

# robert earle

## THE ONLY THING GOOD ABOUT GETTING OLDER

WHEN SHE WAS A LITTLE GIRL, SHEILA WISHED SHE LIVED ALONE, happier to settle whatever she had on her mind by herself as opposed to letting someone else into her thoughts and feelings. Nothing was ever settled with her family, and understanding why not was impossible. One thing always crashed into another. It was safer to fight and dislike than to get along and love. Being at fault almost seemed right. She was eight when she had it spelled out for her: fair didn't matter. She hated that. If they couldn't love each other, couldn't they at least be fair? She wished everyone else would just disappear. Let her fix her own breakfast, put bandaids on her own cuts, forgive life for what it did to her, and make her own mistakes.

Upstairs her parents slept in the largest bedroom, Ted slept in a smaller bedroom, and she slept in a very small bedroom with a slanted ceiling. They had bare wood floors everywhere because her father didn't want a vacuum cleaner. To the extent he could help it, he didn't want any machines in the house. At his gas station he spent all day leaning over fenders or down in the pit messing with nuts and screws and wrenches and grease. So he wanted a quiet, simple, well-swept and dusted house that had to have plumbing and electricity and a refrigerator and an oven, but he never gave in to a dishwasher or a dryer, just a washing machine. He didn't want pets, either. He'd grown up on a farm to the west, near the border with Bluefield County, that had every kind of animal, and he had to take care of them all — pigs, chickens, cows, mules, goats, guinea hens — and he wanted nothing to do with them and their appetites and wastes, as he put it, reducing an animal to that phrase, not a mule but an appetite and its wastes, not a kitty but an appetite and its wastes. He had lugged feed pails through the squish of their wastes, and he had shoveled their wastes and smelled them and hauled them in a hand-pulled cart and wanted no more. When he was old enough to drive, ten, he got into the family truck, pushed his legs out as far as they could go and navigated by looking under the top of the steering wheel and just over the horizon of the dash board, so trucks and later cars did make sense to him.

He could squirm in the truck's innards and fix things no one else could reach. He had an ear for what was broken and went right to the spot. He did not like to touch an animal, but he would steel wool a rust speckled chrome bumper until you couldn't tell it wasn't new.

At the dinner table his hands bespoke his mechanical life. He had two fingernails that were permanently blue underneath. He had a missing fingertip and a finger that stayed crooked all the time. His skin was always a little pink, almost raw, from the way he scrubbed his hands with something called Mione soap, a rough, sandy kind of grit that hardened as its can rusted on the shelf beside the faucet near the kitchen stairs out back.

Her mother was afraid of her father. If they began fighting, her mother got a screech in her voice, as though she had a baby owl in her throat. Her father detested that sound and would order her to go to their bedroom. Her mother would have to stay there while her father settled into his rocking chair in the parlor and fished out a *Nettles Neat* that he would light with a match cupped inside his hand as if there were a wind in the parlor, though the only wind in the parlor was him, and the only clouds were his exhalations of smoke, and the only smell, after he had been to the sideboard, was the bite of his moonshine mixed with what he called a dab of water.

When Sheila was little and crawled onto his lap to be read to, he made her do the fitting of their bodies, never adjusting to her needs. After he read for a few minutes, he said, "Okay, that's it. Go help your mother in the kitchen. Learn your cooking." But in the kitchen Sheila did not get to do much because her mother prepared meals with cautious precision in line with her father's liking and a little girl either would get the amount of flour wrong or not get all the silk out of the rows of corn on the cob or be spattered with hot grease or spill milk or put her hands in things where they did not belong. She would eat cookie dough before the cookies were baked. She would stick a finger in the ice cream maker when she was supposed to just keep cranking. She would ruin a piece of aluminum foil that could be used again. So she kept out of her mother's way, pretending to be efficient in sweeping up dirt Ted tracked in after football or baseball practice.

Even when Ted wasn't that big, he seemed big to her. His clothes were what they called husky, but he was springy. In baseball he was a catcher who could leap up and throw a base stealer out when he was nine years old. In the county football league

he played guard and would drive defensive linemen up into the air before knocking them to the ground. He only was allowed two sports because his father said he would look ridiculous on a basketball court. Instead he had to help at the gas station after school in the winter and in the late summer when the baseball season was over. His job was to hand his father things and pump gas. When the children were both in school, their mother did those things, plus managing the cash register and the crackers and peanuts and sodas they sold in the office. After dinner she would tote up the cash, match it to the receipts, and enter everything into her long green ledger book while her father sat in his rocker, smoking *Nettles Neats* and sipping his moonshine with its dab of water.

He hated television because Ted and Sheila squabbled over what to watch and the reception was a snow storm unless he got up and adjusted the rabbit ears all the time. They lived in a crease in the woods that fouled up the signals coming from Nettles. The houses nearest them were a pretty good walk. Sheila liked walks for various reasons. She had friends to see along the main road and up gravel side roads where their mothers served milk and cookies or pie because she had a certain status. Her father was a Burke, not the kind of Burke who was rich, but at least he had his own business. Other fathers didn't. Almost all of them worked for the rich Burkes' dying tobacco business in Nettles and certainly would lose their jobs, or had lost them, whereas Sheila's father only had been a mechanic for *Nettles Neats* ("Rolled Right, Wrapped Tight") long enough to accumulate the money he needed to buy the gas station and get away from the government's attacks on tobacco, tobacco farming, tobacco advertising, and tobacco smoking, so the theory was that he could never be put out of work like her friends' fathers.

Greentail Falls County was not, strictly speaking, tobacco country, only a point of assembling, packaging, marketing, and distributing tobacco, all of which was concentrated in Nettles, the county seat. Thanks to the rich Burkes, or the right Burkes, or the lucky Burkes or whatever you wanted to call them, Nettles had the auction and warehouse facilities and exclusive use of the wondrous cigarette-making machine that transformed the industry. So the other fathers in Greentail Falls County would drive to work in Nettles, leaving behind the thickly forested piedmont hamlets where they lived. In turn Sheila's father sold them gas and kept their cars and trucks running. But even early on he deduced, and therefore the entire family

deduced, that his little station was in a precarious position. Changes affecting other families had to affect his family and not for the better.

The rich Burkes were so rich that they probably did not even realize they were cutting and running. They probably thought that Lemuel Burke's creation of the university named for him kept them where they'd made their fortune even after they left. They understood Nettles would wrinkle, rot and shrivel, but the university would keep it on the map even after new Burke fortunes were made in power companies and banks and insurance and drug companies in places like Charlotte and Atlanta. What did they care about the folk they left behind in Nettles, much less Greentail Falls County?

Sheila didn't have to be very old to grasp the fact that the only safe place near at hand lay within Burke University's seven mile stone wall, wrapping snake-like around its wondrous campus with its giant trees and ponds and meadows and lawns and manicured quadrangles and winding walkways among the gray granite castles that served as school buildings and dormitories and dining halls and libraries and gymnasiums. She was smart and always got A's. Tests were like stopping a moment to tie her shoelace. Ted and her father did not seem to like that any more than they seemed to like her in general. Her mother was the one who signed the report card.

Increasingly home life revolved around Exxon making noises about cutting ties with her father and Ted hogging the bathroom. When he came out, he would bring his latest pimples to their mother who would tell him they would go away and stop popping them, but then he would go right back into the bathroom, lock the door, and stare at his face, apparently. Not pooping that long, certainly not peeing. Just messing with his speckled face, for which Sheila felt sorry and which she also feared. Ted said that if he had acne this bad, her face would look like a baboon's ass when she was thirteen.

The only thing good about getting older, he confided, was sex. He knew some girls who were getting ready, and so was he. Before long, he said, some boy would try to show her what he meant; but that boy better watch it. Ted wasn't having anyone getting all over his sister, much less inside her. How exactly would that happen, she asked. He showed her his penis when it was erect once and told her that's what would get inside her, right up her pussy. He chased her out of his bedroom with it and almost caught her.

The person who did catch her was the Sunday school teacher, Miss Hartness, a thin, gentle single woman with a long face, large smile and soft voice who lived with her widowed old father down one of those gravel roads. The girls and boys had separate classes in the basement so they would not fuss with each other, and of course, there was a Boys bathroom and a Girls bathroom. That's where it happened. Miss Hartness had a rule that no girl could go down the hall in the middle of the class to tinkle unless she went along to make sure everything was all right. The girl would sit on the toilet and pee, and then Miss Hartness would hand her some toilet paper to dry herself off. "Good and dry now?" she would ask, insisting the girl spread her legs so she could see that the task had been performed properly. Sometimes she would reach down to the girl's ankles and pull up her panties for her when she stood up. But other times Miss Hartness would tell the girl, told Sheila once, "Now, honeybee, that's still damp," and she would take a few pieces of fresh toilet paper and pat the girl, patted Sheila, and rub back and forth and ask if that felt good.

Sheila suspected that Miss Hartness had no business down there, but she liked Miss Hartness gently drying her pee hole, making her feel warm and buzzy between her legs. She said yes, it felt good.

One Sunday after Miss Hartness took care of Sheila in the Girls bathroom, she said she had to pee, too, and asked if Sheila would help her get dry. Sheila knew women were hairy because her mother was hairy. She was surprised at how hairy Miss Hartness was, though. Miss Hartness said this was exactly the problem for her, how wet it all got. She stood, and Sheila pressed the toilet paper up between her spread legs, and Miss Hartness said no, she had to rub a little, not just pat, and get in past the hair into the crack because that's where she sometimes dripped even after she was finished. Sheila rubbed a little, exactly as Miss Hartness had just rubbed her, and Miss Hartness's hips began to move back and forth toward Sheila and then suddenly Miss Hartness began trembling like a quivering arrow that had hit its mark. At the same time she made a choked kind of moan. Sheila thought she must have hurt Miss Hartness, but Miss Hartness pulled Sheila's head to her belly and held it there, and after a bit she said she was all right. "Now let's hurry back to class," Miss Hartness said, because the other girls were waiting.

Sheila told a girl about this new part of going to the Girls bathroom with Miss Hartness, and the girl told her mother who told Sheila's mother who told Sheila's

father. This was on a Monday night, right after he came home. She told him in their bedroom where he was changing out of his work clothes, and there was yelling, and then her mother came out of the bedroom having been pushed, hard, calling for Ted to go see his father while she went into Sheila's room with her and shut the door.

Her mother called her a name she'd never heard before and grabbed her by the hair, hurting her, and then pulled her to her waist, almost the way Miss Hartness had done, and began crying.

Finally she kneeled down to look Sheila right in the face and said, "You don't ever let anyone touch you like that again, do you understand? Never, never, never."

Sheila began crying, too. She promised she wouldn't. Then she heard her father and Ted come out of her parents' bedroom and bang down the stairs and out the front door. She asked her mother where they were going. Her mother hissed that the devil had gotten into their church, but the devil wouldn't get away with it.

She grabbed at her mother to get closer. They tumbled on Sheila's bed and lay there, holding each other, Sheila saying that she was sorry, and her mother saying Sheila wouldn't be the one who paid, and Sheila feeling that she had done something Jesus would never forgive.

They fell asleep. When they woke, it was dark, and her father and Ted were coming back into the house. Ted's footsteps were the ones they heard running up the stairs. Her father's footsteps didn't come for an hour or more. He must have been sitting downstairs in his rocking chair, drinking moonshine and smoking *Neats*. Sheila and her mother were too frightened to go see.

They got under the covers fully clothed. Sheila lay there smelling her mother's hair and her breath and the laundry soap smell on her blouse. It seemed like the night would never end. Ted coming out of the bathroom didn't end it. Her father heavily and slowly climbing the stairs didn't end it. That night was the longest night of her life. She lay there praying and pleading and listening to the rasping of her mother's breathing and being afraid to go out and pee. So in the gray light of dawn, she ending up wetting the bed.

When her mother realized what had happened, she snapped, "What have you done? Are we going back to *this*?"

Sheila had no idea what to say. She felt like a green leaf turning yellow in the autumn, drying up and falling. Her mother pushed her out of bed. There Sheila stood,

soaked with pee, just like the sheets.

“You’ve got to grow up!” her mother whispered. “No more of this, you hear?”

At school that day she heard that Miss Hartness and her father had died — their house burned down, they couldn’t get out — and she felt terrible, especially when the girl she had told about the last time she went to the bathroom with Miss Hartness said they couldn’t be friends anymore. “I’m not allowed. I have to forget the awful things you said. You tell too many lies. I hate you!” The girl began crying and ran across the playground to get away. Sheila did not try to follow. She stood by herself and watched some other girls jump rope without asking to join in. They counted to a hundred and fell in a pile, laughing because they’d made it. No one bothered about her standing there, not doing anything, just standing there.

The next Sunday when the family squeezed into the car and drove to church, she would not get out. She fought and struggled and held on. Ted grabbed one leg, her father the other. Her mother cried at them to stop. Whenever they got one of Sheila’s hands loose, she tightened harder with the other. She pulled her foot right out of her shoe. She twisted onto the ground when she couldn’t hold on any longer and made such a mess of herself she could not possibly go into the church. So they left her in the car. Every Sunday for the next month she sat through the service out there. After that her father and mother just gave up. They went to church with Ted and left her behind, which was how she liked the house best, having it empty and all to herself.

Ted began to hate her, too. He called her a troublemaker. He said maybe she couldn’t tell the difference between a boy and a girl, so maybe he ought to show her again. He pushed her into her room and closed the door and said what if they both got naked, how would she like that?

She told him she wouldn’t like it. He pulled her hair and grabbed her in a hammerlock and knuckled her head. He put his hand over her mouth so no one could hear her crying. She was just so dirty, he told her. Now he’d have to wash with Mione soap, too. But first he forced her on her bed and lay on her, twice as big as she was, so that she could not move and felt his boner right through his jeans.

He was so angry at her that it happened again and again. All she could do was get out of the house, go off alone, avoid him and other people, too. She stopped raising her hand in school and sometimes tried to spend a whole day without saying a word