

Chapter 2

Miss Kettle's Place

The summer heat of nineteen and forty-four took different forms. The common form, the one everybody felt – eighty degrees by seven-thirty in the morning. The uncommon form, felt only by me and my best friend William White Wallace – the passionate love of two fourteen-year-olds for a twenty-two-year-old married woman. Though William White once said to me, “Freddy, she’s mine,” he never acted jealous. In the dark of night her voice awoke and aroused me, brought on groans of desire.

She had a married name, Lorna Comstock Meyers, but to us she remained Lorna Comstock, Lorna C everybody called her, winner of the Miss Kettle contest of nineteen and forty. In a story on the competition, our weekly newspaper, the *Kettle News Leader*, described Lorna C as “Perhaps Kettle’s candidate for movie stardom, with her shoulder-length chestnut hair, brown eyes, and a countenance that brings smiles from all but the most hard-hearted of men.” William White once said “She’s so trim, you think she’s wearing a corset, but she’s not.” Lorna C’s dark eyes had the power of magnets, bringing my gaze to hers. In the dark of night she appeared in my dreams. In the light of day when I looked at Lorna C’s face I couldn’t put the brakes on the slow downwards drift of my gaze. It would come to rest on her rounded and slightly upturned breasts, perfectly proportioned for her five-foot-nine-inch height. On chilly mornings delicate bumps would rise at their tips, push against her sweater. “Freddy, would you warm us, put us back in place?” they seemed to whisper. Once Lorna C caught me staring and gave me a stern look. My face felt hot and red. Then she surprised me with a tiny smile.

The Miss Kettle Contest took place on the stage of the Dixie Palace, named the Kettle Opera House at the time of its construction in nineteen and twenty. The theatre had a large stage and a pit for an orchestra. When the Opera House first opened it showed silent movies and hosted traveling vaudeville acts. Grandpa Lemley told me Al Jolson played the Opera House one night in nineteen and twenty-one. In nineteen and twenty-six a large group of Kettle Methodists and Baptists, most of them active in the Temperance movement, persuaded town council to pass an ordinance that prohibited vaudeville acts. A year later talking pictures arrived and that led to the building's name change, to the Dixie Palace.

Often when I arrived early, before the lights dimmed I'd stare at the ceiling and soon find myself making-believe that I'd entered another world. The vaulted ceiling had clouds painted across it, and six octagonal chandeliers with amber glass panes and bronze scrollwork dangled like oversized jewelry. Smaller jewels, wall sconce fixtures that resembled miniature chandeliers, glistened. Walnut and oak paneling rose halfway up each wall, below the patterned maroon tapestry of wall coverings. Another of the large chandeliers hung in the lobby. I once told William White that the Dixie Palace seemed like a big room from a castle that had been mysteriously placed on Main Street. Every Saturday afternoon William White and I each plunked down ten cents for admission and enjoyed the Dixie's cowboy movies. Sometimes I liked sitting in our palace more than the movies themselves.

In the first part of her talent presentation in the Miss Kettle competition, Lorna C, who had been a business major at Kettle High School, solved arithmetic problems read to her by the emcee of the contest, Mr. Johnson Weeks. The two of them stood in the center

of the stage under bright lights, Lorna C in a tight-fitting red one-piece swim suit and Mr. Weeks in a wrinkled dark blue suit. The lights reflected off Mr. Weeks' bald head. He gave Lorna C a wide smile and his heavy jowls shook as he asked, "Three hundred and fifty seven divided by three?" Before you could say Jack Robinson, Lorna replied, "One hundred and nineteen." Mr. Weeks asked, "Two thousand sixteen, plus one thousand seventeen, plus two thousand one hundred and fifteen?" "Five thousand one hundred and forty eight," Lorna C said without a pause, right on the money every time. No sooner had the math problems ended than the pianist in the orchestra pit struck up a fast-paced rendering of the Glenn Miller tune "In the Mood." Lorna C put on a red, white, and blue top hat, picked up a baton, and began the second portion of her talent presentation, tap dancing. The stage lights dimmed and a spotlight beamed on her. Lorna C's dark eyes sparkled and she flashed her bright smile at the audience, then at William White and me. Lorna C dragged the toe, then heel, of her right foot in a circle while the pianist played the introduction to the tune. As soon as the melody started, Lorna C's left foot jumped out in front of her and led her right foot into an accelerated tapping that punctuated the music. When the music and tapping ended, she received a standing ovation. Later, as Mr. Johnson Weeks placed the crown on Lorna C, he smiled and said with pride, "With her beauty and talent, I believe Lorna C could pass as a sister to Ruby Keeler or Ginger Rogers, except I personally think she's probably a lot smarter than both of them put together."

Lying in bed that night I wondered where I might study tap dancing. Then I thought about Lorna C in her red swim suit. I imagined taking her hands and, like Fred

Astaire and Ginger Rogers, dancing with her on stage of the Dixie Palace. After our performance we would walk backstage. Her lips would touch mine, her arms around me.

Lorna C and Wandel Meyers – that’s “Wan-del”, with the emphasis on the “del” – got married in June of nineteen and forty-one. The wedding took place exactly one month after that rainy morning when Wandel, who had a strong aversion to centipedes, aimed his twenty-two rifle at a solitary centipede crawling on the sidewalk that connected the screened front porch of his Momma’s small white frame house to the berm of Route 42 and pulled the trigger. After the bullet passed out of the barrel of Wandel’s twenty-two and through the centipede, at a high velocity, it glanced off the concrete beneath the remains of the centipede, ricocheted off the brick steps in front of Wandel’s Momma’s house, then returned itself to Wandel, and came to rest in his right thigh. He recovered from his wound in time for the wedding.

Everybody knew Lorna C loved Wandel. Still, William White and I, and most folks in Kettle, could not understand what she saw in him. Already, at age twenty-four, Wandel’s sandy brown hair had thinned. And Lorna C stood at least two inches taller than Wandel. He still had active remnants of acne and no one knew of his ever having caught a baseball, football, or basketball in any form of team competition. He did not play a musical instrument and had a rough time reading the written word aloud. And Wandel had a problem with centipedes.

On the positive side, Wandel carried a tune reasonably well and satisfactorily sang hymns. In spite of his reading difficulties, Wandel had memorized the Twenty-Third Psalm, which he enjoyed reciting at church whenever members of the congregation

testified about their Christian commitments. But none of this mattered. Wandel loved Lorna C and she loved him.

William White and I attended the wedding at the Kettle Baptist Church, though we didn't receive written invitations. But neither did anybody else in Kettle. Lorna C and Wandel's Mommas just called a lot of folks, told them the date and time of the wedding and asked them to please come – if they wanted to bring a dessert, cookies or a small cake, for the reception that would be fine.

That warm June evening William White and I stood beneath the elm trees in the yard of the white frame Baptist Church, its steeple as tall as the trees. The pink-frosted glass windows of the church reflected the glow of the burning candles in the sanctuary. William White said, "It's too hot to go in there." I yanked on his arm and pulled him through the door. Inside, the candles, rows of them placed along the altar and part-way up each aisle, and a sanctuary full of people pushed up the temperature. William White and I sweated in our dark gray wool suits, buttoned-up white shirts and blue knit neckties. We found aisle seats near the front of the church on the side reserved for the groom's family and friends. When the organist hit the first notes of "Here Comes the Bride" everybody turned to look at Lorna C at the far end of the aisle. She wore a white gown, pearl buttons down its front, and so long that it trailed along the carpeted aisle behind her. A lace veil fell across her face. William White jumped up and down to get a glimpse of her until I grabbed his shoulder and held him down. Then he stepped out in the aisle and stared at Lorna C with a dumb grin on his face. She walked down the aisle with William White facing her. When she reached our pew I pulled him back to his seat. As Lorna C passed

us she turned her dark eyes ever so slightly towards William White and me and smiled. I wished I could touch her white gown. I wished I was older.

At the reception in the large room the Baptists called The Hall of Joy we drank fruit punch. William White pulled me over to a corner, frowned, and then put on an expression that looked like the one he wore when he got his final word in the spelling bee, the one he couldn't spell. "What has she done, Freddy? What she has done?"

Wandel and Lorna C had a brief honeymoon. Lorna showed us a photo of her and Wandel standing in front of the RC Cola sign beside flat rock-face of the entrance to Luray Caverns in Virginia. After they returned to Kettle and settled into the three-room apartment attached to the back of Wandel's Momma's house, Wandel convinced Lorna C they should buy Jim's Place, a restaurant for sale on Main Street in the center of town. Jim's Place sat opposite the C&O railroad station and next door to Gruber's Department Store. The owner, Jim Ramsay, had decided to retire. He had operated the restaurant his entire life. It had belonged to his father and before him his grandfather and great-grandfather, whose father, Jim's great-great-grandfather, had cut virgin timber and used the logs to build the Kettle Trading Post. The large old green-roofed log building stood until nearly the turn of the century when Jim's Dad had it torn down and built the present two-story brick building on the site of the old Post.

Jim never married and had no children to take over the business. In recent years he'd lost his hair, once curly and black, and his once tall frame became stooped. Momma told me she heard he had a serious disease. William White said Jim had ulcers and heart problems from too many years of eating his own greasy hamburgers. Maybe that's why Jim had hired Bertha Benson as chief cook a few years earlier.

The front part of the restaurant, long and rectangular, had four booths with red table tops and black leather seats along its two side walls. In the center of the room sat three red Formica tables, each with four chromium plated chairs. Beside the entrance Lorna C had placed a Wurlitzer jukebox, bright red, green, and blue sections forming an arc above the machine's center-window. After we deposited five cents and made a selection, behind the window a record dropped on to the turntable and music played after a long arm with a tiny needle at its end gently lowered itself to the surface of the turning record. Across the opposite end of the room sat a red counter with five round stools, each with a red-leather top. William White liked to spin them. Behind the counter a wall with tan double doors, each door with a half-moon window, opened into the kitchen. A round illuminated electric clock, "Drink RC Cola," hung beside the door.

William White and I could never figure out how Wandel got Lorna C to agree to buy the place, much less how they came up with the money. But he did and they did, even though everybody in town knew that Wandel had only enough money to stay two jumps ahead of the bill collector. He beamed with pride the day a work crew placed the new rectangular neon sign above the front entrance, perpendicular to the brick building. When lit, one-half of the sign blinked the words "Miss Kettle's Place" in blue neon. The other half of the sign had a red neon outline of a shapely woman wearing a top hat and holding a baton. When the sign blinked, one red leg raised, then, on the next blink, returned to its original position. Some people said the sign seemed kind of racy. William White and I viewed the sign as a poorly disguised attempt by Wandel to cash in on Lorna C's being a local celebrity. "Just one more reason for her to ditch him," William White said.

Wandel achieved two small places for himself in Kettle history. The first occurred when he became the one-hundredth man from the Kettle area to enlist in the service after Pearl Harbor. The *Kettle News Leader* carried a picture of Wandel and an Army sergeant leaning over a desk in a room at the County Court House as Wandel signed his enlistment papers. The picture appeared in the “War News” section of the paper and carried the caption “Kettle hits 100 with Wandel Meyers.”

After his departure for boot camp in the spring of forty-two, Lorna C ran the restaurant alone. This didn’t alter things in any major way for she operated the restaurant pretty much by herself even with Wandel present. Wandel enjoyed talking with customers and told Lorna C it meant a lot to them for him to do that. He also liked to sample the food Lorna C and Bertha Benson, who stayed on after Jim sold the restaurant, prepared for customers. Bertha’s desserts got lots of compliments, particularly her pecan pies, with their rich fillings made with lots brown sugar and Karo syrup, and their flaky crusts. When she took a break from cooking, Bertha liked to talk with customers. You could tell where she placed herself by just listening for laughter. Sometimes she’d help Lorna C with the restaurant’s business ledgers.

Wandel would talk to customers about preparing for the restaurant business as a business major at Kettle High School. He often added that until he and Lorna C bought the restaurant he hadn’t determined the right way to apply his education. Wandel had tried such businesses as Wandel Meyers Paperhanging, Wandel Meyers House Painting, and Wandel Meyers Trucking and Delivery, businesses with a couple of things in common. First, Wandel’s nineteen and thirty-seven quarter-ton shiny red Dodge pickup truck with whitewall tires and “The Wandel Meyers Co., *good work, hydraulic brakes,*

Phone 3736, Kettle, W.Va.” painted in gold letters trimmed in black on each door.

Second, Wandel’s failure to earn a profit and build a steady income, a problem that may have been created by Wandel’s love of fishing.

One day I listened to Wandel express his wonderment at what he could have missed in his business courses at Kettle High, “A fully accredited secondary school,” Wandel said. Lorna C served a blue plate special to a customer in the next booth, then took Wandel aside and said, “Honey, remember that period during your senior year when you had the chicken pox? I’ll bet that’s when they taught business profit.”

When William White learned that Wandel had joined the Army he ran out his front door, got on his bike, and pumped the pedals while standing up all the way to the Mount Zion Baptist Church and back, a distance of at least six miles, including Haggett’s Hill, top to bottom. Then William White came to my house all hot and sweaty, his blond hair plastered against his head, lacking the little wave in the front that he kept combed just right. He started fixing his wave with the pocket comb he always carried in the right rear pocket of his jeans and said, “Mark this day, Freddy, April seventeenth, nineteen and forty-two. It is the start of my new life with Lorna Comstock.”

When William White arrived I had been trimming our front yard hedges next to the sidewalk. Later I would help Daddy paint the dark green trim on the windows of our white frame home, a step I feared would be the first one down the road to the two of us painting the entire two stories of the house. The thought made me sweat even more.

“William White, do you mean Mrs. Lorna C. Meyers?” I said, emphasizing the “Mizzes.” He ignored me and went right on talking about plans for his new life, punctuated with comments about Lorna C’s beauty.

William White often hung out at Miss Kettle's Place for hours at a stretch. Lorna C didn't seem to mind his being there, particularly during the slow times of the day. After Wandel left for basic training, Lorna C said she liked to have somebody around to talk to, a comment that William White took most personally. "Freddy, it was an invitation," he bragged. "She wants me there."

I often went with him to the restaurant, but just sitting around drinking RC Cola and mooning after Lorna C, though nice, after a while had a dulling quality for me, particularly when Bertha fried lots of hamburgers and the smell of burnt grease took over the restaurant. After I had a long stint at Miss Kettle's Place, my Momma sometimes threw a conniption fit and made me hang my clothes on the back porch to air out.

Most of the time William White shared Lorna C's company with Albert Newcomb, who returned to Kettle in nineteen and thirty-nine after he lost the lower half of his left leg in a mining accident at the Rowena Number Three Mine near Slab Fork, south of Beckley. Because of his disability, Albert had no steady employment and lived with his Mom on their farm. A few years earlier Albert's Daddy had died in a tractor roll-over accident on the farm. Albert, then fifteen, had been riding behind his Daddy when the tractor, a large red Farmall, began to tip over and he jumped clear of it. Before the accident Albert had been a good student at Kettle High. But after his Daddy's death he quit doing his homework and failed one test after another. Everybody knew that when Albert turned sixteen he would quit school. And he did.

After Albert's return to Kettle from Slab Fork, each morning his Momma gave him a ride to town on her way to work in Huntington. He hung around Kettle until her

return in the evening. Tall and trim, always wearing his black Stetson cowboy hat, denim jacket and flannel shirt, Albert would stand on the sidewalk in front of the Post Office. The Post Office occupied the ground floor of the red brick building at the corner of Main and Maple Streets, at the opposite end of our Kettle business district from Gruber's Department Store. Albert wore a wooden peg leg, which he fitted on just below his left knee where his leg had been cut off. He doubled up the unused portion of his left trouser leg and pinned it above the straps that held his peg leg in place. On rainy or cold days he'd go inside the Post Office, or to Miss Kettle's Place, where he'd share the company of Lorna C with the rest of us. All the while Albert made himself available to the community for what he called free-lance work, such as helping with trash hauling, tobacco pruning, tending and harvesting, and his favorite work, taking tobacco crops to auction at the Huntington market, an all-day free-lance job.

Albert had four hand-carved oak peg legs that he had cut, dried, and fitted himself. Each one had a cushioned leather top with leather straps that secured the peg leg to his knee and lower thigh. Albert, it turned out, had a talent for woodcarving, and folks around town appreciated the life-like figures he carved into the surfaces of his peg legs. Each leg's carving featured a different theme. I liked the one he called "Fourth of July." It featured a Winchester rifle, an American flag flying from a flagpole, and a small cannon firing a ball up the length of the leg. Albert's peg leg for Christmas, with a tiny sled, Santa, and reindeer, attracted lots of attention, as did the Easter model with its rendering of the Crucifixion. The fellows who hung out at the Post Office preferred Albert's leg with a hunter and rabbit, "hunting season," Albert named it. Lots of people

wanted Albert to enter one of his legs in the woodcarving competition at the Cabell County Fair. Albert always told them, “That ain’t no place for a false leg.”

In addition to looking for free lance work, Albert and his friends spent each day talking and sharpening the blades of their pocket knives on the stone window sills of the Post Office building. For different reasons the men couldn’t serve in the Armed Forces. Some of them had grown too old. Others couldn’t pass the physical exam. One day as I walked by, Albert and a couple of his friends talked about the woodcarving competition. One of them said right to Albert’s face, “Albert, I believe you are afeard you will win a blue ribbon.” I think he had it right.

The leg carvings sometimes created difficulties for Albert. When little children saw the leg carvings they’d say things like, “Mommy, look at the flags on that man’s leg,” or “Mommy, Jesus is on that man’s leg.” If the lady didn’t know Albert she’d tell the child, “Hesh up.” When adults realized that they stood before a work of art, they’d do a double take and stare at Albert’s leg. Albert usually ignored them. He’d stroke the blade of his pocket knife on the stone sill of front window of the Post Office and test the sharpness of the blade’s edge by slicing a piece of paper.

One day Albert’s seventh-grade English teacher, Miss Daisy Watkins, wearing her customary print dress covered with yellow daisies, observed Albert’s concentration during a blade test as she walked by. Miss Daisy said, “Albert, I wish you had paid just half as much attention to your studies when you were in school.” Albert’s face reddened and he quickly removed his Stetson. “How’d do, Miss Daisy,” though he said it mostly to the back of her gray head for Miss Daisy didn’t slow her pace.

If Albert knew the person looking at his leg, the leg gazing usually brought a “howdy” from him and a comment from the viewer about the model Albert wore that day. Mayor Raymond T. Baumgartner would make a big to-do about Albert’s peg leg and call people to gather ’round and have a look. He’d then say in a proud way, “There’s so many ways each of us can contribute to the life our Kettle community, just like Albert here does with the art of his peg leg carvings.” The mayor usually finished his comments in Albert’s absence, for by then Albert would have ducked into the Post Office or the front door of a store.

Albert attended every Kettle High School football game. He loved to watch the team pass the football, and his deep bass voice would rise above the noise of the crowd, yelling for the Kettle Tops to pass the ball on most every down, even though, year in and year out, the team had little strength in the passing department. Albert’s friends from the Post Office joined him in repeated calls for passing and loud cheers for Kettle High. Albert always wore a heavy sweater of bright orange and black, our school colors. During the first half of a game Albert and his friends would consume a fair amount of corn liquor produced out at Pappy Roosevelt’s hog farm. Along about the third quarter of the game they often made a supporter of the opposing team angry and a fight would break out.

Most people around Kettle knew the danger of a fight occurring near Albert and made a point of looking out for Albert’s black Stetson poking above the crowd, then skirting the area. But out-of-town fans hadn’t been warned about Albert and what they faced. Albert had achieved some local notoriety as a fighter because of a surprise move he originated. Once into a fight, Albert would reach down and quickly loosen the straps of his peg leg. Then while vigorously hopping around his opponent on his good leg, an

act that generally caused his opponent to stare at him gape-mouthed for a moment, Albert would seize the peg leg by its small end and swing it as a club. The blow usually dispatched his opponent in mid-stare and set Albert on a course of finding and dispatching another opponent. Saturday morning's discussion among Albert and his friends at the Post Office might start with Friday night's Kettle High School football game, but would quickly become a replay of the fistfight and Albert's hopping and dispatching of opponents.

Kettle had a joyful Fourth of July celebration in nineteen and forty-four. D-Day had taken place a month earlier and folks sensed that the war in Europe had turned and would be won. Wandel Meyers landed in the Normandy invasion and earned a promotion to sergeant for his leadership in battle. "Wandel Meyers? Are you sure?" some folks asked. Others mentioned the intensity of Wandel's battles with centipedes and allowed that he might have redirected those considerable energies towards German soldiers.

The Fourth of July celebration took place in Riverfront Park, three acres of grass, maple trees, and picnic tables at a bend in Sour Apple River not far from Main Street. At the park's sandy beach we'd swing from a heavy rope tied to a strong limb of an old water maple on the river's bank. When the swing reached the highest point in its arc over the river, we'd drop into the cool water. We didn't have fireworks that Fourth of July; fireworks had to wait until after the war. But in the days leading up to the celebration everybody pitched in and decorated the park with American flags and red-white-and-blue patriotic bunting. On the Fourth of July folks arrived at noon with picnic baskets. Some of the boys chose teams and we played softball games while many of the men, some

pulling wide-brimmed hats down over their eyes, pitched horseshoes. About three o'clock the town band assembled on a platform and folks gathered in front of the bandstand to hear a thirty-minute concert of patriotic tunes. Afterwards Mayor Raymond T. Baumgartner walked to the front of the bandstand. He wore a white shirt, white pants, and a wide red-and-blue-striped necktie. The mayor's shirt had become so soaked with sweat it stuck to his short round body. His thinning brown hair, also wet with sweat, had plastered itself to his head. The mayor, a Roosevelt Democrat, devoted a considerable portion of his speech to reminding everybody "of all that Franklin Delano Roosevelt has done to improve life in the town of Kettle, including the Civilian Conservation Corps dam and pond." He paused for applause, for folks enjoyed Sunday picnics at the CCC dam. "The paving of Kettle's streets with brick by the WPA." Applause again. "A Federal banking system that kept the Bank of Kettle solvent during the darkest days of the Depression." A pause, silence. "And now, along with our cousin Mr. Churchill and our comrade Mr. Stalin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt is leading us to victory in World War Two." A pause followed by enthusiastic applause. The Mayor beamed, raised both arms, and with each hand formed the two-fingered V for victory that we often saw Winston Churchill flash in Movietone newsreels at the Dixie Palace.

In the heat and excitement of public speaking, the mayor's face flushed a deep red. His white cotton britches looked like they could barely contain his ample girth. Although Mayor Baumgartner's speech had been serious, growing waves of laughter from the audience punctuated it. Little kids behind the bandstand had discovered that the entire seam in the seat of the mayor's white cotton britches had failed, exposing his bright red, white, and blue striped boxer shorts. Each time more kids joined their friends to view

the mayor's underwear, a new wave of laughter and agitated pointing erupted among them. Adults in front of the band-stand began laughing at the kids. The mayor must have thought some hidden wit and humor in his speech had created all the good spirit, for he seemed to be working himself into a long speech. Mrs. Raymond T. Baumgartner, dressed in a red blouse and a blue and white skirt, walked out on the band-stand and whispered something into the mayor's left ear. He thanked folks for their patriotic spirit, waved and shuffled sideways, stiff-legged, to the bandstand steps. The ended his public appearances for the day.

Rows of picnic tables displayed dishes of mouth-watering food. Sliced ham, fried chicken, potato salad, green beans, chocolate pies, angel food cakes and more. I chose a large piece of the raspberry cobbler made by Beverly Shade's Mom. Beverly and I had classes together at Kettle High. I ate my piece of raspberry cobbler so fast I dripped red raspberry juice down the front of my white shirt.

Beverly found some soap and water and helped me remove the raspberry stain from my white shirt. She rubbed the soapy cloth on the red spot on my shirt. I put my hand on hers to direct it. My heart raced and I didn't want to take my hand away or for her to stop. Beverly's height and high cheekbones put her face even with mine and her eyes became pools of blue that asked me to stare into them. I had an impulse to invite Beverly to go with me to a movie at the Dixie Palace on Saturday night, but decided against it. William White and I already had plans. I'd do it another time.

Later I walked to Miss Kettle's Place to meet William White. Lots of folks drifted over to there after the celebration and ordered the blue plate special. William White and three of our friends, all four of them wearing white t-shirts and Cincinnati Reds baseball

caps, sat in a booth playing Rook and eating French fries. Each of them had a bottle of RC Cola. Lorna C had turned on the radio that sat on the front counter and folks listened to Lowell Thomas give a positive account of the war news and wish his listeners a happy Fourth of July. It had been a good day.

Albert, his Stetson pushed back on his head, sat at the far end of the counter near the cash register. I told William White that I wondered if Albert chose that seat so he could look at Lorna C each time she rang up a customer's bill. Sometimes she returned Albert's look and give him a little smile. When that happened Albert's face would redden and he'd turn and gaze towards the plate glass window and Main Street. The last time William White and I saw this happen, William White elbowed me and blurted out, "Freddy, Albert's trying to come between us and Lorna C."

I pulled the last empty chair in the place up to the booth next to William White and my friends. Shortly after I seated myself, Lorna C asked if I would like something to eat or drink. "Sure, Lorna C, I'll have an RC Cola." She turned and walked to the pop cooler, bent over and reached inside to pull out a cold and dripping wet bottle of RC Cola. When she got good and bent over, William White elbowed me in the ribs. "Look," he whispered. I then surprised myself. As shapely and nice as Lorna C appeared, I found myself thinking about Beverly Shade, though I didn't tell William White.

Later that evening, after I went to bed and turned out the light, when I closed my eyes, I saw Beverly's face. Then the image melted and Lorna C's face appeared. I felt a passion for her surge through my body.

That summer William White and I had a business partnership mowing lawns, earning from fifty cents for small yards to a dollar and a half, and once in a while two dollars, for larger yards on hillsides. We had the use of our families' push mowers and the two of us mowing in tandem would polish off an average lawn in a half-hour. We'd allow another fifteen minutes for hand-trimming around sidewalks and trees. We had rounded up quite a few "contracts," as William White called them, back in March when Kettle had had a warm spell and the grass began to grow. We knocked on lots of doors and gave folks a chance to get in on the ground floor of our business, as William White described it to them. By the end of June we found that if we got an early start each day we could manage our mowing contracts by working only in the mornings. That left us with afternoons to go fishing or swimming, or to work on our now favorite game, basketball.

The local hospital, just outside of Kettle, had a new full-length outdoor blacktopped basketball court with lines painted on it and a hoop and backboard as good as what we had in the Kettle High gym. We never saw anybody on the court, so we began to go there in the afternoons and play one-on-one. Sometimes a few guys joined us to play a real game. We had to hitchhike the three miles from Kettle to the hospital and back. We'd stand beside the highway and look squarely at the driver of an oncoming car, our right arms extended and our thumbs pointing in the direction we wanted to go. Most folks knew us and we got rides quickly.

In the past six months William White had grown to five foot nine. He told me that he wanted to try out for the junior varsity basketball team this year and pushed me to play with him almost every day. One day he said, "Maybe I can teach Lorna C to play

basketball and the three of us can play two-on-one,” a hare-brained scheme if ever I heard one.

Along about the first day of August, a Wednesday, we mowed lawns and then thumbed over to the hospital. We played a few games of one-on-one until it began to rain, and then we headed back to town. I went home – I didn’t want to miss “Terry and the Pirates” on the radio that afternoon. At the end of the previous day’s program the announcer had said, “Terry has prepared secret plans to blow up a Japanese ammunition factory in Indochina. Tomorrow he’ll be ready to strike a blow for freedom. But can he do it? Find out. Tune in, same time, same station.”

The stores in Kettle closed on Wednesday afternoons. That, combined with the rain that turned into a downpour, made for a nearly deserted downtown. William White headed for Miss Kettle’s Place and a visit with Lorna C. Earlier in the day Albert had gone with Benton R. Kinder to weed and prune Benton’s tobacco crop.

William White later described to me the events of that afternoon. “There were no customers in the restaurant and Bertha Benson had gone home when I got there. Lorna C and I sat next to each other at the counter and played 500 rummy for nearly an hour and a half.” He described to me the tight-fitting white blouse and pink skirt that Lorna C wore. He said she kept looking at the front door and once in a while would walk to the door and glance up and down Main Street. “She might have been looking for customers or, more likely, she was checking to make sure we’d be alone.” No customers appeared and the rain showed no promise of letting up. Lorna C told William White she wondered if she should keep the place open on a day like this. The two of them continued to sit at the

counter. Lorna C played her cards and counted her points in the game. William White played his cards and counted his blessings in what had become more than a card game.

What happened next on that rainy afternoon differs, depending on whether the story is told by William White or Lorna C. William White's version – he had just played the eight, nine, and ten of spades. In leaning forward to place his cards on the counter his knee brushed against Lorna C's leg. "She cast the gaze of her beautiful brown eyes first towards my leg that had just touched hers, then slowly turned and looked right into my eyes. She leaned forward, her lips parted ever so slightly and she half-closed her eyes." He paused then said, "I am a human being, Freddy, and I was unable to resist a clear invitation from the woman I love. I kissed her."

Lorna C said, "We were playing 500 rummy and in the middle of the game William White lunged at me and tried to kiss me. I screamed. Then I yelled, 'William White Wallace, you get out of this restaurant! And stay out!'"

William White and I had been best friends since first grade, but I felt Lorna C's rendering of the story had the ring of truth to it.

One evening a few days later, William White and I joined some of our friends for hamburgers at Miss Kettle's Place. After we placed our orders Lorna C said, "I'm sorry, but I can't serve you until one person who will remain unnamed leaves this restaurant." We all turned and looked at William White, whose face had turned crimson. He made a beeline for the front door. I left too. That evening William White and I sat on the front steps of the Bank of Kettle and watched traffic pass along Main Street.

William White suffered through the remaining weeks of August. No more long afternoons for us at Miss Kettle's Place. We continued to do our lawn contracts but I had

to double-check William White's work. He often left uncut streaks of grass due to his failure to overlap his paths of mowing, due to a failure of his vision on the job caused by the failure of a dream coupled with, in my opinion, his own stupidity that day in the restaurant. On the positive side, at least I didn't have to listen any more to details of William White's plans for a future life with Lorna C.

About the time the Rose of Sharon tree in our yard began to bloom, William White and I hit our stride at basketball. My play had improved and we had close games most every afternoon. The appearance of the Rose of Sharon's whitish-pink blossoms signaled the coming end of summer and the approach of the beginning of school. William White and I wanted to use every available minute of our remaining freedom to do the things we enjoyed most.

One afternoon after a few games of one-on-one basketball at the hospital court, we stood on the highway and thumbed a ride back to Kettle. A fellow we'd never seen before, alone and driving a black four-door nineteen and thirty-five Chevrolet, stopped and gave us a lift. The car had back doors called "suicide doors." They had the hinges on the rear side of each door. If you drove along at a good clip and for some reason opened a door, the wind would quickly push it wide open. If you happened to have a firm grip on the door handle you had better hang on or you would find yourself out on the road. Or maybe somebody else would find you because you'd be unconscious or deceased.

"Hop in, boys."

William White and I climbed into the back seat of the Chevy. "We're going to Kettle," I said. William White slammed the door shut.

The driver appeared to be in his late thirties or early forties, balding and chubby. In the afternoon heat, sweat dripped from his face. From ours too. He wore a white shirt that stuck to his body, and a black necktie. A white straw Panama hat lay beside him in the front seat. Beside us in the back seat lay two glossy magazines with naked women on their covers. Totally naked. Front views. In color. Beside the magazines some smaller one-inch thick booklets had been stacked, each one with a pen and ink sketch on the cover. One booklet featured Superman and Lois Lane with their hands in each other's private places. William White picked up one of the little books and found that if you held it between your thumb and forefinger and flipped the pages rapidly, Superman and Lois Lane stripped naked and went at it. I could see the fellow watching us in the rear view mirror. He smiled and a gold upper front tooth gleamed. He said, "It's OK, have a look." I don't think even Superman could have done it as many times as we flipped the pages of the little book. A carton on the floor had a printed label, "Drives women crazy. The original French Tickler." William White started to open the carton and I stopped him.

The fellow smiled again, "You boys from Kettle?" He watched us in the rear-view mirror. We nodded. He continued, "I'm wondering if there is a place in Kettle where a man could find a woman, you know, for the afternoon?" I had never been asked a question like that and didn't know what to say. I wanted out of the car, but didn't like the thought of opening a suicide door while rolling along at forty miles an hour. I shook my head, no. William White got a serious expression on his face and looked into the fellow's eyes in the rear view mirror. "Why yes, I believe that's possible." My mouth gaped open.

William White continued, "There's one place you can go. It's a restaurant called Miss Kettle's Place." He paused and gave the man a serious look, then said, "Miss

Kettle's Place is in the center town, directly across Main Street from the railroad station. Just go in and sit at the counter and ask for Lorna. You can't miss her. She's very pretty. Dark hair, tall. When you speak with her, tell her you have some time on your hands and show her your wallet – that'll do the trick. She has a room in the back where she entertains.”

I kept my mouth shut, but imagined it hanging open. “What's he doing?” I yelled inside myself. For all we knew this guy would come back looking for us after he discovered William White's lie.

About the time William White said “that'll do the trick,” the car stopped at Kettle's traffic light. I said, “We'll get out here.” We thanked the man for the ride and jumped out of the car.

The fellow flashed his gold tooth in a big smile and replied, “I sure appreciate your assistance.”

William White stuck his head in the passenger side window of the front door and said, “Glad to be of help.” He winked at the man and added, “I hope you have a good afternoon.”

When the car pulled away from the light I felt relief.

At first we walked away normally. But when we got far enough away that the fellow couldn't see us, we began to run as hard and fast as I have ever run in my life. When we arrived at my house we threw ourselves on the floor of the front porch. William White began to laugh in whoops. In between whoops he'd say, “I can hear him, 'time on my hands,' he'll say, then show her his wallet.” Another whoop.

I have to admit, the whole thing seemed so ridiculous I began to laugh. Then whoop. Each time we stopped laughing William White'd whoop once more and that would trigger me to start again. The ache in my sides finally got the best of my laughter. Even William White could only whoop for so long.

We waited about an hour then headed for Miss Kettle's Place. We scouted Main Street for the Chevy with the suicide doors. Not seeing it anywhere, we walked to the front door of Miss Kettle's Place. William White said he thought it would be best if he didn't go in, so he crossed the street and sat in the shade of the railroad station platform. I walked in the restaurant and took a seat at the counter. Lorna C's movements wiping the counter top seemed a little jerky, but I thought I might be imagining things. Albert stood just behind the plate glass window at the front of the restaurant and looked up and down the street. I said hey to Albert and Lorna C. After I ordered an RC Cola I asked, "How're things going?"

Lorna C turned towards me with her mouth partly open but no words came out. Albert pulled the brim of his Stetson forward, lowering it towards his eyes, and then said, "I tell you, Freddy, we had a little set-to a while ago. Some feller in a Panama hat come in here actin' real odd, like he knew somethin' we didn't, askin' for Lorna and flashin' a wallet filled with money. About the time she said 'I'm Lorna' I stepped in and said, 'Who wants to know?' He said, nasty-like, 'What's it to you?' and I said once more 'Who wants to know?' and he said 'Excuse me,' in a way that sounded like he wanted me to go fishin' by myself and then rotated his self on his stool towards the counter, turnin' his back to me. I give his shoulders and that stool a good spin. By the time he stopped his spin and stood up I was on my good leg and had my peg leg in my right hand, my arm

arched and ready to swing. The feller's eyes got right large. He said, 'I think there's been some mistake,' and high-tailed it towards the door. I yelled, 'Hey, you ain't paid for your coffee' at his backside.'

Lorna C looked at me, then at Albert, and spoke in a slow and quiet manner, "I don't know who that man was, or what got into him, but Albert, I'm glad you were here." I had never before seen Albert smile. He had a handsome face. Albert pushed his Stetson back on his forehead and said, "Thank you, Lorna C. I'll always be here." Lorna C gave him a warm smile.

* * * *

The day after Labor Day Lorna C received a telegram from President Roosevelt. Wandel had been put a list of men missing in action. For a couple of days folks came in the restaurant and offered Lorna C comfort and support. They told her they'd pray for Wandel. Then a second telegram arrived. Wandel had died in battle and distinguished himself in such a way that he would be awarded a Silver Star – Wandel's second niche in Kettle history. No soldier from Kettle had ever been awarded a Silver Star. The War Department also told Lorna C that because of the explosion that took Wandel's life, there would be no body of Wandel to return home. She learned that Wandel had lost his life when he charged a German machine gun nest that guarded a fuel storage tank. After Wandel had been wounded, he threw a hand grenade into that nest. When the grenade detonated it triggered an explosion of the fuel storage tank and everything went to cinders, including Wandel.

Until Wandel's death, I hadn't known anyone who died in the war. I thought about how we said goodbye twice to Wandel. Once after he joined the Army, the one-

hundredth enlistment, and a second time when he left for overseas. Yet Wandel continued to live in my mind. I imagined him driving his truck or talking to folks in the restaurant – all the while a voice in me said, “Wandel is dead and gone.” Each time I heard the words “dead and gone” within me, I felt like my insides had fallen into a dark pit. Then I’d have trouble concentrating. Not long after Wandel’s death I failed a math test, a subject that had been one of my best.

The evening after we received the news of Wandel’s death, after I went to bed I thought about him and cried – for Wandel, for Lorna C’s sorrow, and for mine too. I got up and went down to the kitchen. Daddy walked in shortly after me. He had on his light blue pajamas and old dark blue bathrobe. I told him I couldn’t sleep because of my thoughts of Wandel. Daddy fixed a glass of warm milk for each of us.

We sat down at the kitchen table and Daddy said, “It’s hard to understand something like Wandel’s death.” He told me that at the time of World War One, a war Daddy said people called “the war to end all wars,” he knew a young man from Kettle, Sonny, who served in the Army and died in France. Sonny grew up in a family who lived near Daddy and Grandma and Grandpa Lemley. In the summertime Sonny worked for Grandpa Lemley and Daddy worked alongside him, even though Daddy said that as a young boy he probably didn’t add much to their getting jobs done. Sometimes Daddy and Sonny would sing hymns while they worked together. Daddy said he cried when he learned of Sonny’s death in battle, “I couldn’t believe Sonny was gone forever. Grandma and Grandpa Lemley took me to a memorial service for Sonny, and that helped me put my feelings for Sonny in a special place.”

“Where’d you put them?”

“At the service I asked God to watch over Sonny. And to help me live in a way that would honor Sonny. I guess God helped me find a special place inside myself to put my memories of Sonny, for I felt a little better after that.”

William White and I went to the memorial service for Wandel at the Baptist Church. I asked God to watch over Wandel and to help me put my feelings in a special place.

After the service many of Lorna C’s regular customers, including William White, gathered at Miss Kettle’s Place. Everybody brought potluck dishes and people reflected on Wandel’s life and told stories about him. We laughed when somebody told the story of Wandel shooting the centipede. Lorna C remembered aloud how well Wandel recited the Twenty-Third Psalm. Then she recited it in its entirety just the way he would have done, and we cried.

Buford Vittitoe, a tall and heavy-set man about Wandel’s age, dressed in blue jeans and a brown work shirt, talked about fishing with Wandel, recalled the time Wandel caught a fourteen inch sucker during night fishing on the Sour Apple River. Then he asked “Do you folks remember the Kettle Nativity Scene of Christmas, nineteen and thirty-eight?” People nodded their heads and murmured that they remembered.

Miss Hattie McClintock, her gray curls bobbing as she spoke in her fast and snippy manner, said, “I helped sew the costumes that year, along with the other members of the Women’s Club. We put a lot of time into it. The club’s top talent did the sewing.”

Buford said the town had invested in floodlights that lit up the manger scene set up beside the fire station with Joseph, Mary, the baby Jesus, and the Three Wise Men. “One night,” Buford said, “Wandel and me sneaked into to the far station and got far

helmets and put them on the Three Wise Men. Then we crossed the street and sat on the Bank steps, waited to see what would happen. Sure enough, a fellow from out of town stopped his car and yelled to us, ‘Why are there fire helmets on the Three Wise Men? Don’t folks around here know anything about the Bible?’ Wandel answered him, ‘Well sir, we read our Bible carefully and it says that the Three Wise Men came from a far.’ We liked to split our sides laughing.”

I laughed along with everybody else, although down deep I felt a great sadness. Lorna C laughed too, but tears filled her eyes. Then she asked me to help her with dessert and get some plates from the kitchen. When I opened the cabinet doors I remembered Wandel standing at that very spot getting plates. My eyes filled with tears and my stomach jerked so hard I gasped.

After the potluck, Lorna C closed the restaurant, though not just for the night. I watched for the lights to come on again, but the place remained dark for a couple of weeks. After she reopened the restaurant, Lorna C worked only once in a while. Bertha Benson ran the place. One day I stopped in for a RC Cola. Bertha sat in the first booth, alone. She wore her usual light blue work dress and her heavy body stretched the dress’s seams to their limit. She had covered her wavy black and gray hair with a light blue net – Bertha said that health regulations required her to wear it when she cooked food.

I asked about Lorna C and Bertha replied, “Lorna C told me she learned that Union Chemical was advertising in the Charleston newspapers for people to work in the factory. She figured she could do something for the war effort and at the same time honor Wandel by going to work there.”

Lorna C put the restaurant up for sale and Bertha Benson bought it. The neon “Miss Kettle’s Place” sign came down, replaced by a simple black and white sign with a single light on either side of it: “Bertha’s Place.” Each side of the sign also had painted on it a large bottle of RC Cola.

Lorna C moved to Charleston and lived near her new job at Union Chemical. After the war ended she continued to live there, though we heard that she got an office job in the State Capitol. Albert Newcomb said, “Half of the men in Kettle put aside work to come in the restaurant and stare at Lorna C. Can you imagine the men in the State House? They ain’t got much to do anyways. I’ll bet every chance they get they’re in Lorna C’s office hangin’ out and gawkin’ at her. I’d give my good leg to have her back here.”

Albert surprised everybody and bought Wandel’s red Dodge three-quarter-ton pickup truck from Lorna C, a purchase that helped him improve his free-lance business. On each of the truck’s two doors he had painted in gold letters trimmed in black, “Albert Newcomb, *no job too small.*” Albert rigged a shoe to fit on the end of his peg leg – that allowed him to successfully negotiate the truck’s clutch for the shifting of gears. Otherwise he drove just like anybody else. “The right leg does most of the work anyway,” Albert said.

After the war ended William White and I got all wrapped up in our lives at Kettle High School and my memories of the summer of nineteen and forty-four began to take their place alongside everything else that happened over the next four years at school.

About two weeks before graduation in the spring of forty-eight, William White pounded on my front door a little after ten o'clock at night. All out of breath, he told me that he and Billy Joe Wheeler had been at the A&W Drive-In in Charleston. While they sat there eating hot dogs and drinking root beer, in came Wandel's, now Albert's, red pickup truck with Albert Newcomb behind the wheel. A woman who looked like Lorna C sat beside him. We stayed on the front porch until just after eleven o'clock and speculated on the possibility that Albert Newcomb had begun to spark Lorna C, something neither of us could believe.

The next day at noon hour, while William White, Beverly, and I walked to the cafeteria, he mentioned Albert's sparking Lorna C. Beverly threw a steely glance at me then turned to William White and said, "Well, well, a local beauty may be gone. Will Kettle's boys live through their disappointment?"

Our speculation about Lorna C ended late one afternoon about a week later when the *Kettle News Leader* arrived on our front porch. In the lower right portion of page one was a story that Lorna Comstock Meyers and Albert Newcomb had been married in Charleston and would live there. Lorna C and Albert Newcomb? Married? My stomach contracted and my breath grew short. I sat down in a porch chair. Why had she done it?

A few minutes later I walked into the living room. Momma had seated herself in her favorite chair, beside the table with her reading lamp. She first asked me to hand her the paper, then she paused, stared at me for a moment, and said, "Freddy, you look like you just lost your best friend. Is something wrong?"

I went up to my room and shut the door, recalled the evening at Miss Kettle's Place after Wandel's memorial service. How the food and stories we shared had

nourished us, lifted each other's sorrow. At the end of the evening, how everybody, even William White, had hugged Lorna C and kissed her on the cheek as they left the restaurant.

I had been the last person to leave. Lorna C turned out the lights and for a moment the two of us stood in the doorway. I put my arms around her to say goodbye and she gently hugged me. Then her arms lingered, stayed around me. The length of her body rested against mine and she turned her face towards me. Her lips gently parted and her eyes closed as her face neared mine.

William White's words echoed inside my thoughts, "She cast the gaze of her beautiful brown eyes first towards my leg that had just touched hers, then slowly turned and looked right into my eyes. She leaned forward, her lips parted ever so slightly and she half-closed her eyes."

I wanted to place my lips on hers and tightly press our bodies together. I wanted to gently undress her. And I knew she wanted me.