

## On the Road with C. T. Savage

I'm sitting here in the South Berkshire County Police Station on a molded orange chair staring at the green-painted block walls and scuffed vinyl floor tiles. They put me between the cart with the coffee machine and a big blue water bottle, and they've gone back to their computers and scanners. I think they're bringing in a psychiatrist because I refused to speak. I hug my pocketbook like some old country lady on a bench in the bus station. I didn't mean to stonewall them, but I closed down. I wasn't hungry; I didn't have to pee. I've seen this happen to patients after a trauma, and I've been watching it happen to me.

But my stomach growled a while ago, and I've begun to feel prickles of embarrassment. I'm ready to starting signing papers or whatever they want me to do. C.T.'s wallet is still in my bag, but they have the truck license, and I expect by now they've ID'd him and soon they'll get hold of my kids. Or else I'll call them myself, which of course is what I should have done in the first place.

There was a ruckus over my pocketbook, a brown leather hobo bag, expensive at the time I bought it. The nice young Massachusetts police officer's lips got tighter and tighter as he kept trying to get some information out of me: "We know you were with him, ma'am. We just want some information." I appreciate that they try to be polite up here in the Northeast just like back home in West Virginia, but when I didn't talk, the young cop tried to lay a hand on the pocketbook—gently, he didn't try to grab it—but I snatched it back and hugged it, and some of the people in the parking lot at the lake started to grumble—What's he doing to that poor woman? And then his boss came over and they asked me if I wanted to go in the

ambulance, but I could tell that the emergency people had already given up on C.T. They got him out of sight as soon as they could, and I was pretty sure he was gone. Then the older cop offered me a ride to the police station. I didn't have a lot of choice, did I? The truck was in the lake.

I've lost track of the hours now. At some point one of the women police came over and told me they were sorry, but my husband had passed away at the hospital. I was so frozen I didn't even say, He's not my husband. I divorced him twenty-five years ago.

But now tears have started pouring out of my eyes. I'm crying because I'm hungry as well as exhausted, and I feel such a fool for being here.

Maybe also a little bit because C.T. won't be showing up on my doorstep anymore assuming *just assuming* that I'm ready to hop on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle and go for a ride because he happens to be in the mood. He liked his motorcycles black and classic. He never cared for custom-painted orange flames or chrome add-ons. He never cared for helmets, either, and he used to join the younger boys when they had one of their bareheaded parades to protest the helmet laws.

This time he came in his Chevy truck with no motorcycle, but with that big old motorboat in tow.

Goddamn you, C. T. Savage.

I still choke when I think of how he walked out on me all those years ago *saying* he was looking for a job, but leaving me with two babies and out of everything, I mean out of everything from milk to toilet paper, and there's C.T. looking all mournful and saying, "Merlee, honey, I just can't take this."

He can't take it, but Merlee can! That's C.T. to a tee. When he's ready, he just checks out and leaves me sitting in the police station with all the details that someone is going to have to take care of, and who do you suppose it's going to be? Not C.T.

People warned me from the beginning. Everyone in Cooper County, West Virginia, knows the Savage boys. There were six of them, not counting the cousins, wild but not bad. One died in prison, but he was the dumb one, not the mean one. The mean one was Ray, and wouldn't you know it, he's back in Cooper County preaching. I've never especially cared for the kind of people who go around having conversion experiences every couple of years, whether it's religion or hair color. People ought to have some consistency, in my opinion.

Which C.T. did have. He has been a motorcycle-riding, engine-repairing wild boy with a crooked grin from day one. He picked me out when we were both teenagers. To his mind, I was his woman then, and I'm his woman now.

Was his woman.

He stood in my doorway without saying a word, just grinning, and it wasn't till he'd been at my house for a while that I realized C.T. wasn't just being laconic, he was having trouble getting enough wind to speak. If it had been anyone but C.T. I would have seen right away how sick he was. I'm a nurse in a West Virginia town, so I know black lung and all the other diseases that come from people breathing coal dust plus smoking since they were eight years old. I know what lung disease looks like in people's faces and even in their hands.

I'm an RN, no thanks to C.T. Savage for that either, although typical of C.T. he showed up for my graduation from nursing school and cheered. When I was a brassy little smart-aleck teenager, I used to toss my hair and tell people I was going to be a doctor, and everyone laughed except for C.T. Even back then he gave me that grin like I was the best thing since sliced bread and said Merlee can do anything she wants. So he came to my graduation with a couple of his friends hooting and hollering with a case of beer.

I could have been a doctor, too, in a different place and time: with more money, more pressure to go to college straight off, and a prescription for birth-control pills. The doctor I work for gives me little tests sometimes: what do I think the diagnosis is, and I get it as often as not, and once or twice I got it when he didn't. I have a lot of pride in how I scratched my way to an LPN with two little kids and then on to an RN.

I'm going to miss knowing that C.T. is out there somewhere boasting to his buddies about me.

What he wanted, he said, was to go to Canada. That day, I was in the kitchen, getting a drink of water before going back to face some more of the weeds I hadn't pulled all summer. It was my vacation: Doctor had gone to his place on the beach in North Carolina, and after I cleaned up the backyard, I was going to go visit Dawn and maybe babysit her kids while she and her husband took a weekend together.

And there stood C.T. Savage in my doorway finally sucking in enough air to say, "Hey, Merlee, come and take a ride to Canada with me."

When I was fourteen, I guess I had an excuse for going off with him. I was bored and looking for the world to find me. I'd sit on my butt on the front porch staring at the hillside and listening to coal cars crunch into each other over at the mine. Then one day, here came C.T. like an answer to a girl's prayer. He was riding the motorcycle he'd rebuilt himself: a 1957 Harley-Davidson Sportster X that had been in a fatal accident, and he had painstakingly found parts, made parts, and rebuilt it. He didn't even say Hey, girl, want to go for a ride, he just gave me the grin and jerked his chin toward the passenger seat, and even now when I think of it, I get the tingle. The tingle that gets girls in trouble and keeps the gene pool from getting stagnant.

I said, "I don't want to go to Canada, C.T."

And he said, "Well, let's go put my boat in the lake and I'll take you fishing."

I always liked motorcycles pretty well, but I never did like boats, at least not out of water, which is the only way I'd ever seen C.T.'s. He'd brought the boat around last summer and tried to talk me into going fishing with him then too. I said no last summer, and when he tried to back out of my driveway, he ran the boat trailer onto the Minards' property across the road and knocked over their mailbox and ended up having to get half the men from four miles around to come and help him pull the boat trailer out by hand.

So I spent that day making iced tea and sandwiches for two dozen people while C.T. sat on my porch like the lord of the manor visiting with my neighbors and having a good old time. Smoking, he was still smoking last summer, on my porch.

This time he didn't look good. With his beer gut and his white ponytail and a little pink scalp showing through, and he was tipped to one side. He never was any taller than me: C.T. and I were always eye to eye, but this time I was looking down on him. His eyes were red and his skin was blotchy.

I looked out at the truck and the boat and said, "No, C.T., I don't want to go out in your boat, and I hope you're not planning on knocking over Joe and Rose's mailbox again."

This time he hadn't parked in the driveway. He just sort of stopped the truck in the middle of the road. My place and the Minards are almost to the dead end where there's a fence and a cow pasture. In the old days,

C.T. would never have just stopped in the middle of the road like that. I was a little slow on the uptake, and it took me a while to realize he was leaning on the doorframe and his neck tendons were big from the effort of sucking in air. And the grin was off, because there was so much strain in his face, and in the deep cracks alongside his mouth there was dark stuff that was either tobacco juice or dried blood.

I said, "C.T., you look an awful mess."

"Aw, Merlee," he said, "I stopped smoking."

I invited him in—it was never his house, so I didn't have any particular memories of him here, except showing up at the door. I never let him sleep here. I took him in the kitchen and set him down at the little painted yellow table. I was dirty from the garden, but my house was neat. I'm not much for cleaning and polishing, but I keep things cleared away.

"Iced tea?" I asked him. "You want a beer?"

He said, "I could use a glass of water." And he coughed. I could hear in his chest then, the sound: wheezing, a lot of something bad getting stirred up.

I got him water and a glass of tea, and then I got the brandy bottle from under the sink and poured him brandy in a juice glass, and I poured me one too. I opened up the refrigerator and found some of the Colonel's extra-crusty left over and put that out. Leftover coleslaw too. He smiled and took a chicken leg, but only ate a bite.

I took a good look at his arms then. He'd always been fairly scrawny in the leg department, but he had these nice big forearms, usually sunburned skin and golden hair, but always strong: Popeye arms, I used to tease him. But now there was wrinkled skin where the muscle had receded, and bone was pushing against the skin.

I thought, C.T.'s wasting away.

He drank and shook his head and started to laugh over nothing, and that set him off coughing, really coughing, all his neck tendons looking ready to pop his neck.

"You want a medical opinion, C.T.?" I said. "The medical opinion is you need to go to the doctor yesterday."

He nodded. "I appreciate your professional opinion, Merlee. I have been going to a doctor. I've had this thing for a long time, you know. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Emphysema. Too much smoking."

He sucked in some more air. His skin below the splotches was gray. "I got me a breathing machine out there in the truck."

"You're on oxygen?"

"Just when I need it, time to time. I'm taking it easy. I thought I'd take you for a ride, maybe go fishing."

"You know I don't like to sit on a lake and get mosquito-bit."

"I thought maybe you could just—well, hell, you could pack up this chicken and bring it along."

This was when I started to go a little crazy. It was how his skin was gray and his lips were too dark and his muscle going away. I had my first wave of getting sentimental over C.T.

He started talking about places with a lot of woods, Canada or Maine, but maybe the ocean would be good too. He hadn't seen the ocean very much in his life. He never talked a lot, but when he did start in, he could go on for twenty minutes at a stretch, and he always assumed you wanted to hear. I let him talk while I studied how bad he looked. He had dreamed of Cooper's Rock, he said. "I had this dream of flying off Cooper's Rock. I was in this boat and I went flying off Cooper's Rock out into that canyon and just flew and flew. Air in my face, the best air moving all over."

"You dreamed you flew off Cooper's Rock in your boat?"

He said, "Do you remember what all we used to do at Cooper's Rock?"

It was a state park, and it was the place the boys and girls used to go for big excitement, with beer and marijuana, at night after the park was closed. We had been chased by state troopers a couple of times, but more often we sneaked in and went out onto the big stone overlook itself and screamed at the moon. Oh, Cooper's Rock was a big thing for us back then.

He said, "A few weeks back I took the truck out to Cooper's Rock and I spent a whole afternoon looking it over, but hell, there was no way. They's just that little wooden footbridge to the rock, and we would've got stuck in the crevice with the little path over it."

"We?" I said. "We? What are we talking about here?"

"They got the whole damn thing figured out, they don't want boys driving ATVs or trucks over there."

It was indirect, like I said, but by the time we finished this conversation, I knew. I knew he was sick, and I knew he didn't intend to go out from a hospital bed.

I could have said no, of course. Like I did with the boat last summer. Only see how far that got me. And if I hadn't known what I was looking at, I could have pretended I'd see him in a couple of months and he'd be fine. But I do know what I'm looking at, so I told myself, Well, heck, why not go out for the afternoon with old C.T.?

I said, "I'm not going to any Canada with you, C.T. I'll go out with you for the afternoon, but not Canada."

And he smiled so big his eyes disappeared.

"I mean it, I want to be back here tonight."

C.T. just grinned and I packed up the chicken and the brandy, and at the last minute I stuffed the portable blood pressure cuff in my pocket-book and went back for syringes and some epinephrine I keep around in case of bee sting. I had the idea I might be able to wake him up if he started drifting off into a coma from not enough oxygen to the brain. It's like I was being crazy and practical at the same time.

I didn't think we were going to get on the road at all. He still couldn't handle driving that big boat. He got his trailer in Joe Minard's front yard again, but this time we'd had dry weather, so the lawn didn't get too cut up, and he missed the mailbox. By the time we were on the road, he was in a sick sweat. I thought maybe after we drove over to Cooper's Rock Park, we'd come home. I might even let him stay a few days and maybe convince him to go to the hospital after all.

Cooper's Rock is only half an hour from my house now that they put in the interstate. C.T. did okay until we got into the parking lot there. He pulled across about eight parking spaces and stopped. His chin sank down onto his chest and he just fell out, right there, head back, mouth open, wheezing. I ate chicken and drank some brandy and walked around the picnic area and looked over the Almost Heaven West Virginia souvenirs in the refreshment stand and bought some maple-sugar candy and then came back to the truck. After a while he started coughing so hard that he woke himself up. His eyes got big and he couldn't stop coughing, and then he was real short of breath, so I pulled up the tubes and the nose clip and adjusted the position of the aluminum oxygen tank. He took a sip of that for a while and got some color back.

I said I'd seen enough, I was taking him to a hospital, and he said, No, no, what were they going to do in the hospital? Tell him to stay hooked up to the oxygen all the time, he already knew that. All he wanted, he said,

was to drive for forty-five minutes or so to this lake he knew of in western Maryland. I knew the lake too, and we both knew he wasn't putting the boat in any lake in the condition he was in, but it was an easy drive, back on the interstate, on into Maryland. I made him get into the passenger seat and stay hooked up to the oxygen, and I drove. I was still thinking mostly about whether or not, or how long, I wanted him in my house, because I was assuming that was where we'd be that night.

He slept all the way to Maryland, and I woke him once we were in the parking lot there, near the boat launch. We were looking out at this green man-made lake with brand-new summer houses on the far shore and water-skiers out in the middle. I asked him if he wanted to go for a walk or whatever, and he just looked around and smiled and took out the oxygen clip and started telling me a story about this special fishing rod he used to have that folded up small enough to go on the motorcycle and how he lost it in a bar somewhere once. "I wish I was on a motorcycle heading to Canada," he said.

"What's this about Canada anyhow, C.T.? Whatever happened to patriotism?"

"Oh, I was just thinking I'd like to go where I never been."

"You and your oxygen tank," I said. "You're not going to Canada either."

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. His voice was steady, but thin. "I have this picture," he said. "I see myself out on a lake in Canada, maybe it's not Canada, maybe it's Maine. Anyhow, it's a really fine day and as pretty as a picture, and the lake is so smooth and you can't tell the difference from the real shore and sky and the sky and shore in the water, and I just lean back and ease down, sky, water, it's all the same, me and the boat."

And while I was still taking this in, he opened his eyes and winked and gave me the biggest C.T. grin yet: "You wouldn't think a person could get lung cancer on top of emphysema, would you? I could live with the emphysema, but I don't want to wait for this lung cancer thing to slow me down."

I was raised to be polite, but I had to struggle my way through nursing school and struggle to take care of *our* kids, and something about C.T. always takes the lady right out of me. "Goddamn you, C.T., I'm not going to be your nurse!"

And he looked at me with this hangdog expression and said, "Naw, Merlee, I wouldn't never. I just wanted—when I was thinking about—lying back in that lake, I saw you over on the shore saying farewell."

“Farewell, my foot,” I said. “I’m not going to go to some lake in Canada or Maine either to—help you—do that.”

C.T. said, “I never been to Vermont or Massachusetts either.”

And then he fell out again. This time I felt his pulse, which was going way too fast, and took his blood pressure, which was okay. His skin was dry and hot and his breathing was definitely going downhill. While he slept, I looked in the back of the truck and there were no fishing rods, and none in the big, gawky old boat either. Nor did he have any clothes. I went through his glove box, and there were a couple of tools and some candy bars. I took his wallet out of his pocket, and there wasn’t much money either. I put the wallet into my bag and tried to figure out what to do next.

I could have taken him home, or to the hospital. I was the one in the driver’s seat, and he was weak as a puppy. I thought I was using my brain to Make a Decision. You know, to Choose among my Options. Shoot, I was fooling myself. I never said, Okay, I choose to help C.T. kill himself. On the contrary, I said the opposite: I said, I’ll go along with him and talk him into checking into a hospital. One of the things I’ve always been good at is convincing myself I’m doing one thing while I’m really doing another.

But I’d do it again. Not that I think I was right, particularly, and not that I’m happy about the whole thing, but I know myself well enough to know I *would* do it again.

We drove on another hundred miles up into Pennsylvania and got gas and found a Super 8 motel. I took a shower and C.T. watched TV and slept propped on all the pillows breathing louder than the TV and the air conditioner put together. I sat up late with the lights on, watching him like nurses used to do in the old days before managed care. I just sat with him, and thought about the old days, and thought about the times I had sat up with Dawn and Charley when they were sick. Thought about how I’m glad that I can make a living doing something that helps people.

In the morning he seemed better, so we went out and found a Shoney’s with a big breakfast bar. I said I wanted to go home, and he said he was feeling good and wanted to drive today, wanted to go north to some other lake he knew of. His eyes were crinkly and he seemed more like himself, and he didn’t pass out and he didn’t take any oxygen all day. It was another clean bright day more like September than August.

We were having a spate of beautiful weather, and we took a slow trip, looking at lakes. Two more days. Mostly I drove. C.T. napped a lot, and then he'd wake up and nudge me and point at something pretty. He's always been like that: he doesn't describe things, but he's always seeing things he wants me to see. The first time I went for a ride on his Harley, he stopped on top of a hill beside a pasture and pointed. It was nothing but a bunch of cow pies in the foreground and mountains in the distance, but when he made me look, something settled down in me and got quiet and I saw how beautiful it was. He used to do that when we had little babies, try to get me to go off with him: Hey, Merlee, he used to say. Let's take us some beer and sandwiches and go find us a mountaintop! He liked to sit sideways on the Harley and look at a sunset and suck in cigarette smoke like he was sucking in the whole world. "Ain't that something, Merlee?" he would say.

So I guess that's what we did. We looked at state parks in Pennsylvania and then went across into New York and on to Vermont and New Hampshire. We ate in restaurants and slept in motels, on my credit card, of course. I sort of went on autopilot. I bought a couple of T-shirts in a Super K and some jeans and a big bottle of detergent, and we did a wash.

I could hear at night his breath rasping with stuff in his lungs. Every so often I'd think how he was going to slip into a coma, and then I would take him to a hospital. That's what I thought was going to be the end of it.

We had made a loop through New England, just touching a little bit of Maine. He was still talking about Canada, but then he peed himself during his nap. I took him to a motel and went to the laundromat, and I brought back a box of adult diapers.

C.T. said, "Are you planning on putting those things on me?"

And I said, in my best nurse's voice, "I certainly am. I don't intend to spend every day washing your clothes!"

I thought I was going to have a fight, but he shut up and let me put one on him, and then his jeans, which were still warm from the dryer. This was in New Hampshire, and that was when I headed southwest. I was intending to go home, although I didn't say anything, and C.T. didn't say anything either. That was yesterday, and this morning we found the lake in the state forest in the Berkshire hills.

The worst moment for me was when the little boy started to cry. It was a public boat launch in a state park on a summer weekday afternoon in

broad daylight. There were folks at picnic tables, and farther on a swimming area, and the nearest campsite had the family with the little boy who cried.

We sat a while in that parking lot, like we'd been doing. I thought C.T. had fallen asleep again, but he spoke up and said he thought he'd like to take a turn driving. I got out and helped him move over under the wheel. He said why didn't I take a little walk and stretch my legs while he got up strength to drive. So I stepped back from the truck. I just backed away, and things slowed down for me, and it was like someone was packing me in cotton, everything around me was thick.

He grinned at me and said, "Hey, Merlee, you forgot something," and sort of slung my pocketbook at me. I caught it, and then he said, "Hey, Merlee, look what I found," and tossed me a half-crushed pack of Pall Mall cigarettes. I don't know where he had stashed them—maybe under the seat—because I'd been through all his things. He winked like he'd pulled a trick on me, and then he put on the seat belt. I think it's the first time I ever saw him put on a seat belt.

You're always surprised when the thing you've been more or less expecting actually starts to happen. He had some trouble with the seat belt, but I just backed up to the nearest picnic table with no people and sat down.

He had some trouble getting the engine to turn over, too, and then he had to fool around with the emergency brake.

Somehow too soon, although it had taken quite a while, he got the truck in gear and moving forward.

He cocked his left elbow out the window, the way he's always liked to drive, and waved at me. Then he hit the gas and aimed down the boat ramp. There was maybe one other trailer in the lot where somebody had launched a boat, but mostly it was just picnickers and hikers, so he had his way clear. He accelerated with more force than you'd expect, given the shape he was in, revved the engine, and went in with a big splash of water. The truck shot straight out, but I don't know if it would have gone deep enough to sink without the weight of the boat and trailer behind it.

People stirred around and looked, and it took everyone a little while to register that the truck had gone into the water before the boat. The engine coughed and sputtered out, and the water rushed in through the windows of the cab. It stayed above water for a few seconds, and I thought maybe C.T. had fouled up, that the water wasn't deep enough, but no, it just took a while. The truck sank, except for the very center of the roof.

The forward motion stopped, the truck went silent, and the water churned and sloshed, and there was some swirling and bubbles, and then that quieted down too. People started running toward the water.

I took out one of the Pall Mall cigarettes and the book of matches shoved in with them, and I lit up and started smoking. I sucked smoke and blew it out while people gathered down by the boat launch talking to each other. I think most of the people were just stunned.

I dropped the first cigarette because my hands were shaking, and lighted up another one.

People waded in, and a woman and a man were pulling out cell phones.

I smoked as fast as I could, trying to burn off the cigarettes without breathing in smoke. Meanwhile the people were gathering up energy and running, and then the little boy asleep on a blanket woke up crying.

He hadn't even seen what happened, but he felt the turmoil and started to wail. I felt bad for the red, sleepy, howling baby face. The little guy had good lungs. If C.T. had had that kind of lung capacity, they probably could have dragged him out soon enough to save him.

Some man went in the water and started diving like a big-shot hero. They shouted encouragement to him and more people waded in so I couldn't see what was going on, but I thought they were pulling something out.

The mother came running back and swallowed up her little boy with hugs.

I smoked another cigarette, got it burning like a little torch, and blew out smoke into the sun between me and those people at the boat launch. I started feeling sick.

Sooner than I expected, I heard sirens. And not long after the police arrived, you could hear the ambulance siren coming down the road. The people were still huddled around something I couldn't see, but I supposed it was C.T. The police moved people back so the EMT could get at him, and everyone was hustling around, and I looked at the sky and the trees and concentrated on finishing off the Pall Mall cigarettes. I had this notion that if I finished them fast enough, C.T. would finish what he had set out to do too. I sure didn't want C.T. to end up in a hospital on a respirator after all this. After a while they moved him into the back of the ambulance and worked on him there too, but I thought they weren't hustling quite as

much as they would have if he'd been responsive. My guess was, the shape he was in, the very strain of beginning to drown would have been enough to stop his heart. The less fast they hustled, the more likely it was that C.T. hadn't fouled up.

Pretty soon I had the young police officer standing between me and the sun. I was on the last cigarette. I'd been grinding them into the picnic table as I finished, and I'd balled up the pack and dropped it with the butts on the ground. For half a second I thought the young police officer was going to chastise me for littering or defacing public property.

He was very polite, at least he was before he knew I wasn't talking. He said, "Ma'am, some of the people said you were with the victim."

I never planned to go catatonic. This poor boy was just doing his job, and doing it politely too. I never planned my three hours of insanity, but you don't plan insanity. Not even temporary. If you plan it, it's something else. What happened was, the young police officer between me and the sun started breaking up, like a voice on a cell phone. His image wouldn't hold. I started thinking about all sorts of odds and ends, like how the police had come so fast and I guess that means it's more crowded than it looks up here in western Massachusetts. I started thinking how we might have done better to have gone to Maine after all, and found a lonely place where nobody would have found him for weeks. But maybe C.T. didn't want to be private, or—most likely, knowing C.T., he didn't care one way or the other.

The police officer started to get frustrated when I wasn't responding, and that was when he tried to touch my pocketbook. I jumped away, and the older police officer asked me to go with them in their car.

So I rode in the backseat of the police car and watched the ambulance go out just ahead. At the fork in the road it went one way and we went the other. At the police station they put me in the fiberglass chair and kept asking questions, and after a while the woman officer came over and told me she was sorry, but the hospital had called and they couldn't save him.

I think they've got some kind of psychiatrist coming to see me now, but I'm ready to talk. I'm sorry for the commotion. It was an aberration. Well, an aberration on my part. C.T. just did exactly what C.T. wanted to do. C.T. wanted to go out in his own time, not in a hospital. He would have preferred to ride his Harley-Davidson, but he's been sick. He's not the suicidal type ordinarily, this was one of those quality-of-life issues. And he loved being out of doors with the wind in his face.

I don't think we planned it as well as we should, because the truth is, I refused to participate in the planning, and C.T. was never very good at it. And I am sorry about the little boy crying, but we always used to say that Trouble was C. T. Savage's middle name.

I'm going to make them call Hebert's Funeral Home in Kingfield, West Virginia, to come and get C.T. I don't want the new mortician whose place looks like a drive-through dry cleaner. I want Ed Hebert Sr. himself to preside. I know he has not-so-early Alzheimer's, but he still looks the part, with his face as bland and reassuring as a loaf of bread, wearing the best-cut suit in Cooper County, and nobody has ever had waves of white hair like his. Little Ed will come in their best hearse and take C.T. home, and then I want Ed Sr. to stand by the door and welcome people in for the viewing.

I'll dress so well for the funeral that people will be afraid to say anything to my face about my temporary insanity. They'll whisper to each other, though: Whatever possessed Merlee Savage? And if I overhear, I'll say, None of your business. Or, You wouldn't understand. Or, It was an old-fashioned love story.

Or just, Goddamn you, C. T. Savage.