

not to let the springs creak. Standing up, she almost passes out herself, but she's driven now by something deep and primal. She finds the telephone and takes it into the kitchen. She calls one of her sisters, but keeps it short and quiet. "Glenn made me get bit by a snake," she whispers. "He's fallen asleep. Call the ambulance. I'll meet them on the road by the Chambless place. Tell them not to come up here. Tell them not to run their lights or sirens. It'll wake him up."

When she hangs up, she waits to hear if he is stirring. He's not. She makes her way out the back door, praying the dogs won't start barking. Outside, it has become a clear, cold night. The sky is full of stars. She can see this won't be easy. When she told her sister she'd get to the Chambless place, she'd forgotten how hard it is to move after you've been bitten by two rattlesnakes. She tells herself to put one foot in front of the other, and this works as far as the drainage ditch between the electric fence posts. She leans into one of them. She glances back at the house. Then she gathers her strength. In the far distance she can

see the lights of the Chambless place and the Cunningham place, and it is toward them she is headed, partway on foot, partway on her knees. She is not sure whether she is going to live or die. All she knows for certain is that she is headed toward the light.

And later, much later, it seems, when the ambulance attendant takes her arm in the middle of the road, it's as though he is escorting her through a door into a bright room where all this can be explained and given a name. He tells her not to be afraid, and they hook her up to a machine and give her oxygen and wash her hand off, the one that was bit. It is such a simple thing for the attendant to do, but she thinks about it on the way to the emergency room, and later that night, when the same ambulance attendant accompanies her to the big university hospital in Birmingham, she is thinking about how nice it was to have her hand washed off like that. Her hand was mostly numb, but she could still feel it a little, a gentle anointing, both warm and cold, like something she'd receive in church, and she realizes she's been trying to get herself

clean from one thing or another for as long as she can remember. Maybe this time, it'll be for good.

During the recess after Darlene's testimony, I found a seat near the front of the courtroom on a pew-like bench reserved for the press.

"I believe they're all cousins," one reporter said as the crowd of onlookers filed back into the courtroom.

The contrast in appearance between us and the people who were attending the trial was striking. Most of the women, no matter their age, wore their hair uncut. It cascaded to the waists of their ankle-length dresses or was pinned atop their heads in gray knots. Few of the women seemed to have on makeup or jewelry, but there were some young rebels with teased hair and dangling earrings, the slogans on their T-shirts years out of style.

The men, with their dark looks and duck-tails, were unsettling to me. What might have been nothing more than ordinary decorum in a different social context appeared in this one to be wariness and suspicion. Their glances

toward the journalists were thick-lidded and vaguely menacing. But I noticed their expressions did not seem to change even when they were talking with what appeared to be family and friends. It was the same look on the face of Glenn Summerford, who sat at the defense table with his hands in his lap. He was wearing a sky blue shirt, and his eyes seemed far apart and remote. I saw now that the unnerving cast to the men's faces was probably just inflexibility, an unwillingness to give themselves up to public emotion. It had to do not so much with their religion, I reasoned, as with their poverty.

All rose as Judge Loy Campbell entered the courtroom in his motorized wheelchair. He had just read in the news that someone had found Babe Ruth's outhouse, and he passed that information along to the jury before he reconvened the court.

At the prosecutor's table, Darlene Summerford turned to whisper something to the district attorney, Dwight Duke. Darlene was dressed in a white knit dress and hose. She had certainly left her husband's church, but

she had not yet cut her auburn hair, and her sullen expression and lupine eyes suggested a wilderness of thought. When she smiled over her shoulder at someone in the courtroom, I wondered what it would be like to be bitten by rattlesnakes. I wondered if there could be any pleasure at all in that, in coming so close to death and surviving. I would find out later that Darlene was four months pregnant, had been pregnant without knowing it when the rattlesnakes bit her, and that the doctors now thought the baby would be fine.

I could hardly take my eyes off Darlene Summerford during the trial, even at the end of the day, when a surprise defense witness took the stand. The prosecution had argued that Glenn had backslid and taken to drink. In a fit of irrational jealousy, he had tried to kill Darlene and disguise it as a suicide. Glenn's attorney, Gary Lackey, had argued that both the Summerfords had backslid and taken to drink, and that the idea for Darlene to stick her hand into the snake cages had been her own.

But the surprise defense witness, Tammy

Flippo, twenty-three, said that everybody had it wrong. A birdlike young woman with the distracting habit of twisting the ends of her hair as she talked, Ms. Flippo testified before a hushed courtroom that *Darlene* had been trying to kill *Glenn* with the snake, not the other way around. "She told me she wanted to kill him because she didn't want to live like that no more," Ms. Flippo said. "She was going to let the snake bite Glenn on the neck, but when she reached into the box it bit her instead."

Ms. Flippo's testimony set the courtroom abuzz. "She's lying!" said Ms. Flippo's ex-husband, Ollie T. Ingram, when he cornered me in the hall during a recess.

"In my opinion, she's in love with the minister," added her former sister-in-law, Sylvia Ingram.

After the recess, other witnesses testified that both parties wanted a divorce, but because Darlene feared losing custody of their thirteen-year-old son, and Glenn wanted to keep preaching, divorce was out of the question, and the death of one or the other seemed the only way out.

By the end of the first day of testimony, it was unclear who had tried to kill whom. The only sure thing was that backsliding was serious business in this part of the state.

I stayed in Scottsboro that night, at an economy motel run by a family from India. The room smelled of curry and blackeyed peas, a confusion that mirrored my state of mind. I didn't know who to believe or what the trial was ultimately about. Although the testimony had echoed familiar themes from a troubled secular society — marital infidelity, spousal abuse, and alcoholism — it had also raised questions about faith, forgiveness, redemption, and of course, snakes.

At times, it must have seemed to Darlene that she was on trial instead of Glenn. Glenn's attorney, Gary Lackey, had referred to her as the foremost woman snake handler in the Southeast. He had introduced videos and still photographs of the couple handling snakes, and he had attempted to portray Darlene as a woman with suicidal tendencies and an unhealthy fixation on snakes. Police had found

photographs of rattlesnakes in her purse, he reminded the jury.

"Tell me, Mrs. Summerford," he had asked during crossexamination, "did you and your husband ever breed these snakes?"

"Why no, sir," she said. "They did that themselves."

The reporters in the courtroom laughed, and Lackey threw a wry glance at the judge.

I understood why the media attention paid the trial infuriated some of Scottsboro's residents, including the district attorney, Dwight Duke.

"Down the hall," he had said to a room full of reporters, "we've got a trial going on about an eighteen-month-old kid that got beat to death. Just another dead kid. But here we've got snakes, a preacher."

That night, as I watched a television newscast about the trial on a station out of Chattanooga, I, too, was aware of the skewed priorities that drove the media. But to be honest, I also found myself more interested in the case of the snake-handling preacher than in the death of the child.

In their closing arguments the next day, both Lackey and Duke appeared to distance themselves from the Summerfords, perhaps because of the snake handling itself. "This is an extremely dysfunctional family," Mr. Lackey, Glenn's attorney, said. "It's hard for any of us to descend into an abyss filled with serpents and practices with which we are unfamiliar." Of Darlene, he said, "We don't know what to make of a person who takes photographs of snakes around in her purse."

Duke, the prosecutor, said, "We're not dealing with reasonable people." He implied that Darlene's seventh-grade education made it impossible for her to have dreamed up such a complicated scheme to get custody of her boy. The proof of her husband's guilt, his logic seemed to say, lay in the poverty of Darlene's imagination. What he left the jury with was something minor, a matter of syntax, really. It was contained in the suicide note that Darlene testified her husband had dictated and forced her to write.

Duke read the short note aloud and pointed

out a curiously repetitive pattern: "Daddy was asleep. Daddy's asleep. Glenn is asleep."

"This is not a suicide note. This is an alibi note," he concluded. "This man was trying to build an alibi."

During the jury's deliberations, I caught up with Darlene Summerford in a dark hallway on the first floor of the courthouse. She was leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette. Fair skinned and rangy, she was attractive in a rawboned way. Her most striking features were her eyes, the pupils of which were wide open and nearly octagonal in shape.

"I'm fixing to get that girl yonder," she said, pointing her cigarette at Bobbie Sue Thompson, who was just then walking out the courthouse door. "She's one of Glenn's girlfriends. He promised to marry her the fourteenth of this month."

Darlene looked at me, and her eyes narrowed. "I didn't run around on him. I didn't have time." It had been Glenn who had done the running around, she said, and she went through a list of women she suspected he'd had affairs with. "If he'd straightened up, we

could have had a good life," she added.

But it had never been much of a life for her, she said, even before she hooked up with Glenn Summerford. One of thirteen children born to a couple on disability in the Sand Mountain town of Dutton, she'd had to struggle for everything she'd had. One baby'd been taken away from her by the welfare people, and she had sworn then she'd never let another one go without a fight.

She started suspecting things weren't right between her and Glenn when he broke her mother's jaw with a vase at a family dinner and when he hit a brother-in-law over the head with a pair of vise grips shortly after that. And then there was the drinking and the fits of jealousy and his own infidelities, which he didn't admit to anybody. But she'd still prayed for him when he got bit by a western diamondback in the middle of July. She thought all along that he'd come to his senses and straighten himself out after that. Maybe then they'd have had a chance. But even if he'd seen the light, maybe even then it would have been too late. Darlene Summerford knew she

was due for a change. She just didn't think it'd take the shape it did.

It had been only four months since she'd been bitten, but her life had already taken a turn for the better. She'd gotten a job at Andover Togs in Pisgah, a trailer next to her mother's house near Dutton, and a half acre of land. The doctor had told her the baby she was carrying was going to be all right. She said if she started going to church again, it'd be to a different kind, maybe Baptist. "I sure ain't gonna marry no preacher, though," she said.

In the meantime, she had her mind set on one thing. "I just want justice." And she stubbed her cigarette out on the sole of her shoe.

Several hours later, it came. The jury found Glenn guilty of attempted murder. The verdict was met in silence by a courtroom filled with people who did not seem to fully comprehend what was at stake. Because of prior convictions for grand larceny and burglary long before he took up preaching, Glenn faced the possibility of life in prison under Alabama's Habitual Felony Offender Act. And

that's exactly what happened. Judge Campbell later sentenced him to ninety-nine years in the state penitentiary.

The prosecutor had maintained during the proceedings that the trial was not about snake handling. But in ways that is all it had been about. Facing fear. Taking risks. Having faith.

"I knowed I was telling the truth," Darlene said after the trial. "I figured they'd say I was lying, but it didn't matter. I knowed I was telling the truth."

But what I would most remember from the trial was something Darlene Summerford said in the first floor hallway before the verdict came down. We were leaning against the wall while she smoked a cigarette, our heads close together so no one would overhear. I had asked her what it was like to take up serpents. She knew it was a serious question. She blew smoke thoughtfully toward the ceiling, and even after all she'd been through, there was a note of wistfulness in her voice when she finally said, "It makes you feel different. It's just knowing you got power over them snakes."

Power over them snakes. On the road back to Birmingham that night, I wondered exactly what she meant. I was in that fugue state familiar to most journalists, the exhausted aftermath of the legwork of an assignment, before the writing begins. The article about the trial, which I was composing in my head even then, had a predetermined shape and a natural end. Glenn Summerford had been convicted. Justice had prevailed. But the moment Darlene Summerford told me what it felt like to take up serpents, I knew the real story wouldn't be over until I'd seen and experienced what she was talking about for myself. Darlene's journey with the handlers was behind her now. Mine had just begun.

SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

"I guess you heard about Brother Clyde," said Cecil Esslinder, the redheaded guitar player with the perpetual grin. We were standing on the square in Scottsboro a few weeks after Glenn Summerford's trial, and Cecil was squinting up at the noonday sun.

"All I know is what I read in the papers," I said.

"That's what I'm talking about."

The papers had reported that on the Saturday night after Glenn's conviction, a man named Clyde Crossfield had been bitten by a rattlesnake at The Church of Jesus with Signs Following. He'd been flown by helicopter to a hospital in Chattanooga and had survived the

bite, but some members of the church thought he wouldn't have been bitten in the first place if Glenn Summerford had been there to pray over the snake before he picked it up.

"Brother Clyde was acting crazy," Cecil said. "He just pulled that serpent out of the box and started jerkin' and swingin' it around like he was mad at it."

The rattlesnake bit Brother Clyde on one hand and hung on. When he managed to pry the snake off, it bit him on the other hand. Infuriated, he pulled the snake's fangs out of its mouth, put it back in the box, and sat down once more among the congregation. At first, it looked like he might be all right, Cecil said. But about twenty minutes later, he fell over onto the floor. That's when they sent for an ambulance.

"Brother Clyde wasn't anointed to take up that serpent," Cecil said. "You'd have to be crazy to go and pick up a snake like that."

"He didn't even pray over the box or nothing," said Cecil's wife, Carolyn, a short, pear-shaped woman who was leaning against their car while she tugged at a stubborn hangnail.

"Do you know Punkin Brown?" Cecil asked. I shook my head.

"Brother Punkin is from Newport, Tennessee," he said. "Now there's a man who really gets anointed by the Holy Ghost. He'll get so carried away, he'll use a rattlesnake to wipe the sweat off his brow." Cecil paused and glanced around the square. "That Brother Clyde, though. He must have been a little mentally ill."

It happens all the time in the South — preachers leaving a church in disgrace. Most of the scandals are predictable and banal: illicit sex or the misuse of church funds. Few preachers leave their churches under circumstances as peculiar as Glenn Summerford's, and rarely have the dangers been so great for those left behind.

Cecil and Carolyn Esslinder had remained loyal to Glenn after his arrest and conviction. Other church members hadn't. Some had sided with Darlene. And still others, who had stood by Glenn after his arrest, became disillusioned with his behavior and left the

church even before the trial began. Among them were Sylvia and Johnny Ingram, who had been attending the church for about three years. Johnny, a sheet metal contractor who had made a rare leap to the middle class, had been the church treasurer and had paid for Glenn's lawyer. "We loved the preacher," said his wife, Sylvia. But when Johnny's sister-in-law, Tammy Flipppo, left her husband and children to visit Glenn while he was free on bond after his arrest, Johnny and Sylvia had a change of heart. "We didn't choose to go to a church where the preacher did one thing and preached another," Sylvia said.

The tensions between those who sided with Glenn and those who sided with Darlene exploded in bitter name-calling on the day of the hearing to determine who would get custody of the Summerfords' teenage son, Marty. Although the hearing was closed to the public, the hall outside was packed with supporters of both Glenn and Darlene. No blows were exchanged, but occasionally someone from one side or the other would have to pass through a gauntlet of catcalls and icy stares. It was un-

comfortable even for an outsider like me to cross the line and talk to both sides.

"They're nothing but a bunch of liars, thieves, adulterers, and hypocrites," Darlene said to me as she glowered at the church members who had remained loyal to Glenn. She accused them of having taken many of her personal belongings from the house on Barbee Lane, including her pet bird, a cockatiel. "They even stole my underwear," she said.

A reluctant witness on Glenn's behalf paced the opposite end of the corridor. He was waiting to be called into the hearing room. He said he had known Darlene's family, the Collinses, for over twenty years. "It was a house full of sluts then, and that's what they are today," he whispered.

In an alcove off the hall, under the watchful eye of an armed sheriff's deputy, Glenn Summerford himself sat brooding in his white prison garb. His eyes looked hooded and remote. "I didn't even know she *had* a bird," he told me. It was Darlene and her supporters, he insisted, who had taken everything. "They brought a truck and stole a bunch of church

equipment, several hundred dollars worth."

Predictably, Glenn's version of the events that had landed him in prison also differed from Darlene's. He said that he didn't even know she'd gotten bit by a snake on the night of October 5. "I loved her," he said. "I didn't try to kill her. I kept her from killing herself."

In the weeks prior to that night, they had both backslid and taken to drink, he said. "She was bad to run around," he added. "On September eighteenth I caught her with a man, a preacher from the church. When I told her on October fifth I wanted to get a divorce, she tried to kill herself."

He said she took a box of Sominex and a bottle of extra strength Tylenol. He made her drink warm water so she'd throw the pills up. She threatened to kill him. It was a similar story to the one the jury had heard in snatches during the trial, but not from Glenn's own mouth. On the advice of counsel, he hadn't testified in his own defense. "If there's a new trial, I'll testify," he said.

About that time, he craned his neck to peer down the hallway, where those support-