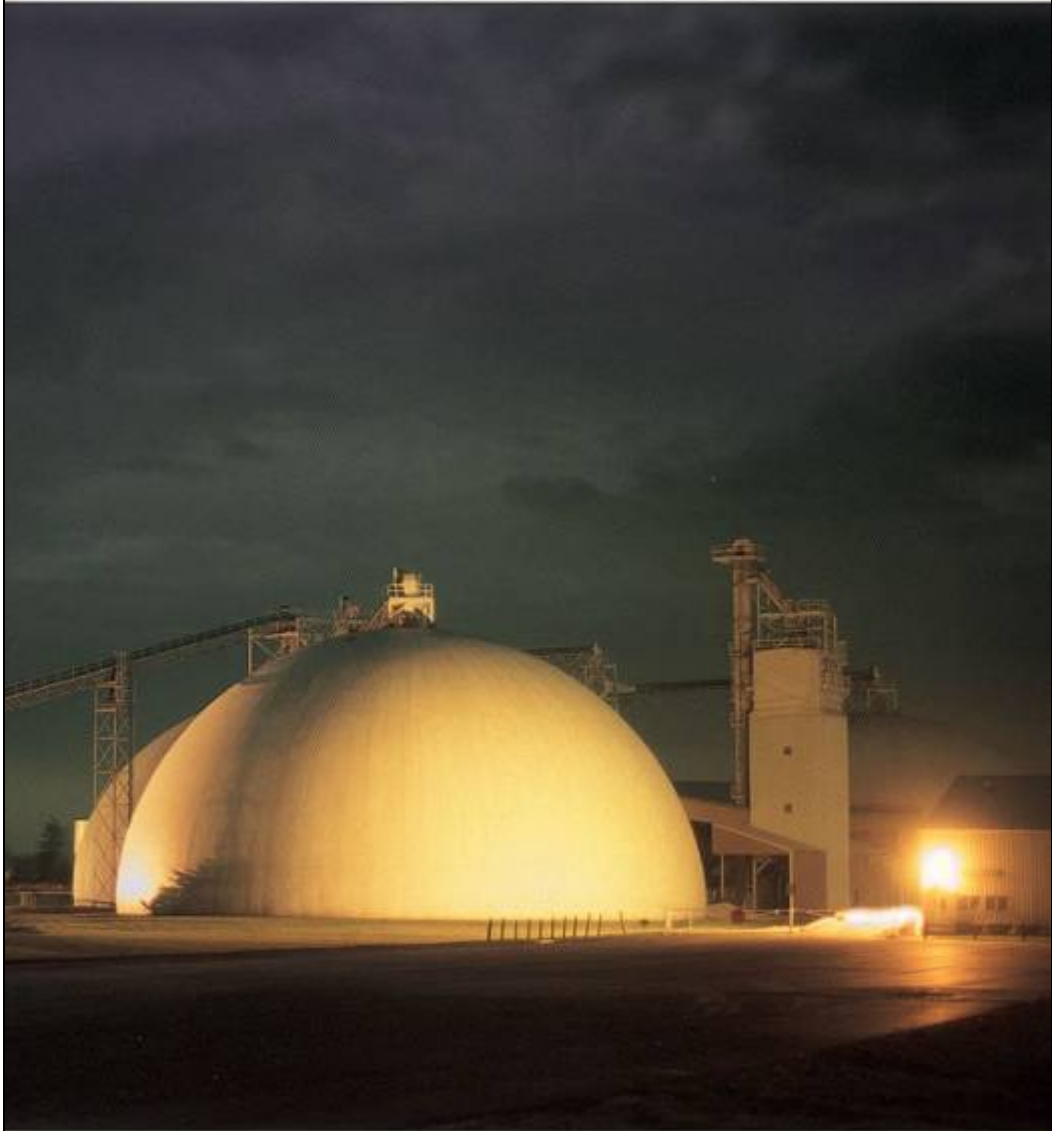


WITNESSES



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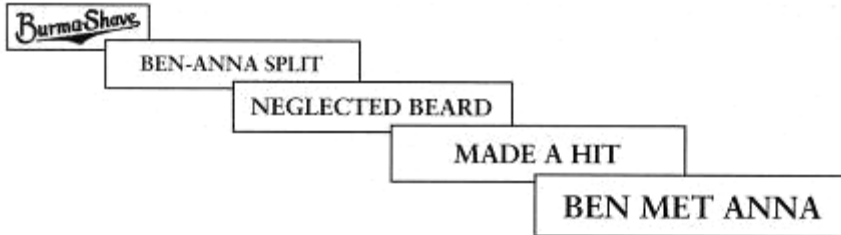


The Tub

Lex Williford

for the James sisters

Every Sunday morning before eleven-o'clock Mass until 1951, when Helen turned sixteen and her mother finally put a stop to it, Helen drew her father a hot bath in their lion-clawed tub, then watched him dance and shave before the bathroom mirror steamed. When she was small and her father took anything — chickens, tomatoes, pies — as full payment for fixing people's cars during the Depression, he tickled her nose with his shaving brush while the deep tub filled to blue, then picked her up, laughing, and rubbed his sandpaper-rough whiskers against her cheeks. When she got too heavy to lift anymore, he taught her the lines he'd memorized the week before from signs scrolling out along East Texas blacktops on his long sales trips to Texarkana and Tyler and Lufkin:



Her father tight-tucked a white terry-cloth bath towel around his waist, and he bobbed and dipped his hips, stropping his straight razor along a thick leather strap, waving it in the air like Glen Miller's baton to the Big Band beat of their walnut Philco blaring "In the Mood" from down the hall. Then he squeezed out a white curl from a blue tube of Burma Shave and whipped up a thick lather, his rosewood shaving brush clop-clopping inside his cracked ceramic cup, to the machine-gun pops of Gene Krupa's syncopated rim shots.

Burma Shave
 DYNA-MITE!
 BUT IF HE'D SHAVED
 TREAT HIM RIGHT
 DINA DOESN'T

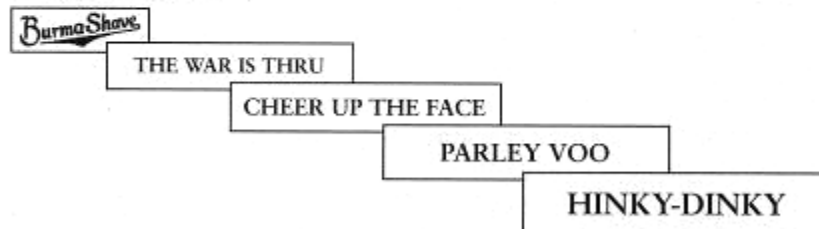
Humming and swinging, her father swirled the brush up under his nose and around his cheeks and chin, a white beard of foam, then scratched his straight razor up his thick black neck-stubble in time with "Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy from Company B." Helen swung her hips and hummed along, too, but she worried her father might cut his own throat or lose his hip towel, he got so carried away sometimes, turning from the mirror, then turning her, ducking her under his arm, then spinning her laughing out into the hall. She swung with him and danced, ready to cover her eyes at any moment if she had to, but her father's hip towel always stayed. Helen gripped her father's styptic pencil in her damp palm, keeping a close eye out for any welling nick, even the slightest pinprick of blood.

Burma Shave
 AND...
 GRAB YOUR PANTS
 BE BRAVE
 FIRE, FIRE

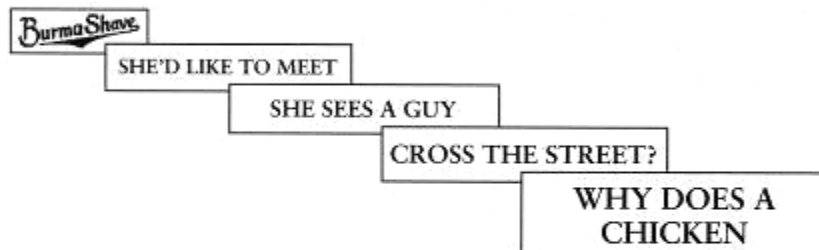
"So, Sister, what's the news from our boys on the front?" her father asked her every Sunday morning since 1942, when Helen, seven, heard the news from FDR and ran to the bathroom door, breathless, to tell him the Allies were holding back the Axis advance in North Africa. Her father, thirty-two, had a heart murmur since he was a boy, and the Sunday she told him the news he looked sad and said, "Honey, your old man should be fighting Rommel over there, but he's a 4-F bastard with a hole in his heart."

Burma Shave
 OFF YOUR CHIN"
 WHEN YOU GET THOSE WHISKERS
 "MANEUVERS BEGIN
 "AT EASE," SHE SAID

Her father kept it up throughout the war, even after Truman dropped the bomb and her mother made her father sleep on the living room divan for two months till he promised to shut down his garage next to Lou McVee's bar down on the corner of Beacon and Columbia. Helen missed her father terribly weekdays he was on the road selling engine gaskets for the Monkey Grip Rubber Products Company, but Sundays, as the tub misted the mirror to steam, he was back again, laughing and reciting the lines from the new signs he'd seen just the week before outside Nacogdoches, Texas:



During the long, happy period of peace from '45 till '50, Helen's father still dolloped a dot of shaving cream onto the tip of her nose, still winked at her and asked her the same question – “So what's the news from our boys on the front?” – till she blushed and giggled about the public school boys who passed whistling by the windows of St. James, the all-girls Catholic school in east Dallas. But when her father started helping Kit Keeble, a black-haired boy from down the block, rebuild the engine of his '36 Indian Chief in their carport Saturdays, the word *boys* shifted to the singular and stayed that way for good.



The day Kit turned sixteen, he showed up at their front door in his jeans and a bomber jacket, a bulge at his shoulder where he'd rolled up a pack of L&Ms in the sleeve of his white T-shirt, and he pleaded with her mother to let him take Helen for a spin around the block on his rebuilt motorcycle, which rumbled and roiled oily smoke from their grass-humped drive.

"This girl's only fourteen," her mother said, almost a shout, "and she'll *never* ride a motorcycle, not so long as *I* live." Then she shut the screened door clapping in Kit's face.

Burma Shave

ON HIS CHINNY-CHIN-CHIN

BECAUSE OF THE HAIR

IS NEVER LET IN

MANY A WOLF

For the next two years, Helen held out till her sixteenth birthday, when her mother said she'd *think* about letting Helen go out with Kit, maybe, if Helen was good and she was home by nine p.m. As always, her father lost that argument but never said a word to his wife Hanna when he started paying Kit two bits an hour to come over and help him Saturdays in the small mechanic's shop he'd built behind their carport. Helen spent half the day trying to talk to Kit, who didn't say much, but her father talked to him easily and winked at her, pointing to the screwdrivers and wrenches Kit called out for when he rolled out, grease-smudged, from the creeper under her father's 1940 Chrysler Royal Coupe. Her father believed absolutely in Chrysler and Monkey Grip products, he told Kit, and he pointed out the new Monkey Grip calendar under the shop's single yellow bulb, chimpanzees in suits and ties and green visors, waving cards at each other as they argued over a hand of smoky poker. Her father showed Kit everything he needed to know, how to change the oil and filter every three thousand miles, how to change the points and plugs, how to change a head gasket and set the timing.

"Don't do that, Kit. You'll make another smudge," Helen said when Kit squinched his eyes and scratched his nose with a greasy thumb.

"Well, scratch his nose for him, why don't you?" her father told her. So she did.

Burma Shave

GO HOME O

IF YOU WON'T SHAVE

TO ROMEO

SAID JULIET

In the bathroom that Sunday, she whispered, "Kit looks just like Monty Clift, don't you think, Pop?" and she listened outside the door for her mother's heavy footsteps on the hall's hardwood floors. She sat on the cool edge of the tub and touched a finger to the scalding bath water, just the way her father liked it, so hot she could barely touch it, and she watched him dry-towel the foam scraped from his pink neck and face, a bloody white tear of toilet paper stuck to his chin. She watched him open his pocketknife to clean out the black crescents of gunk from under his thick, scallopy nails, then stared at all the white flecks under her father's fingernails and her own. White flecks under fingernails were venial sins, her mother had told her once when Helen was ten. She'd done something wrong, she couldn't remember what, and Helen worried about herself and her father, they both had so many.

SOME *Burma Shave*

SHOOT THE BRUTE

RANT AND RAVE

GRUNT AND GRUMBLE

DOES YOUR HUSBAND
MISBEHAVE

In her father's dark shop behind the carport, Kit's hands were always too black with grease to see any white flecks under his nails. One Saturday afternoon, without saying a word to her mother, her father chaperoned them both, his treat, to a matinee of *A Place in the Sun*, and the Lakewood Theater was so dark all Helen could see were Kit's knuckle cuts on the armrest next to her, the black crescents under his thick nails, just like her father's. At the end of the movie, when Elizabeth Taylor told Montgomery Clift, "All the same, I'll go on loving you for as long as I live," Kit took Helen's hand into his rough palm, and she sneaked a glance at her father, who smiled a moment, but pretended not to notice, then swallowed in quiet gulps when Montgomery Clift told Elizabeth Taylor, "Love me for the time I have left. Then forget me," then walked down Death Row to his execution.

The Saturday she turned sixteen, Helen's father called out to her from the tub down the hall, asking if she'd mind washing his back. By then her father's beard stubble had gone to gray and he'd lost most of his hair, and the only way he could comb the damp, downy fuzz on top of his head was with a soft, plush towel. Helen sat on the edge of the tub

and scrubbed her father's hairy back with a long-handled brush, quiet, glancing up at a mourning dove pecking at their neighbors' roof gravel just outside the bathroom window.

"All right," her father said, "what's the matter? You can tell me." Helen didn't answer and he made his old joke about rotating the crop of hair on his back to the top of his head, then recited the rhymes he'd seen the week before in the high grass shoulders on the way from Longview to the Louisiana line:

Burma Shave
 BUT NOT YOUR CHIN
 YOUR HEAD GROWS BALD
 OF TOIL AND SIN
 WITHIN THIS VALE

Helen stared off a long time, unable to speak for the tightness in her throat.

"So what's the news from our boys on the front?" her father said, trying to cheer her up. Then she broke down and told him that Truman had drafted Kit for Korea.

"That's it," her father whispered. "Shhh. That's enough. Don't tell me any more. No more news from the front."

Burma Shave
 A NO MA'AM'S LAND
 IS BOUND TO BE
 BARBED WIRE BRISTLES STAND
 A CHIN WHERE

Her mother stood outside the bathroom door, her stomach and bosom heaving in her wire bra and girdle, her heavy arms folded, a white mustache of Nair depilatory on her upper lip. "So, young lady, you want to tell me what's going on in here?"

Helen's throat pinched and throbbed and she couldn't answer. Her mother frowned at her father. "Well? What's she doing in here?"

Helen's father sat up in the tub, sloshing water to the bathroom floor. "She's upset. Can't you see that? They're shipping Kit off to Korea."

"Good for him. Good for us. Get him out of *my* hair for a while.

Keep him from sniffing around here all the time.

"Hanna, for God's sake—" her father started.

"What's your daughter doing in here?" her mother said again, almost a shout. "Girl gone to woman sixteen years today. I'd like to know."

Helen's father flushed in the cooling bath and pulled his knees up to his chest like a child.

"I was just washing his back, Mama," Helen said, blushing, too, staring down at her bare feet in a puddle of her father's bath water.

"You hush. And *you*." Her mother glared at her father, pulling Helen out into the hall by the sleeve of her slip. "Naked. In front of your own grown daughter. What in God's name is wrong with you?" Then she pulled the door shut like a shot.

Burma Shave

A WHISKERED WIFE?

HOW'D YOU LIKE

TO GO THRU LIFE

SAY, BIG BOY

That afternoon, Helen's mother told her no, she couldn't go out with Kit, not tonight or any other night, and so what if he was leaving next week for Fort Hood? Helen would just have to wait a year or two, when Kit came back stateside, and Helen said, "*If*, you mean. *If*." Then she ran out the front door, down the steps and along the cracked walk to her father's old garage down the street like she'd done a thousand times as a girl. She turned the corner of Beacon and Columbia and ran smack into Lou McVee, who leaned against a light post outside her bar smoking a Lucky Strike.

Burma Shave

FROM EVERY SQUEEZE

YOU GET A BIG THRILL

JUST LIKE LOUISE

THE BIG BLUE TUBE'S

"Hey, honey, why in such a hurry? You all right?"

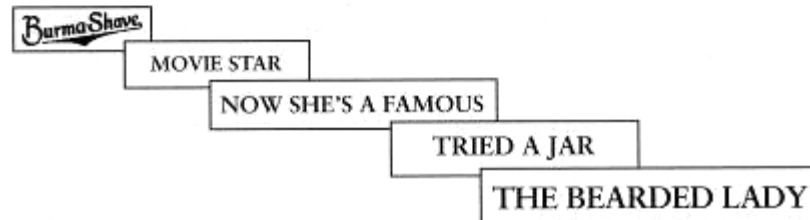
Helen wiped her eyes and listened for her father's air compressor hissing next door to fill anyone's tires for free, but then she glanced at the QuikStop and remembered her father's garage had been closed down for years, and her father would soon be off hitting golf balls at the Bob-

O-Links to get away from her mother.

“My god, you’re Jesse’s kid, aren’t you? So pretty and all grown up. How’s your daddy these days, honey? We miss him around here, you know.”

“My pop’s off puttering at the putt-putt —” Helen started, but the childish words caught in her throat, and she tried not to stare too long at Lou McVee the first time so close up.

Word had it that Lou McVee had lost her Navy husband early in the war, when a Zero took out an ammunition dump in southern Oahu. December 7, 1941. Naturally blond like Helen, Lou McVee had long, wavy hair, and her eyes were go-light green, her skin smooth as Ivory soap except for the silvery down along the sides of her neck. Lou McVee didn’t need any make-up, except a little red lipstick and an eyebrow pencil to darken the mole at the corner of her mouth like Shelly Winters.



“M . . . ma’am,” Helen said, blinking, almost a stutter. She looked through the padded door to the dark her mother had warned her father never to enter and said, “Is it OK I use your phone?”

Lou McVee stepped out her cigarette on the stoop and touched Helen’s shoulder, turning her toward the door. “Sure thing, hon.”

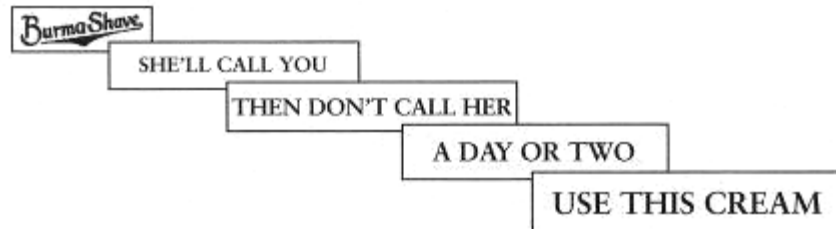
It was dark inside and cool, and a stubbly-faced man tonging a blue block of ice from his truck laughed and said, “Bringing ’em in here a little young, don’t you think, Lou?” and Lou McVee laughed back and said, “Aw, shut up, Donny, and bring us in another one of those blocks of ice. Anything for Jesse’s girl.” Lou McVee squeezed Helen’s shoulders and winked, then led her down a dark hallway. Helen spotted a Monkey Grip calendar and a framed photo on the wall, a man turning and swinging a woman across a dance room floor. The dancing man was laughing, his hat tipped down over his eyes like Fred Astaire.

“That’s my dad,” Helen said, pointing.

“And guess who *that* is?” Lou McVee pointed to the dancing blonde, her back to the camera.

“Your daddy was kind to me after I lost my Bill at Pearl Harbor. He

and Bill were good friends. And don't let anybody else tell you different." She pointed Helen to the phone booth next to the women's room and dropped a bright buffalo nickel into her palm for the call. "Let me tell you, honey. Your daddy can dance."

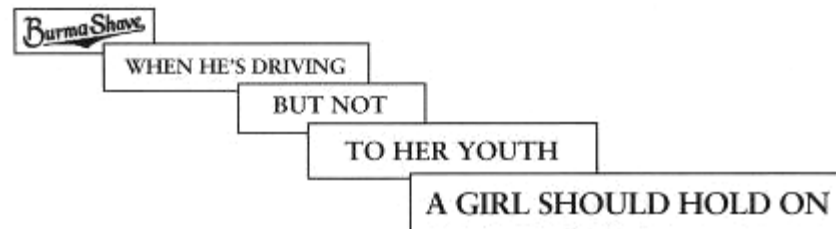


Helen met Kit at the QuikStop curb, his '36 Indian Chief rumbling and rattling the storefront windows like summer thunder. When she ran out of the store to greet him, Lou McVee's lipstick all grown-up strange on her mouth, Kit ran right past her without noticing and stood turning a display of balsa gliders and kites.

"Which one you want?" he said, grinning. "It's your birthday. Get you a sandwich, too, and a Dr. Pepper. Let's have us picnic at White Rock Lake."

She pointed to a balsa kit with a rubber band and red propeller, then to a bright green kite, then to another one red, white and blue, and when she couldn't make up her mind, Kit bought them all, plus a spool of string, with the money he'd earned just that morning from her father.

They spun out from the curb, tearing through the honeysuckle air past blurs of greening oaks and honking cars, her eyes watering in the wind all the way to White Rock Lake. She locked her arms tight around Kit's skinny waist and shouted, "Slow down!" laughing so hard she almost peed her pants. Kit laughed, too, and shouted back over his shoulder, "Don't open your mouth or you'll swallow a bumble bee!"



Along the lake's muddy shore, Kit slid the glider wings and rudder into their balsa slots and held the plane while she wound the propeller's

rubber band tight. Then she let the glider fly out across the road to the fish hatchery, and a wind caught it and swung it back over the cottonwoods and out over White Rock Lake.

"Oh, no!" she shouted, her hands over her eyes.

"Want me to go get it?" Kit said, full of bluster, and laughed when it ditched behind a sailboat, and Helen said, "No, Kit. The water's freezing."

Kit stripped off his bomber jacket, T-shirt and boots anyway, his chest still smooth as a boy's, and he whooped and hollered and cursed as he stumbled in and swam out, snagging the glider and waving it high in the air.

When he got back to shore, the black gumbo mud squelching up between his toes, the wind blew his chest to goose-pimple blue. "What you standing around for?" he said, his teeth chattering. "Warm me up, will you?"

Kit's mouth tasted like Mrs. Baird's bread and chicken salad, L&Ms and tadpoles, she thought, and when she threw his bomber jacket over his shoulders, he zipped it up around her, and she held him so long inside her sweater got all wet. Kit's face was smooth as her father's best chamois, whiskerless as a girl's.

By late afternoon, the two of them had run themselves breathless trying to get their kites up into the air, but the wind that had taken the glider out over the lake had died.

"Here," Kit said, "I got it," and he hopped onto his Indian Chief and kicked it to a grumbling roar, then steered it one-handed up and down the hillside, dragging the red, white and blue kite through the high grass like a folded Stars and Stripes. When he bumped back onto the road, he held the string high up in the air till the kite caught the wind and flew out behind him like a salute.

Kit looked back at the kite far out over his shoulder, then grinned at Helen, kicking his tailpipes like a bronco's flanks, yipping like a cowboy.

When Helen saw the car coming, she shouted back, "Kit!" then covered her eyes with her hands.

BurmaShave

AND MISSED THE CURVE

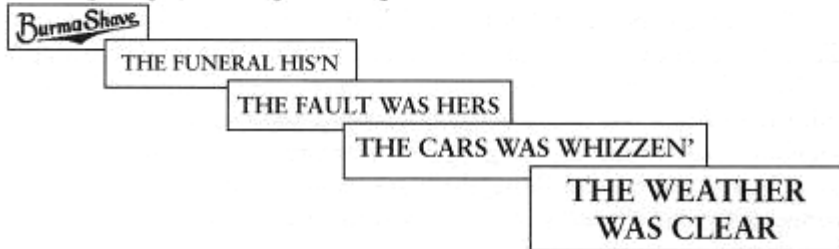
HE KISSED THE MISS

A CAR - A CURVE

A MAN - A MISS

Helen ran across the road and jumped the ditch where Kit's Indian Chief lay on its side in the mud, the back tire still spinning, slinging

mud, black exhaust sputtering and burbling from the tail pipe under the ditch's muddy water. She stumbled through the high clover where Kit lay next to a live oak along the shore, his eyes closed, his head turned at a strange angle, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.



Kit's eyes fluttered a moment when she bent over him and then he began to laugh.

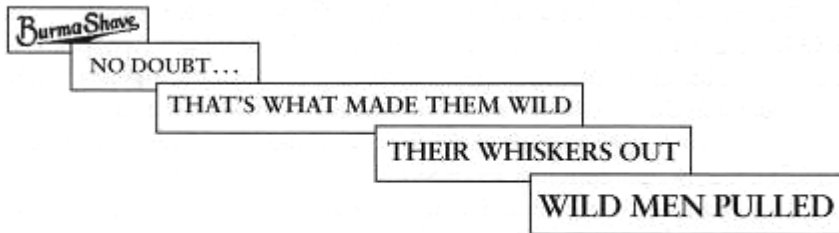
"I'm going to kill you!" she said and slapped him on the arm.

"Ow!" he said. "I've had an accident!"

"I thought you were dead!" she shouted.

Kit grinned at Helen and pulled her down to him in the grass, then pointed up to the sky.

The snagged string had wrapped his wrist, and the kite flew taut out over the lake like a flapping flag.



It was just five minutes to nine when Kit dropped Helen off at the QuikStop, another five-minute walk back home. From the front porch, the screened door's rusted spring panged and twinged as her father's grandfather clock tolled nine.

Her father stood from the divan. "Helen? Thank God."

Her mother sat at the dining room table, staring at the cake's unlit candles, next to it a red-ribboned box in yellow wrapping paper.

Helen's father looked her up and down, his eyes worried, and Helen glanced down to see the grass stains on the knees of her gabardines, her fingers catching in her wind-tangled hair.

"Best now you go to your room," her father said, almost a whisper.

"Let this kettle cool."

Helen turned.

"Wait," her mother said and stood. She walked to Helen by the front door and pressed her fingers and thumb hard between Helen's jaws, turning her face left, then right. She wiped the corner of Helen's mouth with a finger. A red smear of lipstick. "I want you to go across the street to Mr. Yarbrough's yard and strip your father a good willow switch. A good green one, I say, or I'll send you back for another."

"For God's sake, Hanna, there's no way I'm going to—"

"This is *your* fault," her mother told him. "You think I don't know about you bringing that boy around here all the time? Giving him money? You think I can't see? Why do you always have to undermine me?"

"She's sixteen, Hanna. Too old to—"

"Too old, you say, or too young. It's a father's job to discipline."

"You could buy a whole goddamn bundle of switches, for all I care, and I still wouldn't—"

"Don't you talk to me with that filth. Helen, outside. I'll just have to do this myself. Somebody in this house has to."

"No," her father said and gripped Helen by the wrist. "I'll take care of this myself, once and for all." Her father jerked her by the arm down the hall to the bathroom. He unhooked his razor strap from the mirror, and then held it out for his wife to get a good look at it in the hallway. "Here!" he shouted. "Is this good enough for you?" Then he slammed the bathroom door in her face and locked it.

"Who the hell do you think you are, young lady?" he shouted at Helen. "Do you have any idea how much you scared your mother and me? We've called every hospital in Dallas. You *did* go out with that boy, didn't you? And you rode his motorcycle when your mother expressly told you *not* to, am I right? *Answer* me."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then. This is the first and last time, you understand? I don't want ever to have to do this again. You think I want to do this?"

"No," Helen said.

Her father told her to put her hands on the side of the tub, to keep quiet till he'd finished. Helen stared at him, stunned, trembling by the tub.

Then her father smiled at her and winked.

The slinging strap slapped the side of the tub hard, and her father shouted, "That's for being smart with your mother!" Then he made a pained face.

"Ohh," Helen said, covering her mouth to keep from laughing.

Her father slapped the strap against the tub again, a loud hollow crack. "And *that's* for riding a motorcycle when your mother expressly forbid you to!" Helen's father grimaced, rolled his eyes and grinned.

"Ohhh," Helen said. "Please, Pop, don't hit me again."

"What? I told you to keep quiet, didn't I?" And he strapped the tub twice.

"Oh. Ohhhhh," Helen moaned, covering her mouth, and snorted.

"Jesse?" her mother said just outside the bathroom door. "Jesse! What's going on in there? What are you doing to that girl?"

"This is just what you wanted, right? Here!" And her father slapped the strap against the tub one more time.

"Jesse!" her mother shouted, wiggling the doorknob, then pounding the door. "Open up this door!"

Her mother's heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway's hardwood floors, and Helen could hear her mother pulling down hatboxes from her bedroom closet.

When her mother pushed open the bathroom door moments later, hatpin in door lock, Helen and her father were both sitting on the edge of the tub, red-faced, unable to look at each other without laughing.

Helen's mother stared at them both a long time, her arms folded.

"I want you out of this house," her mother told her father. "Now."

Her father wiped at his eyes. "Oh, come on, Hanna. We're just having us a little fun." But her mother's eyes were hard as marbles.

"It was me, Mama," Helen said, knowing that look, knowing there was no way of changing her mother's mind. "Please, Mama, it was my fault. I'm the one you should—"

"Out," her mother told her father, "out!" and she pointed down the hall to the front door.

For months, Helen's father was on the road seven days a week, staying over weekends at hotels in Little Rock and Marshall and Houston, and Helen's mother refused to talk to him when he called, sometimes two or three times a night. Whenever she heard his voice, she slammed the phone into its cradle. When Helen reached to pick up the receiver herself, thinking it was her father or Kit Keeble calling from Killeen, her mother stood in her way and let the phone ring till it stopped, then refused to talk or even to look at Helen for days.

One evening, Helen found one of Kit's letters from Fort Hood ripped into tiny pieces as she carried out the kitchen trash, and she spent hours taping the pieces back together behind the locked bathroom door.

“What are you doing in there?” her mother said in the hallway. “I said what are you doing?”

Kit had had a good time at White Rock Lake, the letter said. Why hadn't Helen written? He hoped she wasn't mad at him, hoped he hadn't gotten her into too much trouble.

Helen wrote him back right away, saying she was sorry; she'd only gotten the one letter — were there others? Then she told him to call her Saturday nights at eight p.m. before they gave him his marching orders from south Texas to South Korea. She gave him the number of the phone booth she'd called him from that day at White Rock Lake, then told him to address all his correspondence to her care of Lou McVee.

Six months after he'd left Fort Hood, Lou handed Helen Kit's last letter, a blue government issue flimsy as tissue paper from a U. S. base just outside Berlin. They were shipping Kit off to Seoul next week, he wrote, but not to worry. He'd just gotten himself an old '42 Nazi BMW with a sidecar — a bullet-riddled *Volksmotorrad* that had seen action in the Battle of the Bulge — and when Kit shipped the motorcycle back at the end of his tour, he and her father could fix it up like they'd done the Indian Chief, and she could ride with him in the sidecar, where it was safer for a girl.

Kit stopped writing a month or so later, and Helen feared he'd met a Korean girl. It never once occurred to her that he might have gone MIA.

One Sunday morning, after Helen had bathed and dressed for eleven o'clock Mass at St. James, she walked in on her mother sitting at the living room table, covering her mouth with her hands. When her mother looked up and saw her, she wiped at her eyes and stood, touching Helen's shoulder, then pointed down to a short obit in the *Dallas Morning News*. In a blizzard some time after Christmas, an Army cycle had run over a Chinese land mine on a back road just south of Kaesong, and they'd not found the bike or the driver's body till a month later, frozen in a ditch under four feet of snow. Funeral services would be held that morning at Sparkman Hillcrest.

Staring at her mother, Helen remembered Kit lying on his back, playing dead under a live oak along the shore of White Rock Lake, remembered him laughing, wet and shivering, in his bomber jacket, and the same palm that had slapped his arm, then touched his smooth, bare chest in the goosepimple cold burned with the urge to slap her mother's face.

But her mother had already set their heavy black phone on the living room table, had already begun to dial, asking the operator for a hotel in

Lex Williford

Fort Smith, then handed Helen the phone.

When her father answered a moment later, he'd just stepped out of the bathroom steam.

"Pop?" Helen said, the word catching in her throat like whiskers in a drain.

"Helen."

Her father had just cut himself shaving when the telephone rang, and he joked that he just might bleed to death. Then his faint laugh crackled and faded over the line as she told him the last time the latest news from the front.



"The Tub," *Witness*, Volume XVII, Number 1, 2003, 62-76.

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