

Notes about these “outtakes” (David Dobbs, July 7, 2011):

- Here’s the passage I pulled because it raised too much of a mystery. It was toward the end of the opening section, when I’m talking to my mother’s cousin, Betty Lou, to see what she knows about Angus. She’s just told me about the letter that brought my mom the news of her lover’s death just after World War II:

“But there’s another thing about that letter,” said Betty Lou. “I feel a little funny saying this.”

“How so?”

“Well, I couldn’t help but wonder — and I could be wrong on this — but from the very beginning, when she first got that letter, and I read it after she did, I couldn’t help but wonder if he really truly disappeared, or if maybe he just *decided* to disappear. I mean whether he wanted to go home, back to Iowa, is where he came from, and had his friend write that letter for him. Or maybe he wrote it out himself and had his friend copy it and send it to your mama, so your mama would think he was dead and he could go back home.”

There was a pretty long silence before she continued. “I mean: If you were him and wanted to go back home — you wanted to go back to Iowa, be with your family there, instead of going back to Texas to be with Evelyn Jane — that’s one way you could do it. Maybe the easiest way. I almost feel bad thinking it. But it was a war. People did crazy things.”

“Hm,” I said.

“I never told your mother I was wondering that. But that’s been in my head all these years. He might justa gone home.”

- Here’s another, one that just didn’t quite fit anywhere:

When necessary she swayed people by less agreeable methods. Steel resolve backed her graciousness. A psychologist in his twenties who worked in a Houston mental health clinic, whom I met because a high-school friend of mine sometimes sat his kids, once asked me what my parents did. When I told him my mother was a psychiatrist, he said, “Oh? What’s her name? Maybe I know her.”

I told him.

“Jane Preston? That’s your mother?”

“Yeah, why?” I asked, a bit flustered.

“Jesus fucking Christ, man. Everyone I work with is scared to death of that woman!”

- And another:

I was presented the first thread of this story a year or two after my father moved out, when I, in my mid-teens, would visit her every week or so in the evening in her bedroom. Finding her sitting up in bed reading, I would sit in the large, determinedly “masculine” Morris chair my father had abandoned. The visits let us catch up, I suppose, but mainly they let her tell me the story of her life. The result was an arrangement blatantly and almost comically Freudian in a number of ways, including not just the obviously Oedipal but the weird reversal that found a middle-aged

psychiatrist gazing at the ceiling as she related memories, reveries, and fantasies to a figure, who just happened to be her son, sitting mostly silent in a nearby chair.

Most of her stories were nostalgic anecdotes or moral lessons – the grandfather who took in relatives during the Depression; the uncle, a doctor, who treated people whether they could pay or not; the ugliness of those who held her mother's past against her and the decency of those who refused to. Occasionally she told one about my father from early in their marriage, and these were usually flattering, which surprised me, for in other venues the subject usually drew bile.

The Angus story surprised me too, and from a side I wasn't used to defending. I had no idea what to do with it. I let it go by like a bus marked for a route I didn't want — and I essentially forgot about it until her deathbed request thirty years later. But I see now what anyone of her profession would have seen — anyone who gave a grain of weight to Freud's insights about veiled motivation — which is that my mother was telling me (among other things) that despite my perch in the Morris chair, despite my favored place among her children, I was not the most important man in her life. Angus was. And if he'd lived — if she'd had her dearest, most lasting wish — I would not be.