

The Curing Season

(Novel excerpt)

August came as usual that year, but the tobacco trucks -- with their tall mounds of honey-brown sheaves, the lingering sweet fragrant trails and the bumpity sound of rickety old wheels going to the warehouses -- did not.

I had been away for some time and despite regular visits, until that spring, had sloughed off the gray, silty dirt that once held me. My sister, Nina, had stayed at Winterhaven and became its caretaker, the job I was supposed to have, but when Mother died I left for boarding school, college and then my work abroad, and as I would say with some pride but also sadness to my friends at the University where I taught, I had at last escaped those backward eastern North Carolina fields and woods and would never again see a tractor in spring, nor feel the dripping sweat of an August afternoon around my neck. So my life, while solitary, was busy and I enjoyed my English students and the research I'd started years earlier.

Nina called just before Christmas and left a message with the English Department. Since I didn't have a telephone, by the time I finally got word it was too close to the holidays to book a flight. Her sentences, short and ghost-like, told me a curtain was drawing closed and I'd better get home soon before whole chapters of my life ended there. Likewise, that meant the curtains were closing here and I would never wander through the streets of this city again the same way. I gave notice to the dean, finished what I could of the academic year and packed my belongings into cardboard boxes for shipment to Winterhaven. I flew home on New Year's Day.

When the plane set down in Raleigh, even that renovated airport had a worn-down feeling, and before I got out of Wake County, I was met by the familiar tired fields and tumble-down barns to my left and right. Driving along the familiar highway, the only one connecting east and west, I fell through the circles of distance and time. A few counties beyond, the fields, trailers, exhausted sheds and broken fences consumed the landscape and I knew I was getting close to home.

Soon I existed the highway in my rented car and drove along N.C. 33, where I took the curves without thinking, the same curves I drove so many times with Mother and Grandmother and Nina, the curves that separated and defined my world, slowing at the Battles's pasture for the sharp turn, then pausing at the Mosley house, where Ann and Cecil raised their boys, and coming to a full stop for the sign, the only one for miles, I took the last stretch not seeing another car, just the large open fields and rows of faun-colored crops.

At last I saw Winterhaven. From far off, the second story appeared as I rounded a high place in the road, then I pieced together the driveway and the porch. The gate posts grayed with lichen nevertheless stood firm; the trees along the driveway were black and barren this time of year, their spidery arms grasping at each other above me. It must have rained, because there wasn't any dust, but the crunch of the sandy dirt road beneath was familiar, like the hug of a relative you see differently with age.

I parked in the horseshoe driveway before the front porch, left my bags and walked up the large stone steps.