

NOVEL EXCERPT

Swimming the Sky

BY NORMA WATKINS

(From the unpublished novel *Old Testament Eyes*)

PAST MIDNIGHT AND APRIL AINSWORTH had thrashed the sheet into knots. She kept going over the day: James, her father's caretaker had stolen a gun from the house, lied about it, then smirked when April confronted him. She turned on her stomach, trying to find a comfortable position. Tried lying on her back, eyes closed, making herself think of nothing. Did her closed eyes sense that light coming in under the lowered shades? Blind people suffered from insomnia, too. She'd read they can tell when it's day by sensing the light they don't see. The article said blind people shouldn't have cosmetic surgery to remove their shrunken eyeballs because it caused them to lose this ability. She wouldn't mind removing lying, smart-aleck James's eyeballs with a fork.

Brain jumpy, legs jerking, April gave up and sat on the side of the bed. She was running on the fuel of fury and could not turn it off. A drink might help. She tiptoed up the hall, felt her way through the den, found the door to the kitchen, and closed it behind her. Only then did she turn on a light.

She slipped through the swinging door into the dark dining room. Fumbled with the liquor closet lock, holding one hand with the other to stop her hands shaking. Scrape of key on lock. April held her breath, but no sound came from down the hall except her father's snoring. She held bottles to the streetlight's glow until she found the Jack Daniels. Got a glass in the kitchen.

If James walked in on her now, he'd say, "Can I get you any little thing?" Waving that crippled hand in her face, eyeing the bottle. She'd have to slam him over the head with it.

She slid back down the hall. Mouth like cotton. She'd better not run into James. Angry as she was, she might murder him on the spot. Put her hands around his scrawny neck and squeeze until his eyeballs bulged and he dropped like a sack of meal. She would see to it that some worthy blind person got his eyes. Kidneys, heart and liver, too, if he hadn't already pickled them on the beer he sneaked in the house every night.

She propped herself in bed, trying to hold the glass level and keep the bottle steady. Only a little spilled on the sheet.

The secret to drinking was to sip. She was sipping pretty fast, but it was still sipping. The whiskey didn't put out the fire in her gut, but the warmth of it seemed to coat her anger. She rolled a swallow around in her mouth. If people acted right she wouldn't need alcohol.

Sipping, sipping, sipping, tiny swallows, like birds fluttering down her throat, or fish, small golden fish. Better fish. She didn't really care for birds. The idea of feathers filling her throat made her swallow wrong and spray her nightgown with bourbon.

A third of the bottle gone and bourbon wasn't working. The room felt smaller, as if the walls were moving in. She couldn't stay in this house. If she got any more furious, she would go into James's room and smother him in his sleep. Hold the thin pillow against those white teeth and watch his arms flail until it was over and he went limp. If you smothered someone, were their eyes still good enough to transplant? She didn't want to mess up his organs.

Back up the hall, she unlocked the kitchen door and went out into the carport, glass and cigarettes in her bathrobe pockets, bottle under her arm. The night air felt cool and the grass was

wet under her bare feet. Down to the lake, huge and silver in the moonlight, tarnished in the shadows. She walked over the narrow concrete walkway to the small island in the center, singing to herself—softly so she wouldn't wake anyone. *I'm a little teapot, short and stout, here is my handle, here is my spout.* She made a handle with her free arm and a spout with the whiskey. She was boiling over. Close up, the water, shallow at the grassy edge and deeper further out, glowed black as oil. She set the bottle down and slipped out of her robe and gown. Stepping in, she allowed herself to fall face forward. The cool liquid broke against her skin. It was beautiful. If James were out here, dark as he was, he wouldn't even show. If James were out here, she could push his head under and hold it until the bubbles stopped and he wiped that smirk off his face. *When I get all steamed up, I just shout: Tip me over and pour me out.* She turned on her back, flutter-kicking, and sang to the stars.

Lights went on in the house. Was it morning already? She would swim around the island, circling the lake on her back. Voices. She turned upright. Somebody was in the old row boat they kept behind the house, paddling toward her.

“Hold on, Miss April. I'm coming.”

James. She put her mouth half underwater and growled, water turning the sound into a gurgle. The idiot was moving toward her. Didn't he know she owned this lake? James could paddle until he turned blue and never catch her.

“Hold on, I'm getting there,” he called.

April's legs felt heavy and she let them sink until she touched bottom. Soft muck up to her ankles. Something slimy wriggled by. That's when she screamed, or somebody did. Lights popped on all around the lake. She floated again, moving her arms, backstroking into deeper water. So pretty. Like Christmas. Stars

up there and stars in the water. If she got her body lined up right, she could swim the sky.

Oars bumped against aluminum. She lifted her head.

“I’m here, Miss April. I’ll save you.”

At the top of his voice, so the neighbors would be sure to hear.

James struggled to get closer.

April treaded water, watching. “I am swimming, James, not drowning.”

He held out an arm. She grasped his hand with both of hers.

“Careful or we’ll both drown.” His voice quivered.

“Drowning’s good, James. Drowning’s just what you need.”

He laughed, showing teeth and his fear. “Don’t play with me, Miss April. You know I don’t swim.”

She braced her feet against the side of the boat and flipped him over her head.

James had his mouth open screaming when he went under. He still had his shoes on. The lake was deeper here. The man would sink like a flatiron. He fought his way up, gasping for air. April shoved him under again, holding him down by the shoulders, ignoring the fingernails and the flailing. When he came up for a second breath, she grabbed his shirt and pulled him close.

“Don’t try and fight me, James. I’m stronger.” His eyes were big; his mouth chewed air. She shoved him under a third time, held him for a long minute, and pulled him up. “You going to stop lying now?” He drooped in her hands, which took the fun out of it. April towed him to shore. He lay on the bank, coughing and spitting.

People watched from the dam side of the lake where they’d built the new houses. “We’re fine.” April called to them.

“Everything’s fine.” Maybe it was too dark for them to see she was naked.

She went inside, put on a dry robe, and brought out towels. Her father’s room was still dark. He was a heavy sleeper. She helped James dry off. In his room she found a pair of pajamas that looked like her father’s. The man had no shame, but this was probably as clean as he’d been in a year. Neither of them spoke. James refused to look at her. April tucked him into bed, turned out the light, whispering in the dark. “I didn’t enjoy having to punish you, James. Don’t make me do it again.” She stopped at the door. “You listen for Daddy. I’m going out.”

James found his voice. “Miss April, you ain’t in no shape—”

She knelt beside him in the dark. “No more rescues, James. I’m a big girl. And no stunts like quitting on me either. You try that and I’ll have you arrested for stealing Daddy’s gun.”

“I ain’t quitting.” He sounded braver now that he was dry and fairly certain he wasn’t going to die. “I’m here to protect your daddy.”

He meant from her. April laughed. She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “Sleep well.”



Dressed and in the car, April tried to figure out how much whiskey she’d had. A fifth was one-fifth of a gallon. A gallon was 128 ounces. So a third of a fifth? Hard to figure out without pencil and paper, and the bottle was still on the island. She didn’t feel the slightest bit drunk. Without stopping to look, she backed down the driveway and swung the car out onto Old Canton Road. This was a game. Maybe there’d be a car coming and maybe not. The trick was not to care. No good escaping if you burdened yourself with worry.

The counter at Dunkin' Donuts across from the hospital was empty. April slid onto a stool and ordered coffee.

"Haven't seen you here in awhile," the night waitress said.

The woman looked familiar. What was her name? April squinted, trying to read the nametag on her uniform. Looked like "Squalor," but that couldn't be right. "I've been taking care of my father. He had a stroke."

"That's too bad."

"Can't talk or walk."

"It's hell growing old until you consider the alternative." The woman filled a thick, white mug to the brim. Her hand didn't shake one bit.

April's head buzzed. She held the hot china in both hands to quiet the tremor and sipped the coffee black. "Do you believe in organ donors?"

"How's that?"

"Giving your organs to somebody when you're dead."

"I prefer to be buried intact."

"Well, I believe in it. My Aunt Ernestine got her new corneas from a dead person. She's eighty-seven and still doesn't need glasses."

"Imagine."

April didn't like the woman's tone. "The reason I bring it up is, there's this man taking care of my daddy and he lies and steals. I've been thinking seriously about killing him. He's a little bitty thing and I could manage. I almost did it tonight. He's young enough that his organs are probably in pretty good shape, even with the drinking. He has a deformed hand, but the rest of him is okay. I was wondering, do you think strangling or smothering would be better? Which would do the least damage?"

The waitress looked at April over her reading glasses. "Time to check yourself in, honey."

Anger flared like a bonfire. “I was speaking to you as a friend, hoping to be allowed to express an opinion without being told I am crazy.” April heard her voice getting screechy, but she couldn’t help it. “I’m terribly sorry to have bothered you.”

“I am your friend, sweetie. Want me to call your husband?”

“I do not wish to be called ‘honey’ and ‘sweetie’ by someone who didn’t finish high school. My name is April Ainsworth and you can mind your own damned business.” She threw a dollar on the counter and tried to slam the door behind her, but it had an automatic closer.

She was so hot. In the car, she turned the air-conditioner on full force, but that didn’t help. Her skin felt scalded. It was probably her blood pressure and she would die from a stroke, which was exactly what she deserved, to burst from rage and spew blood all over the dashboard. She drove fast up North State, swung onto Old Canton and took a right on Lakeland. Another right onto Ridgewood, and she turned into the tennis club. No one around at this hour. She would sneak in the pool and cool off.

Years ago, she would’ve been able to swim at the city pool. Her father put a stop to that. When Negroes wanted to swim with whites, he went to court arguing that public swimming was a privilege provided by the city of Jackson, not a right. He won. The pool where April spent every teen-age weekend had been closed for thirty years. The last time she looked, the concrete bottom had cracked like dried mud.

She parked the car and climbed over the fence. Difficult to manage in a skirt, so she took it off. The trouble with most people was they had no imagination. She’d only been asking a question. All she wanted was an intelligent, theoretical discussion on the deterioration and possible bruising of body parts before and immediately after death. It was not like she’d already killed

James. Choose your audience, she reminded herself, dropping the rest of her clothes in a pile at the deep end.

The water felt cool against her skin, which helped, but inside she felt a sparking, like her brain was firing impulses from the top of her head to her toes. Every one of them said: “Kill James.”

When the police arrived, April was not too drunk to be embarrassed. She didn’t like her body well enough to be seen naked. She had ugly scars from an operation in high school, and from the hysterectomy the doctors claimed would make her sane. The officers were kind, turning away while she pulled clothes on over her wet skin. Somebody brought her skirt from the far side of the fence. She recognized one policeman, which made it worse. He telephoned Walton and they stood around in the parking lot waiting.

“Very kind of you,” Walton said when he drove up in his BMW.

“No problem, Mr. Ainsworth,” the officer said. “Your wife hasn’t done any damage, though we could charge her with trespass.”

“We’re members here at River Hills,” Walton said.

“Of course.”

April stood away from them, teeth chattering, arms wrapped around her shoulders, crying now, hating them, hating herself the most.

Without a word, Walton got a towel out of the trunk and spread it on the passenger seat.

Between hiccupping sobs, April tried to explain on the way to the hospital how well she’d been doing caring for her father until James stole the gun and lied about it. It came out in a rush, words on top of words, and not in the right order she realized when she stopped to listen.

Tears streaked approaching headlights. April wiped her nose with the back of one wrist and jammed her fists in her eyes trying to stop crying. “I’m sorry for the mess, Walton. I start off knowing what I’m doing and things go wrong. I never mean to embarrass you. You’re the best husband in the world.” She put her head on his shoulder.

The corners of his mouth turned down. “Sit up. You’re wet.”⁸²