

# The Mosquito

*Paul Ruffin*

This is not, of course, where a story ought to begin, given the current attitude toward stories set on college campuses, and it is almost suicidal to use writers and such as characters; but I've always believed, since my earliest days of poverty in rural Mississippi, that when you find something of value, no matter how you've come across it, you go ahead and pick it up and keep it and deal with the consequences later.

So there I was, a minor program participant at the Bennington Writers' Conference in the summer of 1988, sitting in an audience of probably a hundred people, listening to Herb Gold read from his new novel. George Garrett and Alan Cheuse were directly in front of me, New York photographer Miriam Berkeley was to my right, and sitting to my left was Darcey Steinke, heroine of this, my true-to-life, so-help-me-God story; I don't know who the fellow was directly behind me, only that he was tall and from Alpine, Texas. The rest of the people were just a blur, students and staff, some from as close as Bennington, some from as far away as California. They don't really matter to the story. You have to box things off to get a framework; outside the box anybody and anything will do.

Now, you have seen women like Darcey Steinke—just to my left, remember? Sleek. I'm talking steamlined. Not an ounce of fat anywhere on her, unless you count the padding around her kidneys, which I don't think is fair. You can't see it, after all. You ever notice how you never find yourself thinking about beautiful women's *insides*? Why should you? If you took one of Darcey's kidneys and mixed it up with kidneys from a priest, a faggot, and your grandmother, I doubt that you'd be able to put your finger on Darcey's. Maybe, but not likely. Besides, some great tragedy notwithstanding, you'll probably never have to.

All fe-male lean meat, and every square inch of it declaring that you'd better look quick before it changes because she won't stay like this long, like it's a butterfly stage or something, and innocence a big part of it because she hasn't lived long enough and hard enough to have tainted much. As if all of her has been headed for some sort of perfect plateau where she can't stay but a few summers. And that, friend, is the glorious state that Darcey Steinke was in.

Ok, you're saying, so you managed to get yourself seated beside a lovely, slender young thing that, the best you could tell, was as innocent as she was pretty. So what? It has happened lots of times to lots of fellows and it can't be that big a deal. And if you're saying that, you'd be right, right square on target, except for a little complication. And by little, I mean, by God, *little*. The size of a mosquito.

Picture this now, while you're trying to figure out just what was so unusual about a middle-aged man seated beside a beautiful young woman, perhaps lusting a bit, with his wife and daughter back at off-campus housing sweating in a fanless room and no t.v.: A mosquito, who must have thought himself loose in some sort of heaven of flesh, buzzed around above all those bare shoulders and arms and legs and finally selected what he judged to be the one spot of all on earth where he wanted to land—on Darcey Steinke's thigh.

And picture me there, but for a couple of pieces of professional correspondence between us a complete stranger to Darcey, watching that mosquito curl in, flare, and land. And then, oh, just preening and prattling to himself, he sharpened his probe, aimed it, and jabbed. Slipped the old prod into her up to the hilt as if he'd planned it for years.

Now what was I to do, an almost stranger, while this little bastard swelled on Darcey's blood, maybe drooling encephalitis germs or something worse? Should I reach down and wave him away? Slap him flat against her thigh? Nudge her and point so that she could dispatch him?

Any of the above? *Sure*. What if he disappeared while I was shooshing or squashing him or drawing her attention to her thigh? How would I explain that? My hand right at or on her lean white thigh, or my finger pointing at it—and no mosquito? How would I explain that to her? No sir. There was too much thigh there, and that shift-like silky dress sliding higher every time Darcey moved. Hell, women know you look at what they've got out for viewing, but you don't want to get caught doing it. In some sort of pristine world that we may be destined for someday men may be able to sit beside something like that and not look at it, not contort the corners of their eye sockets and hate the fact that their noses keep them from get-

ting a three-dimensional view, but we'll be making a few more revolutions of evolution before we're there.

They *know* we look, just like we know that *they* pick their noses and fart, but nobody with any class wants to get caught at it—unless, of course, he's out with the boys and the wolf-pack mentality prevails and he not only looks and whistles but wants to be seen and heard doing it. I did not want Darcey Steinke to know that I had any more interest in her long, smooth thigh than I would have had in George Garrett's khaki thigh.

But what about the mosquito? While I was sitting there pondering my options and Herb was going on with his reading and folks were tittering and nodding in rhythm, the mosquito was becoming turgid, tumescent. I leaned forward until my mouth was no more than a foot from Darcey's thigh and lightly blew. The mosquito's wings fluttered, but he made no motion to go, seemed indeed glad for the breeze. *Move, you little son-of-a-bitch, move!*

The closer my face got to him, the more fascinated I became. I swear he had his two rear legs cocked out and dug in, his middle two splayed lazily to each side, and with his front two he kept a steady rubbing motion going, as if he were praying or wringing his hands with ecstasy—his whole body, except where propped up by his rear legs, rested squarely on his prod. Call me crazy. I don't care. He was at exactly the right spot for my mid-forties eyes to focus on him, even in the dim light of that auditorium; an inch closer and he would have blurred, an inch farther off and I would not have been able to swear to what I saw.

I put my glasses on and slid down onto one knee and leaned forward until my nose was no more than six inches from the little son-of-a-bitch. Down the row everyone seemed to be listening intently to Herb; George and Alan had not noticed, I was sure, and Miriam had her open eye glued to the camera. The seat backs were high enough that the people behind were blocked from view, except for the tall guy from Alpine, who squinted at me once, then looked back up toward Herb.

Totally enraptured now, the mosquito was propped up on his deep-stuck prod, sides bulging, a crapulent scarlet icon poised on Darcey's pale thigh. I stared in disbelief as—and I swear to you that if I lie, my eyes are responsible, not my tongue—his head swayed back and forth on the sticker, lolled in gutful torpor, as if it mattered not to him whether he ever found blood again, ever flew again, his life having come to as glorious a summit as he could have wished.

It was then that, Herb's voice having risen to a climax, the room stirring to applaud, I turned my face up toward Darcey's, saw her cold eyes cast down upon me and felt the burn of shame on my cheeks. My eyes still locked firmly to hers, I lifted my right hand from the floor and pointed dumbly to her thigh and the mosquito, *who was not there*.

There was nothing to say. I rose from my knees, nodded goodnight to her, and stumbled out to the aisle. I looked back once toward the front, where Herb was bowing and smiling, and in front the brightness a dark speck, large as a housefly, rose steadily toward the lights just coming back on in the ceiling, ascended like some bad angel at dawn, driven from a night of debauchery in Paradise by the mounting thunder of God. □