

LOUIS DANIEL BRODSKY

*The Faulkners, the Franklins, and the Fieldens:  
A Conversation with Victoria Fielden Johnson*

ORIGINALLY, MAJOR PORTIONS of the following interview were recorded during a five-day visit I made with Victoria Fielden Johnson and her daughter, Gillian, in their home, in Cape Coral, Florida, May 20-24, 1985. Two additional interviews were conducted in 1986 and 1987.

By nature, Mrs. Johnson, whom I first met in 1978, while she was still residing in Oxford, Mississippi, is a proud, very modest, and private person, who cautiously guards her feelings about the Faulkners of Mississippi. For this reason, I am especially grateful to her for sharing her reflections and candid perceptions, her accurate and poignant memories of seasons, days, and moments shared with Estelle and William Faulkner, over three decades, as their eldest grandchild.

This edited version of taped conversations consists of sections I have rearranged to create an approximately chronologically structured narrative. Except for necessary grammatical and stylistic refinements, silently imposed, I have not altered the dialogue.—LDB

LDB: How do you think William Faulkner felt toward the Oldhams and Franklins, after he married Estelle Oldham Franklin, in 1929?

VFJ: He had respect for my grandfather Cornell Franklin. I doubt he felt much love for my great-grandparents Lem and Lida Oldham. After all, they had resisted Pappy's marriage to my grandmother, from the outset, and, even after she had returned to Oxford, from Shanghai, with two children — a divorcée — they still balked at the notion of their daughter marrying Billy Faulkner. Certainly, through the years, he showed his love for the Franklin children, Victoria and Malcolm, and accepted them as his own.

LDB: The Oldhams had made a European-style match, based on money and position and old-line family name.

VFJ: Yes, exactly.

LDB: When William and Estelle finally got married, in 1929, and took up permanent residence at Rowan Oak, in 1930, didn't both of Estelle's children, from her former marriage with Cornell Franklin, move in with them?

VFJ: Well, that was one of the things that Pappy held against the Oldhams. By keeping Malcolm with them, in their home, on South Lamar, acting as guardians for the frail child, they became recipients of Cornell's child-support checks. Pappy realized that the Oldhams were depending on that money themselves, claiming to use it to support both children. In fact, my mother's portion never came to Pappy and Grandmama. Instead, my great-grandparents used that income to support themselves. Pappy resented them for this and for the fact that they never reimbursed Pappy for any of my mother's expenses.

LDB: What a paradox! Faulkner bore no resentment toward his wife's former husband but rather toward Estelle's family — his own in-laws.

VFJ: Yes, that's so. Pappy realized, early on, that Cornell Franklin was not at fault for having whisked his sweetheart away. He was almost as much of a victim of the arrangement as Estelle was.

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LDB: More so, the Oldhams continued to warrant Faulkner's disrespect; they actively discouraged their daughter from marrying him, arguing that he was "Count-No-Count," even a decade after they had first canceled him from her list of eligible suitors.

VFJ: People have said that Grandmama was a weak person all her life. She had succumbed, at twenty-one, to her parents' dictatorial demands, but at thirty-two, after she had divorced Cornell Franklin and come back to Oxford, with two children, she did assert herself and, against their wishes, married Pappy. Now, that required a great deal of courage. She bucked everybody to marry him. I'm not sure, but I think Estelle and the two children returned from Shanghai, in 1926. I would imagine, as a divorcée, in the mid-1920s, she was greeted with a leer, perhaps even shunned by the "uprights" in the town. Pappy convinced her that marriage to him would be good for her *and* for the children, but it took him at least a year and a half to do it. He wrote *The Wishing-Tree* for my mother, in early February 1927, but he and Grandmama didn't marry until June of 1929. Her divorce from Cornell Franklin took a long while, simply because communication between Oxford, Mississippi, and Shanghai, China, took months, in those days. And Pappy must have done a good sales job, too.

LDB: As a young man, Faulkner doesn't seem to have been very successful in courting ladies. Even after Estelle Franklin left the United States and his love interests turned elsewhere, during the interim, he failed to make lasting relationships.

VFJ: I think if he had been as persuasive with others as he must have been to get Grandmama to finally marry him, he might have ended up with somebody else. And it wasn't necessarily that Pappy had been a failure with my grandmother. Remember, she had already been promised to another man; their mutual fates had been wrested from their control. Even after her marriage to Cornell Franklin, I strongly believe Pappy was still very much in love with Grandmama. He realized that it hadn't been her fault either. I don't think he blamed her for that, not even in the beginning.

LDB: It seems that Faulkner's love for Estelle matured and ripened during the eleven years that lapsed between her marriage to Cornell Franklin and her wedding to him. Somehow, wasn't their relationship destined to last, to mature? Also, wasn't there something inherently doomed about it? After all those years of separation, why was Faulkner compelled to marry Estelle Franklin, already a mother of two children and no longer the romantic vision of his adolescent idealization of southern womanhood?

VFJ: Obviously, he still worshiped her. And even though many sad years would come after they married, he never stopped loving her.

LDB: Did the fact that Estelle had two children make her even more attractive to him, excite a vague and undefined sense of himself as Don Quixote coming to the rescue of his beloved maiden in distress?

VFJ: He adored the children, Malcolm and my mother Victoria, and I know he loved Grandmama.

LDB: That Billy Faulkner remained an ardent admirer of Estelle, during her eleven-year marriage to Cornell Franklin, is evident when you assemble surviving gifts he gave her, persuasions to love: an inscribed book of Swinburne's poems (1919); a copy of the hand-lettered and hand-bound one-act play *The Marionettes* (1920); a handmade book of his own poetry, which Faulkner dedicated to Estelle and titled *Vision in Spring* (1921); a copy of *The Marble Faun*, inscribed in 1924; the hand-lettered and-bound single-impression copy of *Royal Street: New Orleans* (1926); and, in 1927, both an inscribed copy of his second novel, *Mosquitoes*, and the handmade child's fantasy, *The Wishing-Tree*, which he wrote for and presented to Estelle's daughter Cho-Cho (Victoria), on the occasion of her eighth birthday.

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VFJ: Most of these gifts were given to Grandmama on her various trips back and forth between Honolulu or Shanghai and Oxford, when she and Pappy would see each other. During the entire time of her marriage, Grandmama was homesick for her parents and friends and for Pappy, too. She told me this herself. I think my grandfather Franklin was extremely understanding and kind to keep sending Grandmama back. But it had been an arranged marriage for him, too, and, probably, he wasn't in love with Grandmama either. They hardly knew each other, at the time of their marriage. When Grandmama left my grandfather Franklin for the last time, he grieved, but I'm quite sure the grief was more for the loss of his children than for his wife.

LDB: It must have been obvious to Cornell Franklin, during those years they shared, that his wife had never lost her affection for William Faulkner. Nor did he feel rancor toward Faulkner when Estelle married him, in 1929.

VFJ: Quite the contrary. My grandfather Franklin was grateful to Pappy for his care and concern for Malcolm and my mother.

LDB: In those early years of Estelle's marriage to Faulkner, did Cornell and Estelle keep in touch?

VFJ: They did, to some extent, but Cornell corresponded more with Lida, his ex-mother-in-law, mainly with regard to the children's well-being. And, of course, he would send the Oldhams monthly child-support checks.

LDB: But did Faulkner and Estelle maintain ties with the Franklins?

VFJ: Later they did. In Columbus, Mississippi, in Shanghai, China, and, coincidentally, during the fifties and sixties, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

LDB: What about during the early stages of their divorce? Was theirs a rude severing?

VFJ: Not at all. I recall Mama telling me how Grandmama and Pappy took her to Columbus, Mississippi, to stay with her grandmother, who was Grandmama's ex-mother-in-law. About three weeks later, Mrs. Hairston brought Mama down to Pascagoula, where Pappy and Grandmama were honeymooning, and she stayed with them, too, for a short while.

LDB: And when they returned and moved, temporarily, into Miss Elma Meek's house, before purchasing and settling into Rowan Oak, on Garfield Avenue, did Malcolm and your mother take up quarters with them, too?

VFJ: Actually, both Mama and Malcolm stayed at the Oldhams' until Pappy bought Rowan Oak. Then, my mother moved down there and sort of "became" a Faulkner. But Malcolm, who was quite frail and very young, stayed on at the Oldhams'.

LDB: In the beginning, that had to have been an exciting, happy time for William and Estelle. Yet it must have come as quite a shock to her. After all, she had been used to a more lavish life, in Shanghai. For that matter, her parents' home, on South Lamar, was sumptuous. At first, Rowan Oak had no electricity and no bathroom.

VFJ: It was a shabby place. My mother told me how, when they arrived, she sat on the front steps and cried. And I'm sure it must have been a shock to Grandmama, as well. However, you must understand, she was very much in love with Pappy, so I don't think it was as bad to her as it appeared to have been for my mother. Mama was embarrassed to have her friends (she was only eleven then, remember) come to such a horrible, shabby place, which was now her new home.

LDB: Estelle's excitement over finally consummating her childhood dream of being married to Billy Faulkner, already a successful, if unappreciated, novelist, must have softened the starkness of the place for her. She must have sensed in it a challenge, sensed the romance of possibilities Rowan Oak presented to them both. Faulkner, too, must have seen it as a challenge in which they could both participate and share and as something more: he was a landowner for the first time.

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VFJ: Absolutely! "Count-No-Count" had just become landlord of one of Oxford's most stately, if ramshackle, homes.

LDB: Rowan Oak provided solitude away from the city and proximity to it. Also, for Faulkner, there must have been a certain sense of snob appeal inherent in his new surroundings.

VFJ: I know Grandmama also loved the solitude of this new home. She had not been able to handle the intense social world of Shanghai, though she had tried and had found it diverting for a few years, when she had first gone out there. In truth, the gambling and drinking had been too much for her. The fast pace had proved to be too much for her stamina. She welcomed this quiet place, perhaps even as Pappy did, because it was on the fringes of Oxford. She had visions of raising her family there. And, a year later, Pappy and Grandmama had their first child, Alabama, who, tragically, died after only nine days. Of course, that was a major calamity to both of them. Then, two years later, they succeeded in having Jill. This was a good time, in the beginning, and Rowan Oak was a place where Pappy would accomplish much of his very best, most significant writing.

LDB: Tell me, again, about the Franklins. If, in those early years, there was little contact between the Faulkners and the Franklins, how about later?

VFJ: Before we get to that, let me just say that there were a number of very eerie coincidences that occurred between the Franklins and the Faulkners, in the thirties and fifties. For example, after Cornell Franklin and Grandmama got divorced, Cornell, like Grandmama, remarried in 1929—he to Dallas Lee, she to Pappy. Both couples had children who died very, very prematurely. Both had another child, in 1933, the only child for both couples: Jill, for Pappy and Grandmama, and Corney (Cornell, Jr.), for Cornell and Dallas. Also, Dallas had two children from a previous marriage; her daughter came with her, much as Victoria had with Estelle. Dallas's son, Peter, remained with his father, and Malcolm was left at the Oldhams, to grow up. [And] in 1951, when Cornell and Dallas were finally allowed, by the Chinese communists, to leave Shanghai, they moved to, of all places, Charlottesville, Virginia—actually close by, in Keswick.

LDB: And that's where Jill was living.

VFJ: No, not yet. In 1954, Jill married Paul Summers, who was in law school at the University of Virginia. They took up residence there, then. I remember one Christmas vacation, traveling, by train, from Boston to Memphis, where Pappy picked me up and took me to Oxford. I had stopped off, first, in Virginia, to see Jill, for a few days. We were invited, by my grandfather Cornell, for dinner at his home, one of those evenings I was there. And I know that, later, when Pappy was at the University of Virginia, as writer-in-residence, he and Grandmama were often invited to parties at the Franklin home.

LDB: So Faulkner actually saw Cornell when he came to Charlottesville?

VFJ: Yes. Judge Franklin was a highly regarded lawyer, and Paul, Jill's husband, was in the University of Virginia law school. So they had that in common, as well as the family connection. Furthermore, as I said, Cornell and Dallas had a son, Corney, who was the same age as Jill. He spent a number of summers with us, in Oxford, at Rowan Oak, during the war. The Faulkner hospitality, from those years, was fully reciprocated by the Franklins, during the fifties. In fact, today, Corney is a lawyer in New York. Tad, Jill's eldest son, was a seaman. Before shipping out from New York, he would always arrive a few days early and stay with Corney. And, in recent years, Corney has visited them, too, in Charlottesville.

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LDB: To me, one remarkable thing is how, at one time, at Rowan Oak, during the war, Faulkner was actually hosting Malcolm and Victoria, Cornell's children from his first marriage with Estelle, Corney, Cornell's son from his second marriage, as well as Jill, the daughter from his marriage to Estelle. What a fusion that must have been!

VFJ: Oh, and don't forget my father. During the forties and early fifties, he spent much time at Rowan Oak.

LDB: If you can, tell me about your mother's feelings toward her new father, William Faulkner.

VFJ: I think by the time they married (Mama was ten), she felt Pappy was her special friend. "Billy," she called him. And he had written, for her eighth birthday, for her, especially, a wonderful, fabulous children's story called *The Wishing-Tree*, which he typed and bound by hand. He even watercolored the front and back papers that covered the little volume, hand-lettered, in ink, the title, on a tiny label he glued to the front, and dedicated it to her: "For his dear friend / Victoria / on her eighth birthday / Bill he made / this Book." It was not until after Jill was born, in 1933, that Billy became "Pappy," which was not until Mama was fourteen. Billy was Mama's special friend, and I think she felt that Grandmama was an interloper in that relationship. There was a certain jealousy and, then later, with Grandmama's drinking, Mama felt alienation and disgust. Then, the children came: first, Alabama, who died, then Jill, and they decided to send Mama to a boarding school, in Holly Springs. That shoved her right out of the nest and her place with Pappy. Then, in 1936, she experienced another shattering thing: Grandmama and Pappy picked up, taking Jill, and left her alone, in Oxford, while they went to California. Suddenly, Mama had nothing, where she had had it all. She had had a beautiful, loving relationship with Pappy—Billy—her father. Suddenly, she had nothing.

LDB: Already, your mother had been split off from Malcolm, after Estelle's divorce from Cornell Franklin. Now, she found herself split off, again, this time from her new father.

VFJ: I know my mother felt abandoned and, most likely, somewhat betrayed.

LDB: Knowing this certainly helps explain how your mother might have become infatuated with the first handsome young man that came into her life.

VFJ: Yes. Also, I think Pappy felt he had been taken advantage of, by my mother, by her elopement, and her getting pregnant, while Pappy was in California, made him feel as though she had completely betrayed him, his trust in her.

LDB: Faulkner felt strong fatherly love for your mother, didn't he? When away, he would address his letter envelopes to her, "Miss Victoria Faulkner." And many of the books he inscribed to her during the thirties carried entries such as "To my daughter, Victoria," or "For my daughter, Victoria, her book, with love, from Billy."

VFJ: I think Mama resented having been sent off to boarding school, being pushed out to make room for Jill. Perhaps, she also felt that Pappy really had no more use for her, now that he had his own flesh-and-blood daughter.

LDB: Did your mother ever give you any indications of her resentment?

VFJ: Well, she could be a very jealous, possessive person, and I think she was terribly envious of the new baby, Jill, and, for many years. She adored Pappy, worshiped him, and to her, both Grandmama and Jill were intruders into her sacred relationship with him.

LDB: Did your mother blame Faulkner or Estelle for Jill's existence?

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VFJ: She didn't like Grandmama at all—her own mother! Just before Mama died, in 1975, she disposed of more than two hundred letters Grandmama had written to her, over the years. She didn't want anyone to see them, to get to know Grandmama as a lovely human being, a lady who cared deeply about her children, her husband, and who was proud of the simplest pleasures in life.

LDB: Your mother disliked Estelle because she had given birth to Jill?

VFJ: No. I think it was the drinking that really ripped it, sundered the relationship between my mother and Grandmama. And also, she never quite forgave Grandmama for having divorced her father, Cornell Franklin.

LDB: Whom she had also loved.

VFJ: Right! Adored! My mother adored men; she didn't like women. She did not like me, she didn't like her mother, and she did not like Jill.

LDB: And, apparently, your mother carried this animosity toward Estelle Faulkner with her, all her life.

VFJ: I would say that if she loved Grandmama at all, it was because she was her mother and duty demanded it. One day, when I was fourteen or fifteen, my mother said, "I don't like Grandmama," and I thought, "How can you not like and love your own mother?" It was a shock to me.

LDB: You said that when your grandmother and Jill went out to join Faulkner in Hollywood, in 1936, where he was doing script work for Twentieth-Century Fox, your mother, home in Oxford, met a man whom she would soon marry.

VFJ: Yes. She was just a freshman at Ole Miss. She had graduated from high school at seventeen.

LDB: What was his name, and where was he from?

VFJ: Claude Selby—he was from Vicksburg, and he was in law school, at Ole Miss.

LDB: After Estelle learned that your mother was pregnant, she and Jill returned from California?

VFJ: Yes, they came back to Oxford, in late May of 1937, I believe.

LDB: When they left, Faulkner was very lonely, at least for Jill. Actually, he may even have feared for his young daughter's safety. I believe he distrusted Estelle's ability to handle herself. Her drinking had reached an almost uncontrollable pitch, in part because she had learned of Faulkner's affair with Howard Hawks's secretary, Meta Carpenter, and she was also aggravated by anxiety over her own daughter's marriage to a young man she did not know. I have read a few letters from Faulkner to your mother, from that period, in which he pines for his daughter Jill, imploring your mother to protect her.

VFJ: Well, my mother was very strong. She had been a very strong-willed child.

LDB: So, in a manner of speaking, Faulkner regarded your mother, rather than his wife Estelle, as a surrogate mother for his daughter Jill. Therefore, when your seventeen-year-old mother married Claude Selby, Faulkner must have been hurt, disappointed, and felt left with a helpless situation, in having neither his wife nor stepdaughter to look after Jill while he was away.

VFJ: Well, perhaps, in the beginning, especially because Mama had gotten pregnant within months after she had married Claude Selby. Fortunately, Pappy had returned home from California, just about the time of my birth, in late September 1937, because while I was still in the hospital, my father deserted my mother and me.

LDB: And Faulkner must have quickly realized that, now, he had another weighty responsibility. There was another fatherless child, another daughter, in his family. Just the previous year, he had virtually inherited his dead brother Dean's daughter and his widow, at least responsibility for their financial support.

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VFJ: And don't forget his own mother, Miss Maud. When Pappy's father died, in 1932, automatically he assumed the role of head of the household — a house full of women.

LDB: What do you know about your father's desertion of your mother and you?

VFJ: I recall Mama telling me how my father came to the hospital, right after I was born, and that, five days later, he was gone — disappeared without any word.

LDB: How did Faulkner respond to this? Was he angry?

VFJ: I believe his emotions were mixed and confused. He felt heartbroken for my mother, because she was suffering, because, obviously, she loved the man. At the same time, Pappy was incensed that his daughter had gotten herself into such a mess. Now he was going to have to be the guardian for one more child.

LDB: Did your father really disappear?

VFJ: For a while, my mother couldn't locate him. Finally, she discovered; he had gone to the upper peninsula of Michigan. She took off after him, with me, and worked as a waitress, in various lumber camps, trying to find him, get him back. She finally found him, but he would have none of her entreaties to return with her, to Oxford, and take up life as a married couple with a child.

LDB: This almost sounds like a reprise of Faulkner's Lena Grove story from *Light in August*, written less than five years earlier.

VFJ: Well, I do know that Pappy got on a bus, came all the way up to Michigan, and accompanied us back. That was in early winter of 1937. Not long after that, Pappy got in touch with my grandfather Franklin, in China, and said my mother was going through a hellish time, in Oxford, and suggested it might be good if she came out there for a while. My grandfather readily agreed. He had pretty well stayed out of the picture, with regard to Grandmama and Pappy, except for financial support of the children. But as soon as Pappy indicated that my deserted mother was in trouble and that a time away from Oxford would be a positive thing, he said, "By all means." I am quite sure that he paid our fares for the trip, too, not Pappy.

LDB: Do you feel Faulkner's urgency derived from his awareness that the town of Oxford was talking about your mother; that the whole affair was not only a scandal but that his stepdaughter, Victoria, and her new child would be adversely affected by the notoriety?

VFJ: Of course. Just read Pappy's "A Rose for Emily," if you really want to know how the town reacted to anything and everything even slightly out of the ordinary. And my mother's dilemma was not at all ordinary, at that time. That was fifty years ago, remember, and values were a lot different then. We went [to Shanghai] when I was about one year old, and we stayed with my grandfather Cornell and his wife Dallas until 1940. We were evacuated when the threat of war with the Japanese grew imminent.

LDB: And it was between 1938 and 1940 that your mother met, fell in love with, and married William Fielden.

VFJ: Yes. She fell madly in love with him. My father was a self-made man. I had tremendous admiration for him.

LDB: How old was he when he met your mother?

VFJ: He was twenty-four. And as far as my mother was concerned, he was the most handsome man in the world, the sweetest man I have ever known. He indulged Mama, spoiled her rotten.

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LDB: When you returned to Oxford, your new father stayed behind, in Shanghai. Was he on good terms with Cornell Franklin?

VJF: Of course. And it was he and Dallas who gave Mama away, in marriage. My father and grandfather were very close, and Cornell Franklin felt good, knowing Mama was now in very kind and caring hands. My father stayed on with the tobacco company, until November 1941. Anyway, in 1940, Mama and I returned to Rowan Oak, and it was awful, because nobody believed that we had been evacuated. They thought Victoria Franklin Selby Fielden had just dumped another man.

LDB: That was the "Rose for Emily" scuttlebutt around Oxford, right?

VFJ: Exactly! And they couldn't imagine that we were actually almost at war. I mean, people didn't accept divorce that readily, in those days. My grandmother was a branded woman, for having divorced, and my mother already had one divorce under her belt. To many people, it looked like she might be getting another. She had to put up with the gossip.

LDB: William Faulkner and his family were a constant source of ridicule and slander, in Oxford, weren't they?

VFJ: Yes, we were, but I never knew quite why we were treated differently. I didn't regard Pappy as a famous writer. He was simply Pappy. He was my grandfather, and I didn't say, "What do you do for a living?" I didn't inquire about things like that. Sure, I heard him pecking away on the typewriter, every morning, but it just didn't register. But in Oxford, somehow, we were all made to feel we were different. There was a subtle shunning, I felt.

LDB: All right, perhaps the Faulkners were unconventional, even amoral, if you will. But they weren't immoral. Estelle's marriage to Cornell Franklin had been star-crossed, from the outset, and your mother's brief marriage to Claude Selby had been a tragic miscue.

VFJ: Yes, my mother was very hurt and very disillusioned, but at least Claude hadn't run off with another woman or anything like that.

LDB: So, in 1940, you and your mother came back to Rowan Oak, and Malcolm was still at the Oldhams. Faulkner and Estelle were at home, with seven-year-old Jill. There Faulkner was, with four women around him and he himself homebound.

VFJ: Yes, most of Pappy's dependents were female, but don't forget the major responsibility he also assumed in inventing work for his brother John and his wife Lucille, out at Greenfield Farm. And don't forget their two sons, Jimmy and Chooky, and also his "black family" Pappy felt totally responsible for, in those years. They had to be very distracting and disconcerting to him and for his writing. He was pulled in so many different directions, by all who had come to depend on him. Notwithstanding, I can understand how Jill remained the object of all his awe and love. She was his flesh and blood, his one great hope, at that point.

LDB: Yet Faulkner didn't seem to show favoritism or admit distinctions between the Faulkner and Franklin families.

VFJ: No, he didn't. We were all treated with equal importance. And for all of us, the same restrictions and not unpleasant deprivations prevailed. None of us minded the austerity in which we lived, because there was a love for each other all felt. To me, as a young child, Rowan Oak was an enchanted place, a cocoon that protected us all, thanks to Pappy.

LDB: When did your father, Bill Fielden, come back to the United States?



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VFJ: He got out of China in 1941, and he headed directly for Oxford. He was due in, shortly before Christmas. Of course, I hardly knew my father, at that point. They had been married for four months when Mama and I left, and, suddenly, a whole year had passed, so I really didn't know him. I was excited because this was my Daddy coming home. They came in at night and walked into the living room of Rowan Oak, and there was a very awkward, awkward silence; everybody just sort of looked him up and down.

LDB: And perhaps that silence was filled with a bit of trembling, too.

VFJ: Oh, sure. For Pappy, Grandmama, me, and Jill, certainly for Mama . . . but Jill broke the ice. My father was terribly ticklish and so was Jill. She walked up to Daddy and said, "Brother Bill, I'm Sister Jill. If you won't tickle me, I won't tickle you." And he got down and just hugged her, and that did it for everybody. We all broke out laughing. There was constant chatter from that moment on, lots of hugs and love, and Pappy and my father became immediate friends, and they stayed close friends for the rest of Pappy's life. In fact, my father became the son that Pappy never had and Malcolm never did become for Pappy, despite Malcolm's unceasing efforts to live up to that role in Pappy's estimation.

LDB: And your dad moved into Rowan Oak, at that time?

VFJ: Oh, yes, until he could find work. There was never any question that my family would share living quarters at Rowan Oak, until we could get our lives in order.

LDB: Your mother and dad had their own bedroom. Jill had hers, I guess?

VFJ: I slept with Jill. By that time, Grandmama and Pappy had separate rooms. He slept in the middle room upstairs. Grandmama took the far back one, for hers.

LDB: Do you think this suggested a total rift between Faulkner and his wife?

VFJ: No, nor do I think occupying separate bedrooms was really a sign of frigidity, on Grandmama's part. Contraceptives were largely unknown, then, and I think Grandmama probably said, at the age of thirty-six or so, "Enough is enough." Her firstborn, my mother, had been delivered with forceps, which damaged her head. Alabama had died prematurely, and I don't know how difficult the births of Malcolm and Jill were. But after Jill was born, when Grandmama was thirty-six, I'm not surprised (in fact, I can empathize) that separate bedrooms were in order. She was a tired, sick lady, by then.

LDB: Between 1940 and mid-1942, there seemed to be a full house at Rowan Oak, much bustle and excitement. Faulkner was doing some of his best writing. But by July 1942, Rowan Oak was empty, again, except for the blacks and Estelle and Jill, almost like Scarlett, at Tara, after the war.

VFJ: Right, and Grandmama ran the place. And she did a damn good job of it! Almost single-handedly, she maintained Rowan Oak. She made repairs, grew and worked the victory garden, made it produce; she canned vegetables and made jams and jellies.

LDB: During the period from 1942 through September 1945, Faulkner spent most of his time in Hollywood. He would return home for Christmas and spend three-month periods the studio termed "suspensions," back in Oxford.

VFJ: Most of those "suspensions," I believe, were in the winter. Pappy was always home for Christmas, and he had to be there to butcher at least one hog a year, so we'd have meat for the next year. Those winter nights were spent upstairs, in Grandmama's room. She suffered from the cold, so we'd have a fire in the fireplace, and she'd read in bed, while we played cards—Pappy, Jill, and I. Grandmama read, all the time. She liked some of the Russian writers, particularly Dostoyevsky

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and Gogol, and I remember her reading Henry James and H. P. Lovecraft. I'd say her tastes were pretty eclectic. Pappy, Jill, and I would play a card game he had imported from Hollywood—he called it "Skombiel." I don't know where he got the word, but when he won (as he usually did, and with a vengeance), he'd shout it out just as if he'd shot the ass off a Nazi fighter pilot! I played my last game of Skombiel in March 1946. When I returned to Rowan Oak, to go to school in 1949, we'd moved up to canasta.

LDB: I believe most of Faulkner's productive time during those war years was spent elsewhere and with others than his immediate family. In fact, in Los Angeles, Faulkner had resumed his relationship with Meta Carpenter, who, in late 1941, conveniently divorced her husband, Wolfgang Rebner. When he did return from Hollywood, in September 1945, for the last time, where were you and your mother and father? Where was Malcolm? What was the connection that existed between all of you and Estelle and William Faulkner?

VFJ: First, let me back up a little and tell you about Malcolm. When my mother and I returned to Oxford, to Rowan Oak, from Shanghai, in 1940, Malcolm was still living with the Oldhams. He was seventeen and already doing research at the University of Mississippi, there in Oxford. He had a brilliant mind. He was a herpetologist, doing work in med school. He was doing phenomenal work on tropical diseases, so where did they send him, when he went into the Army? Instead of the Pacific, they sent him to Europe. That's the good old military for you!

LDB: He enlisted?

VFJ: He enlisted, on Pappy's advice.

LDB: I've read one very poignant letter Faulkner wrote, from Hollywood, to Malcolm, in early December 1942, in which he advises Malcolm to enlist because becoming a soldier, fighting for his country, will be "public proof of his masculinity: his courage and endurance, his willingness to sacrifice himself for the land which shaped his ancestors."

VFJ: But Malcolm did ask Pappy for his advice. I mean, it wasn't just gratuitous advice, and Pappy said he thought it would do Malcolm good. Pappy was as eager as my father to enlist. I think he was simply too old (older than he wanted to admit), and it was better anyway, because, literally, there was no one else in the Faulkner family, at that time, to support all its members.

LDB: Also, if Malcolm needed an example from his own immediate contemporaries, Jimmy Faulkner, his step-cousin, had just enlisted. Faulkner was very proud, especially because Jimmy was training to be a Marine pilot. And this was the highest, most glorious status William Faulkner could imagine a soldier attaining. For Malcolm, was this the first time he had left home, left Oxford?

VFJ: Yes . . . and no. In some respects, he had always been "away" from home.

LDB: Malcolm must have had considerable difficulty leaving his mother. Hundreds of extant letters attest to his attachment to Estelle, letters written almost on a daily basis, from various stations and camps in Europe as well as training posts in the United States, over a three-year period. He seemed inordinately tied to his mother. What is your memory of that? Your mother, you have said, was disdainful of your grandmother. Was Malcolm?

VFJ: I think Grandmama was the only parent Malcolm really did feel he had, and yet he lived all those years at the Oldhams. So that was the crutch he used. He didn't know his natural father at all, and he wasn't allowed to live with his

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mother and stepfather, so he grew up with doting grandparents and an aunt [Dorothy Oldham]. He was a physically weak child, and the Oldhams, having lost a boy themselves, bowed to his every whim. He learned to use them to get his way, and they spoiled him. As a minor, he inherited the estate of his Uncle Malcolm. I know the Oldhams used the liquid assets to keep their own household going, but Malcolm himself squandered the rest, later on. Since he was the eldest son, and believing totally in Salic law, he felt he should have inherited *all* of Cornell Franklin's estate *and* all of William Faulkner's, when they died. He felt gypped when the other children on either side got anything at all.

LDB: Lem and Lida Oldham must have lavished everything on Malcolm.

VFJ: Oh, yes, they spoiled him rotten.

LDB: From what Malcolm wrote in his book of recollections, *Bitterweeds: Life with William Faulkner at Rowan Oak*, it appears he had enormous respect and love for Faulkner.

VFJ: He did, and he wanted desperately to be accepted by Pappy, treated like a son, and the fact that he wasn't living at Rowan Oak made it all the more difficult.

LDB: Did Malcolm bear resentment toward his mother or stepfather or sister because your mother had grown up there at Rowan Oak and he had not?

VFJ: I don't think there's much doubt he felt excluded, though I don't believe he blamed this on anyone in particular. However, I do know that Malcolm regretted not knowing his own father.

LDB: Malcolm had been bereft of both his fathers, hadn't he?

VFJ: Yes, and this created a terrible, terrible insecurity, horrible insecurity. He didn't know where he belonged, which father was really his, and I think the potential for greatness was there, in him, but that he never reached it. And, at a certain point, he actually became quite mentally unstable, and he had problems for the rest of his life.

LDB: In the early years, what were some of the manifestations of psychological imbalance or instability? Did Malcolm begin drinking heavily, and, if so, was it in emulation of his mother and stepfather?

VFJ: I don't recall it, in those years. When he went off to war, my memory is of a brilliant young man, with a marvelous life ahead of him, with no significant problems. He was a dear, loving, all-American kid who also had this really wonderful mind; otherwise, he was rather average in appearance and demeanor. Of course, he did have an upset and screwed-up life, living with his grandparents and spinster aunt, rather than with his mother and stepfather or with his real father, but . . .

LDB: Why didn't Estelle ever insist on having Malcolm come live with them, out at Rowan Oak?

VFJ: Malcolm was a frail child. I believe Grandmama was concerned that life at Rowan Oak, in those early years of no indoor plumbing, etc., might be too rigorous for him. Then, after Jill was born and I, a few years later, there simply wasn't room for him, at Rowan Oak.

LDB: Would Faulkner have brooked that, found that arrangement acceptable?

VFJ: I don't think the Oldhams would have brooked it. They were the ones who were hanging on, and not just because of the money from Cornell but because they doted on Malcolm. Malcolm sort of replaced the son, Ned, they had had, who had died as a child. Yet, I can also remember how, on Christmases, after we would have our opening of presents, at Rowan Oak, we would always go up to South Lamar, and Pappy would drop us off at the Oldham house, and we would have another Christmas celebration there, with Malcolm and the Oldhams.

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LDB: And Faulkner would never go in?

VFJ: No. He never went into the house. He would take that time to go up and visit with his mother, Miss Maud.

LDB: He was not on speaking terms with Lem and Lida Oldham?

VFJ: No, I wouldn't say that, because Christmas dinner was always held back at Rowan Oak, and my great-grandparents would come down there, for that.

LDB: He would invite the Oldhams?

VFJ: Oh, yes. He always made them feel welcome in his home.

LDB: But he wouldn't go into their house—ever!

VFJ: That's right, because they had so heartily disapproved of his marriage to their daughter, in 1918 and, again, in 1929. That was Pappy's way of showing his pride: "No, you are welcome in my home because you are the parents of my wife and deserve respect, as such, but I will never go into your house, never!" And I can remember begging Pappy to come in and enjoy the festivities.

LDB: Will you focus your thoughts on Malcolm, again? Tell me what happened when he enlisted.

VFJ: The war really messed Malcolm up. He was with the Medical Corps, right behind Patton, as they opened up the death camps, and the horrors that he saw really screwed up his mind.

LDB: What makes you privy to that insight?

VFJ: I remember, when Malcolm got back, after the war in Europe was over, he moved in, again, with the Oldhams. I was eight years old and very much aware of what was going on, then. My father had left for China, in late September 1945, but my mother and I didn't leave until April of '46, so during those eight months or so, in Oxford, I was with Malcolm enough to recognize traumatic effects the war had had on him. I can recall my mother holding him, while he sobbed over the horrors he had seen firsthand. He cried all the time; he had horrible nightmares.

LDB: Faulkner was home from Hollywood when Malcolm returned from the war. I know that he was very sympathetic toward Malcolm and considered him his loving son. A number of books he gave Malcolm during that period carry inscriptions which confirm Faulkner's love for "my son," in very touching, compassionate terms.

VFJ: I think that was one of the few times in Malcolm's life, when he felt Pappy had actually taken pride in him, for doing what he had done, for going to war, for volunteering, wanting to go. And, let's face it, Malcolm was a very young man.

LDB: Also, Faulkner was being very protective, very nurturing during this time, doubtless because of the incipient instability coupled with increased drinking he must have detected.

VFJ: Yes. By then, after the war was over, all of us were aware of the horror of the Holocaust, the atrocities of war, which, unfortunately, Malcolm had witnessed.

LDB: Once back in Oxford, again, after the war, what became of Malcolm?

VFJ: Well, he went to the university. He resumed working on a degree, which he never did get. He fell in love with Gloria Moss, in 1947. I think, maybe, Pappy had an inkling that it was not going to work out as a marriage, because he sent Malcolm out to China, and, once again, he communicated with Cornell Franklin, saying, "I think it would be a good idea for Malcolm to get away from here and for him to see you."

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LDB: Faulkner was concerned about that. He didn't think it was a proper match, and he sent Malcolm out to visit Cornell Franklin, in Shanghai, China?

VFJ: Yes. My grandfather Franklin had a very beautiful home there, and Corney was in school in the States, so there was plenty of room.

LDB: Is that where you were living?

VFJ: No, my father and mother and I lived in an apartment in Shanghai, but Malcolm stayed with my grandfather. And he became totally morose and, literally, would cry, in his beer, over Gloria. Finally, my grandfather couldn't stand it anymore, and he called Pappy and said, "Can you get the damn woman over here so they can marry?" I mean, Malcolm was an embarrassment. All he did was cry, even in front of perfect strangers. Granddaddy had no patience with that kind of behavior. He was a very strong, domineering, athletic man, and he considered it unmanly to cry. So Malcolm wasn't getting any sympathy from him, and, at times, even my mother was disgusted by his actions.

LDB: Was your mother weak like her brother?

VFJ: No! Definitely not!

LDB: Do you feel, perhaps, this strain, which Malcolm exhibited, came from your grandmother, or . . . ?

VFJ: I do, but I give Grandmama a lot of credit, too, more than most do, because I have seen her be very strong and so unselfish and so giving. One has to have immense courage to be that giving of oneself. But I'd have to say, also, that there was a strain of weakness in Grandmama, genetically, which Malcolm inherited and, perhaps, even exploited, to get his way with her. It should be said, as well, that Malcolm's visit to Shanghai, with his father, was pretty scary. Since leaving there as a baby, in 1925 or 1926, he had seen his father only two or three brief times: once in late '42, when Cornell, Dallas, and Corney had been repatriated (before Malcolm went to Europe, as a soldier), and maybe a couple of times after the war was over. He didn't know his father, and Cornell could be an intimidating man. Poor Malcolm didn't stand a chance.

LDB: Needless to say, your grandmother had to be very concerned, worried, and overly protective of Malcolm, at that time.

VFJ: Naturally. I mean, that was part of the problem, from the beginning. He had been such a sickly child, and the Oldhams convinced Grandmama that he was better off staying there than with Pappy and her, at Rowan Oak, in the unheated house with no bathroom, etc. But I think Grandmama always felt guilty about not keeping Malcolm closer to her while he was growing up.

LDB: So, in the later years, she spent a great deal of time with Malcolm.

VFJ: Yes, coddling him, which he did *not* need. He needed a swift kick in the ass! Malcolm's problems arose from *overnurturing*, I think. There were the grandparents and an indulgent aunt; and my mother, too, was very protective of Malcolm, her brother. Over the years, I think she was the only one who really *liked* him. They had a rapport that no one could shake. Even when Mac attacked me, once, later on, my mother refused to believe it and reduced it all to an overly active imagination on my part. Finally, during his divorce from Gloria, he had a complete breakdown, and Pappy brought him up to Virginia, thinking it might help to get him away from Oxford. But he got crazier and crazier, so Pappy took him to a hospital in Richmond. When my mother found out, she was furious and wanted to get him out, right away. She refused to believe that her little Mac was mentally ill.

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LDB: Faulkner had recognized, all along, that Malcolm's slow undoing was the coddling, hadn't he, that his sense of manhood was being stifled?

VFJ: Yes, but unfortunately, Pappy has gotten a lot of criticism for having tried to offset that, by treating Malcolm more sternly and for having tried to instill in him more sense of discipline and responsibility toward his own person, other persons, and personal objectives. In fact, Pappy was attempting to make Malcolm a more self-reliant, independent person. I really feel that the contempt some have had for Pappy, for his rough treatment of Malcolm, was unwarranted and certainly undeserved.

LDB: Let me shift the focus, a little, by underscoring the fact that generally, with the exception of his problem with Malcom, the years between his return from Hollywood, in 1945 and late 1947, were relatively peaceful and tranquil, if artistically infertile, ones for Faulkner. However, by 1948 he got an idea, which, perhaps, Phil Stone, his good friend and lawyer, in Oxford, had suggested to him and which may have spawned the book-length novella *Intruder in the Dust*. Although Faulkner could not have realized it, soon his solitude would dissolve. Its diminishment would coincide with publication of *Intruder* and the attendant publicity the book would generate. It dealt with the fomenting issues of civil rights and race relations in the South.

VFJ: Also, *Intruder in the Dust* was an easier book to read than earlier novels Pappy had written. And probably, it was an easier book for him to write. Basically, it was a mystery story.

LDB: Can you recall the time, early in 1949, when MGM sent Clarence Brown and his film crew to Oxford, to do on-location shooting of *Intruder*?

VFJ: I remember the crew scouting around for outdoor locations. In town, they found the house they wanted to use, pretty quickly, but I think it was Pappy, himself, who suggested Pea Ridge Road for one of the early scenes, where Claude Jarman is going across the log and falls into the creek below. And my father and Pappy and Jill and I would go out there and watch them shoot—pouring paraffin on the water to make it look like an icy stream. You know, it was kind of hokum but a hell of a lot of fun. One of Jill's classmates was Claude's stand-in, and he fell off that log, into the cold water, five or six times, so that Clarence Brown could get the cameras located properly. Then Claude did it, and they cut a "take" immediately.

LDB: What did Faulkner think of all that?

VFJ: Oh, he was fascinated, spellbound, and amused. That paraffin could look so much like ice was intriguing.

LDB: Did he intermingle or socialize with the crew and actors?

VFJ: More than I would have thought he might have.

LDB: Was there anyone, in particular, to whom he was most drawn?

VFJ: Oh, well, Miss Patterson he adored. Elizabeth Patterson. She was Miss Habersham in the movie. And he was taken by Juano Hernandez, who was a fine gentleman. He played the role of Lucas.

LDB: In those days, Oxford was a very segregated, closed society, wasn't it?

VFJ: Absolutely!

LDB: What were conditions like for Juano Hernandez, in Oxford, during the filming of *Intruder*?

VFJ: Well, Grandmama and Pappy wanted to entertain everyone, and, of course, his was the leading role in the film. But they were told, in no uncertain terms, that to have Mr. Hernandez to their home would cause such a brouhaha that they did not dare.

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LDB: You're talking about entertaining him, at Rowan Oak?

VFJ: Yes.

LDB: And they did not invite him?

VFJ: They did not invite *anyone*! Pappy was furious but managed to stifle his anger. Instead, they had a small party for Claude, with the teenagers—Jill's friends, mainly, who, of course, were all white, at that time—1949.

LDB: And that's because . . .

VFJ: Because they were told it couldn't be done without causing trouble. They intended to go ahead anyway until a relative, Bob Williams—Sally Murry Williams' husband—and the mayor of Oxford, at the time, came and begged Pappy not to do it, for the sake of peace in the town.

LDB: So Juano Hernandez himself actually became the "intruder." And they found a home for him, in a black family's residence, in Oxford.

VFJ: Yes, he stayed with a black family the whole time and socialized with no one, when not on the set.

LDB: After the movie was finished, the premiere was held at the Lyric Theater, in town—Bob Williams's theater, if I recall—on October 12, 1949.

VFJ: There was tremendous excitement. Oxford put on a parade. There had been parades before, but we'd never had *three* marching bands and *three* floats. I mean, it was something, for that little town. Talk about a high. I mean, everybody really put on the dog. Grandmama made a dress for me, with taffeta I'd brought back from Hong Kong.

LDB: And Faulkner. Was he excited or frightened by all the celebration?

VFJ: Initially he was pleased, but then he backed off. I think he had gotten a little too close.

LDB: He realized he had stirred something up that wasn't . . .

VFJ: Yes, he was upset and disappointed about the Hernandez incident, for one thing, how it reflected badly on his hometown and on his state, and, also, just the inevitability of facing that movie on the giant screen, where everybody would have the opportunity to criticize it, got to him. He had to back off and rebuild his defenses, in case it did not go well. I believe Pappy was quite aware that his views were not commonly held and that, now, they were also going to be on parade.

LDB: Among other acknowledgments and addresses preliminary to the showing of the movie, for the first time in public, the Lyric "Premiere Program" for *Intruder in the Dust* announced that the novel's author, William Faulkner, would make a speech to the audience in attendance.

VFJ: Pappy made a very insignificant speech. In fact, his remarks were more just an inaudible mumbling of words, very quick and very short.

LDB: Was there a problem getting him to the function, that evening?

VFJ: Yes, there was. The whole town went all out for the cast and crew members who returned for the premiere. The university gave a formal ball, and Pappy refused to go to that.

LDB: Did Juano Hernandez return to Oxford, for the premiere?

VFJ: No, he did not.

LDB: Claude Jarman did, didn't he?

VFJ: No, he couldn't either; he was shooting on location, somewhere else.

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LDB: What was the nature of the difficulty getting Faulkner to make an appearance, that evening of the premiere?

VFJ: Well, he dug in his heels and said, "No," he wasn't going.

LDB: Specifically, what did he do?

VFJ: He stayed up in his room, in his pajamas, and refused to get dressed, to go out. He was like a child throwing a tantrum, digging in heels and saying, "No, no, no." Physically, he was stronger than any of us women—Jill, Dean, me, and Grandmama. There was no way that we could force him to go, so we just stood there entreating him. We were all dressed up to the nines, you know. Thinking back on it, now, it was pretty hilarious, but it wasn't funny then.

LDB: Luckily, there was one woman who finally did convince him.

VFJ: Yes. Aunt 'Bama McLean. She was a very formidable woman and one of Pappy's favorites. She was the Old Colonel's daughter, from Memphis, the only surviving member of that part of the family. In her grand-nephew's eyes, she was indomitable. And that evening, fortunately for all of us, she prevailed.

LDB: Who had contacted her?

VFJ: Everyone had known about the premiere, for weeks and weeks, and she wouldn't have missed it for the world. But Pappy would not have invited her. Probably, Grandmama extended the invitation, and, likely, with the notion that she might have to be the one to coerce the "stubborn mule."

LDB: So Aunt 'Bama was going to be in Oxford, anyway. But it was only with her coaxing that Faulkner consented to go. How did she do it?

VFJ: Well, she came down to the house, so that all of us could go to the theater together.

LDB: You mean it had gotten that late? It was that close to the time for the ceremonies to begin, and he was still refusing?

VFJ: Yes, there was to be a cocktail reception, at the Mansion (restaurant), just before the showing of the film, and he was the only man in our midst, and Aunt 'Bama darn well just said, "We need an escort, Billy, and you're going to be it," and he didn't, couldn't, refuse her.

LDB: And he got dressed up in his best duds, I suppose.

VFJ: Yes. Yes, he got all gussied up, like a peacock strutting around almost. But it was Aunt 'Bama who made him do it. We had to take two cars, there were so many of us.

LDB: That had to have been quite a scene, too: six women and William Faulkner pulling up in front of the Lyric Theater.

VFJ: There were Grandmama, Jill, Dean, Aunt 'Bama, Miss Maud, and me. With the klieg lights out front, it was so funny. I mean, this dingy, rat-ridden theater, with all the sweeping lights in the sky, and Pappy, in his formal attire, escorting a pack of six formally-dressed ladies. The whole spectacle was something Oxford had never seen.

LDB: Although he couldn't have realized it then, digging in his heels, in the upstairs bedroom of Rowan Oak, may have been the last time he would find sanctuary there.

VFJ: Well, I think, with this premiere showing and the fame and everything, suddenly he was scared again, and he wanted to retreat. He wanted his privacy again, wanted it back, very badly. He wasn't too sure he wanted that celebrity, after all. It was even worse when he got the Nobel Prize, about a year later—at least this time, he didn't go on a binge.

LDB: But now, he had stirred it up; actually, he had begun making it worse.



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VFJ: Yes, he had definitely gone too far. He couldn't stop it.

LDB: At least the movie version of *Intruder* made the public aware of William Faulkner, Mississippi, Oxford, and the seemingly "typical southern plight" of the white/Negro problem in the South.

VFJ: The movie was not just a good one; it also was true to Pappy's book.

LDB: Through it, Faulkner had made the public take notice of his home state and its racial dilemma. But how about the very immediate public reaction of Oxford?

VFJ: Before the book and movie appeared, Oxford had regarded Pappy pretty much as an eccentric failure. Suddenly, though, he had brought fame and glamour to the town, to Oxford. But along with it, they did not agree with that film, certainly not with the implications of its conclusion. They could not and would not accept, as viable, his stand about the Negro and civil rights, so there was tremendous resentment, rancor, controversy, and open hostility toward him and the Faulkner family—toward all of us.

LDB: Specifically, who in the family resented him?

VFJ: His brother, John, and his wife, Lucille, and that whole side of the family. I don't know that they ever had words, but, perhaps, it was jealousy on John's part, because he would never accomplish much with his own writing. They were avowed segregationists, and they went out and joined the Citizens' Council right away, to thwart progress. That was their reaction.

LDB: How about debates or scenes within the family? Miss Maud's reaction? Were there heated arguments, vindictiveness, unhealed wounds? Was Miss Maud embarrassed, ashamed, angry?

VFJ: I never talked with Miss Maud, directly, about civil rights. I don't know if she shared John's cynical, negative views, but she probably thought that Billy had gone a little too far in his liberal attitude. Whether she discussed or argued such issues with Pappy, I just don't know.

LDB: My impression from letters I've read, between Miss Maud and Phil Stone, is that she also was a strong "segregationist," as you put it. Regardless, Faulkner had caused considerable animosity and hostility within the family, as well as from without.

VFJ: Oh, yes. There is no doubt about that!

LDB: In the minds of people in his hometown and in his state.

VFJ: A lot of his own former close friends. There were many who did not want to associate with him anymore.

LDB: Or did not dare to, for political or commercial reasons. William Faulkner had become a dangerous agent, someone espousing seditious views which, if sided with, could completely ruin one's business or chances of succeeding in gaining political office. Worse, after he received the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, in December 1950, he became extremely vocal and began submitting open letters to the editors of important national newspapers.

VFJ: Also, the Nobel Prize made him more powerful. The town really feared him. He had access to the world. And now the world would know all about Oxford, Mississippi, and its prejudices and mores and cultural biases and attitudes.

LDB: Indeed, he was in a position to expose bigotry and prejudice, which had been an influential part of his heritage.

VFJ: Right. But I think he always did this with mixed feelings. I don't think there was ever a time when he didn't realize that this was his own background, his own native land, his heritage, and that, by exposing these inherent evils, he was simultaneously indicting himself as well. He never wanted to be thought of as a traitor. He felt a deep love for Mississippi,

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but he also knew that the route Mississippi had taken was wrong, basically, humanly wrong, and he could not help speaking out. Pappy was not a political animal, but here he was, involved in political aspects of the civil rights movement in the South, and he was a moderate. But being a moderate in Mississippi, in those days, meant being a flaming liberal. He became embroiled in politics, which was not his milieu, and he was being badgered, constantly, for opinions. Many people wanted him to be more liberal, and he retreated. He was a moderate, and he didn't want to offend his own place or people anymore.

LDB: Frequently, his public statements were misread, depending upon who was interpreting them. Some saw him as holding to the middle ground, which, indeed, was what he was espousing: namely, that changes had to be made now; but *now*, for Faulkner, didn't mean today or next week.

VFJ: All too often, he was misunderstood by both liberals and radicals. Yes, you are correct. Some people were reading him as a segregationist; others, the desegregationists, were pushing him to take a hard-line stance, and he was begging for more time from everyone: "Give us time and we'll correct this." And when the Supreme Court decision came down, in 1954, Pappy contended that there was no way you could *legislate* attitudes; you had to *educate* people to them. [But] there's no doubt that almost all of Pappy's associates, friends, and many who didn't know him at all found him traitorous and his public sentiments reprehensible.

LDB: By the mid-fifties, Faulkner and his wife realized the course they were on was not a viable one. The celebrity he had achieved within the last six or eight years was empty and didn't consist of the stuff he had dreamed, as a youth, it would. Estelle would begin to correct her problem, by attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, but Faulkner would suffer extremely debilitating consequences during this time. Foremost, he was a writer, a fictionist, not a polemicist. And if he were to be a propagandist at all, one who did care about "changing the world," it would have to be of a much more subtle, less didactic persuasion. All his finest fiction had been woven of these qualities. In fact, what Faulkner suddenly discovered was that he *was* a propagandist, a politician, and . . .

VFJ: He was frightened about it, terrified at finding out just how far away he had gotten from that which he did best.

LDB: By mid-decade, he was suffering severe stress, exacerbated by acute drinking and distractions from all corners: the State Department, extramarital affairs, and anonymous citizens in and out of Mississippi confronting and challenging him on racial issues. He realized it was time for him to attempt to realign his priorities, among which was the need to get back to his writing. Essentially, his life was far too occupied with activities and visions that were counterproductive to writing fiction.

VFJ: Writing fiction *at home!*

LDB: Right. From 1950 through 1955, Faulkner had been very much away from home, uprooted, dislocated.

VFJ: Both geographically and spiritually. I think he was lost, losing it, in those years. We left Mississippi, in June 1952. Already, he was very much involved with Joan Williams. I think even Pappy realized the hopelessness of that. Joan was saying no. But, of course, there were other women as well, as we now know. He was a pitiful man, at that point. He was lost. He didn't seem to know where to go. And he was traveling. He was a celebrity, meeting people, influential people, and he was also meeting women. And most of all, Pappy was away from his family. His country had turned against him. I mean his country in terms of Mississippi and Oxford. I think he sank into a despair, and that was the cause of his excessive drinking. His health was just going to pot because of it.

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LDB: In letters Estelle wrote to Saxe and Dorothy Commins, she confirmed that Faulkner virtually hadn't been home, at all, between 1950 through 1954. He really was at odds. Rowan Oak had been invaded; it had ceased providing him with that refugelike state of contentment and tranquillity it once had. To make it worse, at one point, during the early fifties, he was having affairs with Else Jonsson, in Stockholm, Joan Williams, Meta Rebner, and, within another year, 1953, he would become smitten by a teenager, Jean Stein.

VFJ: I think these women were just poor substitutes for more substantial rewards he was searching so hard for, to fulfill his life. He wasn't gaining rewards from his writing, despite the numerous awards his writing was residually receiving. *A Fable* had not come out as he had wanted. That was his biggest disappointment during those years.

LDB: And *Requiem for a Nun* had not really been the great "experimental" novel some critics considered it to be.

VFJ: I don't think he cared as much about *Requiem*. I really don't! Frankly, Ruth Ford had bothered him, for years, to do that one, because she wanted to be a star, and she thought it was a good story. Sure, Pappy had it as a story before he actually started a play, dialogue, and Ruth pushed and pushed him. It was not one of the things he really wanted to do, because he knew that his forte was not straight dialogue.

LDB: Other than for *Requiem for a Nun* and *A Fable*, both of which were derivative legacies from earlier conceptions, Faulkner's publications between 1949 and 1957 consisted of collections and compilations of rewritten stories, almost all of which had appeared years earlier. These books had been concocted as sales ploys; to follow up on Faulkner's Nobel Prize publicity, and mostly were done under the fatherly guidance of his editor and trusted confidant, Saxe Commins.

VFJ: Thank God for Saxe! And for Dorothy, his wife. Pappy said she was one of the kindest women he had ever known. I believe the Comminses saved Pappy's life, during the fifties—literally.

LDB: Even with Saxe's assistance, the writing was not very consequential.

VFJ: You're right. Very little of it seemed consequential and even less that he was particularly fond of. He had had such high hopes that *A Fable* would be his greatest novel. He dedicated it to Jill, because he thought it was going to be his chef-d'oeuvre, but he was not satisfied when it went to print—it wasn't good. And that was another source of depression. Things really hit an all-time low, I think, in '54. And to make matters worse, Jill got married, that year.

LDB: That had to be very depressing.

VFJ: Certainly. Pappy went on a binge as soon as she got married, right after the wedding. And so did Grandmama, but that was the last one for her, as far as I know.

LDB: In many respects, 1954 seems to have marked the nadir in the lives of Estelle and William Faulkner.

VFJ: Indeed. I agree. That was an extremely bleak period in their relationship. Grandmama had not yet really decided to lick her drinking problem, but she was beginning to see the necessity of doing so, if for no other reason than for Jill's well-being. And Jill, herself, was actually playing a role in Grandmama's change. She had insisted that Pappy make an agreement, with Grandmama, to provide her with adequate funds, to allow her some freedom. After all, Pappy had been traveling, leaving for months at a time, without providing Grandmama with enough money to keep up Rowan Oak. He was taking off around the world, going to Egypt, to Europe. He was doing all these things while expecting her to sit home, alone, at Rowan Oak, and that was immediately after Jill got married. Grandmama was very lonely. Nobody was there. That's

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when my parents suggested she come to the Philippines. She protested all the way to the airplane, but she did get on the plane and go, much to Pappy's amazement. He was surprised at her independence, in doing that — that she got a visa, the papers done, had her inoculations, and went. And she was gone for three months. On her flight back home, she came to visit me, in Switzerland, where I was attending school. She even spent a week in Paris and some time in Rome, on the way—all by herself.

LDB: And it was shortly after this that Estelle determined to commit herself to the AA cure.

VFJ: Yes, I think so, though she may have already started getting help some months before, because she was wonderfully herself during those days in Switzerland.

LDB: From that point forth, there seemed to be a different relationship between William and Estelle Faulkner.

VFJ: It certainly didn't happen overnight, though. I don't think Pappy trusted her, for a couple of years. He kept watching, to see if she would relapse into her drinking.

LDB: Yet Faulkner maintained his own double standard, didn't he? She could attempt to cure herself, but there was no way he was going to quit. He continued to deteriorate.

VFJ: No. Pappy was not the same kind of alcoholic Grandmama was. He could control his drinking if he wanted to, and I guess he couldn't understand why Grandmama couldn't do the same thing. My grandmother was the classic alcoholic: a glass of wine at dinner was enough to set her off. Once she started, she couldn't stop and wouldn't until she passed out. That was it. I mean, she was a *real* alcoholic. It had an allergic effect on her. On the other hand, Pappy could drink socially and not get drunk. He could have a few drinks, wine at dinner, and that would be that. But when he was under a great deal of stress, he might decide, "I'm going on a binge," and he would make the decision consciously and soberly.

LDB: That strikes me as a very selfish act.

VFJ: Without a doubt. But Pappy would do that. Often, he struck me as a willful child who merely wanted his own way. I remember one incident that occurred after Jill married Paul, that August of 1954. Grandmama drank at the wedding, and that started her off. Dorothy and Saxe left, and my parents had to go on, elsewhere. I was left, after the wedding, at Rowan Oak, with Grandmama and Pappy. I had just learned to drive, that summer, and I didn't drive too well, and I didn't have a license yet. Grandmama went off the deep end and was in bed, immobile, out! She had lost her baby. Her Jill was gone.

LDB: That summer Estelle suffered severe hemorrhaging and had to be hospitalized. That could have been a few months earlier.

VFJ: Yes, she did have ulcers, I'm sure from keeping everything inside her. She never burdened anyone with the knowledge of Pappy's affairs, except in her letters to Saxe and Dorothy Commins, because they were the only people she confided in. And she never, never told her children. She never let out all this agony, so she got ulcers, and it was exacerbated by the drinking, of course. Pappy also realized his baby had gotten married and gone away, and he sort of looked around, and you could almost see the wheels working — "Stelle's gone and done it; I might as well, too." He went on a binge of binges. I was there by myself. Finally, after two days or so of my trying to keep at least the beds clean of vomit and excrement and everything else, Pappy; somehow, in his drunken stupor, realized I couldn't take it anymore, couldn't handle it. I was too immature. I really couldn't drive. I couldn't go to the bootlegger for them or do anything, really. Pappy kept mumbling, in

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his stupor, "Get Malcolm! Get Malcolm to take me to Byhalia." Two days later, having gone to the grocery store; to get something to put into Grandmama, so she could sober up, I drove into the driveway, and Pappy was sitting out on the front porch, in his favorite rocking chair, like he had never been away, and I said, "Pappy, I'm so glad to see you," and he said, "Yessum, I knew you were in trouble." Even in his drunken state, he realized I couldn't cope with the situation, and he'd gone to "dry out." Grandmama took a while longer.

LDB: Fundamentally, Faulkner was a very conscious drinker, and even in that drunken state you described, he knew what was going on.

VFJ: True, but my grandmother, no! She was blotto; she passed out. When she woke up from bouts like that one, she never knew anything that was going on or what had gone on. She would just take another drink and pass out again.

LDB: Faulkner used alcohol to balance his tension, didn't he?

VFJ: Yes, he did.

LDB: Buzz Bezzerides has told me similar tales that occurred during the time Faulkner worked, in the early to mid-forties, at Warner Bros. Yet I have not encountered one person who has ever expressed the notion that Faulkner drank heavily, if at all, during periods when he was writing.

VFJ: The question of Pappy's drinking has been asked of me, often — "Did Faulkner drink while he was writing his fiction?" Also, "Was his writing affected by his drinking?" I have always said, "Absolutely not, because when he drank, or when he was drunk, anyway, he couldn't get down the stairs, to the typewriter, to write. I mean, he would be in bed, ranting and raving, hollering for me to play Mozart...which reminds me, Pappy had no knowledge of music that I'm aware of, but knowing that the Oldham side of the family was musically oriented, he somehow decided that Mozart was the great "guru," and Mozart was what he yelled for when he was drunk. Many years after the big Nobel Prize binge, I was practicing a Handel piece, when he came in, one afternoon. Knowing his aversion to "noise," I stopped. But he said I could keep on playing, because he liked Mozart so much. I never told him it was Handel, because I figured that if he didn't know the difference *sober*, I could slip in some Handel, the next time he got drunk and demanded Mozart. That was in 1960, though, and I never had the chance to fool him.

LDB: At any given time, Faulkner's condition was a response to his own volition. He could determine his own state, could willfully impose the condition on himself.

VFJ: I remember when he had been out drinking with his hunting buddies, for a week, and he hadn't gotten drunk. He had been drinking socially, but he was not drunk. But when he got home and learned that he had been selected to receive the Nobel Prize, within a month or so, in Stockholm, and realized that he was going to have to face that audience, make that trip, submit himself to protocol, suddenly he said, "I can't handle it! I ain't going!" His only response was to start hitting the bottle. And I'm telling you, we had a time getting him to Sweden, at all.

LDB: Shades of the premiere of *Intruder in the Dust*.

VFJ: That occasion had been child's play compared to this spectacle. Talk about tantrums and displays.

LDB: And he got very sick on that trip. But let's focus on that period a little more closely. We discussed Faulkner's passage from the forties through the mid-fifties, suggesting that 1954 might be considered a catastrophic low-water mark in his life. Perhaps that period gave Faulkner sufficient alarm and caused him to reassess himself as a family man and as a public figure.

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VFJ: Yes, indeed. And as a *writer*. Yes, I believe the change started about the time Pappy went to Charlottesville, as writer-in-residence at the university. You see, Jill had settled there with Paul, and their first child, Tad, was born in the spring of 1956.

LDB: This may have been the beginning of a new life together, for Estelle and William Faulkner.

VFJ: Yes, I believe so. They became very close friends again. At times, they even looked and seemed like they were a newly married couple. There was a joy they shared, and Pappy took pride in Grandmama's having licked her alcoholism. He was very proud of her. I don't think he felt she ever would have had the guts to do it, but she did quit, and without too damn much help from him, either.

LDB: Would it be a fair assessment to suggest that when it came down to those last six years of Faulkner's life, 1956-1962, he came full circle, that in his mature years, the image, the vision, that, as a young man, he had possessed of Estelle Oldham, the one who had married away from him, caused him so much heartache, actually returned to him absolved, vindicated, redeemed?

VFJ: Oh, I think so. Definitely! Actually, despite all his other affairs, I believe that Grandmama always had been at the center of Pappy's emotional life.

LDB: I've been told there was a new tenderness between them.

VFJ: Yes, there was. And it was lovely to see.

LDB: In 1956, Faulkner started working on new fiction. *The Town* would embody his attempt to tie up major loose ends he had been contemplating since the early twenties, when he and Phil Stone had idled away days, fabricating humorous anecdotes about the Snopes clan of Yoknapatawpha County. By 1957, the book was published. In 1959, he followed *The Town* with the concluding volume of his "Snopes Trilogy," *The Mansion*.

VFJ: I think those books reflect the new peace of mind that had come to Pappy because Grandmama had licked her alcoholism and he suddenly saw her as a completely different and new and appealing woman. He tremendously admired her fortitude, and it showed in his work, as a mellowing force.

LDB: Estelle admired his writing, didn't she?

VFJ: She did. Yes! And whenever Pappy would finish a new novel, type it out, he would ask her to read it. This was a consistent routine for him, throughout the years. I remember being at Rowan Oak, one afternoon toward the end. Grandmama and I were sitting and talking in the kitchen. It was in the early spring, sort of a chilly day, and Pappy came in from the barn, and Grandmama said, "Billy, I think now is the time to tell her. Don't you want to tell Vicki something?" And he looked rather smug, with a little smile, just proud of himself as he could be, and he said, "Vic-Pic, I've got a new book coming out," and I said, "Oh, Pappy, that's great! What's it about?" And he said, "No, you're going to have to read it," and I said, "What is it called?" He replied, "*The Reivers*," and I said, "What does that mean? I've never heard that word before." He said, "It's 'The Thieves'; it's a Scottish word I found and liked," and he told me about how he had debated its spelling. He said, "Vic-Pic, the best part is that it's dedicated to you and to my other grandchildren, and you head the list." I just wanted to cry. I mean, it pleased me so much. I just kept on saying, "What's it all about, what's it all about?" He said, "Vic-Pic, it's the funniest story I've ever read"—not *written*, but ever *read*. And he was just smiling all over himself, and he was happy, and

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you could see Grandmama was happy. She was sharing it with him, right there. They didn't hold hands or touch or anything like that, but they were together in his happiness, their happiness.

LDB: And in what respect, did you head Faulkner's list?

VFJ: Well, I was the eldest. But I mean I was a *stepgrandchild*.

LDB: Were you really a *stepgrandchild*?

VFJ: I guess not to Pappy. He considered me his grandchild, and that's what pleased me so much. He could have dedicated *The Reivers* just to Jill's children—Tad, Will, and Bok—but he did include me and Mark, Malcolm's son. And he did it according to age. I was at the top. I was the firstborn of Pappy's grandchildren.

LDB: Although Faulkner never legally adopted Estelle Franklin's two children, Victoria and Malcolm, there was never any question of his fatherly sentiments; they were unequivocally his daughter and son. His dedication of *The Reivers* proclaimed and celebrated his steadfast love and devotion to his son and two daughters, by commemorating their five children.

VFJ: Sadly, Pappy died before he could autograph a copy of *The Reivers* for me. Actually, he did inscribe one for my parents, the first of June. He and Grandmama had come back to Oxford, from Charlottesville, especially to attend my graduation from Ole Miss. But I was not staying at Rowan Oak, rather at Jim and Dutch Silver's house, on campus. Then everything got rushed, and I was gone. When I did return, in late August or early September, with Mama and my fiancé, to discuss possibilities of having my wedding at Rowan Oak, Grandmama gave me the copy of *The Reivers* Pappy had saved to inscribe for me; and Jill wrote in it, "For Vicki, because Pappy would have—if he'd had the time before July."

LDB: Let's backtrack, once again. When William and Estelle Faulkner were in Charlottesville, did they rent a house or buy one?

VFJ: When he assumed the position of writer-in-residence, they rented. I recall they rented one place on Ivy Road (where I stayed, once), then a second place at 917 Rugby Road, which they ended up purchasing.

LDB: But they still made an effort to keep ties with Rowan Oak, with Oxford, with Mississippi, didn't they?

VFJ: Oh, yes. They were always there, at Christmas, at least through 1956, while I was in college. After that, I think they may have celebrated Christmas in Charlottesville. And, usually, they returned in the spring, so that Pappy could get in some jumping and Grandmama could tend her rose garden. They made three or four trips a year, going back and forth. They never flew. Grandmama and Pappy shared the long drive back to Oxford and then the return to Charlottesville. And even though their hearts were now with Jill and her growing family, Rowan Oak remained very important.

LDB: Yet in Virginia, he had found a new home, and he was very flattered to count as friends the sophisticated horse and hunting crowds, flattered that they would admit him into their circles. I can understand how, in his mellowing, he might have considered their acceptance of him and his family a sign that he had "arrived." After all, his whole life he had set up their manner of living as a standard of the highest order, to be sought after and emulated.

VFJ: Well, yes and no. Don't forget, there was a great deal of snobbism in Pappy, and that society was rife with snobs. Actually, only a very small part of Pappy's life touched theirs.

LDB: Faulkner was never willing to abandon, completely, his roots.

VFJ: Nor could he have, even if that had been his choice.

LDB: When Faulkner died, in early July 1962, he and Estelle were in Oxford.

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VFJ: Yes. As I said, they had come back for my graduation from Ole Miss.

LDB: Did Jill return to Oxford, with them, to attend your graduation?

VFJ: No. She had three little children. But Grandmama and Pappy gave me a wonderful party at Rowan Oak.

LDB: Your grandfather died less than a month later, didn't he?

VFJ: Yes. It was a shock.

LDB: Did Estelle go into a depression when Faulkner died?

VFJ: She was devastated, utterly devastated, but I wouldn't call it a depression, where she let herself go, and she certainly didn't resort to drinking. She hadn't touched a drop since 1955. Not a drop!

LDB: It was Faulkner's wish that one-half interest in Rowan Oak should go to your mother and one-half to Jill.

VFJ: Well, he had deeded Rowan Oak to Jill, in 1954 when she was twenty-one, to avoid future inheritance-tax problems. But he thought my mother had always gotten the short end of the stick, with regard to her own father, Cornell, who had left her practically nothing, so what he did (and Jill and Grandmama agreed) was to see that one-half of Jill's share should be transferred to Grandmama, then have Grandmama deed that share to my mother. My mother would inherit one-half interest in Rowan Oak when both were gone.

LDB: Was that how it worked out?

VFJ: Yes and no. Since Jill, as executrix, had the burden of estate taxes on her shoulders, Mama relinquished her right to the property, so that Jill could sell it and pay the taxes.

LDB: All right, but it was certainly understood that Faulkner's hope was that your mother and father would eventually occupy Rowan Oak.

VFJ: Yes. They would retire there, keep it intact, always as a place for any member of the family. It would always be home for the Faulkners and the Franklins and the Fieldens.

LDB: But shortly after her father died, Jill realized his original intention was not feasible. Instead, she attempted to interest the State of Mississippi and the university, in taking it over and preserving it as a memorial.

VFJ: Not at that point! Jill was the executrix of Pappy's estate, yet she was having severe problems, because, apparently, Pappy hadn't gotten the best legal and financial advice about his will. Jill was really stuck with paying the taxes, since most of the royalties from Pappy's books were tied up at Random House. Essentially, what my father agreed to do, at the time he could retire, was to assume my mother's half-share in Rowan Oak and buy Jill's share. But my father became ill with cancer, and it was obvious that he would not be able to maintain Rowan Oak. He died in 1970, and Jill was strapped with the taxes. Her only recourse was to sell Rowan Oak. My mother realized that Jill was bearing all the burden, and she agreed to the sale to Ole Miss, which was effected in 1973.

LDB: There would have been no way Estelle would have considered moving back to Oxford and occupying Rowan Oak, living there alone, would there?

VFJ: No way at all. As I said, she was devastated by Pappy's death. I remember a few months after Pappy passed away, my fiancé and my mother flew up to Mississippi, from Caracas, as I mentioned earlier. I couldn't think of anything more romantic than the possibility of being married in the garden at Rowan Oak, and we talked to Grandmama about it. Although she regretted it very much, she said she just couldn't bear it—a wedding at Rowan Oak at that time. It would be too painful



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for her to stand. Instead, I married in Caracas, and she intended to come to the wedding, but, in getting her smallpox vaccination, she contracted it and ended up in the hospital. Regrettably, she missed the wedding, but Jill came and was my matron of honor.

LDB: Can you recall any specific moments when Estelle reflected on your grandfather after he was gone?

VFJ: Yes. One instance I remember happened in February. It was February 19, I recall, because it was Grandmama's seventy-fifth birthday, in 1972. It was three months after my husband had died.

LDB: And shortly before she was to die.

VFJ: Yes. Just a few months. Anyway, Grandmama was living with Jill, in Charlottesville. She had her own quarters, in Jill and Paul's house, and it was quite separate from the rest of the house, a private area.

LDB: She had sold the house in which she and Faulkner had lived?

VFJ: Yes, the one on Rugby, I believe, and she had put the money into Jill and Paul's house, to build onto it, so that she could be close by, in case she got ill and needed someone to care for her. She always suffered from colds, and up in Virginia, particularly, the dampness and the harsh winters were more rigorous than in Mississippi. She had a chronic case of bronchitis.

LDB: She was a heavy smoker.

VFJ: Yes, and a heavy coffee drinker, too.

LDB: Was she a frail woman?

VFJ: Yes, yes! Tiny!

LDB: Valetudinarian?

VFJ: No. No! But frail. She was always very, very small, very thin, and, of course, the years of drinking had not helped. Anyway, by the time of her seventy-fifth birthday, she was suffering from old age, as well. She would huddle in bed, most of the day. My mother, Gillian, and I had gone down from New York, to Virginia, to be with her. I went into her room, that afternoon, to talk to her, privately, and she asked me how I was getting along. I told her that I was still very much grieving over my husband's death, but that I had had a dream, in which I had seen my husband across a room full of people, and I was trying to get to him. He just smiled and nodded, and though I never could get to him, I had this feeling that everything was all right. Then she said to me that she had had the same thing happen after Pappy's death—I can't recall her saying just how long after. She'd had a dream, and she believed in ghosts, and she said she didn't know whether it, the dream, was actually a vision, whether she was waking or dreaming, but it was so vivid she thought she must be awake. She had seen Pappy come and sit on the end of her bed, at Rowan Oak, and he said, "Stelle, everything is all right," and, after that, she had had a deep, serene feeling of peace. Three months later, Grandmama died and was brought back to Oxford, to be buried in St. Peter's, beside Pappy.

LDB: Victoria, when you think, today, of your grandmother Estelle Oldham Franklin Faulkner, what is the most poignant memory that comes to mind?

VFJ: I can still hear her singing and playing her own music, at the piano, in the living room of Rowan Oak. I can actually hear Grandmama singing, long before her image comes into focus, behind my thoughts.

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LDB: You had grown up listening to her music and singing. You mentioned one song for which she had written the music and the lyrics, your favorite and hers, too. She had titled it "White Beaches." You said you had coaxed her into copying it down for you because you didn't ever want to forget it. When was that?

VFJ: That was not long after Pappy died. She made a trip to Venezuela, in 1963, after I had married and was living in Caracas. My parents were there, too, so Grandmama came down and stayed quite a long time. I had a piano and she played for me, at my request. We taped her playing without her knowing it, or she never would have allowed it. She said the words rather than singing them, but the words were muffled, nearly inaudible, so I asked her to write them down for me.

LDB: Did you know that in 1927, after Estelle had separated from Cornell Franklin and left Shanghai, she presented Billy Faulkner with a novel she had written, a novel entitled *White Beaches*? And that she asked him to submit it to a publisher for her?

VFJ: I had no idea Grandmama ever wrote a novel. I'm amazed but not surprised!

LDB: Faulkner sent the novel to Scribners, who rejected it and returned it, without too much delay. When Faulkner informed Estelle, she became so distraught she burned the manuscript. Faulkner's response was one of extreme anger toward her. What strikes me as most remarkably coincidental is the identical title of the novel and the song you said she played until the end of her life.

VFJ: She wrote the poem and the music for "White Beaches" before she wrote the novel. Of this I am quite certain.

LDB: To what do you imagine "White Beaches" referred?

VFJ: I can only speculate that the novel must have been set in Hawaii and that it could have been about her youth, her arranged marriage, and about the lover she left behind. I feel certain that she wrote the song "White Beaches" in Hawaii, in 1919, before she moved to Shanghai, with Cornell Franklin.

LDB: Can you recite the lyrics to this song?

VFJ:       When the wanderlust comes, it is time to go  
              To the place your heart calls you to.  
              Mine is a place by the blue, blue sea,  
              Where I'll go someday, Love, and take you.

              It's a bit of a cove with its bit of a beach,  
              And around it the cliffs loom stark,  
              But we will be sailing there soon, dear heart,  
              In our strange and beautiful bark.

              White beaches and starlight,  
              And the sea is beckoning me  
              To a place that men might call lonely,  
              But it means all heaven to me.

              To my beach with its surf and its wind-bent palms,  
              And the feel of your loveliness in my arms,  
              With the god of true lovers to stay all alarms,  
              On my white beach 'neath the low tropic stars.

LDB: Was Hawaii the place where Estelle and Cornell Franklin honeymooned?

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VFJ: No, but it was the location of their first home. And for Grandmama, all her life, it remained the most romantic spot in the world.

LDB: Undoubtedly, in the song, she had captured all her own most profound longings and emotions from that period. The unnamed lover in the song—obviously this was not a reference to Cornell Franklin.

VFJ: Right! Although she had married Cornell Franklin, it had been a marriage arranged by both families. He was a good match for her. He was from an exceptional, old Mississippi family, and he was a brilliant young man, with an equally bright future, who had just finished law school at Ole Miss. But Grandmama didn't know him. She married a stranger who took her off, away from Mississippi. She had never really been anywhere in her life, except perhaps to attend Mary Baldwin, in Virginia. Well, she had been born in Texas, but Mississippi—Oxford—had been her life. Then, she was taken away to this strange, almost foreign country, and with a strange man. She was enchanted by the beauty of the place; she had an artist's eye. But she had left her romantic lover behind, at home, and that was Billy Faulkner, Pappy. She had written her poem, her song, about a place that had struck her for its beauty, and she wanted to show it to Billy. The line is right there: "Mine is a place by the blue, blue sea, /Where I'll go someday, Love, and take you."

LDB: "To a place that men might call lonely . . ."

VFJ: "But it means all heaven to me."

LDB: And the object of her affection and her longing was Billy Faulkner.

VFJ: Oh, yes! *Love*, within commas, capitalized—yes! That's Pappy! After all, Cornell Franklin would hardly have required a description of this place. Certainly, it was the secret, exotic place she would always dream of sharing for the first time, initiating it with her true "Love."

LDB: Estelle would play this song whenever she sat down at the piano?

VFJ: No. Not unless we specifically requested it. But it was her favorite, and it was ours, too, the entire family's — Jill's, mine, my parents'—and Pappy's, too!