

1992

Chapter Two

Rayfield Allen Waller

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/seeds>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Work is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in SEEDS: The Literary Journal of the Sisters of Color by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Waller, Rayfield Allen (1992) "Chapter Two," *SEEDS: The Literary Journal of the Sisters of Color*. Vol. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/seeds/vol2/iss1/3>

Chapter Two

She turned off the water.

Outside, the rain sliced at the grass and the stooped trees. All the windows in the house were glazed with rain. It was May already, but every day, it rained.

She sat the cups down into the dish rack one at a time, very gently. She'd finished with all of them. Nothing was left to wash but the knives and spoons. She squirted more of the dishwashing liquid into the sink. She watched the brownish grease float to the top of the tepid water. The grease was spinning and twitching as the liquid touched it.

She thought of her mother because her mother used to do just what she was doing now. Her mother, once she'd started going senile, would wash only cups, saucers, spoons and knives. She'd leave everything else dirty.

Sometimes Katherine was afraid she was becoming like her mother had been.

She thrust her hands into the water—to the wrists—and felt for the single fork. She snatched it out and tossed it onto the pile of dirty forks. She was *not* like her mother, because her mother had had no choice.

"Anytime I want, I can wash the other things. I just don't want to," she said to her hands. They were beginning to wrinkle and pucker. She listened to the sound of rain pattering against all of the window panes.

The rain seemed sometimes to be trying to speak as the wind slashed it across the glass of her windows. Some nights, when it rained, she'd lie awake trying to decipher what the water was trying to say to her. She—

What? What? Somebody at the door. Somebody want's me. What?

She snatched the stopper from the drain, and, without drying her hands, went down the long narrow hallway leading to the living room and the front door. The gun lay just where she'd left it, on the coffee table. She took it over to the door and raised the little pink curtain which covered the miniature window set into the wood.

It was Harrison. He stood on the porch with the big blue bag hanging from his left shoulder. The rain was hissing against the steps just behind him. He was covered with a clear plastic slicker. He looked clean. Very clean.

She waved at him through the little window, but he couldn't see her. He was stepping lightly from foot to foot, like someone who needed to use the bathroom. She sat the gun down on the floor, behind her potted ivy plant, and went back to the door as he began knocking again.

First, the big wooden door. Then the screen door. As she opened the screen door he stepped back so that it would swing out. The wind whipped in past him, and a fine mist plastered her nightgown to the front of her body.

"Katherine! What are you doing? You're getting wet!"

He rushed in, turned and pushed the big wooden door closed again. He turned and looked at her, the strap of the mailbag biting into his left shoulder.

"Hi Harrison. You got a letter for me? You got a letter? From my son, Victor? He said he'd send me a letter."

"Did you just get up? You shouldn't have opened the door in your night clothes. You'll catch a cold."

He stood gazing at her. She was wet; and she didn't look too bad wet. She was in her late forties, but she still had a firm body, flaring hips, and she still had that beautiful, expressive face. He thought of all the old women he saw every day. Katherine was the only one he never thought of as being old.

He eased the mailbag down off his shoulder, letting the strap roll slowly. Lately the strap had started to bite him, and he was becoming very careful about it. He let the bag slip all the way to the floor. She stooped and pushed it over to the corner beside the door.

"Katherine, I'm not staying."

"Oh, yes. Yes. You *have* to have coffee. I just made coffee. Sit down in the kitchen, and I'll go change my clothes. I made you coffee. For you."

She turned and dashed up the stairway. Outside, the wind was kicking up against the porch. He'd forgotten to pull the screen door back in, and it was flapping slowly, in and out, slapping against the wall of the porch. He looked down at the bag. The same bag he'd carried for years. In all thirty years, he'd only had three. This one had ridden his shoulder for seven.

He thought of the bag as he opened the door again and reached for the flapping screen. The bag had become a dead weight which pulled harder every week. Just one more year and he could retire. Just one more year.

He pulled the screen in and closed the door against the wind. The slicker clung to him like aluminum foil. He pulled it over his head. I should leave, he thought. Just leave her the letter and go. But the house was warm. He needed to rest. He felt so tired. Four more blocks and he could go home.

He turned to the mailbag, thinking of Katherine's letter. He stooped and pulled at the zipper. He noticed the gun. The letter sat there right at the top of the pile. The gun lay, butt up, wedged between the wall and the flower pot. It pointed like a finger at the door.

Straightening, he gazed at one of the windows in the living room. Just two more blocks. But he was tired and his shoulder hurt. He walked down the long hallway to the bright, yellow kitchen and sat at the breakfast table.

He'd been in this kitchen so many times before. He'd sat here with Katherine and Fred, sometimes falling two hours behind, talking. Fred had been what some called an ugly man. His skin a deep, deep black, his broad, flat nose pushed into his face like a lump of putty. But Harrison had loved that wide, sad face. Looking into Fred's ancient, wise, and clear eyes, there was nothing he couldn't say to that face. Katherine, by contrast, had always been a very light-skinned, sharp-featured woman. Her mother had been Black, but her father, according to Fred, had been a full Cheyenne Indian.

Fred had died. Leaving Katherine alone. Ten years. Every year left Katherine a little more sorrowful, a little more confused—as if Fred had been the only thing keeping her tied to the earth.

The rain was angrier now. It thrashed against the side of the house and pummeled the roof. The windows were chattering like teeth. He could hear the broken gutter at the back of the house, gurgling as the water splashed over the side of the runnels.

He noticed the huge, delicate silver teapot, the one she used to use only for holidays. It sat at the very center of the table, and it was hot. She'd used it to heat water. The coffee cups sat at opposite side of the table, each with a spoon and saucer.

"Did he send me the letter? Did he had?"

As she rushed in he saw that she changed to bluejeans and a big, brown football jersey—the one Fred had worn on Saturdays. He pushed the

letter across the table to her as she sat. She smiled.

"Katherine, why is your gun sitting on the floor next to the door?"

She seemed to darken for a moment. Then, "Oh, them boys. Them boys from over on Mt. Elliot. They come here sometimes. They throw stuff up on my porch, to scare me. I can scare *them* with a gun."

"But—"

"Oh, it ain't loaded. You worry too much. Is this my letter? Is this my letter from Victor?"

"Yeah. That's yours."

"A letter to me, a letter to me."

As she tore into the letter, he eased himself back in the metal-framed chair resting all of his back. It was dangerous, he knew, to let himself relax this much. It would be too hard to get back up again, to pull that bag back up onto his shoulder.

She looked so alone. Sometimes he wanted to stay here: not go back out at all, but stay here with her and fix the broken gutter and help her wash the dishes and hide every single letter, so she wouldn't read them ever again.

Every one of those damned letters damned Victor kept sending.

Already, he could tell, Victor had done it again. Her face had gone lax. She was hunched over the letter, slowly shaking her head, shaking her head. Her fingers were trembling very slightly.

"Victor says no," she said simply. There was no place else to go. She would have to remain in this house, alone.

The note of acceptance in her voice was so new, so chilling, that he put his coffee cup down. He watched her as she very neatly folded the letter up and slipped it back into the envelope.

Harrison thought of the time, ten years ago, when she'd heard that Fred had had a heart attack—that she'd been taken to Receiving Hospital. That time too, she'd suddenly become quite calm and deliberate.

She quietly tucked the letter into her jean pocket, and her hands floated back to the table-top where they fiddled with the spoon still sitting inside her empty coffee cup. She looked suddenly up at him, and he could see the question in her look.

"Harrison, are you tired?"

That was not the question. He had not expected this question. Suddenly she was speaking much too clearly.

"Yeah, I'm tired. . . Old people like me get tired easy."

"Yes. Crazy people get tired too."

Harrison said nothing to this. The room suddenly seemed tight, and hot. He thought of the bag waiting for him at the other end of the long hallway.

"Harrison? Stay here. With me. You can rest."

He rose from the chair, and it seemed to be the hardest thing he'd ever tried to do. His back felt twisted and broken. His nostrils burned. He looked down at her and tried to open his mouth. He thought of the bag that was still waiting for him.

"Alright Harrison. Go. Get the hell out of my house. You can't have any more of my coffee, either."

She watched him reach down to the table, pick up his spoon from the napkin she'd put there for him, and place it gently into the half full cup. He went for the doorway and disappeared.

She rose and took the cups over to the sink. She let Harrison's cup

drop and shatter on the stained porcelain floor of the basin.

He was pulling the bag back up onto his left shoulder. He'd already tugged the slicker on, and he was buckling the silver clasps of his rubber boots. She stood at the kitchen end of the hallway, watching. The slicker made him look like a wrapped sandwich.

He paused at the door, as if he were not really going to open it. He looked down at the huge boots, then looked back at her.

He left.

She closed the door. She wandered through the house, touching furniture, touching lamps, and touching the things that had belonged to Fred. At last she ended up back inside the kitchen, the edge of the folded letter sticking out of her pocket poking her sharply in the side.

The rain was still trying to say something, but was still failing at it.

She stood a long time gazing out of the window over the sink. The one tree in the backyard was fluttering. As she watched the tree, she tried to remember the Algonquin words her father had taught her. There was a word for when the trees and the wind and the rain began trying to speak to you. They'd spoken to her father. Now they were speaking to her. She could not think of the words.

She didn't understand what the rain was trying to say.

After Harrison was gone, she always felt suddenly lonely again. Like the return of an illness that she'd thought might be gone for good. She walked around and around the kitchen, touching the top of the table, and running her hands over the stacks and stacks of cups and saucers which sat quiet and white there on the counter top of the sink. She watched the rain slicing at the trees outside, and tried and tried to remember some of the songs her father had taught her when she was a girl, but she couldn't remember.

A little later she walked back into the kitchen, steadily aimed the gun she'd pulled from her dress pocket, and calmly, deliberately, shot the row of dishes stacked beside the sink. The shattering bits and pieces scattered like startled children across the white sink basin, and across the linoleum floor.

Rayfield Allen Waller