

By Saturday, We'd Be Singing

by John Riley

My uncle lived part-time in prison, in a cell with a blanket, pillow, and towel. The remainder of his days he lived in a small house on Prospect Street. When he was in jail he'd get slim, when he was out he got heavy. Sooner than later he'd end up skinny again.

He hated to drive and when he did his mouth clenched and his fat lips pressed into one. His eyes started darting and he spit and cussed and my fingers got sore from clinging to the dash.

He had a friend, a pale young man he'd met in jail, who visited sometime. When the pale man showed up I had to get lost, but on the summer nights we had to ourselves my uncle sat at his Formica table and drank whiskey from a tall glass while I stood behind him and rubbed his bald head. "You've got less hair than a genie," I'd say. "I like to keep clean," he'd say back. While he got drunk he told me stories from back in the vast black space before I was born. When he finished telling his stories—I never cared that I'd heard them before—he'd look me right in the eye and say, "A man's a fool to let anything move him on the inside boy, cepting his bowels," and stuff a couple of dollars in my shirt pocket.

Then he would say the words that thrilled me the most. "Why don't we take ol' Sam Cooke for a spin?"

I knew how to take an album out, fingertips gentle on the slick black edge. I blew the dust off, careful not to spit, lined up the hole and dropped it soft as a bed sheet that last half inch. I could still feel it in my fingers when it settled on the turntable. Soon as he heard the

first notes, my uncle's eyes went soft, then glided from soft to a softer glisten. I'd slip behind him and wrap my arms around his shoulders and we'd sing until we were sleepy. I loved him so much when he was drinking!

When he came to visit, the pale young man—I never knew his name—stayed the whole weekend, sometimes through Monday. After he left, for the next few days, there was no drinking, no "You Send Me" or "Bring It On Home To Me." Nothing but rummaging for snacks and watching his stubby fingers tap out broken rhythms. But by Thursday his fat lips settled back into line, by Friday the shark eyes went back to shifting.

