

SHENANDOAH

47/3

\$5.00



FALL 1997

Lex Williford

THE BRUSH

for Andrea

Rachel's mother Nova is a groupie, but Rachel doesn't use that word. Nova's slept with the guitar player for Trapeze. She's slept with the manager of Wishbone Ash. She's slept with Dom the Drum, the Scottish roadie who set up drum kits for Zeppelin and the Who before the deaths of John Bonham and Keith Moon. She doesn't go around bragging about it exactly, but whenever it happens she disappears for days and when she finally comes home she can't stop smiling, or crying.

Nova's not her mother's real name. Her real name is Etta Gene Brawley. Etta Gene ran away from home when she was fifteen, and she had Rachel when she was sixteen. She changed her name to *Nova* at the Dallas County Courthouse a month after Rachel's eighth birthday, two weeks after she had Rachel's baby sister Vega in the emergency room of Baylor Hospital. She wanted to change Rachel's name to *Galaxy*, too, but Rachel said, "No, Mom, no way. That's stupid."

"They're all the names of cars," Rachel said.

"Stars," Etta Gene said. "They're all the names of stars."

Etta Gene grew up in Tyler, Texas, where she learned to hate roses. Her father grew acres of the damn things — whites, reds, yellows, pinks — and after his wife left him, he left them all over the house for Etta Gene, and when she didn't do what he told her to do when he told her to do it, he chased her down the hall and into the kitchen and around the island stove with a fistful of them cutting into his rough palms, whipping her bare legs till she cried, scattering bright petals all over the house.

When she's not partying or clubbing or going to concerts at Memorial Auditorium downtown, Nova sells roses along Northwest Highway while Rachel holds Vega sweating in her lap in the shade of a cottonwood or an overpass. The light turns red and Nova walks along the median in frayed cut-off jeans and a tank top, cranking her hand beside each car till she gets a taker. She hates the job, but it's something she knows and anyway she sells a lot and she gets a great tan. Nova's just turned

twenty-four, but Rachel thinks the skin along her mother's shoulders is already starting to look like the leather jacket Dom the Drum left on her mother's bed the morning he slapped her the last time, then caught up with his road crew in Cleveland. Summer days, Nova stands in the hot sun beside an umbrella that shades a big bucket of cool water packed with long green stems and tight red buds. Sometimes a man buys a rose, then hands it back to her through the driver's side window. Then he smiles at her, like this is some big, original idea. When the cars start honking in the turning lane behind him, she gives him a wrong number, then steps back onto the curb, rolling her eyes and wiping the sweat from her upper lip. Then she sells the same rose to the next car that drives up.

Nova gets the roses below cost from an old boyfriend in Tyler who won't leave her alone. Rachel saw him once when he drove up the gravel drive in a battered Ford F-100 pickup spray-painted in splotches of brown and green. He stood in the doorway and handed her mother a dozen yellow roses wrapped in dry newspaper, then stared at Rachel a long time without blinking. He had black eyes and blackheads on his neck and stiff black hair like a horse's tail sticking up in a cowlick over his forehead like Rachel's.

"All right," her mother told him, "now go."

When he'd driven off, Rachel said, "Is that him?" and her mother said, "Maybe," then tossed the roses out into the front yard.

Rachel's mother has bright hazel eyes. They're almost green like Guinevere's in that Crosby, Stills and Nash song her mother's always playing on her eight-track, like her baby sister Vega's blinking up at her from her cardboard crib when the sun angles down through the blinds. Rachel's legs are white and skinny and her knees look funny, like two old men frowning at each other in the mirror, but her mother's legs are smooth and dark and slender and beautiful, except for the tiny pink scars like cat scratches along her ankles and knees and shins. Rachel's mother has long blond hair, almost white from the sun. It's baby's hair really, like Vega's, like the manager's for Wishbone Ash. Rachel can't remember his name. Rachel's hair is short and thick and stiff like the wiry black hairs she wiped

from the toilet rim the two weeks Dom the Drum grunted and shouted from her mother's bedroom, but her mother's hair goes all the way down to the backs of her knees and it swings when she walks and it's as fine and straight as a spider's thread shot across the two hackberries in the back yard.

Rachel loves the smell of her mother's hair. Sunday nights, when a man isn't around or her mother isn't gone, Rachel puts Vega to sleep between two pillows at the foot of her mother's bed. Then she and her mother spoon together and watch Monty Python. Rachel presses her face into her mother's hair, still damp from brushing it out upside down over the kitchen window fan, and for a while it doesn't have that rank, resinous stink of incense and Tareytons and pot smoke. On the Admiral black and white TV Dom the Drum bought at K-Mart the first week he came to stay, John Cleese goose-steps in the Ministry of Silly Walks and her mother's shoulders move when she laughs like she's crying again, and Rachel falls to sleep breathing in the smell of Herbal Essence shampoo and her mother's cream rinse made of strawberries and eggs and milk.

"I *hate* this hair," Nova says when Rachel brushes it out in the mirror with her mother's turtle-shell brush. Nova puts the last touches on her green eye shadow for the Jethro Tull concert, then pulls out a long strand of hair from behind her ear. "Just look at these split ends, will you? And it's limp, just limp. Why can't I have thick hair like yours?" She leans in towards the mirror with her eyebrow pencil and blackens in the dark fuzzy mole at the corner of her mouth — her beauty mark, she calls it—then puts on her yellow Yardley lipstick and presses her lips together twice. She covers the mole with her fingertips, like she's being thoughtful, like she's talking to a man. Then she frowns, turns her head left, then right. "Dom said I'm beautiful. What do you think, Rachie? Do you think I'm beautiful?"

"Sure, Mom," Rachel says, and she wants to puke. Her mother smiles with her eyes closed, and Rachel stares a long time at her mother's heavy foundation and rouge and the black mascara gunking her mother's eyelashes together. Then she looks up at herself in the mirror and crosses her eyes and frowns so hard her chin prunes and two long cords stand out on either side of her neck.

Nova won't let Rachel use her turtle-shell brush, won't even let her touch it, except to stand behind her at the bathroom mirror like this, brushing her hair down in long, smooth strokes. The brush is the only thing Nova's mother left her in Tyler, Texas, high up on the top shelf of the bathroom cabinet, handfuls of bleached hair stiff with hairspray curling out of the black horsehair bristles. Nova's father bought her mother the brush at Neiman-Marcus on their last trip to Dallas three months before Nova's mother disappeared for good. The brush is heavy in Rachel's hand, gilt along the sides and striped like a tiger in the shade. While she brushes, Rachel listens for her baby sister's cooing from their bedroom, little questions she asks when she needs Rachel to feed her her bottle or change her diaper, when she wants Rachel to smooth her fingers through the long wisp of blond hair curling up from her head like a question mark. Rachel stares off and listens, rubbing her thumb along the gold filigree rose on the back of her mother's brush, the long thorny stem down the handle.

Nova's hair crackles with static and sticks like webs to Rachel's fingers, then sparks when she touches her mother's neck. "Ow!" her mother shouts. Then the brush catches in a knot and her mother shouts again, slapping the back of Rachel's hand with a loud pop.

"But, God, Mom," Rachel says, shaking out her stinging hand, "I didn't mean to."

"Well, stop it, then," Nova says. "Just stop it."

Rachel never shouts when her mother brushes her hair. She never hits. Her mother jerks her hair too hard sometimes, always in a rush out the door, but when the stiff black brush her mother bought her at the Skaggs-Albertson Drugs tears out hanks of her hair and her eyes begin to water, Rachel presses her fists together between her thighs and blinks hard till her eyes are dry as newspaper.

"Do the dishes and carry out the trash," Nova says as she starts out the front door, and Rachel gets this feeling. Her mother turns around on the front porch. "And don't forget to clean up the bathroom like I told you a thousand times." Her mother turns and the wide bells of her tight Levi's swing with her long shiny hair and her boot heels click down the cracked

SHENANDOAH

walk to the blue Karmann Ghia convertible parked at the curb. When the man with the blond 'fro reaches across the seat to open the passenger door, Rachel knows her mother won't be back for days. Maybe not even for good. Then she can't swallow and she tries not to think. If she thinks, Mary Ann will know and then start in on her crying, which never stops.

When her mother's gone, Rachel never uses that stupid name *Vega*. She uses her sister's real name, the name Rachel gave her the first time she saw her red and wrinkled as a raisin in the incubator at the Baylor Hospital preemie ward, after the girl in *Gilligan's Island* who's not as pretty.

Mary Ann, she says.

Etta Gene. Hippie. Groupie. Slut.

Rachel kicks a hole in the screen door, then pulls the front door shut and locks both dead bolts. Then she lights a cone of patchouli incense in an ashtray on her mother's wire-spool coffee table and puts on her mother's squeaky eight-track tape of *Déjà Vu*, the volume on low, a lullaby for Mary Ann. In her bedroom, she stares down at the Admiral black and white TV carton on the board-shelves and concrete blocks by her air mattress on the floor. *Model number 2X19FB3*, the carton says, the numbers stamped in red on the side.

Mary Ann lies face down on a yellow beach towel folded inside the cardboard box, her thumb in her mouth, a dark wet spot spreading out over the towel under her fist. Rachel slips her fingers under the tiny palm of Mary Ann's other hand, a starfish spread out on the towel, and it closes tight around her finger and won't let go. The suckling becomes a loud smacking, which stops when Rachel draws a line down her sister's back. Mary Ann smiles, her eyes closed, a web of milky saliva at the corner of her mouth. Rachel pulls her finger from her sister's grip and covers her legs with the towel. Mary Ann frowns. Rachel waits for the crying to start.

In the kitchen, Rachel walks three times around the card table where she and her mother ate supper in a rush, a dead rose drooping its head over the lip of a vase in the center of the table, its red petals curling to black. She carries the dirty plates to the sink and rests her elbows on the kitchen countertop, which comes almost up to her chest. Green mold fuzzes the

macaroni and cheese caked on the pans and plates stacked in the sink from a week ago.

"Fuck," she says and hears her mother's voice.

She plugs the sink with a rag and turns on the hot water and squirts in Palmolive, then scrapes out the dried refried beans they had for chalupas from a dented aluminum pan and into a plastic bowl. She puts the uncovered bowl on a shelf in the Frigidaire, then looks a long time at the carton of Lone Star Longnecks on the bottom shelf. She pulls out a bottle and opens it with the church key hanging over the sink. She doesn't drink any until she's finished scraping the dishes, the food plopping into the Safeway sack under the sink. Then she drinks the whole beer fast. Her throat burns and her eyes water. She burps.

She drops the dishes into the suds, then stands awhile at the sink and looks through the kitchen window at the faint stars out over the Dallas skyline, the lightning bugs winking in the back yard. She waits for a buzz to come on. Then she thrusts her hands into the scalding water and stabs her thumb with a fork. She squeezes out a drop of blood, then burps again, a long rolling belch. She laughs, covers her mouth. Then she walks down the hall through the red beads hanging from her mother's bedroom door, her hands dripping suds onto the orange shag carpet.

The plastic film canisters are in their usual place between the wall and her mother's dark-stained mattress. Rachel wipes her wet hands on her mother's bedspread, a yellow Indian tapestry, then opens a film canister. Thick clumps of flowertops and seeds. She sniffs the musty hay stink inside, then closes the lid and opens another. Bitter-tasting flour. "Excuse me while I powder my nose," Rachel whispers, the way her mother tells her friends sometimes, when she disappears into the bathroom for half an hour. In another canister, white squares of paper like confetti. "All dotty on Purple Microdot," her mother told Dom the Drum once, laughing, on the couch. "People purple eaters," he growled, black punchholes in his crazy eyes. Rachel touches her tongue to one of the sweet purple dots, then drops the paper square back inside and opens another canister. Long black caplets like spiders' eggs. "Little Black Molly parties

SHENANDOAH

hardy," Rachel says, then imagines her mother flicking a pill into her mouth likes she's flipping a sparking butt out into the street.

Rachel taps out a cap into her palm, then lines the film canisters back up behind the mattress just as she found them. Then she walks back through the bead curtain into the kitchen, washing the pill down with another beer from the fridge, chugging till her eyes burn and foam runs down the sides of her mouth. She blinks, wipes her neck and chin. Then she drops both bottles into the Safeway sack under the sink and carries the trash out to the dumpster across the street.

Halfway back up the front walk, she hears crying from inside the house. She stands listening on a wide crack where the front walk tilts up in two pieces like an ice floe that's breaking apart. When the crying stops, she runs up the steps to the house.

Thirty minutes later, she's still pacing the hall, walking into the kitchen and around the kitchen table, then into the living room and back down the hall, rocking her crying sister in her arms. Mary Ann's face is a screaming red fist, her voice a long grating wail a million times louder than the cicadas ratcheting outside in the cottonwoods. Rachel tries to sing along with Neil Young above all her sister's racket:

"Country girl, I think you're pretty. . . ."

She bends over and picks up Mary Ann's pacifier from the floor, then wipes off the orange carpet fuzz from the nipple and sticks it back into her sister's mouth. Mary Ann sucks fiercely a moment, a short space of quiet. Then her face fists again and she spits it out on to the floor and screams.

"Come on, baby girl," Rachel says. "Please."

She shifts Mary Ann to her other shoulder and tries to get her to drink her bottle, then pats her back and walks six times around the card table in the kitchen as the baby screams into her ear.

In her bedroom, she holds the baby under her armpits and shakes her. Mary Ann stops, stares at her wide-eyed, then screams. Rachel shakes her again, hard. Mary Ann stops a moment. Screams.

"Don't," Rachel says, shaking her sister till her head whips forward and back. "Don't!"

Rachel feels light-headed, wobbly, like someone's shaking her, and her heart floats like an air bubble trapped inside her chest. She puts Mary Ann back down into her cardboard crib, and the baby screams. Rachel covers her ears, then reaches a hand down into the box and covers Mary Ann's mouth and nose with her palm. The room is quiet. When she removes her hand, the baby coughs. Her screams tear the air and scrape across Rachel's eyes.

"Stop it!" Rachel shouts, "just stop it!" Then she slaps her sister's face.

Mary Ann stares up at her, gasping, trying to get her breath. She hiccups. "Hit," she says, "hit, hit."

Rachel shakes out her stinging fingers, surprised, surprised. Then she sticks her bleeding thumb into her mouth and sucks it. When she sees the red stripes on her sister's cheek, she covers her own cheek and remembers a burning there in her crib. Then she rolls her hand up in her shirttail like the bald pink chick she found dead under the hackberry in the back yard.

Rachel wanders down the hall, her feet floating like a breath off the floor, her heart floating, trembling, in her chest. In the living room, the eight track rumbles and kicks a low thump into the speakers as it skips over to another track, and she pulls out the tape. Then the house is quiet, too quiet. In the kitchen, she floats to the sink to finish the dishes, but when she picks up a cereal bowl, a giant brown water roach flies out from under it into her face like a Chinese fan and she drops the bowl, shattering.

In the bathroom mirror, her eyes are bloodshot, her irises black, the pouches under her eyes filling with blue blood. A smear of light at the corner of her eye. She jerks her head left and it's gone. She closes her eyes and leans against the sink, dizzy, then opens her eyes again, elated, her heart tingling like the feeling sometimes between her legs. Under the bare bulb hanging over the mirror, her black hair shines like a grackle's wing and when she smooths it down with her palm, the mirror's silvering peels back around her face. In the cabinet over the toilet she reaches up for the Ajax, then sees a mushroom growing out of the floor behind the toilet like a fat black tongue. She takes down her mother's lipstick and mascara and

SHENANDOAH

eye shadow instead, then spots her mother's turtle-shell brush on the top shelf. She reaches up.

Hours later, Rachel walks around the kitchen card table at three a.m. in the dark quiet, wired as a high power line, wondering if her sister will ever cry again, if her mother will ever come back. Then a car door slams outside and her mother's boot heels click up the front walk. Rachel presses her face to the kitchen window screen, watching the man with the blond 'fro stagger up the walk with her mother, his arm around her waist, his hand in her back pocket. A rattling of keys and the man pushes her mother against the door, kissing her, his hand up under her shirt, their teeth clacking together like dominoes, and her mother pushes him away.

"What?" he says. "What's the matter with you? Jesus."

"Go," her mother tells him. "Just go."

"Why? I thought you wanted. . . . What the hell's matter with you anyway?"

"Nothing. Just . . . nothing."

The man looks at her mother awhile, then shakes his head, his hands out. "All right. No problem." Then he turns around and staggers down the walk, starting up his Karmann Ghia at the curb, the engine rattling at idle like a sewing machine. "Goddamn crazy woman," he shouts loud enough for the all neighbors to hear. "You think I need your problems? Jesus." Then he tears off, his car weaving down the block.

In the living room, Rachel's mother kicks the front door shut, then kicks it again, pressing her forehead against the door. Then she leans back against it, hugging and rocking herself in the dark. Rachel tries to sneak past the kitchen door to her bedroom down the hall, but her mother looks up and sees her.

"What are you doing up?"

Rachel turns her face away in the dark kitchen. "I heard you. Your *boyfriend* woke me up."

"Like hell," her mother says. "You're still dressed and there's something on your What's that on your face? Come here."

"What?" Rachel says.

"I said come in here. And look at me when I talk to you." ³

Rachel hesitates, then walks into the living room. Her mother flips on the switch, and Rachel squeezes her eyes shut

against the bright blue streak of the overhead light, her head down, her palm over her eyes.

"God, look at this," Nova says, the ashtray reek of pot smoke and Tareytos on her breath. She pulls Rachel's hand away from her eyes and squeezes her jaws tightly between her thumb and fingers, turning her face roughly, left and then right. "Would you look at this? Jesus God. What is this? You want to tell me?"

"Nothing," Rachel says, pulling free of her mother's grip, looking down and away.

"Did I say you could touch my makeup? When did I ever say you could touch my makeup?"

"You never said I couldn't," Rachel says.

Nova jerks Rachel by the arm across the hallway and into the bathroom, her long fingernails cutting into Rachel's wrist. A lipstick cap floats upended in a sinkful of water, coarse black hairs curled into the clogged drain, a smear of rouge ringing the basin, a blob of black gunk dried to the mascara brush fallen to the floor.

Nova pushes Rachel against the sink and shakes her hard by her shoulders. "I told you to *clean* up this bathroom, didn't I? Didn't I tell you to *clean* it up? Just look at this mess. And look at you. Would you just look at yourself?"

Rachel stares at her reflection in the mirror, the bright green eye shadow, the too-thick foundation and powder and rouge and mascara, her black hair sticking up in a cowlick over her forehead, sticking out over her ears. She covers the beauty mark painted at the corner of her mouth, then puckers her lips, bright with yellow lipstick, then burps, covering her mouth and laughing.

"What's the matter with you?" Nova says. "Come here. Let me see your eyes." Nova squeezes Rachel's cheeks hard between her thumb and fingers and peels Rachel's eyelids back. "My God, you've been drinking my beer, haven't you? And you've been into my stash."

Rachel pulls free of her mother's grip and steps back. Her mother spots her turtle-shell brush lying on its side, wedged between the wall and the lid of the toilet tank. Nova picks it up and pulls out a fistful of black hairs from the bristles, like the

SHENANDOAH

nest of black hairs between Dom the Drum's legs the two weeks he walked wherever he wanted to walk, naked, around their house.

"What is this?" Nova says. "You want to tell me?" Then she hits Rachel's backside with the back of her brush.

Rachel sucks her teeth and rubs herself, then steps back against the laundry cabinet, the ammonia reek of her sister's weeks' old diapers stinging her eyes.

"Don't you ever touch my makeup," her mother says, hitting her again. "Or my beer. Or my stash. And don't you ever touch my mother's brush again. Ever," she says, hitting her again. "Ever."

Rachel jumps back, dodging another blow, then pushes her mother backwards into the bathtub, running down the hallway and into the kitchen. When Nova catches up with her, she stares down at the broken cereal bowl crunching under her boot heels, then at the empty Lone Star longneck on the card table, and she throws the bottle at Rachel, who ducks, the bottle clattering against the kitchen cabinets. Then she chases Rachel around the table, striking her with the brush on her bare legs and thighs and calves.

Rachel gets down on all fours and crawls under the table and her mother pushes it over, the vase and rose flying. Her mother kneels down on the wet floor and holds Rachel down, hitting her with the back of her turtle-shell brush. "What's the matter with you?" she says. "Can't you *cry*? Can't you? Here, *this'll* make you cry. And *this*. Cry," her mother says, hitting her again and again. "Cry, goddamn you, cry."

Rachel floats inside herself, in the bubble trapped inside her chest, away from the blows, her teeth clenched, her fists pressed together between her thighs, her eyes burning as she blinks them dry.

Then her mother's crying, holding out her turtle-shell brush, the handle broken off in her hand, the back of the brush lying between Rachel's legs on the floor. "My God, Rachie, what've you done?" Nova stares at the broken brush, then at the curling black petals scattered all over the floor, at the bright red welts and bleeding cuts on Rachel's legs and ankles and shins. Then she holds her. "Baby girl," she says, "what've I done? What am I doing?"

LEX WILLIFORD

Rachel still floats in the place she hides when her mother hits her to make her cry and hits her to make her stop crying. She can't cry now. She's broken and she's broken her mother's brush. Her mother's shoulders are moving like she's laughing. Rachel reaches out to touch her mother's shining hair.

“The Brush,” *Shenandoah* 47.3 (Fall 1997): 30-41.

No reproduction without permission, for education purposes only.
If you wish to request permission to reproduce, please [email lex@utep.edu](mailto:lex@utep.edu).