

## Chipped Pieces

*Scott Henderson*

The sepia-toned tedium of southeast Georgia was endless. I rolled down a window to free a fly, the map on my lap flapping its own creased wings. Scented by skunky papermills, the air was cool and dry, though autumn remained just a rumor. A rusting, two-tone Chevy raced past me with a *Reagan/Bush '84* bumper sticker, a mud-spattered mantra for the upcoming election.

Magnolias crowded both sides of the road when I left Tallahassee earlier in the day, but they had soon surrendered to pines, which gave way to scrub, swamp, and periodic proselytizing. A billboard in Valdosta had asked, “Have you been Saved?,” a warning as much as an invitation.

Going to Waycross that weekend was a foot-dragging favor for my mother. Three years before, my great-great-aunt had taken a fourteen-hour bus ride to visit us in West Palm Beach. Although prom and high school graduation were looming, I had talked mostly about clothes, recipes, and musicals.

My choice of topics during my aunt’s visit might have surprised her, but I knew by then I was different. For nearly two years I’d agonized over whether to keep my self-knowledge hidden or to face the ostracizing consequences of telling others. The advent of college had only prolonged my indecisiveness—my cowardice. Once classes commenced, I became a solitary scholar, the peach-fuzz whiz-kid who dated armfuls of books.

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As I approached Waycross, my radio blared Tina Turner’s insistence that “it’s ... the thrill of boy meeting girl ... it’s physical ... opposites attract,” her words cut short by the censorship of small-town static.

A sign larded with boosterism sputtered: “Welcome to Waycross ... Gateway to the Okefenokee Swamp ... Opportunity Ripe for the Picking!” I had no idea if it was the swamp or the opportunity that had lured my mother’s people to Waycross. They were a Celtic clan of sandy hair and pale skin who left the Appalachian hollows for the scorching sun of treeless terrain—dirt-poor farmers who never questioned the Bible’s truth, a scorching sun of a different sort.

My mother, her sister, and my grandmother had spent almost every summer with relatives who were scattered along an arc stretching from Jacksonville to Charleston. In her decades-old recollections of those sojourns, my mother would carefully arrange family members like pieces in a china cabinet: the perfect ones were placed in front, while the chipped ones—an aunt who smoked cigars, an uncle who wore dresses—were tucked in back.

The encyclopedia volumes stacked in our garage provided additional clues about that sliver of Dixie, places where my mother had learned to dance, to kiss, to wordlessly prompt a light for her cigarette. Those volumes showed me other things, too—photos of bare-chested men who held my stares as I sat on that increasingly hard floor, slowly realizing I was one of the chipped pieces.

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The Ware Retirement Center—a renovated hotel—was the tallest structure in Waycross. The lobby was empty except for some threadbare armchairs and a broken grandfather clock. I pressed the elevator button until it produced a grinding, metal-on-metal sound, as if the building needed a hip replacement.

The elevator eventually appeared and took me to the fourth floor. In a minute I was at my aunt's door. "Hello, Steven," she said amiably.

She was wearing a cream blouse and a light gray skirt (if either item had had any wrinkles, it would now be covering in a closet). With ninety-two years of practice, her posture was erect, a straight line from her black shoes to her white hair.

"Hi, Aunt Beulah," I said. "It's nice to see you." I feared there'd be an incriminating pause when she might recall my campy chatter during her Florida visit.

"I expect you've eaten lunch," she said, her speech neither clipped nor brusque, though not effusive either.

"Yes ma'am," I responded, my voice inadvertently straying above the masculine pitch I'd rehearsed.

"Good. Have you got your things?" A real question that time.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, raising a folded suit bag. Aunt Beulah nodded, as if her question had been a statement after all.

“Then let’s get you settled.” She stepped inside, body language cuing me to wait in the hallway.

Peering through the doorway, I could see that her apartment was a spartan affair. An issue of *Family Circle* magazine sat under a lamp on an end table next to an olive-green couch, beyond which a two-chair dinette faced a makeshift kitchen. In contrast to this no-nonsense simplicity, I knew Aunt Beulah had constructed defenses, barriers that barred the entrance into her private thoughts and feelings.

“Here we are,” she said, holding a key. She guided me past the elevator and unlocked the door to a modest room, an accommodation residents could reserve for guests.

“I hope this will do,” she said, giving the bathroom a quick inspection.

“Yes ma’am, it will be fine,” I replied.

“Wonderful,” she said in a tone of small victories. “We’ll drive over to Jack and Ruth’s house at 5:00.” Marching orders confirmed, she went back to her apartment.

Aunt Beulah had reasons for her reticence. The youngest among ten siblings, she was the only one to attend college, earning a nursing degree in Atlanta. A few years later, she married a salesman who died shortly after the birth of their second child. To support the two children (“Red” and Jack), she’d returned to her former nursing job at a Waycross hospital.

As a working mother in the Deep South, Aunt Beulah had been an aberration, though her difference was not like mine—nobody had ever suggested she might be “funny” because she’d never remarried. She could be forgiven, even admired, for her single-minded independence and imperturbability.

The TV in my room didn’t work, so I half-heartedly read a textbook I’d brought with me. Bored, I began thinking about the guy who often sat next to me in my economics class: lanky, tanned, long blond hair. Probably a surfer from Daytona or Ft. Lauderdale. He’d flop down in a desk, then adjust his shorts to make his lack of underwear obvious. Those interludes incited a riot of distracting thoughts, voyeuristic silences when my desires were free of judgment.

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“It’s not much farther,” Aunt Beulah said. Streets named for Confederate generals and poisonous plants marked our progress into Jack and Ruth’s neighborhood.

“Turn right after the stop sign,” Aunt Beulah directed with the crisp precision of someone who no longer drives, just navigates.

Dusk had descended by the time we arrived. Azaleas surrounded a ranch house, its yard blanketed in leaves that crunched underfoot as we slowly walked to the front door.

“Come on in y’all,” Aunt Beulah’s son Jack said, his drawl an unconscious cliché, molasses on a cold day. He took us to the living room, which contained a hodgepodge of furniture encamped next to an empty fireplace. Savory aromas escaped from the kitchen.

I had on a polo shirt, khakis, and penny loafers—arbitrary costuming that people like me used to identify each other, rare hints in the guessing game of is-he or isn’t-he, a game we were forced to play in the shadows of ambiguity and inuendo.

Ruth, Aunt Beulah’s daughter-in-law, took both my hands: “We’ve been looking forward to seeing you, Steven,” she said affectionately.

“My mother sends her regards,” I said, endeavoring to keep the sing-song chiffon out of my voice.

Jack and Ruth’s son Jimmy interrupted us with a fidgety greeting. Restlessly thin and exhaustingly talkative, he was a high-school sophomore and an equal match for any hummingbird, flitting from topic to topic, from person to person, sentences stopping and starting at random points along the way. My mother referred to him as a change of life baby—“menopause” was a vulgar word—which, according to her, explained his avian attention span.

“Steven!” Jimmy’s sister Sara, a junior at UGA, exclaimed as she gave me a big hug. The chance to see her again was why I had ultimately decided to make this visit.

During their holiday trips to Florida, Sara and I—giggling grade-schoolers—had sat at sequestered card tables playing board games and mimicking the adults. As teenagers, we’d had lengthy long-distance phone calls discussing the boys who wooed her and the girls who belittled me, allaying our insecurities with pep rallies of commiseration.

Sara had also lived with my grandmother while she completed an internship prior to college. We joked a lot that summer in South Florida, so I laughed when she had said I was like

an older brother—but she'd been serious. One day at the beach she had begun rating the guys, encouraging me to agree or disagree with her opinions. Initially wary, I was soon contributing my own uninhibited comments about the bronzed musculature on display. “Jesus, he’s a ten!”, I exuberantly panted when a lifeguard paraded by in a skimpy skin-tight suit. I cursed myself for such a careless outburst, though all Sara had said from behind a pair of drugstore sunglasses was “You have a great eye Steven,” seemingly as unconcerned as the seagulls circling above us.

Joining us for dinner that night in Waycross was Sara’s boyfriend David, also a UGA student. He had a large, sporting-goods build, his brown flannel shirt snubbing the preppy plaids that mingled at cotillions and Republican fundraisers.

Curiously, David’s eyes held mine even after our snippet of small talk. Was I missing something? I probably just wanted a different image to replace the surfer in my thoughts later that night.

Given it was dry household, there’d be no pleasantries over beer or bourbon. “Let me sit next to Meemaw,” Jimmy chirped, wings aflutter.

In the dining room, a picture window reflected our images as if we were watching ourselves in a play.

“Oh piffle, I forgot that magazine,” Aunt Beulah apologized.

“You needn’t fret, Mama—I’m in no hurry for those recipes,” Ruth said, pulling out a chair for Aunt Beulah.

“You’re not getting senile, are you?” Jack kidded, but Aunt Beulah bristled at the attempted humor. One of her sisters had been committed to the Milledgeville State Hospital, a Spanish-mossed asylum worthy of Tennessee Williams.

In the crisscrossing chit-chat that followed a short blessing, I admittedly engaged in what my mother approvingly labelled a “personality act,” the artifice of scripted etiquette and generous praise. I had been taught that white lies—those sugar-coated substitutes for candor—weren’t actual lies, only a delicate dance to avoid stepping on toes. As for the lies you might tell yourself, their color was a mystery.

“Y’all help yourselves,” Ruth insisted.

Jack handed a bowl of collards to me, his sixty-year-old face faded and lined, features fatigued by unseen demons. “Remember,” my mother had cautioned, “don’t bring up Jack’s brother.”

I had been told about Jack’s brother many times. Coming home from Georgia Tech for Easter break, Red had been killed by a drunk driver. Aunt Beulah had expressed her grief stoically, but Jack responded differently. He quit junior college and developed a life-long drinking problem, the damn-shame-of-it-all irony as unmentionable as Red’s death. Were forbidden topics simply another form of duplicity?

Out of nowhere (nowhere being the backyard), we were startled by a dog’s frantic barking.

“I’ll go see what that mutt’s holler’in about,” Jack said. While he was gone, Jimmy began telling the table (well, me) how their dog Buckshot continually got into trouble. Mercifully, Jack returned before Jimmy could become entangled in a tangent.

“I didn’t see anything. I ’spect he found himself a possum,” Jack reported.

“Meemaw, tell Steven the possum story,” Jimmy pleaded, his excitement rivaling Buckshot’s.

“I don’t think he wants to hear that old story,” Aunt Beulah chided. “It’s not even really a story”—which she then proceeded to tell.

I had vague memories of this anecdote—something about a possum in a family vegetable garden. There was one detail I hadn’t forgotten—that playing dead was an instinctive paralysis, the lifeless limbo between fight or flight.

My thoughts had begun to wander when David pressed his leg, rigid and unhesitating, against mine. His eyes remained fixed on Aunt Beulah. The rising warmth of our touch continued until he moved his leg.

I tried to conceal my confusion. Because I constantly searched for signs, I was occasionally fooled by the looking-glass illusion of seeing in others what I saw in myself, a mirage of mistaken identities. Maybe David had been genuinely interested in that silly story and wasn’t aware of his wayward leg.

Aunt Beulah, having given the possum a dignified burial, took a concluding sip of water.

“Are y’all ready for dessert?” Ruth was heading to the kitchen, confident of our answer. She returned with a tray heaped with slices of pound cake, the Communion wafer of the South.

The conversation shifted to the classes Sara and David were taking next term. “Then, in either June or July, we’re hoping to announce our engagement,” Sara noted nonchalantly.

Chair legs creaked. “I don’t see why y’all are in such a rush,” Aunt Beulah interjected. Our reflections sat motionless in the window, figures frozen on a glass canvas.

“We’re *not* in a rush, Meemaw,” Sara said with polite firmness. I had the impression this skirmish wasn’t new.

“Getting engaged—getting married—is *serious*,” Aunt Beulah persisted. “You ought to slow down and get to know each other.”

Were these time-worn truisms a way of implying that David wasn’t good enough for Sara? Even so, nobody else seemed to share Aunt Beulah’s worries.

“Jack and I got married after dating for less than a year,” Ruth said, seeking to mollify the combatants.

That begged a question—when exactly had Ruth discovered Jack was an alcoholic? Perhaps marriage, instead of ending secrets, created more of them, deceptions abetted by a blind eye or a lame excuse.

A tense silence was in the offing, but Aunt Beulah put the matter to rest: “Suit yourselves—I still think you’re rushing things.”

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As Jack was helping Aunt Beulah to the car, I had a few minutes alone with Sara while she was washing dishes.

“What do you think of David? She didn’t wait for an answer. “I fell for him the minute we met. He’s definitely *the one*. Isn’t he really handsome? I’m sure you noticed how attractive he is.”

When I didn’t immediately respond, she turned to face me. “I apologize—that didn’t come out right. I meant, well, you know.”

“Yes,” I said, sounding confessional, “I know.”

She dried her hands on a towel. “We expect you to be at the wedding—no excuses!”

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“Good morning. This is the day the Lord hath made,” the minister intoned.

Attending church with Aunt Beulah had not been optional. Nevertheless, I hoped my smiles and handshakes wouldn’t suggest that I condoned the congregants’ theology of easy damnations—their hate-the-sin, love-the-sinner philosophy.

As we were walking down the aisle, an elderly woman blocked our path. “Beulah Parnell, you *must* introduce me to this nice-looking young man.”

Aunt Beulah appeared irritated by this ambush, but the woman continued: “I bet you have plenty of girlfriends.”

Before I could utter one of my stock responses, Aunt Beulah intervened: “Dicey Miller, you know that’s personal.”

Aunt Beulah’s vehemence surprised me. Did she suspect that I’d built walls, too?

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Mrs. Miller said contritely, following up with a safer query: “What are you studying?”

“I’m majoring in economics,” I replied. I was tempted to add “and surfers.”

After getting settled in Aunt Beulah’s customary pew, I prepared to re-live scenes from my Baptist childhood. The service that morning would include a reading from Leviticus, so I girded myself for the potential pulpit-pounding denunciation that I was an “abomination,” a vile pervert akin to the sulphurous stink spewed by the local papermills.

However, when the minister got to the passage from Leviticus, it didn’t pertain to “unnatural” acts, but the command, “You shall not deceive one another,” the prohibition against lies that ensnare others.

Aunt Beulah had found the verse, Bible held close, head nodding in agreement.

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A few renegade crumbs were the lone remnants of sandwiches Aunt Beulah and I had eaten at her dinette table. She had done most of the talking, reminiscing about her brothers and sisters, a lineage of odds-and-ends claiming me as well as them.

“Alex and I were the last ones. He was the best among us,” she said, drawing to a close. “You favor him quite a bit.” My cheeks flushed from the unanticipated compliment. “He never did marry,” she added, as if she had omitted an important fact.

I envisioned various televangelists—those fire-and-brimstone lobbyists so unlike Aunt Beulah—who prescribed marriage as the cure-all for non-existent diseases.

A wall clock ticked impatiently. Did I dare tell her? Tell her everything in a single, breathless sentence, everything that I kept locked inside myself? If only I could tell *my* story—whether it was about a first kiss or a final dance—adding it to the other family stories that were told and re-told.

But the opportunity quickly evaporated in a cloud of fear and indecision. Six months later, when I learned Aunt Beulah had died in her sleep, I would wonder how that trip might have turned out differently had I found the courage to say something.

Aunt Beulah rose, both of us realizing it was time to say goodbye. “I appreciate your coming to see me,” she said.

When we reached her door, she handed me the *Family Circle* magazine I had noticed the day before. “Could you drop this off for Ruth? They’ve driven down to Folkston for the afternoon. You can leave it on the back porch.”

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A car was in Jack and Ruth’s driveway, but I didn’t see anybody. I walked around the side of the house, half afraid that Buckshot—thinking I was prey—would attack me. I saw David shoveling mulch next to a crepe myrtle.

“Hi David,” I called out. A loud chorus of cicadas emitted a din of mating songs.

“Hey,” David answered. “Sara’s mom said you might come by.” The sun had begun to burn his freckled face. “They’ll be gone until supper.”

“I didn’t expect to see you,” I remarked, attempting to make myself heard above the cicadas. “I guess they’ve put you to work.”

He was wearing boots and an old pair of pants that dipped below his shirtless torso. A cap—defiantly angled upward—gave him a cocky appearance.

“Yeh, I do my best to help with stuff.” His voice had that tell-tale inflection I’d learned to recognize—and to hide. He retrieved a t-shirt from the porch.

I was sweating, my sticky clothes stuck to prickly skin. “Aunt Beulah said to leave this magazine for Ruth.” I tried to swallow.

He wiped his forehead with the shirt, framing his physique for full effect, muscles modeled with an unmistakable motive. I stood motionless, unable to avert my gaze. He slowly surveyed the length of my body, stopping midway.

A slight breeze stirred, causing the cicadas’ singing to cease.

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It was twilight when I got to my Tallahassee apartment. I had a couple of bites to eat, but became nauseous almost immediately. I hunched over the toilet, vomiting the meagre amount in my stomach.

I thought about David. There hadn’t been a need or even the slightest desire for words—only desire, which we’d satisfied soon enough.

Yet, in another sense, it hadn’t been sudden. I’d seen the way David had initially looked at me, felt his leg under the table, and witnessed his coy exhibitionism. I’d assumed that these were insignificant coincidences. Like a possum, I’d been playing dead.

I now had few doubts about David, given our feverish moments together. He wasn’t a naïve adolescent going through a phase of fumbling experimentation. Nor was he an egotistical straight guy who’d made a bet with himself that he could lay a queer boy. His longing had been too insistent—too similar to mine.

The tiny apartment was suffocating me. I took a deep breath, struggling to subdue my anxiety over whether to say anything to anyone about what had happened.

Would David actually marry Sara, but secretly have sex with men? Perhaps I would do likewise—marry a woman someday, then sneak out in the middle of the night to cruise parking lots and urine-soaked restrooms, a debasement of meaningless grunts and moans.

More than that, though. Barely three hours earlier I'd betrayed Sara, if that was the right word, and I hadn't hesitated at all. I tasted bile and fought back a second wave of nausea. I wanted to forget everything. But I couldn't live a life of never-ending lies, not any longer. And I knew where the truth-telling had to begin.

I wiped my eyes and glanced at the clock. Both of them would still be awake. I'd speak to my mother first—maybe she wouldn't hang up. My hand was shaking as I dialed the number.

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A year had passed since my trip to Waycross. I was finishing leftovers in front of the TV when the phone rang. It was my mother calling to tell me that Sara and her current boyfriend planned to get married as soon as he graduated from UGA Law School.

"Ruth said Charlie's already been offered a job at Atlanta's most prestigious law firm," my mother enthused. "She thinks Charlie and Sara are the *perfect* couple."

I couldn't tell if that was a dig at me, but I ignored it. My mother hadn't spoken to me for months after I had come out, so this was an improvement.

The lead-in to the nightly news began before I could mute my TV: "Good evening. This morning, actor Rock Hudson died at his home in Los Angeles. The popular film star succumbed to AIDS-related complications."

My mother was rambling on, steering clear of subjects that she wouldn't or couldn't talk to me about.

"I guess that's it," she said. "I hope you're OK ... that you're being *careful*." Was this the real reason she had called? I wanted to lash out, to be unsparingly blunt: "Oh, no need to worry.

Rick—my *boyfriend*—and I always have safe sex.” But because she didn’t even know I had a boyfriend, I simply said “yes.”

The following spring, I received an invitation to Charlie and Sara’s wedding. They were having a big-church ceremony followed by a sweet-tea reception. I recognized Sara’s handwriting at the bottom of the invitation: “I’m sorry for the long silence. It was a lot to handle. We need to reconnect. No excuses!”

It seemed like only yesterday that Sara and I had been rating guys at the beach. I could still remember the soaring assurance of those seagulls.

The RSVP card sat beside the invitation. Its calligraphy conveyed the comfort of unquestioned custom, the staid decorum of linen napkins and dessert forks.

I checked “Will attend.” Hesitating for a second, I also checked “Will be accompanied by a guest.”