

## Saved

Jayne and I teach high school in the Bible Belt, deep in the dukedom of the Baptist clans. We do this for less money than I am willing to admit. Year after year, as prices of everything go up, you don't get a raise, so you make less and less. They talk about bringing you up to the regional average, which is like saying we'd like to abuse you about the same as you'd be abused in Mississippi or Guam, but in the end they have one reason or another why they have to go on abusing you more than anywhere in the country.

One morning in August, Jayne stayed for breakfast. On the radio they kept repeating heat advisories—the dos and don'ts of the obvious. I wasn't about to go out in the hundred-six degrees in tight-fitting wool and move around real fast while dehydrated. Instead, I'd leaned on the cool end of the thermostat, remained in my boxers, spread the newspaper on the kitchen table and gulped my coffee with outrage over the State's decision to drug test employees. I scooped deep in the bag of Community dark roast to make a second pot.

"So now they want us honest, hard-working, under-paid slobs to pee in a cup for them."

Jayne said, "You're not so honest and you don't work that hard."

"It is they who are the criminals, extortionists, child-rapers..."

It's true that some of them had been indicted and found guilty and sentenced to real time in the slammer.

"They'll just test black people," Jayne said. "Haven't you figured it out by now? The ones who drive state vehicles and wear keys to everything and work around machinery..."

No doubt more will be indicted—by others of their kind—which is why none will ever serve time, because once they start locking each other up, where would it end, they figure, I'm sure. But Jayne was right—it was the blacks who should worry about drug testing. I didn't have much to complain about. But out the window the summer rushed to a close. A crop-duster blew a long white veil ten feet above the cotton, disappeared behind the gin, shot up out of the neighbor's house

and soared to a big arc. I admired Jayne's profile and her slender neck as she read aloud letters to the editor from the Subnormal Morons for Christ, moral bullies and toothless know-nothings. I had a sudden notion to leave immediately for New Orleans.

Jayne said she didn't think so. She didn't have the money, and this, that and the other thing. She took her coffee out back to look at the parched perennials. It hadn't rained a drop in over two months. I got on the phone and found a discount deal and booked a week on plastic at the Crown Plaza, a few blocks off the Quarter. I put on loose lightweight clothes, drank some water so as not to be dehydrated, moved evenly across the yard to the wilted gardenias and surprised her with the news. "I'll take care of the money," I told her. You'd think she would have acted grateful.

We spent a week eating and drinking and going to music clubs, seeing movies that would never come to the Bible Belt, or if they did, would soon be gone after a barrage of letters to the editor from the Subnormal Morons for Christ. When the week ended, as we walked from the hotel to the parking garage, I congratulated myself for having the sense to disregard the lack of money and get away from the Baptists and the charismatics and the Pentecostals and the holy-rollers and the Bible-thumpers and the maniac penitents with bullhorns, and the guy who walks Louisville Avenue with the huge cross on a wheel, and the high school principal popular for expunging books from the library, and the coach who prays in school, and the white fourth-grade teacher who is loved by parents black and white for spanking with a paddle in front of the class what turns out to be only little black boys. As we rode the elevator in the parking garage, I approved of myself for having the good sense to get away from all of them and indulge for a week before classes began.

But the damned truck wouldn't start, a hundred and seven damned degrees. I figured it was all the Baptists' fault. The worthless truck lay dead as retribution for immoderation among the Catholic idolaters and pagans to the south.

I didn't feel like rolling with it this time, the way a reasonable person would, that reasonable new person I was supposed to be. I felt more like leaning over the wall, cussing all automotivedom to hell, spitting down at the pandemonium of the streets, stomping away from the son-of-a-bitch and not looking back—be that person I wanted to be. But I was supposed to be able to deal with things now in a

composed and orderly way, which I did, for a minute or two. Then I stomped and spit, cussed all automotivedom to hell and kicked the fender viciously.

Jayne walked away in disgust. For a moment I watched her stand at the wall to overlook her prospects and then I sidled up not quite apologetically. A small film crew set up equipment on the sidewalk four levels below. At the end of the street I spied, half-hidden behind the building, the right-hand side, the

—TO

—AIR

half of a sign that I believed read AUTO REPAIR.

“When the Lord closes one door, he opens another,” I said. Jayne had read it from a sign in front of a Baptist church on the drive down, one of those portable eyesores that clutter the South with homilies, shaped like arrows and rimmed with mostly broken light bulbs, pointing at all your lack of options. All week I’d been repeating this particular homily at inappropriate therefore appropriate moments. She always read church signs aloud so I would scoff and ridicule the Morons for Christ in my cranky way and blame everything on them. She was no innocent party in this crime.

At certain moments it makes sense to blame everything on something, and what kind of open door could it be, if to get through it would cost a hundred and sixty-four dollars. Though it might have been a lot more, and I suppose the nearest car-repair might have been miles away. Here it appeared to be right at the bottom of the four levels of ramp. But I didn’t want the whole pain in the ass that has to follow a breakdown to be about some damned Baptist homily.

We hadn’t moved the truck all week. I’d loved walking everywhere. Saturday night after jazz at Snug Harbor we’d walked to the bank of the Mississippi, and I decided to ask Jayne to marry me right there and then, tired of waiting for the perfect moment at the perfect place. All summer every time we got to what I’d been thinking would be the perfect place, it didn’t seem so great anymore. I tried neck deep in the Caribbean, palms swaying on the beach at the base of the cliff below the sacrificial altar of the Mayan ruin of Tulum. A place doesn’t get any more perfect, and we hugged in the clear aqua sea.

But I fretted over the human sacrifices and the thousands of common people who had lived in squalor outside the walls that enclosed the ancient Mayan superiors and religious leaders. The chosen few feasted on grouper and poblanos baked in banana leaves. They got the good

digs with carved and painted walls and built-in bunks and advanced calendars. The common people parched out there in the dirt beyond the walls, eating iguanas and praying they wouldn't be chosen for the honor of having their hearts cut out with a dull knife and their blood drunk by priests as insurance against calamity.

I think Jayne anticipated it then, me to propose marriage, as perfect as it was, as close and refreshed as we were, embraced in the aqua sea. But I ruined the moment with some stupid Marxist critique of the Mayan culture, when I know nothing about either.

On the way back from visiting Jayne's friend in Birmingham, I tried the off-handed proposal, undercut neatly, I figured, by the banality of place and the quirkiness of the moment, pool-side at the cheapest motel in Alabama, a moment so imperfect it was perfect, toothless hillbillies and their exceptional sons frolicking vulgarly like randy earth gods in soaked cut-off sweat pants.

But I began to worry that I'd live to regret the impulse because the kitsch of it wouldn't wear well, and eventually Jayne would tell the story about how I proposed at the shallow end of a pool you wouldn't want to swim in, in a heat you couldn't endure. I caught myself soon enough to have second thoughts, drained my beer, and kept it to myself. I couldn't expect Jayne to recognize the fleeting and therefore perfect moment amid the plastic chairs and gamboling rustics and wafts of humidity laced with chlorine and flatus from a paper mill.

There were other notable moments, but I let them all pass as not quite perfect. Now our vacation dwindled to a close. Soon we'd both be tying the pencil to the paw for peanuts again. So I stood atop the levee in New Orleans after the good jazz and admired the Mississippi, the main artery throbbing with the pulse of the people and the land, and I decided to ask Jayne to marry me.

I thought it was romantic enough. The bridge lights twinkled on the water, freighters slipped by on their way to the Gulf as if in a dream. Steve Lacy's soprano sax still dissolved the margins of error in our heads—or at least in mine—and a homeless man slept on a bench nearby, symbolizing, I thought, how our partnership and love for each other protected us from such misfortune.

I felt good about it—great, really. I was thrilled. It had been a good week. She had appeared to enjoy the show at Snug Harbor, and normally she appeared to hate jazz. We both had loved the hell out of the gospel brunch at the House of Blues. We'd been moved, between the glorious singing and bottomless mimosas and the buffet. I let the

freighter slip down the river through the night first, imagining myself at the helm, way up above the cargo deck in a towering bridge at the stern, the full length of her reaching out ahead of me, steering for the Gulf and the outward bound, on to the Panama Canal and beyond, and I said, “Jayne, will you marry me? I love you so much.”

I blinked back out of my seaward gaze and turned to her, but she wasn't there. She strolled up the levee, hands in pockets, head tilted back to the stars. She didn't know I'd asked her to marry me. I don't know why I let her get way up the levee, almost to the French Market. I should have run her down and seized her and asked her to marry me before she witnessed my reaction to the worthless truck.

Jayne glanced up from watching the film crew to give me her you're-an-idiot look. I had just kicked the fender viciously and cussed.

“It gets worse,” I snarled.

“I don't think I want this,” she said, “all this pain.”

“It's the painless sons-of-bitches who get me,” I said. I blamed it all on the Baptists.

I figured I could avoid a towing charge and cut my losses by coasting the truck down the ramps of the parking garage. Once down, I could push it the wrong way on the one-way to the car repair shop that I'd spied as I'd leaned over the wall cussing.

The mechanic guy said he had cars backed up for days but if I got it down, he'd take a look, which was damned good of him. He said he knew how it was to be broke-down away from home. What was this, a mechanic with a heart, practically right at the bottom of a spiraling ramp that would allow me to take advantage of God's gravity, which was still free, to deliver my truck unto his trustworthy hands? Maybe I could roll with this one after all.

I stopped my cussing and asked Jayne if she'd mind giving me a hand. At the bottom of God's free ride, a problem remained—pushing the truck a block the wrong way on the one-way.

Back in May some kid had smashed in the fender just below the headlight. I paid a ticket for failure to yield and my insurance rates doubled. The kid claimed injury, of course. The impact occurred at about one mile-an-hour and didn't even jostle him in his seat, didn't spill my go-cup of beer, didn't even break my headlight, just bent the flimsy fender under the bumper, and here he was claiming injury. It sickened me, how a guy will jump at becoming the most fragile of sissy crybabies at the smell of free money from the spoils of a fallen world

that's set up so that we need legal organized crime to protect us from each other. A Baptist kid, I figured with justification from some Bible verse to sue his neighbor.

So the fender curled under in an obvious way, crinkled a bit behind the headlight, paint scraped off. The truck didn't look so good, and there we were pushing it backwards out of the parking slot, popping beads of sweat, so I could hook a ride with gravity, after kicking back luxuriously all week in the cool of the Crown Plaza, pretending we were somebody.

"Here goes," I said.

"I feel like white trash," Jayne said.

I felt bad for her, getting tangled up with me, but I said, "Get used to it," and I think I meant it, because I'm the kind of honky who will forever break a sweat to shove my load along as far as I can before I pay someone to tow it for me, and in this case there was God's gravity on my side, so it made no sense not to use it, no matter what we looked like pushing a banged-up '85 pickup past the crystal lenses of the arty film crew in their severe clothing statements.

I got to the bottom of the ramp with ease and silence. It didn't take any gas, never mind a tow truck, and none of that grumbling of the engine that we've all come to accept as a way of life. As I tugged the stiffened steering around the tight turns of the ramp, I thought the entire world could run this way, free and easy and damned near silent, and I'll be damned if the guy at the repair shop didn't send a kid over to help. I braked at the gate, paid the parking fee, and the three of us proceeded to push the truck around the corner, and up the one-way the wrong way to the shop.

The severe film crew watched dumbly. Jayne wasn't really there in this scene—white trash pushing old truck. Jayne was invisible. On the sixteen-millimeter frames where her image should be, you would see if you inspected closely the indications of her psychic removal, evanescent traces where her image should be.

Instead of parading through the intersection with a certain presumptuous urgency that transcends law and order, like I'd planned, we got hung up there because a Baptist tourist tried to make a Baptist left at the light. A Baptist left is when any Baptist tries to make any left at any green light. They come to a halt pedantically at the stop line and wait as though the file of oncoming cars will stop some day. They wait through the green and would never turn on amber. They wait till it's red again, and wait through the red for the green arrow, if there is one,

when it's righteous to turn, instead of how everyone else turns left at a light, by barging into the middle of the intersection and squatting there, pushy and aggressive, poised ready to turn through the amber or the red or any damned color. It's only a colored light, a line painted on the road, but Baptists wait at the stop line and feel right about it, secretly despising all other drivers driving wrongly around them, and if there is no green turn arrow, they wait there through the afterlife, snug and saved.

We couldn't get around the Baptist to turn the wrong way onto the one-way. I leaned on the horn, and when he wouldn't budge, I waved Jayne and our helper onward, yelled for them to push. I leaned my weight into the truck, one hand on the steering wheel, and butted the Baptist's bumper squarely in the Baptist bumper sticker, the film crew leering at us.

Jayne yelled, "Jesus! What the hell are you doing?"

When the Baptist looked into the rearview, I flailed my arms like a maniac with a message he didn't want to hear, so he inched up enough for us to squeeze between his car and the curb and shove the truck into the intersection and around the corner. Not much rankles me like Baptist lefts and film crews in severe black.

There was a spark before I'd worn the battery down. I told the guy that much. He peered under the hood and then looked around the garage.

"I'm the only one here who can work on carburetors," he said, meaning, I'll have to put aside everything I'm doing to deal with this.

I figured nobody could detect the problem that fast.

Jayne wrinkled her nose and sniffed. "What's that smell?"

"That's smoked deer," the mechanic said.

I couldn't read the guy yet, having had only these few words between us, and they spoken peering into the snarl of an internal combustion apparatus. First I thought it was sarcasm—okay, with all the stench of oil and gas and solvents and grease and exhaust, what you smell is smoked venison, of course, which we always prepare here in the shop as we work.

But looking at him peer into the inscrutable engine, I realized it was not sarcasm, and when I chuckled, and he looked up, and I caught his eyes, I said, "You're kidding, right?"

"No. We're smoking a deer roast."

He seemed to be telling the truth, but I wasn't sure what to do with it.

"Where you from?" he said.

"Five hours north—on Louisiana roads—four if you go out of your way through Mississippi."

He nodded knowingly. "Look at that." He pointed to a steady drip from the carburetor jet. "I might have a jet in an old carburetor that'll fit in there. Check back at five."

This was not the orderly sort of repair shop where some German-American in clean overalls specializes in BMWs. I sensed that this guy practiced the art of keeping up with de-evolution of American junk. The chaos of genius spread out on every flat surface, tiny critical parts frozen in photographic memory, I figured, in an order unrecognizable to anyone but him. The place reeked of cigarettes and stale beer beneath the general petro-stink, and beneath it all—could I smell it too, my wrecked sinuses—was it smoked deer? I wanted to believe it was.

He said his name was Milton, and I told him mine. "Want some, smoked deer?" he said. I didn't want any, not sure if it actually existed, as much as I wanted to believe it did. I couldn't be sure what I smelled in there. Uncertain as I was about how to read this guy, I wasn't about to ask again, just to get more of what could be deadpan sarcasm—It's a bit of beef Wellington we're roasting on the hot engine block of that idling Mercury Tracer—old family recipe.

Jayne and I sat at the bar silently. We'd already fed a few cash-advance twenties into the video poker machines. She'd had three quick drinks and didn't feel any need to humor me. When the alcohol reached just deep enough in my brain to blur the edges and leave the world appearing to be more pleasant, I had a notion to yank us away from video poker and clean out of the place, find some fresh air, but Jayne took out another twenty and eyeballed fresh machines.

If it cost a few twenties to kill the time waiting for Milton to fix the truck, that wasn't so bad. On the other hand, I'd been up almost a hundred. I could have put that toward the truck repair. Maybe the day would have meant something with a hundred at the end.

I think Jayne figures it the other way, that it means something if it costs a hundred—you value something more when you pay for it. That's probably a smarter approach, but I wanted to cut my losses, be satisfied with a pleasant buzz, get my truck and go home, get married and maybe have a kid as an expression of faith, hope and charity.

“Why doesn’t the Lord just open all the damned doors,” I said as I stood, “and leave them the hell open, if he’s so great? Instead of a labyrinth of closed and open doors with a toll at every turn and a chorus of Baptists singing a chain of homilies about it?”

I didn’t expect an answer. I carried myself forward. I came to a pause over a urinal, unable to avoid a certain dim reflection. There must be an art to getting out early. Maybe you have to make-believe it’s all about coming out ahead. It’s hard, and when I returned from the men’s room, Jayne had two whiskeys standing all golden next to two beers, a pack of smokes alongside, and a stack of fivers for the machine next to them.

If you get out early, maybe you can carry yourself home with a bit of dignity—you’re a get-out-early artist. Or maybe you wouldn’t call it dignity, but you’re not drunk and you didn’t lose much. You can be civil without exaggerating it.

The moments had a smoldering aura to them because I was aware that at any minute the conspicuously uncomplicated civility could give way to crankiness and the crankiness to viciousness with new convolutions, because if the truth be told, it wasn’t very exciting sitting at the bar, cutting my losses and giving myself a hard look, compared to engaging, for a price, in the remote chance of drawing a royal flush with the bet high and running up a quick 500 dollars. And we could communicate at the machine. We said, Try Joker Poker and Now we’re cooking and Come on, you money-grabbing void between the voids.

So, if one thing really leads to the next, we could blame that phenomenon, winding up slam drunk in the broad daylight, a few hundred dollars poorer, when it came to check back with Milton.

“What’s the matter?” I said. I guess that’s what everybody says. I was drunk enough to start snarling no matter how much I was aware of it. I would find a way to blame her for feeding money we didn’t have into a computer that’s programmed to take as much as you feed it by making you think you might get some of it back. I was drunk enough to find a way to blame her for the damned truck. Normally there wouldn’t be much hope for civility now, and Jayne was braced. I would watch myself begin to snit, and soon I would deteriorate into full-blown snarling.

But I realized—it washed over me—it descended upon me—that I wasn’t feeling at all like snarling or finding blame. In fact—it was strange—I felt damned civil. Maybe I didn’t get out early, but I almost felt like I had some dignity. I figured, why couldn’t I have some dig-

nity? I thought, this is it, the perfect moment, the aftermath of losing our ass at video poker in the St. Charles Tavern, the after-work crowd drifting in. I said, "Let's call Milton and tell him we're staying another night."

"I don't think I want this," Jayne said—"that's what's the matter. Now it's the truck; soon it'll be the moron students; then it'll be the insurance companies; then it'll be the Baptists again. Every day it's something. I'm not happy with this."

We got back in the heat and walked. Outside Milton's place we saw two women in jeans holding cans of beer, looking under the hood of my truck and chatting with Milton, who said he'd been working on the thing all day. He had to replace the fuel filter and break down an old carburetor for parts and clean them up. When he took the bad jet out, he saw that someone had plugged the partner jet with silicone for some reason he couldn't figure but evidently had to do with a previous air/fuel ratio problem. So he had to replace that jet, too. He picked parts from the confusion of parts on the workbench and showed them to me as he explained the process. My carburetor, all cleaned up and shiny, fitted with new used jets, leaned on the wall at the edge of the bench.

"But I think I got it now," he said. "I just have to put it on. Get yourselves a beer from that Coke machine. Y'all can sit in the office and relax. Want some smoked deer?"

"You really have smoked deer?"

"Been smoking it all day."

"I don't do deer."

"It's good meat," Milton said.

"How do you get the beer out of here?" I said.

"Just open the door."

I hadn't seen a Coke machine like it in years, the kind that you push the metal lever down and get a manual sense of the bottle releasing to come down the shoot. Behind the door, ramps full of beer bottles zigzagged down, descending from one side to the other and back again. You could spread the metal guides and pull a bottle out.

We sat in the cluttered office. The loveliest body I've ever seen in a bikini hung on the back wall under the days of August. A big guy who I'd noticed working on a brake job came in with a plate piled high with slices of meat and set the plate on the cluttered desk.

"Thanks very much," I said and put a slice in my mouth. "Who shot the deer?"

“I did,” said the big guy, “in Alabama.”

Milton came in. “How is it?”

“Very good.”

“Not much to it,” he said, pointing to jars atop a file cabinet. “I put some red wine in there, Worcestershire sauce, mustard sauce, seasoned salt, what you see there, and I forgot about it. Twenty-dollar smoker. Aren’t you having any?” he said to Jayne. “It’s the perfect meat—lean, clean, no antibiotics, no stock yards...”

“I don’t like the idea of it,” Jayne said.

“Get yourselves another beer. Don’t be shy.” Milton propped open the front door of the office to let in some air and went out to the truck. I got us two more beers, leaned back in Milton’s swivel chair and ate smoked deer. The truck had fallen into the right hands. Another mechanic might have told me I needed a new carburetor, rather than monkey around with replacing jets. Another mechanic might not have had an old carburetor to mine for jets. If it had started in the parking garage, the gas drip might have gotten worse on the long drive home. The gas might have ignited from the heat of the engine.

Jayne slouched forward and frowned. I didn’t know why, with a Coke machine full of beer to maintain the drunk, a plate of smoked deer to sustain us, and a friendly mechanic to guide the way—and I’d quit snarling. I tried to cheer her up by telling her we should get the recipe and write a witty letter to one of those fanatics on the Food Network or call Car Talk and tell Tom and Ray about how Milton smoked a deer roast while he rebuilt my carburetor to perfection with—was it?—yes it was—with Stravinsky on the tape deck.

Maybe Jayne brooded over the return to work. Nobody who gets paid what she gets paid should have to bring the job home with her, but with her job it’s either bring it home or do it poorly. What’s harder to live with, for her, I don’t know.

I’m not crazy about my job either, but I don’t bring it home. I live with doing it poorly. I can take it.

I got two beers, handed one to Jayne and said, “When I hear the Baptist teachers say, ‘Thank the Lord for that,’ or ‘The Lord is good,’ when something good happens, and when something bad happens say, ‘The Lord is teaching us a lesson,’ or ‘The Lord is trying our faith,’ I think to myself, *De hairball make de good ting hoppen, or De hairball mad, make de bad ting hoppen, or Bad woozoo come if we not kill de pig and drink de blood. It can all be blamed on the Baptists.*

“I know,” she said.

Outside the women laughed at something Milton said. Through the other door the big guy scrubbed his hands at the sink. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* quietly freshened the air. I popped another slice of smoked deer into my mouth and sipped some beer. The woman in the bikini smiled at me from the month of August. I swiveled around to face Jayne, bowed forward to offer her the plate of smoked deer.

"Jayne."

She grunted.

But suddenly, I knew that asking her to marry me wouldn't cheer her up. The perfect moment had arrived, I knew, but to ask her now would imply a certain presumptuousness, as though all I had to do was grace her life with a vow of devotion and birds would sing again in the apple trees. I swallowed the meat and slobbered it down with beer and leaned back in the swivel chair and swiveled.

I drove out of there, hazarding our way in traffic. No gas dripped on the hot engine block. God knows what else might have been going dangerously wrong in there. As I drove I considered a billboard we passed—a three-day package to Cancun. We could jam it in before school started, put it on the plastic and worry about it later. We could find a little lagoon all our own, down the coast near Tulum, a lagoon that had never been stained with human blood. I could ask Jayne to marry me there, cook grouper and shrimp and poblanos on a fire, and pass around the bottle of Monte Alban. But it was hurricane season down there now, and I doubt there is a lagoon that hasn't been stained with human blood at one time or another, in a country where the federal police murder their fellow peons on command every time they complain to energetically.

The weather was decent; the heat had broken, down to ninety from the routine one hundred. I had all three windows open because the air was broken, so the hot wind buffeted through. Near home, cotton speckled the delta—it was almost pretty, especially with your eyes squinted a bit. I glanced at Jayne—she'd been quiet for a long time.

I knew clearly then that something soon and simple would be best. So I thought the banks of the Ouachita would be a good place to propose. We could walk there from the house. It helped me once to get down in the tepid swill with the snakes and prehistoric paddlefish and swim across to the swamp and look back across the river at my old truck and see that it would be dead soon enough no matter what.

I drove toward the Ouachita. If that doesn't work, I thought, there is always Niagara Falls, Las Vegas, the Holy Land, East Timor...

As we veered off the exit, it almost felt good to be back, flat and hot and dried-up and ugly as it was. We stopped at the Hobnob, a bar where we went about killing Friday afternoons. The usual crowd was there. We told them how we'd slipped away to New Orleans and ate good food and heard good music. I told them the truck broke down again, way up on a parking garage. I was fixing to tell them the whole story about Milton and the smoked deer and everything, but Jayne told them how I'd cussed and kicked the truck viciously like a two-year-old, and I lost interest.

When Jayne got up to use the lady's room, Mark said, "Well, did you ask her to marry you?"

Lately in certain company I had made no secret of my intentions.

"No," I said. "I tried a few times, but the moment was never quite right."

"She won't marry you," Dawn said.

"She might."

"You're too negative," Dawn said, "and you either don't know or you don't care how you affect people."

"She sees through all that."

"You're a whiner and a complainer," Stephanie said. "Who would want to live with that?"

"I don't whine so much. That's not exactly right."

"You're cranky," Stephanie said. "Who wants to hear about how rotten and corrupt everything is?"

"We were fixing to tell you, if she didn't tell you soon," Shelby said. "She has no intentions of marrying you."

"We meant to tell you months ago," Garrett said, "to save you both the trouble."

"Why would it be any trouble? How can you presume it would be trouble? It wouldn't be any trouble."

"Well more this than that," Garrett said—"we hoped to save you this trouble, now."

"It really would have been better kept private," Jennifer said.

"Well, why is it suddenly public then?"

"Exactly," Jennifer said. "That was our hope, to save you the public