

First Man ~ 1947

by Ginnah Howard

By the basement washtubs, I watched him skin a squirrel: slit the fur around the legs, up its belly; peel the skin perfectly back from the naked pink body, glistening wet and veined. On Christmas, all of us in the living room after the big dinner off my grandma's Fostoria, he told stories of tanks and wine cellars, with one foot up on a straight-back chair. I thought him very handsome. We laughed. Everybody. Except sometimes my grandmother was thin-lipped, suspecting him of "drinking." He teased—teased us all. I liked that in this house of women who never did. My Uncle Chuckie. But they called him The Black Sheep. Everybody said, Oh, smart—no question 'bout that. They left unsaid the other half as families do. My mother told me stories: When Charles was young, he wrote bad checks to pay his paper bill. His brother's route was perfect, with money in savings where their dad was chief cashier. His father said, Why can't you be like Jim? That part made me mad. The woman he married, my Aunt Grace, said, Don't pick me up at the office in your stained work-clothes.

