

spilled across the surfaces, sending motes before my eyes. When we'd cut through the parsonage yard and were back on the highway, Rosaleen produced two church fans from the bosom of her dress, and, doing an impersonation of me gazing up sweet-faced, she said, "Oh, Brother Gerald, she was just kidding."



We came into Sylvan on the worst side of town. Old houses set up on cinder blocks. Fans wedged in the windows. Dirt yards. Women in pink curlers. Collarless dogs.

After a few blocks we approached the Esso station on the corner of West Market and Park Street, generally recognized as a catchall place for men with too much time on their hands.

I noticed that not a single car was getting gas. Three men sat in dinette chairs beside the garage with a piece of plywood balanced on their knees. They were playing cards.

"Hit me," one of them said, and the dealer, who wore a Seed and Feed cap, slapped a card down in front of him. He looked up and saw us, Rosaleen fanning and shuffling, swaying side to side. "Well, look what we got coming here," he called out. "Where're you going, nigger?"

Firecrackers made a spattering sound in the distance. "Keep walking," I whispered. "Don't pay any attention."

But Rosaleen, who had less sense than I'd dreamed, said in this tone like she was explaining something real hard to a kindergarten student, "I'm going to register my name so I can vote, that's what."

"We should hurry on," I said, but she kept walking at her own slow pace.

The man next to the dealer, with hair combed straight back, put down his cards and said, "Did you hear that? We got ourselves a model citizen."

I heard a slow song of wind drift ever so slightly in the street behind us and move along the gutter. We walked, and the men pushed back their makeshift table and came right down to the curb to wait for us, like they were spectators at a parade and we were the prize float.

"Did you ever see one that black?" said the dealer.

And the man with his combed-back hair said, "No, and I ain't seen one that big either."

Naturally the third man felt obliged to say something, so he looked at Rosaleen sashaying along unperturbed, holding her white-lady fan, and he said, "Where'd you get that fan, nigger?"

"Stole it from a church," she said. Just like that.

I had gone once in a raft down the Chattooga River with my church group, and the same feeling came to me now—of being lifted by currents, by a swirl of events I couldn't reverse.

Coming alongside the men, Rosaleen lifted her snuff jug, which was filled with black spit, and calmly poured it across the tops of the men's shoes, moving her hand in little loops like she was writing her name—Rosaleen Daise—just the way she'd practiced.

For a second they stared down at the juice, dribbled like car oil across their shoes. They blinked, trying to make it register. When they looked up, I watched their faces go from surprise to anger, then outright fury. They lunged at her, and everything started to spin. There was Rosaleen, grabbed and thrashing side to side, swinging the men like pocketbooks on her arms, and the men yelling for her to apologize and clean their shoes.

"Clean it off!" That's all I could hear, over and over. And then the cry of birds overhead, sharp as needles, sweeping from low-bough trees, stirring up the scent of pine, and even then I knew I would recoil all my life from the smell of it.

"Call the police," yelled the dealer to a man inside.

By then Rosaleen lay sprawled on the ground, pinned, twisting her fingers around clumps of grass. Blood ran from a cut beneath her eye. It curved under her chin the way tears do.

When the policeman got there, he said we had to get into the back of his car.

“You’re under arrest,” he told Rosaleen. “Assault, theft, and disturbing the peace.” Then he said to me, “When we get down to the station, I’ll call your daddy and let him deal with you.”

Rosaleen climbed in, sliding over on the seat. I moved after her, sliding as she slid, sitting as she sat.

The door closed. So quiet it amounted to nothing but a snap of air, and that was the strangeness of it, how a small sound like that could fall across the whole world.

