11. ON INTERPRETING: A TUTORIAL

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INTRODUCTION

How do we make sense of discourse? How do we home in on the point a speaker is trying to get across. How do we detect a stance[1]? In the following examples (1 and 2), it is rather easy to come up with an interpretation: The stance made explicit at the end of the text provides for a guideline. It tells us how to conceive of the 'brute facts' presented earlier. For instance, in (1), the explicit stance is that of gratification. It makes us view the speaker as endorsing the simplicity and minimalism of the elements described. In (2), however, the explicit stance is that of dismay. The objects described here are presented as dissatisfying - as devoid of human warmth and feelings. The highly similar texts thus convey different points, depending on the evaluation of the facts described:

(1) Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations . . .

[1] *Stance* is defined by Du Bois (2002) as:

- "a public act by a social actor,
- achieved through overt means,
- of evaluation, positioning, and alignment
- with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural landscape".

". . . *evaluation* is the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer's *attitude* or *stance* towards, *viewpoint* on, or *feelings* about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about" (Thompson & Hunston, 2000: 5 cited in Du Bois, 2002, emphasis added).

Pink and white carnations – one desires
No much more than that.

(2) Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations . . .
Pink and white carnations – one desires
So much more than that.

Taken from *The Poems of Our Climate*
by Wallace Stevens

Example (3) may get the message across indirectly, by means of metaphors and ironies, which highlight the speaker's point. In this example, a stance is conveyed toward views and attitudes and determines how we perceive them:

(3) Take Care, Soldier[2]
Yitzhak Laor

Soldier, don't die, wear a helmet, a flak vest, surround
the village with a ditch of crocodiles, starve
it if necessary, eat Mom's goodies, don't
die, shoot sharp, take care of the armored
Jeep, the bulldozer, the land, one day it will be
yours, little David, sweetie, don't die, please.

Watch out for Goliath the peasant, he's trying to sell his
pumpkin at the nearby market, to buy a gift
for his grandson is what he's plotting, erase the bleeding of Eva Braun
when you checked if she was faking her labor pains, silence
her screams, that's how every delivery room sounds, it's not easy
with your humane values, be strong, take care, forget
your deeds, forget the forgetting.

That thy days may be long, that the days of thy children
may be long, that one day they shall hear of thy deeds
and they shall stick their fingers in their ears and they shall scream
with fear and thy son's/daughter's scream shall never fade. Be strong,
sweet David, live long, and see thy children's eyes, their backs shall
hasten to flee from thee, stay in touch with thy comrades at arms, after
thy sons deny thee, a covenant of the
shunned. Take care, soldier boy.

Ha'aretz, 13 April 2001

The care for the soldier may seem sincere at the outset. It might indeed be sincere even throughout. But, then, the ironic stance toward the clichéd metaphors, portraying the Israeli oppressor as "little David" and the oppressed Palestinian as the mighty "Goliath" and as a Nazi, is revealing of the speaker's criticism of the oppressors' self-image. This

[2] Translated from Hebrew by Vivian Eden. The poem was dedicated to Haggai Matar – a young Israeli who refused to serve in the Israeli Occupation Forces.

implicit attitude alongside the explicit dissociation from that soldier's deeds ("one day they shall hear of thy deeds/and they shall stick their fingers in their ears and they shall scream/with fear") affect the way we make sense of the point the speaker is trying to bring out.

In his seminal work, Labov (1972) looked carefully into linguistic devices serving to highlight the raison d'être - the point – of narratives. His work was extended by researchers such as Reinhart (1984, 1995), Shen (1985), Polanyi (1978), and Giora (1990, 1993, who applied it to non-narrative texts).

In this chapter, I am using Labov's (1972) paradigm in order to highlight its contribution to the theory of narrative interpretation and at the same time to lay out some of the limitations of the theory as a single theory of story comprehension. To do that, I am analyzing Alice Walker's (1971: 21–26) story *How did I get away with killing one of the biggest lawyers in the state? It was easy* (see Appendix) in a tutorial manner. Taking the story as an object of analysis and doing it step by step should shed light on the role of the devices Labov termed "evaluative" in guiding our 'online' interpretation.

EVALUATIVE DEVICES

Labov (1972) views a story as a linguistic string consisting of two kinds of clauses. One type of clause, termed "narrative", describes a punctual, non-habitual, temporally bounded act or event. The order of presentation of such clauses is constrained by the actual, temporal order of these events in real-life situations. The chain of events temporally ordered constitutes the 'foreground' of the story (see also Reinhart, 1984).

The other type of clause is considered "free" in that it is not constrained by the actual order of the events and can appear anywhere in the text. These free clauses constitute the non-narrative material of the story. They include clauses that carry "background" information as well as information destined to "evaluate" the 'brute facts' described in the narrative clauses.

Narrative clauses have linguistic properties that help identify them. They are affirmative, main clauses that involve punctual, transitive verbs, describing past events in the active voice and in the simple past tense (or narrative present).

Likewise, non-narrative, free clauses are linguistically identifiable. They make up subordinate clauses; they involve non-punctual, at times repetitive, or aspectual verbs denoting continuous (past progressive) or perfective (past perfect) events, or some irrealis. They may further involve stative verbs, modal, existential, and affective verbs as well as negation, passive voice, metaphoric, and analogical aspects. They make up all that is not narrative.

According to Labov (1972) and Reinhart (1984, 1995), non-narrative clauses have a dual role: They provide for background information and for "evaluation" of the narrative information conveyed by the narrative clauses. In this paper, I will only consider their evaluative role and indicate the way evaluative clauses cue the reader as to the theme or the point of the story.

ANALYSIS

Walker's (1971) story *How did I get away with killing one of the biggest lawyers in the state? It was easy* can be divided into two. The first part involves the first five paragraphs,

which constitute the background section of the story and include only non-narrative clauses. The second part begins with the sixth paragraph—the point in the story in which the chain of events, ordered on a temporal axis, is unfolded. The shift from the story's background to its foreground is indicated by a temporal adverb ("One time"), suggesting that from here onwards, the story is displaying its set of narrative clauses (intertwined of course with evaluative material).

The first paragraph (see 1 below) does not contain only background information such as who the heroine is or where and when the events take place etc. It also has an evaluative role: It displays one of the major contrasts of the story to be attended to as one proceeds with the reading, namely the stark difference between the social, economical, and mental states of the two conflicting parties - the rich whites and the poor blacks. It is against this background information that the future events and developments involving the black heroine should be weighed. This means, among other things, that a psychological or psychoanalytical analysis is ruled out. Instead, the story should be read along sociological and political lines, that is, from a social and political perspective and its point or theme should be likewise constructed:

1. My mother and father were not married. I never knew him. My mother must have loved him, though; she never talked against him when I was little. It was like he never existed. We lived on Poultry street. Why it was called Poultry street I never knew. I guess at one time there must have been a chicken factory somewhere along there. It was right near the center of town. I could walk to the state capitol in less than ten minutes. I could see the top – it was gold – of the capitol building from the front yard. When I was a little girl I used to think it was real gold, shining up there, and then they bought an eagle and put him on top, and when I used to walk up there I couldn't see the top of the building from the ground, it was so high, and I used to reach down and run my hand over the grass. It was like a rug, that grass was, so springy and silky and deep. They had these big old trees, too. Oaks and magnolias; and I thought the magnolia trees were beautiful and one night I climbed up in one of them and got a bloom and took it home. But the air in our house blighted it; it turned brown the minute I took it inside and the petals dropped off.

The background information conveyed by the story's background part tells of a young girl who is raised by a single black mother. The abject poverty of the neighborhood the heroine lives in is reflected by the street's name - "Poultry street". A chicken factory must have given the street its name. The chicken is thus the emblem of a class the heroine belongs in that is kept for purposes of sheer exploitation. The blacks resemble the bird that is raised in confinement and is robbed of its products to the extent that eventually it is slaughtered to provide for its proprietor. No wonder the whites are represented by a free, powerful, and actually a ruling bird – the eagle – which is placed in a superior position - on top of the golden dome of the capitol building – a powerful dominating position.

The second to fifth paragraphs constituting the second section of the background part disclose information about the mother, which has an evaluative impact as well.

This information should guide our reading of the daughter's future conduct to be compared to her mother's:

2. "Mama worked in private homes. That's how she described her job, to make it sound nicer. 'I work in private homes,' she would say, and that sounded nicer, she thought than saying 'I'm a maid.'
3. "Sometimes she made six dollars a day, working in private homes. Most of the time she didn't make that much. By the time she paid the rent and bought milk and bananas there wasn't anything left.
4. "She used to leave me alone sometimes because was no one to keep me—and then there was an old woman up the Street who looked after me for a while—and by the time she died she was more like a mother to me than Mama was. Mama was so tired every night when she came home I never hardly got the chance to talk to her. And then sometimes she would go out at night, or bring men home—but they never thought of marrying her. And they sure didn't want to be bothered with me. I guess most them were like my own father; had children somewhere of their own that they'd left. And then they came to my Mama, who fell for them every time. And I think she may have had a couple of abortions, like some of the women did, who couldn't feed any more mouths. But she tried.
5. "Anyway, she was a nervous kind of woman. I think she had spells or something because she was so tired. But I didn't understand anything then about exhaustion, worry, lack of a proper diet; I just thought she wanted to work, be away from the house. I didn't blame her. Where we lived people sometimes just threw pieces of furniture they didn't want over the railing. And there was broken glass and rags everywhere. The place stunk, especially in the summer. And children were always screaming and men were always cussing and women were always yelling about something. . . . It was nothing for a girl or woman to be raped. I was raped myself, when I was twelve, and my Mama never knew and I never told anybody. For, what could they do? It was just a boy, passing through. Somebody's cousin from the North.

The mother is portrayed as a struggling woman, making an effort to live and even love. Through her struggles, the author further criticizes the black men, who take no responsibilities over their deeds: "I guess most them were like my own father; had children somewhere of their own that they'd left" (p. 22).

At the end of the paragraph about the mother we are introduced to the heroine's rape when she was twelve. This rape is described nonchalantly. It is described in the passive voice ("I was raped"); the offender has no identity ("It was just a boy, passing through. Somebody's cousin from the North"). And there was nothing anyone could do about it (p. 22). Against the background of this rape, with which she had made up, and which stirred no protest on her behalf having resigned to the fact that the powerless can do nothing in an oppressive society, even one in which she is an in-group member, the rape in the foreground should be weighed (the verbs of the narrative clauses are in bold):

6. "One time my Mama was doing day's work at a private home and **took** me with her. It was like being in fairyland. Everything was spotless and new, even before Mama started cleaning. I met the woman in the house and played with her children. I didn't even see the man, but he was in there somewhere, while I was out in the yard with the children. I was fourteen, but I guess I looked like a grown woman. Or maybe I looked fourteen. Anyway, the next day, he **picked** me **up** when I was coming from school and he **said** my Mama had asked him to do it. I **got in** the car with him . . . he **took** me to his law office, a big office in the middle of town, and he **started** asking me questions about 'how do you all live?' and 'what grade are you in?' and stuff like that. And then he **began** to touch me, and I **pulled** away. But he **kept** touching me and I was scared . . . he **raped** me. But afterward he **told** me he hadn't forced me, that I felt something for him, and he **gave** me some money. I was crying, going down the stairs. I wanted to kill him.

This is the first rape event occurring in the foreground of the story—in fact, the event that triggers the story's chain of events. It is directly evaluated by an explicit mention of emotions ("I was scared"), by an indirect, kind of 'speechless' stance projected by the use of three dots, and indirectly, by the passive voice of the rape in the background, which brings out the active voice and transitivity (Hopper & Thompson, 1980) of the specific verb in question ("he raped me"). The use of a narrative clause here, that is, of a simple past tensed, active voice verb, carves the doer as an identifiable agent, points to his responsibility for his crime and to his overt aggression. Here, the child no longer ignores her feelings. Rather than being repressed, her feelings surface and are in the open: She wants to kill him! This evaluation of the rape also registers her emotional autonomy at this stage. At this point, she does not react as an oppressed victim but as a victim who is still in touch with her emotions: She realizes the full significance of his violence, without attempting to underestimate it.

This sense of anger is not going to last, though. An act of aggression turns a victim into a powerless patient. Next time the man rapes her, this meets with no objection or protest on her part. Like other rape victims, the heroine now acts mechanically. This consequence is mimicked by the lack of evaluative material whose unexpected absence stresses the 'cause and effect' connection between the events.[3] This absence, thus, where some emotional reaction or hesitation is anticipated is highly surprising: "he stopped his car again, and I got in":

7. "I never told Mama. I thought that would be the end of it. But about two days later, on my way from school, he **stopped** his car again, and I **got** in. This time we **went** to his house; nobody was there. And he **made** me **get** into his wife's bed. After we'd been doing this for about three weeks, he **told** me he loved me. I didn't love him, but he had begun to look a little better to me. Really, I think, because he was so clean. He bathed a lot and never smelled even alive, to tell the truth. Or maybe it was the money he gave me, or the presents he bought. I told Mama I had

[3] On the evaluative effect of the unexpected see also Polanyi & Strassmann (1996).

a job after school baby-sitting. And she was glad that I could buy things I needed for school. But it was all from him.

Indeed this rape ("he **made** me **get** into his wife's bed", p. 23) is met with no protest. However, the evaluative information further prepares us for the final act of murder. The wishes from the previous paragraph ("I wanted to kill him"), which make us anticipate the aggressor's death, are seconded here by an insinuation that that person is already 'dead', in that he does not smell 'alive' even. And killing a dead person is much easier than killing a living one.

However, at this stage the awareness of the heroine is muted. She contemplates her good luck. Unlike her mother, she has someone who loves her, would not let her get pregnant and who furnishes her with money:

8. "This went on for two years. He wouldn't let me get pregnant, he said, and I didn't. I would just lay up there in his wife's bed and work out algebra problems or think about what new thing I was going to buy. But one day, when I got home, Mama was there ahead of me, and she saw me get out of his car. I knew when he was driving off that I was going to get it.

Though paragraph 8 involves material that should be registered as narrative, the linguistic markers of narrative clauses are hardly there. Indeed, the adverbial phrase "one day", signals the return to the foreground of the narrative and makes us expect the next chain of temporally ordered events. But the events that follow don't assume the linguistic forms of narrative clauses. "Mama was there ahead of me, and she saw me get out of his car". 'Seeing' is not a punctual verb. And though it implies that the heroine 'got out of the car', the event itself is narrated as if it were a background event. Here is where Labov's theory fails to account for our intuitions.

The next paragraph involves further theoretical problems. For instance, though we consider "had one of her fits" narrative, the verb would not justify it. And worse even: While "That night she **told** me something . . . " is a narrative clause, the following—"She said"—which looks just as narrative is not, because it is either an instance of 'told' or a repetition of that generalization:

9. "Mama **asked** me didn't I know he was a white man? Didn't I know he was a married man with two children? Didn't I have good sense? And do you know what I told her? *I **told** her he loved me*. Mama was crying and praying at the same time by then. The neighbors heard both of us screaming and crying, because Mama beat me almost to death with the cord from the electric iron. She just **hacked** it off the iron, still on the ironing board. She **beat** me till she couldn't raise her arm. And then she had one of her fits, just twitching and sweating and trying to claw herself into the floor. This scared me more than the beating. That night she **told** me something I hadn't paid much attention to before. She said: 'On top of everything else, that man's daddy goes on the t.v. every night and says folks like us ain't even human.' It was his daddy who had stood in the schoolhouse door saying it would be over his dead body before any black children would come into a white school.

The evaluative clauses are interesting here. There is a direct evaluation of what she "told" her mother, addressed to the listener: "And do you know what I told her? ***I told*** *her he loved me*." These evaluative clauses are also italicized to indicate their significant role in the story as a whole. Unlike her mother, the daughter did not act out of free will or authentic emotions. She wasn't attached to her oppressor because *she* loved him. Like many other women, she was involved with him because *he* loved her. This lack of inner motivation for her acts, highlighted by the evaluative devices, should cue the readers to the intended interpretation: This is a story about the descent of an autonomous mind out of an oppressive state; it is about growing up in an oppressive society, and about becoming conscious of one's social identity as a black, poor woman. The next paragraph goes on elaborating on her 'anesthetized' state of mind that is the theme of the story:

10. "But do you think that stopped me? No. I would look at his daddy on t.v. ranting and raving about how integration was a communist plot, and I would just think of how different his son Bubba was from his daddy! Do you understand what I'm saying. I thought he *loved* me. That *meant* something to me. What did I know about 'equal rights'? What did I care about 'integration'? I was sixteen! I wanted somebody to tell me I was pretty, and he was telling me that all the time. I even thought it was *brave* of him to go with me. History? What did I know about History?

Paragraph 10 is indeed about how the heroine conceives of her personal experiences as detached from any social or historical context. This is the starting point from which her more developed social and political awareness is about to emerge (as is obvious from her state of mind as the story-teller). Since the story is told from the point of view of the grown up person, these evaluative perspectives allow us to compare her two different states of mind and construct the point of the story. At this stage of the story, however, the evaluative clauses make us focus on the process of maturation of an oppressed state of mind. This becomes even more obvious in the following paragraph:

11. "I began to hate Mama. We argued about Bubba all the time, for months. And I still slipped out to meet him, because Mama had to work. I **told** him how she beat me, and about how much she despised him—he was really pissed off that any black person could despise him—and about how she had these spells. . . . Well, the day I became seventeen, the *day* of my seventeenth birthday, I **signed** papers in his law office, and I **had** my mother **committed** to an insane asylum.

Though she has come of age and is legally mature, emotionally she is still unaware of her motives and of her 'voluntary' subjugation. Her mother, on the other hand, will not give up – yet another evaluative contrast:

12. "After Mama had been in Carthage Insane Asylum for three months, she **managed** somehow to **get** a lawyer. An old slick-headed man who smoked great big black

> cigars. People laughed at him because he didn't even have a law office, but he was the only lawyer that would touch the case, because Bubba's daddy was such a big deal. And we all **gathered** in the judge's chambers—because he wasn't about to let this case get out. Can you imagine, if it had? And Mama's old lawyer **told** the judge how Bubba's daddy had tried to buy him off. And Bubba **got up** and **swore** he'd never touched me. And then I **got up** and **said** Mama was insane. And do you know what? By that time it was true. Mama *was* insane. She had no mind left at all. They had given her shock treatments or something. . . . God knows what else they gave her. But she was as vacant as an empty eye socket. She just sat sort of hunched over, and her hair was white.

At this stage of lack of social awareness, the heroine acts as the agent of her abuser, complying with his interests while acting against the interests of her in-group members, that is, against herself. The evaluative clauses here highlight the significance of the trial as a landmark in the heroine's inner growth. The judge "wasn't about to let this case get out. Can you imagine, if it had?". Why is such an obscure event receiving our attention? After all, this is a trial with a highly predictable consequence? Why is the trial evaluated as a turning point, while the rape, for instance, is not? What makes this 'uninteresting' event so crucial to the theme of the story? This event, as we will see soon, is instrumental in shaping the heroine's mental transformation. It is this event that triggers her process of liberation from an oppressed state of mind:

13. "And after all this, Bubba wanted us to keep going together. Mama was just an obstacle that he felt he had removed. But I just suddenly—in a way I don't even pretend to understand—woke up. It was like everything up to then had been some kind of dream. And I **told** him I wanted to get Mama out. But he wouldn't do it; he just kept trying to make me go with him. And sometimes—out of habit, I guess—I did. My body did what it was being paid to do. And Mama **died**. And I **killed** Bubba.

Paragraph 13 is certainly one of the most central segments of the story. The most crucial event is presented here—the heroine's breakthrough—her 'waking up'. However, because this is an emotional event described metaphorically it cannot be viewed as a narrative event, despite its other 'narrative' features (e.g., a punctual, simple past event). Here again lies one of the weaknesses of Labov's theory. Still this event is highly evaluated.

As earlier, here too, central narrative events are not evaluated: "And Mama **died**. And I **killed** Bubba".[4] Recall that the lack of evaluation where it is expected, is by itself evaluative. Here the consecutive sequence of events, undisrupted by any evaluation, forces use to see the death of the mother and the killing of the abuser as a cause and effect chain of events. Given that no justice is done in court, the heroine acts to practice justice out of court. The powerless have to have a justice mechanism of their

[4] It's questionable, though, whether 'died' would qualify as a narrative event.

own. The state's institutions are serving only the powerful. In a way, then, she kills the wrongdoer because he killed her mother. What would she do for herself, then? How would she compensate herself?

14. "How did I get away with killing one of the biggest lawyers in the state? It was easy. He kept a gun in his drawer at the office and one night I **took** it out and **shot** him. I shot him while he was wearing his thick white overcoat, so I wouldn't have to see him bleed. But I don't think I took the time to wipe off my fingerprints, because to tell the truth, I couldn't stand it another minute in that place. No one came after me, and I read in the paper the next day that he'd been killed by burglars. I guess they thought 'burglars' had stolen all that money Bubba kept in his safe—but I had it. One of the carrots Bubba always dangled before me was that he was going to send me to college: I didn't see why he shouldn't do it.

For once we have a heroine who is going to benefit from her crime. Now she is going to invest in herself. She takes the money he has promised he would give her to enable her to get an education, which indeed might guarantee her progress in this abject reality. Investing in herself indicates that the heroine has reached a full fledged social awareness. This development is culminating in the final paragraph:

15. "The strangest thing was, Bubba's wife **came over** to the house and **asked** me if I'd mind looking after the children while she went to Bubba's funeral. I **did** it, of course, because I was afraid she'd suspect something if I didn't. So on the day he was buried I was in his house sitting on his wife's bed with his children, and eating fried chicken his wife, Julie, had cooked."

In this final scene, it is the powerful white who is asking the underprivileged heroine a favor, in a manner that allows the heroine to refuse, thus recognizing her autonomy and newly gained powerfulness. In addition, the heroine is now symbolically in a superior position: While her abuser is buried down there, she is up there, in his house, sitting on his wife's bed, with his children and eating fried chicken that has been cooked for her. It's not just that she is alive and her abuser is dead and powerless; it's not only that now she is in control of his most precious things and in a superior position in the scene of his crime; it is also the total reversal of roles that is taking place in front of our eyes. The young, poor, black woman has gained control over her life, and at least momentarily, she is doing it through controlling her abuser's life. Sheer saturnalia!

How did I get away with killing one of the biggest lawyers in the state? It was easy is not about killing the abuser. It's about growing up and achieving autonomy and control. The killing of the abuser is only a stage, whether symbolic or real, in achieving that goal. The construction of this theme, then, is not based on the series of events that might make up a plot, but by the set of evaluative devices that instruct us as to our final interpretation of these events.

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APPENDIX

How did I get away with killing one of the biggest lawyers in the state? it was easy

Alice Walker

My mother and father were not married. I never knew him. My mother must have loved him, though; she never talked against him when I was little. It was like he never existed. We lived on Poultry street. Why it was called Poultry Street I never knew. I guess at one time there must have been a chicken factory somewhere along there. It was right near the center of town. I could walk to the state capitol in less than ten minutes. I could see the top – it was gold – of the capitol building from the front yard. When I was a little girl I used to think it was real gold, shining up there, and then they bought an eagle and put him on top, and when I used to walk up there I couldn't see the top of the building from the ground, it was so high, and I used to reach down and run my hand over the grass. It was like a rug, that grass was, so springy and silky and deep. They had these big old trees, too. Oaks and magnolias; and I thought the magnolia trees were beautiful and one night I climbed up in one of them and got a bloom and took it home. But the air in our house blighted it; it turned brown the minute I took it inside and the petals dropped off.

"Mama worked in private homes. That's how she described her job, to make it sound nicer. 'I work in private homes,' she would say, and that sounded nicer, she thought than saying 'I'm a maid.'

"Sometimes she made six dollars a day, working in private homes. Most of the time she didn't make that much. By the time she paid the rent and bought milk and bananas there wasn't anything left.

"She used to leave me alone sometimes because was no one to keep me—and then there was an old woman up the Street who looked after me for a while—and by the time she died she was more like a mother to me than Mama was. Mama was so tired every night when she came home I never hardly got the chance to talk to her. And then sometimes she would go out at night, or bring men home—but they never thought of marrying her. And they sure didn't want to be bothered with me. I guess most them were like my own father; had children somewhere of their own that they'd left. And then they came to my Mama, who fell for them every time. And I think she may have had a couple of abortions, like some of the women did, who couldn't feed any more mouths. But she tried.

"Anyway, she was a nervous kind of woman. I think she had spells or something because she was so tired. But I didn't understand anything then about exhaustion, worry, lack of a proper diet; I just thought she wanted to work, be away from the house. I didn't blame her. Where we lived people sometimes just threw pieces of furniture they didn't want over the railing. And there was broken glass and rags everywhere. The place stunk, especially in the summer. And children were always screaming and men were always cussing and women were always yelling about something. . . . It was nothing for a girl or woman to be raped. I was raped myself, when I was twelve, and my Mama never knew and I never told anybody. For, what could they do? It was just a boy, passing through. Somebody's cousin from the North.

"One time my Mama was doing day's work at a private home and took me with her. It was like being in fairyland. Everything was spotless and new, even before Mama started cleaning. I met the woman in the house and played with her children. I didn't even see the man, but he was in there somewhere, while I was out in the yard with the children. I was fourteen, but I guess I looked like a grown woman. Or maybe I looked fourteen. Anyway, the next day, he picked me up when I was coming from school and he said my Mama had asked him to do it. I got in the car with him . . . he took me to his law office, a big office in the middle of town, and he started asking me questions about 'how do you all live?' and 'what grade are you in?' and stuff like that. And then he began to touch me, and I pulled away. But he kept touching me and I was scared he raped me. But afterward he told me he hadn't forced me, that I felt something for him, and he gave me some money. I was crying, going down the stairs. I wanted to kill him.

"I never told Mama. I thought that would be the end of it. But about two days later, on my way from school, he stopped his car again, and I got in. This time we went to his house; nobody was there. And he made me get into his wife's bed. After we'd been doing this for about three weeks, he told me he loved me. I didn't love him, but he had begun to look a little better to me. Really, I think, because he was so clean. He bathed a lot and never smelled even alive, to tell the truth. Or maybe it was the money he gave me, or the presents he bought. I told Mama I had a job after school baby-sitting. And she was glad that I could buy things I needed for school. But it was all from him.

"This went on for two years. He wouldn't let me get pregnant, he said, and I didn't. I would just lay up there in his wife's bed and work out algebra problems or think about what new thing I was going to buy. But one day, when I got home, Mama was

there ahead of me, and she saw me get out of his car. I knew when he was driving off that I was going to get it.

"Mama asked me didn't I know he was a white man? Didn't I know he was a married man with two children? Didn't I have good sense? And do you know what I told her? *I told her he loved me*. Mama was crying and praying at the same time by then. The neighbors heard both of us screaming and crying, because Mama beat me almost to death with the cord from the electric iron. She just hacked it off the iron, still on the ironing board. She beat me till she couldn't raise her arm. And then she had one of her fits, just twitching and sweating and trying to claw herself into the floor. This scared me more than the beating. That night she told me something I hadn't paid much attention to before. She said: 'On top of everything else, that man's daddy goes on the t.v. every night and says folks like us ain't even human.' It was his daddy who had stood in the schoolhouse door saying it would be over his dead body before any black children would come into a white school.

"But do you think that stopped me? No. I would look at his daddy on t.v. ranting and raving about how integration was a communist plot, and I would just think of how different his son Bubba was from his daddy! Do you understand what I'm saying. I thought he *loved* me. That *meant* something to me. What did I know about 'equal rights'? What did I care about 'integration'? I was sixteen! I wanted somebody to tell me I was pretty, and he was telling me that all the time. I even thought it was *brave* of him to go with me. History? What did I know about History?

"I began to hate Mama. We argued about Bubba all the time, for months. And I still slipped out to meet him, because Mama had to work. I told him how she beat me, and about how much she despised him—he was really pissed off that any black person could despise him—and about how she had these spells.. . . Well, the day I became seventeen, the *day* of my seventeenth birthday, I signed papers in his law office, and I had my mother committed to an insane asylum.

"After Mama had been in Carthage Insane Asylum for three months, she managed somehow to get a lawyer. An old slick-headed man who smoked great big black cigars. People laughed at him because he didn't even have a law office, but he was the only lawyer that would touch the case, because Bubba's daddy was such a big deal. And we all gathered in the judge's chambers—because he wasn't about to let this case get out. Can you imagine, if it had? And Mama's old lawyer told the judge how Bubba's daddy had tried to buy him off. And Bubba got up and swore he'd never touched me. And then I got up and said Mama was insane. And do you know what? By that time it was true. Mama *was* insane. She had no mind left at all. They had given her shock treatments or something. . . . God knows what else they gave her. But she was as vacant as an empty eye socket. She just sat sort of hunched over, and her hair was white.

"And after all this, Bubba wanted us to keep going together. Mama was just an obstacle that he felt he had removed. But I just suddenly—in a way I don't even pretend to understand—woke up. It was like everything up to then had been some kind of dream. And I told him I Wanted to get Mama out. But he wouldn't do it; he just kept trying to make me go with him. And sometimes— out of habit, I guess—I did. My body did what it was being paid to do. And Mama died. And I killed Bubba.

"How did I get away with killing one of the biggest lawyers in the state? It was easy. He kept a gun in his drawer at the office and one night I took it out and shot him. I shot him while he was wearing his thick white overcoat, so I wouldn't have to see him bleed. But I don't think I took the time to wipe off my fingerprints, because to tell the truth, I couldn't stand it another minute in that place. No one came after me, and I read in the paper the next day that he'd been killed by burglars. I guess they thought 'burglars' had stolen all that money Bubba kept in his safe—but I had it. One of the carrots Bubba always dangled before me was that he was going to send me to college: I didn't see why he shouldn't do it.

"The strangest thing was, Bubba's wife came over to the house and asked me if I'd mind looking after the children while she went to Bubba's funeral. I did it, of course, because I was afraid she'd suspect something if I didn't. So on the day he was buried I was in his house sitting on his wife's bed with his children, and eating fried chicken his wife, Julie, had cooked."