



WALKING OFF HEAVENS' SHORE

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These excerpts are very short as most of the stories are flash fiction.

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WALKING OFF HEAVEN'S SHORE

By Charlotte Henley Babb

Ginnie Mae's wide feet were crammed into new white shoes with pointed toes. She walked towards the river in the heavy, white robe, waiting her turn to have her soul washed clean forever.

If heaven's like this, I'd rather not go...

She stopped herself; she couldn't let the bad thoughts in. But they sneaked in anyway like she and Billy Wayne sneaked out at night. Billy Wayne was bad, Momma said, but talking to him made her feel so good, so happy. That was bad, what he wanted; it made babies. Thinking of him brought the deep, red pain in her belly, but Jesus would wash it away inside like she washed it off outside every month.

She looked up from her aching feet to the congregation gathered on the shore, listening to the preacher standing waist deep in the muddy river. Everybody else's feet must hurt too, and they couldn't doze off standing in the sun, not resting as usual on the hard pews in the shade of the church. Being saved was very serious; she could tell from how they looked: eyes squinted, mouths set, lines of care etched in their faces even as they sang the hymns. Salvation was forever; it took away the evil that made them lighthearted and carefree. She knew she needed that washing because she wanted Billy Wayne so much. The Holy Spirit would quench the fire that burned within her, that consumed her soul....

INTERVENTION

By Charlotte Henley Babb

I didn't hear the helicopter over the lawnmower and my iPod—just a big truck rumbling by. Two women in pink fatigues tackled me, rolled me in spandex, and hauled me to the tiny pink whirlybird on my front lawn.

"You've just won the Lifetime Makeover Sweepstakes, Honey," a sweet voice drawled in my ear as she heaved me in, "clearly just in the nick of time."

Wedged in the tiny space, I could hardly breathe. I yelled, "Let me out of here." I struggled against the bonds, managing only to twist my back.

"It's a long way down, Sweetheart, just like your former life."

The soft notes of Pachelbel's Canon drilled in my ears. Something pressed against my neck, and I faded into pink-tinged darkness....

TURNING POINT

By Charlotte Henley Babb

8:15. Forty-five minutes to Friday morning.

At the kitchen table, I stared into black coffee. Lasers exploded in my head. The deadly morning sun ricocheted off the white kitchen walls and zinged through my skull. The more I woke up, the worse it was.

Not a hangover. I hadn't drunk anything. Too stupid to go to bed, I'd channel surfed old movies. She starred in every one, on every channel. I drank more coffee, dark and hot, like her eyes. The smell reminded me of her too, rich, bittersweet. The ache in my heart eased the rage in my head, but only for a second. ...

SWAMP OF THE SOUL

By Charlotte Henley Babb

Why is the darkness of the soul referred to as the desert: dry, baked, clean as bare-picked bones? The inner darkness is like a Lowcountry swamp, almost refreshing at first, beautiful, mystical and cool, coming in from the fervent midday heat which scorches the skin, taxes the lungs with humidity, and threatens to melt the corpus calosum.

Yet the swamp grows airless and dank, black water slithering knee deep like its reptile denizens, around columns of cypress sitting zazen, drapes of vegetation that sign arcane messages with no breeze, insects whispering to less palpable beings that lurk just beyond peripheral vision and lust with the unquenchable desire of gods for human flesh....

WALK THE DOG

By Charlotte Henley Babb

That's Dick on the phone, but I'm not going to answer it.

I don't need to go for a ride.

After all, I know for a fact he just kicked Mae out, sending her back to her momma. She's been living with him for six months, I guess, cleaning his house and cooking for him and drinking his beer. It's his own fault for bringing her up here from Savannah. How drunk do you have to be to pick up a chick in a bus station and carry her home like a bag of leftover French fries?

I'm not that desperate.

Mae's heart is bad, and he is a sucker for a damsel in distress. She was always having to go to the emergency room or the free clinic with palpitations or something, which makes it hard on Dick since he doesn't drive—too many run-ins with the law. He'll never have a driver's license in this county again.

I should know better....

THE FIRE INSIDE

By Charlotte Henley Babb

Vernon Parks clipped his pager on his belt for the first time as a probationary volunteer firefighter, Hammett County Volunteer Fire Department. He stood straighter, tucked his shirttail, and brushed his sandy hair from his forehead. He stowed his turn-out gear in the back of his Blazer.

He still couldn't believe that the fire department had gear large enough to fit him. They even gave him a license tag for the front of his truck, so everyone would know he was a member. One day he'd be an officer and carry a walkie-talkie. He just needed to pass the six months' probation. At nineteen, Johnny had already served two years and had made lieutenant.

Vernon couldn't drive the fire trucks until he passed the training, but at least he was a firefighter with privileges. He admired the new tag on his Blazer. Someday he planned to attach a strobe light bar across the cab and maybe a winch on the front, ready for anything. Vernon stepped up into the cab and cruised to the fire house to hang out with the guys before class.

As he drove, he fantasized about rushing into a blazing building, snatching a child, an old lady or even a dog and dragging them to safety just before it collapsed. Not that many fires happened in Hammett County. There'd been a grass fire last week from some kids shooting fireworks. Nothing to it. Then, of course, there was Dad's body shop. Vernon remembered that day two months ago. ...

STORM FRONT

By Charlotte Henley Babb

Toni Jeter paced the beach alone, glancing over the dunes every few seconds towards the cabins among the palmettos and live oaks. The chilly April wind pushed her small frame, catching in her baggy fisherman's sweater and ragged-knee jeans. Her blond hair was frizzy in the salt air, darkened from its usual gold to a muddy shade with mousse to make her look frazzled and desperate, her blue eyes large in her pale face. More like Susan Renee Snipes, the girl who proved her love to J. Earl Logan in the bed of a pickup fifteen years ago, only to be tallied on the locker room wall.

We are finally going to get what's owed us.

At twenty-one Toni changed her name to wipe off the stench of being called white trash. Susan Renee Snipes was like an old school acquaintance, not herself. She escaped from her small plantation hometown to college and teaching.

J. Earl had changed his name too, becoming Lloyd Logan, radio personality, but she had known him on sight. He was a little taller and heavier, but his jaw was firm and his eyes still hazel under his light brown hair. He was athletic with muscle that flowed under his business suits. He was more polished, but still the same prick at heart.

The fool didn't even recognize her, not even in bed. She could forgive his pining for Vivian, and even for not delivering the contacts and sources she wanted. Sex was cheap, but he wouldn't let her use his friends.

So she'd use him. No, she'd waste him because he didn't know who she was...

THE LAST TIME I DATED A SERIAL KILLER

By Charlotte Henley Babb

The last time I dated a serial killer, he picked me up at Barnes & Noble.

That's not strange at all—where else do you go in the city centered in a cluster of mill villages when all the jobs have been sold south? At least, if you get picked up in a bookstore, it's a possibility that the person in question is literate.

And he was, along with being tall, dark around his expanding domed forehead, and brilliant with the glitter of mania in his big, green eyes. He had overheard me ranting about how everything I needed to know I had learned from reading *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. That's when he decided to do me....