

ALSO BY TAYARI JONES

Silver Sparrow

The Untelling

Leaving Atlanta



An American Marriage

TAYARI JONES

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2018

For my mother's sister, Alma Faye,

and for Maxine & Marcia, my own

What happens to you doesn't belong to you, only half concerns you. It's not

yours. Not yours only.

-CLAUDIA RANKINE

CONTENTS

<u>ONE</u>

<u>Roy</u>

<u>Celestial</u>

Letters

<u>TWO</u>

Andre

<u>Celestial</u>

<u>Roy</u>

<u>Celestial</u>

<u>Roy</u>

Andre

<u>Roy</u>

Celestial

<u>Roy</u>

Andre

<u>Roy</u>

<u>Celestial</u>

<u>Roy</u>

THREE

Andre

<u>Celestial</u>

<u>Roy</u>

<u>Celestial</u>

<u>Roy</u>

<u>Celestial</u>

<u>Roy</u>

Andre

<u>Roy</u>

Andre

<u>Celestial</u>

Andre

<u>Roy</u>

Epilogue

<u>Acknowledgments</u>

About the Author

About Algonquin

ONE

Bridge Music

ROY

There are two kinds of people in the world, those who leave home, and those who don't. I'm a proud member of the first category. My wife, Celestial, used to say that I'm a country boy at the core, but I never cared for that designation. For one, I'm not from the country per se. Eloe, Louisiana, is a small town. When you hear "country," you think raising crops, baling hay, and milking cows. Never in my life have I picked a single cotton boll, although my daddy did. I have never touched a horse, goat, or pig, nor have I any desire to. Celestial used to laugh, clarifying that she's not saying I'm a farmer, just country. She is from Atlanta, and there was a case to be made that she is country, too. But let her tell it, she's a "southern woman," not to be confused with a "southern belle." For some reason, "Georgia peach" is all right with her, and it's all right with me, so there you have it.

Celestial thinks of herself as this cosmopolitan person, and she's not wrong. However, she sleeps each night in the very house she grew up in. I, on the other hand, departed on the first thing smoking, exactly seventy-one hours after high school graduation. I would have left sooner, but the Trailways didn't stop through Eloe every day. By the time the mailman brought my mama the cardboard tube containing my diploma, I was all moved into my dorm room at Morehouse College attending a special program for first-generation scholarship types. We were invited to show up two and a half months before the legacies, to get the lay of the land and bone up on the basics. Imagine twenty-three young black men watching Spike Lee's School Daze and Sidney Poitier's To Sir with Love on loop, and you either will or will not get the picture. Indoctrination isn't always a bad thing.

All my life I have been helped by leg-up programs—Head Start when I was five and Upward Bound all the way through. If I ever have kids, they will be able to pedal through life without training wheels, but I like to give credit where it is due.

Atlanta is where I learned the rules and learned them quick. No one ever called me stupid. But home isn't where you *land*; home is where you *launch*. You can't pick your home any more than you can choose your family. In poker, you get five cards. Three of them you can swap out, but two are yours to keep: family and native land.

I'm not talking bad about Eloe. Obviously there are worse native lands; a big-picture mind can see that. For one, Eloe may be in Louisiana, not a state brimming with opportunity, but it is located in America, and if you're going to be black and struggling, the United States is probably the best place to do it. However, we were not poor. Let me make that extra-strength clear. My daddy worked too hard at Buck's Sporting Goods by day plus handymanning in the evenings, and my mother spent too many hours fixing trays at the meat-and-three for me to act like we had neither pot nor window. Let the record show that we had both.

Me, Olive, and Big Roy were a family of three, and we lived in a sturdy brick house on a safe block. I had my own room, and when Big Roy built an extension, I had my own bathroom. When I outgrew my shoes, I never waited for new ones. While I have received financial aid, my parents did their part to send me to college.

Still, the truth is that there was nothing extra. If my childhood were a sandwich, there would be no meat hanging off the bread. We had what we needed and nothing more. "And nothing less," my mama would have said, and then wrapped me in one of her lemon-drop hugs.

When I arrived in Atlanta, I was under the impression that I had my whole life ahead of me—endless reams of blank paper. And you know what they say: a Morehouse Man always has a pen. Ten years later, my life was at its sweet spot. When anybody said, "Where are you from?" I said, "The A!" so intimate with the city that I knew her by her nickname. When asked about my family, I talked about Celestial.

We were properly married for a year and a half, and we were happy for that time, at least I was. Maybe we didn't do happy like other people, but we're not your garden-variety bourgeois Atlanta Negroes where the husband goes to bed with his laptop under his pillow and the wife dreams about her blue-box jewelry. I was young, hungry, and on the come-up. Celestial was an artist, intense and gorgeous. We were like *Love Jones*, but grown. What can I say? I always had a weakness for shooting-star women. When you're with them, you know that you're deep into something, none of that hi-and-bye stuff. Before Celestial, I dated this other girl, also born and raised in the A. This girl, as proper as you can picture, she pulled a gun on me at an Urban League gala! I'll never forget that silver .22 with a pink mother-of-pearl handle. She flashed it inside her purse under the table where we were enjoying steak and au gratin potatoes. She said she knew I was cheating on her with some chick from the Black Bar Association. How can I explain this? I was scared, and then I wasn't. Only an Atlanta girl could be so classy while doing something so hood. It was love-logic, granted, but I wasn't sure if I should propose or call the police. We broke up before daybreak, and it wasn't my decision.

After Pistol Girl, I lost my touch with the ladies for a minute. I read the news as same as anyone, and I heard about some supposed black man shortage, but it seemed that the good news had yet to make an impact on my social life. Every woman I took a shine to had someone else waiting in the cut.

A little competition is healthy for all parties involved, but Pistol Girl's departure got up my skin like chiggers and sent me to Eloe for a few days to talk things over with Big Roy. My father has this alpha-omega way about him, like he was here before you showed up and he would be sitting in his same recliner chair long after you left.

"You don't want no woman that brandished a firearm, son."

I tried to explain that what made it remarkable was the contrast between the streetness of the pistol and the glitter of the evening. Besides: "She was playing, Daddy."

Big Roy nodded and sucked the foam from his glass of beer. "If that's how she plays, what's going to happen when she gets mad?"

From the kitchen, as though speaking through a translator, my mother called, "Ask him who she is with now. She might be crazy, but she's not crazy. Nobody would dismiss Little Roy without somebody on the back bench."

Big Roy asked, "Your mother wants to know who she is with now." Like we weren't all speaking English.

"Some attorney dude. Not like Perry Mason. Contracts. A paperwork sort of person."

"Aren't you a paperwork person?" Big Roy asked.

"Totally different. Being a rep, that's temporary. Besides, paperwork isn't my destiny. It's just what I happen to be doing now."

"I see," Big Roy said.

My mother was still peanut-gallerying from the kitchen. "Tell him that he

is always letting these light-skinned girls hurt his feelings. Tell him he needs to remember some of the girls right here in Allen Parish. Tell him to lift somebody up with him."

Big Roy said, "Your mother says—" before I cut him off. "I heard her and didn't nobody say that girl was light-skinned." But of course she was, and my mama has a thing about that. Now Olive came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a striped dish towel. "Don't get mad. I'm not trying to get in your business." Nobody can really satisfy their mama when it comes to the ladies. All my buddies tell me that their mothers are steady warning them, "If she can't use your comb, don't bring her home." Ebony and Jet both swear up and down that all the black men with two nickels to rub together are opting for the swirl. As for me, I'm strictly down with the brown, and my mama has the nerve to fret about which particular shade of sister I was choosing. But you would think that she would have liked Celestial. The two of them favored so much that they could have been the ones related. They both had that clean pretty, like Thelma from Good Times, my first TV crush. But no, as far as my mama was concerned, Celestial looked right, but she was from a different world—Jasmine in Bernadette's clothing. Big Roy, on the other hand, was so taken by Celestial that he would have married her if I didn't.

None of this scored any points with Olive.

"There is only one thing that will win me any ground with your mother," Celestial once said.

"And what might that be?"

"A baby," she said with a sigh. "Whenever I see her, she looks me up and down like I might be holding her grandbabies hostage in my body." "You exaggerate." But the truth was, I knew where my mother was coming from. After a year, I was ready to get this show on the road, creating a new generation with an updated set of rules and regulations. Not that there was anything wrong with the way either one us was brought up, but still, the world is changing, so the way you bring up kids had to change, too. Part of my plan was to never one time mention picking cotton. My parents always talked about either real cotton or the idea of it. White people say, "It beats digging a ditch"; black people say, "It beats picking cotton." I'm not going to remind my kids that somebody died in order for me to do everyday things. I don't want Roy III sitting up in the movie theater trying to watch Star Wars or what have you and be thinking about the fact that sitting down eating some popcorn is a right that cost somebody his life. None of that. Or maybe not much of that. We'll have to get the recipe right. Now Celestial promises that she will never say that they have

to be twice as good to get half as much. "Even if it's true," she said, "what kind of thing is that to say to a five-year-old?"

She was the perfect balance in a woman, not a button-down corporate type, but she wore her pedigree like the gloss on a patent-leather shoe. In addition, she popped like an artist, without veering into crazy. In other words, there was no pink pistol in her purse, but there was no shortage of passion either. Celestial liked to go her own way and you could tell that from looking at her. She was tall, five nine, flat-footed, taller than her own father. I know that height is the luck of the draw, but it felt like she chose all that altitude. Her hair, big and wild, put her a smidge over my head. Even before you knew she was a genius with needle and thread, you could tell you were dealing with a unique individual. Although some people—and by "some people," I mean my mama—couldn't see it, all that's what was going to make her an excellent mother.

I have half a mind to ask her if we could name our child—son or daughter —Future.

If it had been up to me, we would be all aboard the baby train on our honeymoon. Picture us laid up in a glass-bottom cabana over the ocean. I didn't even know they *had* shit like that, but I pretended to be all about it when Celestial showed me the brochure, telling her it was on my bucket list. There we were, relaxing up over the ocean, enjoying each other. The wedding was more than a day behind us because Bali was twenty-three first-class hours away. For the wedding, Celestial had been done up like a doll-baby version of herself. All that crazy hair was wrangled into a ballerina bun and the makeup made her seem to blush. When I saw her floating down the aisle toward me, her and her daddy both were giggling like this whole thing was only a dress rehearsal. There I was, serious as four heart attacks and a stroke, but then she looked up at me and puckered her pink-paint lips in a little kiss and I got the joke. She was letting me know that all of this—the little girls holding up the train of her gown, my morning jacket, even the ring in my pocket—was just a show. What was real was the dance of light in her eyes and the quick current of our blood. And then I smiled, too.

In Bali, that slick hair was long gone and she was rocking a 1970s *Jet* magazine fro and wearing nothing but body glitter.

"Let's make a baby."

She laughed. "That's how you want to ask me?"

"I'm serious."

"Not yet, Daddy," she said. "Soon, though."

On our paper anniversary, I wrote on a sheet of paper. "Soon like now?"

She turned it over and wrote back, "Soon like yesterday. I went to the doctor and he said all systems are go."

But it was another piece of paper that hemmed us up—my very own business card. We were back home after our anniversary dinner at the Beautiful Restaurant, a half diner, half cafeteria on Cascade Road. Not fancy, but it was where I popped the question. She'd said, "Yes, but put that ring away before we get jacked!" On our wedding anniversary, we returned, for a feast of short ribs, mac and cheese, and corn pudding. Then we headed home for dessert, two slices of wedding cake that had been sitting in the freezer for 365, waiting to see if we would stick through the year. Not content to leave well enough alone, I opened my wallet to show the photo of her that I kept there. As I pulled the picture from its sleeve, my business card floated free, landing softly beside the slabs of amaretto cake. On the back, in purple ink, was a woman's first name and phone number, which was bad enough. But Celestial noticed three more digits, which she assumed to be a hotel room number.

"I can explain this." The truth was straightforward: I liked the ladies. I enjoyed a little flirtation, what they call *frisson*. Sometimes I collected phone numbers like I was still in college, but 99.997 percent of the time it ended there. I just liked to know that I still had it. Harmless, right? "Get to explaining," she said.

"She slipped it into my pocket."

"How did she slip you your own business card?" Celestial was mad, and it turned me on a little, like the click on the stove before the flame took. "She asked me for my card. I thought it was innocent."

Celestial stood up and collected the saucers, weighed down with cake and dropped them in the trash, wedding china be damned. She returned to the table, picked up her flute of pink champagne and slammed the bubbly like a shot of tequila. Then she snatched my glass out of my hand, drank my share, and then tossed the long-stemmed glasses into the garbage, too. As they broke, they rang like bells.

"You are so full of shit," she said.

"But where am I now?" I said. "Right here with you. In our home. I lay my head on your pillow every night."

"On our fucking anniversary," she said. Now her mad was melting into sad. She sat on her breakfast chair. "Why get married if you want to cheat?" I didn't point out that you had to be married in order to cheat at all. Instead, I told her the truth. "I never even called that girl." I sat beside her. "I love you." I said it like a magic charm. "Happy anniversary." She let me kiss her, which was a positive sign. I could taste the pink champagne on her lips. We were out of our clothes when she bit me hard on the ear. "You are such a liar." Then she stretched across to my nightstand and produced a shiny foil pack. "Wrap it up, mister."

I know that there are those out there who would say that our marriage was in trouble. People have a lot of things to say when they don't know what goes on behind closed doors, up under the covers, and between night and morning. But as a witness to, and even a member of, our relationship, I'm convinced that it was the opposite. It meant something that I could make her mad with just a scrap of paper and she could make me crazy with just a rubber.

Yes, we were a married couple, but we were still young and smitten. One year in and the fire was still burning blue hot.

The thing is this: it's a challenge being 2.0. On paper, we're *A Different World: Where Are They Now?* Whitley and Dwayne all grown up. But Celestial and me are something Hollywood never imagined. She was gifted and I was her manager and muse. It's not like I lay around in my birthday suit so she could draw me. No, I simply lived my life and she watched. When we were engaged, she won a competition for a glass sculpture she created. From a distance, it looked to be a shooter marble, but when you got up close and looked from the right angle, you could make out the lines of my profile swirled inside. Somebody offered her five thousand dollars for it, but she wouldn't part with it. This isn't what happens when a marriage is in danger.

She did for me and I did for her in return. Back in the day, when you worked so your wife didn't have to, they called that "sitting your woman down." It was a goal of Big Roy's to sit Olive down, but it never quite worked out. In his honor, and maybe for my own, I worked all day so Celestial could stay home making dolls, her primary art medium. I'm into the museum-quality marbles and the delicate line drawings, but the dolls were something that an ordinary person could get behind. My vision was a line of cloth dolls that we were going to sell wholesale. You could display them on a shelf or hug the stuffing out of them. There would still be the high-end custom jobs and art pieces. Those could fetch five figures, easy. But the everyday dolls were going to make her mark, I told her. And you see, I turned out to be right.

I know that all of this is water under the bridge, and not a sweet little creek either. But to be fair, I have to tell this whole story. We were married only a year and some change, but it was a good year. Even she would have to admit that.

A METEOR CRASHED our life on Labor Day weekend when we went to

Eloe to visit my parents. We traveled by car because I liked a road trip. Planes, I associated with my job. Back then, I was a rep for a textbook company, specializing in math books, even though my way with numbers ended with my 12 times tables. I was successful at my gig because I knew how to sell things. The week before, I closed a nice adoption at my alma mater, and I was in the running for one at Georgia State. It didn't make me a mogul, but I was looking forward to a bonus hefty enough to start talking about buying a new house. Nothing was wrong with our current abode, a solid ranch house on a quiet street. It's just that it was a wedding gift from her parents, her childhood home, deeded over to their only daughter, and only to her. It was like white people do, a leg up, American style. But I kind of wanted to hang my hat on a peg with my own name on it.

This was on my mind but not on my spirit as we drove up I-10 on our way to Eloe. We settled down after our anniversary skirmish and we were back in rhythm with each other. Old-school hip-hop thumped from the stereo of our Honda Accord, a family kind of car with two empty seats in the back. Six hours in, I clicked on the blinker at exit 163. As we merged onto a two-lane highway, I felt a change in Celestial. Her shoulders rode a little higher, and she nibbled on the ends of her hair.

"What's wrong," I asked, turning down the volume of the greatest hip-hop

album in history.

"Just nervous."

"About what?"

"You ever have a feeling like maybe you left the stove on?"

I returned the volume on the stereo to somewhere between thumping and bumping. "Call your boy, Andre, then."

Celestial fumbled with the seatbelt like it was rubbing her neck the wrong way. "I always get like this around your parents, self-conscious, you know." "My folks?" Olive and Big Roy are the most down-to-earth people in the history of ever. Celestial's folks, on the other hand, were not what you would call approachable. Her father was a little dude, three apples tall, with this immense Frederick Douglass fro, complete with side part-and to top it off, he is some sort of genius inventor. Her mother worked in education, not as a teacher or a principal but as an assistant superintendent to the whole school system. And did I mention that her dad hit pay dirt about ten or twelve years ago, inventing a compound that prevents orange juice from separating so fast? He sold that sucker to Minute Maid and ever since, they have been splashing around naked in a bathtub full of money. Her mama and daddy—now *that's* a hard room. Next to them, Olive and Big Roy are cake. "You know my folks love you," I said.

"They love you."

"And I love you, so they love you. It's basic math."

Celestial looked out the window as the skinny pine trees whipped by. "I don't feel good about this, Roy. Let's go home."

My wife has a flair for the dramatic. Still, there was a little hitch in her words that I can only describe as fear.

"What is it?"

"I don't know," she said. "But let's go back."

"What would I tell my mother? You know she has dinner cooking at full tilt by now."

"Blame it on me," Celestial said. "Tell her everything's my fault."

Looking back on it, it's like watching a horror flick and wondering why the characters are so determined to ignore the danger signs. When a spectral voice says, get out, you should do it. But in real life, you don't know that you're in a scary movie. You think your wife is being overly emotional. You quietly hope that it's because she's pregnant, because a baby is what you need to lock this thing in and throw away the key.

WHEN WE ARRIVED at my parents' home, Olive was waiting on the front

porch. My mother had a fondness for wigs, and this time she was wearing curls the color of peach preserves. I pulled into the yard close up to the bumper of my daddy's Chrysler, threw the car in park, flung open the door, and bounded up the stairs two at a time to meet my mama halfway with an embrace. She was no bigger than a minute, so I bent my back to sweep her feet up off the porch and she laughed musical like a xylophone.

"Little Roy," she said. "You're home."

Once I set her down, I looked over my shoulder and didn't see anything but dead air, so I trotted back down the stairs, again two at a time. I opened the car door and Celestial extended her arm. I swear, I could hear my mother roll her eyes as I helped my wife out of the Honda.

"IT'S A TRIANGLE," Big Roy explained as the two of us enjoyed a corner of cognac in the den while Olive was busy in the kitchen and Celestial freshened up. "I was lucky," he said. "When I met your mama, we were both a couple of free agents. My parents were both dead and gone, and hers were way in Oklahoma, pretending like she was never born." "They'll get it together," I told Big Roy. "Celestial takes a minute to get used to people."

"Your mama isn't exactly Doris Day," he said in agreement, and we raised our glasses to the difficult women we were crazy about.

"It'll get better when we have a kid," I said.

"True. A grandbaby can soothe a savage beast."

"Who you calling a beast?" My mother materialized from the kitchen and sat on Big Roy's lap like a teenager.

From the other doorway Celestial entered, fresh, lovely, and smelling of tangerines. With me nestled in the recliner and my parents love-birding on the couch, there was no place for her to sit, so I tapped my knee. Gamely, she perched on my lap and we seemed to be on an awkward double date circa 1952.

My mother righted herself. "Celestial, I hear you're famous."

"Ma'am?" she said, and jerked a little to get up off my lap, but I held her fast.

"The magazine," she said. "Why didn't you tell us you were making waves in the world?"

Celestial looked shy. "It's just the alumnae bulletin."

"It's a magazine," my mother said, picking up the shiny copy from under the coffee table and flipping it to a dog-eared page featuring Celestial holding a cloth doll that represented Josephine Baker. "Artists to Watch," announced a bold font.

"I sent it," I admitted. "What can I say? I'm proud."

"Is it true that people pay five thousand dollars for your dolls?" Olive pursed her lips and cut her eyes. "Not usually," Celestial said, but I spoke over her.

"That's right," I said. "You know I'm her manager. Would I let somebody shortchange my wife?"

"Five thousand dollars for a baby doll?" Olive fanned herself with the magazine, lifting her peach-preserve hair. "I guess that's why God invented white folks."

Big Roy chuckled, and Celestial struggled like a backside beetle to get free from my lap. "The picture doesn't do it justice," she said, sounding like a little girl. "The headdress is hand-beaded and—"

"Five thousand dollars will buy a lot of beads," my mother noted.

Celestial looked at me, and in an attempt to make peace, I said, "Mama, don't hate the player, hate the game." If you have a woman, you recognize when you have said the wrong thing. Somehow she rearranges the ions in the air and you can't breathe as well.

"It's not a game; it's art." Celestial's eyes landed on the framed Africaninspired prints on the walls of the living room. "I mean real art."

Big Roy, a skilled diplomat, said, "Maybe if we could see one in person."

"There's one in the car," I said. "I'll go get it."

THE DOLL, SWADDLED in a soft blanket, looked like an actual infant. This

was one of Celestial's quirks. For a woman who was, shall we say,

apprehensive about motherhood, she was rather protective of these cloth creations. I tried to tell her that she was going to have to adopt a different attitude for when we opened up our storefront. The *poupées*, as the dolls were called, would sell for a fraction of the price of the art pieces, like the one I was holding. They would have to be sewn with a quickness and, once it caught on, mass production all the way. None of this cashmere blanket stuff. But I let her slide with this one, which was a commission for the mayor of Atlanta to be given as a gift to his chief of staff, who was expecting a baby around Thanksgiving.

When I parted the blanket so my mother could see the doll's face, she pulled in a loud breath. I gave Celestial a little wink, and she was kind enough to reset the ions in the air so I could breathe again.

"It's you," Olive said, taking the doll from me, taking care to support its head.

"I used his picture," Celestial piped up. "Roy is my inspiration."

"That's why she married me," I joked.

"Not the only reason," she said.

You know it was a charmed moment if my mother didn't have a single word to say. Her eyes were on the bundle in her arms as my father joined her and stared over her shoulder. "I used Austrian crystals for the hair," Celestial went on, getting excited. "Turn it to hit the light."

My mother did and the doll's head shimmered as light from our everyday bulbs bounced off the little cap of black beads. "It's like a halo," my mother said. "This is how it is when you really have a baby. You 've your own angel."

Now my mother moved to the couch and laid the doll on a cushion. It was a trippy experience because the doll really did favor me, or at least my baby pictures. It was like staring into an enchanted mirror. In Olive, I could see the sixteen-year-old she had been, a mother way too soon but as tender as springtime. "I could buy this from you?"

"No, Mama," I said, pride barreling up from my chest. "That's a special commission. Ten K. Quick and dirty, brokered by yours truly!"

"Of course," she said, folding the blanket over the doll like a shroud.

"What do I need a doll for? Old lady like me?"

"You can have it," Celestial said.

I gave her the look that she calls my Gary Coleman expression. The contract specified delivery by the end of the month. The deadline was more than firm; it was black-ink-notarized in triplicate. There was no CPT proviso. Without even looking at me, Celestial said, "I can make another one." Olive said, "No, I don't want to set you back. It's just that he's so much like Little Roy."

I reached to take the doll from her, but my mother wasn't exactly releasing it and Celestial wasn't exactly making it easy. She's a sucker for anybody who appreciates her work. This was something else we were going to have to work on if we were going to make a real business out of this.

"Keep it," Celestial said, like she hadn't been working on this doll for three months. "I can make another one for the mayor."

Now it was Olive's turn to stir the ions.

"Oh, the mayor. Well, excuse me!" She handed me the doll. "Put it back in your car before I get it dirty. I don't want you sending me a bill for ten thousand dollars."

"I didn't mean it like that." Celestial looked at me in apology.

"Mama," I said.

"Olive," Big Roy said.

"Mrs. Hamilton," Celestial said.

"It's dinnertime," my mother said. "I hope y'all still eat candy yams and mustard greens."

WE ATE DINNER, not in silence, but nobody talked about anything. Olive

was so angry that she messed up the iced tea. I took a deep sip, expecting the soft finish of cane sugar, and choked on the hot taste of kosher salt. Shortly after that, my high school diploma fell off the wall, and a crack starred across the glass. Signs? Maybe. But I wasn't thinking about missives from above. I was too distracted by being accidentally caught between two women I treasured beyond question. It's not that I don't know how to handle myself when I'm in a situation. Every man knows what it is to spread himself around. But with my mother and Celestial, I was actually split down the middle. Olive brought me into this world and trained me up to be the man I recognized as myself. But Celestial was the portal to the rest of my life, the shiny door to the next level.

Dessert was sock-it-to-me cake, my favorite, but the tussle with that tenthousand-dollar doll stole my appetite. Nevertheless, I pushed my way through two cinnamon-swirled helpings because everybody knows the way to make a bad matter worse with a southern woman is to refuse her food. So I ate like a refugee and so did Celestial, even though we both had pledged to stay away from processed sugar.

Once we cleared the table, Big Roy said, "Ready to bring your bags in?" "No, Big Man," I said, my voice light. "I got us a room in the Piney Woods." "You would rather stay in that dump than your own home?" Olive said.

"I want to take Celestial back to the first beginning."

"You don't have to stay there to do that."

But the truth was that I did. It was a story that needed telling away from my parents' revisionist tendencies. After a year of marriage, she deserved to know who she was married to.

"Was this your idea?" my mother asked Celestial.

"No, ma'am. I'm happy to stay here."

"This is all me," I said, although Celestial was glad we were staying in the hotel. She said she never felt right about us sleeping together under either of our parents' roofs even though we were lawfully wedded, et cetera. Last time we were here she put on a Little House on the Prairie nightgown, although usually she slept au naturel.

"But I made up the room," Olive said, reaching suddenly for Celestial. The women looked at each other in a way that a man never looks at another man. For a beat, they were alone together in the house.

"Roy." Celestial turned to me, strangely frightened. "What do you think?"

"We'll be back in the morning, Mama," I said, kissing her. "Biscuits and honey."

HOW LONG DID it take for us to leave my mother's home? Maybe it's the

looking-back talking, but everyone except me seemed to have stones in their pockets. As we made our way through the door at last, my father handed Celestial the shrouded doll. He carried it awkwardly, like he couldn't decide if it was an object or a living thing.

"Give him some air," my mother said, pulling back the blanket, and the sinking orange sun lit up the halo.

"You can have it," Celestial said. "For real."

"That one is for the mayor," Olive said. "You can make me another one." "Or better yet, the real thing," Big Roy said, tracing an invisible pregnant belly with his big hands. His laughter broke whatever sticky spell bound us to the house, and we were able to leave.

Celestial thawed as soon as we climbed into the car. Whatever bad mojo or heebie-jeebies were bothering her vanished once we were back on the highway. She undid the French braids over her ears, nesting her head between her knees, busy unraveling and fluffing. When she sat up, she was herself again, riot of hair and wicked smile. "Oh my Lord, that was awkward," she said.

"Word," I agreed. "I don't know what that was all about."

"Babies," she said. "I believe that the desire for grandchildren makes even sane parents go left."