



As a girl growing up in rural Georgia, Leona believed in God. Not that she saw any evidence to support this belief or possessed some mystical conviction based upon what Pastor Wiggins called ‘sheer blind faith.’ Leona simply accepted God, much in the same way she accepted eight o’clock as being her bedtime, because that was what Samuel and Nadine Feeny expected of their daughter.

Only when she became a teenager did Leona question her belief, though she was uncomfortable doing so and, as a result, would pray, sometimes a dozen times a day, asking the same God she was challenging to forgive her for such ‘blasphemy.’ Then she would wait for Him either to punish her for her audacity or to give her a sign that, indeed, He did exist. Yet, since He did neither, she finally quit praying to a God who, given His continued silence, obviously didn’t care whether she believed in Him or not.

By the time she went away to college, Leona had completely left her Southern Baptist upbringing behind. Uncertain about what she wanted out of life, she undertook her studies with a single-minded tenacity even she found admirable; and unable to think of anything better to do, she remained a student as long as possible. As a result, Leona received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Georgia, and deciding that teaching was probably her best, if not only, option, she applied for a vacancy at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. When offered the job, Leona was surprised but accepted and moved to the exotic region called ‘Acadiana.’

In many ways her new home was a country unto itself. A land of bayous and swamps, black coffee and crawfish, it was also a place where people embraced the concept of *joie de vivre*, which included an almost decadent indulgence in food and music, as well as an endless string of festivals celebrating everything from frogs to rice to Mardi Gras. The people were just as enthusiastic about their Catholic religion, which meant that Leona, who no longer considered herself a believer, now found herself among a populace that believed with a fervor bordering on the fanatical. But wanting to fit in—while taking pride in her detachment—she attended mass at St. John’s Cathedral and took pleasure in the serene carved faces of the saints, as she did in the sliding from seats, kneeling, and sliding back into seats; the tinkling bells and incense; and the chanting of ‘Hail Mary, full of grace.’

Being personable, Leona quickly made friends in the English Department and felt she had at last found her niche in life. The only problem was Dr. Gabriel Frazier.

A recognized scholar of medieval literature, Gabriel had published two slim volumes of poetry, an achievement Leona would have liked to discuss with him since she was secretly working on a collection of her own. But he always seemed to be avoiding her and sometimes even turned in mid-stride, retreating into his office as she approached. Moreover, she detected a measure of disapproval in the way he looked at her—so intently that the pupils of his gray eyes narrowed to pinpoints of black—as if he were judging her and finding her lacking in some vital quality.

Forty and a bachelor, Gabriel lived in a quaint cottage just three blocks from the house Leona rented on Evangeline Street, and she occasionally glimpsed him weeding the immaculate flowerbeds as she drove past. He also had a cat, a white cat that crouched among the blossoms, swatted at butterflies, and, unlike her, elicited a smile from his usually stern lips.

Perhaps five-ten, Gabriel was slim, with wavy hair, more gray than black, barely brushing the collar of starched shirts that, regardless of the area's humidity, were always impeccable; and though the other male professors opted for more casual wear, he wore either a sport coat with creased trousers or a suit, light or dark depending on the season, and always a tie. Given his fastidious demeanor, whenever Leona looked at him, she invariably thought, *and he glittered when he walked*,¹ because the line so aptly fit Dr. Gabriel Frazier.

He also had the most exquisite hands. Long fingered, they were incongruously expressive, possessing a spontaneity and passion that seemed totally independent of the habitually reserved man to whom they were attached.

At the second faculty meeting of the fall semester, Leona watched the way the sunlight streamed through the windows and turned the pale skin of his hands to gold. Embarrassment flushing her cheeks, she tore her gaze away and saw Gabriel looking at her, the familiar reproach in his eyes, and she feared he knew that she had been fighting the urge to reach across the table and touch his hands.

After that, Leona was tormented by Gabriel's unvoiced disapproval. What made her so loathsome in his eyes? She was not a vile person and did not deserve his disdain.

In mid-December, on an uncharacteristically cold day for the subtropical region, as she exited Griffin Hall at the same time as he, Leona heard herself say, in a breathless, unrecognizable voice, 'Gabriel, will you come to dinner next Saturday night?'

His expression divulging nothing of what she thought surely must be an astonishment paralleling her own, he stopped in mid-stride and looked down at his polished black loafers.

'I mean,' she said, 'I'm having a Christmas party.' In saying it, she decided it was true. She glanced at his hands—they were covered with kidskin gloves—then she too looked at his shoes. Within their mirror bright surface, she could see her reflection—Leona in miniature, pale and afraid.

He cleared his throat, eyes now on a female student zigzagging her bicycle among cars in the parking lot.

'It's an opportunity to get into the holiday spirit,' she said. Not that she even had a tree yet, but she would go tomorrow and select the most perfect one in town. 'It's at seven, and I live close to you.' Hearing the underlying desperation in her voice, she added, 'Other people from the department will be there, plus, of course, the dean.' At least, she hoped this was true, since she had yet to invite anyone else.

Looking back down, he tilted his right shoe as if studying the sheen.

Swallowing, she said, 'I make the most wonderful eggnog, not too spicy and with just the right amount—'

¹ 'Richard Cory' by Edwin Arlington Robinson

‘All right,’ he said, quite unexpectedly. ‘I’ll put it on my calendar.’ His eyes were now trained on something beyond her left shoulder. ‘Seven o’clock you say?’

‘Yes, that’s right—seven o’clock.’ And not wanting to give him time to reconsider, Leona fled to her car, where she sat behind the wheel and trembled. Gabriel would be in her house and—with those eloquent hands—he would touch things that belonged to her, things that she too had touched and would continue to touch time and again.

For the party, she wore a wine-red velvet dress. Floor length, with an empire waist, it made her feel glamorous; and with her dark hair up and an antique choker about her neck, she thought she looked as if she had stepped from the legendary courts of Camelot. Yet didn’t Gabriel’s expertise—and his passion—lie in those ancient times *when swords were bright and steeds were dancing*?²

Waiting for her guests to arrive—a surprising number of people had accepted the invitation—Leona walked from room to room, trying to see her home through the eyes of the man who sat in such unexplained judgment of her. Upon glimpsing a side of her divorced from academe, would he realize she was a woman of subtle, yet eclectic, taste? Someone who appreciated the arts? Or would he see behind the facade she had so diligently constructed and know she no longer believed in God?

Leona froze, hand outstretched to move an ornament from one limb of the tree to another. Now, why had she thought such a thing? As if her non-belief had anything to do with Gabriel Frazier’s condemnation of her. The mere idea was preposterous.

Sighing, she glanced around the living room. It was festooned with greenery and mellow with candlelight. Then again, she doubted Gabriel would notice his surroundings, though being *a gentleman from sole to crown*,³ he would mingle, have some duck and pâté, perhaps a glass or two of wine, then wish everyone a ‘Merry Christmas’ before bidding them all ‘goodnight.’

Midway through the evening, Leona heard herself talking quite animatedly and telling a joke, though she’d always taken life too seriously to see the humor, even in one-liners. Feeling giddy, she walked over to where Gabriel stood in front of the bookcase, brushed against his arm (either by accident or intentionally, she wasn’t sure which), and looked into the gray pools of reprehension that were his eyes. ‘Gabriel,’ she said, ‘I’m so very glad you came.’

He stepped back, pressing his spine into the bookcase.

Giggling, though neither was she one to giggle, Leona realized she could smell his cologne—some subtle fragrance she didn’t recognize.

‘Dr. Feeny,’ he said, ‘I think perhaps you’re drunk.’

‘I have a question,’ she said. ‘Why do you disapprove of me so?’ Then she held her breath and waited for his reply.

Sliding past the *Complete Works of Emily Dickinson* and a leather-bound edition of *Sonnets of the Portuguese*, Gabriel glanced into his wineglass. ‘Dr. Feeny, I—’

‘Admit it, you don’t like me.’

‘That’s absurd. I don’t know you well enough to dislike you.’

She leaned toward him, whispered, ‘But you disapprove of me, don’t you.’

² *Miniver Cheevy* by Edwin Arlington Robinson

³ *Richard Cory* by Edwin Arlington Robinson

‘Now, I—’

‘It’s all right. I really don’t mind,’ she lied. ‘I’d simply like to know why since, as you said, you hardly know me at all.’

Cheeks crimson, he now inched along in front of a row of paperbacks, mainly Danielle Steele and Barbara Cartland, which Leona read for entertainment, as well as respite from more serious prose. ‘Disapprove of you?’ He laughed, the sound there and then gone. ‘I don’t disapprove of you, not at all.’

Leona watched him pull at his tie. It was dark red, with a green paisley design. Against it, his hand was not a real hand at all, but the flawless appendage of a sculpture carved from purest ivory—immeasurable in its perfection. And no longer able to bear it, she reached out and touched his hand.

‘Dr. Feeny!’ He snatched his hand away, his aversion a cold hard light in the center of his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, though she wasn’t sorry at all.

Shouldering past the novels of Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel cleared the bookcase and headed for the sideboard, where he filled his wineglass, sloshing Cabernet onto the poinsettia-embossed runner. Ten minutes later, he bid everyone happy holidays then disappeared into the chilly dankness of the Louisiana night.

After that nothing changed. Neither did Gabriel’s disapproval intensify nor did it abate. It simply was. As constant and predictable as the wheezing push-pull of the accordion Leona’s neighbor sat on his porch and played every Saturday night, it remained as the spring semester began then ended, and summer descended, bringing with it the ever present threat of hurricanes.

Leona took a sabbatical to work on an anthology of contemporary poets but made little progress. She couldn’t explain why, but she felt vaguely dissatisfied; and searching for something—she wasn’t sure what, merely knew it had been misplaced—she would drive around Lafayette. On one such pilgrimage, she passed Gabriel’s house, where she saw him tending the flowerbeds, his sublime hands covered by gardening gloves, and the white cat playing among the blooms. Then, as she turned the corner, Gabriel and the cat were lost from view.

She continued going to mass and, toward the end of summer, attended confession (She wasn’t Catholic, but she doubted the priest knew or even cared). And there, within the dusky confines of the confessional, she closed her eyes against the white, hot pain of the loss she couldn’t identify and waited for absolution.