

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Geoffrey Craig
Snow (Part II)

He sat stunned, unable – or unwilling – to change the shocked expression he knew was all too visible on his face. She looked at him expectantly and then got up. She wandered aimlessly around the house. She stopped and looked at the painting of the woman and young girl. He watched her. She came back and sat at the table.

“Quite an opening,” she said.

“No kidding.”

“Now you really will want to walk to Dry Creek.”

“Did I say that?”

“You didn’t have to.” She paused briefly. “Do you want me to go on?”

“I don’t know,” he said, feeling his stomach churning and tension gripping his entire body. He had never been in a situation remotely similar to this.

“I don’t know why you, and I sure as hell don’t know why now; but I’m going on.”

She got up and again wandered around the room, as if collecting her thoughts and preparing herself. When she sat down again, she started without hesitation or further preamble.

“I was twenty-two and waitressing in the best restaurant in Mission City. Not a city by your New York or New Jersey standards, but it looked like one to me. I had come to the city from something considerably less than a city - about an hour’s bus ride away. The restaurant served damn good food: Italian although the owner, Ricardo, called it ‘Continental’. No one had a clue as to which Continent was intended. Not ours that’s for damn sure. Half the customers claimed it was Yankee grub since Ricardo had come from New York; and the other half said it was Italian what with a name like Ricardo. They also insisted the Mafia had him on their hit list for being a snitch and any day now they’d mosey down to North Carolina to rub him out. Long memories, those Mafia types, since Ricardo had opened the restaurant twenty-some years ago.

“My Daddy drove a truck for a local supermarket chain. Momma did the most magnificent hair dressing anybody in those parts had ever seen. Some of the ladies would let no one but Momma do their hair. She worked at Corinne’s Beauty Parlor for I don’t know how many years. Made Corinne Pendleton, who couldn’t hold a candle to Momma, a small fortune – not that Momma saw any part of it other than her wages and tips. Corinne invented the word skinflint. Many’s the time Daddy told Momma to start her own place, but she invariably replied: ‘How am I going to do that?’ Momma loved doing hair and talking to people. Beyond that, she had no skills. And talk about trusting. Her employees would have robbed her blind.

“Daddy didn’t believe in college. Upwardly mobile for Daddy meant working your ass off. He drove more hours than any other driver in the

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

company. He left high school after his junior year and always said if he didn't need a high school diploma, why did my brother and me think we needed college ones. If it weren't for Momma threatening him with divorce – or worse - he would have worked the day of my high school graduation.

"I had been working part-time at the local diner, and they took me on full-time after graduation. I lived at home and saved what little I could. Back then, people didn't tip like they do now. I overheard someone the other day talking about how waiters expect twenty per cent even if they spill the soup in your lap. Twenty per cent? Maybe it was different up North; but at the diner, I was lucky to get ten per cent, and for that, the customers thought you should wash their car as well as serve their eggs and grits. It got better when I started at Ricardo's but never twenty per cent - not on your life.

"Lots of the girls from my class got married within minutes of graduation or at least had steady boy friends. I had never had a boy friend except one guy senior year who took me out a few times 'cause he thought I'd be easy. If I'm less than model slender now, you should have seen me then. But pound for pound, I was the best dancer in the class – not that I got to show it very often. Anyway, he left me when he found out I wasn't ... easy that is. I had a couple of good friends though and got invited to parties from time to time. It was at a party at what-passed-for-a-college where those two hotshots thought I'd do them both. When I knocked their heads together, they claimed I had led them on.

"Guess sitting between two guys on a couch in a semi-dark room where some people are making out and others have progressed to feeling each other up is leading them on. I had assumed – naïve as I was – that we were going to have an interesting conversation. You know Hemingway or Faulkner or something of that order. I may not have gone to college but I've read a book or two. Don't look at me like that."

He wiped the smile off his face.

"I was just thinking," he said, nodding in the direction of the crammed bookcase, "that you've read more than one or two."

"Now isn't that a nice thing to say."

"I was also picturing you knocking two heads together."

"I didn't actually knock their heads together. Just pushed them off the couch."

"It's still a funny picture."

"That's the only amusing part of this story."

"I can imagine."

"After two years at the diner, I heard about a job in Mission City at what a friend said was a fancy restaurant. Now I can speak properly when it's called for so I gussied up, borrowed Mom's car and drove over. Ricardo asked me some questions and said he would check me out with my boss. Must've gotten a good reference 'cause he called me a few days later and offered me the job on condition that I lose ten pounds. Almost told the

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

skinny Wop to shove his job and add a few pounds himself; but the pay was great, and I could leave home. Not that home was a drag, but I was twenty and figured only losers live with their parents at twenty.

"I ended up losing the ten pounds; and while it didn't do anything for my social life, I could stand to see myself naked in the mirror. Got a room for ninety a month in a young couple's house. Had to share a bathroom with their five-year-old daughter. Hell, at home we had but the one bathroom. I learned early what that thing is you're so proud of. I walked into the bathroom one day without thinking to knock – just as my brother stepped out of the shower. He grabbed for his towel and screamed: 'Get outta' here', but I got myself a good look.

"One evening when I had been at Ricardo's for a year, three guys sat at one of my tables. They laughed non-stop and left a hefty tip. A few nights later, one of them came back – alone. He didn't sit at one of my tables; but I noticed he was studying me. I enjoyed it since it didn't happen often. Sheldon, my wait staff buddy, said: 'That cute dude is admiring your butt.' Sheldon had zero interest in any part of a woman's anatomy. At one point, as I was passing this fellow's table, he said, so that no one else could hear: 'Excuse me' and slipped me a folded slip of paper.

"I hurried into the Ladies' Room and bolted a stall door.

You are very attractive and seem intelligent and nice. Would you do me the honor of letting me take you to dinner? If this is agreeable to you, please call me at 426-5899. Sincerely, Reverend Prentice Holloway

"*Reverend*, I blurted out loud. He sure wasn't laughing like a Reverend the other night. And no one, ever, had asked me to do them the honor of anything: not get them a beer or extra salad dressing or make my bed or take out the garbage and certainly not go out to dinner. Since my folks considered church a nuisance, I had never even spoken to a Reverend.

"*What kind of name is Prentice?* asked Sheldon.

"*What kind of name is Sheldon?*

"*Common-or-garden faggot's name.*

"*Go stuff it.*

"*Wish I could.*

"Sheldon was a funny guy and a good friend. Too bad women didn't interest him. I would've been better off if they had. Anyway, I didn't figure it was so unusual to have a last name for a first name, especially if you were destined to be a Reverend. I waited two days to call him, not because I wanted to, but because Sheldon insisted.

"*You got to keep the upper hand,* he said.

"What can I say about that dinner except that I didn't want it to end. A steakhouse in a neighborhood I didn't know. Bit out of the way, which was fine by me. Prentice started things off with a Scotch; and as I was thinking about a second Bud, he ordered a bottle of wine.

"*Hope you like wine.*

"*I haven't ... I sure do.*

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

"Keeping the upper hand didn't look to be working. I only had two glasses, but I still had a buzz going. Prentice finished the bottle. He talked a lot about himself. Thirty years old and haled from Georgia. Mission City was his second ministry. First was a church in Alabama. Had been there three years when, six months ago, they moved him.

"How come? I asked him.

"That's their way. They like to move young ministers around. Broadens our background.

"He loved to watch football and played basketball on Saturday mornings with a group of guys – two of whom had been his companions at the restaurant. His mother was a school teacher, and his father had also been a Methodist minister.

"Father simply assumed it's what I wanted.

"What did you want?

"To play in the NBA. JK as some of my younger parishioners like to say – or text rather. I had no idea what I wanted. Figured being a minister would be an okay gig. After all, I'm a people person.

"I couldn't stop pinching myself for the next few months. A man was attracted to me and found me interesting. I didn't know which was more of a turn on. Oh my God, I thought a gazillion times a day. Seventh Heaven had nothing on me. I lost another five pounds, and he noticed. I can't tell you all the stuff we did: dinners, movies, picnics, hikes up Cherokee Mountain. Whatever Mission City had to offer and then some. One Saturday, we drove eighty miles to a theme park and laughed all the way there and back. I was supposed to work, but I told Ricardo my Mom was seriously ill.

"You can see for miles from the top of Cherokee Mountain. The city looks like an electric train set; the mountain ridges melt into the blue distance like a painting. One side of the mountain is a sheer cliff with huge, looming boulders. Legend has it that a Cherokee girl jumped off the cliff because she didn't want to leave her white lover when her people were forced from the land. I wondered if it was true. I got goose bumps standing on the edge. I'm not scared of many things; I make exceptions for sheer drops.

"Whenever we climbed the mountain, I brought food and Prentice a bottle of wine. After eating and drinking, we would lie in the grass and make out. I loved the way he kissed me – with his tongue always seeming to find something interesting to investigate. One day, he reached inside my shirt and ran his hand under my bra. I felt the most exquisite shiver run up and down my spine. I was still a virgin at twenty-one. He caressed my stomach and then unzipped my jeans a little ways and slid his hand under the elastic of my panties. I had soaked my panties.

"I caressed the back of his neck, pulled on his earlobe with my mouth and whispered: 'I'm ready.' That sure in hell got him going. He kissed me like a hungry bear, pulled his jeans down to his knees and pushed against me. He was hard as the proverbial rock – which sure in hell got me going.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

I pulled down his boxer shorts – he was a minister, remember – and put my hand where it had never strayed before. Whoa!

“This is my first time.

“Excellent.

She stopped talking and studied him as if he were an amoeba under a microscope.

“Is this getting too graphic for you?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

“Then we’d better quit now.”

“it’s not just the sex.”

“What then?”

“I assume this is the man you’re going to kill.”

“You assume right.”

“Not sure I care to hear the details.”

“If I’m going to tell it, I have to include the details. You’ll see why.” Her eyes were as full of pain as a little girl’s whose doll has been lost or broken. “Upper crust banker in you coming out? Can’t stand to see life writ large and brutish?”

“You have no right...”

“I’m sorry. Forget I said that. Shall I continue?”

“I guess so.”

“Hell, we’ll be parting company after the storm.”

“Doesn’t mean I won’t remember.”

She nodded her head.

“He was very patient. It took an effort for him to enter me. When he did, I felt a quick stab of pain but nothing like what I had expected. I didn’t get off – that didn’t happen for a while – but it was still wonderful. Afterwards, we lay side-by-side in the grass. I looked up at this immense blue sky. The tall grass waved alongside my face. It was very hot and sweat trickled down my body. Insects buzzed around us. I hadn’t noticed them before – shows you what passion will do. We held hands - our fingers interlaced - but didn’t talk. I was in my own world. I had made love. Life was finally beginning.

“As we were drifting off to sleep, we heard voices and jumped up, straightening our clothes. Turned out it was our imaginations – that or some birds twittering. We looked down at the beaten grass and laughed. No trouble telling what we had been up to. After that, I actually started admiring my body in the mirror. I still wasn’t a skinny bitch, my boobies were too large and my ass wasn’t what you see on those boy-girls; but what the hell. Prentice suckled my nips and caressed my butt, and that’s all I cared about. I tried shedding a few more pounds; but I was done losing weight.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

"I should've been concerned about his drinking. He loved the booze which, I must admit, surprised me in a man of the cloth. Some cloth! I ignored it especially since we always went to classy joints – not dumps like Brady's for which the word dive was invented. I was in love so why sweat the small stuff. Did I say 'small stuff'? Sometimes we did our drinking miles from Mission City. Change of scenery sort of thing was how I figured it. You can call me a dumb-fuck anytime you want." She laughed. "But just try it."

"Not for the world," he said.

"Not that Prentice got rip-roaring drunk or even was a mean drinker. You know, the kind that likes to tie one on and then give their wives or girl friends matching black eyes. That wasn't Prentice. In fact, he got mighty amorous when he'd had a few although he wasn't always up to snuff. And thank God, he was a Methodist. If he'd been a Baptist, he'd have been looking for a new line of work. Might've made a difference, but I doubt it." She stopped. A faraway look came into her eyes. The fire glowed in the stove. The room was dead quiet. A solitary tear rolled down her cheek. "Sheldon took me aside one day.

"Your gentleman friend is getting quite the reputation for cozying up to the bottle. Could be why he left Alabama.

"Mind your own goddamn business. The anger in my voice set me back. Sheldon was my best friend. I'm sorry, I said. I like the odd drink myself.

"Odd drink, Sheldon muttered and went into the kitchen.

"My parents didn't approve of my seeing Prentice. Oh, they approved of Prentice all right. I brought him home one Sunday after services, and you'd have thought the President was coming over. Prentice charmed the dickens out of them, talking football with Daddy and – can you believe it – ladies' hair styles with Momma. Meanwhile, I tucked in. Never seen such a spread in our house. I didn't care if they had to roll me to the car. Course I had to starve myself for a week to lose the weight I'd gained. All I have to do is look at food and here come the pounds. Should've had a feather like those Romans. Almost did it without one that evening. Carrying all that food around at work, especially with the smells, almost caused my poor stomach to heave it all up like a geyser. What concerned them was that Prentice, being somewhat older, might try to have his way with me. Momma said as much on the phone the next morning. I didn't inform her that he was already having his every which way with me – and vice versa.

"I would sneak into the rectory after work and leave before dawn. He kept that adorable house neat as a pin. I loved it there. Sometimes we ordered pizza; but more often, Prentice cooked. He was downright handy with a spatula. A modern man. He had two DVD players: one in the living room and the second upstairs in the main bedroom. We watched movies after making love; or if it was X-rated, before, during and after. Prentice called them educational, meaning ... well, you know what he meant.

"My parents came round quick as lightening when Prentice asked me to marry him. After the shock waves rampaging through my body managed to subside, I said: 'Yes, yes, yes and please take me now.' Which he did, right on the sofa without even pulling the blinds. Thank God, it was

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

dark out. I got there three times; and by the time Prentice got around to it, I was afraid he'd bring the roof down on our heads. I called Momma first thing in the morning.

"Married life was, at first, a miracle - especially the miracle of Emma. Prentice said he got the name from Jane Austen. *Jane Who?* I didn't favor the look Prentice gave me before explaining so the next day I took my eight-month pregnant self down to the library. I had always liked to read and thought I knew something about books, but this was the first inkling that my English teachers might not have been up to snuff. Jane Austen, although I struggled some with her style, was love at first sight. You'll find her Collected Works in the bookcase."

"Don't judge a book by its cover," he thought.

"Thus began my serious reading. My folks bought Emma the prettiest crib, all decorated with foals and puppies and kittens. Prentice's Mom and Dad contributed a big girl's bed, which we stored in the basement. They drove up once a month and tried not to show how much they believed Prentice had married beneath his station. Ricardo flipped when I quit and begged me to do three nights a week. I thought the poor man would go down on his knees. Of course, me and Sheldon were his best. I liked having the extra money so I agreed. Methodist ministers, as you possibly know, aren't bankers."

"How about laying off bankers - for the time being?"

"Happy to when you lower that obscene mortgage rate."

He got up.

"Sit down. Relax. You already explained mortgage rates. I just meant it's a struggle to raise a kid on a minister's salary."

He sat back down.

"Our dream world looked set to last forever."

She got up and walked over to the wood stove. He watched her wide hips and butt. She walked without a trace of femininity. He drank some cold tea. She stirred the logs. The low flames leaped up. She added another and returned the poker to its holder. She came back to the kitchen table.

Good thing she doesn't wear tight jeans. Why some women wear skin-tight pants that look like they're ready to burst is beyond me. At least, she dresses sensibly.

"More tea?"

"I'm fine."

She sat down and resumed her story.

"Prentice came home one evening with a cut and swollen lip and bruises all over his face. Someone had ripped one sleeve practically off the shirt, and his windbreaker looking like it had been dragged through a pig sty. Emma, who was three, burst into tears when he stumbled into the kitchen. I don't know how he managed to drive home without killing himself. He had gotten into a brawl in a bar in one of the city's seedier neighborhoods. He was lucky someone hadn't stuck a knife in his gut. I had cut way back

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

on my drinking after Emma was born and had pleaded with Prentice to do the same. He did drink less at home but made up for it elsewhere. In the confusion at the bar, he had slipped away before the cops arrived; but someone had recognized him. The sheriff showed up later that night – mercifully after Prentice had washed up, changed clothes and sobered up some – and had a chat with him.

“Too frigging late. Word got out, and the Church Elders asked our bishop to re-assign us. He hadn’t told me that the Elders had already warned him. Lots of people apparently knew about his drinking. It was also not his first fight – just the most obvious. Sheldon would’ve had the balls to tell me the truth, but Sheldon was long gone. Before we moved to our new church in Tennessee, I insisted that he swear off the booze – except for an occasional drink at home. I didn’t consider that drinking. Fool!

“Turns out I liked the new parish. Although the town was smaller than Mission City, our neighborhood was a step up: leafy streets, solid houses, a playground a block away. The house ... well, I had dreamed of a house like that: neat white clapboard, wide front porch, two spacious bedrooms upstairs, cozy parlor with a gas fireplace. It suited me fine that it wasn’t a rectory attached to the church. Prentice talked about various projects, including adding a deck out back. I encouraged him. I figured every marriage has its rough spots, and we had come through these in decent shape. And I loved my neighbor, Mary Beth Reilly.

“Great place to raise kids, she said over coffee at her kitchen table while Emma and her twins drew farms peopled with oddly-proportioned animals. Schools are good; and if you avoid the wrong places, which everyone does, it’s totally safe. She glanced at one of the twins’ drawings. Beats me what it is, but I couldn’t have done as well at her age.

“We had a quiet few years. I got a job waitressing two nights a week. Prentice loved having Emma all to himself on those nights. They played hide-and-seek and then he gave her a bath and put her to bed – making up a different story every night. He was very creative that way. We tried to have another baby, but it didn’t work. After a couple of fruitless years, we both got tested. Nothing wrong so we kept at it. Still nothing. We talked about adopting but somehow never got around to it. Prentice still got mellow from time to time at home and occasionally went to bars with friends – including another minister. But he didn’t drink enough so that anyone would take notice, and I thought everything was fine. Emma would be asleep by the time he got home, and we would get into it. Those were okay days. I mean we had our fights, and he hit me when he was pissed off ... or pissed; but I didn’t make a big deal of it. I figured that’s what guys did. He started martial arts and learned how to hurt me without its showing or doing any real damage. To be honest, first couple of times he hit me, I walloped him back. But I gave that up soon enough. He hit much harder.

“One evening when Emma was eight, he said we ought to jazz up our sex lives. Naturally, he’d had a Scotch or two. Well, I thought after eleven-odd years, we had a damn fine sex life and proceeded to tell him so.

“Sure, he said, but even the best wine grows old.

“Thanks for the swell compliment.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

"Hold onto your shorts. I was just thinking of a few innovations.

"Recalling those X-rated movies, I told him I had nothing against innovations; and the first ones were fun: different positions he'd read about in some book or playing parts like him begging for it or pretending to whip me while I did him. He sent away for costumes, which we kept well-hidden to be sure Emma didn't find them; and I have to admit they were a turn on. But gradually, the make-believe got serious and the costumes weird. He started tying me to the bed or binding me in odd positions – telling me it really got to him and we needed to trust each other. Trust or no trust, I felt more and more uncomfortable – and downright scared at times. Besides, I never got off with these shenanigans. I was a super reluctant participant, but I didn't let on. The pretend whipping flew straight as a homing pigeon to real whipping. Nothing hard, nothing hurtful, no marks, but I hated it and wondered when it would get nasty."

"Sounds like it already had."

"Keep your socks on."

"You mean shut up and listen."

"For now."

She ran her hand through her thick hair. She rubbed the back of her neck. She called Jethro over from the stove and scratched him between the ears.

"I got off less and less frequently, and he didn't care much. I'm making this sound like it happened in a brief period, but we're talking about a couple of years. Sometimes we had plain, ordinary sex; and I became hopeful. Springs eternal, right? It's why I went along with it, always praying it would stop. Because it happened gradually, I didn't understand how strange we had become. But each step took us further downhill until I felt trapped in this nether world. We no longer had anything remotely like a normal sexual relationship. I hated it; I hated myself. But I had no clue what to do about it. Some people might've talked to their minister." She laughed. He didn't speak. "Not very funny, I guess."

"Not very."

"It gets less funny by the minute. I was pretty freaked out. Thought about nothing else. Emma asked me if I was okay. I lied. Said my stomach was bothering me. Had to watch what I ate. Told her it was nothing to worry about. She bought it." She paused as if deciding whether to go on. She drank some tea and made a face. She shrugged. "One night, we started to make at love. Good at first. I was getting turned on when he tried something revolting. I pushed him away. *Not on your life*, I said.

"Front door, back door, you still get in the house.

"Not my house, you don't.

"He didn't push it that night, but he kept after me. Claimed it was perfectly normal and that lots of couples did it. Said it was a real turn-on for both men and women. I said I couldn't speak for the men. As you've by now figured out, Prentice is both persuasive and persistent so I gave in. It was painful and horrible, but he loved it. He begged me to do it again, but

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

I told him no fucking way. One morning after Emma had left for school, he forced me. He started with nice caresses and French kisses – and fool, I thought maybe – but when I wouldn't let him turn me over, he grabbed my arms, flipped me on my stomach and held me down. He lifts weights so no problem. I struggled, but he just laughed. Afterwards, I wanted to spit in his eye. I felt dirty, humiliated. Wanted to vomit whenever I thought about it. Wasn't sure which was worse: the act or the rape. And don't you dare tell me it wasn't rape."

"I won't."

"You know by this time that I'm no prude. I'm well aware that some people, especially gay men, get off on that sort of thing. And I don't believe in telling other people what they should or shouldn't do. But I drew a line in the sand. The only feelings I had left for my husband were disgust and revulsion. We had hit frigging rock bottom, and I wanted out. Maybe not divorce but out. I was petrified that if I went for a divorce, he'd find a way to take Emma from me. Course I didn't know what out was but I thought at least it couldn't get any worse. What an idiot I was."

She stopped and then harrumphed. He waited.

"Why in God's name am I telling you all this?"

"Because it feels better?"

"It doesn't."

"Because you've held it in so long it had to come out?"

"Now don't go getting all psychological on me. I'm a simple country girl."

"You're hardly simple, and I wasn't getting psychological. I don't believe in playing amateur shrink. The pros have a hard enough time with it."

"Never had the privilege of meeting one."

"For whatever reason, maybe you just had to tell it to somebody ... anybody."

"No," she said with a hint of a smile. "Not just anybody."

Jethro went to the dog door and barked. Then he sat and looked at her.

"He's well-trained," she said. "Barks when he needs to go."

She let him out and stood at the window. Pale, dull light seeped into the room, giving it a tired, washed-out look. She stood erect, her broad shoulders squared as if on parade. The minutes slid by. She didn't move. Plenty long enough for the dog to do his business.

Why me? People don't make a habit of telling me their personal stories. Makes my marriage smell like a rose.

When she let Jethro back in, the dog shook himself violently, showering snow in all directions.

"I could use a whiskey," she said. "How about you?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

He looked at his watch. Not quite ten-fifteen. He never drank in the morning.

“Good idea,” he said.

The chair made a scraping noise as he slid back. He walked to a front window. The snow fell less thickly but had by no means stopped. Trees drooped under their heavy burdens. The landscape was white as a bridal gown. He could barely make out the distant ridges. He returned to the kitchen. She handed him a juice glass decorated with bright, yellow daisies. The Scotch burned like a hot iron. He choked. She smiled.

“Not the aged stuff you’re probably used to, but it does the job.”

“Feels like I got too close to a mule.”

She took a big swallow. “It does at that.” They sat back down at the kitchen table. “Prentice must have felt bad about the rape because things quieted down for a few months. We made love occasionally – common-or-garden stuff. Felt okay, and I allowed myself to hope. I put getting out on hold – to see what would happen. Maybe things would work out. Maybe I could forget that my beloved husband had raped me in the butt and maybe we would get normal again. What part of Disney World was I living in? Did I expect some genie to pop out of a bottle and straighten Prentice out?” Her laughter was sour as hard candy. “A whiskey bottle.” She drank some more. “I felt lethargic. Like here’s this freight train barreling down the track and I can’t find the energy to get off the track. Stupid, wasn’t it?”

“Not stupid. Denial. Happens all the time. Look at the Jews in Nazi Germany. Didn’t think Hitler meant what he said. Couldn’t get any worse, they thought. Hah!”

“Are you Jewish?”

“My grandfather. His cousin died in a concentration camp.”

“I’m sorry.” She reached out a hand as if she were going to touch his but pulled it back. “You know a lot.”

“For a guy walking around in a snow storm?”

“Precisely.”

They sipped their whiskey in silence. An owl hooted. Jethro raised his head and then went back to sleep. Owls were of little interest compared to coyotes.

“Don’t think I was in total la-la land. I was hopeful, that’s all. I didn’t trust him. Since he only pulled the weird stuff when Emma was out of the house, I dreaded sleepovers. But you can’t say no – not without a reason. At least, I couldn’t. She was turning thirteen, which I figured was a big deal, so we planned an over-the-top party. She could hardly sleep, looking forward to that party. Two weeks before the big day, her best friend, Samantha, invited her over for a sleepover. Samantha lived across town, and Prentice dropped Emma off. He took an unusually long time to get home. We had dinner reservations, and I was changing. I only had on a bra and panties when I heard him climbing the stairs. His tread sounded slow and deliberate. Normally he moved quickly. I was hunting for my blue dress in the closet. He slipped in behind me and put his arms around me. He

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

nuzzled my neck. He turned me around and kissed my lips, my ears and the cleft between my breasts. He slipped a hand inside my panties and stroked my butt. Gently, I freed myself and said: *I thought we were going out for dinner.*"

"I had a better idea.

"How about later?"

"Later's too late for what I have in mind. Something very special.

"No, I said and tried to push past him. He swooped me up like a doll and carried me to the bed. I cursed and squirmed, but threw me down and tied one of my hands to the bedstead with a silk ribbon he had hidden under the pillow. In doing so, he freed one of my hands. I swung and hit the back of his head. He slapped my cheek, hard, and said: *Try that again and you'll regret it.* I lay still and cried. My cheek stung. He tied my other hand and both feet. I begged him not to do whatever it was he had in mind. He just smiled and said: *This is going to be fun. You might really like it. I certainly will.*

"He took off my bra and tried ripping my panties, but the material wouldn't tear so he cut them off with a scissors. When I saw the scissors, I screamed. *Don't worry,* he laughed. *No one's going to hurt you.* The no one didn't register. He got his camera and took a few pictures. I felt so exposed, so ashamed. Then he left.

"After a few minutes, I heard footsteps. It sounded like more than one person, and I realized what was going to happen. I wanted to cry for help; but who would hear me, and I figured it would only make things worse. I was whimpering when Prentice entered the room followed by a tall, black man. All I can remember about the man was a scar across one cheek, that he was bald except for some fuzz and that, when he stripped, he was lean and muscular."

She put her face in her hands. He sat rigid, trying to think clearly.

"Don't go on," he said. "This is too hard on you, and I've heard enough."

"You," she snapped. "You've heard enough?" Her eyes were fierce and angry. "I mean to finish. You started this with all your damn questions. Well, sir, I mean to finish it. You got to be careful what you start."

"Yes," was all he could say.

"The man had me twice, with Prentice murmuring, in a threatening tone: *Be nice to him.* I was shaking when the man left. It had hurt badly. The man had said absolutely nothing. Prentice had taken pictures the whole time. I don't know if he got them developed; I never saw them. I tried to find them to destroy them; and then my lawyer searched for them; but neither of us had any damn luck. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Prentice took the man downstairs. I heard the kitchen door open and close. Prentice came back and sat on the bed, stroking me. It was horrible.

"Don't think of telling anybody," Prentice said in a hoarse voice as if he had been running. "The menace in his voice was unlike anything I'd ever

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

heard. I couldn't recognize it as Prentice's voice. I was petrified. Then he undressed and knelt on me. He..."

"Stop."

She got up and crossed to a window. She looked out. He got up and took a step towards her. She turned and faced him. "You fucking men," she spat out and charged him, fists raised. He lifted his hands, palms out, to protect himself. She stopped just short of him. She looked at him, stunned, and then turned away.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

He let out his breath.

"That's okay, but let's call it a day."

She walked over to the stove, warmed her hands and put in two logs. She circled the room like a tiger. He stood, rooted to the spot. She went back to the table and finished her whiskey. "Let me finish. I've got it under control." She carried her glass to the counter. "But I could use another one."

He drained his glass.

"Me too."

She refilled the glasses.

"Let's sit by the stove. I'll feel better not staring across the table at you."

They sat in the armchairs. She seemed to be composing her thoughts and, at the same time, fighting her emotions. He sipped whiskey while he waited. He looked at the fire and then around the room, his glance pausing briefly on the painting of the woman and young girl.

"For the next two weeks, Prentice stayed away from me. I suspect he felt a certain amount of guilt. I went out whenever Emma was not home. I made up all kinds of excuses. During the day, I sat in the town library. I didn't read. I just sat. If she were going to a friend's house for the evening, I arranged to go out with Mary Beth or some other friends. I had no idea what to do if she wanted a sleepover. I wanted a divorce but I didn't know any lawyers. I couldn't ask my friends. What was I supposed to tell them? On the outside, we looked like an ideal couple. Finally, I just looked in the phone book and found a family-practice lawyer who was a member of our congregation. I had talked to him briefly at one or two church socials. I was still afraid that Prentice might somehow get custody of Emma so I procrastinated. As Emma's party rolled around, I was working up the courage to call this fellow.

"The party was fabulous. She was so beautiful and happy. Prentice could not have been sweeter, but I couldn't stop trembling. No one seemed to notice. If they did, maybe they chalked it up to emotions at Emma's rite of passage. She beamed when she saw our present: a bazillion-speed bike. Emma's quite the athlete and loves to cycle. She had ridden her old bike all over town, and it was on its last legs. Prentice and I had bought the new one months earlier.

"One Friday, not long after the party, I left Emma home after school

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

to go grocery shopping. I had determined to call the lawyer on Monday. Prentice had invited friends over for Saturday so the shopping took me a while. He seemed to think our social life would go on as if we hadn't a care in the world. I stopped for Chinese take-out on the way home. I had no desire to cook that night. I got back a little after six. Prentice helped me carry in the bags. As I was putting stuff in the fridge, I called out for Emma but no answer.

"Where's Emma?"

"She was bored so I told her to arrange a sleepover. She's at Samantha's."

He smiled sweetly.

"My stomach felt like I had hit an air pocket. Trapped – just fucking trapped. Too late to call Mary Beth, and I couldn't just go pick up Emma. She'd of had a fit. So I prayed. We didn't speak during dinner. Prentice's face showed nothing – a mask concentrating on his chop sticks. He had never been any good with them. After making a fool of himself, he got a fork.

"Don't know why I even try," he said with a queer smile.

"He started as I was putting a glass into the dishwasher. I thought he was going to the fridge, but he slipped behind me and put his arms around me. He kissed my cheek and neck. I froze. He took the glass from my hand and set it in the tray. He gripped me tightly and began moving against my rear.

"Another special night," he whispered. *"Our friend will be here soon. You'll get off this time for sure."*

"That unfroze me. I wasn't going through that again. Whatever holds a brain together snapped like an over-stretched rubber band. If it's possible to see red, I saw red. I pulled a knife from a holder on the counter. I keep my knives sharp. I did a half-turn and struck upwards. I later learned I severed an artery in his neck. Blood spurted like one of those high-powered water guns. Prentice moaned and let me go. I went crazy. I stabbed him in the face and chest. He fell to the floor. I stabbed a few more times and then hurled the knife across the kitchen. It left a streak of blood on a wall. Blood was gushing onto the tiled floor. I rocked back and forth on my knees. I heard a gurgling sound and blood spilled from Prentice's mouth. His body shuddered and lay still. He was dead. I kept rocking. Someone knocked on the kitchen door. In a trance, I went down the short corridor and opened it. The black man seemed surprised to see me.

"Oh, it's you," I said as if he was our best friend.

"Where's the man?"

"He pushed past me and went into the kitchen. He took one look and tore back through the door, without closing it. I called nine-eleven."

"Jesus."

"Too late for Jesus."

"I meant."

"I know what you meant."

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

He started to get out of the armchair.

“Stay put.”

He sat back down. A grim half-smile played across her lips and vanished. Despite his proximity to the stove, he felt chilled.

“There’s only a little more.”

Jethro had been lying under the kitchen table. He got up, stretched like it was a Yoga class, and padded over to the stove. After warming himself, the shepherd went to the woman who scratched him absent-mindedly. Not satisfied, the dog sidled over to the man, who did the same.

“He’s decided you’re okay.”

“Funny because I’ve never had a dog. My sister was allergic. Later, I thought it wasn’t fair – in a city. They’re always on leashes.”

She didn’t respond. She continued watching him scratch Jethro. In her mind, he was sure, she was seeing something quite different.

“Emma stayed at Samantha’s until my parents came for her. I was charged with first-degree murder. The lawyer my parents dug up did his best, but he was no Will Gardner. He ransacked the house but couldn’t find the pictures and what chance did he have of finding the black man – even with the scar and fuzzy head. Not that I didn’t look at pictures of black criminals until my mind was swimming. By the time we quit, I wasn’t sure whether I’d recognize him if the bastard walked up to me and said:

Hey bitch, I’m the guy your loony husband paid to rape you while he got off taking candid photos.

“None of the pictures rang a bell; and while my lawyer made inquiries among the seamier elements in the black community, he got nowhere.

“*Fellow more than likely hit the road*, he commented sagely. I could’ve figured that out with one hand tied behind my back.

“To his credit, however, my lawyer found bartenders who would testify to Prentice’s drinking but none who would say he drank to excess. There was no official record of the brawl back in North Carolina. The Methodist organization indicated that Prentice had been moved at the Elders’ request, but that the file did not mention drinking as a cause. It only mentioned doctrinal differences and friction within the community. In Alabama, drinking was mentioned but not as the primary reason for the transfer. The congregation felt it was time for a change. The autopsy did not show elevated levels of alcohol; and as my lawyer pointed out, drinking is not grounds for killing a man. At the time of my arrest, I showed no signs of physical abuse.

“My lawyer said I could take the stand and testify about the black man, but it would be my word against a dead minister’s. The prosecutor would provide plenty of testimony to the outstanding job Prentice had been doing for his congregation.”

“What about your motive?” he asked in an indignant tone. “Protecting

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

yourself from abuse would hardly be grounds for a murder charge – certainly not first degree.”

“Glad you noticed since I thought the same. But they came up with a motive that would: jealousy. The saintly Reverend Holloway had apparently been fucking the brains – assuming she had any – out of a widowed member of the congregation, and she claimed I had found out, which was, of course, pure bullshit. I didn’t have a clue although I should have. A man like Prentice. He had even made her certain promises – whether being tied up and raped was one of them I couldn’t say. The distraught widow was prepared, at the expense of her good name, to testify.”

He leaned forward, anger suffusing his face.

“Don’t,” she cautioned. “I know where you’re going. My lawyer also pointed out that neither is outrage over adultery grounds for murder. Hell’s bells, I could have also told him that and I’m a dumb fuck. Prentice’s morals were not on trial; I was. Leading a congregant astray is jim-dandy so long as you’re leading the rest of the sheep in prayer.”

“I hope that’s not really true.”

“Hope all you want. Look where it got me.”

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

He looked at his hands and noticed how neatly clipped were his nails. He didn’t even have a garden to muck around in. He eschewed manual labor of any sort. He believed in fixing the martini and calling the electrician when a light bulb needed changing. If they thought it was a joke, he told friends, he’d invite them over the next time a bulb went out. Her hands were chapped and her nails well-chewed.

“Didn’t anybody ask why, if it was pre-meditated, you would choose to attack a large, strong man trained in martial arts from the front? Or with a knife rather than another weapon?”

“You’ve hit the one crack in their case. My lawyer said we could try self-defense; but without any evidence as to the existence of our black friend or any sign in the kitchen of a struggle, the jury likely wouldn’t buy it. I had been so lucky – or unlucky – in killing him so fast. The multiple stab wounds could’ve been part of my plan. Anyway, the D.A. concluded I had just enough of a chance with self-defense to offer a deal. I pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and was given seven years, including time already served.

“My lawyer popped the champagne corks – not literally although maybe he did back in the office. I had, in his humble opinion, narrowly missed a death penalty or life in prison. I didn’t feel quite so pumped up. But he did his best, considering he wasn’t even half as smart as me.”

How absurdly unfair. How often do the innocent get punished while the guilty go free?

He had questions, but now was not the time – except for one that he had to ask.

“Emma?”

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

"I haven't seen her since that night. She never visited me in prison and didn't answer any of my letters. I wrote a slew. My parents gave them to me, unopened, when I got out. They had told her that it was a fight, that I had acted in self-defense, that Prentice was a violent man; but she didn't believe them. She was crazy about her father. That's all I had told them – nothing about the black guy or any of the other stuff. What was the point?"

"She stayed with my parents until she was eighteen and then went to California. My parents know where she is but won't tell me. *We can't*, Momma told me in tears. Emma told them if she ever heard from me, no one would ever find her again. She changed her last name so I couldn't track her down. I'll never see her again."

She glanced at the painting of the woman and young girl and then stared straight ahead. He waited a minute. He nudged Jethro aside, rose from his chair and crossed to where she sat stony-faced. He placed a hand on her shoulder.