

THE END OF DAY

When I was seven years old my family bought a television set “on time” that is, by making monthly payments on it. We were the third household in the small town of Quicksand, N.C. to get one. The television all but replaced the battered brown plastic radio—the only thing that ever brought us together aside from the dinner table. It was post World War II and the cold war raged around us. My classmates and I were taught to duck under our desks in the event of a nuclear attack. Everybody was scared to death of Communism. Some of my favorite TV shows became “Foreign Intrigue,” and the heart stopping thriller, “I Led Three Lives.” Herbert Philbrick appeared to be a mild mannered American family man who worked in advertising, but in secret he was a Communist activist. He was also a good guy, an FBI informant; hence, he led three lives. Each weekly episode became a life or death situation, but somehow he would always be saved. I began to feel as if I, too, led different lives.

At school I pretended to be the happy-go-lucky Nicolette Elizabeth Bradshaw—the girl everybody called “Niki.” At home I often felt sad, hopeless. And sometimes I would become angry—really angry and I’d pitch a fit. My older sister and two older brothers could pitch some good fits, too. But my Daddy took the prize. His full name was Woodrow DeRoy Bradshaw but everybody called him, “D.W.” Whenever he misplaced anything it was always Mama’s fault, and he’d yell, “Lovinia! What in the Goddamn Hell did you do with my Goddamn shoe horn?”

Goddamn it to Hell!” He screamed loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. He would often bash his head against a door jamb, throw things, and jump up and down. Mama said he reminded her of “Rumpelstiltskin” and she wished he would stomp right through the floor and never come back. Othermama, my maternal grandmother, (who had lived with my family for as far back as I could remember) warned if I didn’t stop throwing fits like D. W. and ask for God’s forgiveness, that one day men in white coats would come and take me away. Othermama enjoyed watching game shows and “To Tell the Truth” was her favorite. I enjoyed it, too. A celebrity panel would try to determine which one of three guests was telling the truth. The object of the game was to get the panelists to vote for an imposter. After the panelists had voted the announcer would say, “Will the real Mr., Miss or Mrs. So-and-So please stand up. In my imagination if I were on the program, when the announcer said, “Will the real Miss Nicolette Elizabeth Bradshaw please stand up,” I’d be hard put to know which one of me that would be.

In 1958 my favorite song, “All I have to do is Dream” performed by the Everly Brothers topped the Billboard charts. I still looked like other girls my age, I was now fourteen, but inside I had become an obnoxious, black-hearted-she-devil full of evil secrets. According to Othermama, my siblings and I had to rise above adversity. None of us knew exactly what adversity meant but we knew it had something to do with Daddy. Othermama claimed he was a no good rotter— the devil incarnate. Because we were his offspring, we were at risk of becoming devils and no good rotters, too. It took a great deal of energy to carry that heavy load of sins and family skeletons and quite frankly I had little energy left to be a carefree teenager. But in 1958, I was given the opportunity and I took it. It seemed a dream come true.

Like many young girls, I, too, had been swept away by Margaret Mitchell's novel, Gone with the Wind. I read certain passages over and over. Like the main character, Scarlett O'Hara, I, too, become obsessed with my very own Ashley Wilkes. Tall, smart, handsome and snobbish, his name was Paul Reed. Paul sat behind me in English class that year and I fell hopelessly in love with him. Paul came from a family that regularly attended church. My Daddy was an abusive alcoholic and a gambler and my family rarely went to church. Daddy didn't want to go and Mama claimed she didn't have anything nice enough to wear. I went to church with my best friend Rhonda Peterson and her family. Daddy had a good job that paid well, but he never gave Mama enough money to run the house. Mama worried constantly over how to pay bills. Paul wouldn't understand our situation. He wouldn't want anything to do with me if he knew how we lived. But the truth is I could've remained in my dream state of blind exquisite unrequited love for Paul Reed had it not suddenly been interrupted by reality and Rhonda.

My friend Rhonda was invited on a date by an older student from our class named Ricky who had just received a car for his sixteenth birthday. He invited her to attend a recital presented by "Les Pieds Dansants," a local dance studio. Her Mother said she could go out with him on one condition—another couple would have to go along and make it a double date. Rhonda suggested that I go along. Knowing my secret love, she told Ricky to ask Paul to go as my date. Rhonda broke the news that afternoon as we walked home from school.

"Ricky spoke to Paul in class today," Rhoda said. Paul said he'd love to go and that he will call you. Paul also said that you are one of the nicest girls in school."

Clothes had always been an issue or rather not having enough of them. But for once, I wasn't panicked about what to wear—the dress I had worn to the Ninth Grade Banquet would be perfect. Made of orange and yellow flowered chiffon, the dress had dainty pale yellow spaghetti straps that required a strapless bra (not that I needed one). Worn with three heavily starched crinoline slips underneath, I felt light enough to float on a breeze. To complete the outfit, I wore my very first pair of high heeled shoes dyed a pale yellow to match the dress. The shoes, slips and dress were a gift from Othermama, my maternal grandmother, for graduating from junior high school with excellent grades. The only problem I faced was logistical. Would Ricky and Rhonda drive to my house first and pick me up or go to Paul's first then come for me. I broke into a sweat just thinking about it. Rhonda was the only friend I ever invited to visit my home. I dreaded for Paul to see where I lived. I could ask to spend the night at Rhonda's but hadn't she done enough? As the much awaited night drew near, I did ask if I could be at her house when Ricky picked her up and she said of course. Her older sister Rachel overheard the conversation and offered to help us prepare for the big date. After high school, Rachel planned to become a model. Rachel insisted that I wear her yellow flowered rhinestone earbobs as they were a perfect match for my dress. I hoped Rhonda would take the hint and ask me to spend the night but she didn't and I simply couldn't bring myself to ask. I would regret it.

After I dressed, Rhonda's older sister Rachel coaxed and teased my lifeless, dirty-blond hair into a sleek pageboy. I had often been criticized for being too thin but surprisingly the reflection in the bedroom mirror revealed a slender, pleasing figure. I seriously wondered if the reflection could really be me. At last 6:30PM arrived and minutes later so did Ricky in an old dilapidated

black Ford. Rhonda sat up front. I climbed in the back stepping carefully over a pile of junk in the floor that included a metal tool box and a bicycle pump. Paul's home was a lovely two story structure surrounded by carefully trimmed shrubs. I attempted to observe and memorize everything about it but seconds later when Paul stepped from their screened-in breezeway wearing a white sport coat, I saw nothing else. Our destination for the evening was Owens Auditorium in Charlotte, a public facility built to house various events such as Ice Capades, Broadway shows, Billy Graham Crusades, and athletic events. Our seats were nowhere near Rhonda's and Ricky's. Paul and I were seated in the very top row of seats in the balcony. At first I was disappointed that we weren't sitting near Rhonda and Ricky but I soon forgot about them. Paul and I were so far away from the stage it was hard to see the dancers or hear the music so we began to make small talk and were soon giggling in the dark. Shushed by various audience members nearby, we drew closer. Inevitably, our heads came together. I don't know how long I sat there with my head touching Paul's. Could this be a dream? I wondered. At last, our classmate Dee Dee appeared. She sang "Hard Hearted Hannah" then broke into a tap dance that earned her a standing ovation. The show ended all too soon.

Out in the parking lot, it had begun to drizzle. I knew by the time we reached the car that my hair would be limp and stringy but I didn't care. If the rain continued and came down harder, my whole life could be ruined.

"Want to go to Shoney's for a coke?" Ricky asked. Like Cinderella who forgot about the time, I suddenly forgot about the rain. "Yes," Paul, Rhonda and I answered in a chorus.

I was probably the only teenager who had never been to Shoney's. As we quietly savored our soft drinks, "Twilight Time" by the Platters began to play on the radio. The words made my heart pound and my mind race. When they sang the part about, "Deep in the night your kiss will thrill me..." the spark of love that had been lit in my heart ignited a conflagration. I blushed from head to toe. The song also brought what I called "the twilight burials" to mind and I felt my face burn hotter. Whenever it had to be done, Mama would wait until dusk to slip out of the house and drag the heavy shovel from the garage. Although we had no neighbors, it was my job to stand guard and make sure that no one came around until the act was completed. Mama wasn't a physically strong person but she buried each one as best she could—some in the front yard and some in the back. Once in a while she wouldn't dig deep enough and our cocker spaniel, No-Go would run right to the spot and exhume the remains. No-Go would then have to be kept inside the house while Mama chose a new site to dig another plot. No markers existed but our yard served as a garden of remembrance, although the secret graves were something I desperately tried to forget. According to Mama, alcohol consumption had caused Daddy to lose—among other things—control of his bowels. Whether he had lost control or was simply too plastered to take care of his own needs, Mama had to deal with the results.

"Can't you just wash them?" I asked.

"Wash them?" Mama screeched. "Niki, I don't think you understand."

"Well, then, stuff them in a paper bag and throw it in the garbage," I offered.

"Oh, Lord God! What if the garbage men were to open the bag?" She snapped. "I can't take a chance like that!" Our trash was picked up once a week by a garbage truck with a small

crew. In Quicksand, everybody got to know everybody else including their business, and this is what Mama feared the most.

“No. His soiled underwear has to be buried,” she insisted. “No one must ever know.”

I gave Mama explicit instructions for the evening; most of the time she obeyed my orders. I specifically told her to make Daddy to go to bed; turn off the porch light, the living room lights, and close the kitchen door around 11:00PM—before I came home. First of all, our house wasn't dilapidated or unattractive on the outside. It was a two year old three bedroom ranch-style home constructed of authentic old bricks built by my grandmother's longtime friend, Mr. Ned Iggy. In the living room, Iggy (that's what everyone called him) designed and installed a large picture window with a set of jalousie windows on either side. The purpose of the installation, he proclaimed was to open up the home to the great outdoors. It did. The house stood at the end of a lone dirt road in the middle of a wilderness yet to be tamed. Ned Iggy had grown up with “Othermama,” and we suspected, had been in love with her since their childhood days.

Othermama never considered him more than a friend but when he began visiting her after his wife passed, she felt sorry for Iggy and found it hard to turn him away. Well into his seventies, Iggy was tall, gaunt and hump-shouldered with a long needle shaped nose and thin bloodless lips. He was not an attractive man, and the eye condition didn't help. Due to weak muscles, one of his watery bloodshot eyes would go in one direction while the other eye wandered in another making it all but impossible to know exactly what he was looking at or who he was talking to. My big sister Rosebud found him repulsive. I didn't like him either. The total opposite of my handsome, generous grandfather who had gone to his reward many years before, I found it hard to understand how Othermama could stand him. He would show up sometimes on a Sunday

afternoon and take Othermama for a ride to get ice cream or to visit the graves of friends. Iggy was a well driller and with his four grown sons ran what could've been a successful well drilling business had his sons not been drunkards. Iggy was also known to take a drink or two which could've explained those watery bloodshot eyes. Iggy proposed marriage to Othermama on various occasions and she always turned him down kindly. But Iggy had convinced himself that if he built a nice home, Othermama would come. They would live happily ever after in the intimacy and seclusion of their honeymoon house, the only inhabitants in a remote wooded area at the end of a dirt road. While Iggy and his sons hammered away erecting the honeymoon home, Mama struggled to buy groceries and maintain house payments. It soon became clear that due to Daddy's heavy drinking and gambling, we had to sell the house we'd called home for ten years and find a cheaper place to live. Mama found a buyer right away for our small white frame house with the neatly kept lawn and was desperately searching for someplace to go when Othermama decided to approach ole Iggy with a proposal of her own. His house was almost finished. She asked if our family could rent it with the option to buy. Mama had no way to buy anything at the time; in fact, paying rent would be a hardship, but for some reason, Iggy agreed. Perhaps he realized that his honeymoon dream home with Othermama was just that—a dream, and figured he might as well make a profit. No one will ever know for sure. To a passerby Iggy's house might've appeared rustic, expensive—but inside, ceilings sagged and discolored black and white linoleum lined an uneven kitchen floor. A slightly irregular ensemble that included a murky-green colored toilet and a matching sink and tub shared a bathroom painted Pepto Bismol pink. The walls of each room (supposedly made from sheetrock) were not much thicker than cardboard. No doubt sloshed when they worked, the so called carpenters (Iggy's four sons) had screwed the light switch plates on crooked in every room and that produced a

dizzying effect like the fun house at a county fair. Iggy claimed that a landscaper sowed grass on the property but it never materialized. To make it look like a lawn, Mama hired a man to come every few weeks and mow down the clumps of crab grass and Johnson weeds that covered the lot. The house stood at the end of a dead end dirt road. Iggy named the road “Loblolly Lane” after all the Loblollies—the particular type of pine trees that bordered two sides of the property. Although the house was located less than a quarter mile from the highway, driving down the dirt road or Loblolly Lane with its deep ruts, ridges, rocks and dust seemed endless—and hazardous—especially at night. A hard rain could render Loblolly Lane impassable.

Thankfully it had stopped raining completely by the time we left Shoney’s but I remained anxious. What if it had rained harder in Quicksand than in the city? Loblolly had trapped a number of people in her slimy ruts forcing them to call a tow truck to get them out. If the road had become muddy from the rain and his car got stuck, Ricky would have to use our phone to call for help. Our phone was in the kitchen. If Ricky came inside, no doubt Rhonda and Paul would come inside, too. Paul would see Daddy sprawled out drunk in his chair surrounded by empty beer cans and an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts and ashes. We would all stand around while Ricky ordered a tow truck and one of the cocky roaches or huge water bugs that we battled on a daily basis for the right to use the kitchen might suddenly decide to creep out of a crack and crawl down the wall or across the floor. Of course Paul would see it. My stomach lurched at these possibilities.

Where do you live? Ricky asked. My throat tightened making it difficult to answer. “Loblolly Lane,” I squeaked. “Turn right just before you get to the railroad tracks. Go slow. It’s a dirt road.”

“Really bumpy,” Rhonda added.

Ricky made the turn and I said a quick prayer of thanks. Evidently it hadn’t rained much at all in Quicksand. Ricky’s Ford navigated the rough terrain and I drew a sigh of relief when we finally neared the driveway.

“That’s my house on the right,” I said. With a sinking heart, I realized that Mama had not turned off the porch light. I said goodnight to Rhonda and Ricky. Paul and I walked across the yard toward my front porch in what seemed to be slow motion. Mama had kept her word and turned off the living room lights. The TV had been turned off, too. The jalousie windows on each side of the picture window had been opened wide to catch the night breeze and as we passed by, the sweet night air became filled with an ungodly racket. I recognized it right away but it startled Paul. Daddy had always been a snorer. He also suffered from emphysema. When he slept mucus collected in his throat. Each breath he drew forced the air to travel through the mucus creating what Othermama called the “death rattle.” The loud strangled gurgling noises came from the far right corner of the darkened living room—the corner that harbored Daddy’s chair and ashtray stand. Obviously, Daddy was sleeping there in a drunken stupor. Paul glanced at the picture window. I knew he was curious so I began to talk loudly hoping to distract him.

“I had a wonderful time,” I said. “Thank you.” Paul didn’t answer. As we walked he was now starrng, craning his neck actually to get a better look inside. I followed his gaze to see that someone had just opened the kitchen door and the light was on. Othermama stood at the kitchen sink with her back to us wearing nothing but a slip and the slip was stuck in the crack of her ample butt. Stunned, I stepped up on the stoop and leaned back in a flirtatious theatrical pose

against the front door. Paul stood directly in front of me. Thank goodness, from this position he could no longer see Othermama. Moths attracted by the porch light flitted around us. I slipped one hand behind me, searched for the door knob and held on tightly, waiting for Paul to say something. I dared to think he might even kiss me. But he just stood there with a small lopsided grin on his face. Like background music in a movie, Daddy's death rattle rose to a crescendo then fell only to begin again. And Paul just stood there. To end the unbearable awkwardness, I smiled brightly and said, "Well, goodnight," and backed through the door as fast as possible. I could feel tears starting. I waited by the door until I heard Ricky drive away then ran to find Mama.

Mama sat at the lemon yellow dinette set in the kitchen. She held a pot in one hand and a spoon in the other. An expert at the task, the spoon became a blur as she whipped the contents in the pot at lightning speed. Mama had learned to cook two things before she quit high school, French toast and fudge. Afternoon naps and homemade fudge were Mama's way of coping with the impossible.

"Honey, did you have a good time?" She asked.

"I—I had a wonderful time," I sobbed. She looked up from the pot but continued to whip the mixture. Why are you crying?"

"How could you?! I told you—!"

"Shhhh! Niki, for God's sake don't wake D.W." I sank down in the chair across from her.

“You were supposed to get him in bed.”

“He wouldn’t budge.”

“Paul heard him snoring—making those awful sounds! You should’ve left the TV on.”

“It’s that’s lung condition, poor soul—” Mama begins to pour the rich dark brown substance onto wax paper.

“You left this door open! The light was on and Paul saw—”

“Niki, please.” Mama begins licking the spoon.

“You have chocolate smeared on your chin,” I say. I want to scream. How can Mama be so nonchalant when my whole life has just been ruined? I couldn’t believe that she just kept licking the spoon. I thought she understood. All this time I thought she had been on my side.

“I’m not ashamed of our home, Niki.”

“That’s not the point! You still have chocolate on your chin—it’s more to your right.” Once again Mama swiped her chin with a napkin.

“Niki, we are extremely fortunate—”

“Othermama was standing at the sink with her slip stuck in the crack of her butt. Paul saw her. I know he did. I could just die.” Mama picks up a case knife to cut the fudge.

“It hasn’t cooled enough,” I tell her. Ignoring me, Mama scrapes a glob of fudge from the wax paper with the knife and holds it out.

“Have a piece.”

“No!! Mama, I don’t want any. I just want to know why. Why didn’t you do what I asked?” I couldn’t seem to stop crying. I felt as if I didn’t know the thin, gray haired lady sitting across from me. I wanted to shake her; make her understand.

“You had a good time.” She said. I wiped my eyes before I spoke and blew my nose on a napkin.

“Yes. But when we drove up the porch light was on and I had to fight off the moths— he heard Daddy snoring and then he saw Othermama in the kitchen. Oh, God—”

“Did he say anything?”

“Who? Daddy?!”

“No, Paul.”

Nothing. I told him I had a good time and thanked him but he didn’t say anything. He stood there on the stoop like an idiot until I said goodnight. I don’t understand.”

“He probably didn’t know what to say—boys his age have no manners.”

“He knew what to say, Mama—he just didn’t say it. He was probably so shocked at what he heard and saw he couldn’t speak.”

“Let’s go to bed,” Mama suggested. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

The next day was Sunday and I didn’t feel better, I felt worse. Monday was the last day of school. I worried about how to act around Paul when or if I saw him. As Sunday dragged by, I secretly hoped he would call. It crossed my mind to call him but I dismissed it right away.

Calling a boy would be too forward. I wasn't that kind of girl. I also worried that he would call. If we started dating, he would find out more about my family—I couldn't let that happen. If he did ask me out again, I would have to say "no." He wouldn't understand why and I could never explain. The situation was hopeless. Only a fairy Godmother or an act of God could change the course of events.

"Of course you're going to school," Mama said. Why wouldn't you?

"I don't want to see him."

"Maybe you won't have to—"

"Of course I will! We have to line up to enter the auditorium for the graduation ceremony and he'll be there."

"Well, smile and say, hello." Clearly, Mama still didn't understand my predicament.

We lined up alphabetically outside the school auditorium and I managed to keep my eyes down. After I received my report card, I dashed home to get ready for our ninth grade picnic. Rhonda's Mother packed a lunch and drove us to Dyer's Lake. I didn't own a bathing suit so although it was way too big, I borrowed my sister Rosebud's elegant chartreuse swimsuit—the one she'd worn in the Miss Quicksand Contest. Toward the shallow end of Dyer's Lake was a very high sliding board. Perhaps it was a death wish, but I decided to climb up and slide down. I didn't know how to swim because I was really afraid of water. But much younger kids took the slide and because the water wasn't very deep, I decided I could do it, too. In addition, I suppose I was showing off a bit or at least attempting to get Paul's attention. He was somewhere in the crowd

of kids in the water but I hadn't spotted him. I don't recall how many times I went down the sliding board but I kept doing it to avoid interacting with my classmates for fear someone would ask about my date with Paul. Perhaps it was my imagination but no one seemed to notice my expertise—not even when I slid down backwards. Finally, I decided to find Rhonda. I was wading in water up to my shoulders when someone splashed water in my face. I turned around to see Paul and his friend Steve. Both of them splashed water in my direction so I splashed back. I giggled nervously and they laughed, too. I knew they were just playing but I didn't like it. They splashed me and I splashed them a few more times then they began to horse around with each other so I turned and got away as fast as I could. I went to the spot where Rhonda's Mother had put down a blanket for our lunch. She handed me a towel.

“You are red as a beet,” Mrs. Paterson said. Put this on. She reached into a beach bag and brought out a white cotton t- shirt.

The doctor did not have to make a house call to diagnose sun poisoning. I had thrown up most of the night. Mama said the blisters on my back were the size of quarters. Rhonda came to visit the next day, observed the blisters and confirmed their size.

“Did you talk to Paul at the picnic? Rhonda asked.

“No,” I groaned. “And he hasn't called.” Rhonda didn't stay long because I couldn't turn over to talk to her and I didn't feel like talking. Pretty dark-eyed Rhonda (a Sophia Loren type), and the other girls my age would start dating in the fall when the high school term began, but I wouldn't. Loblolly Lane wouldn't allow it. Even if Loblolly Lane did cooperate, there was Daddy to deal with. Besides, boys didn't seem to like me. I could make them laugh, but

obviously, I would never be anyone's girlfriend. My date with Paul seemed to prove it—my romantic fantasy was over—that day had ended. Maybe boys could sense my unwholesome nature, even though I tried to hide it. At this time in my life, I decided not to make any close friends. Rhonda would always be my friend, but she was different. Rhonda never judged. During my sophomore year in high school, I felt jealous, envious of others and cried a lot. Othermama insisted that I had my whole life ahead and that I could do anything I wanted to do. She urged me to “keep moving.” In spite of our disagreements about almost everything including rock and roll music, the length of hemlines, soft drinks and the use of slang, I trusted Othermama—followed her advice. I didn't know where I was going, how I would get there or how rough the journey might become; I only knew that in spite of what Othermama called “adversity,” I was on my way.

.....