

## Chapter One: *Understanding Women*

©Copyright by C.W. Smith 1998

To be published October, 1998, by [TCU Press](#).

# 1

The year I turned sixteen, my parents let me spend the summer with my Uncle Waylan and Aunt Vicky, but had they known more about the lives of my host and hostess, they'd have nixed the plan for sure. On Easter eve Uncle Waylan and Aunt Vicky stopped in Dallas on their way home in New Mexico. They'd visited her folks in Baltimore, where they had motored (that quaint verb!) in Uncle Waylan's new '56 Mercury. They'd also toured Washington because Aunt Vicky thought it important for him to see the nation's capital. Though they'd been married three years, my family had not met her. From knowing Uncle Waylan's first wife (Aunt Noreen), and subsequent girlfriends, I'd expected a dolled-up lounge lizard, a cow-gal, a bar-maid or waitress wearing tight slacks and sporting large costume jewelry in the shapes of, say, fruits or vegetables. Uncle Waylan's usual formers wore bright lipstick and flung their outsized personalities about with the huzzah of circus barkers. It didn't bother them to tickle-wrestle with Uncle Waylan before an audience of adults or trade licks bicep to bicep. Once one offered to share the

gum from her large moist mouth. They were as awesome as Amazons. My new Aunt Vicky wore black-rimmed glasses and a blue calf-length dress; she said she believed the Rosenbergs were innocent and that the cherry blossoms in Washington had made her think of haiku. We were seated in our living room on Amherst that distant Saturday afternoon, my father drawing on his pipe and my mother quietly blinking while Uncle Waylan and Aunt Vicky chainsmoked Phillip Morrises from a pack on the table between the matching brocade wing chairs in which visiting couples were customarily enthroned, though it wasn't usual for the male to sling a booted leg over one chair arm. Beyond the bay window behind them, my sisters Alise and Diedre were playing Hopscotch on the front walk. My mother didn't know a haiku from a heil Hitler. Neither did I, so I asked. "Oh, I'm sorry," my new aunt said. "It's Japanese poetry. It has only seventeen syllables." She closed her eyes -- not dreamily or theatrically, but as if reading off the backs of her eyelids -- and recited, quietly, while ticking off the numbered syllables on her digits. "*Si-lent cher-ry bloom / With your old el-o-quence / Speak to my in-ner ear.*" She opened her eyes and smiled. "Why that's lovely," said my mother. My father harrumphed, "I used to know The Charge of the Light Brigade by heart, and some Chaucer, but I guess kids don't memorize poetry these days." "Yes, they do," I piped up. They waited, expectantly, so I added, "Something something something fired the shot heard 'round the world," and they laughed. "I make my students learn it," my new aunt said. Uncle Waylan beamed. "Schoolteacher," he bragged. "How about that? Me, only poem I know is 'There once was a man from

Nantucket --'" "That's enough, Waylan Kneu!" snapped my mother, though you could tell he hadn't planned to go on. My new Aunt Vicky cocked a brow at him as if cautioning a child to save his charming antics for later. My father was a Vanderbilt alumnus, but my mother had been the only one of three children to finish high school. Years later, I understood that the Depression had given her a ferocious desire to better her station in life. I think her younger brother was a disappointment, if not an embarrassment. She said he had "done well for himself" -- he owned and operated an oil field roustabout service -- but he should have cultivated an interest in finer things. "What would those be, exactly?" my father asked her. "Church and charity, for two," she said. "More education, for another. Why should you have to ask?" My father said, "Well, May, because I thought maybe you meant symphony orchestras or art museums, and I doubt there's either one within 300 miles of Hedorville, New Mexico." According to his sister, Uncle Waylan belonged to no church, drank unapologetically, drove too fast, blew money on quarter-horses in Ruidoso, owned no footwear other than cowboy boots, played poker and bingo and listened to Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys or Ernest Tubb, read only the newspaper and True magazine, and wasn't fastidious enough about his grammar and swearing before women and children. His freely chosen partners were guilty of drinking beer straight from the cans, smoking cigarettes on the street, owning no white gloves, and not knowing any better than to put a jar of pickles or a bottle of catsup on the dining table. I liked him, though. He called me "Sport" and over the years had given me presents that my parents

invariably said I was too young for: a big-league ball glove when I was six, a pocket knife at seven, a BB gun when I was nine. Once he let me fondle a loaded revolver he kept in his glove compartment and browse through playing cards whose backs were adorned with bare-breasted women. So far as I knew, my father didn't know such things existed, and I sometimes envied the son Uncle Waylan might have one day "if he ever settles down with the right woman," as my mother always put it. I admired his looks. His hair was very black -- he looked vaguely "Indian" -- and with his ever-present boots he frequently wore a black leather vest over a pearl-button shirt. You thought of old West poker sharks. His face was a little pocked from old acne, but he was cowboy-handsome, and he grinned when he teased me or his wife or my mother in his droll, whiskey-and-cigarette baritone. He had a laugh like a shotgun's pop, and he punctuated it by slapping whatever was close by with the fingers of one hand. They were "having drinks" on this Saturday afternoon -- mixing Coca-Cola and whiskey from a flat pint bottle Uncle Waylan brought in. He and my new Aunt Vicky were, that is. My mother sipped daintily from a six-ounce bottle of Coke that had a paper napkin saronging its green hips like the wrap of a genteel lady leaving a swimming pool. My father had poured about a teaspoon of whiskey into his tumbler and filled it to the brim with water. "How about you, Sport?" Uncle Waylan grinned, holding up the bottle. "You do and I'll skin you alive." "Aw, hell, May, it won't kill him. I started drinking this stuff when I was still on the tit. I remember Daddy used to - -" "I'd just as soon not hear about what used to happen when people overindulged!" Uncle Waylan laughed.

"Remember when Daddy passed out on the front porch and Mama sewed him up in a sheet while he was sleeping it off?" My mother shot up from the sofa. "Well, I better see about dinner. You will stay, won't you?" She aimed this at Uncle Waylan. I didn't know if he understood his sister the way I understood my mother. The subtext I heard (but couldn't have fully articulated at sixteen – then it was like a deep but very soft pedal tone from a church organ vibrating up through your soles, up your spine and into your brain, by-passing your ears) was this: *It would have been nice if you'd called ahead and told us you were coming so I could've fixed a proper dinner; now you've caused a ruckus in the kitchen, but you are going to stay whether you want to or not, because since you made me endure the anxiety of this makeshift arrangement I get to pay you back by complaining during the meal about how each and every item might have been better if I'd had time to fix it right.* Aunt Vicky said, "Waylan, since we dropped in unexpectedly, the least we can do is take everyone out to dinner." "Aw, hell, Vicky, May don't mind. She's gonna feed five, anyway. What's another two?" Aunt Vicky favored my mother with the sorrowful gaze of martyred sisterhood. "I'm sorry, I tried to get him to stop so we could call --" "It's no problem," chirped my mother. "So long as y'all don't mind taking pot luck." "At least let me give you a hand." As Aunt Vicky rose to chase after my mother into the kitchen, she plucked up her green Coke bottle and empty tumbler and held out her hand for his. He gave her the Coke bottle, and she cradled it against her breast with her own. Then he looked perplexed as she put out her hand again. She wanted his glass. "I ain't through." She poked

him with a look. "Bottom's up, sailor." He tossed back the drink and gave up the glass. When she'd gone, he crossed his legs and lit a cigarette. Standing alone atop the burnished walnut smoking stand, the pint bottle looked as out of place as a dog turd. Uncle Waylan eyed it as if wanting a swig but couldn't bring himself to take one.

"That Olds treating you okay?" "Well, it has a few miles on it now." My father smiled at me. "Since Jimbo got his license, he's been hounding me to buy something new."

"Whata you want, Sport?" "Ford or maybe a Merc, like yours." "You want to drive it?" "Sure!" "It's a nice automobile," Uncle Waylan said to my father. "Heated up a little between here and Memphis but you figure that's going to happen to a new one." He turned to me. "You probably been thinking about your own car." "Oh, yeah. Yeah." I grinned at my father, hoping my joshing Jimmy Cagney diction would disarm him. "Skinflint here won't cough up the dough, though." "A boy ought to earn his car. Nobody ever gave me one." "Me either," harmonized Uncle Waylan. They stared me down, these two popes of the Protestant work ethic. "I never said I wasn't willing!" I protested. "It's just I can't make enough mowing yards or bagging groceries." "You mean you can't make it fast enough to suit you." Uncle Waylan laughed. "Oh, I do remember that! Tell you what, why don't you come out to the oil patch this summer and work for me? I pay my hands \$1.75 an hour, and you could board with us for nothing, of course." "Oh, Wow! Uncle Waylan! Man, that would be, man, that would be -- Jesus!" (Whoops, forgot myself!)

"Well, that would really be great. What would I do?" "Lots of lifting, lots of digging. It's hot and dirty and there's long

hours and you'll use every muscle in your body, and there'd be days you'd wish you was back here lounging at the pool." "Oh, man, I don't care!" I yelled. "Bring it on!" My brain was racing -- \$1.75 X 50 hrs.? a week X 12 weeks in the summer = man, overt \$1000! I could buy Bill Howard's '49 Hudson Hornet and repaint it MG green and tool cool as you please down Forest Lane with one arm hanging out the window, and girls would think that's such a swell car, wish he'd ask me out! "Daddy?" "Sounds like a pretty good idea to me," my father ventured cautiously. "Might make a man out of you. Hard work never hurt anybody. Of course, you'd have to do every bit as much as any hand and not expect special favors." "Oh, no! I wouldn't expect any -- I'd carry my weight, I promise!" "Well, we'll see," my father said. "I'm sure your Aunt Vicky needs to be consulted about this." "Don't worry" -- Uncle Waylan slipped this to me, then, earnestly, he appealed to my father: "I've got a good one this go-round. She's an understanding woman." The same phrase had praised my Aunt Noreen and his later girlfriends, but this time, though, he added, "She's got real class." "I can see that." Uncle Waylan used to have a steering knob he transferred from the wheel of one car to another as he traded them, a knob featuring a cheesecake pinup under the Lucite cap. But the one on his new Merc encased a yellow rose, instead. I cupped the knob with my palm and wheeled the Merc up Preston and down Lover's Lane with its stately old homes and bois d'arc trees that dropped softballs of green-clad pitch onto the walks, then I cruised up to Forest Lane hoping to be seen by someone I knew. I tried to will away the presence of the two grown men, tuned the radio to catch My Prayer by The Platters,

and imagined this was my very own Merc, and I, we, were parked on a summer night by White Rock Lake, I and who? Louise Bowen? No, someone...sexier (this thought shocked me, it was so unexpected), groping and wallowing in the back seat, her kneecaps showing white like snowy mountain peaks above the seat back. I was overwhelmed with riches, and I longed to be alone in my room to relish this shower of good fortune, be a Scrooge McDuck diving in and out of all these possibilities. Aside from buying my own car, my blood was likewise stirred by the delicious prospect of getting away from home for a summer – going West, escaping family, the burdens of tradition such as the one that required allegedly idle boys to awaken each day to a mother's list of chores. Instead of baby-sitting my sisters or mowing the grass or delivering papers or wheeling around on my bicycle like a ten-year-old looking for odd jobs, I'd be working like a man at manly work. I'd be using muscles, handling big steel things, wearing steel-toed boots, doffing a roughneck's hard hat, chowing down from a tin box, smoking, cussing, and rolling my shirt sleeves up to show my muscles when I came back after a summer as an oilfield worker. Good as a Charles Atlas course! Louise had told me she would be working at Camp Longhorn as a counselor. That scotched my long-term goal to feel her up (if only through her panties) by our fifteenth date. Now I could go away too and not be the one abandoned. Also, there was the prospect of hanging around with Uncle Waylan -- the varieties of poker he might teach me, what he knew about guns, car engines, etc., and he was relaxed and cool and probably wouldn't be strict about a curfew. Aunt Vicky interested me, too. She didn't fit my picture of an

Uncle Waylan wife, and she was a teacher. Teachers were the category of adults I'd had the most exposure to, following my parents, but I didn't know much about them. Sometimes when I passed by the teacher's lounge and the door was cracked open, I'd see one smoking and drinking coffee and talking to another, and that was always a tantalizing cameo. I'd caught them at being ordinary mortals. A teacher's private life -- what did it consist of? Already in my own living room, I had seen one play the Wife and Visiting In-law. She was cool. Cherry blossoms? Well, you might expect that, but bottom's up, sailor? I hoped she'd agree to Uncle Waylan's invitation. He'd told me not to worry. And though all his partners had been "understanding women," he'd assured my father that he'd "gotten a good one this go-round." What "good" implied (at least to that laughably green sixteen-year-old male coming of age in a world long since gone) was that she could be counted on to approve his ideas.