

Family Museum of the Ancient Postcards

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In April 1976 my Uncle Silas on my daddy's side got out of jail early after two years and five months of time served for arson. We welcomed him with dinners and back slaps, ignored the pink guilty splotches on his face, places on his skin that would never fully heal, regarded him with a child's wonder, his disappearing act a magic trick—now you don't, but now you see him.

July '76 was the bicentennial for white people, and though we agreed with our black Muslim cousin and black nationalist neighbor, "Whose 200 years of freedom?" we all marveled at the fireworks in town, bigger and better than usual, some of us with our arms crossed over our chests in protest, but all of us with faces tilted to the clear summer sky.

Most remarkably, late in that year, forty-one-year-old Ginny Harshaw, my mother's aunt's child, my cousin, though I called her Aunt Ginny, found a husband. We'd given up on her long, long ago. Just when she had ceased to be a variable in the world of change, Aunt Ginny shocked us

with Gerald, five foot, maybe a little more with a big round belly taut as a starving child's. Though Aunt Ginny was an imposing woman, tall and big boned, a woman's beautiful, "her cheekbones," the women said, her "long fingers like a pianist," they said, though no man ever noticed, apparently except for Gerald.

Our family talked. My mother, her sisters and brothers, wives of brothers, everyone had something to say about Aunt Ginny and Gerald. But none of our mocking importance or our jokes made Aunt Ginny twist in shame or doubt the certainty of her mind. Nothing stopped her from rushing like a teenager out her mama's door when Gerald's Grand Torino rattled up the drive. "He is not afraid," she said and neither was she as she launched herself into the world, sprung and released like a sharp stone from a slingshot. After all those years of living with her mother and her dead father, gone now for twenty-five of those years, she finally flew the coop. On the way out the door, her hard suitcase on the porch already (she would return for her personal things soon, she said), pillowcases of summer clothes packed in the trunk of Gerald's car, she bent to her mother's chair in the front room—her hair dyed black as a China woman's tickled Aunt Ginny's lips—"Bye Mama," she said. Once on the porch, she threw a kiss to her father. "Thank you, merciful God," she said aloud. At that same moment she thought she'd never again have to hear her father's dead steps in the attic or behind her, no more heavy breath, sour from old cigarettes, lingering in the dark places of the creaky house he put together with his own hands. *Enough* she thought, not sure if what she felt wasn't ecstasy. Poor Aunt Ginny. She didn't know (how could she?) how dangerous and foolish to count on anything for the rest of your life.

We didn't hear much from Aunt Ginny in those early months, though we saw her every week on Sunday at my

grandmother's. She stayed close to Gerald, served him food like the other wives, patted his hand, looked at him with what we thought was longing when he stood up too early to take her back to their home. We tried to get him to talk and included him the best we knew how. His people weren't neighbors or friends of ours; they were poor blacks, what we called Boomer rats, who lived many in dark houses out on tangled dirt roads on the fringes of the county. Our own dirt roads and tiny houses where we lived were exempt from judgment. We thought we could make nice talk, let him know he was free to sit among us. We told him how Ginny cooked the best turkey, juicy, we said. Years ago, we said, Ginny's hair was a marvel, black and shiny as a satin sheet, long enough for her to sit on. One time, a white man tried to buy it right off her head in Charlotte. Ginny would run her hand through her now short curls embarrassed to have all that past called up. And though nobody told it, Aunt Ginny knew we were all thanking Gerald for making her (the one we'd all called the lost cause) as normal as any of the other women. Gerald nodded, squinted his eyes in concentration. "Is that right?" was the most he'd say.

A couple of times Aunt Ginny came to Sunday dinner alone, dumb and still as a cow, waiting for the best moment to make her excuses and leave. But soon, though no one is sure exactly when, Aunt Ginny stopped coming at all. "Too far," she said. "Busy, you know how it is," she said, deepening her voice, hinting at sexual delights she hoped the long-married women remembered and coveted. But we knew Gerald was to blame. He had been the only person to change Ginny, the only one to make her want to snap her inertia and escape, shedding the kidnapper's ropes and leaving them in a snaky heap behind her. Whatever roots he worked, prayers or curses he hurled on the air, we knew without fighting it that it was powerful magic. Our best hope was that Aunt Ginny was too happy not to play along with Gerald. We were, of course, disappointed.

Almost eight months after her departure, Aunt Ginny came back to us, with her lips grim and set in a freeze that even death couldn't remove. Aunt Ginny rode shotgun beside her mother in the passenger seat of the Buick, her clothes in pillowcases in the back seat, the hard case luggage, a high school graduation present, forgotten in the rush.

"My nerves can't take all this," Aunt Ginny's mother said as she parked in the drive, theatrically lumbering to her chair in the front room. "You ought not put me through it." Aunt Ginny rested in her room, tried not to look at the lumpy pillowcases and hastily stuffed polyester from their open tops. She kicked the bag off the edge of the bed and the rags exploded like confetti on the floor. "I'm back, bastard," she whispered, sure her father had heard.

We wouldn't say it to her. We are not cruel, but we knew all along Aunt Ginny would return. Late marriages can't take; we nodded in agreement. The old are tired, sapless; and try it, be our guest, but you can't make it without hope, the antidote to despair, that the old have irretrievably lost. Though we wanted different for her, we knew Aunt Ginny's story would take one of just a few predictable shapes. The way they told it, Gerald beat Aunt Ginny for being tall, for glancing at him without tenderness as he drifted to sleep, for trying to prove that he could be loved. Aunt Ginny would not say, but something brought her home in a hurry. We thought we understood.

Aunt Ginny tried; you have to give her that. We saw her trying, felt her stretching for something good. We knew that what she wanted was that glad day when the life with Gerald that she knew was just around the corner finally materialized, poof, in a cloud of sorcerer's smoke. "You'll learn fooling with low class niggers," Aunt Ginny's mother said, the smug joy in her heart obvious on her face, a cruel cutting brightness like a sunny winter sky. Now, Aunt Ginny would have no reason to ever again refute what her mother told her.

I suppose Aunt Ginny's return to Mills Road and her mother was the only reason she and I connected. She was then a forty-two-year old woman, not even a divorcée since she never really married like we assumed, and I was fourteen. To say we had a lot in common is wrong on the face of it, but same knows same, one desperation calls out without speaking to another, and we became friends. In the midst of the murmur of the family crowd, the occasional dolphin-high screams of the smallest children, the chatter: *Do we have more paper plates? Mama, can I have. . . ? Cal, turn down that television; is this the last of the cake? Linda, Joyce, don't let your boys play on the stairs,* Aunt Ginny retreated to the living room, forbidden for children, with her romance novel from Goodwill and a pencil.

"Are you looking for something?" she said.

"I'll know when I find it," I said creeping my way along the back of the stiff Victorian sofa, full of shiny tasseled pillows that had to be moved to allow anyone to sit. Above the fake fireplace, my grandmother had pictures of her favorite children, her son James, a rakish knowing on his face as he stood on the tarmac on some army base in Germany, and her youngest boy, the artist (still in Denver or has he moved again?), smiling wide, a beauty in his high school graduation cap and gown. I hesitated to look directly at Aunt Ginny convinced that seeing her face would compel me to leave.

"What are you doing in here anyway?" I said.

Aunt Ginny sighed and held up *With This Ring*, her romance, an old one judging by the ragged cover of faded and almost disappeared lovers in a posed embrace, framed by the curve of overlapping wedding rings. "I'm reading my literature."

"Those books are trash," I laughed, unable to keep the smugness out of my voice.

"That's my business."

"They're all the same book."

"Oh, so you know everything? Is that how it is?"

"I never said I know everything."

"Really, I thought every twelve-year-old in the world knew it all."

"I'm fourteen, Aunt Ginny."

Aunt Ginny laughed, "Oh, excuse me, fourteen. Come back when you're thirty with a lick of sense." Aunt Ginny had clearly been asleep and her hair was matted on one side; her face was still slack with it. She didn't look like a person with knowledge of any true thing.

"Why don't you stay home if you want to avoid everybody so bad?"

Aunt Ginny sucked her teeth in disgust but didn't answer right away, like she was considering the idea and trying to think of a real response. "I couldn't tell you," she snorted.

Every week we talked, read, but mostly listened as Sunday moved along in the next room. My grandmother and her widowed sister sat at the kitchen table, their stomachs pleased and pouted in their cooking smocks, sighing with fatigue. Harold, the oldest, telling stories that ended with him righteous and victorious. "He's a dick," Aunt Ginny said and I nodded. I had suspected as much. From the basement, the rumble of male voices, my grandfather barking proper form for the free weights, his yelps punctuated by the routine of the click of metal on metal. My mother's voice swallowed in the clamor of women talk. Every Sunday, for months, I met Aunt Ginny in the living room as I passed by my own mama without a word. We often handled each other like we were hot around the edges, careful not to start another round of the war we both heard rumbling in the near distance. I felt my mother's sad eyes follow my back into the living room. Long years would pass before I knew to feel sorry for her.

My grandmother's house is on Mills Road, just off Highway 16, little more than a path used for years by loggers.

When my mother was just a girl she loved to listen to the saws and the pull, then catch of the flat-headed blades in the meat of the trees. The jangle, then click of the metal chains twisting around the logs, dragging them from the woods. The trees were almost nude with most of the leaves and branches gone, the tops lopped off, headless, making them look more like skinned animals than wood. Once, when the working men used uncovered tractors in these hilly woods, a man hired to gather felled trees was killed, cracked to pieces by a massive pine that rushed to him, his back no obstacle to the tree's progress to the ground. The trees the men cut fall with tremendous noise, destroying without compunction or remorse the absent-minded or just unlucky, but still, they said, you could hear the splintering of the man's bones.

That story must have haunted my mother because every time she told it, her face glowed with the same amazement and surprise, the same awe. And though I no longer wanted to hear my mother's stories, I couldn't help but think about her standing where I stood, a girl too, schooled already in the language of last resort.

A hundred yards of grass separated the house from the rise of packed red clay above the highway. When we were children, my cousins and I threw rocks as big as eggs as hard as we could at the passing cars below, never once hearing the satisfying ping of the contact of the stone on glass or metal, a sound we reached as far as we could to catch, a sound that would break our hearts if it happened, though we believed it inevitable.

Aunt Ginny's house is only a quarter mile from my grandmother's, but lower on the hill, leaning against the downward slope of the road. You don't notice the house's lean at first, but once you see it, it's hard not to think of Aunt Ginny's house as an alive, stubborn thing pushing against the world for the hell of doing it.

In her backyard, Aunt Ginny's father had planted thick vines of muscadine grapes on wobbly looking wooden

structures. You heard the vine and the contented buzzing of drunken bees before you ever rounded to the back of the house and actually saw it.

"Sounds like a giant hive," Aunt Ginny said, "but they won't hurt you as long as you take it easy." Aunt Ginny moved to the vine, picked a fat grape, smoothed the white film like gunpowder with her thumb from the grape's skin and took a delicate bite with her front teeth. "So good," she said. "The little ones are pretty tart, but not bad. Come on. I'm not picking for you."

I watched Aunt Ginny as long as I could, but as she expected, I inched to the vine to pick for myself.

"I'm making wine this year. I always wanted to do that," she said.

"Yeah?" I said concentrating on the thick clusters, careful not to pinch the body of a yellow bee between my fingers. "How many grapes do we need?"

"I don't know. Enough. Let's get this pail about full and we'll quit."

"What else do you need to make wine?"

"Grapes make wine."

"If you're Jesus," I said.

"I'm getting a bucket, smart ass. Keep picking." By the time Aunt Ginny returned, my hands and mouth were full, and Aunt Ginny wasn't picking, just staring at me, the dusty bucket over her chest like a breastplate. "Do some things you want to do in your life. Hear?"

"Shut up, Aunt Ginny. God," I said, hating the lessons I was sure came to Aunt Ginny from hard experience.

"I'm serious. Don't wait around. Like sex. Do it as much as you can. I'm telling you the truth. One day, you'll look over your lifetime of being a good girl and doing all the things you were supposed to and you'll be as mad and crazy as I am."

"Okay, Aunt Ginny, I'll have sex with everybody I know, even dogs. Will that make you happy?"

"You've got a filthy mouth on you," Aunt Ginny said as she shook the grapes to settle them. I was embarrassed at my joke. But it wasn't that bad, maybe stupid, but any other time Aunt Ginny would get it.

"Did you see my daddy?" she said, pointing to the house. "In mama's room." Aunt Ginny's glimpse of her daddy had changed her mood. I don't know if it's possible to hate someone you've never met, but I hated her daddy. But I wouldn't look. If I saw him in the window, then every other face with his same turn of jaw, every hungry looking man cupping his rusty knuckles to keep the match flame alive, sparing it from the air, scratching his leg with the back of his dirty shoe, in Denver, Kansas City, Ohio, Winston-Salem or even in my dinky small town would forever move me to hate.

Some of the dead you feel like warmth, their presence a consolation, or so I've heard. My only experience with the dead was with my father's mother, her presence the intensity of a clenched fist. She'd never forgiven me for coming into the world two weeks before she died. But I knew from the cold rage coming off of Aunt Ginny that her daddy's presence was no comfort to anybody. "Yeah," I muttered, my mouth full of grapes, making my lips pucker with juice. I knew enough about Aunt Ginny's father to fear even the flutter of a panel of curtain he moved. I turned my back so Aunt Ginny's father couldn't see my face either. "Tell him to leave," I said.

Aunt Ginny dropped her handful of grapes in the pail one at a time; the soft thuds seemed a comfort. She chuckled, "Are you used to things being easy?"

A few weeks later, Aunt Ginny waited for me outside my grandmother's house, leaning on her Buick, reading. "Hey Bebe. Roger," she nodded to my parents. "You want to go to the store?" I was already halfway in the car before my mother could answer. "Bebe, you don't care, do you?" Aunt Ginny asked, her hand on the door handle.

My mother hesitated, tried to catch my eye as both a warning and a talisman against harm. I wouldn't meet her stare. "Come right back," Mama said.

Aunt Ginny reached across the bench seat and tossed a sweater, some shoes and a couple books to the back. "Get in. We've got to hurry," Aunt Ginny said too loudly, mostly for my mother's benefit. Once on the dusty road, Aunt Ginny rolled her eyes to me. "My mother said bring back an onion," she said, and we both laughed at our mothers and their worthless concern, like the two of us were girls together.

"Where are we going?"

"Do you care?" Aunt Ginny rolled down her window, letting the air flip her curls in every direction.

"Not really." I picked up one of Aunt Ginny's books from the floorboard. Everywhere Aunt Ginny went, every room of her house, my grandmother's and now obviously her car, she left these romances scattered like she molted them. I read aloud: *Her hair flowed and swirled gloriously like honey against the smooth silk of the lavender sheet. Am I beautiful? she whispered. Yes, yes, a thousand times yes, he said caressing the down of her perfect cheek.* "Man, how do you read this?"

"Just wait, little girl. You're going to feel just like that some day. Mark my words. Then don't come to me with none of this, 'but Aunt Ginny, I love him. But Aunt Ginny, he's my everything.'"

"Oh, God, if I ever say, 'he's my everything,' I want you to kill me."

"Not if, when. When, little girl."

"Yeah, okay, we'll see," I said pleased to be talking about my future romantic life, even my refusal of it making that shadow world possible and even legitimate. "What do you need from the store, anyway?"

"Nothing. Just felt like taking a drive."

We turned onto a dirt road barely big enough for one good-sized car, to a brick ranch house, tiny by today's standards. Not like the new houses that have sprouted up everywhere with extra rooms and even extra floors of rooms that more often than not go unused, leaving behind the deflated sense of the wrong promises fulfilled. But this was a starting-out place that people were happy with years ago (this year the hardwood floors, next year the addition), full of possibility. The house didn't look lived in. Not that it wasn't neat or was unkempt, but it was a house without intention, even the grass was filled in with lush green clumps here or there, but bald as sand in the next patch. Aunt Ginny killed the engine and we waited.

"Whose house is this? Gerald's?"

Aunt Ginny nodded her head.

"Are we getting out?"

"I don't think so," Aunt Ginny said.

"He'll see us. You know that don't you?"

Ginny rolled her window all the way up. "Lock your door," she said. "He'll come out in a minute."

"What are we doing here?"

"You want to meet your Uncle Gerald don't you?"

"I've seen him plenty of times," I whined.

Gerald poked his head out the door. I thought he might be annoyed or even that his face would flash with anger, but he didn't look surprised. "Ya'll coming in?" he yelled. In those days, I scrutinized every aspect of a person's appearance, and I knew all there was to know about Gerald's clothed body, but he looked kinder outside of my grandmother's house. His feet were bare and flat like snowshoes, and he wore an oversized T-shirt oversized to accommodate his belly that made him look square and wide as a freezer. "Come on, if you're coming," he said.

"Let's go," Aunt Ginny grabbed my hand. "Is it all right?" she said. Aunt Ginny's desperation embarrassed me, but I couldn't let her see that I wanted to please her.

"We're here now," I sighed.

"Who is this?" Gerald said as if he suspected a trick.

"She's my niece, Gerald. Act like you've got some sense."

"I didn't say nothing." Gerald turned to go back inside.

"How you doing?" he threw over his shoulder. Aunt Ginny smiled at me like I had passed some test. "Ya'll want cake? My sister brought over some coconut cake."

Gerald's house was dark, with mahogany paneling and floors, curtains pulled together like a modest lady's towel on her bosom, each room pinched with every door possible closed to the visitor's eye. Gerald led us to his sparse living room with only a dirty plaid chair and a low-riding sofa to match, *Heimlich*ed against the room's longest wall, and a console television stacked with years of *Ebony* magazines.

"I set up my poker games in here," Gerald grinned. "We're not fancy."

"It's nice," I said, embarrassed that Gerald had to explain.

"You've got good timing, Ginny; I'm in the middle of the game."

Aunt Ginny shifted on her feet like she was embarrassed.

Gerald quickly added, "The Redskins will choke up anyway. They always do. Especially if I have some money on it." Aunt Ginny giggled and accepted his apology, as pleased as if Gerald had said something charming.

"You can turn it, but I don't get but two channels down here," Gerald said to me.

"Where are you going?"

"We're going to talk a minute," Aunt Ginny said. "Will you be all right?"

"Talk?"

"Just right there," Aunt Ginny said as she motioned to the bedroom, an uncharacteristic softness in her voice. "Just a minute."

I rolled my eyes at Aunt Ginny. What did she want me to do?

The other channel on Gerald's television came in only weakly, a dim pulse; Gerald had been generous about getting two stations, but both were just football games anyway. I turned up the volume to cover the mumble coming from the next room. If I'd been thinking, I could have gotten one of Aunt Ginny's romances. All I could think about was being alone and uncomfortable and feeling like my mother who hated being alone. My mother imagined that the rest of the world was invited to a great party with laughing people, too swaddled and secure to experience the abjection of the lonely. Her invitation never arrived. Through the years, I watched her stare out the window, a withering in her eyes, a sad turn on her already-frowned lips. I was determined to duck and dodge loneliness, and when that didn't work, I begged it away, though it never listened for long, except when I was with Aunt Ginny.

The living room was about as inviting as a hypodermic needle, but the outside didn't look much better. Above the largest couch was a picture window like a large television screen, but the show was pines straight as soldiers in a dark copse across the road. If I explored those woods, like the muscled and strong nature girls I envied, would I have to find a graying bone sticking from the underbrush of pine needles or a swarm of insects crawling over each other like the bubbles in boiling water? I believed I would.

I will feel this way again; in less than two years, I will be sixteen with my best friend in her grandmother's house, when her boyfriend will emerge from the kitchen with an ancient rubber from his wallet filled to bursting with water, his face all teeth and light as he offers it to us, the reservoir tip of the condom pointing hard and up like a nipple. My best friend will betray me by thinking this hilarious.

In that very moment, Aunt Ginny will come to me with the completeness of plunging into a tunnel, and I will remember that day, two years before, when Aunt Ginny and Gerald are together, and I am only a room away. I will see them as clear as an honest memory: Aunt Ginny and Gerald intertwined. She grips his back, her fingers dimpling his fatty flesh, his face lovely now in its proximity to hers. I know it does not come to mind, the bulge of his body or even her own ungainly proportions, but she will concentrate on his fingers and knees, smooth baby skin of his ear, the scrub of his kinky hair on her legs. Lazarus died twice. The second time for good. Not every miracle lasts. And I will breathe a few choking sighs (sighs my friend will mistake for muffled laughter), glad at last that Aunt Ginny brought me with her to Gerald's to share with her as much as I could, the biggest and most complicated miracle of her life.

A large green car rolled into the driveway behind the Buick, looking like a parade float, with the back end of it extended into the road. I was angry with Aunt Ginny, but I didn't want her humiliated and ran to get to the front porch before whoever was in that car tried to come into the house.

"Hey," the woman yelled.

"Hey."

"Where's Gerald? Is he here?"

I looked to the door not sure what to say. "Yeah. I think so."

"I'm his sister. They call me Sister. I know he's here. Tell him to come out."

"He's busy."

"Busy? You a Harshaw? You look just like them with them chinky eyes. Is Ginny Harshaw in there?" Sister got out of her car and moved quickly to the house. "She's in there sure enough. Stupid, stupid ass. Not Ginny, baby. My brother. How long they been at it?"

"I didn't time them."

"Don't you get attitude. I'm just asking a question. You know as well as I do what's going on." Sister leaned her skinny frame against the closed door of Gerald's house. Her face was Gerald's, the same big eyes and round jolly cheeks. "If he's like any man I know, we shouldn't be waiting out here but a minute," Sister giggled, but I was years from understanding that joke. Besides, I was annoyed that she had indirectly insulted Aunt Ginny.

"Gerald's nobody's prize," I said.

Sister laughed, "who said anything about all that. I'm just saying the both of them need to start acting like grown people. Gerald ain't got sense. I know it. I'm by myself and you don't see me acting a fool all the time, sneaking around like a child." Sister shook her head, twisted her mouth into a scowl. "If you want a woman, get one. Damn. I'd rather he find the Lord. You won't catch me listening to those Jewish fables, but they do some people a whole lot of good."

Sister stuck her head in the house, but appeared to change her mind and didn't go inside. "Look at you standing out here looking right lonesome."

"Nowhere else to be," I said, sounding more pitiful than I meant.

"You hungry?"

"I'm all right."

"You'd say that, wouldn't you? My house is on the next road. I've got food cooked if you're hungry."

"I'm all right."

"Your Aunt Ginny is not studying you right now. Come on. I'll take you to the store then. There's the *Run In* a minute from here. You can get a bar of candy or soda."

"Can you take me to my grandmother's?"

Sister paused and looked at her watch, but shook her head, like the ticking hands on the face had made her decision for her.

"This ain't a Yellow Cab," Sister laughed. "By the time we get back, your Aunt Ginny will be ready for you."

Sister and I pulled up to a small box of a store. "Here's a dollar," she said. But I had money in a sweated wad in my pocket. "No, thanks," I said. Sister returned her dollar to her purse, shrugged her shoulders, a whatever-you-want expression on her face.

Run In was only big enough for a couple of rows of candy, chips, soup and cola, the few boxes of Kotex and motor oil covered in a film of dust. An older man, maybe as old as twenty, sat on a wooden stool behind the counter talking to a boy I had seen at school, lurking in the smoking section beside the basketball court. The clerk nodded hello to me, barely letting his gaze land on my face. I was a child to him, invisible and unimportant.

"I've never seen you in here," the boy from school said. I didn't realize that he'd ever seen me anywhere since he'd never before raised his hand in greeting or looked directly at my face. I grabbed the nearest candy bar, Chunky, a thick kind with nuts and raisins I hated, and an orange soda, and brought them to the counter.

"We'll let you stay with us," the boy said, winking at the clerk. "You want to give us a try?" he whispered as he leaned toward me. "We'll be sweet to you." The clerk laughed, but kept his seat, his rough fingers tickling my palm with the change from the dollar. I wanted to stay and let something more significant happen to me, an event I would savor in the retelling. But even then, I knew better. Why tears filled my sinuses, the hurt, a pressure like a slap all over my face, I don't know. I threw the soda down as hard as I could close to the boy's feet. I hoped to hear the thick can crack, see the orange fizz explode out like a hydrant all over his shoes. Though the can hissed, it did not pop open, but rolled like a loyal dog to the boy's feet. "What the hell is wrong with you?" I heard at my back as I wiped my eyes and reached for the door to leave.

Aunt Ginny and Gerald were already outside when we got back. I expected to see visible relief on Aunt Ginny's face as I appeared or at least an acknowledgment, but neither she nor Gerald did more than glance up at us for the briefest moment before returning to their conversation.

Sister honked her horn as she pulled out of the driveway. "Stupid ass," she yelled to Gerald, hoping he would have the decency to at least show a little shame.

"Ginny, I'm tired of this shit," Gerald said picking his hair straight up. "Goddammit," he said, but he sounded like he might cry.

"Aunt Ginny, let's go," I said.

"I'm coming."

"Let's go now."

"I'll see you," Aunt Ginny said as she turned her back to Gerald and walked the few steps to the car.

"What are you waiting on?" I said. Gerald watched us, his ugly toes exposed and pleading. I kicked the dashboard of the Buick, leaving the footprint of my shoe on the burgundy vinyl. "Did you even know I was gone?"

"I don't know. Let me think," Aunt Ginny said, her head on the steering wheel.

"Just go."

Aunt Ginny started the car, though we still didn't move.

"Go on, then. I don't want you," Gerald yelled, his voice cracking like a growing boy's. Aunt Ginny pretended not to have heard.

I rolled down my window, leaned as far out of the car as I could. "You go straight to hell," I screamed.

"Don't, don't," Aunt Ginny pulled on my arm, coaxed me back down into the car. Gerald said nothing. In fact, the three of us sat, the way people do when they wait for the life-changing moment to come.

"I used to really love him," Aunt Ginny said.

Gerald finally turned around and went back inside his house. At any minute I was sure he would return with a

flower, a baseball bat, with a love poem or grenade, but he didn't come back at all.

"Aunt Ginny, go," I said.

"He's coming back," Aunt Ginny said, though she backed the car from the drive, turned her head to the dusty road. It would be years, but just as Aunt Ginny predicted, I would feel this kind of love for myself, desperate, stupid, the way Aunt Ginny did or the ways I hoped my parents did (though, in fact, I knew better).

My family arrived at my grandmother's early the next Sunday. Though the front door opened many times, Aunt Ginny did not come. I didn't get to listen to the sounds of the house with her, or see her pretzel her long legs under her body as she read her book about white people in rich, implausible adventures. Just before dark, I walked to her house, to the green paint glowing in the fading light. I could hear her waiting inside, her holding out behind the door. "Aunt Ginny, let me in," I yelled. I was fourteen and in my worst, most painful year. I wanted to tell someone about it, confess it all but there was no one, and worse than that there was nothing to tell. But still I made a vow that when my own daughter is fourteen, I will fill the gap for her. I will not let her flounder disconnected and alone. I believe I would have followed through on that promise. I know it to be true. But although I felt her in quick flashes of being in my belly over the years, she was just as quickly gone. It would be years before I would finally accept that she would never arrive.

In the car, the very next Sunday, my father made his usual speech full of the dread of his in-laws, people who forever thought him too common. "Seven o'clock. No later, I mean it, Bebe." But my mother had decided that her life amounted to these Sundays. She would stay as long as she pleased.

I was sure Aunt Ginny would not be at my grandmother's, but there she was, in the kitchen, cutting herself a slab of dense chocolate cake. "There's my girl," she said. "Come help me eat this."

So much happened in the coming weeks. The grapes we picked turned to wine by themselves, the bucket forgotten and abandoned outside to become crunchy with insects and drowned bees. A boy I considered falling in love with rammed his hand between my legs on the bus, fluttered his dirty fingers in my lap while his friends hooted like sports fans. For a quick, sweet moment, I thought that meant I was desired. And late one Saturday night, the phone rang long and lonesome, not the discordant ring of the wrong number, or the quick bright ring of my mother's sisters, but the drawn-out moan of bad news. Aunt Ginny was in the hospital unconscious from a bottle of pills. If her mother hadn't come back early for the forgotten thing on the kitchen table, Aunt Ginny would be dead.

"I'm going to the hospital." My mother wrapped the stretched yellow cord of the telephone around her hand. "Come on, go with me?"

I did want to go, but I was more afraid than I'd ever been. For weeks my mother and I had spoken in the language of long pauses and slammed doors. We tried as much as we knew how, but the eye of whatever was passing over us had moved on and we were in the storm of it. How can I tell you how hard it is to want not to love your mother? How much and in how many ways I would struggle not to let her know that anything she says means a damn. "Why is Aunt Ginny's sister buried in their yard?" I said. My voice trembled.

"You listen to me," my mother said, her face rabid with anger and pain, "your Aunt Ginny is sick. You're old enough to understand." My mother sighed, holding the top of her head like it might fly off.

"I don't like liars," I said.

My mother's face dropped.

"It's not even her sister, is it?" I taunted, knowing the truth but not yet realizing how dangerous and insignificant the truth is in a life.

"We don't have time for this. Let's go," she said, talking slowly like she was talking to an incompetent. My mother was trying hard not to hate me. I knew it and I blamed her, though I hated me, too. The only difference between us was she could forgive me. We had been close friends for years, better than friends, but in that moment and many like it, neither of us understood that we would be friends again.

"I'll go when I get ready," I said, careful to stay just out of range of her arm.

"You make me sick," she said, and snatched her pocketbook from the table, jingled her keys for comfort. "Suit yourself. But you always do, don't you?"

The next Sunday at my grandmother's, two days after the funeral, the mood was quiet. At least for a while. Aunt Ginny's story was played over and over, *her hair, you should have seen it. That Gerald, he's to blame. A shame, a shame. Did you see him at the funeral crying, looking as pitiful and ignored as an ugly child? He should cry*, we all agreed. But Aunt Ginny's mother didn't blame Gerald. All day long and for the rest of her life she'd find a way to insert in conversation that Aunt Ginny died of pneumonia. She told that lie so many times, her face as clear and untroubled as a turnip, she finally convinced herself. In no time at all, two hours, three, we ate, became many, generations in the small rooms of my grandmother's house, and we closed over the hole Ginny's passing made—a stone dropped into a lake.

It has been years, nearly twenty, since Aunt Ginny lived in that old house on Mills Road, a gravel road now with fine gray dust from pulverized rock in layers over the red clay of my childhood. Now my cousin Mavis and her kids live

there, but they will go soon. Nobody stays in that house long. Nothing works right in the old place, and newer is better, we all know that. I was thirty-three, old as Jesus and had just buried my mother the last time I went inside.

My mother, Bebe Marilyn Harshaw Thomas, had always said that she wouldn't live to be old and she was right. It is a cliché to say she was right about a lot of things. It also is true. The old green house was stuck in the same stage of decay it had been twenty years ago when Aunt Ginny invited me in. Aunt Ginny's room was the room Mavis' daughter shared with her toddler brother, the little boy too young to have any opinion, so Aunt Ginny's old room was still a girl's room.

Though Mavis' child plastered the wall with Disney and television cartoon characters, all I could still see were Aunt Ginny's music boxes in a row on her dresser, dozens of fraying romances, her record player with the handled carrying box, the neat stack of her 45s we danced to one afternoon, until we got tired of her heavy jumping skipping the needle, her twin bed covered in a white cotton bedspread like a corpse, and in the closet, heaps of clothes Aunt Ginny could scoop up in a hurry if somebody ever waited for her in the driveway again.

And her father. Still there. But not after that day. I would stay until he came in the room, as long as it took, until I felt him vibrate on the air. He would not be staring over a child this time. That day he would face me, a woman who never desired to love him. A woman, sure she'd lost for the second and final time, the person in the world who loved her most. You don't get too many people who love you like that. For them, I would force him out of that house for good. I would scream at him, fight him if it came to that. For Aunt Ginny, still and forever forty-two. For my mother, whom I would never see again in this life but would feel when I woke every morning, her palm warm on my forehead. "You have to get up," she'd whisper, and I'd jerk awake, eager to follow her voice.

“Get out, get out, out, out.” I’d make him hear it until my throat was raw and sore. And he would. May God strike me dead if I lie, but before I left that house for good, I heard his retreating steps, the mincing steps of a coward. I heard the creak of the front door, the draft, colder than it should have been. I feel it still. Seconds before the front door slammed, shaking the frame, final as an axe blade, closed and closed.