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PREVIEW

A VINE IN THE BLOOD

By

Valery Varble

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Judith Slater

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2004

PREVIEW

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A Vine in the Blood

BY

Valery Varble

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Approved

Date

Judith Slater
Signature

4/19/04

Judith Slater
Typed Name

Gerald Shapiro
Signature

4/19/04

Gerald Shapiro
Typed Name

Gwendolyn Foster
Signature

4/19/04

Gwendolyn Foster
Typed Name

Susan Rosowski
Signature

4/19/04

Susan Rosowski
Typed Name

Nicholas Spencer
Signature

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Nicholas Spencer
Typed Name

Christin Mamiya
Signature

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Christin Mamiya
Typed Name

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A VINE IN THE BLOOD

Valery Varble, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 2004

Adviser: Judith Slater

Each of the characters in this novel searches for something: identity, connection, healing, “place.” Anata returns to Southern Illinois on an orphan train to look for her mother. Instead she finds a makeshift family in a judge and his grown son, slowly starving in an empty mansion, haunted by guilt, isolated from the community and each other.

Anata’s daughter, Vienna, is torn between her desire for her father’s respect, and her longing to be something more than a farmer’s daughter. She organizes a “bread strike” to increase wages for women in the local box factory.

Vienna’s granddaughters, Sissy and Cairo, search, as well. Fiercely independent, Sissy leaves the farm to become a truck driver. When she inadvertently steals a truck and discovers something surprising in her trailer, she must accept help from the people staying at a desert motel. And Cairo, who remains on the farm, tells everyone else’s story until at last, she finds her own.

The novel explores various themes, for example, the idea that family can occur in unusual ways. There is relentless and painful wordplay throughout, as a kind of code, a burr, a means of survival, a restlessness within language.

But above all else, this novel is about storytelling. The narrative draws on fairy tales, coyote “trickster” stories, history, jokes, and ballads. The multiple narrators tell their own stories and re-shape the narratives told by others. Patterns emerge as events get re-played across time. Anata’s jilting as a young bride, for example, is revisited when, at Sissy’s wedding, the minister almost “marries” great-grandmother and granddaughter. Later, Sissy is “married” in a Bengali ceremony at a motel in order to hide her from the sheriff.

The stories these women tell each other and themselves function as a kind of “source,” as replenishment, marking the terrain in which they live. Ultimately they’re as crucial as the nearby Darkwater Creek, which also wends throughout the book, continually changing course, re-shaping the landscape, gathering force, and finally overflowing its banks.

PREVIEW

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Prologue

CAIRO CHENOWETH

June 1987

"They pulled her out of the well," I'll try to explain to the graduate student who is coming today from Southern Illinois University, a T.S. Quiring. I always imagine the cool stone smell and the baby's head glazed with moss. In fact, she'd apparently been only a few days old, my great grandmother, her head still oddly shaped, but her eyes already focused and accusing. I imagine her slow ascent in the dark, the swinging bucket, its pale reflection in the water below. "Being pulled up out of that well was like a delivery, see," I'll tell the student. "That's why she says she was born out of a well."

"Oh," the graduate student will probably say today, "Oh. Yeah. I see," whether she does or not, carefully jotting something down. She wants to collect an extensive oral history, her letter said. Anata will nod and so will Vienna, beautifully coiffed and manicured and scented, wearing a bright, brave, social smile. She'll follow the conversation this time because she's heard it before. "Can I get you a piece of pie?" she'll say in the sudden pause, speaking a little too loudly. She'll have been waiting to speak up for some time, the words swelling and softening in her mouth. "Mother's egg custard pie is just out of this world. Why, Mother's as famous for her egg custard pies as she is for being the Baby in the Well. That's the truth!"

My great grandmother, Anata Green Keep, is the famed "Baby in the Well" of 1901. It's a story that gets revived every so often, if the number of yellowed clippings Anata's saved are anything to go by. Over the years, she's pasted them into the big old family Bible, thickening its center so that its binding is sprung and it will hardly close. From the side, its pages look stuffed with winter leaves, and there's a sharp, dank, lingering smell, as if at some point the flour-and-water paste fermented. But even my older sister Sissy, who refutes and resists Anata at every turn, likes to make something of the fact that our great grandmother's story now begins with a verse in Ezekial, "Thy mother is like a vine in thy blood, planted by the waters" and ends in Zechariah, "Behold, there came out two women and the wind was in their wings." "Just think of it," Sissy says. "No more Amos, Jonah, Zephaniah, all the rest. Habbukuk. Whoever. Who needs 'em? This is the book of Anata."

The story has thickened over the years, as well. Anata was found in the woods by tramps or gypsies or Baptists passing through—the story varies in nearly every account. It was only by accident, one version suggests, that in such a storm the travelers happened to find the burning house in the woods. Others say it was the sight of smoke that drew them to the clearing, a thin line of it twisting straight up like a hanging rope.

Either way, they were astonished by the small house on fire in a drenching rain. "A house put to fire," someone muttered, and indeed it seemed to burn with a clear fury. "A mighty strange rain," someone else said, since the downpour only seemed to bank the flames. The shrinking tangle of wild blackberry vines before the door blackened and

curled; its berries popped and spat and smelled of pies. The smoke shifted shape, becoming at one point a cloud of hornets that rose into the trees. An owl watched from the throat of a sycamore, the bone-pale gleam of a bad sign.

And the watchers stood transfixed. They were helpless to move or look away, even when they smelled their hair singeing and felt the heat on their faces like a blow, even when the dog sent up a wavering howl. Finally they had to step back or perish; they shook themselves free and, somewhat dazed, went to the well for water.

It was then that someone let out a gasp and stepped back, someone whistled in surprise, someone whispered, "What is it?" But what it was, they couldn't say for sure. One of the men held a lantern down into the well, the better to see what was going on. The light glanced sharply off the water below and the glistening stone walls and came back to strike the man in his eye with such searing force he thought it was a cinder. He stepped back, blinded and swearing. But he'd seen. Down in the well was a bucket, swinging gently. And in the bucket was a baby. It was waving its arms.

So slowly, carefully, they drew the bucket up. One of the women determined that it was a tiny girl baby, raging, suffused with blood, raw as a blister. She didn't so much as flinch in the cold rain that rang on the high leaves. Hoarse from her crying, she raved in silence, her mouth moving in furious shapes. Her grief and rage were pitched at a register only the dog could hear but it whined and squirmed and crept along the ground and looked miserable.

The fire bloomed, after that, in a last display, then collapsed into ashes and shadows. The rain turned to a soft, swaddling mist. One of the women—not exactly a midwife although she'd caught a baby or two in her time and had once snatched croupy

phlegm the size of a hanky out of a neighbor girl's throat when she was choking—
examined the baby. She was a ruddy, scrawny baby, a poor little mite, and hungry,
certainly, but her general health seemed fine. Her diapers were scraps of good fabric,
perhaps lawn (a sleeve picked open, a torn petticoat?), tied with a knot and then pinned
besides with a jet brooch. And something clung, gleaming, to her gums and the corners
of her mouth like drops of mother's milk: loose pearls. In her fists she had part of a pearl
necklace as if she'd yanked it right from her mother's throat; in fact, there were smallish,
graduated pearls everywhere about her ("not good ones, though," as my grandmother,
Vienna, later pointed out), in all the creases and folds of her skin, in her clefts. As it
turned out, she passed pearls in diarrhetic squirts in her diapers for days. The woman
carefully saved these trinkets for the baby, for someday when she'd want them, including
the fine hank of hair wrapped around the baby's wrist, an intended token or not, no one
ever cared to guess.

Anata was carried away by a minister's wife to another state but when she was
thirteen, she returned here by orphan train, on her own.

Her story was revived again during the years of the Depression, when it seemed to
the newspaper men that what the region needed as much as anything was a stirring local
story, something upbeat and hopeful. The story, "a true testament to the basically good
character of most people," ran in all the local papers. And shortly after that, the Biram
Company of St. Louis struck on the idea of using Anata's story to sell their product, Perl-
Lum Healthful Milk Substitute for Infants. A promotional jingle was created; Vienna
received a copy, and pasted it in the Bible. As luck would have it, though, the paper was
thin and Job 10:10 bled through: "Hast thou not poured me out as milk, and curdled me

like cheese?" Sissy laughed herself almost sick at that, and at the jingle; she especially loved the word "vim" and used it for weeks. For some reason, though, I found the song a little moving:

*T'was on a dark and fateful night in a secluded dell
when travelers stopped to rest a while at an abandoned well.*

*They stopped to drink but didn't think of this unlikely tale:
Imagine their surprise to find a baby in the pail!!!*

Perl-Lum! Perl-Lum!

*They drew her up, so small and meek, no Mother to be found!
She'd cried so hard and for so long she couldn't make a sound!*

*T'was feared she wouldn't thrive and that her health would surely sink,
But after drinking Perl-Lum, this sweet girl is in the PINK!!!*

Perl-Lum! Perl-Lum!

*Gives your infant all the best for vigor and for vim!
A BETTER WAY than milk, Docs say, to care for her or him!!!*

*As all the cards and letters from you happy mothers has shown,
you'll have the BEST we could e'er suggest: a "WELL BABY" of your own!!!*

Anata still hums it sometimes.

Almost immediately after the publicity and for months afterward, Anata received an outpouring of gifts and letters as if her rescue had just happened, tenderly-made quilts and baby clothes, even an engraved silver rattle. Anata accepted these graciously, as if they were no more than her due. She thanked each sender with a signed photograph postcard of herself wearing a serious expression and a fetching hat, and included a bookmark in the shape of a cross, crocheted by the First Baptist Church's Ladies Circle until the ladies became, briefly, bickering and divided.

Anata only received one note that was less than positive and it was badly written. It said darkly, "Mothers milch is the onely true kind." There was also a rumor that several infants had sickened on Perl-lum but this turned out to be, rather, a matter of poor hygiene on the families' part. Still, as Vienna reported, "Mother just grieved over that."

And now Anata is in demand again. The story, "Well Baby Wed 69 Years," has run in the newspapers across in four counties, although the actual anniversary isn't until later in the summer. I wondered if they oughtn't to wait until their 70,th a nice round number, before having a big celebration party, but Anata only said, "Better not." Earlier in the year, on Valentine's Day Anata and Granddad—that's what we called him, even though he was our great granddad—were named, once again, "Schnick's IGA Senior Sweethearts." They'd won every year for more than a decade now. Each time they received a box of candy and had their picture made, as Anata put it, holding hands so tightly they look grafted. Granddad never smiled; at most he winced and the light glinted off his teeth. Anata always wore lipstick and very becoming \$400 Italian wool suits in bright colors. This year when she and Granddad were asked, loudly and with careful enunciation, what it took to stay married for nearly 70 years, Granddad bellowed something about love in Christ and that the sun should never set on an argument; Anata had said, simply, "fortitude." But she'd leaned over and kissed a perplexed Granddad, who'd patted her knee, and everyone had laughed and applauded. His cheek looked

marked and feverish the rest of the afternoon, and he was upset later that no one had told him or wiped it off even though at some point Vienna had corrected his hair.

Last night after supper I heard Anata searching upstairs in the junk room under the eaves. It was late when she came slowly down the stairs, brushing against the flocked wall paper as she passed. Lately she'd been shuffling along the carpet so that every time we even grazed each other I got shocked, as if her very agitation was giving off sparks. Ever since we'd gotten the letter from this student who wanted to write about Anata for her dissertation, there were tensions in the house I couldn't name.

When Anata came into the kitchen, she was carrying an aluminum ice cube tray and a green high-heeled shoe. The tray clattered abruptly in the sink and Vienna, painting her nails at the table, looked up. She hadn't yet taken out her hearing aid. She watched Anata tip out the shoe's contents into a baggy and as soon as her nails were dry, she picked up the bag to see. "Oh Mother," she said, "For crying out loud. Throw that icky stuff away."

"Well, no," Anata said, and ate a strawberry. "That's the wildflower seeds the bank gave out last year to make a butterfly garden. I'm giving them to the student when she comes. Maybe some tomatoes. And we need to make her up a package of good rolls."

"Mother," Vienna exclaimed, her voice rising, "those are mouse droppings! Why else would they be in an old shoe?"

Anata didn't say anything; she ate another strawberry, sucking at it. We'd all been worrying about Vienna. She seemed depressed recently, and to tell the truth, a little strange. One day we saw that she'd been crying for no reason that we could figure. So Anata didn't remind Vienna that her vision needed checking, that lately it seemed she couldn't see very well at all. When a few days ago she'd had a little spell, Vienna had put one of her hearing aid batteries under her tongue instead of a nitroglycerine tablet. Although she'd told the story herself, laughing louder than anyone, she'd sounded precariously close to a sob. "Kid, good thing I didn't swallow it for an aspirin!"

"Oh Vienna, that wouldn't have hurt you any," Anata had said and Vienna had replied, "Well, my pride, Mother! It would've hurt my pride." It seemed clear that her pride was already hurt, although I could only imagine the jangling shock of foolishness and dismay. I was sure it had bothered Vienna that she'd actually felt better for a while, that her heart had steadied itself, and slowed, that the pressure in her chest had eased. She hated, we knew, to think she might be that suggestible, that she could be taken in that way.

Maybe Granddad had suddenly remembered this, too, because he stood in the doorway and said, "Now Vienny, you take your heart pills. Don't you be fooling around thataway."

"Oh Dad, I am!" Vienna said.

"Get your glasses checked," Anata said loudly. "That's the first thing."

"What, honey?" Granddad said and then turned to me. "What'd she say?" he asked.

"I said to get her glasses checked!" Anata shouted, and Granddad said, bewildered, "Why, I got them checked not long ago, over at the Wal-Mart in Cape." I glimpsed our reflection in the window and closed my eyes. Is this how we'd seem to the student from the college: quaint, diminished, hectoring, shrill? What was going on?

"Vienna's glasses!" Anata said and coughed then, coughed and coughed, and tried to swallow and choked, and coughed up strawberries. Granddad thumped her soundly on the back. "Are you okay?" I asked, "Yep, she's okay," I told Granddad, and Anata hollered at him to quit it. "Mother?" Vienna said.

For a moment Anata just stood there and looked at the strawberry bile in her hand. Then she folded it into a napkin. When she looked at me, I felt a strong sense of foreboding and the room actually seemed to darken.

From her pocket, Anata took out something that looked like a letter. She held it up and said, "Remember this, Johnny?" Her voice was cold. Granddad put his glasses on and reached for the letter, peering at it, but Anata pulled it away. There was a long silence between them.

Granddad cleared his throat. "Look here, honey," he said to Anata, patting her, "I want you to get to bed directly." He pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat down, heavily, accidentally yanking on the tablecloth so that Vienna's cold coffee sloshed and spilled.

"Grandmother, you don't have to collect any more stuff to give the student," I said. "She doesn't want all that."

But Anata gave me long, cool look. "Why, yes. I do too have to," she said, and handed me the napkin damp with strawberries. "I just got started. There's a lot more I've

got to find." She turned and went back through the front room toward the stairs. She swayed dangerously against the wall as she passed, and her hair clung to the flocking. Granddad and Vienna and I looked at each other. Anata's voice traveled back to us as just as the clock chimed the hour. "I ain't done!" she said.

The student turns out to be a man. His name is Tim Quiring. He's tall and a bit stooped although he isn't much older than I am, in his twenties. He wears small, wire-rimmed glasses and a thoughtful expression. His dark hair is oddly flat in places, like trampled grass, but his shirt has been nicely pressed. And he knows enough about country ways that he comes to the side door, the "milk house" door, as we call it, rather than the front.

Vienna immediately flashes a look at his ringless hand and confers with Anata, who signals Granddad. This young man is clearly a prospective suitor. He's young and sturdy—educated, obviously, with prospects—and as far as anything else goes, my family will tolerate much in the way of shortcomings. If the man is unattractive, well, at least his heart's in the right place; if he's less than outgoing and doesn't have "personality plus," as Vienna puts it, at least he'll be a good provider; if he isn't a Southern Baptist, well then, at least he's a good Christian, although if he's not a Republican, you might as well forget it, as Granddad says. "Why, you'd just cancel each other out."

"Isn't that what marriage is, anyway?" Sissy used to say. "And what makes you think I vote Republican?"

"What, honey?" Granddad always said, refusing to hear what he doesn't want to know. Now he asks Tim what kind of a name Quiring is.

"We're just in-Quiring," Anata calls gaily from the kitchen and I laugh. Tim looks a little startled, but it reminds me of Sissy's kind of jokes and it warms me a little. "Well, actually it rhymes with 'stirring,'" Tim says. He clears his throat.

"It's a while before we're fixing to eat," Anata says. "Have Cairo show you the family pictures." Now it comes; apprehension unfolds in my stomach like thick, pointed paper.

"Carol?" he says, taking out his notebook and writing something down. "You're a great granddaughter?"

"Cairo," I say. "Like Cairo, Illinois. Not great, but I guess I'm not bad. Ha." For no particular reason that we know of, I was named for the nearby town. In the same way, our grandmother was given the name Vienna, although she insists it should *not* be pronounced Vy-enna like the town just up the road, but rather like the waltz or the little canned sausages. For one thing, she takes it personally that there's a prison in that town, even though, as she points out, it's minimum security.

I prefer the local pronunciation of my name, as if it's short for Caroline. I don't like my name much, but it could've been worse; I might've been named for Mounds or Wetaug or Boles.

Sissy never cared for her name, either. When she was younger she wanted a French-sounding name. More than anything she wanted to be called "Desiree," but when our mother obliged her, in her amused drawl, it sounded like "Disarray" and Sissy gave it up.

There's a pause and he gives me a level look. "I believe this house is one of those from the Sears Catalog," Tim says, "that's been built onto?" and writes that down. I didn't know this; it always just seemed like a typical white farmhouse to me. I take him to where the family pictures are hung, just inside the front door we never use, where the stairs rise to the second floor. There's a small stained glass window above the door that spills light, fractured and glowing, onto the various faces. At times they even seem to quicken and breathe.

But Tim doesn't look at them right away. Instead, he looks around the front room. "What strange wallpaper," he says wonderingly. "That's Cave-in-Rock, Illinois, right there, isn't it?" He steps back to get a better look.

I peer at it, too. "I don't think so," I say. It's just wallpaper. It is easy to see things in the shapes, like clouds. The knotty pine paneling that covered Sissy's room when she was small used to give her nightmares: all those snouts and eyes.

There's an upright piano and he plays a single note that hangs gleaming in the stillness. He stands awkwardly, slightly off-balance, and this reminds me that when we first came here to the farm after our father's death, it had taken a while to find our sea legs on these floors that tilted slightly, for our heartbeats to slow to the ticking of the clock in the hall.

"Are you okay?" Tim says, startling me, and I'm surprised at the weight of my sudden grief.

"Yeah," I say, moving towards the foyer, where I manage to stumble over Anata's biblical scrapbook, solid as an extra step at the foot of the stairs.

"I hope you won't mind fried chicken!" Vienna calls from the kitchen, and puts her head around the door. "The chicken's good and fresh! And Mother puts a little baking powder in the flour that makes it extra good and crispy, and we're having mashed potatoes and gravy and cooked greens and a carrot salad. I'm just going to quick make us up some rolls. So you all just go ahead and look at the pictures."

I take a deep breath as Tim studies the photographs. I can smell lemon furniture polish on the small walnut table, the loose, sun-warmed roses in a vase. I smell Tim's deodorant and I have time to wonder what kind it is, exactly, before he turns to look at me, bewildered.

For one thing, there's a picture of a hanging, fading to white, curling in its frame. The bag over the person's head looks oddly like an untucked shirt. There's a ghostly daguerreotype of a Confederate soldier whose build is as slight as a girl's; Sissy insists that it *is* a girl. "There are true stories about that, you know," she always says. "There were women who fought in the war dressed as men. What other choice did they have if they wanted to fight?" She could be right. The face is fine-boned and delicate although it holds the stern countenance of a judge, and the rifle barrel is stopped with a hank of violets. Now, touched by the thin colored light, the soldier looks flushed, unreal, a figment of some outworn passion. The hanged person is water-tinged, submerged, folded by a current rather than a broken neck.

And then there's a photo of Gus Grissom, the astronaut. Someone used the picture for a coaster so that Grissom's head is ringed with a blurred, tragic light.

In fact, all of our old family pictures are damaged somehow. Except for Grissom, they've all come from junk stores and rummage sales. Still, I'm reluctant to confess this, to say the words aloud. If only Sissy were here.

"Cairo, hon, would you go get a jar of spiced peaches?" Vienna asks me from the kitchen and I yell back that I will. "Please? And maybe some of that end-of-the-garden relish. Or would he prefer bread-and-butter pickles? Mother's are just out of this world. Tell him that Mother's pickles are just wonderful. But then, the relish is awfully good, too. Oh, you decide. Whatever he wants."

"Vienna!" Anata's voice rises sharply. "Turn down the fire; why, you've got the grease too hot! You've got it turned on High! Here, you cut out the rolls, you make the best rolls." She comes to the door. "Oh, you're looking at my mother," she says, and her voice softens. "She never did like me much. I never did know why." Tim looks at me and I mumble that I'd better go get the peaches for Vienna. But in fact, I'm afraid to leave Tim alone with Anata in case she decides to say any more.

The fact is, I feel somehow complicit. I was with Anata when she bought the picture at a yard sale. She'd gotten it for a dime because its corner was creased into lightning that skewered the woman through the neck. That's all I can see when I look at the photograph but no one else seems to remark on this feature or even notice it. The woman's name is actually Mrs. Mae Poll Haniston, a well-known amateur ornithologist in this area at the end of last century, well-known and, sad to say for Anata's sake, clearly recognizable. Even Tim says, now, "Isn't that...?" and I agree in a low voice that it is.

He writes something down in his notes. "Wait," I say. But there's no real explanation, even though we'd hoped, for a time, there might be. We hoped that by virtue

of some event or connection we didn't know or understand, Mrs. Mae Poll Haniston really *was* Anata's mother.

Even Sissy had wanted to believe. "My sister took the photograph to the library at Earl L. Grogan College to do some research," I tell Tim. She'd even written a brittle account of her findings: that she'd admired the library's huge jade plant before showing the picture to the elderly librarian who said that he knew it, of course. He allowed that he was himself a distant relation of the Polls.

"Do you know what his name was?" Tim asks me.

"Leonard," I tell him. Tim blinks.

So when Sissy wondered aloud if Mrs. Mae Poll Haniston had ever been known affectionately as "Maypole," the librarian had given a single honk of laughter and said that by all accounts she'd never been known affectionately. Ever. The "Mrs." was, he'd said dryly, a purely honorary title. He'd pointed out that the stick-pin in her hand was not for hats or corsages but for piercing the breasts of specimens. The two of them had gazed in silence for a moment at the part in Mrs. Haniston's hair, as precise as a checkmark, and Sissy had remarked on the way it gave this Mrs. Haniston's face a certain chosen look. "Clearly seconded by the set of her mouth," the librarian, a Mr. Milford—Leonard—had agreed. "For a moment," I tell Tim, "Sissy was relieved. She said she was *glad* that woman was no kin of ours."

The upshot was, I explain to Tim, that there'd been no helpful information, no revelation; Anata's story had not been redeemed. Perhaps that's why Sissy had taken a pen to the photograph, widening the mouth into something humorous and maternal, darkening the eyes so that they were shadowed with regret. "See here?" I ask Tim. "Sissy

tried her best to sketch in an Izola." The problem was, later, that the photo faded but not the ink. The eyes became bold and malicious, the mouth a horrific smirk. And always there was that shuddering lightning crease that pierced Mrs. Haniston through the neck like one of her own stick-pins, electrically charged.

The truth is, I don't know what to make of the photographs either. Maybe it's because I can see the scrapbook out of the corner of my eye, that I find myself venturing, "Because they had no root, they withered away," and when Tim looks at me, "That's in Matthew, I think." It seems at least a kind of explanation.

He says, gravely, "'We think back through our mothers, if we are women.' Virginia Woolf, I think," and I like him for that. He flashes a quick smile. Sissy, I tell him, found an old news item about a local drowning in our creek about the same time Anata was found; she has a theory about this. I promise to talk to her the next time she calls. "In the meantime, I'll look for her notes," I say and Tim says he'd appreciate that, very much.

Anata frying chicken is something to watch, and Tim takes notes, even sketching small diagrams. The iron skillet is so heavy Anata has to drag it across the stove with both hands but she refuses any help, telling us to just stand back out of her way. She shows Tim how she puts the chicken, a few pieces at a time, in a brown paper bag to coat them. She always puts crushed pecans and ground pepper in the flour, she explains, and baking powder, which is the secret to making good fried chicken. Then she demonstrates how to shake the bag, with such vehemence that a drumstick punches through and the