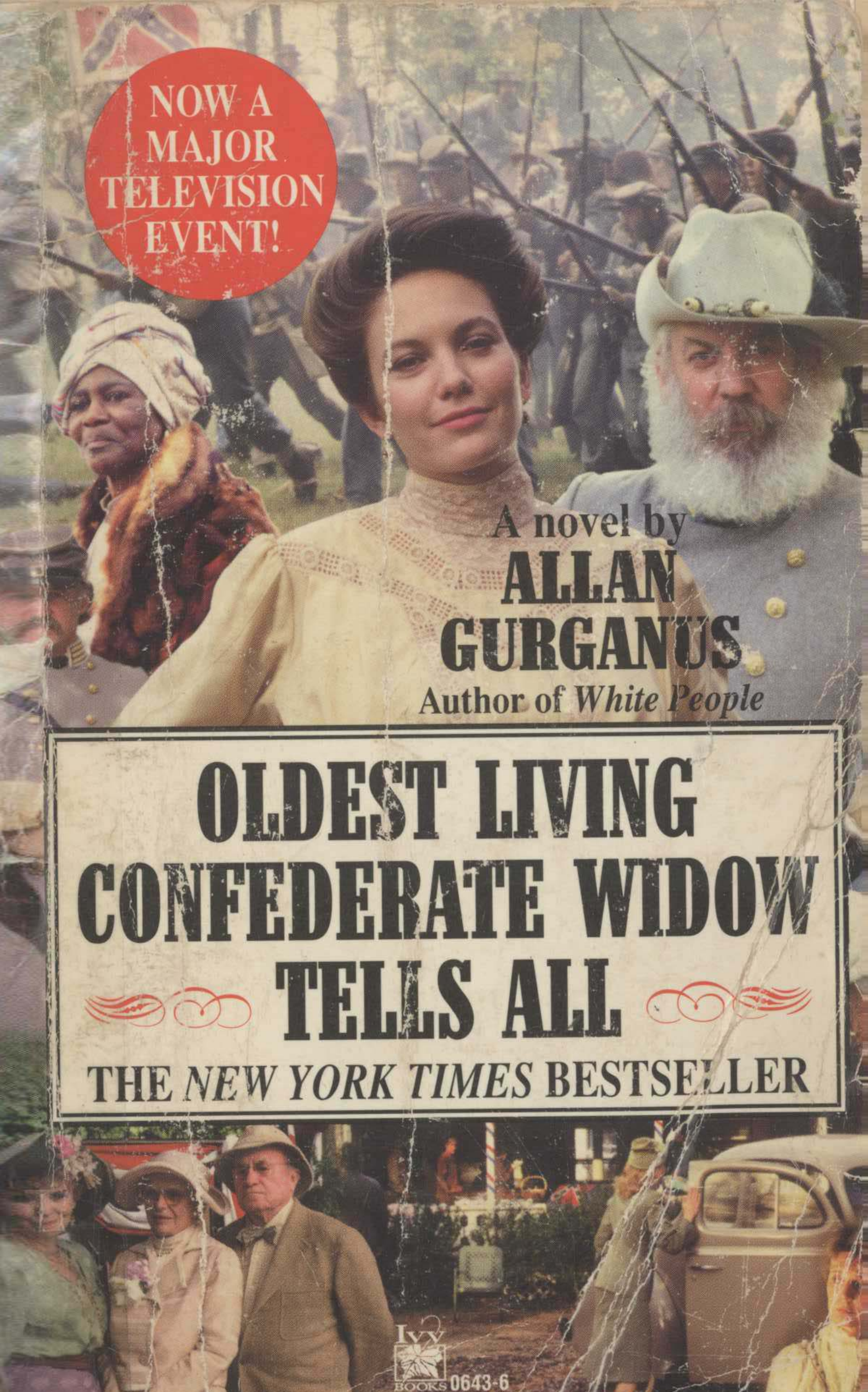

A novel by

ALLAN GURGANUS

Author of *White People*

OLDEST LIVING CONFEDERATE WIDOW TELLS ALL

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

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OLDEST LIVING CONFEDERATE WIDOW

TELLS ALL

Alabama Gurganus

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Earlier versions of chapters from this work have been published by the following: "How to Leave" in *Antaeus*, "A Body Tends to Shine" in *The Paris Review*, "The Tailor and the Leg" in *Southwest Review*, "Fight Song" in *The North American Review*, "The Passable Kingdom" in MSS, "Love at 99" ("One Old Man in Here I Like") in *The Leader*, and two separate portions from "How to Return," one as "Under This Very Mall" in *Harper's* and the other as part of "Garden Sermon," an essay concerning the novel's historical sources, in *The Iowa Review*. "Good Help" was originally published as a chapbook by the North Carolina Wesleyan Press in a signed edition of 1,000, illustrated by the author; twenty-six alphabetized copies were accompanied by original drawings.
I appreciate the editors' early and abiding encouragement.

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To my mother and father,
with gratitude for
standards and tenderness

And, with love, to Mona Simpson

Myth is gossip grown old.

—STANISLAW LEC

What the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending.

—W. DEAN HOWELLS to Edith Wharton
in conversation, *A Backward Glance*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It's a joy to thank my friends and most constant readers, people who greeted this work one chapter at a time: Eric Ashworth, Daisy Thorp, Jane Holding, Edmund Apffel, Andrea Simon, William Gurganus, Amanda Urban, Daniel Kaiser, William Carl Walker; Brian Zeger, Steven Cole, and especially Joanne Meschery. The work was midwifed by Elisabeth Sifton, its brilliant godmother.

Time is freedom. Freeing me during spans of this novel's writing were the Ingram Merrill Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. My colleagues at Sarah Lawrence College lovingly covered for me during a long absence. Many thanks; friends.

The Corporation of Yaddo gave me refuge years ago when I had only a Hermes portable, a clean face, and fairly good work habits. I began this book at Yaddo and am grateful for the place's kindness, its perfect sanctuary.

Books most often consulted: King James Bible, *A New and Complete Concordance of the Holy Scripture* by John Eadie (Glasgow, 1850), *All God's Dangers*, *Pissing in the Snow*, *The Children of Pride*. Shelby Foote's brilliant narrative history of the Civil War. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, *Patriotic Gore*, *The Country Scrapbook*, *Children of Bladensfield*, *Aunt Arie*, *A Civil War Treasury*, The Federal Writers' Project Collected Slave Narratives, *Slave Life in Georgia*, newspapers and diaries of the period. Family letters. And, perhaps most useful for evoking the past, *The Montgomery Ward Catalogue of 1888* and *Images of War*, a complete photographic history of the struggle.

* * *

A word to the reader about historical accuracy. In testimony collected from former slaves during the 1930s' Federal Writers' Project, many recalled seeing Lincoln in the South during the Civil War. Fanny Burdock, ninety-one, of Valdosta, Georgia, remembered, "We been picking in the field when my brother he point to the road and then we seen Marse Abe coming all dusty and on foot. We run right to the fence and had the oak bucket and the dipper. When he draw up to us, he so tall, black eyes so sad. Didn't say not one word, just looked hard at all us, every one us crying. We give him nice cool water from the dipper. Then he nodded and set off and we just stood there till he get to being dust then nothing. After, didn't our owner or nobody credit it, but me and all my kin, we knowed. I still got the dipper to prove it."

In reality, Lincoln's foot tour of Georgia could not have happened. In this book, it can. Such scenes were told by hundreds of slaves. Such visitations remain, for me, truer than fact.

History is my starting point.

CONTENTS

BOOK ONE

Nobody's Perfect

Fight Song

Died on me finally. He had to.

Died doing his bad bugle imitation, calling for the maps, died bellowing orders at everybody, horses included, "Not over there, dunderdick, rations go here." Stayed bossy to the last. He would look down in bed, he'd command the sheets to roll back. They didn't.

—My poor husband, Captain Marsden, he perished one Election Day. Children were setting off firecrackers on our vacant lot. Cap believed it was Antietam flaring up on him again like a game knee. So he went happy, yelling March! to his men (all dead) and to me (not dead yet, thank you very much). It's about what I expected I reckon.

He'd been famous for years around here. The longer he lived the more he got on the local news, then the national noticed, black and white and in color. They brought cameras South and all these lights walked right into our home and his bedroom. Folks put TV makeup on him. He thought it was poison-ivy medicine. He hit the girl doing it.

I had to prime the Captain, make him tell his usuals. By then it was like getting your parrot going for company, you would say a key word and he'd chew it over, then you'd see it snag way in, and out whole favorites would crank—battle by battle—like rolls on some old player piano.

Strangers kept filing through our house, kept not wiping their feet, come to see the final vet of the War Betwixt States propped up. All them boys in blue were cold in Yankee earth. Captain had tricked the winning side by holding on the last, too proud to quit, maybe too cranky. Oh he was a sight—gray uniform bunched over his pajamas, beard wild as a hedge and white to match his cataracts grown big as ice cubes. Above the bed he'd

hung a tintype of his missing buddy, he kept a rusty musket within easy reach. From a nail, one child-sized bugle dangled on its blood-red cord. Plus he had a dried twig off this tree where something bad happened.

A neighbor child brought Captain a fistful of dogtooth violets. I thanked her, set them in a bedside water glass. All day my old man kept squinting violets' way, smiling, swallowing—acting strange. Finally he waves me over, makes a scared face, nods towards blue flowers, whispers, "Lucy, baby spies!"

Especially after that big Civil War moving picture come out in '39, folks couldn't get enough. I had strangers pumping me for aspirins and change of a dollar, and I offered everything. No spring chicken myself. A bookseller brought in every history of the war for Cap to sign, like he'd written it: The War. And you never knew which name my man would autograph next. One minute he was General P. G. T. Beauregard, next minute he'd be Captain Butler. And the bookdealer sold every last signature as real. —Honey, I had Yankees asking me for coffee, tea, and where was the bathroom. Got so I tacked up paper arrows in our hallway. Wrote out "Oldest surviving," etc., like pointing tourists to Mount Rushmore. Wrote "Toilets—men's and women's—please use same one—so you'd best lock the door, and gents, please do keep seat *up* when not needed, thank you. Only fair. Signed, Mrs. Marsden—wife of oldest surviving," etc.

One day I hear muttering on our third floor. I find a Northern newsgirl setting right on the bed alongside our blind son. "Wrong room." I hold open the bedroom door, "Our boy's a bit shy of strangers." She could probably tell. He had his head poked clear under the blankets. Says she in a voice like Brasso, "But we investigative types like to cover all the bases, madam." Her skirt was shorter than most decent panties used to be. I just bet you do, thought I, but, leading her back downstairs, I didn't like to say nothing at the time.

Captain Marsden was thirteen when the Confederacy called. You think he knew enough to stay home safe in civvies? No way. The only male mammals still at large in Falls, North Carolina, were either livestock or babies or our geezers left over from the 18 and 12 one, men still mighty big on John Paul Jones. My husband and his pal felt right overlooked. "We're ready," says the boys. Thirteen, and didn't even have to lie about their age. They had trigger fingers and some eyesight, didn't they? Was enough.

So Marsden trooped off with his best friend, a boy way prettier. The pal was Willie's age but older-seeming. Name of Ned Smythe. You could look him up. Both of them hailed from here, from Falls. Pressed into service in '62 when General Lee was already running out of living bodies to put the gray on and get shot at. —Those boys left town holding hands like girls that age would.

Their mothers had chose going-away gifts. My man's momma knitted him a Union Suit you couldn't call that in the South then, but it was. She brung along five wagonsful of slaves for saying goodbye to young Master Marsden. Knitting long johns she'd used patriotic colors, but instead of gray and red the woman picked red, white, and blue. Poor Lady Marsden didn't even understand secession and here she'd sent off her favorite to fight for it.

Ned's mother carried her best canary to the parade ground. She owned thirty-some, bred them. Wanted Ned to take a caged bird along for company. The head officer, polite as you please, wondered if battle conditions would be (folks later claimed he asked) "canary suitable." They were gentlemen then. Most of our Southern gentlemen got killed. For a while it stayed the polite thing to do and they couldn't not be polite. Being a gent in them times was like being a Catholic priest—more about what you couldn't do than what you could.

Mrs. Marsden asked the officer if these boys would have to fight in rainy weather. You know what he told her? "It depends." Now won't that tact? Honey, them days are gone.

Little Marsden dropped his home-knit long johns by the side the road not ten miles from home. Somebody brought them back. Was like that then. A stranger miles off would know who'd knit what for who and in which colors by mistake. Mrs. Marsden took it as a sign her boy'd been hurt and stripped already. She'd grown up overly rich. Still owned cooperative slaves. Lady Marsden had been encouraged to act batty-brained. She played piano like a pro, lived in a church-sized cupola-bedroom lined with white silk damask. Poor woman thought the North was nothing but icebergs. She pressed the brung-back long johns up against her throat, she told her favorite body servant, "My child'll freeze."

In a way she was right.

The more the Captain got onto TVs, the more Mrs. Lucy here worked. Footprints all over my new beige carpet. Newsladies

kept asking: What did *I* remember of the war, that war? I admitted as how I'd missed it by twenty-some years. I was born in 1885, and he was 1849. Well, when they heard this, they'd get kind of sour-faced and say, "oh," like it was my failing, like I was pretty lucky to have latched on to the last vet gets to live or breathe on either side.

His final thirty years I served as tour guide, and what I gave tours of was Captain Marsden. Kept hiding the bedpan, kept carding knots out of that beard, forever wrestling him into uniform and with Cap siccing the sentinels on me yet again.

Hoarse, he'd asked reporters, "Say . . . what o'clock is it?" They'd check their watches. I stopped them. "He means the year, folks, what year." "Oh," they looked from me to him to me. They seemed embarrassed, like it *shouldn't* be so late in the century. —Newsfolks acted like the recent lack of world progress was *their* fault. I know the feeling. Finally somebody did tell the year, and loud. Cap cupped a meaty palm behind one ear, sat straighter, "Say *what*?" When he heard it hollered again, my man heaved back into pillows and crossed his broad arms. Then Cap grinned out from under overhang eyebrows, he said, "Go *on*!"

I begged reporters to please not use flashbulbs on him. Bright pops put him in a artillery frame of mind, shocked him into yelling for the horse brigade. But no sooner my back was turned, I'd see white light ricochet down the hallway, I'd hear folks scatter.

Off he'd go again. Northern camera crews had flashed him back to combat moods and then they left. I had to slip in and calm him as best I could. I sat, stroking his white hair, smoothing his white beard. I sat cooing the only word that ever helped: "Appomattox, Appomattox, Appomattox, baby." —It's a Indian word, you know. That's why it's so pretty.

2

Nowadays there's more commotion, folks coming to visit me. Just for me, too. Here you are with this recording machine set right on my bed. You way off on that plastic chair. Draw up nearer, sugar. —That's better. Good face. Oh, I know how mine looks now. All bunchy. But so is what's behind it. Don't they say the smarter you are, the more shriveled-up-like your brain

gets? Well, child, if what's inside looks like what's hanging here on front, I figure I'm nearbout to genius level by now.

When my vet finally died (a violent death—another story), peace was such a novelty it scared me like a war would. Didn't know what to *do* with it. Walked around our house cleaning up after myself, but I'd always been the neat one. Every hallway knickknack looked shell-shocked with the silence weighing down our home. No mud on the beige rug now, I half missed it. Not a soul visited. Bad stroke, two broken hips—most of my friends got carried off in three bumpy months. And you know that one old lady living on alone in peace, why she ain't news anymore. First I hated being still. Now I'm getting more accustomed. Fact is, I like it. I love it quiet.

Turns out, that's what I was looking for all along. Funny, ain't it? Some of the old ones in here, they talk like a quiet house on a side street is the hardest thing in the world. To me, that lived in Poppa's home till Poppa passed me on to Cap Marsden's (which we soon filled up with babies and their noise), why a quiet house, it grew on me. Stopped sounding like what was missing, started being what I had. Soon the long hush got feeling better than church. You didn't even have to dress up and go out. It was all right there, all yours, sweet as a reward. Honey, I know I'm sounding like the selfish old woman I've become. But, believe me, it took work to get this way.

—So, you come to pump me for my news before I got too little wind to spill news with? Well, as for secrets, I admit I am rich, child. That's all the riches I've got—but on that score anyways, I am Mrs. Gotrocks. Still, a body can't give her secrets away twice, can she? They're either secrets or somebody else's. Others in here pride theirselves on knowing every grandchild's birth date. Some of our men can tell you how much tax they paid every unfair April for sixty-odd years. Me, I've mostly got his war stories and my peace ones. They're yet on tap. Knock wood (or in *this* room, rap yonder walnut-grained Formica).

But I can't see the percentages in spilling this amount of beans. What if I did tell: Maybe my old man's bad news, what war does, how it feels to be the last of somethiñg. What would I get for it? I know that smacks of greed, but I don't mind. I like being greedy. Turns out I was talented in that direction all along and never even knew.

See the sun in this nice room? Others want the corner rooms but I been given one. Polite young men wash my sheets twice a week, need it or no. This one, Jerome quick, good-looking