

Also by June Sylvester Saraceno

The Girl from Yesterday (Cherry Grove Collections, 2020)

of Dirt and Tar (Cherry Grove Collections, 2014)

Altars of Ordinary Light (Plain View Press, 2007)

**Feral,
North Carolina,
1965**

June

Sylvester

Saraceno

Feral, North Carolina, 1965

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For Dylan, Robin, Linda, David, and Julia.

In loving memory of Dwight and Mary Sylvester, junior and senior.

With deep gratitude to the Gray and Sylvester families for their many tales, and the unflaggingly supportive Victor family, to whom I also belong with my whole heart.

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Dare

I watched the white square of Dare's T-shirt slowly shrink and disappear into the wavy lines rising from the blacktop. No way I could catch up to him now, even if I tried. I wanted to yell after him that he was a jerk, but he wouldn't even be able to hear a car horn from this distance. He was headed toward Feral. Traitor.

I hovered over my bike at the end of our driveway, a long gravel U connected at the top by Rural Route 17. By first grade, I had been allowed on the blacktop, but just the part that would connect one end of the driveway to the other. I made a thousand zeroes rounding off those ends, but had long since branched out from that endless loop. I figured out last summer that there were a lot of places you could go if you didn't ask permission first and just stayed out of sight. On the right side of the driveway, I couldn't easily be seen from the house. This way eventually led to the Virginia state line, with a lot of fields, farms, and the Great Dismal Swamp along the way. To the left was Feral. Riding in that direction, I'd be visible from the house, and there was a good chance Mother would see and call me back inside. Besides, even if I could ride that far, what would I do in Feral? Dare and me hated town and those stuck-up city kids. At least I still did, but Dare rode off every morning now to hang out with a bunch of Feral boys.

I guess I didn't hate everybody there. Birdy and the rest of Daddy's people were from Feral. Mother had some kin there, but most of her people were from Georgia, where she had grown up. That's why she talked so country. Birdy never could get used to it. She was always correcting me and Dare so we would talk right. When Mother talked, Birdy just set her lips into a straight line and didn't say a word. If Birdy or any of them saw me in Feral on my bike, they'd be sure to tell.

Then Mother would lay down the law about where I could ride. Not worth the risk.

I gripped my handlebars hard, and sent a satisfying spray of gravel as I peeled out of the driveway to the right. It wasn't even hot yet, but I could see the tar softening where the cracks in the road had been filled in. I pedaled at full speed, past the Sample farmhouse on the right, past their fields on the left with their family graveyard right there in the rows, so the tractor had to skirt around the graves. I could smell the fresh plowed dirt, and every now and then the cut-grass smell of someone's front yard. If I went far enough there was a road that branched off and led to a country store. It was always cool and dim inside. The counter had canisters full of Bazooka bubble gum, Fireballs, and Tootsie Rolls, but the coolers had the best stuff, YooHoos, Orange Crush, grape soda and, in the freezer section, ice cream sandwiches, Nutty Buddies, Fudgsicles. I didn't even have a nickel so I stayed on the main road, heading to a place where there was another turnoff, toward the Dismal Swamp. I had a spot in mind where there was an old picnic table and a big shade tree with low branches. I could plop down there and watch the sluggish water slur by. It was a good spot to sit and think or throw rocks in the water. And it wasn't town, not even close.

I pedaled so hard the rush of air lifted the hair off my neck. Robins looped between pines like they were playing some game. When I got to my spot, I had it all to myself, not a soul in sight. I eased off where the pavement matched up to the dirt path without too much drop-off. Instead of putting my kickstand down, I just propped my bike against the table and threw myself down under the tree. The shade felt good. I looked up through the rustle of oak leaves, the light filtering down made me feel peaceful the way it always did. That leaf-speckled light, like the light skipping all over the dark water, just made a body feel better.

I figure I can't hate him. Dare taught me all the really important things—how to skip rocks, keep from flinching when playing chicken, walk in the woods without making noise, aim down the barrel of the Daisy BB gun, and maybe the most important, how to spy on people. The best thing he ever did was save me from my stupid name, Wilhelmina Mae Miller. He called me Willie and it stuck, so later that's what kids at school called me. I reckon he saved me countless fights.

Last summer Dare read Hardy Boys stories and we concentrated on spying. We'd done it before, tracking Mother and Daddy undetected, even spying on each other. But it got to be time to branch out. We started by going over to the Perry's place after supper when it was just getting dark. They were old and spent most evenings watching TV. We'd prowl around their little house peeking in the windows, tracking what they watched. They didn't talk much. Later we'd review, lying in the front yard, the air heavy with the sweet smell of corn ripening in the fields.

I was the first to notice how Mrs. Perry sneaked candy when Mr. Perry was in the bathroom. As soon as Mr. Perry headed down the hall to the bathroom, she'd head to the kitchen and take down a Whitman's Sampler box from the cupboard, pick a chocolate, pop it into her mouth, then go sit back down on the sofa—all before Mr. Perry came back from the bathroom. I pointed it out to Dare.

"So what?" he said.

"Well it's like she's doing it in secret, hiding something, ya know?"

"Maybe she just don't want to share with old man Perry." He had gotten in the habit, when no adults were around, of substituting "old man" for mister. There was a long silence before he said, "Sailors used stars to tell where they were when they couldn't see land anywhere."

"So what?" It was my turn to not care.

“So, if we learn where the stars are in the sky then we’ll always know where we are on the earth.”

“I already know where I am. In my front yard, near Feral, in North Carolina, in America, on the Earth. That is exactly where I am.”

“But if you were on a ship in the middle of the ocean and it was dark and all you could see was stars, then how would you know where you were?”

“Well, I’d still know I was on the ship.”

“How would you know where the ship was?”

“You already said—on the ocean.” Sometimes he wasn’t all that smart, I thought.

“The trouble with you is that you don’t know anything, and you don’t even *know* you don’t know.” He got up and walked toward the house. Spying was over for the night.

“The trouble with you,” I muttered to the thin air, “is you think you know everything.”

A few days later, Uncle Erskine came to stay with us for a while. He was retired from the Coast Guard and had a tattoo of a naked mermaid on his arm. Daddy made him wear long-sleeved shirts when he was at the table, no matter how hot it was, but there were plenty of chances to see it. We could tell that even though Mother loved her brother, she didn’t approve of him either, and that cinched his position as our favorite relative. Once when Daddy asked him to say grace he prayed real fast: *Good drink, Good meat, Good God, Let’s eat!* Mother cut her narrowed eyes his way, her lips thinned.

“Brother, we don’t welcome sacrilege at this table,” Daddy’s voice was ice cold.

Dare and me were almost purple from holding back from laughing. When Dare couldn’t stifle himself all the way and let out a sort of snort, Daddy reached over and rapped his head with a knuckle. We knew better than to lift a fork before Daddy did, so the silent moment lasted a while before supper commenced.

That night I went to Dare's room and we had a contest to see who could say Uncle Erskine's grace faster. We got louder as we sped through it *gooddrinkgoodmeatGOODGOD LETSEAT* until we were falling on the bed laughing and Mother shouted from the living room for us to quiet down and get to bed.

But Uncle Erskine turned traitor on me. He started to just joke around with Dare, not me. One afternoon I walked into the living room and he and Dare were laughing like idiots and he said, "Shush, here comes your little sister. You know that's not fittin' for a little girl's ears, son." I gave him my meanest look, but he pretended not to notice. And Dare, Dare just nodded and went along with it.

When Uncle Erskine finally left, Dare talked about him all the time, about how he was going to join the Coast Guard and see the world. I couldn't beat it, so I tried to join.

"They don't let girls in the Coast Guard, Willie. It's just guys. You get a tattoo."

"So? I won't tell them I'm a girl and I'll get a tattoo. Only not a stupid mermaid with big titties. I'll get a skull and crossbones or something, like a pirate."

"Pirates ain't the same as Coast Guard. They don't even exist anymore, and if they did, the Coast Guard would arrest 'em. And if they found out a girl was on the ship, they'd throw you overboard. Girls are bad luck on ships."

I had a feeling that wasn't true, but he said it with such conviction that I wasn't sure. Who knows what Uncle Erskine had told him in all that talking they had left me out of?

Eventually, though, we got back to sneaking around and spying. Then one evening we saw something I wished we hadn't. Bored with the predictable Perrys, we were lured by the yellow glow from the windows of the next house down the road, the Armstrongs' house. Instead of going on the road, we went through the Perrys' back yard, across the vacant lot, into the Armstrongs' garden, then crept through

their backyard, circling around to the front where we could hear a TV on. Some Sundays, on the way home from church, we'd see them cutting back their rose bushes, working in the garden, or just sitting in lounge chairs with their iced teas in hand. Clearly, they had not been to church. Mother shook her head; Daddy looked purposefully, unswervingly ahead. Their disapproval filled the silent car. Mrs. Armstrong had long hair that she wore loose or in a ponytail, not like the other ladies who favored tight perms with enough hairspray to withstand gale-force winds. On this evening, we heard her laugh before we even got to the window. She didn't even laugh like the other ladies. She had a loud, full laugh that sometimes ended in a coughing fit. We located her and her husband in the living room. Mr. Armstrong sat in a Laz-E-Boy recliner with his feet up, staring at the TV, and Mrs. Armstrong walked in and out of the room talking to him. Only a screen in the window separated us from them. The darkness behind us was growing, and the frogs got louder. Any passing car could have seen us there in the spilled-over light from the window. Then Mrs. Armstrong waltzed into the room with only her slip on. Once in a great while I'd see my mother in just her slip, when she was fixing her face or changing clothes. But Mrs. Armstrong was just walking around the house in a short black slip.

"Now what do I have to do to get your mind off that TV, Harlan?" she sort of sang out, like she was talking to a baby.

"Come on now, Bet, I don't get chance to sit back and relax much. Don't stand in front of the TV like that, honey."

"You ain't said a word about my new slip. I thought it was right pretty, got it on sale, too, so don't worry."

"It's nice, honey." Mr. Armstrong shifted in his chair. She was still blocking the TV. Then Mrs. Armstrong started to lift her slip up, pulling it up close to her hips.

"If you don't like it, I won't wear it. Fact is, I can still return it. Maybe I can find something else that would get your attention a little better."

I knew we should scam by the way she was walking toward him, lifting her slip. But my feet stayed anchored. I looked at Dare's face and it was like he was in a trance. Mrs. Armstrong pulled the slip up over her head and dropped it right on the floor. She just stood there in her bra and panties. She didn't even have a girdle on. Then she started kind of dancing and jerking across the floor towards Mr. Armstrong. She put her foot on the lifted leg-rest of the recliner and pushed it down, which threw Mr. Armstrong forward. Then she straddled his lap and pulled his face into her chest. My face felt like it was burning up. Before I even realized what I was doing, I grabbed Dare by his T-shirt and started to run. Broken from the spell, he ran too and soon bolted way ahead of me. When I reached the front yard, he was lying on the grass breathing hard. I threw myself down beside him. We didn't speak for a long time.

Finally, Dare said, "Listen, you gotta swear on the Bible not to tell anybody we were over there."

"You too."

"I'd get the whipping since Mother will say I'm older and ought to know better."

"They won't find out. Nobody saw us."

We lay in silence for a while before I asked, "What do you think happened after we left? I mean, I wonder what Mr. Armstrong did. She just put his face right smack into her titties. . . ."

"Shut up! Just shut up. There's names for ladies that act that way, walking around with their big old titties pushed out like that."

"What kind of names? How do you know? Where have you seen any ladies do that before?" I was as shocked by the sting in his voice as by the idea that he knew anything about ladies that acted that way.

"Never mind. You just better make sure you never act like that."

A shiver went through me. What did *that* have to do with me?

“That’s plain stupid. Like I’d have titties that I’d walk around pushing people’s faces in.”

“You’re a girl, ain’t ya?”

A dark cord twisted through me, turning to a queasy knot in my middle. I thought of the older girls on the school bus, twin bumps sprouting in their sweaters. The stupid way they whispered and giggled, put lipstick on, and looked in their pocket mirrors all the way to school.

Dare must have noticed the way this was churning through my gut because when he spoke again it was in his soft voice, like when I’d busted my lip or gotten a goose egg from hitting the pavement when we crashed playing chicken on our bikes.

“Look, don’t worry about it. You’re just a kid.”

Normally, if he’d said I was *just a kid* I’d be mad enough to punch him, but I could tell he was trying to make me feel better. Still, my stomach churned. How had *that* gotten connected to *me*? I was used to the idea that he would always be older and stronger but this—this opened up some gulf that threatened everything.

“Come on,” he said, “I’ll race you to the house.”

“You go. I’m looking for the Big Dipper.”

“That’s easy. . . .” he started to point.

“I know, I know. Just leave me alone.” I cut him off and, strangely, he allowed himself to be interrupted. He always had to have the last word, but this time he just got up and went inside, leaving me lying on the grass. It was nighttime dark by then, and I stared up at the sky, noticing that the stars had begun to swim a little. I thought I could feel the earth spin. It gave me that weird off-centered feeling like when an elevator goes up too fast and your guts are out of place. I crossed my arms across my chest, closed my eyes and willed the weight of my body to press more firmly into place while half-thoughts chased around in my head. *I’m me, in my yard, near Feral, like normal, me—Willie.* Then, for no good reason, I popped up and

began to spin, turning around faster and faster, eyes open, arms spread out, treetops and sky blurring, until my orbit got erratic and I fell down. Over and over, I staggered back up and continued to spin and fall, spin and fall. Finally beat, I made a drunken zigzag for the front door. When I went inside, there was a good reason I felt dizzy and near sick. But it was my choice, my spinning that did it.

About the Author

June Sylvester Saraceno comes from a family of storytellers—sea-faring folk, preachers, coffee-fueled aunties, and good-time gabbers. Her understanding of the world is an ongoing interior narrative, which she sometimes puts on the page. She worked as a waitress and bartender, collecting tips and stories, and earned an MFA in creative writing from Bowling Green State University. She currently teaches at Sierra Nevada College, Lake Tahoe. Her biggest accomplishment is raising a son, Dylan Victor. *Feral, North Carolina, 1965* is her first novel.



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