

JEAN ROSS JUSTICE

*Tales from a Family Album: The Justices*

*"The family tree a simple chinaberry..."*

In August of 1925 it was, as always, hot in Miami. Ethel Cook Justice was pregnant, which made her even hotter, and she spent a good deal of time sitting around in her underwear. "Vascoe"—her husband—"was so ashamed of me!" I doubt that he was deeply ashamed; he loved her, and she was the town girl, and he the country boy.

He'd been born in Pansy, Alabama, the son of Alfred Union and Nancy Holland Justice. Pansy was a hamlet that later disappeared; Don and I looked for it in the 1980s, and it was gone. The family moved to a farm near Tifton, in south Georgia. Vascoe—he usually signed his name "V.J.," and his siblings sometimes called him Coe—was one of five children. Both of his grandfathers had died in the Civil War. When he was grown, he enlisted in the Army and was sent down to the Mexican border, then overseas in the first World War; in the Army he worked as a cook. He and Ethel began to correspond, her name having come to him through a mutual friend. After the war he went to see her. He was a good-looking young man; she said she was attracted to him because of his pretty teeth. He was working here and there. Either before or after his Army service, he worked in a town on the Gulf Coast and came down with typhoid fever; his father went down to care for him. Eventually he made his way down the east coast of Florida. He remembered that in Fort Pierce the mosquitoes were so thick that the women wore newspaper under their stockings. In Miami he found steady work as a carpenter and went back to marry Ethel and bring her to Miami, which she said seemed to her to be "the jumping-off place."

She'd grown up in Boston, Georgia, the daughter of Joseph Lee and Mary Wilson Cook. Her parents were members of large and relatively prosperous families. Boston was a town of perhaps seven or eight hundred people. Curiously, it had a swimming pool, out near the cemetery. Most of the houses appear to date from the last two decades of the nineteenth century or the first two of the twen-

tieth. In the spring, it's a lovely town of flowering fruit trees and redbud. There are ditches between the yards and the street, and few sidewalks except in the two or three business blocks.

Miami was a small town then, though not as small as her Boston, of course. They lived some distance out on Flagler Street and kept chickens. The chickens knew the sound of Vascoe's car and would come running to be fed when he came home from work. Ethel cooked on an oil stove, which she detested. In a year or so, they moved to another neighborhood, called Buena Vista.

Other south Georgians were coming down; eventually Ethel's parents and her brothers Ralph and Frank came. (Frank worked as a carpenter too. His wife remembered that when a house was framed and the floors in, the people who were working on it sometimes held a dance there.) Her parents had come by the time Donald was born on August 12. Her father, unable to bear the sound of her cries, walked around the neighborhood while she was in labor. ("They didn't have anything to give you but a little chloroform.") It was a short labor. Donald's grandmother held him up to see the sunrise; this was reported later. It was a family with a sense of occasion.

The '26 hurricane took the Georgians by surprise. Donald's aunt Lola Justice and her husband Jim Shinholster started for Ethel and Vascoe's, a few blocks away, but the wind was too strong; Jim left Lola clinging to a palmetto, meaning to go for help—or perhaps that was the time she held onto a wheel of the Model A under the carport while Jim clung to another, neither knowing the other was there. When water ran into Vascoe and Ethel's house, Ethel dressed Donald in his bathing suit and let him play in the water. Other relatives and neighbors were there.

The Miami boom ended. Ethel's mother died, and her father returned to Georgia to live with a sister. Later he came back to Miami to live with Ethel and Vascoe and opened a small neighborhood grocery. He'd once had a market back in Boston, but had never worked much because he suffered badly from asthma. (The remedy he used was the same my mother relied on: asthma powders. The powders were sprinkled onto the metal lid of the can they came in, lighted, and the smoke inhaled. The chief ingredient of the powders was cannabis—in essence, marijuana.) Back in Georgia, the family had owned a pecan grove and harvested the nuts in the fall as a

cash crop; for a time, his wife cooked for the people who roomed at another house in town—not a menial job, but more like a collaboration between neighbors. (“She had to make the living,” her daughter-in-law once remarked.) At the Miami grocery, too many of the people who’d bought on credit couldn’t pay, for the Depression had set in; he closed the store and took the groceries home to Ethel and Vascoe. He kept Donald company when Ethel went out, and they were fond of one another.

Much later, in the late thirties, his grandfather was back in Georgia with a live-in housekeeper who began to say that people were gossiping about the two of them. His health and judgment were failing, and she persuaded him to marry her. This entitled her to a share of his small estate, of course, and Ethel never forgave her. (“A rather pathetic woman,” Don said later, “the poorest of the poor.”)

Donald saw less of the other grandfather, Alfred Union Justice. Because of his middle name, and because his father, killed in the Civil War, was said to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery, Don held to the notion, perhaps the hope, that the family had been Union sympathizers. However, in recent years some Georgia cousins made the trip to Arlington and reported that the burial there was only a family myth. Alfred had grown up in hard times; how fatherless families managed during the Reconstruction years is a question. I imagine the widow and children working a small farm with the help of family and neighbors, but this is only a conjecture. There was an expression for the hard upbringing: “raised by the hair of the head.” Little schooling was available. Alfred was apparently a hard worker, and eventually owned his own farm; the chief money crop was probably tobacco, though he also grew cotton. In the pictures of him in Ethel’s album, he is always in overalls and regards the camera with a firm stare. (But it was not the style in those days to smile for the photographer. Perhaps it was Hollywood that taught people to cozy up to the camera.) He was superstitious; when his favorite dog disappeared, he consulted a fortune teller; the fortune teller said the hired man—tenant farmer?—had stolen it, and Alfred went home and fired the hired man, almost certainly unjustly.

“Your mama wanted you to be perfect,” Nevada, Don’s aunt, once remarked. Certainly his mother was much concerned with his development. He took elocution lessons when he was around five.

(“He couldn’t talk plain.”) He remembered delivering a speech at the Threescore and Ten Club called “Shun The Cigarette” (advice he himself did not heed). And, as he has related in print, he began music lessons after observing a small rhythm band of children at a downtown department store. He took lessons for some years, then lost interest during adolescence. His friend Coney—Ernest Cone Landers—encouraged him to begin again.

A story he liked to tell of his childhood took place before he was old enough to remember it. He fell from the front porch and cut his forehead, which bled so long that his mother was alarmed; seeing some new neighbors out in their yard playing croquet, she called to them for advice. One of the women told her to apply cobwebs, and this worked. A few days later these neighbors were pictured in the newspaper: one had been Machine Gun Jack McGurn, and it was the woman called his Blonde Alibi who knew how to deal with bleeding.

Donald’s mother liked children, and was good at attracting playmates for her son. She liked parties and entertainments. She organized a Tom Thumb wedding (one of those ’30s crazes); you can guess who the happy little groom was. There is a large picture of this occasion, which may have been published in the newspaper. Ethel’s sister-in-law teased her about wanting to “get into society,” and she does seem to have had an innocent yearning to be written up in the paper, as she and her friends would have been back home. (She had once taken unfair advantage of this: she and a chum sent to the *Savannah Morning News* a notice of the engagement of her cousin Oscar Cook and a young lady to whom he was far from being engaged. They were never found out, as far as she knew.) There’s a newspaper picture of Donald at age five, a book open on his lap, with the heading “He Likes Our Club”—apparently a newspaper-sponsored book club of some sort. Miami was smaller then, and smaller events were covered in the paper. (Years later, without telling us, and without understanding how such things worked, Ethel sent a picture of Don and me to the *Miami Herald* to be printed on the society page when we were back in town on a visit; the *Herald* ran it in small, in a people-about-town column. We were rather taken aback, and not wholly pleased.)

The family had a kind of small-town life. Donald—to his parents he was always Donald—went to Allapattah Elementary School,

Allapattah being the name of their northwest Miami neighborhood. The family went to the Allapattah Baptist Church, and Donald went to the Baptist Young People's Union. Sometimes they visited other churches or went to revival meetings with alarming evangelical sermons; Donald sometimes had stomachaches at these, and later reproached his parents for taking him to them. (His mother once said she'd hoped he'd become a Baptist preacher; it's tempting to say that nothing could have been less likely.) On Sunday afternoons they visited relatives or friends from back home. Vascoe's sister Lola and Ethel's two brothers lived in Miami; the three children of her brother Frank were Donald's most constant playmates, and the closest thing he had to siblings. There were family dinners at birthdays and holidays.

In spite of its expanses of raw newness, Miami was a lovely place to grow up. There was the luxuriant foliage, the bay, the Miami River and its drawbridges, the causeway to Miami Beach, which gleamed in the distance. There were exotic spots, like the Venetian Pools in Coral Gables. It was a mix of people: one section was nicknamed Little Georgia, and sections of Miami Beach might have been called Little New York. It was a place of big ambitions and failed efforts, fine Spanish-style buildings and archways to forever unfinished subdivisions. Famous people came to speak and politick in Bayfront Park; there were entertainments for tourists. Ethel liked to take in whatever was going on.

In the summers, they visited back in Georgia. Jitneys went up to south Georgia from Miami, and Ethel and her sister-in-law Alice sometimes took one, with the children, but normally the family drove. Donald didn't mind visiting in his mother's home town, Boston, but was not fond of visiting on the farm of his grandfather Justice. ("And I, missing the city intensely at that moment...") There wasn't much to do there that interested him, and he may have been afraid of his grandfather, who switched his cousin Therman. ("He'd better not switch Donald," his mother said, that privilege being reserved for his parents, on occasion.)

When he was ten, there was the traumatic illness, osteomyelitis. Don and his mother talked about it later with something like excitement. The family doctor couldn't diagnose the illness, so they consulted another, who got in touch with a bone specialist. The specialist was ready to leave on a hunting trip and didn't want to come,

but, already in his hunting clothes, agreed to look at Donald, and made the diagnosis. He operated the next day. Don remembered an ether dream from this occasion, himself drifting away from a dock in a small boat. There was some fear that he would lose the leg, and when he awoke from the surgery, he was relieved to find it still there. There are pictures of him lying on a wheeled chaise with his leg in a cast. He missed perhaps a year of school. Possibly his fondness for games increased then: he remembered a horse-racing game that a friend of the family gave him.

The cost of the illness was considerable—the hospital bill, the continuing doctor bills, the wheelchair, the rattan chaise (which I still have), the pony they bought for him later to cheer him up. (The pony didn't last long; Donald and the pony disliked each other equally.) The family moved from a roomy two-story pink stucco house that they all remembered fondly. (Coney Landers remembers being impressed by it—"a big house with a piano." Snapshots show monogrammed awnings at the many windows.) They moved to a house Vascoe had built one street over, a one-story frame house, set back from the street and occupying three lots. Ethel was a devoted gardener, and in a few years the yard was full of lush foliage, with a small goldfish pool. Vascoe eventually built an efficiency apartment adjoining the garage. (Don and I lived there the first year of our marriage.) Later he built a somewhat larger rental apartment adjoining the house on the other side. Earlier in the Depression, when carpenter jobs had dried up, he'd thought of moving to Texas or Wyoming, where he'd heard there was work; he'd begun to pack when he learned he'd been hired at Bessemer Properties, a real-estate management firm, on a flat salary. He stayed with them for more than ten years at a salary, I think, of around a hundred dollars a month, not bad for the thirties. If a hurricane was expected, he would be busy letting down storm shutters and boarding up hotels downtown and on Miami Beach. By the late forties he was again working on new construction; he built at least one house on speculation with a real-estate friend, Mr. Mattingly, but the speculative building proved disappointing. (After Vascoe died, some twenty years later, Mr. Mattingly asked Ethel to marry him; she declined.) Vascoe was a good carpenter, and liked to have things shipshape; if a door didn't quite fit in a house we rented, he would bring a tool on the next visit and fix it. He was practical and patient—smart,

though not bookish. He was a union member and went faithfully to the union meetings.

Donald attended the neighborhood high school, Andrew Jackson, and played clarinet in the band. He switched to Miami High for his senior year—he once said it was partly because he was passed over for the editorship of the school paper—and was happier there; the student body was eclectic and more sophisticated. In his later years, he marveled at the excellence of the school—a superior school in a handsome Spanish-style building.

After high school, he went to the University of Miami as a day student, on a band scholarship; his parents bought him a Model A Ford roadster to drive back and forth. At the university he was invited into the Snarks, the writers' club, an unprecedented honor for a freshman. He became the music reviewer for the student newspaper and complained once that there had been no modern compositions on a concert program; he also wrote a gossip column. An item in the student paper one year remarked that he had "caused recent campus bewilderment by his play *Surrealist Police*." He acted in several plays, including his friend Bob (Robert Boardman) Vaughn's play *A Grail of Laughter: A Tragedy of Jazz*, and directed another. He played one of the three convicts in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, though a student reviewer remarked that he looked too young for anything but reform school. Some time during the college years he sold a poem to *Mademoiselle*, and received honorable mention in a *Story* contest. The poem in *Mademoiselle* appeared on the same page as a poem by Peter Taylor, his future brother-in-law.

He pledged the Kappa Sigma fraternity. At some point, I think his junior year, he announced his atheism, and there was a trial within the fraternity, after which he was expelled from it. (Yet after his death I had great difficulty getting him off the mailing list. Apparently once a Kappa Sigma, always a Kappa Sigma.)

At the university he studied composition with the composer Carl Ruggles, and a woodwind quartet he composed was played in a concert at the Music Workshop. Ruggles thought he should go to Yale and study with Hindemith, but it was impossible to afford Yale. Years later, Don met someone who had been in the class he'd have joined at Yale, and learned that all the class members had had perfect pitch, which Don did not have.

Along the way he got into a few scrapes. Once, after a good deal of pub-crawling, he and Bud McCarron began to throw rocks at the street lights as they made their way along a Coral Gables thoroughfare; they were arrested and jailed until they sobered up and promised to pay for the damage. And there was a story of dropping a much-desired book out of a window to a confederate at the Flagler Memorial Library. There were the usual dances and dates with girls, some of whose names I still remember. The war had begun, but he was 4-F because of the osteomyelitis.

In July 1944, he was off to New York, where he worked for a few months in a low-paying job at Paramount Pictures; there were several changes of address and several telegrams home asking for money. Either that summer or the summer after his graduation from college, he went on to New England and spent a short time picking apples, and in Boston worked for a week as a short-order cook at a naval base. In late fall he entered the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill for a term. During the war years, colleges were on odd schedules; the record says he entered in November 1944 and stayed several months. (This is when he first met Richard Stern.) Much of the time he lived rent-free in a fraternity house that was half-empty because of the war. I assume he chose UNC because of its literary tradition. Thomas Wolfe and the North Carolina playwright Paul Green were big names in the thirties and forties—and Don had gone up to Asheville at seventeen especially to see the Wolfe boarding house and talk to Thomas Wolfe's mother. (The family had taken a vacation trip to the North Carolina mountains a few years earlier.) But UNC wouldn't accept all his UM credits, I believe because one school was on the trimester system and the other on the quarter system, and there was the question of money; he returned to Miami and graduated there.

Around February of 1945 he worked part-time as a bellhop at the Alamack Hotel and the Marlin Hotel on Miami Beach. The experience stuck in his mind. He noted that when the police came to arrest someone from the bookmaking operation downstairs in one of the hotels, they considerably allowed the bookies to pick the person to send this time (someone not previously arrested). Many years later he worked for a long time on a poem written from the point of view of a Miami Beach hotel night clerk during World War II, sometimes

titled “On South Beach,” sometimes “Where the Elephants Go to Die.” He was never able to finish it to his satisfaction.

After graduation, he went back to New York for a year, working at *Mademoiselle*. (A Miami friend, Rita Smith, Carson McCullers’ sister, played a role in landing the job.) He lived cheaply in Greenwich Village, sometimes sharing a place with Bob Vaughn. Once they fell out over a literary judgment—who was better than whom—and Bob said *if that was what Don thought* he should move out. How much more serious about literature could anyone be?

Don’s mother had an enthusiasm for games and children’s make-believe; at sixty, she could still play a spirited game of cowboys and Indians with her grandson. She was a reader, as Vascoe was not. Vascoe apparently had only a few years of schooling; she had almost finished high school, having dropped out before her last year, after which she clerked for a while in Pearlman’s Store, a small department or general merchandise store in Boston. She loved clothes; probably boys and clothes were occupying her mind, and graduating from high school wasn’t taken as much for granted at that time and place as it is now. In her “Kodak book” there are pictures of her stylishly dressed, posing with other stylishly dressed young women and young men.

In Donald’s childhood she wrote a playlet for either Sunday School or the music club and sent stories off to magazines, though without success. Her taste ran to the sentimental. She was a movie lover; one might say that Don developed his love of movies on his mother’s knee, since she took him with her from the time when he was a small child. She was superstitious and consulted fortune tellers and psychics. Once, at a public event featuring a psychic, young Donald decided to ask the question, “Will my grandfather get well?” though his grandfather was already dead. The psychic said that he would, after some time.

After Donald left home, his mother sometimes rented a room to tourists during the winter season. Vascoe had closed in half of the front porch to make a sleeping porch-bedroom, and they moved into that and rented their larger bedroom, or, occasionally, a breakfast room that had an outside entrance. The roomers were typically elderly women or aging couples down from the northern winter for a low-cost vacation of a week or so. Some kept in touch with Ethel

after they returned home. There were a few surprises: once, in line for the ladies' matinee at the neighborhood theater, she encountered one of the roomers, a young married man, wearing a dress he'd borrowed from her closet.

Ethel had an eye for the interesting event and the odd detail. Things she remembered from back home turn up in the story "Vineland's Burning." There were other recollections from the past, of course. Her younger brother, Frank, had been desperately sick at about age five with what was later thought to have been rheumatic fever. He'd been given up for lost and a little white suit of funeral clothes prepared, but the preacher from the Primitive Baptist Church came and prayed all night on the front steps; next morning, Frank had improved and was asking for cornbread. (Probably the illness damaged his heart; he died of a heart attack in his forties.) Cornbread seems to have been the convalescent's preferred food in the Cook family: when Don's cousin Carolyn Cook, Frank's daughter, was in the hospital with a serious illness, the food she asked for when she was able to eat was black-eyed peas and cornbread. Her mother was exhausted; Ethel cooked the food and took it to the hospital on the bus.

Ralph, the older of Ethel's two brothers, was something of a ladies' man. There was a story of a young woman coming up the front walk carrying a baby, looking for Ralph, who had fled out the back door. (In those days, the mothers of young men in such situations seem to have possessed remarkable gene-detecting powers, and often said what his mother said: "That wasn't his baby.") He told of sneaking out of the house one night to carouse, coming home late, and climbing in a window; his father was waiting inside, and pulled the window down, pinning him halfway in. I don't know if the upshot was a thrashing or a tongue-lashing. He remembered driving from Georgia to Miami when there was only one other car on the road for the duration of the trip, so that they were essentially racing; he made better time because the other driver slowed down on the curves. Cars were important to him. Later he worked for the City of Miami streets department, operating heavy equipment. He was not a movie projectionist, as in the poem that bears his name, and the love of his life was his wife Bonnie, a country girl from Alabama with a pretty face and some sense of style. She and Ralph lived a more good-time life than Ethel and Vascoe—drank

more, went to church less. (The latter were almost teetotalers, though Vascoe might take a drink on special occasions.) Bonnie was good to Ralph's family, and sometimes stayed at the hospital with Donald when he was recuperating from the osteomyelitis surgery. He remembered her as a rather romantic figure. She and Ralph divorced after a few years; they couldn't agree on adopting a child, and she had found another love interest. "She got to thinking she was too pretty," Ethel said, though she was fond of Bonnie and was occasionally in touch with her later. Some time in the seventies or eighties Don wrote to her; she was part of the past that seemed in memory dearer all the time. He was a little disappointed in the correspondence: she no longer seemed a very interesting person; perhaps writing letters was not her long suit. In memory, the world of Don's childhood almost always seemed beautiful to him.

Ralph moved in with Ethel and Vascoe a year or two before Vascoe died in 1957. For years he'd been boarding with a couple who'd become his friends—or perhaps they were friends to start with. When he moved in, Ethel had him get rid of his parakeet, which she believed was worsening his asthma. ("Ah, my mother," Don murmured. "I was lucky to escape with my life." Usually, however, he gave her great credit: "My mother always thought I could do things. My father wasn't that sure.")

The old Allapattah neighborhood was changing in the late fifties, and in the early sixties, a few years after Vascoe died, Ethel bought a house in Hialeah, where a niece, nephew, and sister-in-law lived. It was hard to leave the house Vascoe had built, the pecky cypress cathedral ceiling in the living room, the luxuriantly planted yard, the goldfish pool, the ivy she had planted around the chimney. But she and Ralph moved to Hialeah, and were soon on good terms with the new neighbors. At one time he asked the Cuban-Americans next door if he could give bones or steak scraps to their dog, customarily tied up in the backyard; they said they'd rather he didn't. ("That Cuban dog never gets to go on a walk," he remarked.) He fed the birds and read mysteries. He and Ethel shared a house for seventeen years. He died in 1973, in his mid-seventies; Ethel died the following spring. Though in the 1920s her mother had urged her in a letter not to be "buried in sand," she, Vascoe, and her two brothers are all buried in what is presumably the somewhat sandy soil of Flagler

Memorial Park in Miami, on West Flagler Street, the street where Vascoe and Ethel began their Miami life together.

Don worked for a long time on a poem about another uncle, his father's older brother Canova (Novy). In the 1930s, Novy was the boss of a work gang up on Lake Okeechobee, probably at Belle Glade or Canal Point; he loaned small sums to the workers at usurious rates. He had been demanding repayment of a loan for some time, and on payday there were words between him and the man who owed him; Novy shot him dead. Don remembered driving with his parents up to see Novy in jail; there was not much conversation about the matter. He believed his uncle got off with light punishment—some time in jail, a fine, probation. (The man he shot was black; shamefully, this mattered at the time.) The unfinished poem about the incident is called "The Guard," and Novy is changed to a chain-gang guard who felt threatened by the man he shot and feels distress afterwards. Many worksheets for this poem remain, but it was more or less abandoned (though "The Small White Churches of the Small White Towns" originated there). The event itself is one of the many things about which no one living now can tell us the whole story.