

WHITE BOYS & RIVER GIRLS



THE STORIES ARE
PURE IN THE WAY
THAT GOOD STORIES
SHOULD BE. PAULA
WRITES . . .
TOTAL HONESTY
DIDN'T BACK
FROM FACING
IT. IN SHORT,
"FINE."
BROWN,
OF
LOVE AND

PAULA K. GOVER

WHITE BOYS and RIVER GIRLS

STORIES BY

PAULA K. GOVER

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For my son Aaron David, the music of my dreams, and in
memory of my father, who loved my son without measure.

and

To S., my first kiss. Always.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Ms.*, *College Times*, *Story*, *Southern Review*, *Crosscurrents*, and *New Stories from the South*, 1993, where some of the stories first appeared in earlier versions.

What is most beautiful in virile men is something
feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is
something masculine.

—Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (1961)

I've been things and seen places.

—Mae West, *I'm No Angel* (1933 film)

WHITE BOYS and RIVER GIRLS

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WHITE BOYS AND RIVER GIRLS

Yolanda Jean Louisell was waiting tables at the Tenderloin Ballroom that summer we collided, working five or six nights a week for Willie B. Lamb. The Tenderloin sits a good mile north of feeling like a part of Savannah, facing the river at the end of a tired-looking stretch of fish shops and boatyards what follow on down the coast. While I'd become one of Willie B.'s regulars when he hired up Yolanda, I could tell right off that she wasn't my regular type. She was the kind I sometimes picked up with in between the tall, blond cool-drink-for-the-eyes numbers I prefer, the kind what don't give you nothing to think about much, except for the smell of their hair. Not that Yolanda wasn't a looker in her own rights—small, dark-eyed, skin so pale, like she never seen daylight or breathed in air. The kind with "Slow down, Donnie-boy, watch the road now" written clean across her face. No. She wasn't my regular type.

Take Cynthia, for instance. That's who I'm hanging out with these days. Three inches under my six foot two, small white wedges of skin at her breasts and hips when she peels off her bikini, eyes green as kiwis. She's working on a portfolio for a modeling agency out of Savannah. Hopes to make it into videos

with the house band from the Tenderloin. And she might. Her brother Marvin works lights for the band, and he knows someone who knows someone who could maybe help now that the band's got a recording contract. She's from Tyler, like me, and says she remembers me from when I played football, but she's just enough younger so it's okay I don't remember her. And she's slimmed down since back then, though I don't say nothing about that. Only, I know how she fusses about the pale stretch marks on her bottom and radiating out like a star-burst from her nipples, but they're not visible to no one but me. Or so she says.

Last weekend Cynthia worked a car show in Macon, stretching all five foot eleven inches of her attributes across machine-waxed hoods and bumpers and quarter panels. She's got the glossies developed already and tucked into her portfolio, just so. She takes great pains in arranging them in special order, holding them up under the light in the dining el, the tips of her nails at the corners, going, "What do you think, Donnie, this one or this? Which first? Which one is the real me?" Course, aren't none of them the real her, not the Cynthia I see each morning, sheet wrinkles on her cheeks and sour-breathed as she rolls against me in our bed. But then, what do I know? So I tell her this one or that, point at the photos, smile, say they're all real nice, and that's what she likes to hear.

When the guys come around after work, I kind of flip through the portfolio, looking from the television set to their faces, acting indifferent about how they go to looking from Cynthia in the flesh at the dining-room table, clipping coupons, with hair tied back, then their heads bobbing back over the

pages again. I go, “She’s got it all right,” watching them react to Cynthia’s body all oiled and tanned and spread out in the photos, tucked inside those bikinis what weren’t never meant for swimming.

Cynthia’s big dream is a condo on the coast—full basement, white shutters, privacy fence, the whole shot. We drive around Sundays after church and stop at the open-house signs near the beach, going twenty miles in either direction from the city. She says commuting is stylish these days. We walk up the narrow white sidewalks to the display models, real proper, like we was married or something, me in a clean shirt for once, her all wobbly on heels in her church clothes, and only I know she’s not wearing any panties.

Cynthia and I got this two-bedroom apartment in Garden City off Highway 21. It’s cheap because the airport’s right there back of the place, and to be honest, our neighbors are mostly poor working people, but I kind of like that, you know. Feels like I’m where I belong, even if somebody’s fighting brings the law out every week or so. But when someone asks Cynthia where we stay, she smiles and tells them, “In the city,” slow-voiced and lying so pretty they believe it, and I don’t understand that, but women are like that, ask anyone.

It doesn’t take much to keep Cynthia happy, just keep saying how god-awful nice she looks and act like I can’t think of nothing all day but getting home to her body all stretched out in the chaise lounge next to the pool by the rental office with a puddle of baby oil in her navel. She’s easy to live with because most of the time she’s too busy working on herself to know I’m

around, sticking little foam pads between her toes and fingers, painting her nails while watching the television, flipping between Geraldo and soaps and music videos, studying who she wants to be, shaking bottles of polish so the little beads go clicking around. She spends two hours a day on the exercise bike in our living room, and when she's not busy puffing away there, working the handlebar levers in a criss-cross, increasing the resistance on the wheel, she goes into the kitchen and runs carrots and fruit through the blender. Or she stands in the bathroom spraying some kind of tropical mess on her hair and squeezing the curls around her temples so they stay there without moving until she washes them out in the shower.

Cynthia's only true hobby outside of "creating an image," that's how she puts it, is collecting refrigerator magnets. Now, that isn't a true hobby, not like collecting baseball cards or refinishing furniture, but she has elevated it to that status, and who's to tell her it's silly. Not me. She's got so many of them doodads they cover both doors of the refrigerator, and just recently she's taken to putting them on the front panel of the dishwasher where they tremble through the scrub cycle. Our only true fight to this day was the one time I slammed the door to the icebox and half her magnets fell to the floor, two of them things cracking into pieces down on the linoleum, and she threw a fit like I'd never seen. Just like I'd stepped on her tail, hissing all ugly between her teeth with green facial clay wrinkling in cracks across her cheeks. Now that was a sight.

I've been promoted to crew chief for Clem Palmer's Asphalt and Paving out of Tyler, and we're tarring a stretch over to

Statesboro, so since she threw that hissy fit, I pick up a magnet for her here and there to add to her collection, just to show I care. Mostly I find ones of beer cans and Harley emblems, but I did find a real funny one at Red's store, a shiny naked ceramic lady with big pointed tits, holding her hands on her hips, and with a smile on her lips. Little black letters float across her shiny pink belly, saying, "Get a PIECE of the action," and now, I think that's real cute. Of course, Cynthia says it looks just like her, and a few days after I carried it home to her, she took to referring to me as her "fiancé." So, tell me how that works.

Now, Cynthia and Yolanda aren't nothing alike. Reason I got hooked up with Yolanda at all was out of sheer boredom with my regular type. That's no reason for starting up something like I did, but accidents happen, what can I say? That summer, I'd just broken off with Susie Purviss, who is now married to E. Henry Broadwell, who just happens to be working for Clem Palmer in payroll, but we don't have no bad blood between us these days. Susie had broken things off once E. Henry came around, seeing as she complained she was getting too old to just keep dating like we were, and how I should ask to marry her. She's a charge nurse there over to Reidsville now, pulling in a nice tidy check every week, but marriage was not in my mind two years ago, and it still isn't much in my mind today. Except for those times when Cynthia goes all throaty and says, "And I'd like you to meet my fiancé." Meaning me.

So, Susie and I'd broken up to her crying of "Why can't we just get married, Donnie?" and I certainly wasn't looking for something like that again, though to be honest, that is my pat-

tern. I'm thirty-four, and for the past ten years it's been a woman a year, give or take a couple of dry months now and then. See, you start out saying, "Now, mind you, I'm not looking to settle down just yet." And you say it right from the jump, looking those straight-teethed girls dead in the eyes, and they go, "Why, whatever gave you reason to think I'd expect that from you, Donnie? Why, aren't you just the most nervous man I've ever met?" Then somewhere down the line, it changes. They start talking about moving in together, and they go all pink faced and smiling at babies in strollers, even the ones with spit and cereal leaking in a mess down their chins. They take to staring at you for long, silent moments across the table at the diner next to Miss Lucille's motel, like they was trying to read your mind. I'd just come out of a version of that and kicked around single for a couple of months, when right after the Fourth of July, I noticed Yolanda back of the bar, though she never so much as touched my fingers when I paid for my beer, not even handing back change. Like I been saying, she wasn't my regular type.

Most of the women I end up with are the kind that make certain you notice them first. They sit around on bar stools just crossing and uncrossing their legs, smiling those glassy smiles, shaking their hair off their shoulders. They sit there like there weren't the whole place studying their neat little bottoms, lifting their drinks to their pink lips just so slow it makes you wonder. They're the type once you finally get a couple of beers working, they start making conversation from down the bar or the next table, depending on where you're sitting. They're the kind once you're a little drunk it don't take nothing to talk to them, and

they lean into you a little once you ask their names, like exchanging names was some kind of personal secret. They're the type once you've got their names straight like to go upstairs and shoot a little pool, only they don't really know how to shoot at all, asking, "Should I hit it here? There? Off the side, there? I couldn't do that, it'll never work," squealing, "Donnie, look it," all delighted when they sink something somewhere by accident. They're the type what been noticing you all along, but got it planned so when you finally park yourself next to them at the bar, when you finally look in their eyes, it's like you've just arrived on this earth, beamed down extra special just for them.

But not Yolanda. She'd come from school in Atlanta, where she'd been studying design, though what that meant, I wasn't quite sure. She'd come to live with her sister Regina, an interior decorating consultant, though later I'd find out they were both from that stretch on the Walapaha back home nobody ever mentions as a birthplace proper. The river spreads out back there so wide it seems like a lake when you stand there near the landing. I know the place good, even took a ride out there last spring with Teddy, Cynthia's brother-in-law, thinking maybe I'd catch sight of Yolanda. He's got that speedboat, blue metallic, and we drove on down to the landing one afternoon, down past Yolanda's mama's place, back through those trails don't even seem like a road to anywhere, but then the pines clear away and suddenly, there it is, the old shacks, even a couple of trailer-houses, though how they got those back in there is a mystery. Teddy and I took the boat on down where the Walapaha feeds into the Altmaha, then to where that river gets dark and the

banks rise up, winding all through the woods. My daddy used to take me to the landing to get his liquor. They got a couple stills back in there, though to look, you'd never find them. The Feds come around every month or so, but the people back there are on to that, going so dumb and simple-acting you wouldn't think they'd ever done nothing but sit home all day and read the Bible, waiting for their welfare checks.

But that's something I found out later about Yolanda. The summer we met, I was working for Clem out of Savannah on a contract job at Hunter army airfield. I was putting in twenty hours overtime a week laying tar on a couple of runways, and the Tenderloin got to be my summertime watering hole. Yolanda was working there nights and living in an efficiency apartment over her sister's office in a three-story house two blocks from the bar. She'd had to find a place to work within walking distance of her apartment, since she'd slammed her car into a viaduct on purpose driving home from Atlanta. She'd just left it at the side of the road outside Macon, can you beat that? Unscrewed the plates and took the papers from the dash, then settled with the claims adjuster for cash money and left the car on the shoulder. "Better than being flat broke," she explained. And she took the job at the Tenderloin because it let her work nights and sleep through the day, and that was something she'd needed.

But like I was saying, I found this out later, because at first I just kind of kept noticing her, and she wasn't putting on no show for me. So I took to trying to get her to notice me, but she had this attitude about her like you didn't exist except as a body ordering beer. My regular tactics didn't have no effect, and if I'd

try to wink her down for a draft, she'd come over to my table, saying, "What can I get you?" formal, without a smile, like I hadn't been a regular there for two months, part of the herd, and always drinking from the tap.

She wasn't my type, and I knew it. She was the kind you have to sideswipe into noticing you back, the kind you get a fix on, then let up on the gas and coast into. The boys in the crew seen it coming clear as day, saying how I ought not to mess with someone so serious-faced and unsmiling, and how didn't she look something like a witch. Trust us, they warned. But she got to me, in some deep place I didn't quite know about yet. If business was slow, she'd set up a stool behind the bar and pull out a sketchpad and go to drawing. And that's part of why business picked up for Willie B., in addition to Toujaise's band, because she drew anybody who walked in the door in two minutes flat, and she drew them perfect. She'd take out a piece of charcoal, a long, black stick-looking thing didn't seem no picture could come out of, and then she'd swing it across the page, scribble back and forth with it, work her fingertips in little circles to make shadows and what have you, and that was all it took. Magic. Darryl in his Atlanta Braves jersey, Toujaise in his beret at the microphone, Sasha holding her fingers across her mouth in that embarrassment she has about her overbite when she's not singing, the Wonder Bread man bringing in trays of kaiser rolls for the grill. She'd get the face down, sketch the shoulders real quick, collar, hair, and she'd put her initials at the lower right-hand corner and pin it to the wall near the register with a thumbtack.