

## myself as a delicious peach

I was balancing on the curb, having sex. Pretending. In my mind, I was doing it.

*Oh, baby*, I said.

Even to me *oh baby* sounded stupid.

My dad was always late. My brother said they weren't visitation rights, they were visitation wrongs. My brother was having nothing to do with "el traitor." My mother sent me down to the corner for Dad to pick me up.

"I don't need the man in my driveway," she said. She was very against sex. She said things like *why buy the cow when the milk is free?* To that I said Ma, I'm not a cow and I'm not wanting to be bought anyway. "Oh, yes, I know all about it. Free love. Give me a *break!* Don't even think about pulling anything, Georgia."

She and Sid both harangued me about seeing my dad. "He's a loser," Sid said, which hurt my feelings. "Honey, your father—" my mother trailed off. She was only fierce when she was telling me to not have sex. The rest of the world was vague, she only had the first of the rest of the sentences.

I didn't care that they'd thrown in the towel on my father. I loved him. I loved everyone in my family. Equally. If I started getting down on one, like my mother, I tried to like the others a little less, so it balanced out.

And so I stood there, on my toes, leaning against the kumquat bush, bending into it, and pretending it was my husband. I had my eyes closed. Cars whipped by on the busy street. The day was hot and sticky. I was at a somewhat major Orlando intersection, Summerlin and Topaz; I felt invisible.

I wondered what would become of me.

I wanted a hundred men to see me naked so that I would get used to it, and stop hating my pointed pink body.

My father was on time, shocking.

I'd been deep into it when he roared up. Squeezing my butt cheeks together, I pretended my husband was right there, *right there*. My body bent over, into the bushy tree. Waiting for my Pops, thinking of him pressing on me, pressing on me. Not him, as in my dad, but him, my husband.

But my father was on time, which was so weird. The other two times he'd come for Visitation, he was hours late. Once I'd fallen asleep on the curb, and the other time I had gone home and taken a bath that lasted to the next morning. I went to school a pickle, and he picked me up there, and took me to Steak and Shake for lunch at 9:30 in the morning.

Dad was a busy guy. He had a lot of business interests. This was the year he was in pencils. Last year it was wine bottle holders. The year before, gold.

"Hi, Buck," I said. "Welcome to my world!" I was serious. I climbed in the car, yanking my underwear back discreetly into its place. I fastened my seat belt.

My father gunned the Olds. He hadn't looked at me, hadn't said hi.

“Are you ready?” he said. We passed a car around the curve, and sped past the lakes.

“Born ready,” I said. I hated the sound of my voice. My butt was still stinging. I felt caught, caught in the act. Settle down, I said to the lower half of me. I felt wet and juicy.

*Whoa, girl.*

I thought about sex all the time and I didn’t even know what it was, precisely. But I was fourteen, and thought I should sure know by now, every one else did, so I kept on thinking, oh, push, push it to me, yes, I love you.

“Why are you sticking your butt out like that? What’s wrong?”

“I’m not,” I said. I had it perched off to the side of me, trying to let the air conditioning whoosh up my legs, to my crotch, which I worried was abnormally damp.

We zoomed up onto the highway, past Lake Ivanhoe, all choppy and foamy and steamy in the hot June sun. Little boats, like letters from lovers. I thought that, *little boats like letters from lovers*, and felt I would be famous someday.

I smiled.

“How are you, baby, I missed you,” he said. He gave me a slobbery kiss as veered into the opposite lane; a truck’s horn screamed. “Are you okay?” he was squeezing my kneecap, hard; I hated that.

“I know you miss me.”

“You’re a snot,” he said. “What do you mean you know. You don’t know. I might not really miss you at all.”

“I know,” I said. “I know that too.”

No way would I ask him where we were going.

In the back seat, I saw he had a suitcase. My mother would go out of her mind at that. Perhaps he was kidnapping me, one of those custody battles.

“Cop,” I said, as we passed by a black and white car on the freeway. “Is this the passing lane?”

“Confine your comments to the matters at hand,” he said.

*Confine your comments.* Gotta love that shit, as Oscar, the boy I loved, would say. Confine your comments! Lock your words in little cages.

“Remember,” I said to my dad, who was drinking a highball, “When we were walking through houses going up and I stepped on that snake?” I contorted so I could look up at the sky through the windshield, big blue pajamas with white splotches, so sweet. I opened my mouth and let the sun in.

“What?” he said.

“It’s a beautiful day,” I shouted, over the radio and the blasting high air conditioning. “Where we going?”

“Classified. You’re on a need to know basis, First Daughter. I have told you that.”

“Oh, Daddy, I waited all week to see you!” I reached up and kissed him, just as he was bringing his cigarette to his mouth. It burned my cheek.

“Ouch!” I shrieked. I rubbed my cheek. Would I have a scar?

I rolled down my window to let the smoke out, and he turned the radio louder. I rubbed spit on my cheek, and watched it reddening in the side view mirror as I tried to guess. The beach. His father’s, J.G.’s ranch down on Matlacha, the tawny island in the gulf where you couldn’t swim because it was all *spiney*. Every goddamn thing on my grandfather’s entire island was spiney. The boys, the sea, the food, the trees, the boats.

“Where are we going, tell me, Daddy, I get to know these things. I am *along!*” It was just that we had left Orlando, we were into Ocala.

“Where’s your brother, what’s going on this time, do you want to enlighten me? Why the hell doesn’t he come? Do you have any insight into that situation?” My dad finished his drink at the end of that, and put it on the floor between his feet. “I can’t believe he killed three cats. Does he try to get out of weekends with his poor old daddy on purpose, do you think?”

“Well, you don’t really like cats that much, Dad.” I pulled my hair back into a ponytail, coiled it, and leaned into the rearview mirror to see what that did for my facial bone structure. Good things, as it turned out. It made me look eighteen. Cheekbones, I thought. Blow-job, I thought. What the hell was a blow-job? My father would know, but I wasn’t asking him. I had said at recess I knew. I nodded when asked. I nodded to blow-job and suck-off. I didn’t have a clue. And I was fourteen years old.

“Gonna be a beautiful sunset,” I said, laying my head back down on his lap, and sticking my feet out my open window. We flew along. I honked the horn, wondering who was I signaling, who was I scaring as the traffic whipped past us.

“Cut it out,” he said, and he popped me on the nose.

Which hurt, it always hurt when he pinched and hit me.

I watched my shoelaces snap in the wind. “Sid’s Sid,” I said. “My brother is my brother. I know not what makes him tick.” I was looking at my father’s bottom portion of chin, stubbly, red.

A weak chin, my mother always said.

I suddenly knew what she meant.

Once, years ago, we'd taken a road trip as a family, zipping up I-75, North up the spine of Florida, just like this. We'd gone to Kentucky, before their divorce, our one and only official family vacation.

My mother slept in the car because she found my father's relatives, and their shacky houses, too dirty, too shack-like. The Clampitts, she said. Which I didn't know what that was then, we didn't have a television, but a while ago I saw a cartoon book of the Beverly Hillbillies, and there were some apt comparisons. Those being: Zena Mae my cousin did fix us possum, which was fun to eat, because it was a possum, and my Uncle Clarence did keep his money under his mattress. Also he kissed me. Really good.

I slept on my Aunt Stella Mae's floor on a pallet of old flowered wool blankets with Sid and in the middle of the night when my cousin Dale kissed me, for a long time, and I just stayed very quiet. It felt good and I thought about his lips and the little cool fur above them every day for a long time. I thought I'd marry Dale. I thought about him the whole way back to Florida that trip.

It was funny how road trips made you think even more about sex, more than you already were.

North of Gainesville, me and my dad drove through a patch of rain, hard thunderous drops, a sheet of gray, for about seven seconds, then it was blazing sun again.

"Oh, Daddy," I said, "I am simply dying of thirst." Suddenly I had a Kentucky accent. "Parched!"

"What?" he said.

"Rest stop," I commanded.

“Oh, God,” he said. “You have to wait. Come on. Really?” He said we were going to a great party, a convention, and we had to make time.

“I’m not packed,” I said.

We were speeding into the late afternoon. He was steering with his knee. His gin sparkled like crystals in his glass. He clicked the tuning buttons, looking for the game.

I slouched against the door, which wasn’t locked. If you sat against an unlocked door in a car like this, my mother would fairly lose her mind. It was too nervewracking, so I quit.

My father passed every single person--we were flying up the highway. “You’re doing eighty,” I said. I was trying to say it neutral.

“You got the angle,” he said. “It’s not eighty.”

Another time, Buck’d taken me to Daytona to watch the 500, only we didn’t get tickets, and ended up in a pink cement block one-story motel on the beach, the Neptune Star, with a woman who had a son my age. He and I sat on the sand while my father and Ginger or Gretchen or Gretel took naps. She had a tiny German accent. The boy, whose name I forget, had a small dirt bike. I think it was Derry. Derry or Dusty.

After it got dark, we waded into the ocean. The little motel was dark behind us.

“Why you hikin’ your dress up, because you think your sexy?” he’d said, this boy my age.

I had thought he was about to kiss me. I felt sick to my stomach when he said that. I was burning, my face and palms red. “I was just saving it,” I said.

The ocean crashed around our ankles. I don’t remember who slept where that night, or if we even had dinner, or if I threw that dress—it was white gauze with beige embroidered trim around the skirt—in the dumpster behind the Neptune Star.

“Please tell me,” I begged. “Maybe I have brought the wrong stuff?”

“You’re happier worrying than you are having a good time, that’s the problem with you, Georgia. You are exactly like your mother.”

“No,” I said. “I’m nothing like her. I just don’t have good stuff,” I said. “I didn’t really bring anything except one pair of underwear and my bathing suit.”

I looked at my brown grocery bag, on the back seat, by his brown flagging suitcase. “She would never wear a bikini and I wear a string bikini,” I said.

“I would like silence.” My father lurched us onto the shoulder and at the same time, he curled himself off to the side, and let out an enormous episode of gas, and then started cussing, and tears came to his eyes and the car smelled damp and doggy.

I kept my eyes on the road. I didn’t know what was happening.

He grabbed the wheel, we swerved into the oncoming lane again, the Olds kind of like a giant sled; there were horns blaring, and he pulled over to the side of the road, the crazy shoulder sounding like thunder, and the terrible smell of gas, skunk, and beer.

All I could think was *I thought you wanted silence.*

He wouldn’t sit back down, he remained kind of hunched up over the seat, over the wheel, and we idled in the emergency lane. Then we started rolling along, towards Exit 74B, Lake City.

“Godman it. Bum-fuck Egypt. This bullshit again. Goddamn it. Where’s the nearest goddamn port-o-potty.”

I stared straight ahead. I wished I hadn’t been thinking of sex. I wished I was on the route to becoming a nun, a good person. Not this kind of person. The terrible smell filled the car, and I rolled down my window all the way.

“What can I do?” I said, staring straight out the window, as though my gaze kept the windshield from imploding. I was holding the wheel, so was he.

I hoped the car would blow up—me standing, no, sitting, no, draped, in tatters, on the evening news, oh the tragedy on I-75 continues to leave the beautiful young Georgia Jackson in shock—shot of me standing there by the burning car, my hair gold like Cinderella’s, the car a pumpkin on fire, and my mother and Sid watching this, realizing how stupid they had been, how unkind, how selfish, how fearful, oh their beautiful Georgia. She was perfect.

Til she blew up.

We were close to the Stop and Go. But not that close. We were more askew on the exit ramp. The cars that passed us slowed down and I waved them on. It really did smell awful. Buck threw himself out of the car. There was a stain the shape of Africa on the seat. I wanted to touch it with my hand so I sat on my hands.

He walked around the front of the car, and slid down into the ditch.

His beer had spilled. The empty tinkled out onto the pavement after him.

On the highway above, cars blazed by.

Quickly scooting around, I herded other bottles, the empties scattering round the pedals and stuck them firmly, wedging them so they wouldn’t roll, under my seat, case a cop came up to help us out.

Then my father, who’d been into the ditch of weeds and rushes and back already, yelled at me to pop the trunk. He was back there, and I couldn’t see him, for a long time. The sky was starting to get dark and bright purple, with peach stripes, the way it did at seven o’clock every evening in summer in Florida. Dark, like beautiful curtains being drawn. A flock of birds flew over in their sharp perfect vee. What the hell were they? Geese? Gulls?

Pelicans? I strained to see something I would recognize, but they disappeared behind the brown pines at the edge of the highway.

I heard a trucker yank on his horn, long and low and then when Dad flung himself back into the car, he had a drink, I noticed that first, because it was in a highball glass from my mother's good barware.

But the main thing was he was naked from the waist down, his sport coat flapping at his thighs, and that whole dark weird business down there--when I realized my father had been standing in an emergency lane naked from the waist down, except for socks and shoes.

Naked.

"Whoa," I said. I looked away, it's what you do. I looked out my window. "Wow," I said. He was naked, he'd been standing out back of the car, taking his pants off?

He slammed his door, and we jerked back into the traffic. He didn't agonize over merging like my mother did, he just went for it. One thing you can say about my dad.

I wondered where the pants were. Where the next ones were coming from?

"Hotlanta! Hotlanta, here we come." He belted it out.

2.

"Are you doing okay, Daddy?" We were near Macon before I spoke. I was unsure exactly what had happened—sitting there with him. The bad smell, the accident itself. Things smelled like a hospital, not a good hospital, and I wondered if was true that baby's diapers aren't stinky to the mother

"I said Hotlanta, Georgie, did you hear me, Hotlanta, do you know what that is?"

“Of course,” I said. I tried to smile. I patted him on the leg, but it was so bare, pale, and hairy. His suit jacket sort of covered the whole serious business frontal area, sort of not. I didn’t care where we were going anymore.

He drained his drink, set it on the seat between us, in a nest of Kleenex, flashlights, a hammer, a Hustler, and a pouch of fish gravel. He grabbed my knee, squeezed it in the way I most hated.

“Okay?”

“Great,” I said.

After a bit I said “Should I call Mom?”

“Fuck her off,” he said.

“I know, I know.” I banged my head into the dashboard.

“We gotta stop anyway because I need a bathroom,” I said.

“Why didn’t you go at the pit stop?”

“I needed a bathroom,” I said. “Not a ditch.”

“You kids are spoiled, you know that?”

“Yeah,” I said, and I folded myself over, lay on my knees.

Right before Milledgeville he said for me to run in and get him a six-pack. I’d been sleeping. His hand was on my bare thigh. My skirt was pushed up.

“Get me some beer, honey.”

I woke up with his words in my ears like little hairs.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure I can.” The tears were coming and I tried to think of sex, so I would stop crying.

“Get yourself something, get me a sixer, and go ahead and get me a pig knuckle, too.” The little shack station was strung with all-colored Christmas lights. Two men were talking and wearing overalls. They had a deer strapped to the back of a giant red Ford. The deer didn’t look awake and it didn’t look sleeping.

“Daddy,” I said, taking the twenty. “I don’t want to get a pig knuckle. They are so disgusting. I’ll feel like a dip. I’ll puke. I *will* get carsick and puke all over creation if there is the joint from a poor innocent porcine being in this vehicle. Pig knuckles are too weird.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. Just pluck out a good one, with the tongs. You don’t have to touch it. Get a big one. Get one with a lot of gristle on it.” He smiled. I don’t think he really liked them. I think he liked making me buy them.

“It’s too gross,” I whined. I went from looking at his white socks, to his sunglasses, which had thousands of me’s, me looking worried and tiny and birdish. “Are you going to wait in the car?”

“Do you always ask so many questions?”

“Excuse me,” I said, flouncing into the store.

“You’re a Southerner, aren’t you?” he shouted. The deer men were staring at us.

“Oh hey,” I said, but my throat was pretty closed up and no words came out.

I tried to remember to wiggle my butt the whole way around the store which is not all that easy to do when you are about to buy a pig knuckle, believe me you.

“Oh boy,” I sighed as I flung open the heavy glass door and grabbed his beer, the first one I saw. I hooked the plastic ring thing on my index finger, and slung it over my shoulder and wiggled.

There was the knuckle jar, by the cash register, all pink and gleaming. They’re freaking hooves, I said under my breath. Two women in tube tops with two babies each on

their hips were laughing. They weren't buying anything. They were just standing there by the cokes, laughing.

"Party time," the red-haired one said to me.

I looked out into the parking lot. I had no idea if they could see his pale hairy thighs, the dark nest between his legs, the sports coat ending so soon. My father with no pants on.

"One of those," I said, pointing with my pinkie to the slimy floating knuckles, "And could you please direct me to the nearest rest room?" I paid and took my items into the bathroom, vowing to do it in the other order next time. There was a phone between the men's and ladies. Out back behind the shack, I stood there with my purchases, feeling damp, sticky and dirty. If I called my mother, she would call the police, start driving to Atlanta.

The man who flung himself out of the men's room was one of those good-looking guys, tan, curly hair down his neck, broad lazy grin.

"Hey, sugar," he said. "What's up?" He stood in front of me, looking at the phone and my eyes.

"Hey," I said.

He stood there, and I just wanted him to keep looking at me. He ruffled his hair, like he was just getting out of the shower.

"Oh. Man. Do what it takes to make it a good one, honey."

I felt like he was divorcing me when he hopped on his motorcycle without me. Back in the car I opened the Cheetos. The bag let out a huge popping gasp and my father snatched it, resting his juicy knuckle on his bare naked leg.

"Here," I said. "You need a beer. God, that thing is dripping all over!"

I popped the top—they had been on sale—and handed it to him, sliding it across the seat so any police wouldn't see all this we had going.

“You could have gotten a quieter snack,” he said. He flung the Cheetos into the back seat. You could smell the orange powder of them everywhere.

“Daddy. Cheetos?”

“They're driving me over the edge.”

“Daddy, shouldn't you put some clothes on?” I flicked off the radio.

He took a big suck off his knuckle.

“I messed myself, honey,” he said. His eyes were damp, big. He was pushing the buttons on the radio, looking for a ball game, even though the sound was off. “You can get me a fresh set of duds at the next stop. I don't want to be stopping every goddamn minute. We want to make the banquet, there's a cocktail hour.”

He explained about the convention, his old IRS buddies, how it worked, the dance, the sessions, the bag of goodies waiting for us in the hotel suite. It was a three day party and I would be his princess.

I saw herons, and gators in the drainage ditch by the side of the road. Lolling in the deep purple light. I wondered how long I could wade there before I got nipped. I wondered if people could tell I was still a virgin just by looking at me. I put my feet on the dash, and opened my legs, to let the hot Georgia night on my thighs.

A trucker laid on his horn as he waddled past us. We'd been driving so long, it seemed really slow now.

“You could flash 'em,” he said. And he leaned forward over the wheel, and we sped up.

I thought about that. Wondered if that kind of thing might encourage my tits to grow. They weren't coming in. If they stayed as small as my mother's, I could see suicide, I could see dying in eleventh grade. I would give them that long. Then I was taking steps. I was not going through life flat as a board. Flat as a board, Sid always said.

Then about five minutes into Macon, he hauled off and whacked me across the face. Just out of the blue.

"Daddy!" I gulped, and then started coughing and tears blurted out of my face.

"Goddamn Near Beer," he yelled. He threw the beer I'd bought him way back there into the back seat. He swerved, cars honked, the pig knuckle rolled onto the magazine on the front seat, and he leaned over me, steering with his bare knees, rolled down my window, reached in to the back seat with the hand that had just socked me, I was cringing back into my door, sure it would fly open. He flung the entire six pack, out my window.

"Goddamn Near Beer. No wonder I feel like shit," he said. "Goddamn it, honey, do you pay attention? What were you thinking? Near Beer?"

Underneath the hotel, we parked. The smells fumes and rubber made my stomach swirl.

"You got any money on ya, honey?"

"I want to go back home, Dad. I'm just not wanting to do this. I don't feel well."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that, honey. I really am." He stood in the dim purple light of the parking garage and pulled his bathing suit on.

"You can have a good time without me."

“Honey, goddammit, you’re pushing the limit here.” He was patting himself down, searching for the missing wallet. “This is your debut! Get up for it!”

“Daddy—”

“I want to show you a good time, honey. I don’t do it enough. You’re going to love Hotlanta, we’re going to have a great night, a great weekend.” In his suitcoat and tight little green bathing suit, he yanked our luggage out of the trunk, and then he yanked me out.

“I’m going to go call mom,” I said.

“Oh for God’s sake, don’t even think about that.

“But I just don’t really—” I wanted to be in my crazy mother’s house, sitting on my bed, reading a long book. I wasn’t trying to be mean. I just wanted to be there, that’s where I wanted to be. My own bed.

“Don’t start pulling Belle on me.”

“Dad, do you even have your wallet? What about your wallet?”

“You are ready for a sugar daddy, aren’t you, listen to ya, Geez. Future Homewreckers of America.” He lurched off, his white legs sticking out under the suitcases and suitcoat, his dress shoes damp, his hair like a wild patch of fire.

Peachtree Plaza was the most beautiful hotel I had ever been in. It had an Atrium. I knew this because there were peach plastic signs everywhere on little stands, like little butlers, sayin in gold script *Atrium*. The middle of the hotel was hollow, and shot straight up to the sky, way up! Balconies wrapped around each floor, and I could see all the peach doors to all the rooms, story after story. It was like one of those Escher drawings Oscar liked so much. I could never see the appeal. Until now.

I followed my father, in his bathing suit and suitcoat across the lobby. Fake peach trees, with gold peaches and pretend money dripping from them. Fancy parrots swarming around in cages suspended from ten stories above. Everyone seemed dressed up, even the plants, which had little white lights in their branches. I felt like I was on stage. Like I was making my debut. No one knew who I was, I could be anyone.

“Oh, paradise, here we be.” Buck threw his hands back into the air, dropped his suitcase, and I picked it up. It was like I was in a movie, by myself, in a city, checking in.

Women were barelegged, sandaled, made up, dripping gold beads and hair-sprayed feathered hair—big blonde woman, every single one of them with great boobs. I stood by the fountain, where my father had planted me with his luggage. I had no luggage. I had been picked up for a pizza date with my dad, and ended up in the middle downtown Atlanta with water and conversations crashing around me, glass elevators making me dizzy, and giant birds whistling and fluttering around the atrium, and the Bee Gees cooing and hollering in their soft peach way.

“We’re in room 1212,” he said when he returned. “My lucky room.”

“You’ve been here?”

“Honey, I’ve been a lot of places.” He brushed his damp hair back off his shiny forehead.

“Is this that auctioneers’ convention?” I said, pulling on my dad’s sleeve, but carefully. I had this feeling around him that if I pulled too hard, his whole clothes would unravel, like a blanket, or a sweater, one tug, and he’d be buck naked. “You went to last year?” That was a stretch when Mom had had us calling hotels after him.

We got on Elevator Six, even though it was packed with people. I pressed myself to the back, which was glass, like a capsule. And as the whole city whizzed past, a man asked my what time he was planning on gettin' to the ball.

“I reckon we’ll be there right on time. S’long as the little woman here doesn’t take too much time paintin’ her face.”

I felt frozen, cut-off, we were going so fast. He was making like I was his wife? We were going to a ball? What the hell was I going to wear? I wouldn’t go, I guess. But what was I going to do? This was my movie! I wanted to slap him. And I wanted to stand right next to him, see if people really were fooled into thinking we were husband and wife.

“Excuse, our floor.” A clot of people exited, and I had a clear view of my father, who was lighting a cigarette. He looked like some kind of emu, those skinny hairless legs poking out of that big feathery body.

“We’re really on the thirteenth floor you know,” he said when we got off. I could smell us.

“Then why does it say twelve?”

“Think about it,” he said, and I followed him down the corridors, looking down into the atrium, where people glided about, as if they were being filmed.

“I should call Mom,” I said.

He couldn’t get our room open, but I could. “You just have to turn it, really hard.”

“I’ll be in the bathroom,” he said, and he took the phone book in there with him. And there were the terrible sounds of his gas. I opened a window, and turned on the television.

I pulled the phone into the giant bed with me, and read it’s little face carefully. I decided just to use the Collect option.

I could imagine the kitchen at my mother's. Bare light bulb, Sid's Auto Traders covering the kitchen table, processed veal patties thawing in the sink.

The phone rang and rang.

A loud explosion of noise came from the bathroom, and my father groaned.

"Are you feeling okay?" I said to the wall.

On the television, it was still one long, long commercial for the Peach Orchard, the hotel's gift shop. They had everything, mints, shoes, champagne, cigars.

"It's awful quiet out there!" he yelled. "You didn't fall out the window, did you?"

I walked over to the window, and leaned out. I remembered Sid hanging from the balcony when we were little. "Oh, boy." I took a deep breath, and let my body buzz with the thought of me falling through the air. Would I be conscious as I went down? Who would find me? Would I linger for a few days? Would I fall like a dinner napkin, a kite, or a bird? Would I look beautiful?

I jumped on the bed. It was huge. It was the biggest bed I had ever seen. I flung myself at the phone, and dialed the collect call to my mom's again. This time I said it was urgent, it was her daughter.

Sorry, there's no answer.

My father flushed the toilet, and I was just about to hang up when my mother said to the operator, "Calling collect? She's calling collect?" My mother sounded furious and rushed.

"Do you accept the charges?"

"This better be a terrible emergency."

My father still hadn't come out. More gas. I was going to have to take him to the doctor as soon as we got back to Florida. This was not normal. Accidents, and all this gas. He never ate food. He just drank.

"Well, you won't believe what he is doing now," I said. This was *not* what I had planned to say. I was going to ask if I could buy a dress, a dancing dress. "I'm in Atlanta and I don't think I should be here, Mom. It's a business convention."

"What are you saying, Georgia? Honey, I am in the middle of sweeping out the garage. I can hardly hear you. Can I call you back? This is the most expensive way to call."

"Mom, he's got me in Atlanta. I just don't know. I don't know what to do."

"Atlanta? What Atlanta. What exactly do you mean, Atlanta?"

"Atlanta, Georgia." I spelled out the words, and was suddenly not crying. I tried to think about sex. If I had a husband, how would I be acting? I would not be spelling.

"Oh, for crying out loud. What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Forget it."

"Well, you called. If you called, then I guess you should tell me what is going on. What is going on?"

"I guess I just feel like something bad could happen? I don't know. I'm not sure. Mom, I am not sure. I don't feel like I am old enough."

"What kind of tone of voice are you using with me, Georgia?"

"I said just please forget I called." I was yelling now. My father yelled something from the bathroom. I heard the shower come on.

"If I come up there, you are going to have to be waiting out front of that hotel, Georgia. You can't pull a stunt like this, you can't just keep doing this kind of thing. This

back and forth, back and forth, playing one of us against each other. It will take me five hours. At least. Oh my gosh in heaven.”

“Mom, we’re in this hotel room. People think I am his wife, and he lets them. He encourages them.” I started to swell up with tears.

“You made your bed, Georgia.” When she said this, my father came out of the bedroom.

There was this big long silence. I could feel the clicking of the phone--the money I was costing my mother. I tried to smile up at him.

“Who’s that?” he barked. He was naked, with just a small towel wrapped around his body, and it was about to fall off.

The shower water was still running.

How was I going to sleep in the same bed as my dad. Maybe we could order a bunch of extra pillows, and make a berm down the middle. Like me and Sid used to do.

“I gotta go,” I whispered.

“I’ll come up. I’m coming up. I’m getting upset just thinking about it.” She let out a big stream of air, like a teakettle. “I’m going to have to turn around and come back down here with you, because I can’t be late for work. It’s going to be quick, Georgia. No monkeyshines. I’m going to drive up, then turn around and come straight back. I’m going to be a wreck tomorrow.”

I hung up the phone.

“It that your mother?” He was reaching down now, trying to grab the phone. He had my hair in one hand, and was grabbing on it.

“No,” I said. “Of course not. Why would it be her?”

He plopped down on his side of the bed. His towel fell open.

I skittered across the room like a spider or a baby, keeping low.

“I couldn’t really reach her,” I said.

And I was able, perhaps, to convince myself, somehow, that this was true.

At the reception, in the Golden Fruits ballroom, a huge cavernous plaza of a room, dripping with peach chandeliers, lined with mirrors, and dotted with waiters in black coats, walking around with platters of champagne flutes, I pick-pocketed my father.

Buck had made out my nametag, slapped it on my breast, which still stung, like a bruise. I was feeling like the stupidest girl in the world, I was hating myself, my shorts, my T-shirt, my nametag that said, in my father’s shaky down slant hand, “Mrs Jackson.”

“Dad, it doesn’t seem like we should be here,” I said. That’s when I slipped my hand into his back pocket; it was a joke. But when he didn’t notice, I put the wallet in my pocket. “Dad,” I said. “Did you hear me?”

My father ran into a woman in a slinky blue dress with butterflies made out of sequins. “Shit,” she said.

A man in a green suitcoat and red pants boomed, slapping my dad on his back, “Ya hear the news? Shit like that?”

“Man. She was born to be fucked,” he said.

The waiter guy went by and my dad told me grab two, and he did. I reached for one of his, but he pulled his hands away. He hoisted the flutes into the air. We were standing in a little group of men.

“God, there’s your butt-ugly girlfriend, Bucky,” the back slapper green coat man said to my dad. Two of the other guys, both in navy ties with big gold peaches on them, laughed.

“Oh, the uglier half of the what-her-name sisters, oh yeah, hell ya.”

“Nothing like a dumb dutch broad.”

I looked around, like I was trying to find someone I knew. Someone who read books, I was thinking.

A cluster of women next to us, a cluster of men, burst into the tinkly laughter that I associated with fancy movies. All the women had boobs, and dresses, and there I was, like a boy or an animal or a ghost, my dad’s wallet bulging out of my back shorts’ pocket.

“You sure do like them young, Buck! Every year they’re younger!”

“Marry me, honey, I’ll treat you right, not like old Hoss here,” a ruddy man with pinkish eyebrows said, leaning to me.

“I’ll be back,” I whispered up into my dad’s ear. He smelled faintly of walnuts and grass.

“What are you talking about?” he said gruffly.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. I was stern.

“Ten minutes,” he said, looking at his watch, but I could tell he couldn’t focus on the face.

I smiled and curtsied and dashed through the throngs of dressy folks. I ran down the hallway.

“Hey,” one of the waiters said to me, and I didn’t hear the rest. A warning, or an invitation?

I scooted down the spiral staircase, into the lobby. I pretended I was famous and alarmed, for a very important reason. Ten minutes, I thought. I headed for the elevators. I peeled off my nametag, and threw it into the fountain, which had a monkey in a cage dancing around, right above the plumes of water. I saw the letters melt away, and it was just

a sticky piece of blank paper, with a little blue border, like a window, like a window floating in the water.

Overhead, the parrots, who looked very dressed up, seemed to think it was a good idea for me to go to the gift shop. To get some gum.

What I bought was a purple wrap dress, out of silky stuff that wasn't real silk, "but acts just like" Marvelle the clerk said. It had a large parrot embroidered onto the hip, and it was a wrap dress, very low cut and sexy and it tied at the shoulders and the waist. I liked all the strings. I liked feeling like a package, a present. In the gauze dress, I felt safer and gorgeous, both of those.

"Shall I bill to your room?" she said and I decided that was a better way to go.

"Twelve twelve," I said.

"Lucky numbers," she said.

I wore the dress out of there. I left my shorts, and my shirt in the dressing room. I felt like a new woman.

I minced along through the lobby like a colt in the new silver plastic high heels, feeling vampy and stupid and brilliant all at once. I trolled through the lobby looking for plate glass mirrors. In them all I could see was that I had no boobs, and this was a boob dress.

I took the elevator to the Ballroom floor, and two men in tennis shirts and tennis shorts got on. They smelled like leather, expensive. "Hello," they said. "Going up?"

I wondered how much a prostitute got paid, as I looked at each of them, looking at their faces, the skin there.

I pushed out my tits with all my might. Grow, dammit. Hurry up and grow before I give up and throw myself out a window.

“Have a good one, hon,” they said when I got off.

I smiled back and tried to shake my hips, swivel them, the way I saw women walking, as I went into the party.

It was like I was in a music box, turning, only no sound was coming out.

3.

“What you got that shit all over your face for?” Buck said as we over to the bar at the back of the ballroom. “Wipe off that glop.”

“What can I have to drink,” I said, wiping my eyelids. I handed him his wallet. I didn’t even know how much the bill was. I wondered what kind of time my mother was making.

“A daiquiri for the Mrs. and a double Jack for me,” he said. “Make that two of everything, would you, these lines are bullshit, right?”

Well maybe she would turn around, she had done that before. Miami, Matlacha, the Key West trip--she hadn’t ever made it to any of those, she had turned around and gone back home. What I would do was, at eleven, I’d run down and just see if she was out there, and if I didn’t see in three minutes, no five minutes, if I didn’t see her in exactly five minutes, I’d run back up to the party.

We stood in another line and got oysters. I listened to one of his friends tell some long story like thing about guys in New Orleans coming out of their graves and wanting dirt thrown on them. I had no idea. I just watched his little nose hairs touching each other every time he said a vowel, his ruddy face widening and shrinking with the story. The party was lots louder than it had been half an hour ago. A man cupped his hand around my butt but I couldn’t tell who it was.

My father made a big show of dropping the oysters down my throat. Everyone watched and laughed. I played trained seal, and ducked and bubbled in my purple wrap dress.

The oysters were so good, so slippery and salty and expensive tasting, I just loved the weirdness. And the attention. Until my father said “your goddamn tit is hanging out.”

A woman tinkled up to me, with a beautiful cold porcelain face, a high forehead, and dyed hair. Her Indian bracelets tinkled, she had coins on her sandals. I straightened up, and wiped off some of the juice on my face.

“The kids are all out by the pool,” she said.

I stared at her, dumb.

My dad slapped her on the back. “Open wide, BJ,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, and I looked at my dad for a clue. Wondered what time it was. What I was going to do with the rest of my life.

The kids. The kids. That sounded so funny.

I said sure, but she had already wafted off, and I got up, my father was yelling, really really yelling at a guy way across the room who wasn’t paying any attention to us at all, and so once again I walked down the stairs, and out to the pool.

The sky was the color of peaches set on a purple flannel bedsheet. This Georgia sky was rolling over the downtown buildings, which were silvery in the light, and I couldn’t believe how beautiful it was. I sat down on a chaise. The others were standing in a group by the diving board. Three kids, a girl in a white dress, “age appropriate,” my mother would have said. Sailor collar, short, with blue piping. She had dark hair, and a queenly look, all tan and perfect and groomed. I felt my lipstick on my eyelids, my plastic shoes seemed to be

melting, my hair was kind of like hay gone bad. The two guys looked at me, and then looked back at Linen girl.

I kicked back. I missed my brother. And my mom. And my dad He was not who he used to be. Then tall dark haired “cutie-pie” came over to me, smiling, his big teeth askew.

“So do you like to have fun?”

He smelled like steak and stupidity.

“What?” I said. I spoke from the dress. I could feel the plastic slats of the lawn chair imprinting on my thighs and butt. But still, I let the dress talk. “Of course I like fun,” I said. “What do you think I am?”

Down at the beach he said “Why you trying to hike your dress up like that, do you think it’s sexy or something.”

I wished he wasn’t such a mean tall dumb boy. He was rich. I could see it would be very difficult for him to get into heaven.

We went out into the waves. I threw my shoes, soaked, into the dry sand.

“What’s your name,” he announced, as though he had said this hundreds of times before.

“Oh, I never tell in these situations,” I said, and I flung myself on him.

I put my tongue in his mouth, but it hurt to stick it out that far. I put my hands on his back, his slippery white polyester Danny, you taste just like Heinz gherkins, I wanted to say but that was not very put-outy.

“What is your name? How old are you?”

“Those are the questions I asked boys in kindergarten,” I said.

“Oh, grow up.”

I laughed, and pushed him, and he lost his balance and went down.

“Bitch,” he said, not getting up.

“Paulie, Paulie,” the Queen called, from the deck, far up the beach. You could just hear her voice, like a shell in the wind.

“Fucking bitch.” He splashed water on me. “You’re a fucked up chick.”

“I’m here with my husband,” I said.

I imagined my mother dead, in a car wreck, and ran, fast, back to the hotel, past the Queenie girl and her toady boy--my boy’s little brother, perhaps, and into the lobby, again, this time barefoot, wet, running down the staircase, like I was late, but not for something I had really been invited to.

I had no idea what time it was. People stared at me as I ran past the lanai. Two women reached out to me. Maybe they thought I’d been raped.

I ran through the lobby. The parrots squawked. I started crying, kind of. Since I had been running it was more like a leakage.

The doorman asked if he could help me and then out of the darkness at the exact same moment I saw her truck, the pea green Datsun parked between two long white limos, like a little lima bean.

She got out and jumped up and yelled across the truck, “What happened to your face?”

“Mom!”

“What on earth!”

I looked back. I worried “the kids” would see her.

She stood there, like a military person, in a blocking stance. She had a yellow umbrella with her. She was in her uniform, her khaki jumpsuit, and she had a kerchief over curlers.

“What!” I said. I kept running. I ran right past her, down the circular driveway that was under the hotel’s front. Past the potted palms.

I was so shocked to see her. I got to the busy street, truly outside, and I turned to go back into the hotel, which was a kind of awkward move, since it was only one-third of my body participating.

“Your face!” She was coming after me. The doorman said can we valet your truck?

“Oh,” I said, and I did a kind of vaudeville face check. “It’s on!”

“What’s your father doing, where?” She was vibrating. The bell man, a fat black man with a gorgeous and perfect head was standing a foot away, listening to all of this. What if he was my father, and Marvelle was my mother? Would I be happier or sadder and would boobs come in? Oh, I’d be happy.

“Ma, I can’t believe you made it. Wow. Fast.” She stopped short and stared at me really mean.

She stood hands on her hips. “When my children call me, I am here. I do not like to see my children, either one of them, endangered, and I am here to take you home, Georgia. Where’s your things, where’s your father, what’s wrong?”

“Just wait here. Okay? I’ll be back.”

“Georgia! You can’t possibly go out into a public in that outfit, that thing is falling off of you and it hikes up. This is insanity.”

“You’re telling me.”

“What’s going on up here?”

“You’re telling me,” I said again because it had sounded so good the first time.

I dashed past her, and dove into the revolving doors. I dashed up the beautiful curving lobby stairs again. Each time I ran up or down those stairs, I forgot the misery of the world. On those stairs, I felt destined to wear a crown or something. Even barefoot. I felt like I own the hotel. *Oh, look, she’s late! That woman, she must own the hotel and be wanted up in the penthouse.*

“Georgia!” my mother’s voice hollered across the lobby, got all the parrots going, saying “Come back y’all.

I ran faster. I couldn’t believe she had come into the hotel in those curlers!

I knew my mother, in curlers, and carrying a fraying yellow umbrella, would not follow me into a swanky cocktail party.

I pushed my way to the back. I wanted to order a drink. Blend into the crowd. Glover grabbed my bottom as people swirled around us.

“Agh,” I said. I jumped back.

“Your daddy said to tell you he’s up in the room, and you are late and get your hiney up there.” He winked.

I turned, trundled to the edges of the ballroom and there was my mother and her cold stiff tiny arms.

I took a long last look at the party. I wished so much to be the girl dancing in the middle of the parquet floor to the Frank Sinatra, but that was the other girl.

That was the not me girl. In the right dress with the right father and the perfect dance steps to the right music.

My mother’s voice was steely. “Georgia, gather your things.”

In the Room 1212, my father and three other men, old men, white haired, slack, shirtless, all are stretched out on the bed, our bed, me and my dad's bed.

"Hey," I say. My mom and I are walking in the room. I am holding her hand.

"Buck," one of them says. "Company." His voice is soft.

I hear a woman's voice. I can't tell if it is coming from the bathroom, or the television. I don't want my mother to hear women in this room or see the things that go on in here.

"Did you ever think Jesus committed suicide?" my father says. He speaks to the stale smoky air. The men are watching the television, their eyes jelly. I feel like I'm in a morgue. "Because that's what happened." He is lecturing the room. No one is listening.

"Mom," I say, turning to her, "Just wait in the hall." I push against her chest, like in a car, when the people are flying towards the windshield.

She stands firm in the doorway, bracing the door open with her foot.

I go stand by the television. They are watching it intently. My father is in his bathing suit, no suit coat.

Two men are lying on my satchel, my little jacket, as if my things aren't on the bed. As if nothing is under them. I screw my body around and look at what they are watching. It's an animal program: anemones, starfish, something pink and squishy inside something else gross. Then I see hair. Then I see it.

"Dad," I say. "What are y'all doing?" I pretend I am not seeing. He is fiddling with the remote.

“Where’ve you been?” he says, suddenly sitting up, coming to, taking a breath. “I said ten minutes. You’re a hell of a lot later than ten minutes.” To me his face looks to be in pieces.

“Georgia,” she hisses. “Please.” My mother leans against the hotel room door like a hurricane is trying to press it shut.

“Honey,” he says. He is still fumbling with the remote. One of the men stands up. I think I remember him from when I was a little girl.

“Guess who is here,” I say.

“Don’t you knock?” he says. He is pointing the controls at the television, but it only gets louder.

“What are you watching,” I say, but I don’t mean to ask. It’s the only thing I do not want to say. Pops right out. I cover my face.

“Where the hell have you been?”

“I’m just getting my tote bag, sir. You’re are lying on it. It’s probably pretty uncomfortable.” Two men not on the tote go out to the balcony and light up cigarettes.

“Daddy, we’re leaving now, I think you can understand that.” My mother says this, and the men look at her. She puts her hands on her head, to cover her curlers, or keep from screaming. “I’ll be in the hall. Georgia, make it snappy.”

Has she seen what I have seen?

“Who needs refills?” the standing-up man says. The tote-squisher one lights a cigarette and the mustache one turns on a light by the bed. I snag my jacket and tug on the little tote bag.

“Your butt hangs out of that,” my dad says. “That grab. What is that?”

On the television I can't help but see two women are crawling all over a hairy naked brown-haired man who is butted up against a pink shell-shaped man. They open the parts between her legs and the camera moves in for a close-up. Sea creatures! It's so strange to see this, it's not pretty at all. Why would we be watching? I have never looked at myself.

"Daddy," I say. "I'm going to go with Mom, okay?"

The light-turning on man comes over, stands between me and television, and shuts it off.

"I'm gonna go take a crap," he says and he shuffles past me and leaves by the other door. I hear my mother's voice out in the hallway. "I can't wait very much longer. I'm about at the end of my rope." She is talking way too loud. The bellhops are going to be flocking the place and Dad is going to be pissed at me.

"Oh, for God's sakes," Daddy says. He walks over to the door in the bathing suit. You can see everything about him. "I try to do something nice, look what happens. What the hell did you go and call her for?" He has his ashtray in one palm

"I didn't!" I say. I run to the door. He grabs my arm.

"Mom," I say.

"I'm leaving," she says. "I don't know what you're doing."

My face is burning. I feel Danny's sweat in the rubbed parts, and it hurts, but it hurts good, just like I imagine these things. I think of him in the bushes, waiting for me, this perfect innocent woman who loves him.

"I shouldn't have to pick between two parents," I say.

"What? Why don't you both come in here and sit down and let's talk. Can we talk like adults? Then we can go down to the party, as a family, be a family for a change. Or what the fuckever you want. As long as you are here, you may as well try and have a good

time, woman. Both of you. That's one thing you two were never very good at. Having a good time."

"Not me, Daddy," I say.

"Do you know your daughter has been drinking? Do know what she is doing? The kind of activities she is engaging in?"

"Mom," I shake her by the shoulders, and my father tries to put his arm around me, like we are friends. "Stop, Mom. Stop saying that stuff."

"I don't need the aggravation, I don't goddamn need it." My dad, it turns out, is holding an ashtray, which is fortunate, because his cigarette is all ash, a wand that is about to scatter into thousands of particles.

"Are you going to hit me? Go ahead. These are your friends?" Her face is grim and stoic.

Then he hurls the glass square into the hotel room, over the heads of the men. I watch it hit the window above the television, and I see the glass slowly move into a web of frozen lines.

"That's enough, knock it off," the mustache guy says. He comes to the door.

"Come on back in now, Buckster," the guy says. He doesn't look at us. "Let's go."

A woman in high heels is teetering up the hallway.

"Bye, Daddy," I say.

Another woman comes out of the bathroom.

I don't want my mom to see.

I take my mother by the shoulders, and steer her gently down the hall.

I just stay quiet, and we just walk on past her the silvery teetering hallway woman.

Of course she walks into Room 1212. We both look back. I think oh no this is the turning

to salt thing. She knocks and walks in, one motion. I see the hem of her little slinky dress slink in after her, just a glimpse of purple fabric.

I don't know why my father wanted me around. I don't know what he wanted me on this trip for.

In the elevator, my mother is hard as a wire. She grips my hand, hard. The elevator is crowded and I pretend I don't know her. I'm at that age, I guess, where I can still pull that kind of thing off in my own mind. Everyone else knows I know her. I know they know. But I am still able to stare out the glass, into the black and gold night of Atlanta and the city, stretched out like a sea with all those people going to all their normal and all their fucked up lives. And think: I don't know this woman. I am not related to her. I am not going to be turning out anything like her. I'm going to turn out great.

I follow her, at a distance, out of the elevator, out in the lobby and we leave the Peachtree. I think to myself, *oh that beautiful child, she must be visiting from another country. Perhaps she is the queen's daughter, look at that beautiful hair, she could sell it. It's virgin hair, I bet. Look at it shine! Is she all by herself?* That's what I'm thinking.

The bellman yells at my mother that she said she'd only be there a minute and it's been half an hour.

"Please, please, please, please, I beg of you," she says wearily, and she gets in, and sits there, slumped over the wheel.

"Y'all need to move that vehicle. I have already called the tow service," the man says to me.

At the edge of Atlanta, we get stopped by the longest train in the world. She has trouble getting the car to stay running at the railroad tracks. Car after car of cows and coal

and lumber and barrels goes by. I should thank her for coming to get me, but I can't. I can't.

When the train finally ends, and the gates lift up, she makes a big deal of checking for more trains, and then we finally cross the tracks, into this darker and even more desolate warehouse district at the edge of town.

"Can you see a street sign at least?" she barks.

"Nope," I say. "They don't have them in Georgia."

Driving to Atlanta with my father. Driving back home from Atlanta with my mother. What if I had stayed. Would the men have been nicer if I'd been around? Was my father driven to wildness because I just didn't pay enough attention to him? What's the worst thing?

She has trouble seeing the road, trouble with her clutch.

"You have to cover up. I can't stand it." She hands me a white sweater she keeps under the seat. I will not put it on. She hands me newspaper. "I can see everything," she says.

"I have no breasts," I whisper. Sort of thinking she won't hear.

"That's not the point."

"Well how could it not be?" But I don't really want to fight with her. I don't really want to make her sad. I love her. I love her for showing up, ready to rescue me.

I stare out the window. We drive slowly, 45 miles an hour, back across Georgia and back down to Florida.

"It's a pretty night," I say.

"It really is," she says.

We get fried chicken at the Popeye's in Cairo. Then it gets light, all at once. The sky is peach. I keep thinking about that woman, the shell between her legs. Why was she doing anything in the world like that? It doesn't seem pretty enough a business to show all creation. On television! What makes men pretend to act as though it was beautiful? This monstrous shell.

I thought of my mother's. I thought of the woman's, the woman who had taken our places in 1212, the silvery fancy dancer woman who walked in when we left. I thought of the perfect linen girl's, the girl who would be a bride. What was between her legs? I couldn't imagine any of us had *that* nasty thing in common. I couldn't imagine it was the same at all.

We eat the chicken in the car, trolling slowly home. After we are all cleaned up, with HandiWipes, and the chicken bones hidden underneath the seat with the awful acrylic white old lady sweater, I start to breathe, and I don't feel so wet between my legs anymore. A little calmer. A little less of everything. But it's not until we are pulling into our driveway, slowly, slowly steering, stopping, that I have the courage to ask her.

What do you like about me best, I ask my mother. For real, I'm asking. What is your very favorite thing?