Alease Krause

Sex, Love and the First Signs of Mental Illness

My name is Lucy Pierce Fogelman, from Nashville, Tennessee, and the day I met him I was dripping wet and not looking any too good. It was an indoor pool and the air smelled like Clorox. My eyes burned, and I was shivering cold, my skin webbed with goosebumps. This is a fact: Swimming will not make you skinny. But I didn’t need to be skinny (I already was) — I just wanted to feel good.

My head was turned upside down and I was banging water out of my ear when I heard somebody say, “Hey there, girl.” A pair of sharp-toed boots stood in a puddle of water three feet from me. This is another fact: There is no forgiveness for folks who wear cheap shoes. So I didn’t bother to look any further, just kept my head down and started drying my hair. I banged my ear again for extra measure, just in case he hadn’t noticed that I was not listening and that I also had no intention of responding within the foreseeable lifetime of that footgear. And then he said:

“Whooe, girl! I tell you, you look great. You a dancer?”

At this, I looked closer at what the voice was wearing on his feet. They were new and shiny, but at least they were leather. His jeans were good (faded Levis); his waist, hard and small. No belt. Plain t-shirt. In my past I had had a thing or two to do with clean Southern boys with Soul Train in their voice. So less the boots and with the right face, he had a chance.

It was, in fact, a fine face, a Tom Hanks’ face, with big lips and flaming amber eyes. His name, he told me, was Macon Garrett. He was working at the pool, he said, but only temporarily, which meant to me that he had other, more interesting things to return to.

Yes, he was friendly; yes, he was on the make; and yes, he had a chance even though he smiled too much and made stupid jokes.
“Me, the biggest thing I do,” he said and patted his flat abdomen, “is push myself away from my momma’s table.”
“You look very manly to me,” I said.
“Well, thank you for the compliment. I sure appreciate that. But you know, since I’ll be here every day anyway I figure I’ll work up to swimming a couple of miles. Certainly couldn’t hurt me, could it?”
I walked to the shower. Having to set my feet in the little puddles laced with other peoples sweat and cast-off body cells was the worst part of coming to this place. I turned on the hot water. A naked woman beside me, I could never remember her name, asked me who the man was. “Macon,” I said casually. I heard her sputter the word snake. Without pause, I demanded she repeat what she’d said. “He had on snake-skin boots,” she screamed. “Wrong!” I said. “They were embossed leather.”

I have had my share of love, but I am not a popular woman. I have been described as abrupt, angry, and impatient. I don’t like to be alone but I’m made itchy by niceties. The next day at the pool, Macon called out to me.
“Hey, Lucy.” he sauntered. He smiled. Then he was serious. “You like living in Nashville?” I told him that indeed I did. “Well,” he said, “it ain’t for me.” After a day on the job he had decided that the pool and the people doing laps like mindless dogs would drive him crazy. That night we slept together in the comfort of my soft patchouli scented bed clothes.
It was spring, the windows open, and the night air that chilled our sweaty bodies was full of nauseatingly sweet hyacinths and fresh cut grass. He said he knew all about the gourmet cooking of wild game. He said he knew a thing or two about wine — (turns out he never touched alcohol, preferring instead to smoke dope and go sit around in the woods).
But this is true: He knew sex. His big lips, warm and wet, when they brushed my ear, I knew I loved him. After the third night, one of my neighbors, a well-mannered psychologist, warned me that with my windows open she could hear all that we said. Actually, it was my
moaning and screaming in the throes of ecstasy that she was so delicately referring to.

A total of two weeks, or fourteen nights, we slept together until he moved back to his place down near Lawrenceberg. I waited a week before I closed up house and moved in with him.

_Hold the horses! you're saying. How old is this woman and how come she'd take up with such an easy man?_

I was thirty-two and a successful interior designer. (Never say interior decorator, those are the folks who smoke Camels down to the nub and paint your house.) My design work was distinctive; I was so subtle that I could take someone's cherished (but ugly) Victorian loveseat and make it invisible. My clients, the Nashville recently rich, were able to pay. My clothes, black Armani pants and cashmere sweater sets, draped my bony body elegantly.

I had my house, a stone cottage in the right part of town. I had my antiques in the perfect proportions for my cottage walls. I had original art.

I had my assets, but I had no large sum of money in the bank, and in this you can see I was not hard and calculating. I took up with Macon Garrett, age forty-five and a moderately successful dope dealer, out of sheer love.

When I arrived at his house with my white sports utility vehicle loaded with clothes, boxes, and bags of food, Macon said, “Goddamn, Lucy, looks like you're moving in.” Strands of garlic, cases of wine, branches of Rosemary, two racks of lamb, a dozen eggs and fresh cream and pecans and semi-sweet chocolate for Gateau Ganache, a half-pint of fresh raspberries. How could he fail to love a woman who would bring these things into his country boy life?

He liked the food the first night, no doubt, but was squeamish about rare meat. _Nothing_ is worse than overcooked lamb, but did he ask me before he slapped the rack back on the grill and cooked it until the inside was the color of slate? No sir, he did not.
Two bottles of wine I opened up early so they could breathe. Did he drink any of it? No, I had to finish it all because *nothing* is worse than leftover red wine.

So I'll tell you this: Wine for me can be a problem. Not all the time, but sometimes. I've gone without for months, but let me start cooking and I start drinking. And I always cook like a maniac when I'm in love.

Even so, my wine-soaked, dope-smoked brain waked the first morning knowing what I had to do. The kitchen had to have a southeast window. No two ways about it. And that old, black, worn-down linoleum nailed to the sub-flooring, who in God's name would want to put their feet on that every day?

Figuring six dollars a square foot for antique heart pine flooring in eight inch wide planks (that is if I drove to Tarboro and picked it up myself) and a small but high quality bay window, I thought I could do it all for a few thousand.

Okay, you're wondering what the hell is wrong with me. I had several thousand in the bank, not a large sum for a woman my age, granted, but this is what I was thinking: I couldn't resist the house and the work it needed. I was making a country home with Macon Garrett.

At two on a warm spring afternoon when I'd done about as much as I could in the house (which at this point was mostly throwing out the Sears Early American living furniture), I sprayed myself with mosquito repellent and sat down under the maple with a bottle of wine, pencils, and paper. When you stick plants in the ground haphazardly it can turn out looking like an old woman's yard. And God save me from ever planting flowers in a wagon wheel or Maxwell House coffee can, as seemed to be the trend in this sparsely populated area. I wanted an English garden, lush with varying color and height from early spring to late fall. Flowing, curving rows with
a random look. The whimsical took a great deal of planning. The maple I was sitting under would be the starting point.

Maples are greedy trees, sucking up and needing everything that falls their way, so I'd not be able to plant within a five foot radius of its trunk. I put a circle on the paper for the tree and another an inch or so from the circumference of the first. I drank wine and drew some whirled lines and closed my eyes. On sunny days, the purple and red flowers would wave in the breeze and honey bees would dabble from one cluster of color to another. I listened to the crows that circled in the pasture and the squawking bluejays who objected to my sitting under their tree. Macon's truck rattled along the road, but I didn't raise my head until I heard his door open and slam shut.

He looked worse than the two boys with him. Buttons were missing from his shirt, and he was covered with mud. His left shoulder was pitched higher than the right and he grimaced in pain as he limped toward the back door. When he came out with money in his hand, I held up the glass of wine and peered at him through the golden haze.

"Twenty bucks, is that all?" one of the boys grumbled. Actually, they weren't boys. They were twins. Forty-years old, three hundred pounds, never married and still living at home with their mother. Macon hired them from time to time, during dry spells, to help water his marijuana plants.

"Get on out of here," Macon said. "I'm too tired to fool with you."

They headed off toward a path through the woods to their farm a few miles over. I noticed that they were still very clean, nary a speck on their ironed overalls.

"You know," I said as I viewed the house, one eye closed, through the wine glass. "I worried about that bay window. But just look at it. It looks like it's been in place a hundred years. I simply just love it."

By now Macon was sprawled in the grass. His chest moved up and down in quick jerks and every breath was a moan. "Don't you agree?" I asked.

"You know why the hell I keep doing this? I'll tell you why. It's the only way I can live out here and mind my own business and make a living." He raised up on one elbow and turned his head toward the backs of the disappearing men. "And those two fools are probably gonna go back and steal my plants."
“Oh, don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll help you.”

“Lucy, you ain’t got the foggiest what you’re getting yourself into.” He gave a deep sigh, and one arm relaxed by his side and the other across his eyes.

The next morning I wore a red and white check blouse, short denim skirt, hiking boots and slouch socks. My backpack held the essentials: sunscreen and bug spray and in an insulated pouch chilled raw veggies, chicken salad on sourdough whole wheat, a jar of tea for Macon and a bottle of wine for me. It was not a light load.

No roads or paths went anywhere close to where we were going. Macon drove his truck through a pasture and left it parked on the edge of a gully. We walked the rest of the way.

His job was to fill a ten-gallon bucket with river water and lug it to each of his fifty plants. The trouble was they were planted on separate rocky ledges, hidden by brambles and briars.

He slugged through the trickling shallows to deeper water and dunked the bucket. He managed the heavy load back over the slippery rocks but his knees buckled into the muddy bank when he tried to step up to dry land. Before even one plant was watered, he was cussing and feeling sorry for himself. He stood below me, ankle deep in sludge.

“You need a smaller container,” I said.

He was on the bank now, reaching down to heave the bucket up. Both his legs were covered with mud, the front of his shirt soaked. A second later he let out a blood freezing screech, and the huge pail plunked between his feet and half the water spilled into his already wet shoes.

“For goodness’ sakes, Macon! There has got to be a better way. Don’t most farmers use motor driver irrigation systems?”

“Yeah, that’s what I need. Lines of irrigation pipe flashing like tin foil. Wouldn’t nobody in a helicopter notice that. Just take it from me, Lucy, there’s things you don’t understand.” He picked up the bucket in his right hand and his left waved in the air for balance. I followed him up a rocky hill to what looked like a patch of weeds. Growing there unseen, until he pointed it out, was one of his plants. It was about a foot high. He said that by the end of August it would be over five feet and its buds worth eight hundred dollars. He poured a little
water and let it soak in, and then poured a little more. It was taking
forever.

"Macon," I said, "What we need here is a way to pump the water
and thus save your back and a way to hide the pipes. Camouflage is
not difficult."

He set down on a patch of flat rock and buried his face in his
hands. I thought he was thinking. After what seemed like minutes he
jumped up and reached for the plant, caught it mid-stem and flung
it down the hill.

"That takes care of that one," he said.

I decided he probably wanted to work alone.

After a few hours he joined me in a patch of clover. The ground
was cool, the area shaded, which made the green ground cover look
bluish black. He lay back in the plush growth and I unbuttoned his
wet shirt and kissed his neck.

"You've been a great help," he said. "Glad I brought you with me."

Surely, he didn't want me toting hundred pound buckets of water
through briar patches. "Macon," I said, "you did it all wrong." I took
out a little sketch showing how a channel could be dug directing the
water to a more convenient spot. I explained how dipping it out two
or three gallons at a time was far more efficient than his trying to
carry a ten-gallon bucket and sloshing it all over the place before he
even got to the plant.

"My shoulder," he whispered. "I think I've dislocated my shoulder."

You want to know the truth about a house, look inside the floors and
walls. When his shoulder felt better we ripped up the cheap grade
plywood sub-flooring that somebody, probably Macon's old dead
granddaddy, had put down years ago. When ingenuity, Macon leveled
out the joists with pieces of two by four nailed into their sides.
Square and level. The ancient pine settled snug on the floor, and
perfectly matched the bay window that looked out on a garden of
perennials I had started in Macon's old tomato patch. (Tomatoes are
not a pretty plant, not exactly what I wanted to be looking at when
I was drinking my coffee.) Waving foxglove, a few columbine, hosta
under the shade of the hackberry, the simplicity awed me. And it was
spacious, with room for the plants to divide, for me to add something new every season for years.

Let me tell you, getting those flowers in the ground as fast as I did almost killed me. Macon, already in a bad mood because of his shoulder, had tilled the ground for his tomatoes one morning and then gone off to do errands. By the time he was home, I had set out my plantings, bought the day before from the best nursery in middle Tennessee, the F.W. Paige’s on Franklin Road in Nashville.

He was mad, and I said, “Macon, why do you live in the country? Don’t you think there’s room enough somewhere else out here for those tomatoes, like over yonder in that field?”

“I live in the country,” he told me, “to keep away from trash.”

“Well,” I said, “we all have our definitions and some people might think you’re a redneck.”

“And some people,” he said, “might think you’re a fallen woman and a Jezebel.”

I let it go. Surely, we’ve all been called worse.

Macon’s momma and daddy had a place on the Duck River, the same river that flowed through the pasture in back of Macon’s house. The day he took me over to meet them, they were sitting out on their screened porch, speechless, admiring nature you might think, except for the mean expression on Libby Jean’s face. Nobody spoke and Macon and I just went on and made ourselves comfortable on their porch swing.

The swing must have been three feet deep and full of pillows. We’d smoked a little dope and I’d drunk a little wine on the way over, and with his momma and daddy being so quiet, after a while we seemed alone and drifted into rubbing each other’s feet and caressing each other’s tired shoulders.

“Son,” Frank Garrett said when Macon started holding my face in his hands and kissing my open lips, “are you bored?” He waited for Macon to straighten himself and put his feet on the floor. “I don’t want to scare you but I saw helicopters three days this week.”

“Daddy, I swear the way I got it planted, they ain’t going to see it.”

“Don’t be calling me from jail,” Libby Jean said.
A sweeping wind bent the cottonwood that separated the porch from the river. When it had died down, he told us to forgive Libby Jean’s rudeness. “It’s her feet,” he said. “Her hammer toes were shaved today. Been squeezing her B-width feet into A-width shoes for years.”

“Go to hell,” Libby Jean said to her husband. “If it wasn’t for me you’d still be living in the backwoods with the rest of the inbred Garretts.” Then she looked at me. “My daddy never did approve of the Garretts.”

They were touchy subjects, the natural narrowness of feet and the sophistication of your ancestry. I kept quiet and made friends with Libby Jean when I invited her over to see what we were doing to Macon’s house.

An early morning in late August Libby Jean drove up in her white Cadillac and honked the horn. “Come on,” she said, “I’m gonna get you some peonies for your garden.”

Without much ado, she drove to her old homeplace, now the home of a TV weatherman, and opened the trunk to reveal a shovel, a hatchet, green rubber overshoes and yellow plastic gloves. The new owner wasn’t home and with Libby Jean’s urgency (along with the fact she’d parked her car on his manicured grass), I suspected we were trespassing.

It had been raining for two days and it was quick work for her to cut around the peonies with her sharp tongued shovel. She dug up six plants and divided the root balls with quick whacks from her red-handled hatchet. Fast as a butcher, she wrapped the cuttings in newspaper. Along with tire prints, she left clumps of dirt muddying the lush grass. When we were back on highway she spoke. “These peonies,” she said, “been in my family a hundred years, and I want you to have them.”

For lunch that day I served cold vichyssoise, a little salad of mixed greens and a bottle of Chardonnay. I held my glass up. “To Libby Jean,” I said, “the fiercest of them all.”
Always a vodka drinker, she was surprised at how well she liked the wine, but I had anticipated as much and had two more bottles chilled and waiting in the fridge. It felt good to have somebody to drink a little wine with, what with having been with Macon all these months and drinking alone. I felt civilized. I felt like I was part of a family, with Libby Jean sitting at my kitchen table and rubbing her bare feet over the soft pine floor, her red pedicured toes teasing the old nailholes and knots.

By early afternoon, when I was uncorking the third one, Libby Jean said, “I like you.”
“Yes,” I said. “I’m talented.”
“Mentally ill is more like it. Hobnailed liver.”
“Yes,” I said, thinking it a type of wood coloring.
“The doctor who did the autopsy said it was the worse one he’d ever seen.”
“For sure?”
“Now that’s his daddy’s side. My side drinks but we’re not crazy like those Garretts.”
“The Garretts crazy?”
“Damn right. Backwood Bible fanatics, all of them. Musical, all of them, too. Pianos, guitars, banjos, you name it, they can play it. And you’re not going to find any better dancers then the Garretts. You ever noticed musical families are always on the verge of being crazy?”
“Yes, ma’am,” I said, “I have. All you got to do is look at Jerry Lee Lewis and Jimmy Swaggert. They’re cousins.”
“Now don’t misunderstand me, my momma could carry a good tune and play a few notes on the piano. . . .”
“Yes, ma’am,” I said again, knowing that if I kept on talking I’d hit upon a truth. “Witness Jimmy Swaggert down in New Orleans, sweat popping on his blessed forehead as he squeezes the Bible above his head and screams for us to give it up for Jesus. Uh huh, and then he’s sitting in a motel room, his hands smited with the power so he’ll not reach out and touch the woman, naked, right there in front of him. Mark my words, this is a fact: Guilt makes sex better.”
“Fact is,” said Libby Jean, “the wine’s about gone and those peonies are withering in my trunk.”
If Macon looked like Tom Hanks in the spring when I met him, toward winter I noticed he was favoring James Wood. His hair seemed thinner, his lips less relaxed, but at night beneath the old quilts his hands still sent electricity through my body and blinded my eyes to his daytime colorings.

On December 1, his birthday, his momma and daddy came over and I grilled shrimp and made rice pilaf and served a little French meringue cake so light it could barely support the forty-six candles. He went to bed as soon as they left and fell into a fitful sleep and woke up screaming about acid eating away at his bones.

The next morning his face in the southern light of the kitchen window was brownish-yellow, his eyes the color of peeled grapes. Shaking, he held his coffee cup with both hands. Libby Jean and I had drunk a couple of bottles the night before but he looked like the one with a hangover. He sat at the breakfast table and watched me make lists.

"Lucy," he said after awhile, "I'm just flat out exhausted. I don't every remember feeling this tired before in my life."

"Well," I said, "there's not much to do today. An estate sale over in Brover. That once a month flea market down in Florence. And this afternoon, drive up to Nashville to see the primitives Lackey brought down from Maine. Got a feeling, though," I said and rubbed his limp head, "he's gonna have them priced way too high."

Because he was so tired, there was something I didn't tell him. I had bought three pallets of brick from B.J. Hayes Salvage, and they were scheduled for delivery within the day. I wanted brick walkways through the flowers and a patio off the kitchen, and the hardest part would be leveling the ground. Macon was good at things like this, a near perfectionist. "We'll get you some vitamins," I said, "when we're over in Brover."

Bolts of fabric were propped in the bay window. In the morning light I was overwhelmed with delight at the unusual mix of tartans, checks, and florals I'd chosen for the English cottage look.

Jack of all and master of only one — the visual — I knew how things should be done but when I did them myself, especially drapes and upholstery, it racked my nerves and ruined my posture. For weeks now I'd been looking for a Singer S-111, a monster they stopped making twenty years ago, and while Macon drank his coffee
and issued an occasional complaint about his bones and muscles, I just happened to find one in the classifieds.

"Mr. Bunny," I said as chipper as possible considering his lax expression, "you won't believe what's in the paper." I paused for effect. "A heavy-duty upholstery sewing machine, the kind men use."

"This is one man who ain't gonna sew."

"The Singer S-111 looks like and weighs about as much as a '50 Ford."

"Don't be bringing my cars into this."

"You think I'm talking about your cars? No sir, I'm not talking about your cars. All those junk heaps lined up on the hill? No sir, I think you should leave them there, as art work. Why don't you plant some flowers around them?"

"I ain't planting no flowers."

"Well, just what is it, Mr. Macon Garrett, you plan to do?"

"Smoke dope and tend my crop."

"Do you think Jesus would approve of smoking, growing and selling marijuana?" I said it out of pure meanness, but he went ahead and answered me.

"Yes, ma'am, as a matter of fact, I do. And, Lucy, if you read the Bible you'd know Jesus never set up housekeeping with a woman." With that said, he went back to bed, not a good thing, since I didn't want him to be home when the B.J. Hayes truck drove up. If he was in a bad enough mood, he might go out and run them off with a shotgun before they could unload the brick.

Another thing Macon didn't know — I'd scheduled the house for a spring photo shoot to go along with an article about me that would be in the Home Section of the Nashville Sunday paper. Not a second could be wasted in the time I had to perfect my signature work as the decorator of country homes.

***

One morning, it wasn't more than two weeks later, I was up at five working on drapes for the living room. About eight I was getting irritated and went in to check on Macon. He couldn't move, he said.
He could barely talk. He asked me to call a doctor but being as busy as I was I called his momma and daddy instead. Libby Jean and Frank took him to an emergency room and he was admitted to the hospital for observation.

Libby Jean called on the phone, crying. "They say it's stress. That he's working himself too hard."

"He doesn't even have a job," I said.

Libby Jean snapped at me. "You haven't given that boy a moment's peace since you moved in with him."

One thing I figured might be making Macon sick was the bedroom. It was dark and airless, the quilts musty. I chose a pale celery color for the walls and ceiling and a high-gloss white enamel for the trim. I told Tommy Roach, a local, barely competent painter, to just go on and throw away the fly-specked pulldown shades. We were so far out in the country we didn't have to worry about neighbors peeping in until I could design a period window treatment.

While the painting was being done and Macon was in the hospital, I went to Nashville and gathered together an antique rug and the white, patchouli-scented bedclothes from my own bed.

The rug, a Persian Hebriz, had been hand-tied in fine knots a hundred years ago by a nomadic tribe. It was rolled up and packed on a camel by day and unrolled at night as the floor for their tent. The sand and bare feet wore the wool nap to the thinness of silk, and instead of the gaudy bright burgundies and navies you see in a new rug, the colors had faded into pale shrimp and orange, oatmeal and shades of chocolate. I could easily have sold it to another decorator for twenty thousand. But it was my prize. Bought for fifteen hundred at an estate auction, I had kept it locked up and mothproofed for the past two years.

"My God," Libby Jean said when she brought Macon home, "it looks like a hospital room."

"Just how many hospital rooms have you seen," I said, "that have this kind of floor covering?"

Her nose twitched as she looked around. "Paint fumes and mothballs," she said. "No wonder he's sick."

I started to open a window. "I'll air the place out."

"Don't you dare. It's thirty degrees outside. You want to give him pneumonia?"
While Macon was in the bathroom I led her to the kitchen and gave her a glass of wine. "You know what the doctor said?" she asked me. "The doctor looked at Macon and said, 'Son, the best thing you can do for yourself is hunt and fish as much as you want, 'til you start feeling better.'" She leaned against the counter, crossed her ankles and took a sip of the Chardonnay. Her shoes sent a wave of panic through me. Always vain about her feet, she drove to Nashville to buy expensive and fashionable footwear. It was the first time I had seen her in lace-ups that were as soft and shapeless as dingy marshmallows.

I poured a glass for myself and stood facing her. "At the hospital," I ask, "did he list his occupation as drug dealer?"

"Hunt and fish," Libby Jean said. "Those were the doctor's exact words." She peered into her drink. "Do people ever put olives in wine, like a martini? Everybody in the county knows Macon's a farmer. Farming," she sighed. "It's a hard life."

As soon as Libby Jean's brakelights flashed at the end of the driveway, I slipped off my shoes and lay down on top of the down-filled duvet beside Macon. He was almost asleep. His eyes were closed, he seemed to be smiling, and I opened out his arm and put my head on his shoulder. He was comfortable, but I kept wriggling, trying to find the right position to relieve the tension in my neck. Everything was quiet except for the rustle my feet made on the covers as I twisted around.

I whispered close to his ear, "Attitude and vitamins. We'll stop smoking dope. We'll walk three miles every morning."

He whispered back, "Lucy, I love you."

I said, "Marry me."

He said, "No."

Even with a person you wouldn't marry, the rejection still smarts. It awakened my self pity and made me dizzy with visions of what I'd never have. Self pity is a dangerous thing. For the first time I noticed that the walls in this just painted room were too green and overwhelming for the muted shades of the Hebriz. But the scariest thing about the paint color was this: it made me wonder what I was doing here.

Without much talk, afternoon turned to evening. We rose long enough to undress and than lay naked in the fresh white sheeting
that glowed phosphorescent with the moonlight from the bare windows. The window casings, floor to ceiling, were large enough to frame the trees that waved in the night air. We held hands and were quiet.

I was thinking why we get involved with who we do. Why we ask to marry us people who don’t want to get married, and who we wouldn’t marry anyway. Desperation can be the downfall of a calculating woman. All my money was gone, along with my fingernails. Even my good posture, the heavy dusk to dawn labor and too much wine and dope having carved my shoulders into a weariness.

“There’s a dust storm on the moon,” Macon said.

The breeze picked up a dervish of dry winter leaves and they crinkled against the old panes of rippled glass. Piled at the edge of the yard like a dead beast in the shadows was the Sears Early American furniture I’d thrown out of the living room months ago.

My heart had its own reasons. Maybe I smelled sunshine and open spaces on him that day I met him in the chlorine air beside the swimming pool. What I did — spend months of my life working on a house fifty miles from nowhere in all directions — was minor. Look at it this way: What if it had been drugs (excluding, of course, the judicious use of marijuana) or a married man? Instead it was a time, from early spring to beginning winter, of perfecting my craft. Always, I had wanted love in a well-decorated home. The bad part now for me was the love. I thought I might not be so good at that. I looked at Macon’s worn out, tired face.

“The moon is sick,” he said.

I pressed my nose into his arm and was comforted by the smell of him. Already I knew what I’d take with me when I moved back to Nashville.