did not see the old grand Fox Theater with its famous organ, or the lapsed Georgian Terrace Hotel, or the abandoned Seven Steers Restaurant, still offering cheap steaks and domestic beer. He did not look out on the hippie culture, in its decline, between Tenth and Fourteenth Streets; when he walked there at night, the bare feet, the hair that hung straight and heavy as with the burden of remorse, the free moving breasts inside the thin body shirts, were to him as naturally in their place as the traffic lights, which swung over the intersections. Spotsworth was an easy touch. He fumbled for a quarter or a half-dollar each time he was approached; when his change was gone, he turned his palms upward, and the young girls with the strangely alive eyes understood he had been tapped out for the night. He read their *Great Speckled Bird*. Once they had done a parody of his column. Spotsworth winced at the clever ear of the writer and the proven thesis of his own superfluidity. The column had begun: *Mrs. Eudora McMillan left her wedding ring in a pay toilet*

at the Atlanta Airport. She was unable to sleep, from despair, for two days. It was returned to her the third day by the wife of the same jeweler who had originally engraved her initials and her husband's inside the band, twenty-nine years ago. Mrs. McMillan said, "Pay toilets are the last seats of free enterprise where one gets one's money's worth." It was not explained why Mrs. McMillan happened to have her wedding ring off her finger.

Spotsworth was not consciously aware of their progress, but when the bus cut its momentum, he was standing at the door waiting for it to stop at Fifteenth Street. He stepped down onto the curb, anticipating the pain that closed his eyes. Now he did look around. The change that had come to Peachtree Street was impossible and as sudden as today. He waited for a green light so that he could cross Peachtree.

Fifteenth Street, west off Peachtree, was a vague meandering. He turned up a steep, narrow driveway between abrupt walls. His three-story building of faded government brick plunged solidly into the high embankment. Its window screens were black with age.

An opening in the brick led down three dark steps. He fumbled with the old square metal lock and the long heavy key. It turned reluctantly in his hand. He switched on the electric lights, which were subdued in dust-heavy globes and shades, and then advanced into the low room, locking the door behind him. The room was long and heavy with shadows.

He looked down, unseeingly, on a wide overstuffed couch billowing in lush mounds of stained unclean fabric. A rocking chair crouched under the best reading lamp. Two straight-back chairs stood perpetually empty on square ugly legs, and the rest of the room was books, mostly paperbacks, on impromptu shelves, and a small primitive black and white television set mounted on a low table. Overhead the ceiling paper bulged down in pockets of stale air. Two floor-length windows were dark with rusting screens. A fading, classic print of still-life fruit receded into the shadows. The faint, trapped light in the room burned heavy with time, jarred only by the electric colors of the paperback books dripping on tables and overrunning the crude shelves.

Spotsworth dropped his newspaper and walked into his bedroom without switching on its light. He could see the outline of the low double bed with its iron, orthopedic mattress, and the dark-on-dark shadows of irregular stacks

of books on the floor along the walls. There was a reading lamp and no other furniture in the room.

He opened the door into the bathroom and looked down immediately on the rounded edge of a high porcelain tub mounted on legs like claws. The bathroom had been invented in a closet years after the place was built, and it was necessary to step into the tub to get to the toilet. It was painful for Spotsworth to lift his long narrow legs into and then out over the high sides of the tub.

He reached for the string above the steady dripping in the lavatory and pulled on the light. He watched his long face appear in the uneven mirror. His full brown hair swept youthfully over his high forehead, but his blue eyes were raw and fatigued from interrupted sleep. His nose was straight and large enough for his face. His mouth was wide and very frank and, unlike the eyes, unfatigued by tension, as if it were entirely innocent. His chin was pleasantly long and solemn. He was far older and younger than forty-two.

Spotsworth dipped his hands ceremoniously into the cool water and splashed it onto his face. His skin felt young and tight, as if age had spilled with the water. It was the first good feeling Spotsworth had had coming into the rooms. After fifteen years, they were only spaces in which he moved, no more of a refuge than the bus he rode. He turned the handles, and the deep tub began to fill with a rumble of copper bowels. Rolling up his trousers, he carried his shoes in his hands back through the deepening tub into the silent bedroom.

Chapter Two

The composing room was frozen in time. Insulated against thought. The world came back in plastic capsule dosages. Composing room Linotype operators set it into metal; union printers arranged it into galleys (God forbid a fledgling editor touch a finger to a line); proofreaders revised it; printers devils, under jaunty folded caps of yesterday's pages, pressed it into being in thunder and ink on a current of paper. The world passed through them, obituaries in the pores of their hands, new wars under their fingernails, and they screamed curses at a careless management, while every year a severed finger flew through the air, trailing blood on the unclean concrete followed by dark laughter.

Harold Malloy saw his real name once a week on his paycheck. All he heard was: *Arms!* When he stood straight, which he never did, he was six-foot-three. He weighed 128 pounds. All of him looked tubercular, especially his emaciated arms, which hung down out of his sleeves like thin, prehensile extensions on some giant endangered water bird. He stood, half perched, against a high stool. He removed the copy paper from the tubes and hung it on long spikes, where it waited, indiscriminately, to be set into type. Malloy stabbed *Bleeding Ulcers a Terror* onto *Buckhead Suspect Held in Mississippi* onto *Thompson Offers Bill to Help Jews Resettle in Israel* onto *Whale Gigi, Her Signals Lost* onto *35,000 More Dogwood Trees* onto *Friends Say Edith Put Clifford Up to*

It. The copy to these headlines went on separate spikes. Most of it was national TTS copy and was set by a computer, which the printers hated. When the computer typed errors, and it typed them incessantly, the printers made sure to ignore them. Malloy cultivated a permanent indifference: late copy, headlines written too long to fit, lapsed deadlines, pied type, the neurotic face of the captive managing editor in the plate glass window. Nothing about his job moved Malloy. His hands and eyes casually manipulated the pages of desperate copy paper, while his mind was forever insulated from responsibility by Local Typographers Chapter No. 671 and his own indifference. Indifference was an act of loyalty in the composing room. There were only three or four printers who doggedly tried. Without them, the one-hundred-million-dollar newspaper would roll out blank columns between the black, ugly ads. The copy for the first edition of *The Observer* was running late. That was not why Malloy was shrunk up defiantly into his length of bones. His new 1972 Ford Torino had broken down on the expressway that afternoon.

"Arms, it's all your damn skin and bones. Them Toe-reen-eos ain't built to stand it!"

Malloy paid $4,200 for the Torino. It was blue and white. It had blown a water pump with less than eight hundred miles on the speedometer.

S. W. Gagliano spit tobacco. The union made him do it into his own cup. He put the chew over in the side of his mouth and got back after Malloy: "Anyhow! It's *baaby bluue*!" The printers who could hear him were glad to look up from what they were doing and dog-cuss the Torino.

Malloy fell away from the stool, leaving himself arranged on legs like pincers. "Just keep slobberin' over the motha' fuckin' room! You hadn't got no work to do!"

All the printers looked to Gagliano, who spun around and grabbed his genitals down in his overalls in one bulging hand. "You're late! But I saved it for yuh!" He did it to Malloy every week. Every week they all chortled. Eyes grew rheumy following civil disorders into place upside down in type. Legs aged varicose under the dead weight of forms holding 1,300 lines of one day in the whole world, and the printer laughed and grabbed his crotch for $5.51 an hour.

"Hey, Rosie!"

F. S. Washington, called Rosie, was looking for a face to pull a page proof. The F. S. stood for Fort Smith. He was born in Arkansas. He was glad enough to be called *Rosie* all his life. His grandmother nicknamed him that because that's how he came out of the dishpan when they bathed him in front of a coal-burning morning glory stove.

"Rosie!"

F. S., his feet slewed out in front of him, stopped. He was still looking for a face. Rosie was the assistant foreman of the composing Room. The foreman was near retirement; he never left his ass. Rosie did the work as straw boss. His eyes kept hunting, but his stopped feet meant he was listening over the lunging, mechanical racket.

"I ain't believin' this!" said Elroy Moody, careful not to shift from his Linotype machine, his hands working the keys while he talked like they were carrying the melody.

Rosie saw the man he needed. He was about to move on.

Moody couldn't believe he was leaving. He physically hurt in his nuts to show him what he was setting. "If this bare-ass copy they gave me is a joke. I'm makin' a complaint," Moody whined.

Rosie looked over. He was paid $225 a week to stop trouble. He made himself watch casually around the clanging room. He stood all his life in the middle of deadlines; if he panicked once, he was finished. He began sprawling his feet out in front of him until he was behind Moody, reading: *Permanent Non-Cling™ Tricot (Tricot!) elastic-leg briefs reducing cling-causing static electricity for the life of the garment. Imagine all the non-anti-static nylon satin cotton silk clinging high above the leg riding up the skirt. None of them anti-static to the electricity of sliding fingers, the new step-easy brief in yellow pink beige or all white with every possibility of absorbent double fabric.*

"My ass!" said Rosie, leaning close to read it with his glasses, too engrossed to downplay his surprise.

Moody grinned his bad teeth, as if he had personally typed the newspaper into a dangerous libel.

"What the hell you got here?" Rosie said.

"Spotsworth," Moody said. He checked the slug line for the fifth time to be sure he had read it right. Linotype operators could set the alphabet for

seven hours for all they read of what they typed, but even they groaned when Malloy gave them Spotsworth's notes columns…with all the insane names and lost addresses to set. "Must be somebody jerkin' off," said Moody. He was glad he was sitting down because his own pants were beginning to swell.

"Gimme a proof. Gimme three or four," Rosie said. He tried to say it offhand; a couple of printers were looking at them. Rosie knew proofs would be all over the composing room in minutes. "Nothin' gets outta here on this," he said, looking at Moody. "We set it. Far as we know it runs, until some asshole says it doesn't."

Moody nodded his thin head. He could taste the knot of attention when the proofs swept the composing room. He would only put out three or four, so they would have to take turns reading them.

Somebody was being a wise ass, Rosie was sure. He meant to find out who. It would help him with the union. He had already edited Moody from the incident; he would have to get his satisfaction with the proofs in the composing room.

"Arms!" Rosie had his hand on the alarmingly thin shoulders of Malloy, who was flattered with the attention, but prepared to slow down all his movements if Rosie reminded him that the copy was running late.

"The Spotsworth," Rosie said, "don't send the proofs back 'till the deadline."

"Sure," said Arms, glad to feel the boss's hand on his shoulder now that it wouldn't cost him any effort.

Rosie waited for the column to be proofed. There was an unwritten, lead-set agreement in the composing room: no printer would ever knowingly correct any error made in the newsroom. If a printer saw an error, he made doubly certain it was set, exactly as it was, so that the proofreaders and the copyreaders and editors had the privilege of uncovering it. Unless the printer was unlucky, it got published; if the wording was bad enough, he could carry it around in his wallet, such as:

Coach Screws
Rotary Speaker

The high school coach in Atlanta would not change his last name and loved the Post-Observer headline cat-calls that put his tough teams in each year's state tournament.

Rosie began reading the Spotsworth proof. He couldn't figure out all of it. From the first sentence he was bumfuzzled.

Chapter Three

Words did not come down in an avalanche but accumulated steadily in the newsroom, like water in a reservoir. Each wire service machine clattered at sixty-six words a minute in a worldwide cadence. Only the uneven silences between transmissions gave any hint of a human input. Local reporters and rewrite men typed at lesser and erratic rates, with great spasms of interruptions by ringing telephones, illegible notes, mental blocks, stale hangovers, chronic indolence, fellow cynics, intruding panderers and politicians.

Still the words mounted between 3:00 P.M. and 12:00 A.M.. until the copy desk succumbed. No longer able to bail themselves out a story at a time before each of the four nightly deadlines, the news editors scrawled headlines, not even counting the characters to be sure they would fit the allotted spaces. Editing the copy itself, they only marked paragraphs, not doing so much as that on the TTS wire service copy, but rolling it and packaging it to the composing room in a ribbon of computer tape, as if it were being set as a present to mankind. If the headlines and leads were no longer edited, the bodies of the stories, local and national, could have included original excerpts from the Nuremberg Trials and they would not have been discovered.

All the while, Chief Copy Editor Edward Metcalf rubber-stamped everything into the pneumatic tube, including his own innocence should one

of the copy editors overlook an unusually painful error. The copy editors were doomed to errors of omission and prone to errors of commission, even if time had been stopped and reversed in their favor. They had long ceased to fight it; they rode the flow of copy, not even imagining what might be printed in ink from the pages they ignored.

Metcalf made a filthy comment—*Shit*—and dropped a too-long headline in front of the old, tall copy editor who had not written it. The young, bony copy editor ignored both of them while not reading the copy he was holding. The tall old one looked down on the wide blue mark from the composing room, as if it were an outrage against the freedom of speech. The headline read:

FAINT HOPES
FOR PEACE IN
ULSTER ARISE

The printer's pencil cut off the last letter of the last two lines. No way they would fit in the one column. *Obviously, the dumb bastard*, thought the old copy editor. He wrote in his erratic longhand, which quivered as if both the paper and the pencil were moving:

NO HOPE SEEN
FOR PEACE MOVE
IN TORN ULSTER

The new headline was longer than the one that had been too long, and read the opposite of the old one.

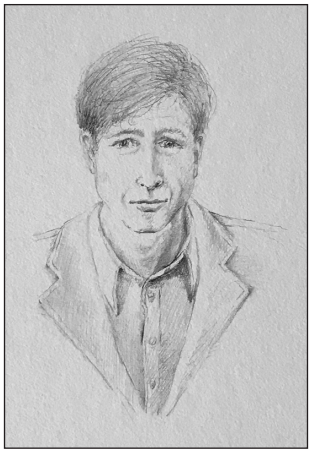
He flew the half-sheet of headline paper in front of Metcalf, who was stamping it in the air before it settled on the desk.

Metcalf made a filthy comment, dropping a new handful of too-long headlines in front of the bony young copy editor, some of which he had already re-written.

At that instant—5:47 P.M.—the old, bald copy boy, P. W. Cato, slapped a length of fresh proofs on the copy desk in front of Metcalf, who did not look

down to acknowledge their existence. Metcalf had enough headlines that wouldn't fit to worry about.

The last possible moment of the day's first deadline, 6:00 P.M., was thirteen minutes away. *The Observer* had never gone to bed less than thirty minutes later than any of its deadlines in the nineteen years Metcalf had been in charge of the copy desk. It was tough, but nobody who went into journalism ever thought it would be easy. The top proof on the fresh stack, none of which Metcalf would read, was neatly indented, nine lines, for Spotsworth's twenty-two EMS head sketch:



SPOTSWORTH

In the proof room, buried next to the loud agony of the composing room, Evelyn Sellers held her eyes open until they blinked against her will. She gripped the length of the galley proof and forced herself to read:

> *Studies showing positive results were largely known to the Administration in 1970 when Mr. Nixon submitted legislation…*

It was impossible. She had not made one of the hieroglyphic notations of the proof room on the margins in front of her.

At first, despite herself, then letting her mind have its way, she remembered phrases and images from Spotsworth's column, which she had

just proofed…*the tight knit pulled, stretched down over that perfect, fading impression the last low hurdle of modesty*.

Miss Sellers held her breath in, but her stomach swelled against her skirt. She quickly let it out, but then she had to breathe in again. She was twenty-seven. Her face had the young, determined look of exactly that age. Even behind glasses, her eyes had a defiant squint. Her face was plain, but animated, her nose round under the glasses, her lips full and mobile. Her figure was sensuous, still young and firm from walking long distances in the city. She wore her skirts well above her knees; men watched her legs when she was standing or climbing the steps of a bus. She was not married. She knew two men, one of them married. She had slept with the married one. She was sure the five older women, and the only old man, in the proof room could see her consciously breathing in and out. She had waited five minutes after proofing the breathless Spotsworth before dropping it in her out-basket. She hoped the old, chief proofreader would pick it up and skim through it, but he did not. She was enormously aware of the safety pin in the elastic of her worn panties. She had never placed any special value in panties, except on certain weekends when she felt they might be removed and they were not. She stood abruptly and began walking between the small ponds of concentration in the glass-enclosed proof room. No one questioned her; no one ever left on deadline, except in an emergency. They assumed nature had subverted her; all of them had more than they could read and hardly looked up. Since the copy desk never edited copy, the proofreaders had to catch everything that was wrong grammatically and factually, as well as typographically. But in fact, the proofreaders skimmed over everything at deadlines and caught very little, except fresh ink on the palms of their hands.

Evelyn Sellers took off her clothes down to her panties and stood on the only folding chair in the ladies' room so that she could see her body in the half-length mirror. She swelled pleasantly in the front and rear of the disgraceful panties. The lapsed band was held tentatively with the cheap safety pin; small bubbles of holes were appearing all along the nylon seams. She turned to her profile. Her breasts were firm and turned with her. She thought of Alec Spotsworth. She had proofed hundreds of his columns. His grammar was always precise. She could not remember one line he had written before,

but she could remember much of the column she had just read. She had never met him. She began to think about the groundskeeper at Atlanta Stadium. He was her age—actually, a year younger. He was always brown from being in the sun. He was tremendously conscientious about his work. Once during a thunderstorm at 2:00 A.M. he had driven her in his car into the bowels of the stadium and leaped out on the playing field in his suit to be sure the tarpaulin was in place. It was summer and baseball season. The tarp was there all right. But the field never drained properly, and the game was rained out. Her groundskeeper was soaked. He was also weeping, as if he were not wet enough. She had never heard a man cry before. It was physically exciting. How could he grow grass with faint sun? It was a high circular stadium, always in shadow, with poor drainage. She had turned on the car heater and helped him undress. She had not seen the condition of his shorts. He took off his coat and shirt and shoes, but kept on his soaked shorts. His name was Clyde Haynes. Every time the sportswriters ridiculed the stadium's *genuine non-grass*, Clyde locked himself in the training room and refused even to answer the telephone. He had majored in agronomy at Auburn. He was serious and never thought about anything but his work at the stadium. He had put his hand in her panties only that one time. She remembered she had jumped from pleasure and not from shock, as he suspected, to her regret, and he had been scratched on this same damned safety pin.

Evelyn, still balancing on the chair, looking at herself in the mirror, stepped out of her failed panties and kicked them into a waste-paper receptacle on the floor. The married man she knew and slept with once ran the Western Union office next to *The Observer* from 4:00 P.M. until 12:00 A.M., almost the same hours as her own. He was a narrow, goat-white little man named Saul Samuel. He rarely said anything and never offered to take her out or pick up a check for so much as a Krystal burger. She had met him going to her bus on Peachtree Street. He lied and said he was a Georgia Tech full professor. She knew he was also twenty years older than he said he was, making him fifty-eight. He carried a small slide rule and constantly pulled it out and figured the exact time somewhere else in the world to the minute and second. He checked it against three watches he always wore on his wrists, one on Greenwich Mean Time. He got off the bus at her apartment the one night she slept with him.

He was the one who had burst the band on her panties. The rest of the night was a disappointment. He didn't say anything. He stripped down to his goat-white body. Evelyn did not make any false pretense of wanting him to stop. She thought of the groundskeeper all the time, and it worked out fine, even though he stopped once to synchronize two of his watches. She had avoided him since.

The restroom door opened and closed, shutting off all retreat for a tall, thin, formidable woman in a severe wool suit too heavy for March. She advanced, unable to stop herself, until she was within touching distance of a bare rounded cheek at eye level. She stood, waiting, as if she expected the looming flesh to speak. She was the wife of the managing editor on her weekly Wednesday voyage to the downtown Poore's department store and dinner afterward.

Evelyn watched her in the mirror, staring. "Do I have a rash?" Evelyn felt her buttocks with her fingertips.

Mrs. Irby Smoot drew herself up, as if she had participated in an obscene act.

"I never gave my panties adequate thought," said Evelyn, seriously, as if she were stating an opinion on Elizabethan English at Agnes Scott, her alma mater. They had found out about the boy in her apartment in those college years. It was her roommate's boyfriend. It was rude of them to also suspend her, but only for a semester. She saw the boyfriend naked but never did get to sleep with him.

Mrs. Smoot, unable to move either foot, teetered dangerously over in her unfashionable high heels.

"Oh!" said Evelyn, with no place to back up on the narrow seat of the metal chair.

Mrs. Smoot regained her balance, apparently from the volume of blood draining from her face.

"I'm going to buy twelve new sets of panties," Evelyn said. "I suggest you do also, or you'll be using safety pins."

Perhaps it was the mention of the homely, ordinary object, a safety pin, that returned control of her legs to Mrs. Smoot. She was still unable to make a sound, and she would never again, even once, open the door to a public restroom without fear and an inexplicable burden of her own unclean guilt.

She rout-stepped out of the room and into the elevator, not caring whether it went up or down. She rode it down and back up again and down again before she could bring herself to pass through the sliding door. Once under way, she thrashed her legs in her knee-length wool suit, past the intimidated security guard, and out into the street. She could never mention the incident to anyone, last of all her husband, making her even more furious with him. He was not running a newspaper. He was running a brothel. She gave up dinner and took the bus directly home. She kept her legs savagely together all the way to Buckhead. Irby Smoot did not understand why his wife missed their dinner appointment. He did know the Thursday first edition was going to be later than Tuesday's first edition.

The Observer owner-Publisher, D. T. Roebuck, called his office from the card room of the Piedmont Driving Club. He had not been in his office this year. He had been in once last year. Told that the first edition of *The Observer* was going to be late, he ordered his secretary to deliver a nasty memorandum to the managing editor. Roebuck did not know his name was Irby Smoot; as Smoot had only been managing editor fourteen years. Roebuck's secretary kept seven versions of the same memorandum, one for each of the working days of the week. Roebuck did not go to the card room on Saturdays and Sundays; he went to the mountains up near Toccoa. The publisher called once each workday and asked if *The Observer* was going to be late. If it was extra late, and if it was Wednesday, he ordered his secretary: "Send the bastard a Thursday memo." It was much stronger than Wednesday's.

The publisher's father, D. T. Roebuck, Sr., won *The Observer* in a poker game in the old Kimball House in 1912. He held sixes against a possible flush, with four hearts showing, in the hands of a pecan tree tycoon from Villa Rica, Georgia. The newspaper lost fifty thousand dollars every month until Randolph Hearst's old *Atlanta Georgian* folded the day after *Gone with the Wind* premiered in 1939. Then it began to make as much as five million in a year.

D. T. Roebuck, Sr. forgot he owned *The Observer* and left it out of his will when he died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1945, at which time he weighed 397 pounds and was dieting to get to 400.

Roebuck, Jr. had been telling the story again around an unlit cigar for the eighth time this March. He interrupted himself and his losing seven-card stud hand to bellow his orders to his secretary over the telephone. All five men at the table were willing to listen; four of them were more than fifty thousand dollars ahead for 1972; all of them had been in the game every weekday since 1945. One old lawyer, who had not practiced law since failing as a clerk for Judge Learned Hand in 1935, lived exclusively off his winnings, sending two sons to Harvard and making payments on a five-hundred-thousand-dollar house.

Managing Editor Smoot had an entire file cabinet stuffed with fourteen years of memorandums from D. T. Roebuck, none of which he had ever read. His own secretary, Miss Irene Fluker, was careful to keep the Thursday memorandums that were delivered on a Wednesday in the Wednesday file. It was the most difficult obligation she had. That and getting into Smoot's office; he would unlock his door and come out for no more than sixty seconds to stick his blunt head against the plate glass window into the composing room, fearing the inevitable publication lateness. He was careful not to make eye contact with anyone inside. He looked up at the Western Union clock, which had been stopped at 1:44 for six years, then he rushed back into his own office and locked his door. Miss Fluker rarely had time to put even one day's memorandum in the files. "There," she said to herself when she did, and went back to her horoscope.

Miss Fluker was fifty. She was a Leo. "Soft-sell gets results. Study today's Cancer message. You gain access to power." The word *Cancer* terrified her. She could not abide being a Leo and following Cancer on the calendar. She was hungry curious, but she was too terrified of the word to look up Cancer's Friday prophesy. Miss Fluker was a virgin. She had never touched a man with her bare fingers. The thought stood her up in front of her chair as if she had been challenged by a United States senator. She bought every salacious new book that came out. She tore off the covers and stored the books in trunks. She could never read them because she could only get up the nerve to open them in the dark. When she would switch on a reading light, she could not

bear to look at the lighted page. She wore the same outfit three of the five days of the week. She was dumpy fat, and two men in the building, who had never spoken to her, wanted to marry her.

When he was sure his wife was not coming for lunch, Smoot turned on the antique television in his office to watch Gomer Pyle, USM. He knew he would like the episode. He had seen it twelve times before.

Chapter Four

The old, still massive, ever-ready press, thundered in its cement pit, raging out miles of *Observers* in an unbroken stream. Deep inside, on page 11-C, adjacent to a Poore's for Easter ad, *Two-in-one anti-static briefs $27 and $29*, as if etched in that spot by fate, rode the face and column of Alec Spotsworth in ink blown not entirely dry. The noise of the press could have been in defiance of the news minds that fed it Spotsworth and would have stopped him dead quiet in the pit if they had known what he had written. Fifty thousand Spotsworths escaped under the noise into the waiting trucks, thrown back into the dark by sweating men anxious to get on the highways to Cornelia and Climax and Chatsworth, Georgia.

The Thursday first edition stacked up on the news desk, copy desk, sports desk, on all the re-write desks, and in the morgue, where they were to be clipped into oblivion, and one copy went under the door into the office of the managing editor, Irby Smoot. He heard it appear on the floor behind him, but did not turn his head from watching Gomer Pyle.

The wire services were in a panic to tally which meetings Kissinger made that Rogers did not, where Chou sat, what Pat tasted, whether the president would undergo acupuncture in the event of an emergency in China, and what the Russians thought. The reservoir of words was almost running over for the second edition, and the newsroom had yet to go to supper in two shifts.

As inexplicable as it would seem the next day at newsstands, around kitchen tables, on buses all the way into downtown Atlanta, through bifocals in parsonages, over the telephone in still-darkened bedrooms, in the dead quiet of the card room of the Piedmont Driving Club, no intelligence on the news desk ever considered fixing itself onto what Spotsworth had written to test it even for the accuracy of the typesetting, which was purposefully immaculate. When the newspaper exploded into public awareness, no subscriber realized there was not a single sexy description of apparel that had not appeared in Sunday advertisements in *The New York Times*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *Miami Herald*, *or The Observer*. It was as if mildly provocative language, run consecutively together, had tripped over into mass depravity.

At least two printers in the composing room squirmed for opportunities to tip off the editors. Such a rat-out was good for movie tickets, sports tickets, parking passes, and the outlaw satisfactions known to informers. Rosie Washington kept himself visible to all the printers, as a warning to keep what they knew inside the composing room. He himself would have leaked it in a minute. It was worth a season of tickets. But having it in the god-abandoned newspaper would be of even greater value. He would wait until there was no time to re-plate the final home edition. He would then carry page 11-C to the news editor. When all the hell cooled down, the editors who were left would have to double his bribes to stop some future catastrophe. The editors would all survive, some knocked back in the pecking order. Salaries at *The Observer* were too low for so precipitous an action as a firing. The union would love drafting a statement of its embarrassment. Of course, it was *iron bound by contract* to *set into type all editorial content, however depraved.*

Every printer now had on him somewhere a bootlegged proof of Spotsworth. They chortled to each other while sending strips of metal into the ripsaw. "The Society Section next…they're gonna run all them brides naked in water beds." Everybody who heard it yowled, except the sub-editor of the women's department, standing over the great gaps in the unfinished composition of her pages. She'd heard every sexual innuendo, and was too worried over the lateness of the hour to even flip them a finger. *God knows over what the little boy printers were masturbating?*

Juanita Peck was the other woman in the composing room. She was card-carrying union and worked the Linotype machine like a city pigeon at an outdoor café. No one hassled her about her sex. And it was plenty in evidence. The good ole' boys knew what she carried in her shoulder bag. She had long, naturally straight, brown hair, which her curly-headed daughter lusted after, and high firm breasts that required no brassiere, and legs the composing room fantasized over. One Wednesday night eight years ago Juanita had left work while throwing up and found her husband on the living room sofa, naked, with a young waitress from a Krystal Café. She shot him one time, cleanly in the heart, with a .32 revolver she always carried in her shoulder bag. The waitress, screaming, dived onto the floor. Juanita began picking up the waitress's clothes, sorting them out from his. *Well*, she thought, *at least they were hurrying to finish before our daughter is due home from Daddy's*. Her husband looked his peaceful self. He never worked, but they never quarreled about it. "You get your clothes on, honey." Juanita handed them to the terrified waitress over her husband's bare feet. He never would trim his toenails. She called his mother. And then the police. His old mother had sixteen children; she didn't recognize Juanita's voice at first. Finally, she understood who was calling. And what had happened. "You still got hold of that union card, now hadn't you?" his Mama said. The old lady always admired a professional woman. But she could never keep straight which one of her sons Juanita had married. She kept confusing him with her oldest boy, William, "pooor soul," who was lost off an LST coming back to his ship from shore leave in New Guinea in 1945; he dived drunk off the stern and nobody was sober enough to find him. Juanita continued to work the Linotype while out on bail and set a lot of the copy about her own case up until the trial. She was helpful, correcting several major errors in the reporter's facts: She called *his mother first and then the police.* And she trimmed the toenails *before the police got there*, *not after*. The young courthouse reporter never did get his facts straight. Luckily, she got them into the paper correctly. Of course, the jury turned her loose in forty-six minutes. It would have been sooner, but they were drinking coffee after lunch.

"Ole' Spotsworth is the one to heat the water for them beds!" hollered Juanita. She was the first person in the composing room to use Spotsworth's name out loud. Rosie laughed. Then everybody laughed. The sub-editor half-

laughed to humor the printers into speeding up their final adjusting of the pages that she still hadn't released.

At 2:00 A.M., the final home edition was far downstairs being printed; all the lunging racket of the Linotype machines had grown still. The Composing Room began to empty, each printer carrying a half-dozen extra copies of the Thursday *Observer*, with Spotsworth's column tucked away on page 11-C. *A panty's worth of Spotsworth!* was what they shouted in the dark, as they left the exhaust-blackened old building, many of them parking under the Central of Georgia train station, now abandoned.

Rosie Washington watched them leave. He knew the editors and the few reporters who hung around this late would be dealing cards over the news desk while waiting for re-plate corrections to be made on the final home. The news editor, Jerome Paine, was in fact dealing a hand of *Hold Me Darling*. They used characters of type for chips. Each character was worth ten cents. A pretty good pot was building. Rosie walked up to the perimeter of players.

Paine was a thin, wasted man. His fragile, ruined hairline clung to his skull; his visible cheekbones threatened to slice through his pale flesh. All of this posthumous look was above the purple shirt and yellow tie that were obscenely alive under his angular jaw line. He kept dealing and did not speak.

Rosie was not impressed. He did not look down at the floor, or up at the moldy ceiling, like the other printers who parked their insulating vulgarity at the door to the newsroom. Rosie meant to spring it on Paine. No doubt he would blame it all on the copy desk.

Rosie laid the final home, precisely folded to page 11-C, over the pot of type in the center of the news desk. "Read it, boys! Don't worry about lightin' up cigarettes, you'll be suckin' wind."

Paine dealt the last up-card in the middle of the hand. He lifted the newspaper only to move it. His eyes read through *Skeebo Wescott, III*, into the indented second paragraph before he could put down the folded paper. He kept reading over the poker talk. He kept reading until nobody was talking. He held the paper with both his hands. It had to happen, the skeleton incompetent staff that he had, the way copy went unread, but the knowledge did not help. He hated, and in some perverse way, loved the insane newspaper. That did not help either. Spotsworth had been here for fifteen years, he was

sure, or longer. If he had only written some filth, they could lock him up. But it was not unreadable. How could he have written it after fifteen years of writing shit? Paine did not move. Rosie gave him credit for that. The trucks were gone. Paine knew it. It was something about the way he sat there. He might perversely love the newspaper, but he hated his goddamn job of news editor: the impossible flood of words; no editorial space between department store ads; not one professional in the newsroom, and he included himself; miles of unedited wire service copy inked onto the cheapest crappy, already-yellowing newsprint that greed could buy, and calling it a newspaper. He looked up at Rosie, still waiting for his reaction. "Fort Smith Washington has got his hands in his pockets playing with himself. He never saw a woman's panties. His wife don't wear any."

Puzzled, everybody around the news desk laughed.

Rosie did not have his hands in his pockets. He looked down to be sure before he caught himself.

No one knew what Paine had read on page 11-C. It was enough that Rosie Washington was embarrassed that there was no editorial union to back him up. He looked ridiculous. Everybody laughed harder.

Paine was pleased. They could have the seventy-five dollars extra the news editor made in a week; you couldn't find it to spend it. He'd go back to being wire editor; they'd settle with him for that. Bodies were hard to find for what they paid; he was more pleased every minute. He would never have to settle another stupid-ignorant argument as long as he worked in the newsroom.

Rosie Washington walked, angled his way out into the hall, not wanting to turn his back completely on the laughter, which he could not understand.

Paine sat there holding Spotsworth's column because he loved it.

Chapter Five

Page 11-C fell sparingly into the hands of readers like scattered dimples of rain over a smooth, vast surface of water before a still distant storm. It was not a page you turned to on purpose. It might contain anything. A full-page ad. A one-column photograph of the *Jaycee of the Year*. Spotsworth's column itself floated daily from section to section, so long as it was deep inside the newspaper. No editor ever considered what readers fingered to that specific page, looking for Spotsworth's half-column image with his eyes unblinking, his shock of hair drawn across his high forehead, his face thin as intensity; the same image that had cheated time for eight years. Spotsworth only knew the readers by those who wrote him letters. He had a fixation with the telephone and never answered when a reader called him. Those who wrote him had different names, but they all seemed to be the same person: obsessed with home remedies, queer names of unknown places, old cemeteries, letters from dead ancestors, neglected landmarks, lapsed publications, deceased pets, their lost horoscopes, civilizations of trivia sealed inside envelopes and mailed into the reality of his in-box.

A Knoxville prostitute, no longer young, waited in the ravaging fluorescent brilliance of the new trailways station for a bus to Griffin, Georgia. Her makeup was stiff on her infirm flesh, and it was only 8:00 A.M. It was a relief not to look up at every man who came into the station. She went home to Griffin once a year. Her father was dead, but her mother was alive, growing heavier and more content every year. She knew her daughter was a prostitute. She was sure it was a better life than being married to a mid-Georgia farmer *who don't own the dirt in his pants cuffs*. The daughter always saved up the best stories to tell her mother over a bottle of mediocre bourbon whiskey she brought down from Knoxville. None of this year's stories were enough fun. The daughter's hair was dead brittle from bleaching, her teeth needed capping (Who could spend seven-hundred dollars on their teeth?) *The Life* was still better than hustling tables. She pulled the first edition of the Thursday morning *Observer* apart, mostly reading the headlines and the captions under the photographs, then with still another hour to kill, reading as far as she could focus her attention into the various stories. She put the paper down, and then lifted sections of it up again, then single pages, to keep from looking at the hands of the round wall clock. Now she was holding up page 11-C. She read into the first paragraph and then started over again twice. She forgot the clock as she read all of it, laughing out through her fingers, which involuntarily flew up to cover her darkening teeth. She kept glancing at the black-and-white sketch of the young-old looking man, who seemed to be writing the column while she was reading it. She paid no attention to the heavy grandmother frowning at her laughter; she did not stop reading and laughing. Her own two-dollar white lace panties felt snug and good. She always watched what she ate and kept her figure. It was the only thing between her and waiting tables.

She could not wait to read the column aloud to her mother. It was the fun they needed. Her mother weighed 225 pounds and wore size 12 lingerie and could keep the column up on the kitchen wall until her daughter came home next year. The public address was sounding the Griffin bus for the last time before she heard it and grabbed her purse and bag and ran for the door, holding *The Observer* as tightly in her hand as a written promise.

The lapsed Plymouth Valiant taxicab, worn to its shocks, advanced in grunts, like an old mechanical dog, out from under the parking roof of the Marriott Hotel into the ruthless stream of traffic challenging the entrance lane to the south expressway. One nervous passenger huddled in the middle of the backseat, fearful of the sprung locks on both doors.

"Anties!…*Everthang*…*scrogging!*" The wind, rushing into the driver's broken window, blew sounds out of his mouth. The passenger, in the first hundred yards, did not know better than to say, "What?" The driver—older, more deeply slouched, more failed than his automobile—turned his head and shoulders from the everywhere traffic until the passenger could see his open, unwashed shirt collar. "*Mouth*…*Apricot*…*Rayon!*" he screamed into the backseat. A fifty-ton automobile carrier, loaded with a 1972 Chevrolet Nova, wheeled half out of its precariously narrow lane to avoid the swerving taxi. The taxi driver, screaming non-words as his driving-lane disappeared into a sheer concrete wall, whipped over without looking. The passenger, terrified of flying and on the way to the airport, sat with his fear in his open mouth. A kid in the next lane, his electrically dried blond hair blowing about his shoulders, powered his Cougar to eighty-five miles-an-hour and drifted toward the taxi driver to show him who was *not* giving way in this bloody traffic. The kid was now seeing nothing but the round back of the head of the taxi driver; his double-knit slacks hot and dark and wet as he waited for the noise and ripping jolt behind him that didn't come. "ies, you see!" whipped out of the taxi driver's mouth, as he looked ahead, driving casually now in the inside lane as if he had been there all along. He pulled up in front of the Delta Airline entrance to Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport. "Hot damn, makes you want-cha hands inside ob-em up to hot armpits!" He was now hollering into the silent backseat with the cab stopped dead still. A woman, standing near the broken open window, waiting to cross to her car, was puzzled to hear him. The passenger handed up two twenty-dollar bills and pulled his own bag out of the backseat, desperate to get into an airplane for the first time in his adult life. The taxi driver felt good. *A five-dollar tip. It was a good omen.* He got out the

column that had been torn from page 11-C. He'd learn it better. *It was goin' over with the passengers, alright.*

His wife deliberately stuffed the unbuttered bread in the toaster. She was that angry. Nothing he hated more than smearing un-melted butter over already cold toast. He loved it buttered and browned on both sides in the oven. She avoided looking at him. She also hadn't combed her hair. The husband shook his head. *Okay, she hasn't been wearing her diaphragm; it happened; he woke up; that's all; she had made it at the end and tried to hide it. She was forty-two. Shit… best not to think about that.* She was not talking. He might as well read. He pulled open the newspaper. He never read anything but the sports section and headlines on the front page. But page 11-C fell open in his hands. *Who is this Spotsworth?* he said to himself. He began to read. *Jesus! Did they print stuff like this?* Without thinking, he began reading it aloud. They were alone. The two kids had already left for school. He was running late. His wife was listening, despite herself. He had not read a sentence aloud at breakfast in the nineteen years they had been married. When they used to go to church, he stayed a phrase behind reciting the Lord's Prayer. He was reading unnaturally fast, each word threatening to run into the next one. She couldn't believe he was reading from *The Observer*. She was suddenly aware she had nothing on under the unpressed housecoat he despised. Six pregnancies, four children, two grown. She had been silently angry last night and then angrier to be so eagerly wet inside. She would kill him if—she was standing by him while he read. His hand was sliding up her bare legs, his fingers quick now that they found nothing to stop them; then she was up against the refrigerator door; she couldn't move to get the handle out of her back, and she was not able to make herself even think about stopping him.

Mrs. Florine Scott sat, her life intact in its compartments, as closed off as her dining room silver, polished and stored by units in its disuse. She sat erectly at the breakfast table, having the last of two cups of coffee. Her husband was mercifully dead and not reading in his chair. The morning newspaper was folded away as discreetly as good manners, lying there for the length of her second cup of coffee, as if in a continuing gesture of silent reprimand to the late Mr. Lott. Not until she rinsed the empty cup and placed it carefully in the electric dishwasher did she slowly unfold the morning *Observer* over the bare empty table. She began to read the pages thoroughly, but was not too caught up in the distant news and gossip of a day in the outside world to have to pretend indifference. Page 11-C came numerically to her fingers, under her brittle, carefully filed and unpainted nails. She never failed to read Alec Spotsworth, or any other word in *The Observer*, and had once even considered sending him a verse of a poem she had written on the mysterious death of an English sparrow, with no signs of accidental or deliberate harm having come to him in her side garden, which was itself severe and bankrupt of all warmth, the cruelly thinned and spaced zinnias standing as in a dressed line of hostility, but finally, she could not bear to have the verse mailed out of her presence and did not send it. Her steel gray eyes read carefully, having been regimented through a long discipline of their own. She followed the two-columns wide, evenly spaced lines to the last printed word: *modesty*. Nothing loomed up in her imagination. She turned to page 12-C, a full-page advertisement for electric lawn mowers with the inconvenience of the sprawling, tripping, rubber-insulated cord nowhere in sight, any latent sexual fantasies entirely drowned in the wrinkled, billion-folded, gray mass of her mind; any untamed wave impulses tethered there, no longer waiting to race all the way to her very bowels. Her two daughters were long vanished, one married to a government CPA in Bolivia; the other would send a card at Christmas with no return address, which went unnoticed. Mrs. Lott, evenly erect, was now reading at the top of page 13: *The monk-parakeet appears to be highly adaptable. One flock, which escaped from its cage at Kennedy International Airport in 1969, soon became acclimated to the north temperature zone after naively laying its first batch of eggs in November—a spring month in Argentina—and seeing its young freeze to death…*

It was Thursday morning, and downtown Atlanta began to inhale its people like living oxygen into endless asphalt arteries. With them came a moving rain line of awareness and amusement and fraudulent and honest indignation and mild disbelief and furious curiosity and only occasional smooth gaps of boredom in response to the five hundred words written by Alec Spotsworth. It was 8:00 A.M. and only one person in one thousand in Atlanta had yet read page 11-C, but a gathering wave of awareness flowed in with the traffic.

Chapter Six

Spotsworth lay drugged in his sleep, certain that he was awake. The pain in his back mounted electrically in his mind until it was still there an hour later, dominating his subconscious so that when he came to, he could not remember having slept at all. The pain was worse than the fatigue. His vertebrae seemed to be fractured down into the mattress, hard as it was over the quarter-inch surface of plywood. He sacrificed his knees upward, holding the mattress below him with the palms of his hands, and then willed himself over on his left side, knees still bent, unable to straighten them. This was the way he would roll over onto the floor, in one physical contraction of the mind. After that, he would be able to stand up from his hands and knees. Then he could walk, sliding his feet ahead of him. By then he would be able to step into and out of the empty tub. Shaving, his right hand and arm raised in space, would be an act of courage. Still on his hands and knees, he was already dreading pulling himself up into the Peachtree Street bus. With his longish hair toppled down over his eyes, his pajamas twisted around his thin body as if they had been screwed onto him by some flawed mechanical device, his thin bare feet mashed into the floor under his dead white ankles. Spotsworth tightened his face in an effort to think of sex. All he could summon up was the huge stomach of the angry young woman who rode the 9:05 A.M. bus, looking as if her bones and lungs and organs had all fallen into one vast swollen bag of

flesh. It was not a thought to ease the forever pain in his back. He needed body heat to pump warm blood down his tortured spine. He was thinking now of a marvelous young woman, sitting in the sunlight. It was no particular young woman, as far as he could remember. She had sensational legs. Her skirt was well above her knees. She had no stockings and perfect ankles. He could nearly see all of her thighs. They started out firm and slim above her knees. He put his hand behind her long calves...*oh god*…His twisted tightening pajama bottoms were killing him where the pressure was now constricting him. He tried holding his breath. It didn't help. He couldn't move off either knee or lift his hands up to untangle the pajamas. He tried to think of the vast stomach of the angry young lady, but he saw a narrow sensuous waist and soft breasts until the final uninterrupted agony of his iron-tight pajamas brought him up on his feet and his back held him there, motionless, balanced between the two pains in the dark.

Two of the riders on the 9:05 bus knew who Spotsworth was. Only one of them had read what he had written for this Thursday morning paper folded in her lap. She was looking to see if Spotsworth would get on at Fifteenth Street. Most often he did. *There he was*, *standing as if he had written such steamy words every day of his life*. She felt the newspaper in her hands to be sure it was really there. She had read the column until she could almost repeat it. Her face began to feel exposed as he pulled himself up the steps. He was so awkward. She wondered if he was crippled in some way. She had often seen him limping, but not quite so seriously. She was thirty-five and attractive to all men except her husband, who played more golf than he sold potato chips. That was why she worked as an accountant in Underground Atlanta, a series of restaurants, bars, boutiques, and nightspots behind their original facades, in the manner of the 1870s, under Alabama Street. She could see that he was not looking at her, or at anyone, but was recovering from the apparent pain of sitting down. Still, she tried to feel the sheer nylon of her best panties up around her, but could

feel nothing, not even the elastic of the waistband. He saw her looking at him, and she turned quickly away, her face pleasantly aflame.

For the only time since he had been awake, Spotsworth did not feel the sciatica nerve down his right leg. The instant the woman looked away, he knew his column had been printed exactly as he had written it. He could not remember one of the phrases he had saved and committed to memory. He had written the non-sentences as fast as he could type. He had only edited it for typographical errors. *The complete idiots…The copy editors; they hadn't touched it.* The woman was not looking at him now, but she was having to force herself to look in other directions. The bus bored on like a giant phallic symbol between the buildings and under the few remaining trees along Peachtree Street. She could not help but glance at him again, and he was looking at her. This time she did not look away; she was amazed at herself…that she was smiling, grinning, almost laughing. It was infectiously amusing; his own too-high chuckle was startling to Spotsworth. The rest of the ride, from Ponce de Leon to Forsyth Street, he did not try to keep from looking up her legs, while she carefully resisted uncrossing them. She could not remember having felt so alive in the morning on a Thursday, going to her grim job. She admitted that any days were better than her nights with her husband. She came to her feet, careless of her skirt, at the Forsyth Street stop; she looked directly at Spotsworth, lifting her rolled up newspaper as a salute, all the while smiling. Spotsworth watched her off the bus, smiling back; he could not remember ever having done it before with any young woman rider. He began to get up himself, having forgotten his back until he paid for it, hanging in agony onto one of the center poles. He managed to stumble off in front of the Old Post Office building across from *The Observer's* low dark offices, sandwiched gloomily between two new but not distinguished thirty-story buildings. He looked back up Forsyth Street, but the young woman was nowhere in sight.

The old narrow cage-like elevator in *The Observer* lobby still required an operator. The elderly black man, who provoked it up and down with a metal joy stick that reminded you of early aviation, faced straight ahead into a large, rectangular brass plate, dull with age, as if he expected to find his destiny in the vague, scratchy reflection.

"Four, please," said Spotsworth, as if he had never set foot inside the building or seen the old man for the last fifteen years.

The old man acknowledged neither the announced floor, nor the spoken courtesy, only blinking his eyes once, as he began to jack the reluctant cage, above, then below, then slightly above the fourth floor. It was against the science of probability that the elevator would ever stop exactly level with any of the six floors.

The open newsroom bullpen was desperately empty at this hour in the morning. All half-dozen of the TTS machines were running, striking multiple keys with a sad hollowness, as though they were typing into an abandoned country words that would never be read. Spotsworth limped ahead between the empty chairs and scarred desks, more nervously than if he had been stepping between accusing stares. There was no message on his desk, not even a stack of day-old telephone messages from readers whose numbers he would never dial. He eased himself erectly into his chair. The old, straight, hard oak surrounded his pain, not relieving it, but taking over the burden of holding it up. He opened the newspaper and, for the first time, read his own Thursday column. The wildly random phrases seemed to him now ordinary and natural.

With the distant ring of a telephone, Spotsworth turned in his chair. It came, muffled, from behind the frosted glass of the office of Managing Editor Irby Smoot. Perhaps it was the empty newsroom that gave the ring its immediacy. Spotsworth had not listened for a telephone ring, or picked up a receiver at *The Observer*, in nine years, since the night of the Grady Hotel fire, when he had last been pressed into the discipline of a reporter. He was accustomed to letting the continuous and multiple ringing mount up around him like shrieks from the damned, beyond all help; however, the phone in Smoot's office had not rung before in all of his fifteen years. In fact, a thin line of rust, as fine as ash burned at high temperature, fell like silence inside the small receiver bell as it first raged, then stuttered, then raged again, in an electrical epilepsy from having been startled into life for the only time in a generation.

Spotsworth half-rotated his chair in the direction of the ringing as Smoot's door exploded with motion and noise, the door handle striking against the glass wall. Smoot came out, moving his arms and hands ahead of him faster than he

thrashed his legs, as if he were struggling up current against the undertow of the telephone. His eyes pleaded around the empty newsroom, until they fixed on Spotsworth; he propelled himself toward the only human hope in his line of sight. The telephone stayed ahead of him with its merciless cadence. The panic in Smoot's eyes increased with each interval of silence as he anticipated the next ring for the lost and damned. He came to an awkward stop, much too near for Spotsworth to be comfortable; near enough that he had to turn his own head to avoid the frantic, downward pulse of Smoot's breath.

Irby Smoot did not speak. Spotsworth did not know if he should stand or speak himself. He had never spoken to the managing editor in the fourteen years Smoot had held the job. As a local columnist, he worked for the city editor, but the persons in that job changed almost with the seasons; he never actually reported to anyone. The tiny pay raises he had gotten simply showed up in his pay check at distant intervals. Yet, Spotsworth had watched the life of Smoot, the devices of his secretary to get inside his office once a day to file some unimaginable papers; the hostile pilgrimages of his wife once a week to his office and then to dinner; Smoot's face, round with terror, looking at the stopped clock through the dirty glass of the composing room window during deadlines. For some inexplicable reason, Spotsworth suddenly felt a need to help him. He was prepared to believe he was the cause of the fear in Smoot, and of the incessant, virgin ringing of his telephone. Spotsworth did not think specifically any of these things, but they collided in his mind.

Something in the calm of the tall, thin man down in the chair in front of him began to ease Smoot's terror. He was certain he knew Spotsworth's face; he had no idea of his name. He thought maybe he had something to do with obituaries, but Smoot had never read an obituary, and the thought of their existence began to force the terror back into his eyes. The very thin man below him was looking up calmly, not staring. Smoot was able to speak: "The ringing." He said it clearly, but the sound of his own voice made it impossible for him to continue. He could no longer even stand there. He began to fall back out of the newsroom, moving only his legs and feet and not his hands and arms, as if prepared to surrender…if he only knew to whom. He had never read one of Alec Spotsworth's columns, including the present one, or spoken with anyone who had.

Spotsworth began to pull himself up out of his chair. The pain in his leg was like a penance. He began an awkward sliding limp toward Smoot's open office door; it was as if Thursday's printed page, and the desperate telephone, had reordered the atoms of his own existence. He was certain no editor or reporter had ever entered the managing editor's inner sanctum. He did remember that the old man who had held the office before Smoot had died in a queer fall from the face of Stone Mountain; he remembered because someone had circulated a sympathy card in the newsroom to be signed for his widow. Spotsworth looked around the spare office; there was not a photograph, or reproduction of a painting, or a mounted front page of *The Observer*, or one single thing on any of the four walls, or book, or newspaper on any level surface, or even one sheet of blank copy paper on the brown metal desk, which was as barren as an operating table, except for the telephone, which now thrived as if on the sexual release of its metallic soul. The ancient television set in the far corner was now quietly playing *Mr. Greensleeves*, who seemed alarmed to be there.

Spotsworth lifted the receiver to his ear. He had not held a telephone in nine years. "*Yes*," he said quietly. The way he said it, so matter-of-factly, as if he always answered this telephone at this early morning hour, in this manner, must have thrown off whoever was on the other end of the now lengthening silence.

D.T. Roebuck, in fact, lay swollen inside himself, a rising grave of flesh under the colored sheets on the king-size bed, which seemed inadequate under him. He hesitated to speak after the dead, flat composure of the single word, *Yes*. Roebuck's windows were barricaded with fabric against the ungodly necessity of morning; the card room of the Piedmont Driving Club did not open until 2:00 P.M.; anything before that, even the civilized contours of a cigar, was outrageous, except, of course, breakfast and lunch, which were best served in one meal, in bed. After they dealt the first round of poker, there would be plenty of time for the first cigar.

The silence mounted, climbing in time and space, but only on Roebuck's end of the connection.

Spotsworth waited, now observing *Mr. Greensleeves*, whom he did not recognize, as he had never seen his own antique television when it was switched on.

The silence completely buried the publisher, D.T. Roebuck, who had never before called any employee, except his own secretary, whom he had never seen, since inheriting the newspaper from his father just after the end of World War II. He began to try and rise up over the smothering quietude of the telephone from flat on his back; it was impossible for the arresting mountain of his stomach, but the effort broke the tension and words poured out of his mouth in one unalterable direction, tolerating no reply, as if the wire were incapable of bearing it. "Committed! By God…"

Spotsworth did not speak.

"Doctors only know to pamper a crazy man. Insanity!" Roebuck relished the way this last word came out of his mouth like the exploded seed of a smooth-skin fruit. "Committed! You ever hear of that anymore!" It was not a question. "Today we publish every fucker's insanity. Sell it on the street. In pulpits. By God we have charge accounts for it." For a minute, he was on the comfortable grounds of an old obsession; he could almost feel the slick backs of playing cards in his hands, by suit; then the fear of the unspoken voice on the other end of the line was throwing him off again. "Not in my damned Thursday morning paper! In every bedroom in Atlanta!" Roebuck could not imagine any person not reading his morning *Observer* in bed; nor could he imagine any person in bed, awake, doing anything but reading, or eating; Roebuck had not had an erection since 1957 and had not been able to see that one; his wife, now seven years dead, had been often humiliated trying to hold herself over him without slipping down the blubbery walls of his inflated anatomy. She had slept in her own bedroom the last eleven years of her life and could no longer remember the normal-sized man he had been when their son was born, who now lived in Switzerland and never wrote home. Roebuck pounded the mattress with his fist: "Have this sex maniac committed! Use our miserable lawyer! But not if the bastard is sober!"

Spotsworth could not imagine what lawyer; he had never seen one in the building. In fact, the old drunken attorney Roebuck had in his mind had died in 1947 in the cluttered, yellowing debris of his practice, not having been called on for a legal act by *The Observer* since 1932, with even the original owner, D.T. Roebuck, Sr., dying with *The Observer* left out of his will.

Roebuck's outrage lifted him into a sitting position in his bed, he and his stomach sharing the space: "The bishop! The bishop called! Here! At

daylight!" He had called at 8:00 A.M., an unholy hour, even for a bishop. "His daughter. A sneaky teenager. Was clipping this pervert's column and hiding it. In her *Book of Common Prayer*. His wife and every old lady in the diocese wants my ass!" Not thirteen people in the city, and not three of them Episcopalians, could have identified D.T. Roebuck as publisher of *The Observer*. The bishop only knew it because he had suddenly paid up his pledge to the cathedral for the first time since his mother died in 1948; his accountant had actually paid it by accident.

"*Get that degenerate in jail!*"

Spotsworth let the silence mount up like an evil smell.

Roebuck was heaving his stomach to get his breath in the dead absence of sound.

Spotsworth waited until he could hear the wet air being forced in and out of this Roebuck's buried lungs.

In the most casual voice of his life, Spotsworth said, "The sex maniac is still here. On the payroll. I know him. I am him. Remember this word: kalantan."

"*What*?" Roebuck lunged forward against his own engulfed self, only to rebound flat on his back.

Spotsworth hung up. He tried to imagine the owner-publisher holding the silent telephone, with no possibility of answering into it. Spotsworth could never have imagined the actual sight of D.T. Roebuck, unable to bend himself up or out of the huge bed, his tiny mouth open, as in a scream, holding the dead telephone in his small dead-white hand.

Chapter Seven

Spotsworth missed them by ten minutes. Seven ladies—wives of ministers and the wife of the bishop of Atlanta's Episcopal diocese—arranged themselves in an awkward moving picket line outside the Forsyth Street entrance to *The Observer*. They had one hastily lettered sign, which was tacked onto a weathered bean pole out of a vegetable garden: *The words of our mouth be acceptable in Thy sight*. It was carried by a tall, narrow, graying woman, as thin as the pole she held, the wife of the minister of the First Baptist Church of Chamblee. The block lettering of the sign was so small it was impossible to read from any distance. Within three minutes after twelve o'clock, the sidewalk shrank under the avalanche of office workers hungry for lunch. More than half of them were young women—typists, receptionists, clerks, telephone operators, young professionals—who had suddenly come down from the thirty-story heights, talking among themselves as if they had been under a vow of silence. None of them seemed aware of the rising spring heat in their light blouses and brief skirts of the season. The young men, in their dappled shirts and eccentric ties and startlingly long hair for Atlanta, stumbled, despite their affected nonchalance at the sight of the young women. The swarm of both sexes passed among and around the picketing ladies, oblivious of their hand-printed message straight from God. The seven ladies were lost to confusion in the two-way current of the sidewalk. They no longer attempted their

amateur march, but turned inward, pressing their arms against themselves to hold their places in the swirl of unseeing people; the added responsibility of the sign was too much for the wife of the minister of the First Baptist Church of Chamblee. She was unable to hold her ground, and was swept along for half a block, until she washed up in the lee of a red, white, and blue postal deposit box; the words she hung onto seemed to intimidate the mails, as no one slowed to post a letter.

After the high flood of hungry pedestrians had eased, the seven wives huddled together, like vulnerable survivors of some natural disaster. The Chamblee wife held onto the sign, now akimbo at half-staff, as if their protest had died aborning. Each of them was embarrassed to look at the others. They had been received only as objects on the sidewalk, the same as curbs and grates, to be stepped over or around. All of them would have left, if one of them had left, except the wife of the Rev. Cleophus Johnson of the Mount Ararat Methodist Church of Lithia Springs, a tall, elegant black woman with a passion for her first public protest. All of them huddled together, against the old dark brick of *The Observer* building, as if bracing against the chill wind of indifference.

A young woman had been watching them from across Forsyth Street on the steps of the old post office building. She did not come there to mail a letter, but in hopes of receiving one; it never happened. Still she came each day at high noon and inquired at the general delivery window with every expectation. She gave her name: Tennie English—each time careful to spell the T-e-n-n-i-e. An old man always waited on her, the skin of his face and neck sagging, his weak eyes blinking defensively, like an endangered creature at the round opening of his habitat. He dreaded to see her coming, with every expectation. His many years at the post office had been carefully anonymous behind the small openings in the frosted glass, as the strangers, with meaningless names, shuffled in and out over the marble floor. He had been detailed for three years

to general delivery. Most of the faces he never saw more than once or twice before they moved on into oblivion. After weeks, then months, and finally, two years, he came to know her face too well, and to dread it, the disappointment he offered like a communicable disease. He pantomimed laboriously through the general delivery each day at noon, though he had already memorized the mail, searching for her name, desperate for the one letter or package that would deliver her from his window, so that her wide dark eyes would not again look heavily into his own and past him into the bins and wooden cubbyholes of his empty life. "Nothing," was the only word he said. Never "Sorry," or even a shake of his balding head. She was aware of his dread and did not consider it to be rudeness. She stepped up to the window each day, as if this past-tense old man could make a miracle.

Tennie English always brought a sandwich and ate it on the steps of the post office. Today she had no drink and built up a great thirst, until she forgot it, watching the men and women come by in their vivid colors and short, short skirts, as if they were dressed in some fashion house and predestined in their various directions. She admired only a few of them. She did not dislike the others but let them go unnoticed with her eyes. The ones she liked, she watched as far as she could see them; she remembered everything about them and whom they were with. She was sad for them if they were alone, and many of them she liked were alone. Sometimes they passed on her side of the narrow street, so close that she could have reached out and touched them. Years later, she could remember their faces. The very old that she liked, maybe she liked the best. She was lucky if she liked one person in a day, but that was more than two hundred faces in a year. She did not come down on Saturdays and Sundays. Many of them she saw again and again. She watched for them, knowing the directions from which they came. She did not give them names, after their sizes, or their ages, or the way they carried themselves. She knew them by their walks, or sometimes by their clothes, but she only remembered them by their faces. It was surprising how few men stopped and tried to speak to her. None of the men she liked ever did. When others stopped, she looked at her watch, as if waiting for someone. She would never have coffee with them or meet them later; she kept glancing at her watch and not telling them her name until they moved along. She would have gone with the men she saw that she liked,

but she only wanted those to stop who never did. She knew she was attractive, although she disciplined herself never to watch for her reflection in the store windows. Usually, she had on untailored jeans, or long trousers, or a very short skirt and new flats. She might wear any kind of blouse, or shirt with the tail out, or an old jacket, or a too-large sweater in the fall and winter, but her skirts and jeans would always be trim, and her shoes new, if she wore them. She was vain about her legs. Today, with the warm sun, she was barefoot. She knew her face was okay and didn't worry about it. Her hair was dark; it might be cut anyway, so long as it was short. It might be very short and bristle about on top, or just short. She often cut it herself. She was twenty-six. She didn't look any specific age, only young. She only worried how she would look when she was very old. She did not think seventy was old at all. *Anybody could look fine at seventy if they set their mind to it.* She could be confident about it, because she could feel the firm bones under her smooth cheeks with the palms of her hands. Her eyes did not dominate her face, but they were frankly there, and dark and rather wide apart. It was a temptation to look in the store windows to be sure they were not too wide apart. Her nose was just a good straight nose, not too small, and so was her mouth, but her mouth was so firm that you might be reluctant to speak to her. Her chin was okay. She was confident enough, sitting there, but knew she was not a true beauty. And that was okay. She was no athlete. Maybe she looked it, perching on the low steps with her trim legs. But when she walked, or moved, she did it awkwardly, as if she thought it out. There was a certain vulnerability about the way she walked exactly ahead, with little rhythm. She was an awkward dancer; if she reached for anything, or suddenly ran, or wore a bathing suit, she was more awkward; she did all those things and others that made her look unfortunate any time she wanted to. She loved to read but could not stand to read a book she didn't own; she had to wait for them in paperback. The only thing she read at the library, just up Forsyth Street, was *The New York Times.* She never read any of the news, only what was happening in New York, which seemed to her like the only real existence, because she recognized the names, but never wanted to go there.

She wished that she had not begun to watch the hapless women picket. Neither word fit—*women* or *picket*. You would have to call them *ladies*, the way

they were too warmly dressed in suits, all of them but two in heels, and they were ineffective picketers, the way they yielded to the noon swarm of people with no one noticing them or what they were protesting until they were left like beached objects at low tide. They knew nothing about protesting. At first, she was amused watching them; then she resented their intruding on her ritual lunch, something not even a fire last month in Lebs Restaurant across the street had been able to do; she saw three firemen that she liked equally, the only time she had ever admired three of anybody at once, and she wanted to go over and tug their metal hats down over their eyes and meet them.

At that moment, she decided to help the ladies. When they retreated against the old brick *Observer* building, Tennie English got up. Her skirt was short, and her legs were so long they made it look shorter. Everything was spoiled for her lunch hour; it only set her mouth firmer as she legged her way, barefoot, across Forsyth Street, not bothering to go down to the intersection, but weaving mechanically in between the creeping traffic, which stopped for her, as if her route had been laid out by city ordinance. None of the ladies noticed her approaching until she was standing among them. She had immediately identified the bishop's wife, Mrs. Frances Eagles, as their leader.

"May I hold your sign?" English asked Mrs. Eagles.

"By all means," said Mrs. Eagles, as if they had been delivered into the hands of a Pprophetess.

She took it from the astonished hands of the Chamblee preacher's wife.

English straightened the sign and lifted it as high as the scarred wooden pole would go. She stood directly in the center of the sidewalk. People, finished with their lunch and hurrying back to work, had to swerve around her, fearing the pole, sign and all, would come down on them; they even tried to read the crude lettering but could not do it. The women began clustering around Tennie English, as though she were about to announce something of maximum importance to their lives.

English said nothing to them, but began to wave the sign back and forth, menacingly. Women and men, too, began to step off the sidewalk into the narrow lanes of traffic. She herself could only make out enough of the lettering on the sign to determine the women were protesting something that had been published in *The Observer*. She could not imagine what.

"Do you chant anything?" English asked the bishop's wife, who clung to the old brick of *The Observer* building.

"Should we?" asked the bishop's wife, as though guilty of some sin of omission. The women now stood firmly under the sign English held. Mrs. Cleophus Johnson could only think: *Why do the heathen rage!* But she was pretty sure that was the motto of some other religious sect.

"Yellow!" cried English, "Journalism!" A separate cry for each word. She had had a lot of practice, and the results were violent. She crashed the sign down on the windshield of a Buick Riviera, and the astonished driver swerved into the front fender of a slowly moving Ford Fairlane. The collision and tearing agony of metal squalled up Forsyth Street, as if Tennie English's chants had properly established a sequence of natural disasters. People stepped out in the street from two blocks away.

English swung the sign back and forth above the sidewalk and the ruined front ends of the automobiles below her. Her separate cries, "Yellow! Journalism!" screamed into the quiet that followed the crash. Traffic was now stymied in both lanes. Drivers behind the accident began climbing out of their cars. Others farther back began blowing their horns. English swung the sign, as if all of them were protesting together. This feeling grew when the middle-aged man who had swerved his Buick got out with blood running impressively from his nose onto his colored shirt and tie. He was not seriously hurt but seemed to qualify as a victim of "Yellow! Journalism!"

English lowered her voice below a scream; she knew it would be impossible to keep that up for long. She tapped her narrow right foot and varied the chant of the two words: "Yellow! Jour-na-lism!" pausing on all three syllables of the last word, giving it a crude locomotive effect. Mrs. Johnson, and then the bishop's wife, and then, evangelistically, the other ministers' wives began chanting with her, as if blessedly released from obligations of silence.

The driver of the Ford could not open his door and was shouting at the man with the bloody nose who had run into him, who could not hear a word he shouted because of the rhythmic chanting of the women.

A cop, his squad car stalled in traffic three blocks away, began walking between the stymied automobiles toward the accident. He saw the crowd and that there had been a crash but was puzzled by the sounds of the chanting

women. He could not make out the words, but the momentum of them frightened him. Maybe there was about to be a riot. He began to run back to his vehicle. "Holy shit!" he hollered to his partner inside the cruiser, "Get help! It's some kind of riot! Whole pile of women rampaging the newspaper building!" He gasped all that in phrases, not sentences.

The length of Forsyth Street, from Poore's department store to Peachtree Street, was a hovering, mechanical crisis, with swelling pockets of desperation at each intersection.

"Jour-na-lism!" chanted the women around Tennis English, looking up at her and the waving sign as if she were the True Source.

"What!" The cop approaching, out of breath, with his shirt inflated around his stomach, could only shout the one word.

"Yellow!" chanted English and the wives, as she lowered the sign above his face, tilting it up and down as if offering a sacrament from the church.

The cop said something, but it was impossible to hear over the chants, curses, shouts, and random excesses of the gathering crowd, punctuated by car horns.

The injured driver of the Buick, his nose bleeding freely, stumbled over the curb and fell dead against the alarmed policeman, who looked down at the imprinted blood on his own blue shirt and tie with disbelief, as if he had been wounded from the inside. The driver blew to clear his lips and drifted a spray of blood in the face of the cop, whose nametag read, I.M. Harper. I.M. Harper carefully discharged mace up over the tall, bleeding driver, who stood under it, as though it were a discreet public ceremony in his honor. Then he threw up on both of them. His lunch had been a Ruben sandwich with a large kosher pickle and two beers. The cop swung his mace can in every direction, as if his bloodied and thrown-up-on shirt was the victim of public madness. The heavy spring air kept the mace at throat level. Pedestrians began gagging, then shrinking back along Forsyth Street, as if some communicable disease had been set loose.

"Jour-na-lism!" chanted the ladies, now determined to revoke the first amendment of the United States.

The noise level in the street climbed another octave, arousing the Associated Press photographer Kelso Morton, whose lab was on the second

floor of *The Observer* building. He raised his window and looked down on the rippling Congo line of people on both sides of the street, and the crashed and stalled and abandoned automobiles, and the near hysteria below him. He jumped into the stairwell as though it were an escape hatch, his Nikon hanging from straps above his shoulders. He did not have a neck. His ears grew right out of his collarbones. He was a splendid black-and-white photographer, so long as anything he shot was not moving. His most famous photograph, published in *Life* magazine, was of two huge trucks colliding on the Atlanta freeway. He was lucky that no one was alive and able to move; the ambulance crew almost messed him up when they began lifting and carrying away the victims. Kelso could tolerate the sight of any one's blood except his own. He was hit in the face with a cowbell at a civil rights demonstration in Jackson, Mississippi, and it took two deputy sheriffs to hold him down so a local doctor could give him eight stitches above his left eye. They enjoyed doing it. He only needed five stitches, but the old doctor was so disgusted by his screaming that he took his time and popped in three more for good measure.

Kelso could not snap off a single shot of Tennie English. She kept swinging the pole and the sorry, unreadable sign. The cop wasn't moving. *Who the hell wants to see a photograph of a bloodied and thrown-up-on cop?* Maybe it was her bare feet that triggered Kelso's memory. But suddenly he knew Tennie English. *Oh, hell yes!* She had taken off her t-shirt, with no bra under it, playing tennis at Bitsy Grant Center. *Oh, hell yes!* Three years ago. Bitsy Grant, whom the tennis center was named for, had taken off his own shirt on the next court. A sign in the clubhouse warned you couldn't do it. Bitsy ignored the sign and never wore his shirt in the heat of summer. Within minutes, after Tennie went shirtless, every male player, on all the courts, had their own shirts off and were cheering. One old senior, his socks pulled up under his bony knees, slipped on the Rubicon surface while watching English lift her arm and racquet to hit an overhead and cracked both his ankles. None of the male players called the police. Nor did the center pro, who took this opportunity to check the heights of all the nets, which he hadn't done in a decade. It was a foursome of women, two of them huge and two of them rail thin, who used the pay phone to alert the parks department of *the naked scandal*. Kelso finally got a shot of English,

when she paused, to smash another overhead, both young breasts wonderfully exposed. Most newspapers in America wouldn't carry it. But it was a front page hit in England and France.

Kelso was also sure he had seen Tennie English's face at other protests. He just hadn't before connected her face with her naked breasts, though he could see she still didn't wear a bra. Kelso lifted his camera to catch her attention. He leaned close and shouted: "Where's your tennis racket?"

She laughed and missed the beat of the chant. She knew him as the AP photographer without a neck.

Kelso also recognized the wife of the bishop. He had taken her photograph several times at the cathedral on Peachtree Road during their annual Easter Egg hunt. *Try getting 125 kids to keep bloody still!*

"Listen," he shouted to English, "I need a shot!" He motioned toward the wives.

English said into the ear of the bishop's wife: "He needs a photograph of you wives."

"Of course," she answered and then passed the word to the others, who managed not to break their rhythm.

English cupped one hand, so no one else could hear, and asked into the ear of the bishop's wife: "What are we against!"

The bishop's wife looked at her in appreciation, as if she had been in a far country and accepted the burden of truth on faith. The crowd, now solid for as far away as Marietta Street, was making a constant noise over the car horns, and the only partial word Tennie English caught of the bishop's wife's explanation was: "*Panties!*"

English immediately shifted the sign to one hand, while she pulled her own weightless nylon panties down to her knees and stepped rather awkwardly until they were between her ankles, under her short skirt. The bishop's wife hesitated. She was a large woman, not fat, but substantial; then she fixed her face directly ahead, as if on the chorus of an inspirational hymn, and began tugging under her suit and slip. The white width of her cotton drawers did not appear until they were well below her knees and down around her ankles. She stood formally with them above the sidewalk between her heels, the same as English, except English was in her bare feet. English's bare feet above her

white panties fed Kelso's hunger for the photograph. The other wives began to follow the bishop's wife's lead, all of them carried along by their chanting and the noise of the crowd and the unbelievable success of their demonstration, holding their mouths firm as they martyred themselves. Two of them, who had the most difficulty, had on pantyhose, but they managed with help from the others. The sight of the seven wives and Tennie English above their mostly white panties stirred the artistic heart of Kelso Morton. He began waving at the wives to look into the camera. He made two exposures: one of their grim faces and firm shoulders; the other of their bare legs and white panties between their ankles..

"Yellow!" chanted the ladies, with even greater emphasis, as if their holy vows had been renewed.

Irby Smoot looked down through the stairwell window of the second floor of the old post office building, appalled, as if the sidewalks of people, quivering in their places like the tangled leaves of a mad Kudzu vine, were in protest of his own empty office across the street. He could still hear the eternal ring of the telephone calling him to his destiny. He'd spent all day in the post office, most of the time perching in the window of the second floor stairwell; when someone took the stairs, he fumbled his way to the unclean men's room, where he washed his hands until they were white and shriveled with wrinkles. He'd also sat in the courtroom on the sixth floor, hearing the case being tried of a conspiracy to deprive one Alfred Rodenberry of his civil rights, by firing him as an apprentice embalmer in the mortuary business of Leroy J. Finney.

"Mr. Finney, in addressing your employee, did you ever use the word…?"

"I object, Your Honor." The defense attorney was a pale, thin man who appeared to have been creased and pressed sideways into his suit.

"Objection overruled." The judge's lips said it entirely independent of his dark, evil eyes under lids swollen over with fat.

"I called him by the same as them other knot-heads learnin' the business," said the defendant, provoking snickers from the clutch of spectators. The judge's swollen-over eyes opened a fraction, dangerously, at the snickering.

"How did you address Mr. Rodenberry, Mr. Finney?"

"I never called him a *black* turd."

Whack! the gavel hit, anticipating the glut of laughter, which came anyway, but only four rows deep. The rest of the courtroom was empty except for Irby Smoot in the long wooden bench on the last row. It was then that he heard the car crash and the gathering noise on Forsyth Street. Smoot pushed himself off the hard bench. And escaped the trial through the swinging door, never to know the fate of the apprentice mortician. His arches were now cramping from standing on his toes, looking out the stairwell window. He watched the angry yelps in the moving shifting crowd, the car horns threatening, as if he heard the sounds with his eyes. The crowd separated, and there was a bizarre half-circle of women, standing as if on handkerchiefs. He recognized the AP photographer. He could not understand why he was shooting the women on his knees. Smoot, for the hundredth time, looked up at the window of his office. He was relieved that it was dark. But he was not saved. He was working up his nerve to go in for his paycheck. He only connected the years of paychecks with his in-box and not with his job. He was certain the telephone had been ringing to fire him. *Could it have been this morning?* He felt he had been captive in the post office building all-of his life. He did not pick out Alec Spotsworth among the crush of people below him.

Traffic was now a steel web, cast over twenty blocks; automobiles were embedded at every intersection, from Spring Street to the railroad overpass, and from Peachtree Street to Stewart Avenue. Passengers in airport limousines unloaded their just-packed luggage in front of their hotels, with no hope of making their flights. Firemen at Spring Street could see no beginning or ending to the stalemate of cars. If there was a fire, they could not get their trucks into the street. It would be a disaster worse than the Winecoff Hotel fire in 1946, when 120 died, many of them leaping to their deaths rather than burning alive.

Chapter Eight

Spotsworth limped badly but ignored the pain down his leg. He gave up trying to move along the sidewalk and joined those people stepping between the cars overheating in the street. He'd left for lunch an hour ago. He'd planned to be back at 1:00 P.M. to pick up his check. It might be his last. But he did not think so. Only he had spoken to the publisher, D.T. Roebuck, who could fire him. Even if Smoot had returned to his office, how could he know to fire him? Spotsworth's column for the Thursday paper was already down the tube. Of course, they would publish it. Who in the composing room could kill it? He meant to pick up his check and not speak to anyone, as was his custom. He could not believe the stalled automobiles on Forsyth Street, like tin fishes gasping for oxygen after the water had been drained away. Spotsworth had no idea the plug had been pulled at 921 Forsyth, by seven amateur activist women and one young professional protester…all against the sexual blasphemy of his Thursday column. Car horns sounded over the standing, moving mob of pedestrians in the street. He heard sirens, but they were not getting any nearer through streets blocked in every direction.

He could see the AP man, Kelso Morton, disappearing into *The Observer* building, as if every car had been restarted and driven away, the mob of drivers and pedestrians dispersed. Spotsworth could not imagine why he was going *into* the building and not *coming out* of it. At first, he thought there had been a

fire. But did not see any smoke. Then he could make out the two mangled automobiles. And the thrown-up-on policeman. But how to account for a standing riot? He came on the seven ladies, who were now too hoarse to chant. A delivery boy shouted obscenely at them. The ladies heard him all right, but none of them gave ground. Tennie English saw Spotsworth before he saw her. He was one of her favorites, whom she watched every day from across the street when she ate lunch. She could see it was one of his days when he was limping badly. She had not understood why some days he limped and some days he walked steadily. She decided he must have arthritis, or a back injury, that flared up from time to time. She liked the way his thick, already graying hair grew away from his high forehead and how he never spoke to anyone. The days he could hardly walk, he was her favorite she saw on the street. He always went into *The Observer* building or came out of it. She never read any newspaper except *The New York Times* and did not know what Spotsworth had done. English handed the wooden beanpole and faintsign to Alec Spotsworth, as though he had arranged to have all the automobiles stop and wait where they sat, so that he could walk between them from a long distance to reach out and take it from her. He lowered the pole so he could read: *The words of our mouth be always acceptable…*" He had to lower the lapsed sign: "in Thy sight." It came to Spotsworth like a religious revelation: These ladies, and this young woman, were demonstrating in front of *The Observer* because of his column. And they had reduced the entire city to its hubcaps. The old wooden pole felt comfortable in his two hands.

English looked to be sure the other ladies were watching her. She scooped up her panties, and turning, put them in the outside pocket of Spotsworth's old, blue corduroy coat, as if she had them on loan and was returning them intact. She did not offer to take the pole, and he held onto it. The other ladies were stepping off their panties and carefully squatting and putting them in their purses. All of them felt cold naked under their suits, although the spring heat was rising off the sidewalk. English waved to them and to the spontaneous combustion of a successful demonstration. The only disappointment: Not one of them had been arrested. The seven ladies began to drift into the moving, thinning crowd, chins up, as if they had been led into successful battle against the *Evil One's* written word.

Spotsworth did not fumble to speak. He could not imagine what he should say. He concentrated on the slight thickening in his right coat pocket, as if it were a message written in nylon. English walked slightly ahead, leading him between bumpers of the stalled cars, careful not to go too fast. If he had said a word, anything, she would have disappeared into the thinning crowd. She did not look back. Spotsworth was forced to guide the wooden pole, with its akimbo sign, over the heads of the people, like a man returning from a triumphant cause.

It puzzled Spotsworth that this young woman had so inflammatory a reaction to his column. She didn't have the look of anybody's wife, certainly not a minister's, and she wore no wedding ring. Even he had recognized the wife of the Episcopal bishop, her photograph often in *The Observer*, a good shoulder length behind her husband, who was nowhere in evidence in the street. Events of today, he was sure, had their beginning on yesterday's 9:05 bus, with another young woman's skirt riding high up her thighs. There would have been no inflammatory column, no catastrophe in the street, no chance this young woman would have handed him this sign. Her name was unknown to him. Of course, he had often seen her, eating a sandwich on the steps of the old post office, and maybe she was the young woman about whom he had fantasized this morning in his agony of pajamas. She sat there every day at noon. He had even written a paragraph, wondering who she might be. He often did that, made a passing description of unknown people he had seen in the street. He never published those sentences. If he had seen the people, they were too real. He only wrote notes and questions and answers from people who did not exist except in the mail; they could not understand why they could never get him on the telephone. That would also have made them too real. He wrote about *things*, so long as they did not belong to any speaking person. He had admired the young woman, eating her sandwich on the steps. He once crossed the street to see her better; she was barefoot, as she was today, and too young to imagine. He had wondered how her bare feet felt on the hard pavement? She was lifting them now, carefully, so that they would not be stepped on, like two delicate animals in a mechanical forest. The reality of the weightless pressure in Spotsworth's coat pocket was more real than the random people swirling around them. They were all the way to Peachtree Center, and the traffic was backed

up as far as they could see up Peachtree Street. They had walked together long enough now that Spotsworth felt they were unspoken conspirators.

She stopped and looked in the narrow window of a small new delicatessen, more artificial than the city's old, warm, if exhausted, sandwich shops. All the foods were wrapped in plastic. Everything about her face was too young, except, perhaps, her eyes and her chin, which was not large but resolute. Her hair was not too short to stir in the breeze that felt good coming the length of Peachtree Street.

"I left…half my sandwich." She was only able to speak in a rough whisper; the words sounded as if they had been tortured individually and let out barely alive. He had been listening all the way from *The Observer* building, somehow knowing not to speak. He felt a compulsion to go back and search out the half sandwich among the feet of the multitude that had passed the old post office steps.

It was obvious by the way she looked into the window, as if into a picture book, that she would not go inside. It would seem an act of disloyalty to hand her back the sign pole. He rested it between them. Her eyebrows were as dark as her hair, and they grew thickly and were not trimmed in one direction, so that she looked even younger. Her eyes, he could see, were dark and older; they were not startled by his looking at them. She had long ago filed him at the top of her inventory of best street faces; it was awkward to speak to him. His not speaking made it possible.

"Cheese?" The word was a question; it came out hoarsely and low in her throat. Spotsworth listened as if she had pronounced something exceptional. He carried the pole and sign inside and came out with a Swiss cheese sandwich on rye bread that was too stiff in its wrapping. Her accepting the sandwich seemed to close the great distance, like time, between them.

"Did you do all this?" he asked, looking the length of stalled automobiles, with two cops on motorcycles swerving their way between them toward the intersection of Peachtree and Forsyth Streets.

She grinned with a bit of cheese already in her teeth. "Listen." The word was an effort for her throat.

An unnatural silence had fallen over downtown Atlanta. Many of the stalled automobiles had overheated, idling in the sun. All of the drivers had

long cut their engines. Many were standing in the street to see what catastrophe had befallen the city. The peppering of the two motorcycles, now out of sight, heightened the silence.

"*On the beach*," she said, every vowel hoarsely and unevenly accented.

"Where?" Spotsworth tried to dredge up the lost impressions of the ocean he had saved from his youth; all that came to him were angry sandspurs in the weeds beside the cabin they rented in Panama City.

"Australia." Between the cheese and her ruined throat, it sounded like a noise a small dog might make.

Yes! The book! What was the writer's name? "Shute," he said, as she nodded, laughing. He had described all the cars stalled, and the people dead in them, the end of the world. She must've read the book and/or seen the motion picture. And maybe Atlanta was practicing for the end.

Spotsworth could see no hope of a bus materializing out of the strangled traffic. As if by unspoken agreement, they were walking north on Peachtree Street.

"Where do you live?"

"Oh. Complicated," she said. She tried to smile, but not enough of the cheese was gone.

They were opposite the X-rated movie house, if one neon sign, one narrow one-story room, one ticket-taker, and a flickering sixteen-millimeter film made a movie house. The old, pitiless hotel, which once held the Domino Lounge, faced across Peachtree Street, like an architectural antagonist, the First Methodist Church. Two stars in the two buildings had played opposite each other: *Kalantan*, the exotic dancer, in the basement of the Domino Lounge, and *Pierce Harris*, the fierce preacher in the sanctuary of the First Methodist Church. He had an odd, grainy voice that somehow came out pitched rather high despite his bulk. He was never a dull man even when he was seventy. It's possible he admired the dancer's form in the advertising posters across the street. No one who saw Kalantan, her body elaborately cream-smooth, with true pre-silicone breasts like round white desire, could imagine her as being dull. Spotsworth had never been in the First Methodist Church, but *my God*—it was an expression, not a deity he called up—the posthumous civic meetings he had covered as a reporter and Pierce Harris as

speaker managed to inflict a cell of life into a few of those dead hours. Spotswsorth did not find it painful to remember he had leered at Kalantan from a near row in the Domino Lounge. He had once gotten a roach in a drink there and only noticed when her dance ended and the booze was gone from his glass. It was startling and humiliating for Spotsworth to realize he was talking aloud. It was equally surprising that she was watching him intently, as if, he suspected, he was some aged imitation prophet, limping on his staff, returning out of Egypt, babbling about lost times of no importance. Spotsworth was only correct in that what he said seemed to her to come from a great distance in time; he himself seemed a survivor of history, and this preacher and this dancer carried the burden of all of the past of Atlanta, when they were here in their prime and maybe passed at this very spot.

English held her slim fingers apart and brushed her hands together, but the mayonnaise only spread wider in an even film.

Spotsworth had never carried a handkerchief, except to Sunday School as a child; he did not waste an empty gesture searching for one that was not there. She reached into his right coat pocket, alternately with each hand, squeezing her slim fingers on her white nylon panties; all the motion in his pocket, the burrowing around like a small warm animal, tingled his entire right side, as if it were some new textbook erogenous zone. She did not stop walking while reaching her hands in his coat pocket.

"What do you write?" The way he spoke, she knew him to be a writer, and one who'd been heading for the *Observer* building. She looked up at him—her eyes an impossibly dark black—and he forgot what she had asked, wishing that she could reach for the answer in his other pockets.

Her question came back to him. "Oh. A column. Nothing. Just boring notes." He'd never said, *Oh*, in his adult life. It was her mannerism that he had unintentionally imitated. She did not seem to notice.

She was looking at him, at the little ridge of brittle hairs, some of them gray, climbing in an unkempt line up the outer rim of his ear. She was looking for the small things she had not been able to see from a distance. His voice, she was glad, was very distinct, a little higher than you expected when looking at him. It was an Atlanta voice—southern, but rather clipped. He was not really that tall, he was just rather thin; he was not quite six feet. "Oh,"

she said on purpose. She was sure that he caught her imitation of his imitation of her.

Of course, he did.

"Do you work barefoot?" he said, earnestly.

She had long skinny feet. He hung back a step and watched one of them come up narrow and black on the bottom, as if she had taken a legal footprint. She raised it, pointed its toes, pleased with its long skinniness. She put it down delicately, as if it were a sixth sense.

The automobiles were stymied as far as he could see up Peachtree Street, toward Ponce de Leon Avenue. He asked her—she had not answered any of his questions—"Why? Why did you do it?"

She took the wooden beanpole from him and in one easy, irrevocable motion, as if it had been cut and rounded and sharpened for that purpose, drove it permanently into the ground near a shrub guarding the Forest Avenue Bridge over Highway I-85. She reached high and swung the awkwardly lettered sign around in place. She read the biblical excerpt again. It still puzzled her. She moved quite close to him, both of-them looking up at the message. She seemed much smaller so close without her shoes. "The ladies," she said. She laughed. Not at them. "It's such a funny word, *ladies*, when you think about it, like some carefully evolved hybrid of perennial, always ready after a flowering spring to revert to a winter bulb. No one on the street knew they were there." She put a hand on his shoulder and jumped up from the sidewalk, pushing down with her hand, to reach as high as she could to see how far the cars were stalled. Spotsworth could not help flinching at the pain in his back.

She felt him give slightly under her hand. "I'm sorry," she said, landing as quickly as possible on her toes. Immediately she regretted saying it more than hurting him. "Let's go," she said, giving him a swat on the arm. Neither of them looked back at the sign they left planted like an historic marker. Neither of them spoke. After they walked as far as Ponce de Leon Avenue, the traffic was moving north.

Spotsworth could no longer conceal his pain; he managed to walk only with a decided limp. Tennie English looked for a taxi or a bus, but neither had broken free of the tangled backlash of traffic in the downtown. Then, at the

wide throat of Ponce de Leon, a bus appeared exactly in front of them like a blunt instrument of transportation. Spotsworth could not hurry. They were lucky a transit official was holding up the bus, directing the driver to turn north. Spotsworth accepted her help from her surprisingly strong hands up the steps into the bus. He was just able to brace himself and drop their tokens into the slot.

Chapter Nine

Spotsworth had lived here fifteen years, and he was seeing his rooms for the first time. He watched Tennie English look up at the swollen wallpaper, bulging down from the ceiling like a long-lapsed breast. He was still looking up in surprise at the bulge when she switched on the lamps, one by one, each of them barely glowing through their dusty shades. She reached into the electric overflow of paperback books and pulled out a copy of *The Hands of Esau*, of which he had once read 13 pages and left it in the place where she had uncovered it. Spotsworth was suddenly aware of the tortured, torn covers, the face-down pages, the irregular disaster of books in the room. And this was one room. English was trying out the rocking chair, at first carefully, and then precipitously, and then she was raging on the heavy rockers, which did not object and seemed in the furious silence of their motion to enjoy the action in its wild, blurred passage, until the rockers were heel-on-toe and the flying lights seemed to double in intensity. Now the sound riding in the long-silent room, as though joining in the motion, was Tennie English laughing, until she was over backwards in the chair and in a ball of her short hair and herself, the chair seat closing over her head. The room was again quiet, but it was not the same silence. Spotsworth looked on in amazement, as if she had disappeared inside herself. He feared she was hurt. Then she was snickering, pleased with herself. Spotsworth carefully rolled the chair off her. Her short

dress was up to her bare roundness and above it; her long bare legs and feet stopped his breath in his chest. She put her hand up to be helped. Spotsworth took it. She was careful not to put too much weight on his back; it seemed natural to her to look out for his back, as she had been watching him limp along Forsyth Street for years. She liked all of him even more than she had liked his face in front of the post office, and it had been her favorite. "Let me read what you wrote," she said. Her voice fit the room; she spoke naturally, without pretense, not subdued by the ghostly surroundings, unlike the few easy women who had been inside the rooms over the years.

This morning's *Observer* lay on top of the crowded, waist-high bookshelf. That was remarkable in itself. Spotsworth never brought home a newspaper because of the total possibility he would not get around to throwing it out. He handed it down to her, as she again sat on the floor. He could no longer remember exactly what he had written. The physical release of it, the sight of copy editor Edward Metcalf ignoring his pages, the thought of the composing room spiking them to be set into type, the idea of the many random citizens of Atlanta, in their bedrooms, their kitchens, and offices, and in hotel lobbies, and public toilets opening innocently to page 11-C, no longer seemed priceless or even real. The thought that still moved him was the imagined sight of the great carcass of the unseen publisher, D.T. Roebuck, having some passage of the column read to him by the wife of the bishop of the Episcopal diocese, under his sea of bedspread through the umbilical cord of a telephone. Spotsworth almost chortled to remember Roebuck's voice, more hysterical over the telephone than the voice of the fleeing managing editor Irby Smoot in his own ear, although it seemed now to Spotsworth that he had been listening in another era. Where in the *Book of Common Prayer* had the bishop's daughter stashed his lascivious column? Between "Evening Prayer" and "Passion Sunday?" How did the bishop's wife come to see it before breakfast? Did she permit the bishop to read it? There was considerable suspicion in the diocese that she allowed him to breathe in but not to breathe out.

Spotsworth could not for the life of him remember a sentence he had written. Nor what he had written for Friday's column. He was still a little uneasy as he remembered that he had quit screwing around and typed out words as intimate as oral sex. After all the events of today, it seemed a small

matter. It came over him…a sudden apprehension…*oh*…a sudden *fear*…that this young woman, whose name she had not trusted him with, might rise up in indignation at what he had written and leave the rooms, barefoot, never to come back. He was speechless to hear the clear laughter of Tennie English coming up from the floor. "They published *this*? The old *Observer?*" She was laughing again and reading aloud random phrases. Spotsworth could not imagine that he had written them. She was amazed that the newspaper, which she had not read in a calendar year, had published this…the newspaper that even abbreviated *hell*: *h—l*. She read excerpts aloud, when she was not laughing—clear laughs like syllables to be sung. "It was *you* we were protesting!" she accused him between laughter. "You're not a male chauvinist. You're at least a sex maniac." Spotsworth listened, as if he were a third person in the one-way conversation, pleased in spite of himself.

English was still broken up with laughter, but she was watching him seriously. She had only known him to see him, to measure the amount of his limp on days at lunch, when he came down Forsyth Street. His face then was never pinched, but it was permanently closed to the passing people…even the one time he crossed the street to look at her more closely, his eyes revealing nothing; they were not the same eyes she was seeing now. What he had written had changed him. Surely, he had thought many true things, perhaps he had even written them and abandoned them, but she was sure he had never before published them. She was certain *The Observer* management must be paralyzed. Her laughter died on her lips. Spotsworth might be fired. She looked around: *How could he take care of himself?* Then again, she should not worry about anyone who could live in these fabulously disastrous rooms. "Are you fired?" she asked, without apology.

"No. Not yet." Spotsworth did not invent his unconcern. He was enjoying her legs. "Only the owner told me I was finished."

English was openly puzzled.

"He…the publisher…thought he was on the telephone with the managing editor. Whom he has never met, I'm sure. It's only been fourteen years he's had the job. He's hiding out now…the managing editor. I saw his face in the window at the post office. He is sure *he* is fired. But he can't be, as long as they haven't told him so. I'm not fired. Only the owner, whom I've never seen in

the office, has fired me. It's that simple." Spotsworth laughed, in the same curious, high-pitched intensity of the day before, when he had seen his column whipped down the pneumatic tube.

Tennis English followed what he said, exactly, as if it were the only possible sequence of events. "If you could publish *this column* today," she held up the newspaper, "you can publish *anything* tomorrow."

"I already have," Spotsworth said.

English could imagine everyone in *The Observer's* old, crumbling, but stately building—she had never been inside it, but it was *crumbling* and *stately*, even from across the street—reading what Spotsworth had written. Someone setting it into type, and someone proofreading it, and no one in the building with the power, or the inclination, to stop it from being printed. All of them drawn up in their chairs, over tight assholes, watching as if they were publishing their own obituaries. "When can I read tomorrow's?" She bounced up from the floor, careless of her short skirt, which covered only the delicious tops of her marvelous legs.

"There will be a first edition of the Friday paper, at Fourteenth Street, by 9:00 P.M. tonight." It was now 4:00 P.M. It did not seem possible this was the same day he began on the 9:05 A.M. bus up Peachtree Street.

Chapter Ten

Arms Malloy, his long head hung over his shoulders, his eyes deep in their sockets, his limbs all angles, perched on his high stool like a great insect. He watched the printers ease over behind Elroy Moody, who stabbed at his Linotype machine with the importance of a man typing the death of a president. Arms had no control over the printers, which only heightened the intensity with which he cursed them, especially when they harassed his typesetters. Because Malloy took every humiliation seriously, the printers humiliated him incessantly.

Moody couldn't set a line of type without making an error for looking up to see who was reading over his shoulder. Two printers were now standing behind him, reading ahead of him, impatient for him to get to the next page. They panted after images from Spotsworth's imagination; from the opening sentence, it read as if it were happening on the page. Moody put two "w's" in "swell" and had to start over the line he was setting. "Asshole," said B. W. Gagliano, who watched him hit the second "w." Gagliano was supposed to be trimming the metal to go under a six-column photograph on the front page, of seven older ladies and one young foxy woman, all standing in their panties in front of *The Observer* building, but he was leaning over, reading the copy on Moody's Linotype machine with his libido.

His "asshole" was all Arms Malloy could stand: "You Italian whop shits ain't satisfied havin' babies every nine months and fifteen minutes. No need to look. We ain't settin' a picture book."

"Yeah, an' if we were, you couldn't get it up to read it," said Rosie Washington, the assistant foreman who was prowling the composing room. He wanted that front page locked up; he knew better than to say so to Gagliano.

Malloy was now standing on legs like popsicle sticks, holding his cock in the manner of B. W. Gagliano, who gave a short, blackened finger to everybody laughing at him. Humiliation came down like a tribal ritual in the composing room; nobody could hope to escape it. The trick was to give it back to them, as Gagliano had just taken it up the wazoo. Gagliano stretched out the time it took him cutting the metal backing for the front-page photograph, but he was careful not to show any response to the obscenities and snickers still ricocheting around the low, frenzied, sex-obsessed composing room.

Rosie knew exactly what Moody was setting in type. Malloy had been careful to show him Spotsworth's column when it first came back. Rosie wished he could set it in forty-eight-point Roman caps and put it across the top of the front page. He burned still from last night's laughter that had driven him out of the newsroom. It made no sense why somebody running the newspaper, or owning it, had not come down like God-all-mighty on the editors, the union, and maybe the machines themselves. In truth, he didn't give a damn for Spotsworth's dirty shit; it was the laughter in the newsroom that scorched his soul. And what they had printed yesterday was just a beginning to what Elroy Moody was setting in type right now. Rosie Washington only knew he could not go back in the newsroom until he crammed the laughter down the news editor Jerome Paine's throat. Rosie did not care if the newspaper died the next day. He did not care if they printed the pope was gay in all-caps, bold italic. He meant to print what this Spotsworth wrote until he crammed the laughter out of Jerome Paine's mouth up Jerome Paine's ass.

Edward Metcalf propped himself especially erect at the copy desk. His face burned with pleasure. He could not believe that Paine had actually-spoken to him, had slapped him on the arm, and said, "Keep up the good work." It could only have been more astonishing if the news editor had said his name. That, of course, was beyond reality; he had not said it once in his nineteen years at *The Observer*. Metcalf was very nearly the only practicing adult in Atlanta who had not read, or heard, of Alec Spotsworth's Thursday morning column by the time he came to work at 4:00 P.M. Thursday afternoon. It was now 6:00 P.M., and Metcalf was marking TTS wire copy paragraphs without reading any of the sentences, and stamping headlines, written by his old, tall copy editor and his young, bony copy editor, without counting the characters to see if any of the headlines would fit. Both of the copy editors had only read Spotsworth's insane, yesterday column—after hearing about it from their startled, awkward wives. And now they sat inside their long bones, marveling at the routine of the newsroom, expecting to be singled out and thrown bodily from the building for letting the upside-down column go unedited. They spent all their time watching and waiting, and read even less than usual of the copy they were editing. Neither had mentioned Spotsworth to the other, or God forbid to the chief copy editor. Metcalf grew every minute in their eyes, with the manner in which he functioned, cursing them without once looking at the managing editor's empty office. He'd even been spoken to *and physically touched* by the news editor.

Paine himself thrived on his own now true recklessness. He did not check *The New York Times* listing of its front page stories for the Friday first edition. He did not bother to read the Associated Press code, suggesting the order of importance of the wire stories. He lifted out obscure articles that appealed to him—an outbreak of mononucleosis among a convention of Jesuit priests in Los Angeles. *If only it had been Las Vegas*, Paine thought, *and the clap*. No one on the news desk dared mention Spotsworth. Even Paine avoided looking at the closed door of the empty office of managing editor Irby Smoot. Smoot's secretary, Miss Fluker, had been in and out of the office all afternoon, until she had filed every old, daily, unread memoranda from the publisher, D.T. Roebuck, that she had been unable to get into the files in the last fourteen years. She was amazed at Smoot's

absence. He never took a day of vacation. He always came in early and stayed late on Christmas Eve.

P.W. Cato, the fifty-seven-year-old chief copy boy, was the only person in the newsroom who relished aloud Spotsworth's name and what he had written. He looked down inside his own stained trousers and quoted phrases from the column. Everybody ignored him. Metcalf, who could not imagine what Cato was up to, was even more convinced that he was crazy.

Religion editor Edwina Bennett kept beginning to cry, not over P.W. Cato—she had long since ceased to be aware that he was alive—but over remembering that she had borrowed a pencil with which Spotsworth had edited his landmark column, and that his copy paper, at the time, had still been in his typewriter. It was as if she had been lent a pencil by Charles Darwin over his manuscript of *The Origin of the Species*. *Or was that written by Sigmund Freud?* She was crying now. In honor of Spotsworth, she had worn no panties this morning, until she could purchase a new pair at Poore's department store down Forsyth Street. It was impossible to get to the counter. Women were scrambling over the displays of panties. A large fat man, dressed immaculately—perhaps a certified public accountant—and a tall, care-worn woman—perhaps a hotel maid—were tugging the elastic in the same pair of lime-green under-panties beyond its breaking point. They fell backward as the elastic gave way, both of them continuing to hold to the lapsed bag of green nylon. Clerks were opening fresh boxes, unable to keep track with what happened to the contents. Edwina had given up waiting at the counter and now could feel a draft off the newsroom floor.

Irby Smoot dragged an old Coca Cola case under the window in the second-story stairwell of the post office building. He could see down on the street below and up into his own office in the *Observer* building across the street. Looking up at the fourth floor, all Smoot could make out were the light fixtures burning in his old office. It didn't mean someone had taken over his

desk. All the lights came on and went off at the same time. He had snuck in at 4:00 A.M. and picked up his weekly check. It had been one day. It seemed he had been gone for years, and perhaps been met on the street and not recognized by his old employees, not one of whom he had ever known by his or her name. At least twice, Smoot was sure that he saw the silvery top of Miss Fluker's head as she passed by his old window; he was caught up with a fierce appreciation of her loyalty and a sudden, inexplicable sexual urge for her short, stout body.

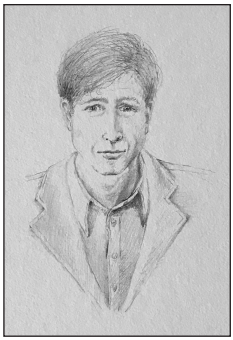
The *thump* of the capsule landing in its pneumatic tube raised every set of eyes in the proof room. Gravity came down like age on the head of the old chief proofreader, Harry Aultman, dragging deep folds of flesh over his eyes so that he had to lean his head back to see up. He was all drawn skin and old bones, with meatless hands like cables. He opened the tube, pulled out the capsule, and raggedly slugged in the writer's own handwriting: *SPOTSWORTH*. The old man's mouth opened, but there was no hope a sound would emerge, as if spoken words had not yet been conceived.

Evelyn Sellers stood out of her straight-back chair and walked directly between the stares of three sets of older women's eyes. She had neglected her proofing with the descent of every pneumatic capsule. She had the length of Spotsworth's galley proof fixed in her mind, so that when she saw it at a distance, it was as if she held it in her own hands. Old Aultman watched her approaching. His eyes looked over the quivering galleys in his hands. Evelyn took the galley proofs from his fingers, which were left formed in the air like a ruined nest.

She began to read the column, proofing it automatically—aware of every muscle and pad of flesh and exposed nerve and warm tissue and bolting artery in her body—even the very roots of her hair. She had opened her mind to every physical thing, including her own breath, as she read the unimaginable first words.

Spotsworth

Skeebo Wescott, III. Kalantan: Not a noun. A Verb. A Sliding, torquing, hovering. Gotta say it: Humping, vibrating Pelvis.



Down, one inch above the stage. A half-inch of dead-black G-string. Staying her arrest. Then. Strangely. Lovely. Gliding. All music. A smile to undo your heat. But. Fingers hot as thighs. Avoiding by one-half inch her sure. Arrest. Myself: Paralyzed. Aching. Bent down. Not giving: One bloody damn. Who sees me. In: The Domino Lounge. Where it's rested. All these years. Under a pitiless hotel. And across Peachtree Street: An architectural antagonist: The First Methodist Church of Atlanta. Two stars in two worlds: Playing opposite one another: Kalantan: exotic to her moving Nipples. And: Pierce Harris. His folksy presence, like out of the 19th Century, gone fierce Preacher. Odd grainy voice. Comes out. Pitched high, despite his bulk. And yet, burning true. A cell of life: In dead Civic Clubs I died in: To find a lone sentence that could live. Pierce Harris: Never a dull voice: Sharing his Belief, all the way to 70. Have to think he came onto a Kalantan poster across Peachtree Street. Maybe: Passed her on the sidewalk. Her flesh: wrapped away. Her fame: Hidden in a smile. Surely: They felt the power of an opposite Presence: of God's strength, of Man's weakness.

Lost. Back inside. The Domino Lounge. Myself a witness. Clutch of Hall of Fame (and wanna-be) College Football Coaches. Upside down drunk. Escaping the torturous annual Conference meeting. And in the dark: Kalantan: True, pre-silicone breasts like round, white desire, her body cream smooth, oozing, twisting, panting, humping, not to the music. To the Drum. The Beat, Beat, Beat, Beat, Beat, Beat in the wet faces of the standing, slobbering, screaming Coaches: the whole room standing, shaking. Don't know when: I got out of

my chair: my mouth open breathing in fractured air. A someday Hall of Famer, to the beat, beat of the drum, bellows: "Show us your _____!" Our city: not ready for that noun. Stick around. It will be. The last drum beat. Silence. Stage drowns in darkness. Kalantan vanishes.

All sound and sex and fury an eon away from Pierce Harris. Across Peachtree Street. A day in his life: At the Georgia State Penitentiary. Being introduced: "I want to tell you a story about two boys.

Lived in the same neighborhood. Went to the same school. Played together. Went to the same church. One boy decided to be smart: Rebelled against his parents.

Quit Church. Did what he wanted to instead of what was right. The other boy stayed in school. Treated people with love. And did what was right. The two boys are now grown. Both are here today. One is the great Minister who is going to speak to you today. The other boy who decided to be so smart. And rebelled. Is the Prisoner who is introducing the Preacher."

That Preacher. And that Dancer. Survivors of history. Have carried the Burden of all of the past of Atlanta.

"Suffering woman came merging her flame-shaken/ Body halo with mine.

The Poet.[2.]

Chapter Eleven

Spotsworth had never been able to drink two beers without relief between them. His bladder was swollen into an enormous necessity. He swallowed frantically, waiting for Tennie English to finish her soak in the high, iron-legged tub. She was delighted that you had to climb in it to get to the bathroom. "It would be," she shouted to Spotsworth in the living room, "Perfect…to have a bathtub in…every door!" Not an easy sentence to shout. He struggled out of his chair, around his swollen bladder, to hear her better. "You could keep them filled with water and everybody would have to go naked!" Spotsworth returned to his rocking chair. His necessity was such he could not even imagine her in the clear water with only mischief on her mind. His own thoughts rolled with the beers in the direction of the bathroom, and the round porcelain spring lying there like a reservoir of relief for his unbearable pressure. It did not occur to him to step out the terrace door and use the driveway. In his need, all he saw was the old leaky toilet. He could imagine the satisfying gurgling and rumbling, after he pushed the rusting handle, as if it were emptying its own gorged plumbing. The sound of English splashing water with her hands and feet was like the drip of liquid heroin before the eyes of an addict. Spotsworth stood. He was amazed he was still dry after uncrossing his legs. His head rowed with the three and a half beers. They were in his bladder as if they were still in their cans, a wet need as hard as

aluminum. He was halfway toward the bathroom. He was not responsible for his feet moving under his panic. "I've got…" His voice was desperate.

English looked over the edge of the tub, luxuriating in the warm water. She saw his eyes, round with necessity, and the fourth beer still in his hand. She waved a flurry of water. "Come on through. Roll up your pants legs. The water's perfect."

Spotswsorth's feet were out of his shoes. He left the socks on…*forget the trousers.* The closer he got to the tub, the faster he hesitated. He was a standing agony. Tennie English slid down in the water and spread her legs to give him stepping room. Her breasts, rounder than Spotsworth had imagined, floated just above the surface of the water. "It's okay." She raised her chin to say it. "I'll close my eyes."

It seemed, to Spotsworth, the proper etiquette. He had to keep his own eyes open to see where not to step. He was startled when her bare foot pushed against his sunken ankle. He saw that she was sneaking a look up at him from the surface of the water, which magnified the darkly swaying island between her long legs; he opened his mouth as if to apologize for *her* seeing *him*, but his necessity was too great for him to speak. He stepped out over the tub, his wet trouser legs and both socks making shallow ponds on the hopeless linoleum, running with great cracks. His hand worked the zipper of its own volition. Spotsworth had never been able to do it, unless standing with no one else in sight. It had been an unbearable discomfort in the Army years and had driven him to outrageous inventions. Suddenly, the three and one-half beers were running like an artesian well; he was amazed that he was not embarrassed.

"Oh. A tributary." Tennie English laughed under water, making geysers of air bubbles.

Spotsworth was all relief. But dizzy on his feet and did not believe he could hike back through the occupied tub.

"Sit down," she said, watching his unsteadiness. "Tell me who you are." Since she had been alone in Atlanta, five years, she had met many people, but had been careful never to try and understand them. Why this tall, thin man, no longer young, standing unevenly, too embarrassed to zip up his fly? Because. His face was still her favorite. And he had known when not to say a word.

Spotsworth handed himself down to the ruined linoleum. He was fine sitting, his back resting against the tub, but he would never be able to stand by himself.

Into the silence, English said, "I was married three times." It seemed, as if being in the water, she was safe under the words. She had never before spoken of her life. Not that she was ashamed. She hadn't planned on saying it, until the words spilled into the tub. "The first two were annulled. But we got to spend the night together." She looked over the edge of the tub at the back of his head with its dark and graying hair, appealingly down to his collar. His nodding made it seem okay to continue. Her own short, dark hair was slick smooth, like the wet fur on a small, warm animal. "That is all you could want to know about either time." She slid back down in the water. "The third boy I married I never spent the night with." She seemed to regret it, as if she had missed out on spring holidays. "He was studying to be a farrier. Do you know what a farrier is?" Spotsworth nodded. "Sure, you are a writer. He left me a note and his motorcycle. Do you mind if I don't tell you what the note said?" He was not moving at all. He seemed content.

"The note said, 'I'm not crazy.' I rode the motorcycle to Atlanta five years ago. I got a divorce. The main reason I got it was because of the word, *crazy*. I can't remember if he was left-handed or right-handed. Does that make any difference for a blacksmith?" Tennie English eased down again under the water. She knew the faces of five-hundred passing strangers, and she could not remember the color of the eyes of any of the three boys she had married; it was the first time she had ever been sad about any of them. "I'm twenty-six." She said that in two words, as if it were separate from everything else that had ever happened to her. English reached up and turned on the hot water. It thundered down into the cooling water, driving deep warm currents that flowed deliciously between her legs. She turned off the noise and the plunging heat. She was warmer in the deeper water.

"That is everything I know about myself," Spotsworth said into the silence.

He was startled at the comic ease with which he said it, at the way he felt comfortable sitting on the cool old linoleum with his fly unzipped; he did not care if he could not get up.

She heard him, all echoes, with her ears under water.

"I never spent all night with a woman," Spotsworth said, "who gets up first in the morning?"

English said, "The first time I pretended I was asleep. My hair was long then. I could barely see through it. He wouldn't wake up, and we had to be out by 11:00 A.M. or pay another night. I think he was glad they annulled it when he saw me in my hair."

English was now sitting up, dripping warm water down his back. Thinking of it running off her slimness stirred Spotsworth, as she had stirred him since he had seen her in the crowd, her arms over her head, waving the pole and the sign, her skirt short and riding high up her long legs.

"Tell me this," he said, before losing his nerve.

"I will," she said.

"Your name?"

"Tennie English."

He turned the sound of it over in his mind.

"Don't ever change it," Spotswsorth said. *He had typed five thousand names and never that one, or one so appealing to him*. It shocked him to hear himself saying that, rather than thinking it.

"I promise," she said. And meant it. *Her grandmother had named her. She never knew her mother or father*. She, too, was surprised to have said that and not thought it.

"Getting out of bed any time is the only impossible thing I do," Spotsworth said. "Ruined my back on the tennis court. Ruined me. But saved the game. From absurdity." His damaged laugh echoed in the tiny bathroom. "Hurt it again, bending over to get a quarter that rolled under a cigarette machine. Got down there and got the quarter, and couldn't get up; people standing in the lobby of the Fox Theatre, looking down like I was some kind of maniac stealing quarters. Never smoked since. In the army, I knew two lieutenants who were married…guys you could count on in the dirt." Spotsworth had not thought of either of them in years. "I never saw their wives. The two lieutenants did everything possible except go home. Kept me up half the night, two or three times a week. I thought it took too much work staying away from marriage to try it." He hesitated. "Half true. I never knew

a woman long enough to ask her out twice. Reason is…they'd seen enough of me the once." Spotsworth tortured himself to look around: her eyes, ever darker, were watching his own. "The truth," he said. "It also happened to me again yesterday. The truth. I sat down at my desk. I kept typing the god abandoned truth. Can't remember the first two thousand, seven hundred columns I typed. Before the last two. Terrible thing about the truth. It changes every minute. Once you start after it, you can't stop, and even then, you will never keep up with it." He was looking into eyes that were not blinking under their dark, wet brows. He was sure they saw everything.

She put a hand on his shoulder. He was startled it was so real and shining with wetness. "Can you get up?" Now drops of water were sliding through her brows, making her eyes blink.

He shook his head.

She kissed him damply behind the ear, the water on her face making a great wet spot in his hair; it was as movingly real as time passing.

She slid her hands under his arms, making a warm dampness. Then leaned into him, her breasts flattening against his back, even warmer and damper. He dug in his heels and pushed off the linoleum. Tennie English straightened up, as though she, in an unmoving stream of water, were saving him in her arms from everlasting drowning and damnation. They stood there, pressed front to back, while she dried off, soaking him through his shirt. Now they were both shivering. The heat was not on in the room, and the thin warmth of March had gone down with the sun.

"They are going to find us frozen together, and they'll publish our picture in your last column." She was laughing, but she was freezing.

Spotsworth reached back and was shocked at the firm wetness of her thighs in his hands, until he was teetering free, balanced somewhere between the fullness of her in his hands and the pain that was real enough down his leg. She almost went over backwards in the tub, making a round sight as she twisted and caught herself on the curved lip. He was able to hand her a towel. She was almost dry, except from the knees down, which were under the cooling water. She draped the towel on the floor and stood on it unconscious of her nakedness. She plunged one hand into the tub and released the water to its fate. Then reached across and helped Spotsworth through the deep, empty

abyss, like a young female Moses. He could see the bed through the open door, as if it were in another country. Standing still, she was elegant without her clothes. "One promise. You won't write about us tomorrow."

He crossed his heart.

She was naked, but knew it was he who was vulnerable; she was remembering his face, like an anonymous friend, above his limp, as he made his way down Forsyth Street across from her perch on the old post office building steps.

Spotsworth looked wildly for some place to put the half-full Schlitz can he still held in his left hand. She took his empty right hand and led him toward the high, old-fashioned bed, as though they had been twice purified.

Chapter Twelve

The true brass doorknob shook in the hand of Mose Daniel, sending the bolt to the poker room rattling in and out of the lock like some illicit mechanical experience. He was afraid to open the door and had to.

Five aging men looked up from their poker hands to see D.T. Roebuck breathing in but too astonished to breathe out. His 380 pounds swelled over his limbs as if he were there without bones; the constant outrage in his eyes seemed to come from deep inside his own flesh, as though the purpose of his seeing was to originate victims. But with even the most timid and reluctant publishing rebuke, as much as a harsh look, Roebuck took to his bed, unable to speak for as long as a day. There was nothing he could do: he was only the owner of the newspaper. Four of Roebuck's card-playing cronies—like scavenger birds around prize carrion—had for twenty-seven years lived rich, complicated lives off their poker winnings, and Elijah Smith lived simply on a few thousand, riding only to the Piedmont Driving Club and back on his bicycle.

The five did not question D.T.'s divine right of arrogance, no matter if he were drunk and peeing in his trousers and asking for a fresh glass and a dry chair. They could not, anyone of the five of them, make an adequate living in his absence from the table.

Mose Daniel shook open the card room door. He was terrified of interrupting this ritual of unending bounty. Mose knew to the last decimal

how many thousands Roebuck lost each day. His tribute for absolute subservience as the ranking servant in the club was one percent off the top. The day's winnings folded over, furtively, in an unread copy of *The Wall Street Journal*, subscribed to for that purpose. Mose invested in property and was the biggest slumlord among blacks in Atlanta.

"Mr. Roebuck." Mose was astonished at his own voice, and the five players, at the sound of it, expected the cards on the table to fly back into the deck; Mose had not interrupted D.T. the day his wife died, until he lost the last hand of the evening going both ways in a high-low, seven-card stud, all the time holding a perfect sixty-four low.

"Mr. Poore's callin', sir. Up on the telephone."

They all looked at the silent instrument, as if visible words were coming out of the receiver. Roebuck was their river of plenty, but Jacob Gideon Poore and his department store *was The Observer*. Management set his ads in type, and editors made up what editorial columns were left around them. Jacob Poore, ninety-seven-years-old, drove himself to work in a two-door, vacuum-shift Chevrolet that hadn't been marketed since 1948.

Roebuck could not put down his cards. His mind could not imagine his hand lifting the telephone. The other players willed it up to his ear, while Mose Daniel pushed on the noiseless door with all his seventy years without moving it against the air.

A sound came out of the receiver nowhere between a laugh and a word… but like some *electronic glee*. Roebuck said nothing, amazed to be alive.

"*Riots!*" *w*as a word Old Poore was cackling. That noise again, high up maybe in his nose, or maybe there was an electrical storm on the line. The sun was shining, but the draperies were everlastingly closed. "*Mad!*" The black telephone shaking wildly in Poore's thin double-grasp, trembling the veins of his arms, and on this end, the telephone squeezing the swollen-over hands and buried wrists of D.T. Roebuck, who gasped out two words that could have been, *"Oh, God."* Eerie sounds again from Old Poore: *"Insane…writer! Genius…of underwear! Sales! Bloomers! Bras! Gone! More ads! Pages! Sections!"* The telephone clicked off, so that Mose Daniel felt it in his bones and closed the door.

Roebuck dropped the receiver on the floor. *Riots for underwear! Thank God my maniac's still writing! The paper'll run forever!*

"Pick up 'em cards," he ordered.

The five men grabbed for their cards, as if they held the fortune of the Republic.

"Balls to open!" Roebuck announced the house rules for each hand dealt as it was being played. He threw in a blue chip before he looked at his five cards. The hand was draw poker. Five players shook their own hands erratically open at the unique appearance of the blue chip, which was one thousand dollars. They could only call what Roebuck bet. They could not raise. He always opened the betting, no matter who dealt or what cards showed. Roebuck had not dropped out of a hand in twenty-seven years. And he never failed to bet.

Dr. Clettus Dielow, his one irregular clutch of thin hair grown dead and long and lapsed over his white, sickly skull like a disease dying of itself, looked down on two kings in his five cards. His old liver and white hands, which had not practiced medicine since the discovery of antibiotics, squeezed the greed in the eyes of the kings. He saw the thousand dollars with his pair.

Elijah Smith—a gentle old man who owned a 1932 Western Flyer bicycle inherited from his uncle, a cross-cut saw salesman and founding member of the Piedmont Driving Club—held a three, a four, a seven, a nine, and a ten, all of them diamonds. Elijah was careful not to win more than five thousand in a year from D.T. Roebuck and lived on it. He eased a blue chip into the center of the table.

Gilmore Slusher worried the last down card after his four spade, five heart, six spade, and seven club. He pressed it, unable to lift it. He was truly old. He reeked with age, as if his flesh had been left outside his body to spoil. His much-loved aunt had been run over by the electric trolley on Piedmont Road after a New Year's Eve party in 1941 and left him, her only surviving relative, a modest fortune—long gone—and a nomination to the Piedmont Driving Club. Slusher had had three young wives. They had been unable to withstand the leaking lips, the lapsed flesh, the greedy hands, even for D.T. Roebuck's money. He was looking for a fourth wife. He needed all the blue chips he could conquer to afford her. He still had both ends open on the straight. He pushed a blue chip out where it clashed with the green tabletop.

There was great sadness in the eyes of the two queens in the hands of July Tidmore. He was fifty-five. The youngest man at the table. His wife was

seventy. She was rich. The only thing she spent on him was her vindictiveness. It was all she had more of than money. She grew thinner and harder every year in her cotton nightgown, both of them despising each other in the dark. Tidmore pushed his blue chip with the entire heel of his hand, as if it carried the unbeatable weight of the ages in its thin, bright circumference.

Only evil lay in the hands of the old lawyer, Hassel Polk. A true judge, Learned Hand, had fired him as a clerk thirty minutes after he drafted a first brief for him in Boston in 1935. Polk moved back to Atlanta and joined D.T. Roebuck's poker game in 1945. His wife insinuated herself into the society pages of *The Observer* with her still youthful slimness. It was the evil in Polk that excited her. Polk released the blue chip, saw it bounce onto the green felt, all of its movement enlarged in his eyes by the heavy lenses.

Roebuck began to lift and spread his cards. The madness in Old Poore's voice was fresh in his ears. And Roebuck's mind, deep inside his swollen-over self, now accepted the *writing maniac* as *his own creation*, the same as the forces that brought the newspaper up out of the cement pit with his own name on it as Publisher, the same as the game in this room and the cards in his hands. Roebuck, the bones in his fingers lost forever behind pads of flesh, raised his bet the thousand-dollar height of another blue chip.

Five blue chips rolled shakily onto the table. Again. And again. And again.

"Lie down and die," Roebuck grunted, putting down the deck and picking up his cards. *Facing a straight or flush or fuck-knows-what from Elijah, takin' no cards; two pair or another straight or flush, with Polk and Slusher takin' one; and god-knows-what, with Dielow and Tidmore draggin' three.* Roebuck was incapable of folding a bad hand. Instead, he increased his bets in proportion to the inadequacy of his cards, so that he lost three times as much as he won.

The five other players, in a ritual of undeclared agreement, played for his money only. Never more than two of them stayed for the last card, usually just the one. There was no bluffing. Roebuck bet every hand. But never before had they all played for thousand-dollar chips, and the greed at the table was larger than any agreement. The five players still in the hand against Roebuck avoided looking at each other as they labored with their cards.

"God in hell," said Roebuck. "Dealer takes three." He ripped them down under his huge second chin. He only had an outrageous chance, drawing to

the pity of the ten and queen of hearts. The absurdity of it filled him with confidence, and he rolled out another blue chip before he picked up his drawn cards. Five chips came forward to match his own. Roebuck lifted his three cards and spun them open with one movement, and they were all red and all hearts—one of them a king—as if ordained there for some true purpose. Roebuck was calm. He always expected to draw the only cards that could save him, and rarely did. He dropped two more chips, as though doubling the moral force of his authority. "Now get on a table. Short bastards'll have to stand up to see over the thousand-dollar blue."

The cards came down like fate: the paired queens of July Tidmore, the paired kings of Clettus Dielow, the two pairs of Gilmore Slusher, the ten-card high diamonds of Elijah Smith, and the dark queen-high spades of Hassel Polk. That much reality drew the oxygen out of the air of the card room.

D.T. Roebuck hit the table with the huge rolling weight of his hands and arms. He spilled a king-high straight of red hearts, like the aged blood around the table, over the ragged pond of blue chips.

Silence in the room swallowed the losers. It was as if the ringing bell in the telephone had raged out a desperate new fate for the five of them.

Chapter Thirteen

Across the top of the front page of the Friday morning *Observer* ran a photograph, cropped very shallow. Only the faces and shoulders of the preachers' wives could be seen. They were all looking to their left into the camera, as if they were standing in place and the world was passing in review. Their eyes were opened wide, but their mouths were tightly shut, as though what they were seeing threatened to violate their lives. But not Tennie English, who was smiling grandly. She seemed to be passing through the lines of an unmoving parade.

Across the bottom of the same front page, cropped at the same shallow level, were the wives' calves and ankles stretching circles of nylon, like lowered flags of distress. Kelso Morton's camera angle, from flat on the sidewalk, also caught just the bottoms of the white plump knees of the bishop's wife at the front of the line. The last pair of glad, bare feet obviously belonged to Tennie English, whose happy face—like the other alarmed faces—was printed an entire page above. It was impossible not to look up and down the page, matching the faces with the calves and feet and surrendered panties.

A long cutline identified each of the wives in the photograph, but not Tennie English, listed as "unknown leader." A large boxed headline (*See Spotsworth, Page 47)* keyed the reader inside *The Observer* for a supposed explanation of the photograph.

Readers of *The Observer* who turned to Page 47 expecting some explanation of the women in the front page photograph and their exposed panties were puzzled to come on Spotsworth's nine-em sketch and his Friday column which was to engrave the written images of Pierce Harris and Kalantan as deeply as the 1864 burning of Atlanta.

Spotsworth, of course, made no mention of Thursday's front page photographs. Readers, well into his religious-sexual exploration, only later remembered to wonder who the hell those women were and what they were doing on the front page above their drawers.

The Observer's puzzling photographs, and the second column of Spotsworth's new career, did not trickle into the minds of Atlantans. It was torn out of wire cages of street vending machines and read in ragged pieces like contraband.

The square, huge dining room projected out from the south corner of the country club. The artificially blue water of an Olympic swimming pool was captured in the floor-to-ceiling window like an element of nature domesticated. The members called it the sun room. The dishes of breakfast were a round noise of disorder. Knives and forks rasped on stone-ware plates, cups glanced off saucers, heels of waiters cracked over the tile floor, cards snapped down onto the few tables that had been cleared, and words in the brightly capped teeth of the lady bridge players all seemed to be of the same clipped, ceramic element, making the spring air in the room brittle with sound.

Four ladies, one of them almost young and none of them old, drank coffee over the ruined landscape of their breakfast.

"I know three of them well."

"You only had to know them casually, Love. You could see enough of their *lingerie* to recognize them, if you knew them at all."

"Irene meant she knew them *well enough* to match the *faces* with the panties."

"Some of us would do well to keep up with our own undies." A sharp look over reading glasses.

"Careful. That's hitting below the hem line."

"I wonder…if you are a Baptist…if you have to tithe *that*, too?"

"Or can you give at the office?"

"Some of us are rarely home, so we can't give *there*."

"It's awfully hard to *give*, if no one wants *any* of what you've got."

"Do you think they will sue?" Said, hopefully.

"One of them may sue her dietitian."

"The *poor* husbands."

"Ever see a preacher who could keep his own pants zipped?"

"Darling, I want to join your congregation. Mine lives under three hundred pounds of robes."

"I was just thinking, the Second Coming, but we might not be invited."

Much laughter.

"I don't get it."

"Not often enough. Of course, you don't."

"Why didn't they print their names, or why they were doing it?"

"Or tattoo them with their telephone numbers."

"My sister's trailing lantana was once in this Spotsworth's column."

"It must trail in the family."

"Now, now. Don't be jealous."

"Did you read today's column? I called my Reverend. Love, he was jealous."

"You're sure this dear Reverend doesn't also dance?"

"I'm still worried about your sister's *trailing lantana*."

"He saved it. Had her move it in the sunshine."

"*Wonderful!*"

"I don't think I can bear it."

"You can make the team, if you can only move it in the dark."

An Amway salesman from Oneonta, Alabama sat in the lobby of the Hyatt-Regency Hotel, with two hours before an 11:00 A.M. appointment. He had never read any religious-sexual images like in the column on page forty-seven, much less in a newspaper. He turned to the Front Page to make sure it was *The Observer*. He saw the faces and legs and underwear of the woman there. He could not puzzle out why so beautiful a woman lived her life naked. *Except*, he told himself, *for the money. And who wouldn't? And the preacher? Did he sneak across the street? Who could blame him?* He watched over the top of the paper the slim bodies of the airline stewardesses going to and from the elevators. He wondered if he could get *The Observer* delivered in Oneonta. The local X-rated movies were advertised on the same page forty-seven as this Spotsworth's column. He got up, careful to keep the newspaper folded in front of him and walked two blocks to the confluence of Peachtree Street and West Peachtree. He bought a ticket from the one bored ticket-taker. The two narrow film rooms were playing *We Do It*, adults only, on the left; and *Prison Babies, the True Story of Teenage Girls Behind Bars*, on the right. He chose the left. *Who the hell wanted to see some teenager sittin' up in jail?* The Amway man walked into the absolute night of the one aisle, bent over, leaning against the total eclipse of light like a boatswain on a stormy deck. None of the scattered figures in the audience sat on the same row. The shaky images ground on the screen. The Amway man had never seen this done in Oneonta. Not with that many in the same bunk. He was watching, and he would very much like to try it. He was in Atlanta to pick up a supply of cleaning fluid.

A taxicab passed north up Peachtree Street. "It's an enormously healthy exercise; it's unprecedented, really," said the psychiatrist, an elegant woman with dark, straight hair, not waiting for the man's answer. "Fantasizing in every living room in Atlanta; it's enormously healthy, of course, it is." She ignored his silence, "An entire city as outpatient." Peachtree Street, passing under them, seemed to reel beneath the sheer weight of the sunlight. "He's right,

absolutely. This Spotsworth. Of course, you can *say sex* in words. Of course, you can," she said, putting out her cigarette in the ashtray between them, suddenly looking into the eyes of the man as if he had appeared without her permission on the back seat.

Seven floors up in City Hall, Brazzola Johnson stood looking down, taking great satisfaction from the *height*, as if all of Georgia was beneath this one office of the mayor of Atlanta. He was a huge black man. He was named after his grandmother, who weighed 300 pounds and lived to be 107 years old. Everything about him was large and smooth, his great round fingers without rings, and, seemly, without knuckles. His feet were enormous in his seventy-five-dollar Florsheim shoes. It bothered him, for an instant, looking down, that he could not wear Italian shoes, or any imported shoes that he had ever tried. His size eighteen triple-E feet had to be custom fitted. He seemed himself to have been custom-cut for the large square office. When he sat, he was swiveled high in his chair and his desktop was laid out below him like the prop for some elaborate children's hour. *Oh*, *yes*, *he liked that image*. He sprung an absurdly small notebook out of his coat pocket and traced this description of himself and his desk in a tiny, precise script, as if he were drawing it in ink on paper for mankind.

He had only been mayor of Atlanta since January, and he was writing a book about himself in his mind: looking over a table-sized topography of sausage, mustard greens, French fried potatoes, and kosher dill pickles from Leb's Restaurant. He was already at the point where all the words he said out loud he was testing to see if they belonged in his notebook. The telephone was lighting up, as if taking on an additional burden of civic responsibility.

The mayor did not answer when he picked up the receiver. He was known for that eccentricity. Brazzola Johnson enjoyed the power of not having to speak.

"Mother Jesus, this woman! You gotta speak to her!" It was the vice mayor. The vice mayor had tiny eyes, with almost no whites, which he squinted

together at all times. He was terrified of leaving the office with one thing still hanging, and every night there were a thousand necessities untended.

"You can't handle one old white woman? What can you do with a city half full of 'em?" The mayor flipped out his notebook and penciled that in.

"Hole 'up, 'air!" the vice mayor shouted. "I ain't sendin' her in, Mayor, he said over the telephone, "she's jus' comin'."

The mayor's door opened-up against the wall, and in came the passive, thin figure of a woman, paper white, who hardly seemed to be moving.

The mayor held the dead telephone.

"Young man," her voice was a wisp, "there has not been a qualified mayor in this office since Mr. Hartsfield. He liked the colored and was qualified. Do you intend to stop publication, immediately, of this imitation godawful newspaper?" She dropped the Friday morning *Observer* on his desk, which reached to her shoulder.

The mayor had read two articles that morning…about himself. One was on page fifty-eight. The most important one was on page seventeen. There was a "holdup" in federal funds, on the MARTA project for rapid transportation, and he was "fighting for it." *Goddamn a Republican president*, thought the mayor, who had missed the photographs of the women and their downed panties on the front page, and had no idea what this Spotsworth was writing.

"Madam! Leave this office!" He pointed with the dead buzz of his telephone.

"Mr. Hartsfield was a gentleman until he ran away with his secretary." The small lady, who was suddenly very old, as if she had aged with terrible knowledge since she walked into the room, turned and tottered out of the office.

The mayor hung up the buzzing receiver, as if cutting off some insulting constituent in mid-sentence. The woman was insane. The blacks wanted up. The whites wanted out. Now all the old ladies were crazy. He walked over to the window. It seemed he was dangerously high in the air, and Atlanta was all pavement under him.

"Mother!"

"I'm not coming out." The bishop's wife confirmed her grip on the inside latch of the walk-in closet. She was standing in a row of shoes, up against her winter coats, which she had not stored for the summer. Her voice was trapped inside the dark with herself, and seemed to roll around the long, narrow space and return directly between her lips, which were trembling.

"Moth—er! You can't stay in there forever. We'll have to store your furs."

The bishop's wife listened in horror to the silence. She could almost feel the wings beating of summer-moths. *If only it was 1978 and she was dead, it would be a wonderful spring.*

"It's true, dear," the bishop said. She held her breath, unable to tolerate the thought of hearing her husband. "Everyone is counting on you for the Easter music. You know Evalena Allworth always mispronounces '*Hallelulah*.'"

Why didn't Agnes Scott teach how a person could hang herself in a closet?

"Mother! It's not that awful. I called the newsstand on Roswell Road. They don't have any more newspapers this morning. They've sold them all out."

My God, if there is a God, if She can only make the dark darker, so that I cannot hear.

Subscribers and street readers of *The Observer*, puzzled by the unidentified women over their panties, were confronted with the other news stories on the Friday front page. Two headlines read: *Priests Hit by Love Disease; Reverend Ike Sells God's Blessings on the Installment Plan*. The first sentence of the lead story at the right-hand top of the front page read: *President James Polk, small and frail as a child, at age 17 had a bladder stone the size of a walnut removed "under the influence of one shot of brandy and two strong men."* Not a few male readers crossed their legs while reading it. Some laughed at the second lead story, which read earnestly: *Aubrey Ogletree of Lithia Springs made a formal complaint to Atlanta Police Thursday night* against *The Erector Set Massage Parlor. Ogletree insisted he was "fleeced. I paid 'em top dollar for the* double-dip, *two of 'em on a waterbed. Both*

s'posed to be naked, but they kept on some kinda string thing you couldn't get loose. Guaranteed to be, they said, 'ah erotic experience.' All they gimme was a massage." *Police referred Ogletree to the Better Business Bureau.*

The sun was up in a single piece and yet shined coldly, as if all that round light were in a great mirror. By 10:00 A.M. everyone in Atlanta and in pockets of towns around Atlanta—Hapeville, College Park, Jonesboro, Tucker, Decatur, Duluth, and in larger cities, such as Marietta—had read, or were reading *The Observer*, or had been told what was in it and grunted their pleasure, or were shocked and called the newspaper, where the telephones rang emptily on, or complained to the police, who hung up, and said, "Damned *fools never been naked?*" There were those at home, drinking beer, working in the yard, who didn't give a shit what was in the newspaper. Not one of them burned an *Observer*, except to put an illegal fire to last winter's leaves.

Observer News Editor Jerome Paine woke his wife again Friday morning, chortling, rasping in the phlegm of his tobacco ravaged throat, imagining the readers struck dumb by the Friday morning front page. He coughed and spit into his pajama top. His wife, turning her narrow bones in her heavy nightgown, was outraged at his spitting. She never read the newspaper. He imagined *The Observer* building in smoke and flames and the city of Atlanta burning down again for the second time in 107 years.

Chapter Fourteen

All the world was covered with round night, rolling on a plain with no end; under everything was dark water, but nothing was in danger; there was no sound. Alec Spotsworth was suddenly awake, but did not lose his contentment; it was as if the place he had been was still inside him. He could not remember when he had slept without waking. He tested his back by lifting his head. It was terribly stiff, but did not hurt. He was astonished. He could even lift his left leg, as if by some long self-denial he had restored his health. He lifted his watch. It was twelve o'clock noon. He fell back in disbelief. He could not possibly have slept that many hours.

He raised up in bed, painless, for the first time in nine years. Tennie English was not there. The bed was emptier than the unending dark and bottomless water of his dream. He stepped out of bed. Naked. Now he was chilled. The room was as empty as the bed.

Spotsworth hurried to the bathroom, lifting his narrow feet instead of sliding them. Water, now cold as porcelain, filled the tub. A scrap of paper floated in the soap dish. He bent over, slipping, sinking the dish with its paper cargo, elbow deep in the water, catching himself on the cold bottom.

Spotsworth was in a true panic, desperate for the condition of the now soaked and lapsed paper, wrapped around his finger like a boneless coelenterate from the sea. She had written with a pencil, and the graphite was beginning to

dissolve. But he could make them out: the seven digits, a telephone number. Spotsworth reached into the sprawl of paperback books and dug out the telephone, lost in a continental drift of words. He had never used it, not even to answer it. He put his trigger finger in the three hole, giving up all caution, as if he were the man aiming the first shot in the final war. The dial rolled back, uncoiling itself like tethered memory. He spun all seven numbers without a mistake.

A voice answered on the first ring: *Georgia Baptist Hospital.* He could not have been more surprised if it had said: *The United States Mint.*

"Tennie English," Spotsworth said down into the telephone, as if the words could be seen. He had an inexplicable fear the operator would hang up and the connection could never again be made.

She rang an extension.

A new voice, in no way familiar but all-reassurance, incapable of implying the hazards of a hospital, spoke: "Hello."

Spotsworth said, "Tennie English, please." He said it gently, more intimately, than he would ever be able to say her name to Tennie English.

There was a rush of paper sliding. "Would you care to leave a message? She's in surgery."

What surgery? Spotswworth wondered, terribly afraid she had been injured.

"I could have her call you," said the voice. "Your name, please."

"Alec Spotsworth," said his own voice, as if it had identified him from a great distance.

"Oh!" said the woman, her voice suddenly younger and more compelling. She had clipped both of his columns; she was very plain, except for her voice, which she knew was remarkable, and which she could use like an honest musician hitting the high notes on a wind instrument. "I will give her your name. She has a break coming. And two hours before starting afternoon surgery." The nurse said it, as if quoting literature, with every possible interpretation, unwrapping herself with her voice, even laying back her head in total submission.

Spotsworth tried to see Tennie English, all in starched white, with proper sleeves, but all he could imagine were her bare feet reluctantly testing the cold hospital floor.

"Here she is now," said the floor nurse, surprised, forgetting to orchestrate her voice.

Spotsworth watched, as if she would appear in the receiver in his hand, and thirty-five years later she might've.

"I'm giving a party. For you. Tonight. It's the world's last party, Spotsworth."

When she said his name, she sounded younger than her bare feet. Tennie English hung up, as if she had never existed.

Spotsworth was inordinately pleased that she had said his name. Now, he began to wonder: *What party? Where?*

Shaving without a pain in his back was like a separate peace. Walking out of his winter-dark rooms into the blown-to-pieces sunlight of 1:00 P.M. was a different life.

The drugstore at Fourteenth Street had not changed, nor its ham salad sandwich. The man at the soda fountain had taken the state pharmacy examination every other year for sixteen years. During each examination, he tore up his paper and walked out before his allotted time was up. He knew most of the answers, but he couldn't bear being in the same room with those few questions that threatened him like a great private joke, with someone laughing, he was sure, at the unmarked squares on his examination paper. He never went to college. *Fuck college*. He knew five thousand drugs, and he could compound any of them; he had done it for Doc for twenty-six years. It took him two years each time to get over the previous failure; he wouldn't be taking the exam again until next winter.

Spotsworth had listened to the same story spilled over the shiny marble counter for fifteen years, but he had never spoken to it.

"Cheat," Spotsworth said, his mouth filled with ham salad.

"What?" The soda foundation man looked up, as if something had been dropped and shattered on the counter. He lifted his washrag in astonishment.

"Cheat," Spotsworth said again, swallowing. "Take your notes in there. Answer every goddamn question."

The fountain man, his rag in mid-air, began to see the possibilities. *Answer every single questio*n, he said, as if they had been discussing the logic of it for a decade.

Spotsworth looked deeply into his face and noticed for the first time he was almost an old man. Spotsworth put down his money, and eased painlessly

off the stool, leaving the almost old man, whose name he did not know, with his rag in the air.

"*The world's last party*, *Spotsworth*," he repeated out on Fourteenth Street, saying his own name aloud to himself for the first time in his life. The sound was strange, as if the name belonged to a man he had never met, but had heard of, and could not remember what it was that he had heard.

Chapter Fifteen

The ambulance turned remarkably into the forty-five-degree slope between the high brick walls which teetered with age and old mortar. It would have been impossible for the driver to open his door, or even lean out the window and spit on the slanting pavement.

Spotsworth saw him turn into his drive from a half-block away. He had never seen a vehicle disappear up the aged drive, which seemed violated by the long white ambulance. Its wide back door opened and a stretcher began to slide out as silently as gravity, drawing the chalk-white face of a patient into the sun, as if for an open-air cure, only to have him drawn back inside by the pale, unhealthy hand of the middle-aged driver.

Spotsworth could not squeeze up the driveway to his terrace-level door.

The driver spoke over the motionless head of the patient. "You Spotsworth?" He didn't wait for an answer. He held out a hanger of clothes.

Spotsworth accepted them, unable to take his eyes off the frail skull of the prone man, whose eyes never blinked, as if they were on the stretcher to witness the delivery of the clothes.

On the hanger, actually-pinned to a coat, was a low, enormously wide-brimmed, black felt Jesse James hat. Spotsworth unpinned it, juggling the hanger under his arm. He put the hat down on his head, until it rode just above his ears. His high forehead up in it, his long face under it, Spotswsorth looked

as if he had eased down from a coal-burning train somewhere in Kansas in 1872. He couldn't see himself, but he smiled, feeling good about the hat. He got the long, brown corduroy coat loose, holding the hanger between his legs. The old coat came down far past his long waist, and the big sleeves rested on the tops of his thumbs. And there it was in a coat pocket: a classic .45-Colt pistol, its great cylinder revolving with long holes like eyes. He pulled the holster out of the other coat pocket, fitting together the hand-sized silver buckle under his flat stomach. A pair of calf-high, pull-on, black boots, aiming down into deadly points, were tied together on the hanger. Under them were a pair of tan and brown wool trousers, soft with age, designed to slip over the boots. Pinned on the trousers was a note, written in fat slippery pencil on a torn piece of brown paper sack:

In Honor of Alec Spotsworth
The World's Last Party
First, Second, Third Floors
129 15th Street
RSVP All of You Who Are Dead
Receiving After 12 A.M.

Spotsworth recognized her handwriting; it was so loose and unformed and sure of itself, with wide, round loops of words so personal they didn't need a signature.

Chapter Sixteen

Mose Daniel, dried up and aged overnight, bent in grief on the stool in the men's restroom of the Piedmont Driving Club. He hummed the sad bars of an unwritten hymn, as if worshiping the cruel white commodes in their open stalls. All the thousands of wadded up tens and tight-in-a-roll twenties, vanished; the source of all he earned, dried up. He grieved as though his slumlord holdings had disappeared. Only one day and night had passed, since the gods changed their faces on the playing cards.

Hiding in the cellars and attics of their homes:

Dr. Clettus Dielow, his clutch of dead hair trembling over his deathly white skull, pulled down a thirty-year-old medical volume. It fell out of his thin grasp to the floor where he left it, face down, lost hopelessly to time.

The mouth of Gilmore Slusher was too dry to leak at either corner. He had counted on his winnings, to bring him a fourth young wife. The thought of her caused a small droplet of spit to form in the right corner of his parched lips. He was seventy-two, and he could smell his age rising up around him.

July Tidmore clanked down in a hard-backed chair. He was drunk and it did not help. His wife's voice came at him in iron decibels, as she hoarded her money with a razor will. He rocked his tailbone on the wooden chair bottom without relief.

Hassel Polk gradually slid his thoughts from murder. It would not help. How could you draw poker against a dead man? His black eyes spread like round ink in his thick glasses from the darkness of his regret.

Elijah Smith, his breath as short as his legs, rested at the top of the hill on Northside Drive. He looked down on Peachtree Creek, in flood stage, where it ran through the willows into Bobby Jones Golf Course. He had not been so far from Fourteenth Street, since he was a child, when it was a half-day trip in a buggy. His legs shook from fatigue, as he mounted his bicycle. The hill made a long steep descent. Wind blew tears in his eyes, which saw no way to live in the new Atlanta. He held bravely to the high old-fashioned handlebars. He swerved sharply, the old Western Flyer mounting the steep bank, speed holding it erect in his powerless hands. Down the falling-away earth, past a golf green—three golfers struck dumb by his passing—now disappearing between the thin line of willows and sailing out over the fast-moving water. Elijah Smith split the brown stream, cold to his waist, and was under it in one splash moment, his flowing white hair trailing a ghostly path above him.

D. T. Roebuck sat alone, his obscenely bloated and formless hands, drowned the deck of cards. A voice, or a sound not unlike a voice, was always in his ear, a static of mortal scratches: "*Ads!*" it shrieked…or… "*Mad!*" over the electrical storm of customers in its store.

Around the big table, shrunk below his chins and arms, D. T. Roebuck continued to deal the cards to empty chairs in the growing dark of late afternoon.

Chapter Seventeen

Spotsworth walked in his boots and his coat and under his hat without pain. He looked carefully up the one block of Peachtree Street, hoping he would pass someone in the night. The quiet hippies and the crazies were drifting away from Fourteenth Street, and even from their epicenter, Tenth Street. There would be nothing to remember them by, except certain weather-tortured day-glow paintings of loops and swirls and mythological creatures in the alleys on the sides of buildings. These poor artifacts lacked even the protection of an abandoned cave. Inventories of fake Indian beads were still carried in stores further up Peachtree Street; in years to come, new owners would puzzle over why they were there. Spotsworth turned off Peachtree and up Fourteenth Street toward Piedmont Road and the celebrated Piedmont Driving Club, which he had been inside once, as a reporter. All he could remember was a sense of everlasting quietness, as though the people spoke and moved without sound or motion, partitioned away in a peculiar warp of time, none of them young or aging, but all of them old and not dying.

The numbers on the houses on Fourteenth Street made no sense. Some of the odd numbers were next door to even numbers, and some were across the wide street filled with islands of trees. The leather and corduroy and soft cotton, the moving shape of his hat in the dark, kept Spotsworth hoping he would meet someone. He was sure that anyone he met would turn and

look back at him as if he, Spotsworth, had changed identities in mid-air. But there were no midnight people walking between Peachtree Street and Piedmont Road.

Spotsworth stood amazed, and then pleased under the magnolia limbs. He cleared his throat, disappointed at the high, familiar sound it made. Suddenly, he was aware that in all that light there was no movement. He saw no one inside the thrown-open doors and windows. Even in his coat and boots he felt a tremor down his spine. It passed as he climbed the wide steps. His boots sounded against the worn boards of the huge front porch. There was nothing to be seen inside: no furniture, no one. He turned in a circle, looking at the empty walls and up at the thirty-foot ceiling.

Soundlessly, as if it had appeared of its own volition, a log fire was burning in the stone fireplace at the far end of the room. Spotsworth watched the flames and could imagine the warmth, but he felt only the chill drafts blowing through the open windows and doors. He was glad of his thick coat.

Seeing the fire, he knew Tennie English was here. He walked down a long hallway, dark despite a faint bulb burning in the narrow ceiling, and then past a series of rooms, all empty and flooded with light and cold March air.

Spotsworth enjoyed the sound of his heels up a long flight of stairs. The rooms of the second floor were smaller and somehow emptier, as if they regretted their lost intimacy. Two fires burned in stone hearths. One of the rooms had been a study, but only impressions were left against ruined wallpaper, where the books and shelves had been. The third-floor ceilings were much lower, and the stairs more abrupt. She was not hiding. Tennie English sat on a quilt in the first room, with her arms and chin on the windowsill.

Spotsworth stood there, awkwardly. He felt as if he would lose his balance if he stepped out on his high heels.

English turned and looked at him all at once, as if she had never seen him. Then she began to look for all the familiar things she knew about him. His long face and neck were even longer under the swooping hat. So were his legs in the brown and tan trousers and down in the boots. She expected him to clear his throat. She was pleased when he did. Being pleased did not frighten her.

"Welcome to your party, Spotsworth." She knew from the first that he loved to hear her say his name. She did not mind that he could not say her own.

Spotsworth walked to her without teetering on his heels. She watched again out the third-floor window, as if expecting guests to come flooding under the trees. She felt his fingers just touching her short hair, as if to stroke it would be an unbearable intimacy. "I don't know anybody here," Spotsworth said. He had no pain down his leg, but he was afraid to sit on the floor.

"It's not a dull party," English said, still looking at the dark beyond the window.

Spotsworth could not believe they had made love, he and this young woman, sitting lost at the window. He feared she would turn around, her face inflicted with disgust.

"Let's be sorry for all the people who never knew us and are not invited," she said. She raised her head against his fingers, for a deeper touch.

With the movement, Spotsworth was almost able to speak.

"We'll make it up to them, Spotsworth," English said. "We'll send them all your past columns. They can memorize them instead of being invited." She said his name, as if he were an important new musician with his own group.

He could remember nothing he had written. "Who are you in the hospital?" The words came out of his mouth as unnaturally as if they had come out of the strange clothes he was wearing.

"Everybody who knows won't say." She was not upset. She lifted her head higher, so that he could sooth her temples. "It's how I pay the light bill. I'm a surgical assistant. Two days a week. Tuesdays and Wednesdays. For Thraillkill when he operates. Sarah, my old roommate in this house, was his nurse. She let me scrub up once to watch. She took a job at Mercy Hospital in New Orleans. She loves piano the way Armand Hug plays it at the Royal Orleans. Thrailkill has-to close his eyes after he gets inside. He's wonderful getting inside. Then he can't keep his eyes open. It makes him sick to his stomach. If someone's there to help, to talk to, he's all right. He taught me everything. As-long-as I'm there helping, he can work with his eyes open. The patients walk out well. We hold every record for fastest operations at Georgia Baptist Hospital. We did a colostomy in thirty-four minutes. You ought to see me with a splenorenal shunt. I'm a fiend with any heart that needs bypassing." She stopped for a breath. "The rest of the time, I teach."

"Do you operate barefoot?" Spotsworth could not imagine where the question came from. Since he could remember, he had always had to invent every word he said to anyone.

"Sure." She looked pleased that he asked. "I get a good grip on the floor. I can go to my left and to my right, like a good shortstop."

It amazed him. he did not fear her practicing medicine without a license. "How did you know my size?" He lifted his arms to show off his jacket and trousers.

She turned and looked him in the eyes. "You're you, Spotsworth. It's what everybody not invited here is afraid to be."

He sat, his back to the window. The .45 Colt pistol angled awkwardly off the floor. He did not think to check if it was loaded. The wall pushed his hat down on his forehead, as if he were ready to say something important to Johnny Mack Brown. Under the tilted brim, he could just see her bare legs folded under her. She must be freezing. He held open the left pocket of his coat.

Tennie English guided her hand in the strange pocket, as if it lived there. She pulled out her panties, which had been carefully folded, and began wiggling them on without getting up from the quilt. Carefully in them, she held out one hand, palm up. He could not imagine what she meant for him to do. She took his own hand and turned it over and gave it a soul slap in mid-air. Spotsworth had never seen it done. It was a ritual that had grown up like a human vine against outfield fences since he had last seen games played. "Like Clyde!" she said. Spotsworth could not imagine whom she meant.

She didn't know when she had taken his coat in her hands. She didn't know if she was happiest for herself, or for him.

"Who owns the house?" He looked up at the neglected ceiling with its rare, hand-carved cornices.

Tennie English said, "The lady who lived here died. You would have liked her. She loved squirrels. She trained them to knock on the window for a pecan. Her estate lets me live here. It takes most of my medical money to pay the light bill."

"What do you teach?" Spotsworth had almost forgotten to ask.

"I'm teaching myself only the honest faces," she said.

Raising the brim of his hat, Spotsworth was startled to see three men, in black firemen rain slickers all the way to their ankles, standing in the far corner between two open windows. He could not have believed in them—except they were drinking. He was sure the music he could hear must have been in the room for some time, racking up the stairs over the bare floors.

"Drink?" said English, not looking away from him, her fingers still deep in his coat.

Without her strong fingers in his coat, Spotsworth would have fallen from the pain suddenly down his left leg. The old lines were instantly in his face, as if he had aged on the spot. He was up. He could walk.

There was no bartender behind the bar. "Yes?" The bartender raised up from stacking tall, empty jelly glasses. He began pouring bourbon from a huge bottle, with only a jot-of-water from a waste-can. Spotsworth touched her glass with his. "Thank you. For my party." The drink helped the haze of pain down his leg. Their glasses were full again, and he didn't remember their setting them back on the bar. As running over as their glasses was the music. Uncle John's Band drowned the air with *Where Their Time Was Going.* The music came up the stairway, as if it were looking for its own source. The bartender kept moving his lips without a sound, as though he had sung the glasses full. All of the air was a thin guitar going high on the neck, every string a pain. Spotsworth imagined the great wad of hair on Jerry Garcia and the beard under his glasses, his invisible face as alive as the music, all of it going and going and going on the guitar and an old 7-Up sign somewhere behind it inside a broken door.

"He couldn't sing 'at boy, but oh 'at guitar," the bartender said.

English took Spotsworth's hand in hers and drifted them toward the three firemen slickers; he could see the men inside them were as young as the music springing into the night.

"You lose," the tallest said. "Thirteen hours we were married, if a minute," lifting his drink as if it were an hourglass.

"Nothing counts dead-asleep," said the short one. "Six hours we were married and never closed our eyes."

The heavy one could only shake his head; the police had knocked down the motel door the afternoon he and English ran off together.

"They're invited…to answer any question you want to ask," Tennie English said, hugging them, one at a time, with one arm balancing her drink, never releasing Spotsworth's hand. Spotsworth remembered their faces to describe them in words, how they looked, having been her husbands by the hour. He raised his own drink to them in his free hand:

"Tell me. Did she ever wear shoes?"

"God no!" said the first husband. "Preacher saw her bare feet. Took off his own damn shoes."

"Girl never owned a sock in her life," said Number Two.

"When they knocked down the motel door, never did find her shoes," said Number Three. "I kept 'em myself. Up on my mantle."

Spotsworth liked the three of them, none of them as tall as him, all of them younger.

"Point me," he said.

They said in sequence, almost in a chant:

"Don't go fear…"

"She can stop…"

"Time."

"An hour…"

"Can be…"

"A lifetime."

She hugged the three of them again. Spotsworth's arm and hand made a lost salute from forgotten Army days, which blew suddenly through his mind and were gone into the night.

The bourbon, magically, began to work. Spotswsorth's pain slid away. Tennie English stopped on the first step down to the second floor; she swayed there in the music, her bare toes gripping the wooden steps, holding her precariously as she and her short frock rode the decibels like currents of air.

English never spoke but led him by the hand down the stairs.

Spotsworth looked in disbelief at the everywhere people, who had streamed into the house in their finery, as if a great theatre had emptied.

An athletic man, standing at attention to the music, a smile as young as desire on his lips, sang along with the anti-war words of the music. Tennie English kissed him silent. Spotsworth knew him from the dog that walked him

and the cane the young man used to tap into the sidewalk a code to hate the killing, which was ten thousand miles away and as old as the first breath. He'd once pinned a sign on his jacket: *ENOUGH!* Spotsworth was sure he could now write the man and his dog and cane in words, even though he had heard and seen him in the flesh, no longer captive of his own iron anonymity. Spotsworth did not hear anything the young man said,until he called after them: "*God denies!*"

Spotsworth looked back, wondering what life the music must take on in the young man's blindness. He had a bottom of bourbon left in his glass. He took the moment to test for pain in his left leg. It was nowhere to be felt. The bare walls began to drive the music inside him. He might have been floating away. All the others knew exactly where they were standing and what was being said to them by other faces under the music: *Uncle John's Band has come to take his children home.*

All the old pain in his leg was lost in the guitar and it was as if only he could hear it. Spotsworth knew the woman under the purple hat. But from where? Then she lifted her round chin and God could not have kept him from looking at her substantial ankles. "White, weren't they?" said the bishop's wife, a new whimsy in her voice and gin in her glass. "You are the man who destroyed my life," she touched Spotsworth but not in anger, "or saved it," she said, touching him again. Spotsworth was too taken back to speak. "The world has not seen the last of her," she said toward the slight form of Tennie English. Spotsworth started toward her and the music. "And I thank you for putting the bishop back in my bed!" shouted the Bishop's wife, raising her gin and ice.

Spotsworth stopped. He could not take his eyes off the light, shining above sanity, on the last blond wave of hair combed across the forehead and above the lightning blue eyes of the tall broad man standing in his United States Army Air Corps flying suit from World War II. He had every voice of his time in his throat, and used his own:

To feel me sink slowly away
In my hair turned lose like a thought.

The Poet! Spotsworth could not swallow; he knew the man twice. First, he knew his great serve and battering forehand for years, across ninety-feet of tennis. The hot merciless afternoons at Bitsy Grant Center, Spotsworth dying after his laser shots in the corners, his fun-evil laughter when Spotsworth never got there and the only man, afterward, he could ever drink a beer with, further up Northside Drive, because it wasn't necessary to say a word. And now he knew him again. The secret man: *The Poet*.

Tennie English ran to hug him, disappearing into his bleak flying suit. And then he had his wide fists up in front of his athlete's body, shadow-boxing Tennie English. His blue eyes fastened on Alec Spotsworth; he used another voice, lethal for the boxing ring:

But I keep rising and singing.

For a millisecond, Spotsworth could see his own fist buried to the wrist bone in the heart of *The Poet*, whose mind had dazzled him with the hundreds of lines he'd written and mailed anonymously for his column; he'd written them as if lesser gods were standing over him on ladders, with rare volumes, quoting civilizations in their own language. Spotsworth reached for the lesser god, in all envy, but had never been able not to like him, even when he didn't know *The Poet* was the *Tennis Serve*.

The Poet saw the change in Spotsworth's eyes. He knew that he was known. He was insulted that so bone thin and humble a rival wordsmith should launch his puny animosity toward him.

The Poet dropped his fists. He would have done his best not to kill him. He admired the bare legs of English that he yet lusted after and approved the *Urban Cowboy* getup of Spotsworth, enjoying the memory of the odd *John L. Sullivan* tennis stance of his once opponent and the years he'd been his anonymous newspaper collaborator. He smiled at them and hated and loved them there together. His words spilled into the music:

> *We must look for it: the stones are going to tell us. Not the why, but the how of all things.*[3.]

Spotsworth didn't only love *The Poet* now, but as much as he loved his language. He wanted to take him, show him his own poor rooms no man had ever seen. *The Poet* took them both in his great arms, strangely comforting, and said:

> *You look as though*
> *You know me, though the world we came from is striking*
> *You in the forehead like Apollo. Buddy,*
> *We have brought the gods. We know what it is to shine*
> *Far off, with earth. We alone*
> *Of all men, could take off*
> *Our shoes and fly.*[4.]

Seeing Tennie English turning, now holding up *The Poet*, Spotsworth hated him. And loved him. She led *The Poet* away toward the music, the words crashing into them with every step.

"Nothing bleeding…is it?" said a high, gaunt man, his head lain back on his long neck, his eyes closed like a sleeping pelican. A glass had smashed on the floor; someone might be cut. Thinking the word *cut* made Dr. Thrailkill gag. Then he was better. He was entirely drunk. Now, he was all confidence. All the flecks of blood he remembered couldn't reach him. "Operate with vodka and see who gets well?" he said. He took Alec Spotsworth by the front of his corduroy coat: "English…beautiful. See her inna-lung make you cry." The thought of an open, bleeding, pulsing lung was too much. He threw up as far as the top of his throat and choked it back down. He never said his own name. Spotsworth knew him by his surgeon's breath, the vodka be damned.

English propped *The Poet*, semi-conscious, against the door to her bedroom, which was a sleeping bag, a suitcase, and a 1908 medical encyclopedia in which she looked up answers to all her questions. She looked through the blond strands over his ears at Spotsworth, who was standing in the door, lost. Even the deep hat could not cover the sorrow he was feeling for himself. She was smiling. Loving his new-born recklessness. She mustn't let him go too far. Of course, he would. She mustn't let it destroy him. Of course, it would. She dropped *The Poet* on top of her sleeping bag. No way to

get him in it. They had operated on his skull. Removed a blood clot. Feared the damage. But not after he woke. And said: "Good! I'm here! The world can still spin!"

She had sat up all that night, dominated by his mind, his talking, soaring above his own comprehension. They met again and she listened to an alcohol-heightened lecture of how her life should never rest on what it knew until it *knew everything*. He thought he might help her knowledge with his hands, but his hands were dumb animals. She looked back down at him on the unopened bag, which lay under him like a great flat cocoon, preparing him for some new kind of life beyond intelligence. She felt a curious guilt, leaving sleeping *The Poet* forever. She walked through the door, watching for a glimpse of Spotswsorth.

And here ricochets Uncle John's Band, *Playing to the Tide*.

The music was in the room as if life could not be sustained without it.

English laughed, sliding the instep of her foot along her smooth left calf, balancing there on one leg, each laugh threatening to topple her over. She recognized a tall woman, crashing the party, cutting her way into the crowd with short, tight steps. She had perfectly round, high breasts, and advanced behind them as if they were armored plates. She wore her dark hair ruthlessly short and cut at a severe angle.

Spotsworth looked the length of her and tried to lift his eyes from her breasts but could not do it. They were as round as geometry and perfectly in place.

"Such filth!" the strange woman swore, as with an oath. "In our *Observer!*"

English knew her to be an Emory University Dean of the new Religion of Correctness.

Spotsworth waited, strangely at ease, beneath her contempt.

"*Redeeming filth*," said a quiet, female voice out of the circle of dancers looking at them. English knew her face, not one of the true faces from the random crowds down Forsyth Street, opposite the old post office.

"Idothankyou," Spotsworth said to the quiet voice, in one clumsy word of bourbon whisky.

"Fired! I'll see to it!" swore the Dean.

"Can'tbedone," said Spotsworth. "AslongasI'mnotthereetheydon'tknowhow."

The dean took his coat in both strong hands.

Tennie English tapped her on the shoulder. The Dean looked behind her in horror, as if she expected to be attacked by the United States Constitution. "My dance," said English, stepping between them. The Dean, her rage intact, receded into the music like an abandoned religion. The huge room, even with windows and doors open, could not contain the music:

"Like the morning sun you come and like the wind you go."[5]

English moved wonderfully, lacking all elegance. She leaned against Spotsworth, making him move his legs, lifting his arms with her hands. Spotsworth looked around in panic, only to see the whole room rising, strutting in place; truly old ladies lifting their chins, shifting their asses; important men to the life of a great city, their meek chests out, raising their knees higher, kicking up their feet, their arms holding onto empty air, panting, their hearts threatened, and the music pounding into the floor. Spotsworth was rising high on the guitar, now lowering himself on his white, thin legs in the great cowboy trousers, and thrusting himself up, as if he were about to strike a vicious cross-court forehand, his boots pounding on the ruined hardwood floor in absolute time with the music. Tennis English had to throw herself down in a heap at the sight of him. The bass beat on as if to raise her from the dead. Spotsworth stepped higher and higher; he felt he would climb the unpainted walls and rap on the reverberating ceiling.

And then…his entire left leg was uninterrupted pain, stopping him in mid-leap.

Tennie English could not stand; she no longer had bones in her own legs.

Spotsworth damned his pain and lifted her to her feet. Up under his chin, she said, "We had that on film, Spotsworth. We could live forever."

They were given a single, modest patter of applause in the near dark on their way to the bar, the rest of the room again rising and falling around them. Spotsworth did not hear the music, it was so inside him. Almost as if he would indeed live forever.

Hunkering in his chair, as though about to pull down his lemon yellow pants and take a crap in the round slot cut in the news desk, Jerome Paine moved his lips as he read all of the above account, and a great deal more, that Spotsworth had written. It would fill *The Observer's* entire front page, without so much as a one-column photograph, and jump inside. Paine stopped reading to imagine the page. He loved it. He'd never seen a front page of pure type. He'd even taken out the one-point rules separating the eight columns. There would be nothing but words and spaces in a last perfect typography for Sunday morning. The rest of Spotsworth's party, he was putting under headlines throughout the newspaper. Some of it would run in the obituary columns adjacent to photographs of prominent Atlantans who had died in the night. Some he was having set in six-point type and scattered among the want ads.

Religion Editor Edwina Bennett was winning the poker game being dealt on the news desk around Jerome Paine, who could not quit admiring the perfect symmetry of the front page. She had memorized the first three pages of Spotsworth's copy; she was waiting to cry over it in the lady's room at the Denkler-Plaza Hotel, where she sat at the bar but not in regret. The copyboy, P.W. Cato, grinning a libel through his rotten teeth, dropped recast copies of the final home edition in the middle of the poker pot, scattering characters of type. "You old no-nut sonofabitch," said Edwina, without looking away from her hand. She was working on an improbable straight flush.

Edward Metcalf, at the copy desk, hurt in his awkward, long bones to be asked into the poker game. Paine had marked "*No headline*" on the endless Front-Page copy by Spotsworth. Metcalf had thrown the copy at his luckless copy editors, the one too old and the other too young, cursing them to write a "*No headline*." Neither could do it, handing him a blank page. Metcalf had stamped it without looking up; he penciled in "*rush*," and slung it in the out-basket, with Spotsworth's thirty-foot-long copy pages, which no one on the copy desk had read. P. W. Cato had rolled up the blank headline page, as if it contained the Gettysburg Address, and shot it, with five capsules of wound-around Spotsworth copy, to their collective fate in the composing room.

Arms Malloy had opened the plastic capsules with his hands, his mind drifting, not even toward his Ford Torino whose water pump was again intact. He held Spotsworth's massive copy in both hands, and let it spread itself out

on the ink-blasphemed floor, where it reached all the way to the first Linotype machine. The individual words were typed as precisely as if Spotsworth had copied them from some long-lost reference work on human behavior.

"Motherfucker!" said Arms. The news editor had marked random pages to go in the food section, the sports section, the obituary pages, the editorial pages, and among the classified ads. Then Arms saw the "No Headline" for the front page lying on the floor between his broken brogans. It was stamped, all right, by the idiot copy editor. There was nothing written on it, except "Rush," in Metcalf's shitty handwriting. Arms hung the blank page on the headline hook and started routing the thirty feet of text on various spikes according to how they were to be set. Now he was thinking, his mind focusing in on hominy grits, those dead-yellow ones; he wished he had a plateful covered in hot butter. He rested his thin face on his bones for arms.

The Linotype operators had looked up, at the same instant, as if they were drowning in unknown words; B. W. Gagliano was holding his cock at Arms Malloy; Rosie Washington walked by, looking for the answer to a "*No headline.*"

Across Forsyth Street, sitting now on a half-dozen Coca-Cola cases, Irby Smoot watched the light in the old office window, as though the-human-race would vanish if it were extinguished. Smoot knew nothing of what *The Observer* was publishing. He had never read a paragraph in the fourteen years he had been managing editor. He only watched the light in his fourth-floor office, as if he could keep it burning with his own willpower.

Chapter Eighteen

Spotsworth sat. Traffic coughed up and down Forsyth Street. It might have come back from the dead. Spotsworth looked directly ahead, not up at Kelso Morton's neckless head in the window of *The Observer* building, as he watched for the world to stop so he could photograph it. The city did not wait or alter its habits. Newspapers lay dormant in their wire cages. One huge, incomprehensible photograph of a sea turtle filled the first, type-free page of the next week's *Observer*. Only if you held the front page in your hands could you see that the turtle wept as it laid her eggs. The old post office building under Spotsworth sat on its smooth stones, hatching its mail.

Twin bare feet moved up the low-steps, and stopped. Tennie English sat beside him. Her hair was even shorter. He was afraid to see her dark eyes. Until she held out a sandwich. He took it. Unwrapped it. It was a banana and cucumber sandwich. The wheat bread was fresh as hope. She raised her own sandwich, as in a toast. Her eyes were looking into his, her pupils large, as if to swallow him.

All the way through the sandwiches, they did not have to speak. He imagined they never would. She drew her thin, bare feet under her, circling her knees with her arms, wrapping the long skirt around her legs like a flag furled.

"The only party I ever had," Spotsworth said, not afraid of the sound of his voice.

Remembering his long face under the swooping hat, English said, "Spotsworth. You were the band, I think."

No melody to equal her saying his name. "Did everybody get home?" he said.

"They were already there," English said.

"I thank you for all the years I will remember them," Spotsworth said. The Poet's words: *Are they fighting, or are they dancing?* rang in his memory.

English kissed his long ear. The city did not swerve in its rush to every direction.

"Come," she said, standing in her bare feet, facing the great doors.

Spotsworth stood, painlessly, as if time had fallen away, taking all the pain from his back and down his leg. But time knew better.

There was no line at the post office general delivery window, as if the world had abandoned Atlanta, swirling madly in its traffic without end.

She offered her name at the low opening, careful to spell it out: T-e-n-n-i-e E-n-g-l-i-s-h: as if she had not stood there every working day for two years.

The old man, the skin of his neck dead white, but his weak eyes dangerously alive, swelled up in his limp flesh, like a creature threatened in its habitat. He turned his thin back. And reached a bony arm, grasping a cream envelope—the last of its species, saved from oblivion, and dancing, as dangerously as his eyes—in his shaky grip. He held the envelope toward her, her fate closed up inside.

She did not move.

Spotsworth took it, as if he had been waiting there through the years.

They sat again on the old steps, the world passing in ignorance under them. The envelope shrieked between them.

Spotsworth said, "I'll read it to you."

Tennie English was certain that she had been born to live and sit on these steps while he read it. She put one hand in the pocket of his old corduroy jacket, as if one part of her could be saved.

Spotsworth opened the letter, careful not to tear it. He heard himself begin to read:

> *Dear Tin:*
>
> *Grandmother died. When shall I send your son?*
>
> *Love, Sissie.*

Her dark pupils swallowed him and the letter.

Spotsworth made his strange, high laugh of joy that she had a child he never knew. Then hated it that her grandmother had died. English knew the separate expressions on his face. She had not been wrong to sit and watch and save the best face.

Spotsworth put a long, thin arm around her, moving in his pain as familiarly as a bird in its feathers.

Epilogue One

The wife threw open the door and slapped the rolled-up *Observer* against the open mouth of her snoring four-hundred-pound husband. He choked and gargled up spit before opening his eyes. She unrolled the newspaper and spread it above his swollen face until the words came alive. She worked through five pages until the spit turned to blood and his four hundred pounds convulsed into cardiac arrest and he breathed his last breath. He had not failed to leave *The Observer* in his will. The wife shut it down that day. It was nothing to the sixteen radio/television stations his father had amassed in his life, leaving her a tidy one billion dollars. It took nine men to carry D.T. Roebuck to his grave.

Epilogue Two

One night later, Spotsworth dreamed that D.T. Roebuck had been murdered in his bed. He invented it as a story and sold it as a mystery novel. It was how he lived the rest of his working life, writing his Atlanta mysteries. Tennie English raised her son and advanced into medical school, becoming a much-in-demand surgeon, working always in her bare feet, unequaled in her movement from left to right.

Epilogue Three

He stood over it. The marker was safe. He'd had the brass carefully aged. And only their first names, no dates, worn into the plain flat marker. It had taken a year to be discovered. It lay, buried in the grass at an odd angle, next to the high brick wall, within sight of the grave of the great golfer, Bobby Jones.

Oakland Cemetery opened in 1850 as Atlanta Cemetery. The new name of 1872 was a gesture to the oak and magnolia trees dominating the landscape. No new burial plot not owned by families or the city itself had been available since 1884.

The "obviously ancient" marker's existence had been questioned, but no one had the nerve to remove it. Tennie—she would only answer to her first name from the time her son was three—told him everything that had happened that year, 1972. He'd written it, having her exact words and that week's last newspaper.

He'd come to the marker this day, each of the past three years. Of course, only their names were here. She had saved his ashes. At her request, he'd mixed her ashes with his. And one windy night, to a recorded prayer of Pierce Harris, her son sent their thousand mingled fragments flying down Forsyth Street, past and clinging to the spot where the old post office had once stood opposite the long-vanished *Observer* Building, onto Peachtree Street…gone/alive in their own narrative.

Atlanta, 2017

End Notes

(1.) "Naked in the quick dead middle of the night." KNOCK/THE/EYEBEATER/BLOOD/VICTORY/MADNESS/BUCKHEAD/and/MERCY. James Dickey. Page 37. Doubleday and Company.

(2.) "Suffering woman came merging her/Flame-shaken/Body halo/With mine." SUN. James Dickey. Page 254. Wesleyan University Press."

(3.) We must look for it: the stones are going to tell us. Not the why, but the how of all things. KNOCK/THE/EYEBEATER/BLOOD/VICTORY/MADNESS/BUCKHEAD/and/MERCY. James Dickey. Page 29. Doubleday and Company, 1970.

(4.) You look as though you know me though the world we came from is striking." KNOCK/THE/EYEBEATER/BLOOD/VICTORY/MADNESS/BUCKHEAD/and/MERCY. James Dickey. Page 29 Doubleday and Company. 1970.