

HABITS OF DEVOTION

RADIO SCRIPT

CAST:

Narrator:	Mike Murphey
Billy Fitzgerald:	Matt Hatfield
Mother, Mrs. Fitzgerald:	Judy Hearn
Charley MacCleary:	Jim King
Homer Fornaker:	Tom Welsh
Elmira Foley:	Judy Hearn
Officer Swayne:	Chris Ranck
Duty Officer Cook:	Don Rush

NARRATOR: On a clear winter morning in January, 1957, Billy Fitzgerald ended his studies for the priesthood and withdrew from St. Joseph Seminary College in St. Benedict, Louisiana. He returned home to Charleston, South Carolina and took up a job driving a beer truck. It wasn't the rigor of academic studies and certainly not any lack of religious devotion or commitment that caused Billy to leave St. Joseph. Like nothing else, Billy wanted to be a priest. There was only his mother who wanted it more. She raised her son for religious office and throughout his youth it was the only future he knew. Certainly it was the only future his mother knew for him.

When Billy told her he was home to stay, that he wasn't going back to Louisiana, she looked at him across the kitchen table, balled up her napkin and didn't say a word. Then she slumped in her chair, fingered her coffee cup as though it was a chalice of hemlock and heaved a sigh of defeat. A sigh so deep that it filled the kitchen with a cloud of despair. A sigh so sustained it wound its way out the kitchen

window, across Charleston and around the world. A sigh so heavy it touched every mother across the globe and prompted her to lift her head from what she was doing and stare into the distance. The youngest of three boys, Billy had been her last hope. The oldest boy was now a used car salesman in Stark, Florida. The next one went to university and was a college professor teaching something called rhetoric at Price College in North Georgia.

And now Billy.

Still without speaking, Mrs. Fitzgerald left the kitchen table and went upstairs to her bedroom. In the heavy oak dresser, pushed hard against the wall, in a drawer behind clothes she hadn't touched in years, Mrs. Fitzgerald found a small olive-wood box with a cross carved on the lid. She held the box for a moment, then with another sigh, this one of resignation, slid the box into the pocket of her apron. In the kitchen, she pushed the box across the table to Billy.

MRS. FITZGERALD: It's the rosary, Billy. Your grandfather carved the beads from olive-wood he got from Bethlehem. You have it. I was saving it for the ordination but you may as well have it now.

NARRATOR: Billy lifted the five decade rosary from the box and cradled it in his hand. On the inside of the cover his grandfather had carved a likeness of Pope Pius V and on each bead a relief of one of the saints. The beads were worn and dark from oil passed from his grandfather's fingers. Billy could imagine him in Ireland, in a smoky cottage saying his prayers before the peat bog fire.

MRS. FITZGERALD: You have to promise me, Billy, to say the rosary at least once each day for the rest of your life...Or at least for as long as you're able.

NARRATOR: And she reached across the table and closed Billy's fingers on the gathering of beads in his fist.

The beads were heavy in Billy's hand. They carried the promise of the Church, but they also carried the weight of his failure.

BILLY: Yes, Mom. I promise.

NARRATOR: Billy was a child of the Church, his mother's child of the Church. He loved to go to Mass: the dressing up, the colors, the pageantry, the sacred paintings, and the vessels used in the Mass. He especially loved that moment in the great drama when the priest turned the bread into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus. Was it magic or was it a mystery? He really didn't believe in magic, so it must be a mystery he wasn't really meant to understand. Billy even loved the Latin. That was part of the mystery for him -- the flowing mysterious sound of this language he didn't understand. He knew what it said, though, and embraced the story it told.

But it was the Latin -- pure and simple as that -- the mysterious sound of this language he loved, that language carried forward by the ancient Church for its own political and ecclesiastical ends, that language of select power recording forever the sacred thoughts of the Church Fathers and carried on by medieval philosophers, the universal language that gave the world five great romance languages -- this language of beauty and mystery was Billy's downfall. You see, Billy couldn't learn the Latin. No matter how hard he tried, practiced his declensions, read aloud, memorized verbs, it just wouldn't stick. Like water in a tight mesh screen, it would pool and circle for a moment, tease the memory, but then verbs, nouns, direct objects, connections, agreements, meaning, all would drip slowly away until there was nothing left.

This was 1957 and in the Catholic Church of the 1950's this was no small matter. Not only was the Mass said in Latin but it was also a staple of theological and administrative communication in the Church.

In short, it was the official vehicle for verbal and written expression. Not only was it used in the services of the Church, all the business correspondence of the Holy See, encyclicals and briefs of the popes, all the decrees and regulations that were promulgated, everything was expressed in a language Billy just couldn't hold in his head and actually couldn't even pronounce well. In his mouth, the beautiful language took on the nature of pigs rooting at a trough.

Certainly, there were other things he could have done in some official capacity for the Church without the formality of Latin, but Billy didn't want that. He wanted to be a priest, offer absolution, actually change the bread into the Body of Christ – the real body of Christ not some imitation thing. He wanted to share it with the people of Charleston -- the boys he grew up with. Have them call him Father. Now that would be something. Other than this, he really didn't aspire to great things in the Church or ask for anything from the Church. Just to be a priest, that was all. Father Barry, Karl Malden in "On the Waterfront." That's the kind of priest Billy told Charley MacCleary he wanted to be –

BILLY: A waterfront priest, Charley, like Father Barry. That's all. Listen. Listen to his speech in the hold of the ship. *"And anybody who sits around and lets it happen, keeps silent about something he knows has happened, shares the guilt of it just as much as the Roman soldier who pierced the flesh of Our Lord to see if He was dead. Boys, this is my church! And if you don't think Christ is down here on the waterfront, you've got another guess coming!"* This is what I want to be, Charley, only not a waterfront priest but maybe a sidewalk priest – yeah! a street corner priest in North Charleston or in the public housing he would mix it up with the Negroes and the Whites, Crackers and Catholics alike, and help them work things out, find their way, bring them into the Body of Christ, at least in spirit if not in the Church. See that justice was done.

That's it. Charley, the sidewalks of downtown Charleston would do as his parish.

NARRATOR: But like a movie, a celluloid image that flashed over and over again in Billy's mind, his life as Father Barry on the streets of Charleston was an illusion that was not going to happen. For ordination, some facility with Latin was required and that was that. So by mutual consent, Billy left the seminary, came back to Charleston and took up driving a beer truck for Homer Fornaker at H&F Distributing, Inc.

His normal route was to deadhead from Charleston to Charlotte, North Carolina, load up with beer and return to Charleston – all in one long day, a very long and lonely day. Fornaker didn't mind if Billy took a rider on occasion to make the trip more bearable and sometimes sent a passenger along himself who was going that way. Now early March was basketball tournament time in the ACC and when Billy learned that South Carolina was playing in Raleigh, he made Charley MacCleary a proposition. Billy and Charley MacCleary had three things in common: they had been close friends since childhood, both were Catholic, and both were passionate about South Carolina basketball. So over beers at the Gamecock Beer Parlor, Billy made a proposition to Charley to

Charley MacCleary

BILLY: You go with me on my beer run to Charlotte...Charley, we'll load up and come back by way of Raleigh to take in the South Carolina game against NC State. One night stay-over on the road, maybe, that's all. Maybe not even that... Fornaker won't care... We'll be back in plenty of time for him to make the local distribution.

MACCLEARY: Just a minute, Billy, let me check my busy schedule. (pause, knocks his beer bottle on the table three times,) Okay, what time?

NARRATOR: Two days later, at two o'clock in the morning Charley MacCleary pulled into the lot at H&F Distributing, Inc. and climbed into the cab of a 1951 Chevrolet two-ton beer truck. It was old for such a work horse but it looked classy and ran smooth as silk. Painted green, it carried bright logos of Blatz, Esslinger, and Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer on each side. MacCleary slid onto the bench seat next to Billy, pointed out the windshield and said, “

MACCLEARY: Lez go.

BILLY: Got to go by Fornaker's house before we hit the road... Get some paperwork from him and he said there's something else he needs to tell me.

NARRATER: The Fornaker house at Isle of Palms was a modest wood frame structure. Painted white with a red roof, the yard was dominated by three ancient water oak trees that shaded a large porch wrapped around three sides of the house. For Isle of Palms, it was a rather modest house. At the door, the boys were met by Mr. Fornaker and led into an office off the parlor. There, in a plush living room chair pushed against a wall, sat a young girl. Arms on the rests, stiff and erect, she adopted the attitude of a queen on her thrown. She wore a cheap filmy dress in blue and pink and a pink sweater a little light for March. Her eyes, gray and cold as granite followed Billy and Charley into the room. A small suitcase sat next to the chair.

FORNAKER: Boys, this here is Elmira Foley. She's a daughter of one a my cousins from Tennessee. Been visiting with us for a while. I'd like for you boys to give her a ride to her aunt's house in Charlotte. Thought this would be a good idea. Save her from ridin the Greyhound all alone... Elmira, this is Billy Fitzgerald, he was studyin to be a priest once. Billy, who's your friend here?

NARRATOR: Billy heard nothing. He was staring at Elmira. She was standing next to the chair now, her fingers laced together below her stomach pressing in on the filmy dress that was now outlining her thighs.

MACCLEARY: I'm Charley MacCleary, Mr. Fornaker. A friend of Billy's. We're gonna stop off at the basketball game in Augusta on the way back.

FORNAKER: Well that's fine. Billy told me that. Make good use of the trip. Here's the order for this trip, Billy. Now, Elmira, if you'd just step out into the living room for just a minute, I want to talk to these boys.

NARRATOR: Elmira picked up her suitcase and walked into the living room. Her dress swished against her legs and her dark brown hair boiled around her shoulders.

FORNAKER: Close that door, will you honey. Now boys, I know I don't need to say this, you studyin to be a priest and everything, Billy, but this is a gentle young girl here and I don't want any rough talk or suggestive jokes, you hear? She's a nice young lady and I don't want her honor besmirched in any way. You get my point?

BOTH BOYS: Yes, sir. We understand.

FORNAKER: Good. Now have a good trip and deliver her to her aunt in Charlotte. She has the address.

NARRATOR: Under the water oak trees, Elmira circled to the passenger side of the truck ahead of the boys.

MACCLEARY: Jesus, Billy, this is like one of those traveling salesman jokes. You know, I'm sorry the farmer says, we have only two beds. You'll have to sleep with my beautiful daughter... Here we are, two-thirty in the morning and he says, 'Sorry boys but you'll have to

drive to Charlotte with my beautiful, whatever she is, sitting between you.'

BILLY: Don't swear like that, Charley. She'll probably sleep all the way anyway.

She did sleep.

On Highway 162 the truck rattled and shook, banged and hissed along at fifty miles an hour. The empty cargo area echoed every noise, and still she slept. On the bench between the two boys, her suitcase behind the seat, her knees splayed, she slept. Sliding down further and further on the bench, her dress slowly slid up her legs, distressingly slow, revealingly slow it slid.

BILLY: Charley, in the glove compartment is a rosary. We can say the beads while she's sleeping. We'll talk soft. Won't bother her. I'll say the first decade.

NARRATOR: For Billy, the Church was all theatre—a drama in which to play a part, to strike a pose, say a line or two. A play in which he knew the beginning and the end, the tragedy and the joy. He knew all the twists and turns of the plot and his place in its denouement. For Charley MacCleary the Church was all bedrock. Its moral strictures, sense of justice, sin and forgiveness, demand and promise were the foundation stones on which he based his life. He believed everything his Church told him—what was wrong, what was right, what was good, what was bad. He believed and had built his life on this belief. But he never talked about the Church. His faith was internal, personal and one would never know how strong it was unless the Church – his core beliefs were attacked in some way. Any attack on his Church was a personal affront and only then would he rise up and state his case, show his hand. It was ironic that the attack on the Church he believed in, staked his life on, the Church of the 1950's was attacked from the inside. It was called

Vatican II and it pulled down all the old walls. But this was 1958 now and the world was still in one piece—the gates of the citadel still standing and so it made sense to say the rosary. Hurtling down a dark highway in a beer truck at over fifty miles an hour, a young girl asleep next to him, spread-eagle, sliding down the seat, the skirt of her dress riding higher and higher, it made sense to say the rosary.

Now Billy was committed to the beads clunking against the steering wheel. But to say that he wasn't distracted, to say they both weren't distracted by the retreating blue and pink hemline would be an improbable lie. Each would find occasion to surreptitiously lean forward and adjust to a more comfortable sitting position or fiddle with something on the dashboard. In the meantime the rosary was said and the skirt continued to barely hide from the boys one of the greater mysteries known to mankind.

(Siren)

Between the rosary and the creeping dress, neither of the boys noticed that the truck was approaching seventy miles an hour until they heard the siren and the glare of flashing red lights filled the cab of the truck. The girl was awake now. She was sitting straight up, her knees firmly clinched, and her hem pulled down to a modest exposure. She looked at the boys with an expression that might have been contempt or at least disdain.

The truck pulled over, the local police car parked in behind, its red light flashing; a tall, thin officer peered in the open driver side window of the cab.

OFFICER SWAYNE: Driver's license, please.

NARRATOR: Driver's license, examined, name written down, the officer then studied the three occupants of the truck. They sat stiff as stone, the rosary stowed in the glove compartment.

OFFICER SWAYNE: Are you okay, Ma'am?

ELMIRA: They tried to look up my dress.

OFFICER SWAYNE: Ma'am?

ELMIRA: These boys tried to look up my dress. Both of um tried to look up my dress while they chanted some mumbo jumbo.

NARRATOR: The officer leaned in the window, looked at the two boys and eased his hand back until it rested lightly on the butt of his gun.

OFFICER SWAYNE: You know these boys, Ma'am?

ELMIRA: I don't know either of um from Adam. They picked me up in Charleston this mornin.

OFFICER SWAYNE: I'll have to ask y'all to step out of the truck please...Just stand there next to the cab there.

NARRATOR: Standing next to the cab now, the three faced the officer. There was another hour 'til sunrise but the soft early glow of the advancing day mixed with a thin morning mist bathed the tableau in an eerie half-light that was bright enough for the three to see the officer clearly. Elmira reached forward and touched the officer's gun.

OFFICER SWAYNE: Don't touch the gun, Ma'am.

ELMIRA: That's a big gun, ain't it. What's your name, officer? Oh, there it is, right on your shirt, 'Wayne,' Officer Wayne.

OFFICER SWAYNE: It's Swayne, Ma'am. Officer Swayne.

ELMIRA: Well, that's what I said, Wayne, Officer Wayne. Are you goin to arrest these boys, Officer Wayne? They tried to look up my dress. That's some kind of mo'lestion ain't it?"

OFFICER SWAYNE: I think it's molestation Ma'am.

ELMIRA: Well, I think so, too. They must be perverts. You gonna arrest em?

OFFICER SWAYNE: No, Ma'am, I mean, I think the word is molestation... You, Billy, you want to tell me what this is all about.

BILLY: Well, officer...we was...well, we did pick her up in Charlston and all, but... we got her from her uncle, but he ain't really her uncle... I mean, they're related somehow... I work for him... Homer Fornaker, that's his name...

OFFICER SWAYNE: Fornaker?

BILLY: Yes sir. He owns H&F Distributing, Inc. We're delivering her to Charlotte for him. It's all legal. We're gonna drop her off and pick up a load a beer, then we're going to the basketball game in Raleigh.

OFFICER SWAYNE: Fornaker?

ELMIRA: That sure is a big gun, Officer Wayne, You ever take it out? Can I see it out a that holster? I'd like to touch it again?

OFFICER SWAYNE: Don't touch the gun m'am. I take it out only when I need to use it, and to practice with it.

NARRATOR: Small squeaks of stifled laughter pushed through the back of Charley MacCleary's fist pressed against his mouth. His face is turned away from the officer.

ELMIRA: Could you take it out now, Officer Wayne? It looks so big.

NARRATOR: Charley MacCleary has turned his back now and was doubled over, his right arm across his face and his left circled his stomach. His body was convulsed with silent laughter. Petrified, Billy Fitzgerald stood straight looking at the officer. He had no clue.

OFFICER SWAYNE: No, Ma'am. What's the matter with him? Charley, isn't it? He sick or something?

ELMIRA: No. I think he just had a little stroke of in'light'ment.

OFFICER SWAYNE: Enlightenment, Ma'am, I think the word's enlightenment. Listen, y'all need to follow me to the station in Camden. I want to make a few phone calls to verify your story. Do you want to ride with me, Ma'am? Might have something you want to say to me in private.

ELMIRA: Okay, but only if I can hold your gun.

NARRATOR: At this point, Charley MacCleary lost it completely and is leaned on the open truck window convulsed with laughter. Billy Fitzgerald, still clueless, hadn't moved.

OFFICER SWAYNE: (Pensive) Um, you can go ahead and ride with the boys, Ma'am.

NARRATOR: At the station, Duty Officer Cook's phone call to H&F Distributing, Inc. confirmed the beer pick-up story and Forenaker himself verified the rightful presence of the girl. But there was still the matter of her claim of molestation.

DUTY OFFICER COOK: Let me get this straight, Miss Foley was asleep in the cab of the truck on the seat between you two boys. She had slid down in the seat in a way that her legs were spread apart and the hem of her dress was hiked way up. You boys kept fidgeting around trying to get a look further up her legs. All the while you were saying the rosary. Is that right? I can't believe I'm even saying this?... Miss Foley woke up, saw the state she was in and saw you peaking at her. Clearly she was upset and felt you were taking advantage of her, which you clearly were doing. Am I right so far?

MACCLEARY: Yes sir, Mr. Cook, but we didn't intend to take advantage of her condition. It was just hard not to look.

DUTY OFFICER COOK: I understand you didn't touch her, didn't touch her dress. Is that right?

BILLY: That's right, We were busy with the rosary.

DUTY OFFICER COOK: The rosary again...Miss Foley, do you want to bring charges against these boys? I'm not sure what they would be. There was no physical assault or contact. They didn't manufacture the circumstances. But we take these matters seriously.

ELMIRA: No, Officer Cook, No charges, please. These are just two dumb boys who found themselves at temptation's door. They couldn't open it no further and couldn't close it neither. They did learn something here though, and I trust em. They're really good boys. I'll just go on to Charlotte with em to my aunt. If they get funny, I'll chase out them beads and make em start countin.

NARRATOR: It was full morning when the H&F Distributing, Inc. beer truck pulled out of the parking lot next to the Camden Police Station and made its way toward Highway 162. The March sun was hazy in its rising and the light was flat and without vigor. The pale sun slanted across the road creating muted shadows that passed over the truck like so many ghosts from the past. Elmira Foley was once again between the two boys. The rosary beads tucked safely in the glove compartment waited their turn again. Billy Fitzgerald, alert as he ever got, hunched up over the steering wheel and turned the truck onto the highway toward Charlotte. Straight, like a ribbon drawn tight, the flat nondescript road crawled toward them, passed under the truck, then snapped away into the distance. The past is past, it seemed to say; this is to come.

ELMIRA: How long to Charlotte, Billy?

BILLY: Two hours, maybe a little less.

ELMIRA: I ain't goin to my aunt's, you know. You ain't taken me there."

BILLY: What?...That's what Fornaker said. We're to drop you at your aunt's.

ELMIRA: Fornaker don't know nothin...Actually he knows everythin, but I ain't goin back there. You take me to Salisbury. I got a cousin in Salisbury.

BILLY: Salisbury? Charley, we're not going to Salisbury.

ELMIRA: Yes you are.

NARRATOR: Her hand is braced against the dashboard.

ELMIRA: You're takin me. You're goin to Raleigh to that basketball game and Salisbury is most on the way. You'll take me there... Deliver me from this... You boys are Catholic, ain't you. And you believe in hell. I'm Baptist. Got dunked in the river with some other girls real proper like. Sang in the choir too. Preacher there—that's up in Bridgeville, Tennessee—he was all hellfire and damnation. Never a Sunday service or Wednesday night prayer meetin passed that we wasn't all goin straight to hell. Thought he had us all scared to death. That preacher though, he didn't know nothin about hell.

NARRATOR: It was Billy she was talking to now, but still not facing him. Looking straight ahead, pulling up the past out of that muddy Tennessee town she came from; dredging up a small dirtroad house back in the woods. Talking to Billy but dumping it all out on the dashboard of the truck.

ELMIRA: You don't know nothin about hell either. All them fancy torment pictures I seen in books. I'll tell you what hell is and it ain't no fiery place off in the beyond. It ain't no *place* at all. Hell is right

here. Hell is a fourteen-year-old girl layin awake in her bed every night listenin for her daddy's feet scuffin up the hall at two-thirty in the morning. Every night she's prayin to Jesus she won't hear them feet. Prayin she won't have to face him across the breakfast table the next mornin. Knowin that her brother, sittin at that same table, knows what's going on. Her momma fussin about the kitchen, she knows too but she's too scared to say nothin and ain't gonna do nothin. The kids on the school bus and at school, they all knowed. Everybody knowed what he was doin. They would look at me funny. Whisper back and forth when I got on the bus. And I wanted was to stand in the aisle and yell at all of em, 'It ain't my fault...It ain't my fault.'"

NARRATOR: Elmira was crying now. Pushing tears out of her eyes with fists that served only to spread the dampness about her face. She leaned over and with the hem of her dress wiped the wet away. Billy took his hand off the wheel and made to touch her shoulder. Almost he does, but then he pulled his arm away and placed his hand back on the wheel.

ELMIRA: So it was my fault. That's what their eyes said when they looked at me. That's what everybody believed. What I come to believe. My fault...My fault? Somehow I caused him to do it? I didn't mean to. But it was my doin with that boy caused him to.... He was just a boy, Billy, sixteen but he had a car. Do you understand that? He had a car and every girl in town wanted to get in that car—just ride away in that car. Then outside the movie show one night, he picked me. A bunch of us was standin there, hot, my god it was hot, decidin where to go next, and he pulled up in that car. Window down, leanin out, chin on his elbow nonchalant like, racing that motor, his black stringy hair fallin onto one eye, and he asked me would I like a ride home. Billy, it was like James Dean, hisself had stopped in that black '49 Mercury we just saw in the movie and asked if I wanted a ride. I woulda rid that car right

off the cliff with him that night if he had asked. I looked at the other girls standin around, their eyes big as saucers, flipped my hair and slid myself into that car. We drove out to the lake and parked. I'd done that before, but this was different somehow. I knowed it was wrong, but I wanted to do it, you know, *it* —I wanted to do everything. It was just a feelin, kinda overwhelmin. But I didn't really know nothing about it except for the girl talk and the health book pictures at school. Turns out he didn't know much more than I did and we sorta made a mess of it. Lots of twisted clothes and thrashin around. We was more embarrassed than anything but in a awkward way you might say we got it done.

NARRATOR: Elmira turned from the dash and looked at Billy. She wasn't smiling but there was a look of clarity in her face, a brightness in her eyes, the face she wore when she was teasing the policeman. It was as though she held a secret now, a profound secret that came to her in the back seat of a green Chevey.

ELMIRA: I know it was wrong, Billy. But it didn't seem like it was wrong no matter what the preacher says. I'm ashamed to say it now, but it was kinda fun and somethin that was natural like. We was laughin when it was over.

NARRATOR: Then suddenly she turned back to the empty road, the white ribbon disappearing under the truck. The open look of possibility; the look of almost hopefulness snapped away.

ELMIRA: He was waitin for me in the kitchen when I got home. Sittin in the dark, a cigarette lighten up his face when he took a draw, drinkin a beer, he was waitin on me. Turn on the light, he said.

How long did it go on? A year? Two years?... I turned the light on and just stood by the door. Held my little clutch bag in front of me, low, like I needed to hide myself. My hair was a mess, lipstick smeared all over my face, and my blouse was half untucked from my skirt.

You been with that boy, ain't you, Elmira?, he said. You think I don't know? I knowed as soon as you got in the car. You're used now, girl. Like a dirty rag you're used. I can smell it on you. The foul smell of what you been doin, and you got to pay now.

He got up, grabbed my wrist and slapped me, and that's when it started. You ever live in hell for two years? It's forever. Then one night, I took a knife from the kitchen and hid it in the bed. When he come, when he wasn't thinkin about nothing but what he was doin, I cut him. I cut him real good. They told everybody it was a accident in the woodshed and they shipped me off to Uncle Fornaker in Charleston... Now they expect me to go back, but I ain't goin back. I ain't never goin back. "Billy, you're takin me to Salisbury... Billy?"

BILLY: Yes, Elmira... Yes, Charlotte first then Salisbury, then Raleigh. Right, Charley?

ELMIRA: My cousin in Salisbury, she works for a radio station. Has a big job herself and says she can get me on there, too. Says I might even get to sing on the air. Imagine that, Billy, if I could just get to sing on the radio. (singing) My voice going out on nothin but air to thousands listenin to me sing. I'm goin to school too. Learn to talk like real people, like them radio people so I can talk on the air, too. You're gonna take me there, Billy. I know it. Load this truck with beer in Charlotte then you take me to Salisbury.

Okay, I'm gonna go to sleep now and think about Salisbury an that radio. Don't neither of you look up my skirt.

NARRATOR: With that, she gave Billy a light tap on the shoulder with her fist then settled back in the seat and was quickly asleep.

Billy didn't know why he did it, didn't know what prompted him—no hands had been placed on his head to sanction him, sanction him to forgive the sin of another person; no words said (spoken in Latin

even) to give him the right to utter a word (a formula) that would wipe clean the slate of anyone who opened their heart to him; in fact that hand had been withheld; unworthy it said; but all are unworthy, aren't they? And if he is unworthy of such a trust then what does it mean to be worthy? And what is a priest, if nothing but a man? If we can't absolve each other, extend the grace of God to those who reach out to us, then by whom and by what right is that simple human act of compassion extended, (or withheld)?—no, no hands of authority had been placed on his head, and yet he reached out. In this moment, no consideration of authority passed his mind, nothing of right or wrong, just,... like Father Barry, kneeling in the hold of the ship, (a man first, then a priest), a need was placed before him and that old hunger to set things right in the world rose up in him, or perhaps it didn't even matter why he did it, but Billy put his hand on Elmira Foley's shoulder,

BILLY: *Et ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis, in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.*

NARRATOR: And so it was done. For whatever reason, it was done. He spoke the absolution so lightly that even Charley barely heard him. But he did hear.

MACCLEARY: That was good, Billy. Pretty, even.

BILLY: Well it should be. I heard it often enough.

MACCLEARY: But what's the penance, Billy? There's always the penance.

BILLY: Look at her, Charley...leaning on me...her head on my shoulder...sleeping the sleep of innocence... The penance?... The penance is the sin itself.

MACCLERY: The *sin*? It's plural though, Billy. *Peccatis* is plural isn't it? Means sins...*I absolve you of your sins*. You said 'sin' like there's only one.

"BILLY: Yeah, they got it wrong. There's only one sin and all the others follow from that one.

(Truck sound)

MACCLEARY: Well, what was *her sin* then, Billy? She didn't do anything wrong. Maybe with that boy, but who would say that was a sin?

NARRATOR: Billy felt the weight of Elmira's body, he heard again, felt again his mother's sigh. The sigh that echoed with disappointment, marked his failure. He gripped the steering wheel and looked down Highway 162. Narrow, straight and flat: relentless, the earth turning pulled everything toward them.

BILLY: Being human. The sin of being the miserable imperfect, disappointing creatures we are. Isn't that enough? Everything else follows from that. We had the choice and we chose the knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil. And the penance? You asked what the penance is...Well we ain't in the garden anymore, are we. No more innocence. And the penance? It's the pain of the knowing what we are.

(Truck sound)

NARRATOR: The air in the truck was clean and clear now—sparkling even, as though a cleansing rain had washed the earth around the cab. *Ego te absolvo*, echoed in Billy's mind. *Ego te absolvo*: old things have passed away; behold all things have become new. *Ego te absolvo*... And Billy wondered who was out there to forgive him; who would relieve him of his great failing? Then, the look of impotence on his face dissolved, like a scene in a film it dissolved, then resolved to

form into something called determination; he lifted his hand from the wheel and snatched at the air as though catching a moth. All his misfortune: the disappointment of his mother, his failure, sins past and those he knew awaited him, he caught; pulled from the air, he scrunched them into a little ball and pitched it over his shoulder. And now the penance, he said. The truck still pounded on the road to Charlotte, still creaked and groaned with the noise of its labor; but inside the cab, there was a quietness now, a silence almost profound in its weight. Elmira slept.

(Truck sound)

So there was Charlotte and then there was Salisbury. Then the truck stopped, not in the town, but next to an open field in the woods on the approach. Elmira slid from the truck in the evening light and looked at the radio station down the long, dusty two-rut driveway. A small sign posted at her feet said, “WROA 540 AM, The heartbeat of Rowan County. We’re all family here and all country all the time.” The station didn’t look anything like her cousin’s description. This one sat alone in the middle of the field. There were no real trees to speak of, just a few scrub oaks that eked out a living here and there among patches of sandspurs and palmettos. The radio station itself was little more than a large single-wide house-trailer anchored to concrete block piers. The top half was clad in a silver metallic siding, aluminum, and the bottom half in blue-green vinyl panels, neither dark nor light—perhaps Mediterranean. Parked in front and to the left side of the trailer was a dusty maroon 1955 four-door Chevrolet, and looming behind the trailer a tall metal frame that could be identified as an antenna. The boys watched Elmira, backlit by the descending sun, walk up the dirt drive and mount the trailer’s three steps. She paused a moment, opened the single door, turned and waived. Then the door closed behind her.

BILLY: She going to be okay, Charley?

CHARLEY: She'll be okay. She knows who she is,

(Truck leaving)