

Toby

Everyone calls her Toby. Her real name is Gwendolyn, but few know that. For sixty-nine years she's been Toby, ever since her brother John called her Gwendolyn, and she spat peas from her seat in the high chair and said, "That sumbitch called me Gwenlum. My name not Gwenlum. My's Toby." The dog's name. The name stuck, long after the dog died, and now only she and John remember how she got the name, and John, once a falling-down drunk, either can't tell or no one would believe him.

She looks out the upstairs bedroom window of her foursquare house nestled deep in the Sandhills of Nebraska. The sun knives off the roof of the empty machine shed and stabs at her eyes. She cups her hand over her brow. She'll have to haul water out to the old windmill, rescue the blue morning glories that have started their summer climb. Buttoning her shirt, she automatically recites a childhood rhyme: *doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief*. She changes the wording for the last four buttons: *banker, rascal, shyster, thief*. Smoothing her wiry gray hair with a glance in the mirror, she voices her concerns to a god she's not sure she believes in, "Give Lila a safe flight. And grant Malcolm Lord a miserable day. It might do the little wretch some good."

Running her palm down the worn stair banister, Toby thinks she'll see Malcolm Lord in hell before she'll give up this place. Her parents built this house in 1920, eleven years before she was born. They ordered it as a kit from Sears, hauled it thirty-five miles overland by wagon from the nearest train depot. She loves everything in this house: the creak in the oak floor at the foot of the landing, the rough maroon bricks of the fireplace, the smell of dust when the furnace kicks in. The red and blue Oriental rug chosen by her mother, frayed in spots, the fringe tangled in

lumps to trip over. The leaded glass doors on the half-wall book-cases, where she and her sister used to hoard bags of candy purchased on rare trips to town. The kitchen window facing west. A loud ticking clock. The same corner table her parents used, one leg propped by a wad of cardboard. The wide bay window, where she stands now, looking out on a sweeping canopy of sky.

The outside façade, however, tells a different story. The designers called it the Alhambra, after a Spanish palace that doubled as a fortress. Cream stucco, black trim, a scalloped header stretching up from the roof, elaborately carved front columns. Anywhere else, the house might have seemed elegant, or at least exotic. Plopped in the Nebraska Sandhills, it looked ridiculous, a fact missed by Toby's father, who had chosen it because it was the most ostentatious of all the models available. As he intended, the Alhambra stood as a monument to Luther Bolden's success on the Bluestem Ranch. When Toby was a girl, this house lit up the prairie for miles, people arriving by wagon and buggy and early autos to sing cowboy songs around a campfire, drink beer and whiskey on the front porch, dance in the cleared-out sunroom. Luther paraded her shy mother, spun Rosemary around in a red taffeta dress he'd ordered from another catalog, his grip tight on her upper arm. King of the Sandhills.

Toby knows that the neighbors smirked behind her father's back. They held grudges, every one of them, justified by her father's legendary ruthlessness. Still, they came to his home and drank his liquor, because they were lonesome and starved for a drop of pleasure, and he knew how to throw a fine party. And most of them, one way or another, owed Luther Bolden.

Even if Toby could scrape together the money, she wouldn't alter the façade. She keeps the false scallops, the hint of fallen

aristocracy, because the exterior of her house reminds her of what she does not want to become – another Luther.

Gertie's already sitting at the kitchen table. She's dressed for town in one of those outfits old women wear, two-piece polyester, Wal-Mart or K-Mart specials. Peach pants, a white blousy top with peach, mint, and blue flowers made of twisted ribbons. Washable, lightweight, and cheap. Toby refuses such clothes, making her mind up, as she has throughout life, not to be like Gertie. Ten years older than Toby, Gertie's her advance warning, her red light flashing. Instead, Toby wears a plaid cotton shirt, tails out over the bunched elastic waistline of her jeans. She does allow herself elastic. She's not a fool.

Toby moves to get juice out of the refrigerator, bends and retrieves a pan from the Hoosier cupboard, reaches down the box of oatmeal. Gertie sits, the Queen of Sheba. More like Luther every day. Toby knows she's behaving like her mother, passively resentful. Sooner or later she'll have to do something about it, but today's not the day. Today they have problems sufficient unto themselves.

She thinks this last, a vestige of some forgotten Bible verse, and then realizes that Gertie is paging through her Bible. The King James version, red-letter edition. Worn and dried-out leather framed by jagged zipper teeth. The zipper hasn't worked for years, clogged by the tangled tassel of a red crocheted cross that serves as a bookmark. Gertie roams the pages with her magnifying glass, head cocked to one side, her center vision robbed by encroaching macular degeneration. Toby leans over to see what book Gertie's opened up this morning, preparing herself for the onslaught that's sure to come. She hopes it's not any of the letters of the Apostle Paul, that bossy old patrician. Not the

book of Revelation, with its promises of damnation and woe. She sees that it's the book of Ruth and breathes a little easier. Well. Two women finding a way to manage, manipulating men to get what they need, not a bad precedent for what's in store for all of them. She doubts Gertie will see it that way, but she likes feeling she has some leverage if Gertie gets going on the shalt and shalt nots of their lives in this hardscrabble place.

"You want me to come with you?" Gertie asks.

"No, I think I better go alone. She'll be overwhelmed as it is."

Toby pours Gertie's coffee, sets the steaming mug in front of her.

Gertie doesn't look up. "You coddle her too much. Just like you did Nola Jean."

"Let's don't get started down that road."

"I'm just saying."

Toby says nothing. She rests her hips against the counter, cradles her coffee cup.

"I s'pose you'll be wanting to give her that front bedroom. I can move down the hall."

Toby studies Gertie, the roundness of her, the squint of her eyes through thick glasses. Gertie's out here for the summer because she hates her little house in town and because Howard's in the nursing home with Alzheimer's. Her eyes, too, getting worse. Gertie's daughter lives in Denver and doesn't want her. Her son's dead, his wife and Gertie not on speaking terms. That leaves only her grandson, Clay, who Gertie blames for everything that's gone wrong. And Toby. Toby's the last car on Gertie's train.

"All right," Toby says. She knows Gertie has no intention of moving out of that front bedroom. Toby had offered her the downstairs study, a small room with a bath that was added on after the accident that confined Toby's father to a wheelchair. All they had to do was swap the desk for a bed. But Gertie wanted

the room that was hers when they were kids in this house. “Maybe that would be best,” Toby adds. She lifts her cup, the coffee bitter on her tongue.

She watches Gertie turn pink, like a live lobster she once dropped in a pan of boiling water when she and Walter took a cruise. She thinks about that lobster and wonders why it amuses her to see Gertie’s discomfort. What kind of monster is she? She ate that lobster without blinking an eye.

“I might just as well go on back to town. I know when I’m not wanted.” Gertie’s high, nasal voice is not her best feature. Walter used to say it was in a dog’s range and beyond human comprehension.

Toby raises an eyebrow and looks at Gertie. She’s had some tough luck, old Gert. Or divine retribution. Either way, Toby’s in no mood to play her games this morning.

“Suit yourself, Gertie. I got to be going, or I’ll miss that plane. I don’t want Lila thinking I forgot her.”

The long drive out to the main road passes the family cemetery. Barbed wire fence, white gravestones peeking out from grama grass. Here and there a yucca with stalks of papery white flowers. Old boots atop six fence posts, the toes pointing home. For all the lost souls, Walter used to say. Toby’s grandparents and parents are buried here, alongside Toby’s brother who died in infancy. Toby’s husband, Walter, too, his heart having exploded one spring during a difficult calving. He died surprised, his arm caught up to the elbow inside a cow. When George, the hired hand, came to tell Toby, Walter was already laid out on the prairie grass. The old cow was done for, bleeding and torn, too weak to rise, her newborn calf standing over her. Toby crouched and laid her hand on Walter’s cheek. Without a word she walked to

George's pickup, took his shotgun down off the gun rack, fished two shells out of the glove compartment, loaded the gun, walked over, and shot the cow in the head. George said nothing. He helped her load Walter in the bed of the pickup. Then he scooped up the motherless calf and climbed into the truck beside Walter's body with the animal shivering in his arms. Toby drove back to the ranch house, weeping finally, and unable to say whether she was crying for Walter or for the motherless calf.

As Toby passes the small green house in the hollow, she takes note of the white picket fence, the crown of bluegrass shaping the front lawn, the cottonwood shimmering in the sun. Her brother John sits in a chair on the porch, wrapped in a blanket, a cup in his hand. George is not in sight, probably cursing the weeds among his tomatoes in the fenced area behind the house. He could be in the barn swabbing the horses down, keeping the black flies from ringing their eyes. She hasn't told either John or George about Lila. They'll have to know, but there's time for that.

Toby waits in the lounge of the Scottsbluff airport. Nobody much flies to this part of Nebraska, so the airport's small. A coffee shop off to one side, maybe twenty padded chairs, blue tweed upholstery on beige plastic frames. Two women's voices rise and fall like a distant flock of geese. She looks out at the runway, notices how the glass makes the air wobble. She's driven an hour and a half to get here, off the ranch, down a gravel road to the highway, west through four little towns. Her fingers are busy, rolling and unrolling the hem of her shirt.

She watches three people climb out of the airplane: a middle-aged man carrying a briefcase, an older woman who needs assistance from the pilot, and Lila. Toby studies the girl. She's wearing wide-legged jeans with frayed hems, a plaid flannel shirt with the

sleeves cut out at the armpit. Her short dark hair spikes up in tufts like singed dandelion seed. When she gets close enough, Toby can see the multiple rings in her ears, one more in her right eyebrow, a glittering stud in her nose.

The three people enter the hallway where the luggage comes through. Toby watches through glass. Since the bombing of the World Trade Center towers, airport security won't allow anyone but passengers in this area. Lila struggles to lift a heavy suitcase off a platform. The middle-aged man reaches over her shoulder, hefts the bag for her. He smiles at her. She glares back. She manages a smaller bag on her own and walks through the sliding doors, towing both suitcases behind her.

Toby notices the belly now. Lila's showing, all right, the bottom two buttons of the shirt left undone. She hides it better than some, being a tall girl, like all the women in Toby's family. That's a coincidence, of course. Toby forgets, now and then, that her daughter is adopted. Some things get passed down – hand gestures, a certain inflection of the voice – but she can't take credit for her granddaughter's height.

Lila stops in front of her. She looks down at her feet. Toby won't speak to her until she looks up. She'll have to learn to carry herself proud through this. People will take their cues from her.

When Lila raises her head, her eyes are clear and blue like the Sandhills lakes in summer. She has always been a beautiful girl to Toby: skin golden and burnished, those blue eyes, that dark hair. The eyes are her dad's, but that hair and skin reveal traces of an unknown ancestor.

"Mom sent me here because she can't stand to look at me," Lila says. She offers this matter-of-factly, and while Toby guesses it's the truth, she's appalled that the girl knows it. Still, she can't lie to reassure her.

“Well. Maybe so.” She reaches out and hauls her granddaughter into her arms.

They don’t say much during the first forty miles or so. Toby watches Lila out of the corner of her eye, the girl’s face turned toward the window. She can’t guess what Lila might be thinking, but she figures she’s scared.

“Air conditioner’s broke,” Toby says.

Lila does not turn her head, but offers her hand in a noncommittal wave.

“You feeling all right?”

No response.

“How long’s it been since you’ve been out here?” Toby asks. She means only to pass the time, but Lila bristles. She turns with a sneer on her face.

“I’m barely old enough to drive, you know. I can’t exactly bring myself.”

Toby gnaws at her lip when Lila turns away. Still, she tries again.

“Four years ago, wasn’t it? For your granddad’s funeral. Your mother hasn’t been out here since then, either. If I didn’t make it to Minneapolis once in a while, you’d never know you had any Nebraska relation at all.”

“Two Christmases ago,” Lila says.

“What’s that?” Toby’s watching closely, not wanting to miss the junction off Highway 26.

Lila turns her face to her. There’s accusation in it, even before she opens her mouth. “That’s the last time I saw you. Two Christmases ago.”

Toby doesn’t answer. She has no defense this girl could understand. Four years or two years, that’s a lifetime to someone her age.

“Your mother off this week? To Paris, I mean?”

“Yeah. I guess. She put me on the plane first.” Lila’s fingers fiddle with the dials and buttons on the radio. She hasn’t turned it on, but her fingers are busy there, like a pianist whose hands are habitually trained. Her left knee bobs up and down to some interior beat or maybe out of anxiety or teenage adrenaline.

“How’s your dad?”

“How would I know?”

Toby’s surprised at the bitterness in Lila’s voice. She knows Nola Jean blames Guy for their breakup, too many nights on the road playing jazz in what Nola Jean calls his Deadbeats Band. Fed up, she’d forced him to choose between her and his music, and Guy went with his true love. Somehow, Toby hadn’t thought Lila would take her mother’s side.

“Don’t you see him?”

“He takes me out to eat once in a while.”

Toby nods but can think of nothing to say. She’s struck dumb with the realization of how alone this girl is.

“He’d like me better if I was musical,” Lila says.

Toby gears up to deny Lila’s statement, then stops. She knows it’s true. She never could relate to Nola Jean, her love for fashion and what she calls the aesthetic life. Nola Jean flies to Paris regularly in her job as an airline hostess and sends Toby expensive blouses and bracelets, trinkets she has no use for. Nola Jean says she’d come home more often if she could fly here, but she can’t stand all those hours in a car. She could fly to Scottsbluff, cut the drive down to a couple of hours, but she doesn’t trust small airplanes, even though she’s willing now to stick Lila on one. Toby loves her daughter, but she’s too old not to admit that she might like Nola Jean better if she had taken to ranching the least little bit.

They ride a few more miles before Toby speaks again. “Gertie’s staying at the house. You remember Gertie, my sister?”

“Clay’s grandma?” Lila turns, her face brightening.

“Yeah.”

Lila smiles then. A lovely face, when she smiles. “How is Clay?”

Toby thinks hard for a minute. It’s too early to tell Lila the whole story on Clay. “Oh, he’s all right. He’s farming out on Gertie’s old place.”

“George still around?” Lila asks.

Toby smiles, peering ahead down the winding road, watching it disappear into the hills. She remembers how George used to take Clay and Lila fishing, the three of them wandering off with poles slung over their shoulders like slender muskets. “That old man is rooted to the land. He’s got my brother John with him now. George looks after him.”

They’ve passed Elmyra and the ghostly remains of Perkins, headed off Highway 26 onto the gravel road that leads up into the hills. Toby drives fast but keeps a watchful eye for roaming cattle. Once in a while she spots a red-tailed hawk circling, its shadow flirting with the thin ribbon of road. On both sides the land stretches away, speckled with primroses and swathed with patches of purple larkspur. Here and there a blue lake dots the surface, formed by rainwater spilling down the side of a hill. Sometimes the water disappears and resurfaces lower as a wetland marsh. Or it might keep on going, down, down through secret passageways to the Ogallala Aquifer, a huge underground reservoir stretching all the way to Texas. When Toby was a girl she imagined herself living on a giant ship, cast atop a rolling ocean. She would lie on her stomach, put her ear to the dry ground, and listen for the sloshing of phantom waves.

They drive in silence onto the cow path that meanders past

George's house, past the family cemetery. They pull up in front of the Alhambra. The rose bushes by the front porch need trimming. The lilacs stray, shabby and overgrown. The lawn has gone to ruin. In the early morning wild turkeys can be heard nesting in the cottonwoods, but now the only sound is the buzzing of insects. That, and the sun, hot and loud, blaring on the roof and walls.

Lila stands looking up at the house, the hills at her back. "When I was a kid," she says, "I thought this was a palace."

Toby moves up alongside her granddaughter, tries to see the Alhambra through her eyes. "What do you think now?" she asks.

Lila shrugs. "I'm not a kid anymore."

With that, she picks up her largest suitcase and moves up onto the porch. Toby, stooping to the smaller bag, watches her struggle with the screen door. She props it open with her hip, lets it slam behind her, the sound reverberating across the empty yard.

Lila

Not much has changed in her grandmother's house. The speckled ceramic hen still roosts in the bay window. White lace doilies drape the arms of chairs. Everything is old. She detects a faint odor, antiseptic or talcum powder. She studies the pattern on the rug, finds the threadbare spot Toby tried to disguise by painting the design onto the backing. Only the TV looks new, though it sits in the same place as the old one. Things are tackier than she remembered. She picks up a blue floral teacup off the oak end table, turns it in her hand, half expects to find a crack or tell-tale glue.

"Don't break that. That was our mother's."

Lila places the cup back in its saucer, rattles it on purpose. She turns to the old woman standing in the doorway to the kitchen, back hunched, head straining forward, the witch from Hansel and Gretel leaning into her oven. Lila's mouth twitches. "Hi, Gertie," she says.

Gertie steps closer, tilts her head back to give Lila the once-over. Lila stands still, though she'd like to run. The smell of Gertie's foul breath kicks up a wave of nausea.

"Why'd you want to mess up your face with all that metal?" Gertie asks.

Why'd you get born with a messed-up face? Lila wants to say. Instead she shrugs. Who cares, anyway? It's not a capital offense. Maybe she'll dye her hair green while she's here.

"Leave her alone, Gertie. She's barely in the door," Toby says.

Toby helps her carry her luggage up to her old room. Nothing has changed here, either. White chenille bedspread, white lace curtains, pale blue walls. A stuffed dog lies on her pillow. She's way past toy animals.

"Is Gertie going to be here the whole summer?" Lila asks. She sits on the edge of the bed, runs her hands over the ridges in the chenille. When she falls asleep on this bed, she wakes with stripes gouged into her cheeks.

"Afraid so," Toby says. She's fussing with the tiebacks on the curtains.

"What's wrong with her house?" Lila stretches her arm and picks up the stuffed toy. Her fingers search out the bell sewn into one ear.

Toby tosses aside a blue and white afghan from the back of the wooden rocker, sits down on a cushion quilted in strips of blue calico. Everything in this room is blue or white, the pitcher on the bureau, the flowers embroidered on the old-fashioned

dresser scarf. All this matching color gives Lila the creeps. Maybe she'll hang orange ribbons from the light fixture, drape red and purple from the headboard.

"You know Grady died," Toby says.

"Yeah, Mom told me." Something about a heart attack while sitting in the stands at the rodeo. It's weird that Clay's dad died the same year her dad split.

"Gertie and Howard had just signed the farm over to Grady. Tax reasons, mostly."

Toby pauses. Still rolling Fluffy's ear bell between her thumb and fingers, Lila pictures Clay banging the screen door on his parents' house, tiptoeing with muddy feet across Gertie's oak floors in the big house a hundred yards away. In those days Lila spent a month here every summer. Though older than her by two and a half years, Clay was an only child, too, and they became inseparable. Fifteen miles between the ranch and the farm, but somebody went back and forth every few days. They'd sleep over at one house or the other, sneak out of separate bedrooms late at night and curl up on opposite ends of the sofa. The year that Lila found out her mother had been adopted, she and Clay sliced their palms with a pocketknife, held them together over an open Bible so they'd be true blood cousins. Afterward, they tore the splotted page out of the Bible and buried it under an elm tree. Then they spit in the dust three times and wrote their initials in the mud.

"You want me to help you unpack?" Toby says.

"I don't have much." She tosses the raggedy dog back to her pillow, reaches to straighten him when he lands upside down.

"Okay." Toby stoops to pick the afghan up off the floor, folds it over her forearm.

"Didn't Wanda get remarried?"

“She did. Frank Trevino, a fine man. But Gertie, she thought Frank married Wanda to get the farm. Some bad words got said. So Howard and Gertie moved to town. Clay’s out there now, trying to make a go of it. He dropped out after one semester at Greeley. I was sorry to see that.”

“Why isn’t Gertie with Howard?”

“That’s just it. Howard’s in the nursing home.”

Toby stands a moment with the afghan, tosses it onto the seat of the rocker. She manages a tight smile, her thin lips almost disappearing. “Well, you probably want to get settled in. Supper after a while.”

After Toby is gone Lila moves over to the window. She looks out onto the yard, hard dirt rambling off into prairie grass. She leans forward until she can see the steps of the porch. She remembers music, “The Beer Barrel Polka,” blasting from the old phonograph her granddad kept in the study. It was her twelfth birthday. Clay hadn’t been around much, too busy helping his dad farm. Disappointed and bored, she’d called her parents to pick her up early. But here Clay holds his arms out to her, coaxing her to dance. She clings to the porch railing. He’s handsome already at fourteen, and his man’s body scares her a little. C’mon, he says. It’s fun. And then she does it. She steps down, and Clay swings her around, step-together-step-hop, step-together-step-hop. When they get better at it, he shows her how to turn on the hop, and he spins her until they are both dizzy and fall to the ground laughing. Her granddad turns up the volume, and then he polkas her grandmother around the yard. Her dad pulls her mother down from the porch and into his arms. Lila and Clay watch for a bit before they scramble up and join them, the three couples twirling, narrowly missing each other, like perfectly timed buckets on the Tilt-a-Whirl.

Looking down from the window, Lila thinks if she had known that was to be the last summer, she would never have let Clay go, never have let her mom and dad out of her sight, never have forgotten to give her granddad a kiss good night. She would never have stopped dancing.

Toby

Gertie and Toby are knitting, waiting up for the 10:00 news. Lila's already gone to bed, in the blue room at the top of the stairs, across the hall from the green room where Toby has taken up residence since Walter died.

"She eats like a bird," Gertie says. She's on the couch, near the lamp. She doesn't need to see to knit, her practiced hands jabbing the needles swiftly, but she likes the warmth of the light.

"Maybe she's a vegetarian," Toby says. Gertie's city granddaughters have all gone through a vegetarian phase.

"Then she should speak up."

"Give her time."

"Did she say anything? On the ride here. Did she tell you anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like who the father is. What she plans to do."

Toby tightens her lips. "She only just got here."

"Wayward girls," Gertie mumbles.

"What did you say?"

Gertie shifts her weight in the chair, offers nothing.

"You don't start in on her. I won't have it. Times are different now."

"The Bible says fornication is a sin. That hasn't changed."