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The Knowing in the Neck: Memoir of a Girlhood in the Glades

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THE KNOWING IN THE NECK:
MEMOIR OF A GIRLHOOD IN THE GLADES

By

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for my daughter
Arielle

and my mother
Janet
ABSTRACT

My creative dissertation, *The Knowing in the Neck: A Memoir of a Girlhood in the Glades*, is divided into three sections. The first section contains chapters based on researched information about the social and cultural history of particular places and times in the state of Florida. I cover how that information influences and illuminates researched genealogical information and family lore going back five generations on both my maternal and paternal sides. This section also contains two chapters that detail the lives of my mother and father before their marriage and one chapter that describes the physical and cultural landscape of the area of Florida called “the Glades.” The second section contains vignettes of my earliest memories. The third section includes chapters that extend the narrative to encompass the years leading up to a family tragedy. These years cover a pre-teen, adolescent time.

The genre of this dissertation may be categorized as creative nonfiction, memoir or autobiography, but I feel “memoir” works best overall. The first section particularly fits the definition of creative nonfiction in that each chapter is a construction of information based on what Lee Gutkind, editor of *Creative Nonfiction*, names “the 5 Rs” or “reading other people’s work, ‘riting on a regular schedule, reflection, research (information/reportage) and real life.” The second section may be categorized as memoir due to chapters created from moments in my life and center on my subjective memory. There is no reflection or research in these small vignettes, only a recreation of a scene using traditional creative writing techniques of dialogue, description and scene to build the chapter. Often, I employ present tense in this section similar to chapters in Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* or Sheila Ortiz-Taylor’s *Imaginary Parents*. The last section most closely resembles the genre that might be labeled autobiography in that I do not focus on a specific scene or memory, but I build a chapter trying to explain many years in a certain period. It is reflective and encompassing but does not employ researched information.
Unlike autobiography, this section does not cover my entire life, but only a few years. Because of this focus, it is more similar to memoir.

For a while now, the genre of memoir has not been limited to those who have lived a full, noteworthy life. Mary Carr, in *The Liar’s Club*, and Maxine Hong Kingston, in *Woman Warrior*, have shown readers they could make simple relatives into mythic characters. I cannot claim that I’ve made anyone mythic, but I do claim that my story (which is connected to my family’s and my state’s story) is as culturally important as it is working-class common. It is my observation that one of the most important things about a lived-life is understanding that life and recognizing the epiphanies that occurred and the (mostly) unarticulated turning points. Recognizing these moments required only that I examine sharp visuals to see what made them sharp. The pay-off was often enlightening and could not have been pre-planned.

Although I wrote honestly about my own life and others, authorial anxiety often permeated my mood. The act of self/female-presentation required me to wrestle with what Virginia Woolf described as the “angel in the house” and made me anxious about trespassing against family and friends as I maneuvered my pen through our lives, through my life. There is the familial betrayal of making public what others may not wish to be known, and the fact that I recognize that the characters whom I portray have very different perspectives on the very same events on which I write. Therefore, in consideration to what has historically been the fate of women as subjects of the male pen, it is important for me, at this moment and in this context, to emphasize that in penning the events of my life, I acknowledge the privilege that the pen gives me, which is to say, the authority which, when printed, will appear as gospel that which could easily be told from another’s hand and with another conclusion. Therefore, this dissertation, I confide, is based solely on the only perspective I was born with--mine, and I regret that it cannot be anything else for this project.
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SECTION 1

THE WAY TO PAHOKEE

CHAPTER 1

FOR THE LOVE OF BIG WATER

In my childhood dreams, alligators leapt at me nightly from black waters. I escaped each assault by hitting snouts in a vulnerable place or stuffing wide open jaws with sticks. In my life, their presence was pervasive. Their floating heads were the target of road-trip games to grandparents' houses or to town on shopping trips. “There's one. There's another,” my sister and I'd yell, searching the roadside ditch banks from the backseat windows of my parents' Chevrolet Impala. Sighting a full body sunning itself on a distant embankment was the golden egg of our games.

Canals run beside most roads in the Glades, sometimes on both sides. It is a place of crisscrossing water channels. It is not the Everglades, where the waters run freely over miles of sawgrass; it is the area around the bottom half of Lake Okeechobee where dikes and canals were engineered to control water flow allowing the drainage of fertile soil and production of agriculture year 'round. It is the sugar cane capital of the United States, the “Winter Capital of Vegetables.” To me, the Glades is miles and miles of waving sugar cane fields: life on the edge of a roped-in, once wild and much-respected body of black water. The alligator population has shifted due to shrinkage of natural space and hunting.

As a child, I stood mesmerized by the size of dead gators imagining my narrow escape had I met it alive, or I floated safely in boats captivated by the very alive ones who swam nearby and quickly submerged when frightened. I have swum in the same water with this reptile that represents my deepest fears. My psychological relationship became more complicated as I grew older. As a death-defying teen, I water-skied across floating heads with stunningly-stupid glee.
Once in a dream, a kind man who insisted I trust him held my hand and walked me into the water. As the water line passed up my body, my fear grew. At the critical moment when the water was almost to my nose, he gave me a command: Trust me and breath in the water. I did and the water in my nose felt like air. He took me underwater where I met and conversed with turtles, fish and alligators. I've struggled with repulsion and acceptance of this creature all my life. At a critical point in my adult life, I dreamed my row boat was sinking in alligator-infested water as large ancient jaws snapped ravenously around the little wooden boat. I kept my eyes focused on the stormy, grey sky above the boat as I sank. I always imagined my fate to end at the whim of a gator's appetite. I am sure of this: no gator has ever given me as much thought as I have given it. I know I have something to learn from this primitive, repulsive creature, but what?

In the strangest way, the soil haunted me too. After my mother warned me to never take candy from strange men in cars, I dreamed of fat hands offering candy from Cadillac windows. When they gave me chase, my cowboy boots sank deeply in the soft, loamy soil that is my birthplace’s black gold. It is harder to walk through soft muck than through soft sand at the beach. This weight around my feet would still be present on waking. My legs would ache from the effort of escape. I am still trying to escape that town in the Glades, and it still pulls at me. One day, it'll have its way with me. There will be no other place to bury me.

That town is Pahokee, a small town on the south-eastern shore of Lake Okeechobee, an hour from Palm Beach. In the 70s, the Chamber of Commerce built an observation tower on the top of the Pahokee dike. From the top, I could see how the world was divided between green, blue and black. There were corn and sugarcane fields disappearing across the east, south and west horizons and a lake disappearing across the north horizon. The blue of my world was sky, not water, but the sky and the clouds reflected in the dark water of Lake Okeechobee. Below the tower, a sprinkling of rooftops dotted a small clustered area and along the four directions leaving town. From this height, the fields that dominated the distance looked like a patchwork quilt with
squares of distinct color; ripe green leaves waved in abundance next to fire-singed, broken stalks--emaciated survivors in beds of ash. Next to the blackened, collapsed square of cane, red fire danced quickly across a green square. Smoke filled the air, turning the green leaves into black ash. Farther away, flecks of gold sparkled from freshly plowed, amazingly-black fields, ready to be planted and to yield a new harvest. This maze of cane fields butted up to small neighborhoods where black ash rained from blue skies on burning days.

Burning cane created a sport for bored or hungry children who stood around with stick in hand waiting for dazed or charred rabbits to run out. White egrets and nesting doves flew up in terror from the encroaching, crackling flames. Panicked snakes slid out and darted between the legs of whooping and hollering children. It took a long time to realize that every child didn't have similar entertainment nor did every place have similar soil. I was an adult before I learned how rare was this muck, found only at the base of the Nile River and a spot in Michigan.

Who were these Glades people? The answer is complicated. Today, the people of the Glades are not simply mill workers or cane cutters or boss men. They are the sons and daughters of people who loved the wild, unsafe world--a world in which you had to be fully awake to survive. The Glades culture is one that arose around untamed water, building in its people a tendency toward fluidity and an ability to change, and they loved who they became because of it. These people did not take their lives for granted. They prized ingenuity because each of them survived without factory jobs, and their unique characters became immortalized through the stories of their friends and families. This wet land created people who distrusted convention and fashion. They could recognize a lie by watching the mouth move, but they didn't accuse. They tipped their hats to the side and listened with one ear high, looked down to the ground, chewed a blade of grass, looked up again and into the lying eye and said, "You don't want to waste my time any longer." It was the land of tomboys and outlaws, of farmers and frontiers people; the land of the wily child who haggled the price of his muck rabbits on his stick. Men lived there
like “Rattlesnake Sam” from Canal Point who single-handedly rid the Glades of Diamond Backs. *The Guinness Book of World Records* counted his skins and recorded him in its pages.

At the turn of the century, when America's cities were experiencing the Industrial Revolution, Glades people plodded on as usual, depending on the land rather than manufacturing things. Eventually, life changed from the old way of living off the land, but it happened in a way that I wouldn't call “progress.” It was a kind of regression--a destructive, invisible force that took place when the farmers sold their land for profit to the sugar industry in the late 1950s. It's true that federal money poured in via sugar subsidies and sugar mill work gave farmers a secure weekly paycheck, but they sold their independence and their family wealth. Migrant families put down roots and stayed in the area. Immigrants from Cuba came via Miami to work in the industry they knew so well. As the Glades people acquiesced to federal water managers, who schemed to control the tempestuous water by building a dike, locks and canals, the people's fear of weather waned, and, in safety, the spirit of my people began to slowly die. They followed the rationalization of money, never considering how one person's profit is the community's doom.

By the time I came along in 1963, Pahokee was just a small, sugar mill town on Lake Okeechobee. Long gone were the characters my father would immortalize through stories, but some quality remained. It is this quality that makes the Glades people different. I've supposed it had to do with the weather and their way of life.

Perhaps it had to do with the water. What a body of water it is. Lake Okeechobee is so wide fishing boats disappear when crossing as if they'd fallen into a watery grave. I call the color of her water black. My dad says it's dark green. From the Hoover Dike that surrounds her, it appears as if this great lake sits at the bottom of a grass bowl, with Australian pines creating a little forest wall between the sandy, lime rock shore and the dike that rises just behind it. The dike is manmade--a testament to man's fear of water and weather. It's a symbol of the Hurricane of 1928 that killed more than 2,000 people around the lake. History books report 2,000 deaths;
local lore and storytellers that knew of the many undocumented migrants say it was more like 4,000. So many that pine coffins ran short, and piles of people were buried in a large pit in Pahokee. Others victims were burned in the fields where their bodies were found and piled on top of each other, two heads high. This lake the Seminoles called Big Water has slept since then, contained by the Hoover Dike, undulating like a sleepy, fat baby, stirring into tantrums when winds rock her awake, but she hasn't burst the dike or flooded the Glades again. She's been obedient for seventy years now.

In the beginning, before the turn of the century, before my great, great grandfathers and mothers set foot in the black soil and couldn't escape, this lake rolled out her sweet, wet load over boggy marshes and headed south over hundreds of acres of saw grass that today, further south, we call the Everglades. In Big Water, the speckled perch and largemouth bass reigned. Catfish and mullet swam in abundance. Down sleepy side creeks the alligator nested, slept and hunted with languid care. The egret and the great blue heron filled her islands and shores while the hawk screamed its lonely cry and pierced the hearts of early hunters.

Along Big Water's south shore and half-way up her eastern side there was once a dense exotic forest of tropical custard apple trees. They filled 33,000 acres before white settlers burned them down and plowed up their roots for the rich soil underneath. The trees grew for miles from the lake and all over its islands. They grew in rich, wet loamy soil, had light, almost cork-like wood and bore an inedible, seedy fruit with a tough pulp. These trees were absent a single trunk, and instead had branches which rose up out of a buttress of roots, twisting up and out in wild formations. What made this forest of custard apple trees most exotic was the canopy of moon vines whose white flowers burst open at night or cloudy days and covered the tops of the orchards. A person could walk for miles under this blanket and not see a glimpse of sky. Nor would anyone venture under this magical canopy without a stick to fight off the strands of spider webs crisscrossing his or her path. This canopy was so thick that the natives stumped the pursuing U.S. Army by running across the top of it rather than below. In the murky gloom of
such a strange forest, grew giant ferns. On the outskirts of the orchards and in the swamps, the
crooked pop ash, the rubber, and the cypress hosted air plants of bright orange and red. Today,
it is hard to find a custard apple tree. In place of the orchards, sugarcane fields and criss-
crossing canals grid the land in squares and lines of controlled water as far as it used to be
covered by saw grass and the old custard apple tree.

Life in this part of the country was first a life of water. The post office for the entire
Glades was located on Torry Island, and mail was delivered by row boat. Settlements sprang up
where canals converged into the lake: Canal Point, Port Mayaca, Belle Glade, and Moore Haven.
These were first a stopping place for dry goods and, sometimes, as in Canal Point, a place where
Palm Beach gamblers came to play poker, use slot machines and drink as it pleased them
through the Prohibition days. The 1920s and ‘30s depression blew through the Glades like a
gentle breeze without affecting the Bank of Pahokee. Afterward, it could claim to be the oldest
in Palm Beach county as the other banks closed one after the other due to panic.

Before the white man and his river boats, the native Calusa tribe lived from the Tampa
Bay area eastward to Lake Okeechobee. Two of their burial mounds exist in Chosen, now a
neighborhood of Belle Glade, but once the first settlement near the lake. A stately home was
built on the mound of one. Its tenants claim that strange, electrical phenomena like lights going
on and off and radios turning on/off by themselves occur throughout their home. The Calusa
disappeared gradually and those left are thought to have integrated into the Seminoles when they
retreated into South Florida.

The old timers who first cleared the land in Pahokee, began the schools, built the little
movie theater, the grocery store and the soda fountain pharmacy have died, and their children
have sold their property and moved on. Few remain. The faces of people and the kind of work
they do has changed greatly even from my childhood. No one sees or knows the owners of
United States Sugar Corporation. The Glades is a land of mill workers, convenience stores and
laborers from the Bahamas, some of whom have stayed in this still-segregated community. It is
a giving place whose freedom and fierceness is lost to a watery memory. It is a land that
patiently awaits environmentalists to save it, the government to collapse its sugar subsidies or the weather to lose patience. If there are spirits who oversee such places, there must be a Goddess of Watery Wilderness, and when she has seen enough, the old hurricane spirit of Big Water will rise in a fiery tantrum breaking the dikes and the dams that have constrained her.

My ancestors migrated into this area over time. But growing up, I had the notion that we had always been here. I was surrounded by great grandparents. Headstones accounted for those I didn’t know. Three of my great grandmothers lived long lives, dying when I was an adult. In the Glades community, I was careful of what I said and courteous to strangers who were possible relatives. If not related, our parents or grandparents might know each other. They were everywhere. Being from a place where families are woven with so much history makes one belong to the landscape more than mentally or in imagination. This memoir is not only an attempt to understand my family’s connection to Big Water, but also to understand mine. It is also to understand the people that settled along her shores and to understand what has changed them. Until we know who we are or why we took another path, we can’t keep ourselves from going in the wrong direction, nor can we really go home.
CHAPTER 2
THE HALLS IN LABELLE

In the recesses of time, where ancestors lived and breathed, not as the old people in my mind nor the names on headstones, but as the children they were, as real young men and women, they rose in the morning to boil water for coffee and, in the evening, for baths. They made love, fought, worked, and relaxed from toil in the shade of an oak tree where a breeze made them close their eyes imagining lives of pleasure. They had misty, grey sunrises that filled them with hope and golden-orange sunsets that waved the labor of day away. In exploring the facts of their lives, I must remember that they were not unlike me. They felt sadness from death and joy in the birth of a new baby. They were afraid when the winds dried, the earth grew dusty, and famine swept across lands. I don't know how unbearable life becomes before one pulls up roots and leaves a place knowing one will never return. In my life, three generations have remained in one area. Why one would travel an ocean chasing dreams, I can only surmise. From history books, it seems emigration is almost always due to poverty or persecution. It seems that no one would leave a native country unless they had crosses or misfortunes to bear. In my imagination, times would have to be drastic or desperate to severe the ties to a community and family for good.

I don't know if my ancestor William Hall was touched by the famine in Scotland in 1772, but I know he came to America from Scotland around then and settled in North Carolina. He fought in the Revolutionary War and received a pension for wounds he received. His wife, Nancy Sanders Hall, bore Soloman in 1785 in North Carolina. Since I only recently came across his name, it is with a curious, but detached spirit that I imagine his burdens. If only I had a story to make him real. Shortly after marriage, Soloman pulled up roots to chase his dreams to Georgia, a land that many were settling after the Revolution. To encourage migration to the
native-filled land, the government gave land grants to veteran soldiers. His wife gave birth to
Stephen Decatur Hall in Georgia in 1826.

Stephen moved to Florida during the Seminole Indian Wars and lived in Camp Izard at
Fort Sumter. He married Lennie Caruthers and had eight children; his sixth child was
Washington Hall, born in 1866, who would become my great grandfather. During the Civil War,
Stephen fought with the 9th Florida Infantry and may have known David Allen Rimes, the
patriarch from my mother's side. A family emergency called Stephen home. He must have
asked for permission to leave; it must have been denied because he deserted just before the war
ended. His first born son, Harstuff, died in 1864 at age five, and may have been why Stephen
deserted. He left for south Florida after Lennie died in 1870 fearing, it is believed, legal
repercussions from the government. Lennie was living at Camp Izard at the time of her death.
Her two-year-old twins were split up and adopted out. Of her remaining children, the oldest was
seven. If he had been prosecuted for desertion, his children would have been orphaned. He
took his family south, further into the wilderness of Florida. Stephen and his children moved to
Sanibel Island, off the coast of Ft. Myers, and lived in the farming community called Wolcott in
the late 1800s and died there in 1904.

It was in this area that Stephen’s youngest son, Washington, met Mary Elizabeth Davis,
moved her in 1888 and moved to a small, nearby town called Alla. After Stephen died, they
moved by Thomas Edison steamboat more inland to Labelle, a small town on the beautiful,
brown-water Caloosahatchee River that runs south-westerly connecting Lake Okeechobee to the
Gulf of Mexico. Washington built a shotgun house near the river and picked oranges, dug
ditches and hunted wildlife for food and trade. He loved to read the Bible and began a weekly
prayer meeting in the living room of his house. Eventually, he built Labelle's first Pentecostal
Church of God next door, and when he moved to another house in the middle of town, behind
the old courthouse, he returned to that church every Sunday for worship. Even when the
Caloosahatchee flooded Labelle with overflow from Lake Okeechobee, Washington rolled his
pants up and tucked his Bible inside his shirt, wading to service. When strong winds blew, he went from palm tree to oak tree, leaning into the wind, full of stubborn obedience to his Lord.

Mary Hall was known as Labelle's seamstress. She could make anything with a picture from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. Labelle women came to Mary's house to quilt. Her quilting frame hung from the ceiling. With a few adjustments, the frame would swing down and women could stitch and gossip. They got together to make jellies and can fruit, especially guavas. There were two colors of guava: white and pink. When Mary canned guavas, she altered the color, tucking the curved halves into each other, stacking these in the jar before pouring thick, warm, sugar water over them. Washington and Mary had thirteen children. My grandfather, Perry Ellis Hall, was the youngest, born in 1915. He knew not one story about his grandfather or great grandfather. He had never heard of William Hall or Scotland. I would discover the name as an adult, wonder at the connection of my people from the Glades to a country in Europe. Of course, it makes sense. Yet somehow, it never occurred to me. I examined his name as if a new child had been born in the family; it was the birth of an ancestor, a connection to something other than Big Water.

The town of Labelle grew as coastal Ft. Myers grew and as settlements developed around Lake Okeechobee. At first, everyone traveled by water. So the river was the highway making Labelle a bustling river town. The Everett Hotel hosted weary travelers as well as served as a place to hold court before they built the courthouse. The merchants ran supply stores, restaurants, a hotel, insurance, real estate and mechanic shops with parts for the steamboats. By the 1920s, they had their own newspaper, *The Caloosahatchee News*. The native Seminoles lived a one-hour wagon ride away on Brighton Reservation near Okeechobee and south of Labelle on Big Cypress and Miccosukee Reservations. Natives came into town in oxcart wagons to trade alligator and raccoon skins for supplies and to cash their government checks. When they had completed their business at the Trading Post, they ate a cloth-wrapped lunch and napped in the shade of the oak trees across from the Post outside my Great Aunt
Priscilla’s house waiting on the wagon to return. Her shy son Bernard would watch them from behind the trees hoping to play. He was frightened away when an old Seminole woman turned quickly and shot out her tongue. He first ran to his mama, who was hanging clothes, and hid behind her skirt. Later, he grew bold and climbed his tree house and watched the children romp with their handmade toys until the wagon came to collect them all. He watched with intrigue until the horse-drawn wagon and the colorful people in their red and yellow dresses turned the corner in front of the courthouse and headed north over the river, toward Okeechobee, black heads bobbing up and down.

Twice in my life, I have heard my grandfather, Perry, mention witnessing a lynching as a boy. When he mentioned it, he never told us the details. Rather, he’d get a hazy look in his eye and stare out the window as if remembering the sight of something he couldn’t name. After he died in 2003, I went to Labelle and spent an afternoon reading about life in Labelle in the early 1920s. I came across the story. It seems the federal government sent in labor crews of black Americans from various parts of the South to build roads. In Labelle, the road crews lived in a tent town. Racial incidents in South Florida were rare, but not completely absent. In Labelle, and in most of Florida, the KKK had not made a strong inroad. Their philosophy was probably shared in the attitudes of the uneducated, untraveled, fighting kind, but Florida had a different history than the rest of the South and such hate was rare. This is why in 1926 when five hooded men walked into Labelle’s Baptist Church’s revival to place a check in the offering, the crowd went silent and held their breath. The men demanded the song “America” be played while they walked up the aisle. Reverend Durrance whispered to the choir leader, Professor Mazzei, who, without the help of the other musicians, played it on his clarinet. With the pomp of priests, the robed men walked slowly and mysteriously up the aisle, their faces covered by white hoods. They placed their contribution in the offering plate and the reverend said a prayer with them. They turned and promenaded out of the church. At once, a sigh of relief filled the air.
The church appearance of the KKK in March of 1926 was odd enough to make the Caloosahatchee News. Although the KKK didn’t make any notable trouble, they must have been stirring fear, doubt and hate in the hearts of men because two months later, a startled scream from a surprised white woman began a manhunt for a boy that ended so horribly, it blanketed Labelle in a bloody shame and etched a sight in my grandfather’s memory he would never forget.

On the outskirts of town, a young black man, Henry Patterson, left the walking road crew in search of a drink of water. He approached the back door of a little house not far from the road. The lady inside, Mrs. Crawford, was young, naive and not accustomed to seeing black people, let alone a man in her yard outside her door. At the sight of his large, dark figure, she screamed and ran away. Young Henry, also frightened, yelped and panicked, running back to the road. Without understanding what the man had wanted, Mr. Crawford quickly got the sheriff and the marshal after him. Everyone assumed he had accosted Mrs. Crawford. Once apprehended, in the marshal’s car, Henry explained he had only wanted a drink of water. Fearing the worst, Henry jumped out of the car as it passed a palm-wood thicket, making his captors believe he was guilty of raping the woman as they suspected. Word spread quickly, and a posse of men gathered and searched. Hours later, when Henry returned to his road camp for clothes, the foreman notified the marshal, who arrived and turned him over to a mob of armed men whose breath smelled of moonshine from the afternoon of hunting for the fugitive. Their hearts were dark and certain. They would not wait for a trial although Henry begged for one.

At a street corner, ten cars and about forty men gathered with their prisoner. Henry, no more than twenty-years-old, cried for mercy, repeating the phrase, “I only wanted a drink of water.” Mr. and Mrs. Crawford reported he had, indeed, done no harm. He begged for them to consider his good mama in Memphis. When he noticed a man in the crowd whom he had worked for, he begged the familiar man to tell the mob how he had always behaved himself.

“Yes, you did,” the man said, nodding.

“Please, don’t let them kill me,” he pleaded. “I done nothing.”
The boss man looked away.

From Bridge Street, the procession of cars and armed men drove their victim south toward the Court House. As Henry was shoved out of the car, shots pelted him from behind. Although Henry was still alive, the angry mob proceeded to gouge his eyes out, cut and mutilate his body while young boys looked on. He was thrown on the fender of a car and driven further, one leg dragging on the ground. The young man tried to lift his head and a foot stamped him in his face. In front of the Court House, the men threw a rope around a big tree. A crowd gathered and onlookers who were confused about whether the boy had committed a crime assumed that he must have. My grandfather told me when I was a teen that he had seen this happen. He was one of the boys sitting in the tree watching the grown ups take judicial matters into their own hands and believed all his life that Henry had probably, indeed, raped the white woman. Why else would men behave so cruelly and with such certainty?

In the library, I was unable to quit thinking about the tragedy of Henry Patterson’s life, his mother who worried, or how a search for work in another state and a request for water had been ignited, by the scream of a woman.

Most people in Labelle were frightened by the lynching and the lawless night that followed. Doors were bolted; drapes were closed. The president of the Chamber admonished Christians in a letter to the newspaper to give a cup of water in Christ’s name and to seek justice for this despicable act. Reporters were threatened by citizens who had participated, and the National Guard was sent in. Citizens were afraid to testify. One admitted to the judge that it would endanger the lives of the judge and jury if he told what he had seen. The judge remarked, “So far as this court is concerned, I know of no better death than to die while doing the highest duty before God and man.”

After the lynching, Washington put the family’s water barrel on the front porch, tin cup swinging at its side. Since the Hall house was downtown, parched National Guardsmen and
Army artillerymen sent in to protect the streets of Labelle and the courthouse proceedings stopped by for a sip.

Henry Patterson’s murder trial lasted over two months. Of seventeen men charged with murder, nine were held with a $10,000 bond and eight were released. In the courthouse, thirty-five black friends of Henry rose to leave after hearing the judge’s ruling, pulling their hats low and shaking their heads.¹

Despite this dark uproar, Washington and Mary’s crew of gangly boys and girls grew up in a relatively quiet town, swimming in the Caloosahatchee River, coming home to the clanging of Mary’s porch bell for dinner, hunting in the nearby forests and skipping school to fish from the bridge or a secret spot on the bank of the river. For weeks at a time, Washington would disappear from town on a hunting trip. He’d go to a particular spot he loved on the shores of Lake Okeechobee. It was a strip of land that jutted out into the water near where the town of Clewiston is today. He’d make camp there and hunt alligators until he had so many he could barely carry their scraped-clean and salted hides home. He’d come traipsing home after a twenty-five mile walk, skins hanging from each shoulder, smelling foul. One of his sons would yell, “Here comes Daddy! You can smell ‘m coming!”

When Mary’s dinner bell rang, a heap of boys would emerge from the river and race each other home. Since Perry didn’t swim, he was the dry one who hung back from the rest as they bolted home for dinner. A friend asked Perry, “Why ain’t you hurrying like the rest?” Perry kicked a rock. “It’s just beans,” he said. “It’s beans and rice ever’ night.” He walked leisurely, looking at the sky, thinking how this river and these people were things that might never change.

In Washington and Mary’s house, one long hallway extended from the front door to the rear. In the kitchen, a wood burning stove sat next to a hand-hewn table, around each leg of which was a coffee can full of water to keep ants from crawling up the legs. They had to change

¹ The News of Hendry County, a compilation of summaries of the Caloosahatchee News 1926-1932 found in the Labelle Library, research date July 2003.
the water periodically, otherwise, rust would form a film across the top over which ants would stubbornly cross. Covering that table was a red and white checkered cloth that Mary kept wiped clean after each meal. On the corner of the table were the condiments: guava jelly, hot sauce, vinegar, and mustard. Mary would fold the clean table cloth over the condiments between meals to discourage flies. Even after they built an addition that included indoor plumbing, Washington always preferred to use the outhouse in the back yard. It seemed uncivilized to him to attend to his nature inside a house.

After Perry graduated from Labelle High, he first worked on the construction of the largest Glades project so far: building a dike to completely surround Lake Okeechobee. It was the Army Corps of Engineers' answer to the devastation of the Hurricane of 1928, which killed over 2,000 Glades people due to the incredible storm surge from Lake Okeechobee when the small levee broke. For years after that storm, farmers unearthed bones left from decayed bodies, which were never recovered. After the dike was built, there were no more water-front homes. The lake became not a part of daily life, but an afterthought, a super-huge fishing hole. It wasn't easy to access anymore. You had to drive your boat to town, up the dike and over, down to the marina where you obeyed federal rules for boating and fishing. A way of life was exchanged for safety. Respect for water diminished. When the dike was complete, Perry left for Alabama to work at a civil construction site. From Pahokee, his brother Cecil sent him a letter saying he had a job at US Sugar Corporation if he wanted it. Perry sent his money home to his mother, who saved it for her son, and, when he returned, she gave it all back to him. "It's your money. You earned it, you keep it," she said. Perry must have sniffed the wind and smelled a new life blowing from the shores of Lake Okeechobee.

Cecil had married Lenora Bridges from Pahokee, and, when Perry moved back, he moved to their house in downtown Pahokee. It didn't take long for him to fall for Lenora's younger, brown-eyed, dark-haired sister Velma. The Bridges were a smart, tough family. Velma's mother, Willie, had long left their moonshining father, Luther Bridges, after years of
living in the Everglades and running a trading post in Homestead where Al Capone himself stopped to do business once. Willie had enough strength and mouth to stand up to any trouble that faced her as a single mother of five kids: two boys and three girls. She left Homestead and took her children to Pahokee and started over. When her daughter Merdis married a man who owned a drugstore. Willie ran the restaurant and helped keep the books. Willie lived ninety-nine years. She was my Othermama, my paternal great grandmother.

Velma and Perry gave birth to Ellis, their first child, in 1941, in Labelle. When the sugar mill offered Perry a job running the Bryant commissary store and meat shop, he accepted, providing they could pay for Velma to be a cashier. They moved to Bryant, a sugar mill subdivision in the town of Canal Point, on the east side of Lake Okeechobee, and commenced to raise a family, eventually having six children. The last one, Nelda Sue, was born in 1959, just four years before I was born.

In 1961, Washington came to live with Perry in Bryant when my father was twenty. By then, Washington was a bent, short man with small feet. He had a small nose and tufts of soft, white hair on his head. He wore a daily uniform of khaki pants, suspenders and cotton, long-sleeved shirts. When he went outside, he wore a dark, dress hat. His wife Mary had died fifteen years earlier, at home, surrounded by her husband and children. Washington’s wish was never to die in a hospital. He was ninety-five when his heart failed, and Perry, his youngest, let him lie in bed, next to my dad's bed surrounded by the comforts of home.

By midnight, Perry's brother Arthur and his wife Eileen arrived. His sister-in-law was horrified that Perry had not called an ambulance. She insisted on calling Dr. Graham from Canal Point, who examined my frail great grandfather and confirmed that he wouldn't live long. Eileen insisted on hospital care despite Dr. Graham's conclusion, so an ambulance (that doubled as a hearse) arrived. Perry watched them strap his father to a bed and slide him into the dark, brooding car. It only took two hours more for Washington to die. He gave up the ghost in Everglades Memorial Hospital, the same hospital I would soon be born in. It was exactly what
he had hoped would never happen to him. Forty-two years later, Perry would get mad when his concerned children would not let him leave the hospital to return home, to die in his bed. They were sure he wouldn’t survive the car trip. He, too, died in a hospital.
CHAPTER 3
CRACKER COWBOYS

Finding an unknown ancestor is like giving birth backwards. When you find one, you fall in love because the distance and silence allows for a foggy, romantic view. Like a baby’s inability to communicate in words, that ancestor shines silently as a signature on a voting sheet or a name listed on a census or military record. To the future children of a man and woman, all the unworthy choices they’ve made become insignificant when compared to the one significant act in which they birthed a child who birthed a child who, eventually, gave birth to the searcher. The rest is forgivable.

My earliest known ancestor on my mother's side is David Allen Rimes. He lived the life of a Georgian farmer, born in 1820, until he moved to north Florida sometime before 1848. In order to be able to vote, and David voted in Florida's first election, a man had to live in Florida a required number of years and had to be registered in Florida's Infantry. David married Betty Albritton and lived both near her parents in Madison County, Florida, and near his parents in southern Georgia, at various times. Betty and David had ten children over a twenty-four year period.

Where David's family comes from, I can only guess. That information remains unborn. The photographs of his children show they are very tall, light-skinned people. They have clear eyes and broad, strong hands. They are European–Scottish, Irish or English. Somewhere in the past beyond my reach are fathers and mothers that, now, seem only like an idea, like my future grandchildren.

David served in the Confederacy in the 9th Infantry and fought in many significant battles in Florida history. His troop was present at the signing of the documents that ended the Civil War at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. One would think fighting in such a significant war
would warrant remembrance in the annals of family history, but my mother had never heard of her great, great grandfather.

I imagine the experience of war resides afterwards in the dark recesses of a man's mind. Unless he is dumbly loquacious, he doesn't burden his family and children with memories of blood and death. It is enough burden to survive your comrades, having looked into the face of another and killed, again and again. At home, the peaceful yet dutiful world of chores and daily meals must feel surreal to a man who has lived through the terror of war games in support of a cause which must feel, at times, vague and distant. At close range, with a familiar, countryman as the enemy, victory must have had a bitter taste. If David told his children anything of what he had seen and done, they did not pass it on.

In fact, by the time I am born, daughter of Janet, daughter of Lee L, son of Cab, son of Hezekiah, son of David, we will have never heard of this man. He will be as elusive as the pages of the Civil War history books I read in high school. His silence will cover generations of people who traveled south into unchartered territory of Florida. They will act as if they had always lived here, as if they were never the sons and daughters of a poor, migrant war veteran looking for land to settle. They will forget to tell the stories of their elders, and those elders will be forgotten.

There were not a lot of reasons for coming to Florida back then. In 1864, reporters concerned with the Seminole situation wrote against defending Florida from Indians. One said in the *New York Herald*, “I am confident no sane man who knows what Florida is would give the life blood of one man for the whole state...or a thousand dollars to gain possession of all the territory beyond the St. John’s River.” Since most of south Florida was still inaccessible, it was easy for federal policymakers to turn their attention to more pressing concerns.

The Rimes did not read the paper. In the 1870s, Hezekiah left his family to travel further south into thicker, more hostile lands. I like to think my life began to be possible in the hardship of that act. In the heat of the day when what lay before him was clouded in mystery and through
hellacious nights which surely brought a veil of mosquitoes to dampen his spirits, he grew closer and closer to what would become my homeland. Around Ft. Kissimmee, Hezekiah met and married a small, dark-headed Indian girl named Lenora who lives in family lore because of her odd preference to go barefoot, to cook outdoors even after Hezekiah bought a cookstove, and to leave home for days at a time. She loved to walk. She'd strap a child on her back and return days, sometimes weeks, later. She'd visit her relatives, and later, her grown children. Worries of her solitary travel were solidly ignored by Lenora. She acted as she pleased. She had been orphaned at a young age, and a family of whites, the Wilkinsons, took her in as their own. She also loved to dance. Lenora could out-dance anyone. She never tired, but shuffled and bounced across the dirt, around fires, in houses, and on the front porch in a rhythm that was so steady she could cook with a child strapped to her back while her feet pranced underneath her.

Hezekiah Rhymes, as he began to spell the name, was my great, great grandfather. Friends called him Hez. He and Lenora raised hogs, caught cows, built wagons and picked oranges from a grove Hez planted at Orange Hammock. This happened in the 1870s in Florida. His fourth child, a son named Cab Calvert, married the neighbor Lewis Thomas' daughter, Dora Lee. The Thomases had a big parcel of land and cows. This land of 300 acres became family land. Before the fencing laws, the family shared grazing rights with Mr. Lykes, of bacon fame, who became a wealthy hog farmer.

Hezekiah and Lenora had ten children. The sons and daughters of Hez and Lenora spent their lives battling the heat and hurricanes of life in late nineteenth century Florida. They spent days chasing cows and herding them through dangerous swamps and thick terrain. They raised hogs and guided them across the Kissimmee River when it was time to sell. Hez always lost a few to the alligators. The boys helped their father make wagons when it wasn't round up time, or long, leather cow whips that pierced the air with a pop. They became known, with other Floridians from the time, as cracker cowboys. The girls learned how to sew quilts and stitched dresses, shirts and overalls.
My grandfather Lee L Rhymes (the misspelling stuck) was born on this land in Kissimmee, the land of Hezekiah. As soon as he was old enough to ride, he worked the cows with his uncles. To get attention, he developed a wicked sense of humor. It was his funny mouth that kept the men entertained around camp fires at night. He was silly, too. He did whatever it took to get a laugh and make the work day a little lighter.

On a cattle drive near Lorida in his late teens, Lee L and his brothers passed by the sharecropper John Price's house where they heard three young girls lived. The first time he saw Evelyn Price, he was sitting astride a horse, and she was sweeping the yard with a handmade broom. When he tilted his hat down, she raised a hand to shade her eyes. She didn't smile. Evelyn was serious. No bells sounded nor did he stay to talk, but they had seen each other and sometimes, that's all it takes. A month later, Lee L and two cousins paid the sharecropper a visit. Mr. Price made a fire outside and allowed his daughters to sit around to talk with the boys, since there was no proper place inside to entertain. That night, Lee L told stories, and Evelyn laughed more than she'd ever laughed in her life. “Shoot,” she said, “You aren't a bit serious. You're all show.” His company agreed.

A month later, the McClellans in Cornwell had a hoe down in their parlor. They moved the furniture out and played a jukebox. Lee L and his brothers came. Evelyn and her sisters and a girlfriend of the family came together. It was a cool evening in October of 1938. I like to think of how the moon swung low in the sky just above the wood frame house that glowed that night from dim lights, music and the blushing faces of young people whose lives had been so full of nothing but tending to earth and animals. Grace, Evelyn's older sister, whispered in Lee L's ear, “Evelyn will only dance with you.” So the lanky cowboy gained courage through sisterly betrayal. That night, they skipped and clogged, and went round and round. Lee L didn't have to work hard to make Evelyn laugh. I am certain he danced and emphasized his long bow legs for a laugh, tilting his cowboy hat forward and moving it over his heart when she glanced his way. I
am sure she tried not to laugh and slapped his arm, trying to hide her delight. The Rhymes boys slept that night in the Price’s barn and corralled their cows in his fence.

A month passed after the McClellands hoe down. During that time, Lee L spent nights on the ground around camp fires with skinny cattle hoofing nearby and tin pots full of coffee grinds growing cold as the fire died low. He would stretch his long, thin body across a blanket, cross his arms under his head and stare at the sky imagining life with Evelyn. It didn't take much convincing. She had prepared to be a wife. Evelyn worked hard for her parents. She was the one who liked the yard to be raked smooth; the dirt had to look pretty. She was the one who milked old Pet, the cow, early in the morning. She had played house with sisters using broken shards of pottery for pretend meals. She was a farmer’s daughter who loved the homestead; he was a herdsman who loved to roam. Lee L was charming, handsome, and funny. Evelyn was wise beyond her years, and had a farm girl’s natural beauty: good skin, high cheek bones, an infectious smile, and straight white teeth. Not long after the hoe down, Lee L went back to Lorida. He was impatient. He wanted Evelyn. She said, “I do,” and they did in Sebring, in November of 1938.
CHAPTER 4
THE BUFFALO MAN NAMED SWEET

To know a man, a father, you might want to know how he interacted with his children. Strangely, it is the last thing I might say about my father. His jobs do not adequately describe him. It is not enough to explain his personality by saying he is an easy-going guy or that he rarely demands anything. One way to know him is to hear his kid-calling, time-to-eat whistle. It sounds like a long drawn-out arch that rises, falls and rises again, swiftly, at the end like an exclamation point. It's unique from the other fathers' whistles on my street. You'd have to know how at the end of every meal, he exhales a long whistle. It means, “I'm done,” and “I'm happily satisfied.” He is not a man of compliments, except this whistle.

My father is named after his grandmother, Willie, and his father Perry Ellis. He is Willie Ellis, but he goes by Ellis. His boyhood friends like Coon Eye and Curtis call him Sweet, which is a nickname that escapes my understanding. It's not that he isn't nice, but “sweet” is not how I'd describe him. He is a small, fast man, always awake and interested in how things work; he likes gadgets and old machines. He invents things like a meter-reader to gauge the monetary value of the energy used in a home. He likes cowboys, the Old West, country music and old cars.

My father is a man of contradictions. He is a large man in a small body. He is a man of few words who loves to tell stories. Because his words are precise, they can sting like an arrow. They are usually enough and they never feel “sweet.” He is definitive and decisive, which, in my teens, meant unyielding and stubborn. He doesn't like to muse, but he loves to reminisce, especially if he's remembering a goof someone made. These memories can choke him with such laughter that his body convulses and folds in. His arms cave in toward his chest. His eyes squeeze shut like Asian eyes when he is tickled. He most enjoys a true surprise like when someone falls or is frightened. He laughs when children cry. He gets this from his mother,
Velma, who hid behind doors to frighten her grandchildren and shouted, “boo,” even if you were already at her house and had already jumped in terror the first time she did it.

It is not enough to say that he was a sugar mill worker and, later, an electrician. He is not his work. But at the sugar mill, he welded nuts and bolts together and made a tractor with wheels and a ring for me. The sugar mill had cats and, sometimes, he brought a kitten home in his backpack. He didn't give it to me himself. He let the kitten find its way out, as I stood looking in horror at the moving bag, growing more and more frightened as the flap lifted.

My father seemed to be interested in humoring himself at our expense. Yet there was that gentle, animal-loving side: he brought home pets like raccoons, rabbits, a greyhound, broken-winged birds, turtles, German Shepherds, various cats and, later, after I was grown, deer. One of the dogs I remember he liked most was Old Red, a large, lanky, floppy-eared hound dog who belonged to no one in particular. Old Red came and went as he pleased on his own agenda, even though my dad fed him like a king. It was always good to see Old Red again after a long summer or to pass him uptown on his way somewhere. There was a glint of real appreciation in my father's eye when Old Red stopped to pay a visit.

To know a man, it isn't enough to know he wears a uniform, but it is part of the picture. My father has worn a long-sleeved, blue work shirt and the same size of Levis, everyday, since he was twenty-five. He wears a straw Panama hat with a feather band and a leather belt, and carries a knife. His front teeth overlap a little. He walks briskly. Young electrician's helpers puff to keep up, even though he has small feet. He is large because I know this story: one night, after my mother was dead, after my father was remarried, he went to the Elks Club with my stepmother. As they were leaving, a man approached him and wanted to show him a gun. My father loves guns; he loves knives too, and he loves to talk story, but when he doesn't like someone, he has no time. He cuts the conversation quickly. This night, my father said no to the man who wanted to show him a gun that was outside in his truck. The man insisted. My father let him talk. The man was tall and had been drinking too much. My father listened to the man's
description of the gun. “It sounds neat,” he said. Finally, my father said no with his teeth gritted. The man took offense. My father threw this large man against the back wall of the Elks Club, held him there and repeated the words slowly, “I said no.” He let him down and walked away with my stepmother. The next morning, the gossip reached our house. The man had shown someone else his gun that night and had shot him through the stomach.

When I was young, we spent afternoons at Fisheating Creek or the Cypress Swamp cooking hamburgers or hotdogs on a grill, listening to Johnny Cash and Anne Murray. We canoed, fished, and slapped mosquitoes sitting in metal fold-out chairs. I waded in tannic water, chasing minnows with a paper cup. My parents drank Budweiser and laughed with their high school friends. Back then, my dad wore a black rawhide cowboy hat and took off his shirt when the heat from the BBQ grill grew too intense.

From time to time, Dad left for overnight hunts with friends. So, it was a surprise when I learned as an adult that he had never shot a deer. At first, I wondered if he was a bad shot, but I knew better. Throughout my childhood, Dad took me and my sister to a spot, sometimes at the lake, sometimes in a cane field, to practice shooting the gun. The guns were always there. As soon as I could hold a gun, my father was trying to get me to hit a target. “Learn to take the kick,” he'd say. It hurt my shoulder. I remember a particular rabbit he brought home and skinned in front of me when I was six. He showed me the insides. “This is the bladder,” he said, pointing at it with his knife. I studied a moment and realized there was urine still dripping out.

“It was peeing,” I said, shocked. “That wasn't fair.” I looked at him in horror. I knew things were supposed to be fair between man and animal.

This is why when I was twenty and he said he had never shot a deer, I didn't believe him. He said it matter-of-factly, but I smelled contradiction and couldn't let it go.

“But you've been hunting how many times?” I asked.

“Plenty,” he said. He wanted to drop it.

“You never had a chance to shoot a deer?”
“Of course I did,” he said, shrugging. “I like to watch them through the scope.”

This was sentimental treachery, and he knew it. His friends would never have put up with that philosophy. “Did your friends ever know?”

He pursed his lips together and shook his head nonchalantly to say no. I smiled. I let it go, but this sealed him as large in my mind's eye.

To know this man, it isn't enough to explain how my father trained his German Shepherd, Champ, to sit in the middle of a sugar cane field with a piece of cold hotdog resting precariously on his black snout while he got into his Luv truck and drove away. When he could no longer see the dog in his rear view mirror, he returned. Champ was still in the sitting position with the hotdog balanced on his snout. Dad got out and said, “Eat,” and the dog obediently threw the meat up and snatched it from the air. But, my father is not only that story.

When I was a kid, we traveled on vacation to North Carolina and stopped at a petting zoo on the way. This event would be lost to the blur of early childhood had we not ventured to the buffalo pen. My sister and I ran up to the pen first, climbed the slatted fence and saw two wooly-headed buffalo absently chewing the cud. When my father walked up, the buffalo took notice and became disturbed. My father said to the buffalo, “It's ok, boys.” But the buffalo grew more and more hostile. Their agitation increased until they were snorting and stomping their hooves. They had, at first, backed away from my father. Next, they rammed the fence where he stood. It vibrated all around. Startled people backed away, looking wildly at my dad. My mother grabbed my sister and me. When they hit the fence again, a zoo keeper ran up and told everyone to back off. “What happened?” he asked the crowd. No one knew. “Something had to have happened,” he said. “They never do this.”

My mother looked at my father in alarm.

“I just walked up,” my dad admitted. The attendee looked at him suspiciously and said, “Well, you'd better stay away.”
In the car he told us, “It's the damnedest thing.” He shook his head, thinking about something. “That was the second time buffalo have reacted like that. The first time, I was in the Boy Scouts. We went to a zoo in Miami, and the buffalo did the same thing. They snorted and charged the fence where I stood.” He was perplexed and drove on without talking. He didn't know what to make of it, but in my mind's eye, I saw this man, the buffalo man, covered in skins, riding across some prairie, shooting them one after another. It wasn't glorious. It was bloody and brutal. Yet, there was more evidence of his intrigue around us. In our den, in my teens, he hung a photo of a buffalo herd covered in snow. We were the only suburban house that contained a fireplace that he designed when he built an addition onto the house. On its mantel, he had a statue of an Indian in thinking pose near a miniature, wood and canvas-covered wagon. There were other paintings: an Indian chief, a snow covered-cabin in the woods, and a painted version of “The End of the Trail.”

To really know him, one must know about the polio and the train conductor. When my father was about five-years of age, light began to bother his eyes. His parents, Perry and Velma, were living in the great big house that was attached to the commissary where they worked. Each sugar camp had a commissary, and it was the center of activity.

Since Ellis had taken to sleeping in his bed with the pillow over his head, Perry and Velma worried. After Perry came into his room one night to check on him and even the light of the closet made Ellis cry, they agreed to take him to the doctor. The doctor called an ambulance and sent him to Good Samaritan Hospital in West Palm Beach. It was an hour drive. He was quarantined in the children's ward with a girl a few years older. They left him with a radio and a toy truck.

The nurses came in a few times a day and wrapped Ellis' legs with wet, hot towels. They submerged him from the waist down in ice water. This uncomfortable procedure helped to ease the pain for awhile. It took a long time to get better. He lost the ability to walk and stayed in the bed negotiating radio stations, playing games and passing time arguing with the little girl. Perry
and Velma came to visit on weekends and stood outside the ground floor window talking to their son through the screen. They were not allowed any contact.

A year later, he came home, having lost the ability to walk, and rested on the couch while his parents worked in the commissary. Since the house was attached to the store, Velma only had to walk through the storage area and into her home to see how he was doing. Ellis was afraid he'd never learn to walk again when a twelve-year old neighbor, Chuckie, began stopping by to visit him. One day Chuckie said, "You want to walk around the room?" He suggested Ellis hold onto the wall and he'd steady him. It took awhile, but Chuckie came everyday. Eventually, Ellis walked. Soon as he walked, he ran. When he learned to run again, he didn't stop. To know a person, you have to know if they were obsessive about something like running, or if they lived for a year in a hospital without a hug from their mother; and especially, you need to know if they had a nemesis named Earl who conspired from train windows to steam them.

Since Bryant, the sugar camp, was only a mile from Canal Point, Ellis ran to town, swam with friends in the canal by the locks and ran home. He ran around Bryant, too. Bryant had two roads out of the camp. One went to Canal Point, the other to Pahokee. He ran down dirt roads from the sugar mill along the road to Pahokee. Along this road, sugar mill trains hauled fresh cut cane from the fields back to the mill. One bored conductor, Earl Mills, decided to pull a trick on the barefoot, running boy, so as the train passed him, he pulled the steam chain and shot white steam out the sides. He covered Ellis in a wet cloud. Ellis could see the conductor doubled-over in laughter, waving out the engine room, but Ellis didn't laugh, nor did he forget. His sense of determination had grown strong over the last year. So he staked out a place in the shadows of the cane leaves and propped his BB gun between two sticks. When the train passed, he pelted the conductor's cab with as many shots as he could in the short time it passed.

This little bit of revenge didn't satisfy the running boy, so he snuck into the train crew's lunchroom with a bag of salt from his mother's kitchen, intending to dump it in Earl's sandwich. Earl, who was not born yesterday, opened the door and caught Ellis in the act. He tied the seven-
year-old up and hung him by his pants from a hook on the wall and went back for the afternoon haul. I'm sure Earl meant to teach the kid a lesson, but Ellis got himself loose and from then on, when the train passed and Ellis was off-guard and on-foot, he moved off the road onto the grass on the other shoulder to escape the shot of steam from the grinning conductor. It was a fight they both enjoyed waging.

When Ellis was a young teen, he was walking from Pahokee to Bryant with his friend Dougie, who carried a pet raccoon on his shoulder. They were walking on the road near the train when Ellis saw the train coming. He thought it'd be funny to see Dougie get a shot of steam, so he didn't warn him when it passed, and, sure enough, when Earl pulled the chain, Ellis dove out of the way, but Dougie and his raccoon were blasted with steam. The frightened raccoon dug its claws into Dougie's neck, sending the boy into a screaming fit, dancing in the steam, trying to loosen the grey, black-eyed animal from its claw-grip around his neck. He couldn't wrestle it loose without deeply scratching his neck and shoulders. Dougie's blood ruined his shirt. Ellis looked back and saw Earl's hand waving out the window. This revenge continued until Ellis stopped running down the roads and started driving his father's car.

When Ellis graduated high school, he went to work for the sugar mill and rode trains with Earl until he was moved into the boiler rooms where he and Billy Thigpen kept the fires going. Weekend nights, he and his friends went to the top of the Pahokee dike to socialize, when they weren't drag racing in the sugar cane fields. They parked their cars along the top. The black waters of Lake Okeechobee glistened in the distance, spreading out under the white moon. Here he met some girls from Belle Glade. One of them, Janet Rhymes, was a girl he had met in Labelle when he was visiting his grandfather Washington. Ellis recognized her. "You look familiar," he said. "You're that kid from Labelle who climbed into my tree house without my permission."
Janet clapped her hands together and pointed at him, “Oh, it's you!” she said, remembering they had played together. “I always climbed that tree when I visited my aunt,” Janet said. “I liked the spot with the boards nailed across.”

“Me too,” he said. “It's my spot. I nailed those boards there.”

“It's not your spot when I'm there. In fact, it suits me well, and it prefers me,” she said, grinning.

So they liked each other. He was a Pahokee guy (Canal Point being too small to count), and she was a Belle Glade girl. There existed some town rivalry, especially between high school football. Maybe she thought he was dangerous or cool. But, she enjoyed coming to Pahokee and making friends there.

To know this man, you have to know how this girl rushed into his life and changed it. Over the summer of Janet’s sixteenth year, she visited friends in Pahokee and, one night, caused a great panic on the dike. Earlier that evening, Janet asked to borrow her sister Linda's Corvair for the evening because Linda had a date. Linda was protective of her hard-earned things, especially toward younger siblings. Linda conceded the car, but she made Janet promise not to drive to Pahokee. In sisterly fashion, Janet promised, picked up some girlfriends, and drove straight to Pahokee.

Ellis was among the kids that night on the dike. They laughed and talked and didn't notice when the Corvair began rolling. At first, some boys tried to jump in the door, but the car picked up speed as it rolled down the grassy slope of the Hoover dike. The shouting crowd was chasing it when it hit the dark, glistening water with a loud splash. The moon hung quietly above the burping Corvair as it filled with water and sank, light reflecting off the tipped-up, rear, chrome fender. A shocked crowd stood watching in disbelief, each person secretly glad it wasn't their car. Janet howled into the light and could not be consoled.

Ellis commandeered a rescue of the vehicle and by three a.m., the Corvair emerged from the water pulled by ropes tied to pick up trucks, cars and the backs of strong, young men. It was
a collaborative heave-ho. The car was towed to a mechanics shop, and Ellis took Janet and her
girlfriends home to Belle Glade.

That night, the Rhymes house was full of shrieks and screams, and Ellis snuck away.
Before he left, Janet grabbed his arm and said, “Call to check on me.” She thought the
possibility of the world collapsing was too great. She could not see living past this error.

After a few months of dating, Ellis told Janet he wanted to marry her, and she wanted it
too, but her parents said no. So Ellis came to Belle Glade in the middle of the night and parked
next door, in front of the mango and avocado trees. When Janet heard the idling engine, she
slipped off her couch, pulled out the small suitcase she had packed, and stole into the waiting
car. They drove nine hours to marry in Georgia because, in that state, seventeen-year-old girls
didn't need parental permission to wed.

Stealing away was how the Buffalo Man named Sweet got a wife, and this is something
to know if you want to know a father like mine who married my mother, the middle child, the
one who slept on a couch. The soaked car and the runaway marriage were steps on a path begun
long ago by ancestors who left places of birth, again and again, whose very lives became a path
toward me. It was the last turn on the way to Pahokee, the way to my life.
CHAPTER 5
JANET’S COUCH:
(Fairytale Style)

In a land of sweet, tannic water and black fertile soil, a girl-soul prepared to visit a cowboy named Lee L and his wife Evelyn, who had two golden-haired girls, Shirley and Linda, and one quiet boy, Jerry. Wise-loving spirits sent her to Earth with the gifts of passion, laughter, strong will, beauty and humor. She would be a middle child, a negotiator. They would name her Janet.

Evelyn’s fourth pregnancy was important because it kept Lee L from being drafted into the war his country was waging across an ocean, far, far away. The couple hoped to avoid war because they had too much work to do at home, and so they hoped their country’s enemy, the men with dark hearts, would lay down their rifles in peace and give back the land they had unfairly taken.

In the spring of the third year of war, when suddenly-dark skies poured heavy showers and the returning sun steamed away water-soaked roads, the girl-child was born into the world. She pitched a scream her father would think of when he finally entered the trenches of battle. When her alert eyes opened after birth, Lee L caught his breath and smiled the dumb-smile of paternal love and whispered, Janet.

It was almost the middle of a century, and no one knew whether to hold on to the past or run into the future. The cowboy wanted no part of progress, material or technical. He lived like his father Cab lived, like his father Hezekiah lived, like his father David lived. Lee L liked who he was. He loved working with his animals. He liked sleeping under the stars, rounding up stray cattle with his cur dog, popping his cow whip in the air, laughing with his cousins and uncles around a fire or a meal. He did not want to change. But inside the heart of the wife, the movies planted a seed-dream that manifested in the shape of a couch, which she secretly hoped to own.
one day. At this time in her life, Lee L and Evelyn were a young family with little children, so she kept quiet about her dreams, rocking her newborn. The older children ate grits with butter and eggs and twittered over a whittled stick the brother carried. Every once in a while Evelyn turned her face from her children, looked out a glass pane of the cabin and imagined a better future in the dappled light reflecting off the Kissimmi River.

The Army of Lee L's country wanted land to test bombs, so they took the Rhymes' land and called it “Avon Park Bombing Range” and paid the family $300.00, one dollar for each acre of Hezekiah's land, forcing their evacuation. Lee L and his cowboy cousins, uncles, and aunts and his mother, moved to a nearby town, Okeechobee, because it was full of cattle ranchers. One uncle started a meat-packing business and hired Lee L for a while.

While bullets and bombs fell on soldiers and families across the ocean, Janet basked in the arms of her sisters and her quiet brother. Lee L enjoyed the newborn's first summer, but in the fall, his country called him to war. He trained for a while and on New Year's Eve, his plane flew over the dark ocean and landed in the middle of an important battle for the strategic control of a river. It was called the Battle of the Bulge. It was quite a change from the oak hammocks and palmetto patches of his quiet, wide-sky world back home. The sounds of cows hoofing and the chewing of cud belonged to another world away.

The arrival of Lee L weakened the dark-hearted men. His army named him "expert rifleman," and he was. When the enemy sent a woman across a bridge to spy on the cowboy's side, the sergeant ordered his men to shoot her as she returned. In his tent at night, Lee L began to sleep with a bottle under his pillow because cowboys never liked to kill, especially women in the back. The war lasted only one more year. It was one more year of shooting fellows on the front line where Lee L was placed in a company the history books would remember as the Big Red One.

Lee L's country won their war, and he flew home exactly a year later, on New Year's Eve. He was the only man from his original unit to come home. He was never quite the same.
He had a heavy heart and swigged on brown bottles listening to the news of the world in his old truck. Evelyn waited for him alone in their bed and fell asleep dreaming of a working cowboy who might shake off the memory of a war, but sometimes memories can only be briefly stymied.

Janet turned into a lovely dark-haired girl with olive complexion and glassy, green eyes. She had a wide, mischievous grin and skinny limbs. She was a passionate child whose tantrums upset the schoolmarmrs in the brick schoolhouse in Okeechobee. When Janet wrapped her arms around the iron banister in the stairwell, screaming to go home because of the strong-talk of a teacher, they called Shirley, the oldest sister, who came out of third grade and talked her arms loose from the railing. The teachers were so surprised by her will, they surrendered.

Evelyn had three more children. The next two girls had blond curls and button lips. The last girl was brown-eyed, had brown hair and an olive complexion like the middle sister. The family of six sisters and one quiet brother moved to Belle Glade, a town on the south side of Lake Okeechobee, into a four bedroom wooden house where metal fans blew cool air through damp, wooden rooms at night.

Janet threw tantrums when her parents spoke strongly and ran away once because her father raised his voice. When Evelyn lost her temper and whipped her with a switch, the button-lip girls cried, but their elder sister wouldn't. They told her, “Cry, sister. She'll stop when you cry!” Janet glared stonily into the sky. She braced her arms straight down, tight fists at the end like a thermometer. Janet, the middle child, was defiant and unruly.

Home from war, there wasn't any ranching work for Lee L. He took a job driving a truck, selling meat to grocery stores around the lake. Evelyn liked the job because it offered a weekly pay and health insurance.

Lee L built a toolshed with a window and a tar paper roof; it was big enough for two adults to stand in. A stick on the inside pushed the board up and propped open the window. Inside was a shelf and a stool above which he hung his tools on the wall. The shed was away
from the house, behind an orange tree and an circle of mulberry bushes. He kept his smokes and his bottles in the toolshed, retreating from a life full of people not shocked from the war.

Evelyn kept seven children well-dressed, teaching them how to sew, to cook greens and beans, to fry meat and to roll dough into fluffy white biscuits. She kept the yard snipped and pruned, sending children outdoors to harvest fruit from the field of fruit trees next to the house. She taught her girls to walk straight, to smile, and to be courteous. Lee L taught them to laugh and cut up, to fish and make a fire. He taught them jokes, but he never talked about the hazards of war.

After Janet let her big sister Linda's car roll into a lake one night, she lost some of her contentious spirit. She worked in the house without complaint and ironed clothes quietly, but Janet was making a plan. She and her boyfriend planned to marry, so she stole away one night, breaking her father's heart and sending him to the toolshed to worry about a daughter.

The children of Lee L and Evelyn married one by one and began to have children. On Sundays, they all came together and brought their children to the little house. Those children played and laughed. They climbed the fruit trees, jumped off the tar-papered roof of the toolshed out back, swung on the rope swing, and rode the lawn mower around the yard for fun. But the best thing at Nana and Gramps’ house was to crawl under the table and listen to six sisters and a brother and all their spouses cracking jokes and laughing so loud the floors creaked.
I was four-years-old when Mama presented the Sears and Roebuck catalogue for my perusal weeks before Christmas in 1967. She opened the big book to the girl toys and flipped the thin pages seductively. Pink things flashed in front of my eyes. There were strollers and skates; there were dolls with creamy complexions, blue eyes and long lashes. They even peed. I saw medicine kits with pretty candy; black plastic horses caught in reared-up poses; furry, unmatted Teddy bears and pink combs, brushes and make up mirrors. I felt a hunger rise, but I remembered what I really wanted, and I closed the catalogue. Soberly, I handed it back to her. I expected approval for my restraint. I took Christmas seriously; I had been told the story of the man who died. I knew it wasn't all about getting things. So, I couldn't squander my wishes in case of a misunderstanding. You had to be careful with grownups. They talked so much that they often confused the obvious.

"I want hair," I said as Mama stared at me with the catalogue lying heavily in her limp hands, a look of incomprehension on her face. "A long, black wig," I said. I knew she could get mixed up if I requested two things. She might not understand that I'd prefer the wig over the rest. I'm not sure if she was mystified that I wanted hair rather than toys or that I wouldn't add another item to my wish list. For weeks, she tried to change my mind. Nothing worked. She gave up and on Christmas Eve, I painstakingly scribbled the word “hair” in black crayon across the memo pad where she had written, “Dear Santa, Debbie wants.” "HAIR," it said. I examined the word. “He might not know what it says," I worried. “You write it for me," I asked. “You have to write ‘black’," I said despairingly. “So he'll know." I knew something could go wrong. I

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had to be diligent. I could not confuse them with other orders. I needed to be precise, and I did not have the words to explain to her all the ways this could go wrong.

I have no memory of why I wanted black hair. Perhaps this desire originated from something I saw on the Daniel Boone show which I watched faithfully. Maybe it was because Aunt Kay, my father's sister, still a teenager then, had thick black hair. Maybe it was because the women around me wore wigs. Maybe I had seen one in Aunt Sandra's Beauty Salon. She had a wall full of white Styrofoam heads covered in various wigs in various styles, mostly blond and brown in color.

After so much thought, imagine my surprise Christmas morning at seeing not only the black wig perched on top of a horse attached to springs, but a red wagon, a pretty blue-eyed doll and the little plastic medicine kit with colored candy medicine pills. I was overwhelmed. I wondered and wondered at this marvelous giving and the transformation of our tamely colored living room into a magical room of bright boxes, ribbons and gleaming toys under red, orange, blue and white pulsing lights.

Christmas night, the grownups of Parkview Court came together after the exhaustion of a day with relatives. We all returned home and they came to our house with bottles of beer and homemade drinks and commenced to share stories of in-laws and news. As the laughter began, we kids took our toys outside and enjoyed the unique opportunity to play in the dark, long after we were allowed to be outside.

Hours later, I was hot from running with Steve and Gene, who had recently gone inside to watch cartoons. When I realized I was alone in the quiet yard, I dragged my wagon across the grass. Before I reached the driveway, I began to feel strange. I stopped as my sense of smell and touch sharpened. I was barefoot and had no sweater on. The grass was cool and thick under my feet, the metal wagon handle cold in my palm. I sniffed the air and listened as sounds grew smaller and more distant. I rolled my head around and felt the trimmed ends of the black wig
sweep across the back of my thighs. My real hair was thin, blonde and pressed hotly against my head.

Over the roof of the Anderson's house the north sky was clear and full of blinking lights. The windows of my house were rolled open and swollen with yellow, diffused light. The laughter of grown ups, the tinkling of iced drinks and the sound of laugh tracks on a T.V. program in the next room seemed to be contained in a world not only apart from me, but far away for the moment.

Behind me, the red wagon sat in cold, metallic silence. In the wagon was the wig's head. She was styrofoam, bald and white as milk. Her neck was circled with a towel, so she wouldn't fall over. I stared open-mouthed into the sky. Everything hung quietly.

Suddenly, the sky was familiar. My house was small. I was large and long-legged. I knew how to sneak up on a rabbit in its hole. I was fast. I knew the animals and could smell them. I depended on my sense of smell, my hearing, my eyes. I could smell the wagon and the grass. There was someone, a man, a brother perhaps, whom I loved. I could still feel the loyalty for him in the center of my body. I knew heat and hardship, but I also knew I could endure. I felt bigger than my body. All that I thought was terribly significant--my neighborhood, our house, my parents, grown ups--suddenly seemed so small and insignificant.

The front door knob turned, and a bright light wiped across the yard and stopped just in front of me. My mother stepped into the square of light becoming a large black figure. She searched the yard, blinking to adjust her eyes to the dark. I looked from the sky to her face. I felt the feeling a mother has for her child when she looked at me. I felt compassion flood me. I knew I should settle into her world. I knew I should have more patience. I also knew we were two individuals. She with her history; me with mine. When she spotted me, her face changed. I must have looked like a small version of Cousin It and then, I had that faraway look in my eyes. She knitted her brow at the sight of me. "It's time to come in," she said, sounding more frightened than worried.
Her voice brought me back to the yard, my cold toes, the wagon, the hair, and I dragged my things to the driveway and up the bump of the carport. She lifted the wagon and me, pulling us into the space where voices were too loud and chairs screeched harshly across the terrazzo floor. Our neighbor Peggy, Steve's mom, spoke loudly and deeply through her nose; she didn't stop talking to my father when I entered the room.

When the door slammed behind me, it startled me, and I lost my composure. I cried so loud that the group of neighbors under a cloud of smoke stopped to listen. Peggy put out her cigarette. My father rose up. I screamed louder until Mom took me into my room, tucked me in pink and white sheets and turned on a lamp. She let me keep the wig on. She sat beside me and whispered, “Too much Christmas,” patting my stomach. Strings of black hair snaked across the bumps of my small, covered body and looked like roots lying across the rolling hills of some early earth.
CHAPTER 7
EATING ROSE RED AND ROSE WHITE

I fell in love with a thin, colorful book about two sisters named Rose Red and Rose White. As soon as Nana, mother’s mother, gave me this book, a strong insatiable desire arose inside me. I could not hear this story enough. I had to beg my parents to read. My mother quickly wearied of repeating the same lines, turning the same pages. I read this book as if it were food. It awakened me. I was three.

The lady across the street, Polly, saved me from my mother's literary neglect. She fed my reading desires. She was married to a policeman named Danny Jackman. After breakfast, I’d tuck my book underarm, walk across the cul de sac and knock on Polly's door. My mother exchanged waves with Polly and closed our door. Polly was a happy, lazy lady who wore a tattered terra cotta robe until lunchtime. She’d have a mug of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She greeted me with warmth and welcome. I glowed near her. When she'd throw her head back and laugh, I'd watch the pink plastic curlers rolled tight on her head, my eyes wide, expecting and hoping for them to pop loose. Danny didn't like cigarette smoke, so Polly kept every window rolled out as wide as it would go and a fan blowing. I wore sweaters there. Polly's white slippers flip-flopped across the white terrazo floor as her coffee gurgled in the kitchen and her robe blew in the house wind. I'd pull my sweater tight and watch her movements, waiting with anticipation for her to settle down to read to me.

In Danny's brown recliner, Polly read “Rose Red and Rose White,” for the umpteenth time. I hungered for words and pictures. My first impulse toward female beauty was to consume it. How I longed to eat the sisters. The girls were so brightly and delicately painted in the illustrations that they reminded me of birthday cakes and candy corn. Their lips looked like strawberries and their dresses flowed like pink lemonade. I chewed absently on my old teething ring, drooling, and listened intently.
Polly's homemade hurricanes caused me to catch a cold, and the cold turned into pneumonia because I kept going to Polly's instead of staying home in bed. Dr. Poteete hospitalized me. I don't remember the early part of my stay. I must have had a high fever. When I began to feel better, I brightened under the attention of the nurses. Mama's friend, Becky Tuten, brought me the *Book of Fairytales* when she visited. The inscription said to D--, three-years-old. Becky read the Rapunzel story while I listened quietly, wrapped in a thin cotton blanket. Rapunzel lowered her golden, braided hair from the high tower window. Below, a waiting prince looked hungrily toward her as if she were a delicious candy morsel. I thought he wanted to eat her. When Polly and Danny visited, I knew I really loved being sick. She brought a new book, *Uncle Remus Tales*, and read me a story. Polly's smoke-scarred voice delighted in imitating the Southern drawl of Briar Rabbit. Later, when the visitors left, I implored the nurse on call to read. Leaning over the silver side-rail, a blonde lady with pink lips read “Cinderella" as I dutifully turned each page. My stay ended long before I was ready to return home.

Each time someone read, I tried to follow the strange language at the bottom. Mama resisted each request to teach me to read. “Please be patient," she'd say. “They'll teach you in kindergarten.” She gave me crayons and coloring books to distract me. I worked hard at learning to color inside the lines.

I first loved color in the Barnes' fabric store. While my mother looked through large pattern books, I'd walk around, petting pink gingham and yellow silk. I liked how lavender polyester and bright green cotton looked stacked on each other. This old wooden store smelled of oil and mold. While I turned a metal carousel of buttons and zippers, I listened to the sounds of ladies' heels striking the plank floor and steel scissors snipping cloth. The women exchanged polite talk and spoke of things on which they had wisdom and authority. I could stay and listen only if I behaved.

Before kindergarten, the fabric store burned down one night. My dad loaded us into the green Impala Cheverolet, and we rode uptown, windows down, our German Shepherd Champ
sniffing the night air out the back window. We joined the crowd who had gathered to watch it burn. My father went to see if he could be of help and joined a group of men closer to the fire. The firefighters fought a raging fire. It lit up the sky like a drive-in movie. The row of wooden buildings, the wooden sidewalk and handrail in front were fragile and burned like match sticks. Next door, Glades Mercantile burned, too. It was the only furniture store in Pahokee.

That night, I lay my head on Mama’s shoulders while she talked with women who held their hands up to their gaping mouths or shook their heads in shocked reverence. Their clean, before-bed faces and scarved heads lit up yellow and orange as they watched the fabric store burn. I would not have been surprised to see a fireman risking his life for pattern books or stacks of cloth. This stuff seemed so central to our lives. They finally gave up and let the fire burn itself out.

Later, they built Royals Department store to replace it. Royals was a chain store, whose tiled flooring was more fireproof, and mass merchandising seemed to offer stuff we were lucky to get. The plank sidewalk was replaced by cement. The old gatherings stopped; managers made sure no one wasted time on long conversations and our world increased its efficiency, not to mention we acquired access to things like plastic Disney lunch boxes and crayons with 100 colors and a built-in sharpener.

In preparation for the first day of kindergarten, my mother made me a new blue dress. She used the floor in her sewing room to lay out and cut the material. I sat near her, fidgeting with my brown bear and staring up at a print of Picasso’s “Blue Nude” in sitting pose with her back to the viewer. In shades of blue, the lady held her bent legs crossed in front of her. Her head lay to the side in quiet resignation. At that time, I never stopped to think why my mother liked this. The woman looked lonely, so sadly beautiful. Among the scraps of material, I tried on the new blue dress, turning while my mother made final adjustments.

The first day of school arrived, and the day began with high hopes. I had stopped begging to be taught to read because of promises that school was near. I had mastered my
emotions awaiting this day. I was excited and had high expectations. My mother took my picture in the blue dress with the white, peter pan collar. I stood in front of the closed door on the front porch wearing white Ked tennis shoes and white socks. I was a skinny, freckled-face child with blonde, thin hair. My mother gathered the front long bangs and pulled them back painfully tight into a barrette. I carried two boxes: one was a tin lunch box with a pretty girl in a yellow dress on the front and back and the other was a red, cardboard pencil and paste box.

My mother and I turned into Glades Day School between rows of large Royal Palms that lined East Main Street--a road that curved lazily east then north as it followed the dike around Lake Okeechobee. She walked me inside to my class. My kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Pasetti, was a kind, frumpish, Italian woman who introduced us to the playground and the coloring books. There were so many rules that it exhausted me. By the end of the day, we had played house and built a fort with large, light-weight paper squares painted to look like bricks, but we had not even learned our ABCs.

After school, I was standing in line and waiting for my mother when it hit me. I had not learned to read. When I saw her car, I remembered all her promises. My bottom lip began to tremble, then the tears flowed. Baffled teacher-aides tried to make me explain, but I couldn’t. One concerned lady opened my car door and helped me in.

“She wouldn't say,” the aide said to my perplexed mother. The teacher shrugged and shut the door. I couldn't say it at first. The weight of waiting and the disappointment of the day was too much. I thought she'd react in horror to learn she had not told me the truth. “They didn't teach me to read,” I said, trying not to cry.

To my astonishment, her worried face changed to one of relief. “Oh, sweety,” she said, “These things take time. You'll learn soon enough. Just have patience.”

I was struck that she'd say that again. Had I not had enough patience? I felt lied to, and it made me sad. I watched out the window as we passed the houses on the dike side of Main Street. The tears were drying on my face. I felt flattened and disappointed in grown ups. We
passed the A & P, the Biff Burger and our Methodist Church. I looked down the church
dwalkway and remembered summer days in Happy Helpers where we learned songs and made
colored-paper crosses and angels with glittered wings. I was doing the same things in school. It
was so disappointing.

At home, Champ greeted me with wet kisses. I changed clothes, had a snack and went
outside. I walked to the end of the driveway and could see Jesus, a new boy in the
neighborhood, two doors down at the end of his driveway. I hadn’t met him yet. I walked over
to see what he was doing. He was drawing circles with chalk. “Where are you from?” I asked
him, pointedly.

“Miami,” he said.

That didn’t seem right to me. “You’re not American,” I surmised. “You talk funny.”

“Ain’t,” he said. “My parents are from Cuba. I was born in Miami. That’s America.”

“That’s not American,” I said in matter-of-factly. I could see it disturbed him. His
mother came to the door and yelled in Spanish to him. It sounded like “bang acá” to me. We
both looked at her. He answered in Spanish and then he looked at me defiantly.

“That ain’t American,” I said.

“Well I am,” he countered, ending the conversation. He picked up his chalk and walked
up his driveway, stuffing chalk into his shorts’ pockets. I stood there a moment considering him;
then I walked over to Steve’s house. Champ followed me. We played post office until my father
whistled for me to come eat.

At home, I told my father about how the teacher didn’t teach me to read in school today.
“What you need,” he said, picking up his fork, “is a swing set,” and he stared into the air while
his fork dangled at the end of his hand. “I’ve got to think about a design. I can bring home some
steel piping,” he said turning to Mom. I picked at my lima beans, ate all my rice and gravy, a
piece of fried pork chop and a buttered slice of cornbread. I didn’t ask my mother to read to me
that night, and I don’t think she noticed.
That year, I learned to recite my phone number and earned my name on a big paper phone on the wall. I also learned to tie my shoe. Mrs. Pasetti wrote my name on a big paper shoe next to the paper phone. I smiled pleasantly to her accolades, but I was sorely disappointed that we progressed so slowly. We did learn the alphabet in song and sang it again and again.

I did learn to read, but it wasn't in kindergarten. It was in first grade with Mrs. McIntosh. My parents couldn't afford the private school that year or the next, so I went to Pahokee Elementary. By then, I had given up the desire to read stories by myself. I enjoyed television and coloring. Plus, the first grade readers were so dopey. “See Jane run,” we read aloud. “Dick and Jane run fast. See how they run.” I'd huff and puff and pull out my crayons. I got gold stars for the pictures I colored, so I concentrated on that. I hated how slowly Mrs. McIntosh talked when she explained something. I wondered if she was a bit retarded. She said silly things like, “Tick a lock,” when she wanted you to be quiet or “Put on your thinking cap,” when she wanted you to pay attention.

At the end of my street and across the highway was the Pahokee city park and next to it sat the library where our mothers sometimes took us on Saturday mornings because the librarian read children's stories. The only problem with the library was the exhausting rules. The librarian was old and would sometimes forget to read in an interesting way. Instead, she would stop reading and shout at a kid for squirming, a distracting habit for those listening and made me not interested, so I squirmed too.

I knew a few things from reading that I couldn't have figured out from my life. I knew the important stuff depended on befriending a bear or shearing a beard when necessary. I knew that sometimes you needed to defy the orders of grownups to do the right thing. Rose Red let the bear in the house because he was cold. Her father told her not to open the door to strangers. So I thought of the pretty girls who listened to their hearts when I took the barrettes out of my hair and let my bangs fall in my face. It felt so much better than being in a tight barrette. Everyday, my mother got angry for the state of my locks at the end of a school day, but I only said, “I'm
sorry.” This frustrated her because she thought I meant, “I’m sorry I did that.” But what I really meant was, “I'm sorry you're so angry.” I unfastened the tight binding daily as soon as she drove out of sight and never felt a bit of remorse. I loved when my hair hung close to the corners of my eyes.

Soon, my world was full of activity, without any books at all. I forgot to visit Polly's and watched *Lassie or Daniel Boone* on television or played outside with neighbors after school. I wouldn't awaken to a good story again until a teacher in second grade read *Pippy Longstalking*. Pippy came into my life like an old friend, like a friend who smoked, even though her policeman husband deplored it and read to hapless, wandering children who rang her bell, even in the early morning. My brain spurted, my imagination churned, and my concentration focused on the crazy, freedom-loving, generous, skinny girl with the red braids. The lady in the library of second grade read from a chair in the middle of a sea of squirming children, but she read like an actress on stage. We were mesmerized, each, by the colorful visuals dancing across our imaginations as she read, and we held our breaths and listened.
CHAPTER 8 
SISTER BAM BAM

My mother's belly grew fat the year I turned three. She painted my white baby bedroom light yellow for the new baby and sewed butter-colored curtains and a matching diaper bag to hold cotton diapers. The empty room was prepared for me. Dad painted it hot pink and installed white shag carpet. In each of the two windows, Dad hung white vinyl roll-up shades and made a curving ornamental shelf over each window. Mom wrapped the wood shelves with quilt liner and covered this with a white fabric of sheer chiffon with pink rosettes. She made a matching bedspread, pillow case and curtains. Neighbors came to see the transformation. Peggy Hatton thought my parents should go into the home decorating business. Donna Bair, mother of Gene and Michael, said it made her want a little girl. Aunt Sandra whistled, said, “Oh my!”

Nana gave me a Little Golden book about a good daughter who helped her mother fold diapers, wash clothes and rake leaves in the yard with her father. When the girl-from-the-book's mother had a new baby, the good girl got a new doll. When the mother fed the baby, the little girl fed her doll. When the mother changed the baby’s diapers, the good girl changed her doll. The addition of a sibling expanded the world between mother and daughter with a little ingenuity on behalf of the mother. The little girl also helped her mother fold diapers into neat squares. I understood my mission. Help mother.

My sister Christa arrived in June, 1967, and I turned four that July. I wanted to hold her much more than I was allowed. I did help fold diapers and when visitors came by, I didn't like them holding the baby. I wanted to show them how I could hold the baby. Aunt Sandra said I was jealous, but Mom corrected her, explaining that I just wanted to show everyone how big I was. My mother and I fought because I wanted more responsibility for the baby.
One Saturday afternoon, I begged Mom to allow me to push Christa in her baby carriage around the circle of the cul-de-sac on which we lived. “No,” she said. “Something could happen.”

“I promise nothing will happen,” I pleaded.

“You'll forget her,” she insisted. “You might leave her somewhere.”

Over and over I pleaded, “I'll not forget her. She's my sister. How could I forget her?” She made me promise not to leave her, even for a second. I proudly pushed the carriage past Mrs. Bair's house. I looked back to see if Mom was watching. She waved at me. I pushed the buggy past the Posa's house where Mrs. Posa waved from inside the door. I waved back. When I reached June's house, the house before Polly's, I took a left turn and maneuvered the buggy up a slim walkway to her front door. There were two cement steps to the door and a little roof that barely covered them. I reluctantly left the carriage to knock. June called from inside, “Come on in.” I hesitated, but then she yelled again, “Come in for crying out loud.” I had to obey grown ups. I figured I'd tell her my sister was here soon as I got in.

June was on the phone and waved at me to have a seat. She didn't seem to notice how worried I was. When I tried to interrupt her, she put her finger in the air, “Just a minute.” I was in a quandary. After she hung up, she deluged me with statements and questions that she didn't intend me answering. “Look at your pretty white dress. Did Mommie make this for you?” She held out the bottom of the skirt and examined the navy piping and the little yellow duck applique Mom had stitched on. “Your mother is such a seamstress. You must feel pretty in such an outfit. You must be hungry. Come into the kitchen. I've just made some cookies.” June didn't allow me a word. When I followed her into the kitchen, I had not forgotten the baby. I was trying to say, the baby is outside. When I saw the plate of steaming oatmeal cookies, that's when I forgot.

When Mom knocked and opened the door, I was sitting at the dining room table with a glass of milk and a mouth full of cookie. I stopped chewing and felt a horrible chill run over me.
My mother made apologies, and soon I was spiraled along the sidewalk, lifted now and again by
a good yank to the arm while she said over and over, “How could you?” which sort of sounded
like, “I'll kill you,” muffled from her tight jaw.

At home, she ripped a branch from the hibiscus bush in the Anderson's yard, stripped its
red flowers and leaves, and whipped my legs as we ran in circles. I tucked my butt in and tried
to out run her, screaming for her to stop. She held fast to my arm and swatted. I knew I had
disobeyed, but all my remorse was lost in the switching. When she was finished, I went to my
room and closed the door. I didn't want to push the baby anymore.

I was spanked a lot due to my sister or to my flubbing up the rules of engagement with a
sister. When Mom emphasized a rule like “No hitting your sister in the head,” the next thing I
knew I had walloped her in the head. It was as if mentioning what not to do made me
subconsciously do it.

Christa sat up early and walked early. She was incredibly strong and grew more so as
she became a toddler. No sooner had she sat up than she began to whistle. She found the purses
of lady visitors irresistible; it humored us to watch her plunder through an open tote bag,
whistling away. There was always something of interest inside a woman's pocketbook: keys,
wallet, change, and lipstick. She'd pull out each item, and turn it over in her fist. It made Aunt
Sandra fall down laughing when she caught Christa sitting up on the side table by the couch
clothed only in a white cotton diaper with her little hand inside Aunt Sandra's purse, her legs
crossed in front of her, and her eyebrows cocked up innocently. As she scrounged around, she
whistled. “Where did this child come from?” Aunt Sandra asked, incredulously.

Christa's skills did not end with whistling. She could climb. When my sister was still in
diapers, she climbed the television antennae to the roof. The antennae was a thin pole that ran
up from the ground, next to the fat, silver gas tank. The gas tank looked a little like a
hippopotamus and served as a starting off point for the roof. Climbing this antennae to the roof
was a favorite pastime of my friends and me. But Jesus, Gene, Steve and me were about five,
and our mothers didn’t like it. Christa had likely watched us and wanted to do what we were doing. No one saw her do it. I was inside when Donna Bair came running over, screaming, “Janet! Your baby's on the roof!” We all went outside, and Mom was struck at the sight of her toddler on the roof throwing pebbles toward kids on the ground (which was what we did on the roof). “My God,” she said, and I thought Mom would pass out before she could get her down. When my father heard, he laughed and called her “Bam Bam.”

One Sunday, at Nana and Gramps' house in Belle Glade, Christa climbed a workman's ladder to the their roof. I was supposed to be watching her, but I was picking kumquats in my shirt. Christa had been swinging on the rope swing in Nana's backyard. Nana came out to look and said, “I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.” Mother wanted to know why I wasn't watching my sister and spanked my butt once for not minding her.

Sometimes my whippings were due to my sister, and sometimes, they were my own fault. At a cousin’s birthday party, I told my aunt, “He won't give me the fucking truck.” She reeled and asked me to repeat myself. Mom came into the room and listened. “He won't give me the fucking truck,” I repeated. My mother yanked me up under the arms, whisked me into the air onto her hip, leaned me over the sink and grabbed the Ivory dishwashing liquid, demanding me to stick out my tongue. When I wouldn't, she threatened a spanking. I would have preferred a spanking had I known the taste of soap. I screamed frantically while she smothered my tongue. I kicked and twisted, spitting and accidentally biting Mom's hands. It tasted horrible. She threw water in my mouth and some went up my nose. I snorted, choked and cried. At some point, I looked at my mother with wide eyes like I was looking into a dark ominous soul.

My elder cousin of a year stood by mesmerized, his cowboy gun hanging by the tips of his fingers, the truck hidden in his curled hand. Uncle wouldn't watch. He opened the newspaper large in front of his face. Aunt said, “Now, now. She's just a little thing,” and wiped her hands nervously on a dishrag. My cousin’s little sister cried with her bottle under her arm. My sister watched with curiosity. Mom wanted me to know that I would not speak with a filthy mouth,
but when I asked what the word meant she said, “Never mind!” When I calmed, I couldn’t look at her. My cousin opened his hand and held out the truck. “Here,” he said.

As my sister figured out how easy it was to get me in trouble, she would cry out that I hit her and get an immediate response. I would be snatched up and fanny-seared before I could defend myself. To my horror, her smile sometimes displayed that she knew exactly what she was doing. These moments were etched into my memory and turned my heart to stone toward her. Once, she came up and grabbed my teddy bear. “Gimme,” she said, yanking it away. I quickly snatched it right back with such force she tumbled backward as my mother turned the corner into the sewing room.

“Young lady, I've told you, don't snatch things!” she screamed at me and whipped my butt with her hand, then handed the bear back to my surprised sister, who held her tongue. I glared at the little tyrant holding my teddy bear.

When I attempted to explain to Mom, she didn't want to hear it. “Please, don't fight with your sister,” she expounded. Later, my sister handed it over, but my resolve steeled against her. I wished I could have whopped her good; it would have resolved a lot of the problems between us. It would have made her stop playing games. Instead, I had to turn my resentment inward. It was a terrible thing to do to siblings. My only revenge was to grow cold toward her and to refuse to allow her to play with me.

Our silver and black German shepherd, Champ, changed after my sister arrived becoming much more protective of our house and yard. He bit the newspaper boy, and Kim Hatton's hand when she was petting his neck. We raised this dog from a puppy. He was the first dog I remember having. We had Yappi, the yellow greyhound, when I was born, but I was a baby then. We got Champ when I was about three, and he obeyed some of my commands. I could say, “Load up,” pointing to my red wagon, and he'd jump in. Dad liked to work with Champ and teach him things. Once Dad walked to the end of the street, hooked the red wagon to Champ's collar, sat Christa in the wagon, and told Champ to stay. Dad ran to the other end of the street
and whistled. Parkview Court was a shell-rock, tarred road. When Champ began running full speed, Dad's eyes grew wide. He knew Christa was in trouble. She was only three, but she held on tenaciously. It could have ended well, except Champ took the curve into our driveway and ran up to the house. When he did, Christa came flying out of the wagon and shot across the yard. She was lucky that she wasn't thrown out on the shell-rock, tarred road.

Christa was tow-headed, and this white hair sometimes frizzed out when she came zooming up on a bicycle. She never wore a shirt, and Mom was not able to dress her and slick her hair back in tight barrettes as often as she did me. Strangers often thought she was a boy. Her chest and arms had muscles at three. She was rough and tumble. At that tender age, she became adept at climbing on the steel swing set my father had made of pipes sunk into cement in narrow holes in the ground. Across the main open portion was a swinging bar, a rope, and two wooden swings. There were two other bars of descending height on the outer side of the open part where Dad jumped up and did pull ups. Christa learned quickly how to swing, flipping in a constant circle, so that, as the bar swung in the air, her body flipped over and over, knees catching her. Her white hair looked like a twirling pom pom--a baton of white cotton instead of fire. She was three-years-old when she fell from the bar swing and broke her arm for the first time.

Five weeks later, with her left arm still in a cast, she fell off the Bair's swing at Gene Bair's birthday party. When she walked up to me, I first noticed how white and frightened she looked. She was holding up her good arm, but half of it was broken and dangling straight down. The bone was cut clean in half. “I'm going to get Mama,” I said, dropping my cake. Gene Bair ran to get his mother, and Jesus took Christa by the hand and walked her home. I ran home as fast as I could, yelling ahead of myself when I opened the door, “Christa broke another arm,” through the house. Mom came out from her sewing room and ran back with me, scooped her up, brought her home, and laid her on the couch with a pillow under the arm. She turned my sister's
face away and pulled the arm straight. When she screamed, it was so loud the party-goers standing outside the house winced.

In the hospital room, Dad fainted when Dr. Poteete pulled out a long needle to numb the arm, reset it, and cover it with a cast. I stayed with the Hattons, down the street, until they came back. I imagined someone could die from a broken bone.

It occurred to me that I should have been nicer to my sister. But there were so many incidents swimming in my mind, so many times I had received beatings on her behalf or because of her. In some way, she had created a wedge between my mother and me, and I imagined she had done so on purpose; with no power, I could only hold a grudge.
Our next door neighbor, Mr. Anderson, liked to sit alone in his backyard, in a fold-out chair, on the cement septic tank. He fuss ed over an old rusty, half-barrel filled with dirt. It sprouted bright red, yellow and green chili peppers. He watered the peppers and tinkered with one of twenty hibiscus bushes that grew along the back border of his yard. Before I began kindergarten, I liked to wander over to look at Mr. Anderson's peppers. Mom could see me from our kitchen window. She kept it rolled open. The peppers looked like crayons, stripped of their paper, coming out of little green bushes. Mr. Anderson would say, “Don't touch the red ones, and then touch your eye.” So, I thought a lot about touching the red ones, then touching my eye.

When I visited his wife Wilma in her kitchen, she let me pour the chocolate chips into the cookie dough. I colored in a Daffy Duck coloring book while we waited for the cookies to bake. When I told stories to Wilma, she listened all the way to the end until she was sure I was finished. She laughed at things I said and never interrupted me. When I wanted her to read a book, she did. Once, Wilma bought two ceramic kittens and invited me over to paint. I painted mine white and gave it sky blue eyes and a teeny pink triangle on its nose. On its paw, Mom wrote, “Debbie, 5 yrs. old.” Wilma painted hers black and white. I felt special at Wilma's, so I was animated and loquacious. My mother called it sassy, which wasn't a respectful way for children to behave, but I had plenty of respect for Wilma.

Mr. Anderson was an odd man. He looked like Elmer Fudd. He wore thin, short-sleeved shirts and pulled his pants up high. He wore black-rimmed glasses. When Mr. Anderson came inside, he played “find the quarter” with me. He'd show me a quarter and then, it would disappear. It was sometimes in his shirt pocket, sometimes behind his ear, and sometimes in the palm of his hand. I would climb around him, curiously prodding my hand into hiding places: an arm pit or a pocket.
After a while, I began to feel strange around Mr. Anderson. He grabbed my hand in a tight way once, so that I had to fight to get free. Then, he hugged me in his backyard by the peppers. He pushed my back against his knees and patted my stomach. He was strangely quiet as I struggled to get away. It was uncomfortable and did not feel friendly. I wriggled free and ran home. I didn't tell anyone because I didn't think hugging was bad, but after that, I avoided him.

Sometime later, I was playing in Mr. Anderson's front yard. He was clipping the gardenia bush and decided to take a break. He set down his clippers on his front steps and leaned back in the shade to watch me. In front of their parked car, I was digging up dirt and patting it into mounds. He came up behind me and whined, “I want to hug you,” and he pulled me up.

“I don't want to,” I explained, but felt the force of his arms holding me again, against his knees. I started to whine, “I gotta go.” He pressed my back to his knees and patted my belly. He kept patting and holding me firmly. I wiggled but his left hand held me securely against his legs. His right hand began patting downward and into my shorts. When he patted into my underwear, my eyes grew wide. I held my breath and struggled a little more. His arms were tight. When he touched the top of my vagina, I sucked in a clump of air and fell to my knees, pulling with all my force to get away from him. He let me go, and I ran straight home and reported all this, in a single breath, to my mother who, to my surprise, believed me without a single question.

When Dad got home, he and Mom went into the bedroom. He came out furious and left the house. My mother turned on the television to The Daniel Boone show, and I curled up on the couch. After my mother made a phone call, the police came, but they stayed at the Anderson's. No one talked to me. I heard a bit of shouting and some radio talk. I wasn't completely sure they understood how it all went with Mr. Anderson. I hoped they didn't think it was worse than what it was. My father never said I should stay away from him, but I had the feeling it had all
been taken care of. I was sorry Mr. Anderson got in trouble, but I knew what he did was wrong and felt a kind of quiet confidence in my family.

Neither my sister nor I was ever invited over to the Anderson's house again. They became reclusive and withdrawn. They worked in their yard quietly on Saturdays. Sometimes, their grown son John came home from the Navy or college, but he was strangely quiet and worked dutifully in the yard, stopping only for lunch, and rarely stayed over-night although he had traveled from far away. I missed Wilma at first, but then, the years passed, and she became a blurry face in a kitchen window and a lady who walked briskly from her house to her car and back again.

As I grew, a thick, prickly hedge grew around their front yard like a fence. It ran the length of the front border of their yard, stopping only at the driveway. At the far end of their yard, the part next to our yard, it ran from the sidewalk up to the house. But hedges didn't keep the kids from my street from picking the sour oranges off the Anderson's tree. When we tired of daring each other to eat dirt or dog biscuits, the sour orange, which was really more lime than orange, stood as a tart alternative. We took my mother's Morton salt, sat on the gas tank in my back yard, and passed the skinned plugs. Each eater got full attention from the others as he or she dared to bite and swallow--wrinkling a nose, screwing up a face and screaming with utter delight. It was like jumping into freezing water.

When Dad whistled for us to come for dinner in the evening, Christa and I would race from down the street, take the short cut through the Anderson's driveway, cross their yard and jump the hedge, sometimes scraping our legs if we didn't jump high enough. If Wilma and Mr. Anderson were sitting on their porch, we'd holler, "Hello," but we never stopped to talk.

Mr. Anderson showed up in my dreams from time to time as a cartoon-ish character. He appeared as a man-faced baby, screaming for a bottle of milk--his perambulator rocking wildly. Maybe this was because he looked like Elmer Fudd. Once he appeared as a kindergarten-sized boy wearing a man's coat who brooded, kicked rocks and stole a diamond-faced watch when his
hand landed there instead of in the candy on the top counter of my grandparent's commissary store. He was too little to see over the counter. Grandpa chased him out of the store with a broomstick like the man-baby was a roach.

It didn’t dawn on me until I was an adult that the incident with Mr. Anderson had not changed my life very much, but had changed his life dramatically. More importantly, it had changed Wilma’s life, and she had not deserved that. She never participated in neighborhood get-togethers nor did she invite any children into her home again.

After the incident, when I was still a kid, I dreamed of having super powers. I flew through our neighborhood sky and zeroed-in on the barrel of red and yellow peppers in Mr. Anderson's backyard. I swooped in, hovered over the barrel, and let my fingers bounce across the bright, luminous vegetables as if I were playing a complicated song on a piano. I loved Mr. Anderson's peppers. When I lifted my hands, the peppers glowed with a slow, contented pulse. I turned over my hands and saw that the tips of my fingers glowed a soft red light, so I touched my eyes, and the world grew terribly small. From that vast distance, my yard and Mr. Anderson's yard looked like the very same blip of green.
Christmas evening in 1970, my parents were hosting the usual round of Parkview Court friends. Their children, my sister and I were playing with our new toys in the carport. I had a new pink bike with a white wicker basket, and my sister had a ride ‘em, spin toy: the Krazy Kar. It had a bright yellow plastic seat and footrest between two large red wheels with white hypnotic spirals on the outside wheels. The inside of the wheels had pegs where you grasped and used your arms to propel the wheels. Turning only the right wheel would send you circling one way; turning the left, you’d circle the other. Turning at the same time could make you fly backwards or forwards.

Tony Duboy from across the street was playing with Jesus and Steve. They were bouncing a basketball between them bragging about their Christmas loot. Jesus kept leaving the game and swinging around one of the garage poles. He would jump at the pole, grab it with both hands, place his bottom elbow against his hip and swing his body out over the grass and land back on the cement. We all did that from time to time. My dog Brownie was lying on the porch stoop watching us. Christa and Dale were taking turns on her Krazy Kar when I got the big idea to out-do them all. I asked Christa for a turn. When she handed over the cycle, I told them all to watch me. I spun around one way. When I stopped, no one was watching. “Steve, watch this!” I yelled and spun the other way. When I stopped, he gave a conciliatory “uh huh” and passed Jesus the basketball. “I’m going to fly down the drive way,” I announced. I took a few breaths, looked at my right fist. I stretched my fingers out and then clamped solidly around the peg. I decided to give this Krazy Kar the ride of the century.

It was dark, too dark for the kids to see me as I sped away from them going backwards down the drive way. I could see Steve’s little sister’s white t-shirt moving in the shadows and the white stripes of Tony’s sweatshirt. The others were mere shadows. I kept thinking, “Watch me. Watch how fast!” I stared intently at my right hand circling round and round. The glow of
the porch light grew smaller as I flew away. I wanted to make my hand a spinning blur. I decided I’d stop at nothing. I’d fly across the road behind me, enter the grass on the other side of the road and bump the sidewalk on the other side. It’d make me fly up. I braced myself and concentrated on my performance.

At the end of the driveway, the parked cars of visitors blocked my view of one side of the road, and I determined to cross it, showing off my speed and ability. But as I was staring at my spinning fist, it stopped at the top. I don’t mean, I stopped pedaling. I mean something stopped me. I strained my muscles to pull the peg on around. It didn’t budge. I stared at my hand on the peg completely befuddled. It was as if I had run into a wall without a jolt, without hitting anything. It seemed like a kind of veil dropped around me. In confusion, I looked to my left, then to my right and was blinded by a bright light, which passed across my back. I felt as if a large metal boat, a whale, were passing and exhaling hotly near my neck. I scrunched my shoulders away from it. Asphalt and loose rocks crunched behind. I heard the slight squeak of a turned wheel. I looked over and behind my right shoulder and saw a silver hub cap rolling slowly by. In silent shock, I turned again to the left and saw red tail lights from a car floating gently away. It had never seen me.

I sat in the Krazy Kar, my mouth ajar, and felt myself grow incredibly small. I felt foolish. I looked at my house in front of me. The rolled out windows looked like eyes. The open door looked like a mouth. The basketball bounced between boys, but I couldn’t hear the bounce anymore. I could only see flashes of white shirt sleeves. My mother’s laughter was the loudest of the voices that slipped like ribbons from windows that seemed far, far away.

This shape-shifted world paralyzed me, so I sat observing it and tried to catch my breath; my fists were still tight on the plastic pegs. I looked across the yard and saw the old bicycle hanging in the Ficus tree. It looked so odd there. When Dad hung it in the tree, we had great hopes of a moon ride. We climbed a step-ladder and mounted it in the air. We yelled, “Pedal to the moon!” just before he pushed. It proved to be easily upset and we each fell off; one at a time, dusting off knees and getting in line again. Abandoned at this hour, except by yellow
window light, it hung quietly at the end of a long rope. It looked sad, as if its potential had not yet been tapped.

My eyes moved deliberately around the yard. From the spastic movements of my friends’ play to the hanging bike, to the windows and then to the sky above the tar roof of my cement-block house. It looked like a little house in a snow-globe. Some strange feeling overcame me about the limits of grown ups. I knew something else deep in my bones. I knew and yet I didn’t know what had just happened. I searched the sky. What in the living world was there? A black plate of pricked promises winked back at me.

I walked the Krazy Kar back to the carport where I abandoned it, and went inside to take my bath. Mom was handing Peggy a grapefruit juice on ice when I came in the front door. She sipped her tomato juice and then took a toke on her cigarette as I passed quietly by the party still heaving deep, hot breaths, and watching how my feet took one step after another on the cold, hard terrazo floor.
CHAPTER 11
THE DIRTY TRUTH

In 1970, I am seven in Mrs. Ford's second grade class at Pahokee Elementary School. She is elderly, heavy set and wears cotton smocks in various floral patterns, not unlike those of Grandma Hall and Othermama, (my great grandmother Hall). Her smocks have two front pockets to keep pencils and chalk. She is grumpy and too strict, until after two months of work, the kids in class compete with each other in a spelling competition. To say that Mrs. Ford's personality transforms during a spirited competition is to understate her change. When a student remembers a difficult word, Mrs. Ford gets excited; she throws a fist in the air and leaps off the chair. The first time we see this, we know instinctively what to do. We think hard and spell like little demons. We know when her knee-high hose begins to roll down, she's happy because we're spelling words right. My ambition and aggression grows in Mrs. Ford's class because I realize I can remember the spelling of words rather easily. She likes gamesmanship, and we have a dandy time mounting spelling bees. Her tutelage is firm, and she cuffs kids with a good slap on the back when they succeed. Her expectations awaken me. When I win, she looks so surprised it seems she's just discovered me. She treats the winners like real people, calls my name to lead the line to recess and asks me if I wouldn't mind taking up the other children's papers and bringing them to her. I glow under her approval, but just as quickly, she changes back when we exercise some humor or ask too many questions. She loses her temper, turns her lips into snarls and bites at us with words. She is fickle, and we are never sure which side of her we will see.

In Mrs. Ford's class, I meet Jeana Reeves, a skinny, blonde girl with bulging blue eyes she will eventually grow into. She is little, funny and mischievous. When we ask to stay in during recess to clean the black boards, we are really planning to take chalk-filled erasers and shake our names across the blackboard in white. After banging erasers together and marking
each other with x's after a wild chase, we take the erasers outside to pound them on the sidewalk as we were supposed to do. From the room, we hear Mrs. Ford yelling. We look at each other and grimace. “Uh oh,” Jeana says with fear. We timidly return and find Mrs. Ford standing in cloudy white air. She fusses the whole time she's rolling out windows. When they're open, she turns to us, points a crooked finger and says, “Next time you'll go to recess with the rest of the hoodlums where you can be watched.” I hang my head and slump to the desk. Jeana bumps into me and smirks. It's the first time I consider laughing even though I'm in trouble. I smile and take my seat.

In the library, I see Jesus and Steve in the corner. Steve is practicing a Spanish cuss word, and when I hear it, I say it loudly, “Mighty Cong.” Jesus waves his arms frantically, telling me to hush that we could be expelled for saying that word. Since Mrs. Ford is not around I say, “Mighty Cong, Mighty Cong, Mighty Cong,” and watch how it drives Jesus crazy. It's funny how it sounds like just a stupid word, and I cannot fathom why this means anything to anybody.

Later in Mrs. Ford's class, I'm standing at a back window and thinking about the board my father has nailed into the ficus tree in the back yard where I climb and sit. From my board, I can see over the dirt alley behind our house and into the maiden cane meadow. If I ever need to run away, I could live there. I could steal food while Mom is at work at the doctor's office. Dad doesn't come home from the sugar mill until 5:30. I could live freely and laugh all I want. I could let my hair get oily and never brush it. I could bang on pots and pans while other kids sit obediently in classrooms. My dog Brownie could sleep at the foot of the tree, and Tabitha, my cat, could sleep with me curled on our board. Before Mrs. Ford calls me away, I think of how my dad and mom would cry with worry, and I know I can never have this simple joy.

Mrs. Ford makes me take my seat. Clara, a dark-skinned black girl, sits behind me. She never listens to Mrs. Ford, who yanks Clara's arm and drags her out the door when the girl talks back. Clara eats paste and picks her nose. She likes to play with hair, and, today, I let her braid
mine. It feels so luxurious to have someone touching my hair that my mouth drops open and my eyelids half close. Jeana sees it and jumps up pointing, “Look at you letting paste-eater touch your hair!” Clara stops and I sit up straight. At lunch Jeana says, “How could you let Clara touch your hair?” and I don't know what to say because Clara is nice, even if she eats paste. Instead of answering, I stare off wondering how a child could be so hungry she has to eat paste.

My spelling glory is short-lived after I incur Mrs. Ford's disapproval on several occasions. Jeana is quick-witted enough to throw Mrs. Ford off her track, yet I seem adept at attracting her attention. I get in trouble for not speaking loud enough when she asks me a question and for not moving fast enough when she tells me to do something. I begin to think she is terribly unfair. When she falsely accuses me of breaking off the arm of a cardboard clock, I gasp and stare wide-eyed, but my words fail me. The freckled-face boy to my left giggles, since we both know that he is the culprit. Mrs. Ford is trying to teach us how to tell time, and I do not understand the connection between time and this two-armed circle with numbers. She does not think to suggest that it is only a representation of the sun circling the earth. Since I want to know what the hours represent, she thinks I'm the dumbest kid under that great ball of fire. “Just learn the numbers!” she presses, then adds, “I'll be telling your mother about this one,” and she holds up the broken clock.

“I didn't do that,” I say, finally speaking. Mrs. Ford looks at me like I've said, “Mighty Cong,” and I realize it is only the act of replying that insults her. The boy's giggling is enough for me, and, feeling especially Pippy-like, I throw down my cardboard clock and announce that I will tell my mother before she does. I've had enough. This changes Mrs. Ford, and she laughs at me. Her moods are exasperating, and I wrinkle my face with determination. In fact, the end of the day cannot come quickly enough for me. I know that my mother will not stand for this behavior. Jeana says, “Don't be stupid an' tell your mom. Mrs. Ford'll forget by tomorrow.” However, I know that Mrs. Ford has never encountered the likes of my mother. For as long as I
have known her, my mother never bends when a person is in need of some heavy-handed correction. I wonder if Mrs. Ford can handle the terror my mother will soon display.

When the school bell rings, it is with delight that I spot the green Delta idling in the pick-up line. Once inside the car, Mom pulls away. I waste no time getting down to the matter. I want to rush, in case my mother wants to turn the vehicle around right then to give Mrs. Ford what she has coming. I tell her how the boy pulled the arms off, how Mrs. Ford accused me, how Mrs. Ford wouldn't let me defend myself and told me she would tell my mother. Mom drives on, quietly listening. When I finish, I catch my breath and say, “So, what will you do?”

To my surprise, my mother turns calmly to me and says, “When you get in trouble at school, you get in trouble at home.” At first, I think I'm not hearing her right. “I'm getting in trouble?” I wonder as I blink and stare at her profile. When she repeats it, my body goes into a cool paralysis, and I have to pull my unbelieving eyes away. When I turn my head, the radio and dashboard float away from me. Everything seems to be disconnected. The shock is too much. I hear the sounds of mountains crashing and the ocean slurping down a drain. She says something about supper, but I can't hear her. Somewhere in heaven, a choir reaches the height of a single, long note. Out the window, we are passing the Women’s Club on the left and to my right is the back of Pahokee High where boys are practicing scrimmage on a muddy field. In my head, I hear my mind say, “That's it. It's all over. If she is against you, they are all against you. You are alone in this world--unprotected. You cannot depend on her.” I know I've hit a dirty truth that I would rather not know. There is no going back. Scissors snip the strings attaching us. The boys are lined up, and a coach blows a whistle. We float by, my mother and I, in the green car. My head is pressed against the window.

My mother continues as if I hadn't heard her, “She is the adult. You are the child. Do you understand?” Without looking back at her, I nod my head to show I understand.
CHAPTER 12
MISS TINKY

I changed schools for third grade because my parents could afford private school again. Glades Day, where I attended kindergarten, was a small school in the former Everglades Memorial Hospital building where I had been born and where my great grandfather, Washington Hall, had died. The office was located in the center of the building and was built of glass from the door knob to the ceiling. On one side, at the bottom of the glass, there was a little curved hole where, in the hospital I suppose, people had passed payment to a clerk. It was through this hole that one day, when I found a dollar on the ground, I passed my hand, clutching the dollar firmly. I wanted to negotiate.

The secretary, Mrs. Johnson, had coal black hair and large kind eyes and listened carefully. “I found this in the hallway,” I said, turning my fist over, so she could see the dollar sticking out. I put my mouth close to the hole and said, “I want to know if anyone has reported it missing.”

Mrs. Johnson bent down near the hole and said, “No, but I'll keep it for you. If no one reports it missing in three days, you can have it.”

I smiled at her fairness and opened my fist, allowing her to take the dollar. It felt immediately like a test. I would be tested to see if I could remember the dollar in three days. Mrs. Johnson would be tested about keeping her word, and the owner of the dollar would be tested to see whether he or she held any regard for money.

In order to keep from forgetting, I stopped by the hole daily. When Mrs. Johnson was too busy, I slipped my hand through the hole and waved until she noticed me. I could have opened the door on the other side, but the grown ups moved in and out so quickly, it seemed dangerous. “Did anyone claim my dollar?” I asked, my mouth near the hole.

“Not yet,” she replied each day for three days until finally, she said I could have it. I proudly took the dollar that day and realized that it was truly mine. Having it in my hand felt
different than the first day I found it. That first day, it had been someone else's dollar, and it had burned in my hand. But the third day, the day Mrs. Johnson kept her promise, it became mine. I was very glad I had waited because the feeling that came after three days of effort was worth it. I felt rich.

Tinky Nason was the “mistress” of Glades Day School–our name for a female principal--and she was my third grade teacher. We called her Miss Tinky although she was married. She was a tiny lady and a grinner–always happy in her high heels with a head of blond teased hair piled high. She had a high, squeaky southern voice, and her importance in the school rubbed off on us. We felt special when our classes were interrupted for school business. There were twelve of us, and we learned to write in cursive under her patient, cheerful tutelage.

One of the twelve kids with which I began third grade didn't make it to the fourth. His name was Ray Waddell, and he died in a truck accident when his father flipped their vehicle into a ditch. The truck toppled over, and everyone inside drowned. Ray's daddy had taken his children out in the cane fields to shoot rabbits. He had four children in the cab when it flipped over. After I found out about Ray's death, I began having “daymares.” When I stared out a window, I imagined Ray's face, his blond cowlick combed neatly from one side to another staring out the back of the truck window. He had this worried expression on his face that said, “Can't someone get me out of here?” When the truck veered off the road, Ray's eyes widened, communicating surprise to me, but then it settled into, “It's ok. This is what I got to do,” and the moment after he gave that look, his eyes rolled up and he leaned over with the truck as it flipped. It was like his neck knew, and his body just went with it. I felt so helpless watching him go, unable to do anything except be a witness. There was nothing he could do but fall away, tumbling over siblings, his big daddy falling on top of them, the truck wheels in the air, sinking.

Miss Tinky interrupted my daymare. “Debbie. Debbie,” she called. When I heard her, I looked at her sharply, wondering what she was doing, where I was, and quickly understanding
that the children were snickering at me. My body was shaking, and I had tears in my eyes. “Are you ok?” she asked me.

My face flooded red. “Uh huh,” I nodded, but it felt too crazy to explain.

Around this time, I began to wonder about God. Through Happy Helpers at the Methodist Church, I had learned songs about Jesus—the nice man who walked with lambs. I understood him and his suffering, and why we liked him. This allowed me to wrap my mind around his existence. I was sure he was a good guy. I was sure if more grown ups acted like him, we'd all be better off. However, the existence of God was another thing. I had never seen any evidence of God, and since the grown ups talked so much about Him, I figured they knew some things that they hadn't shared yet.

One Sunday, I asked my teacher, Mrs. Buckner, “Have you ever seen God?” I expected a serious, thoughtful response. I swung my white shiny shoes under the chair, waiting.

She closed the book she was holding and turned to stare intensely at me. “Are you wondering whether God exists?” she asked, pausing, but I knew from her tone I had said something wrong. “Are you wondering whether children are born, or roses bloom, or the moon rises high into the night sky?”

I looked confusingly at my friend Michelle. She looked away. I shrugged in response to Mrs. Buckner.

“Are you wondering whether Jesus died for you? Was Daniel’s miracle in the lion’s den not enough for you? Do you breathe?” That last question hung in the air a moment, then she shook her head and answered, “Of course, you do. You don't have to see Him to know he's there.”

I eagerly shook my head to show how much I agreed. Sunday school suddenly felt dangerous.

After church, Michelle and I were sitting on her front porch stoop, waiting for our moms to prepare lunch. The sun was bright and blinding. The porch roof barely covered the door. In
front of us, a chalk-smeared hopscotch design from Saturday's play faded into the concrete sidewalk. Michelle was telling me about the horse show she attended last night. “Aunt Faith's horse had ribbons in its tail,” she said, and I imagined horses walking on their hind legs in front of red-coated judges. “Horse show” sounded a lot like “beauty pageant” to me, something for prissy creatures. Because Michelle was a horse freak, her room was full of plastic stallions in reared up poses. I didn't quite understand her interest although I knew her grandmother, Mrs. Sasser, owned several horses, and her Aunt Faith rode them in shows.

I couldn't get my mind off Mrs. Buckner's strange reaction, so I brought up the earlier subject. “Do you ever wonder if there's a God?”

Michelle picked up a stick and dragged it over to the hopscotch design and began to outline boxes and circles. “You better quit saying that,” she said without looking up.

“But I mean, what if no one really knows. I don't think they've ever seen Him. What if He's just an idea. A big, fat idea. Wouldn't that be incredible?” I asked, not really to Michelle, but I wanted to hear my own thoughts. Michelle kept drawing. “Think of how much of our life would be a lie--the church, the rules, the prayers. Everything would fall down.” I amazed myself with how far the lie would touch things. I stood up, thinking about schools and governments and money.

I was walking off, adding this amazing idea up, letting it stretch and stretch, seeing adult after adult fall with their Ten Commandments and their songs, when Michelle screamed, “You're going to Hell! I'm telling if you don't quit talking like this!” She sounded scared. “You're the Devil. Stop it. Just stop it.”

I stopped and looked at her. I didn't know what I was seeing, but it made me feel sad. I didn't want to seem like the Devil to her. I didn't want to scare her or let my questions scare her, so I shut up. I hung my head, and picked up a rock. I walked over to the hopscotch and threw the rock to one, then I leaned over, picked it up and threw the rock to two.
In Miss Tinky's class, I was having another daymare when she let the class out for recess. I didn't realize they left. She walked over to me and sat in a desk. When I came out of it, I was breathing hard and her presence frightened me. “It's sad about Ray, isn't it?” she asked.

I nodded.

She relaxed into the small desk and stretched out her hands in front of her. “It's not fair when God takes little children. It's very hard to understand,” she said, entwining her fingers. I looked at her hands and out the window. “How do you know God did it?” I asked.

She seemed surprised. “I don't,” she answered. “Come to think of it. I don't at all.”

“Why do bad things get blamed on God?” I asked, but before she could answer, I asked, “Have you ever seen God?” knowing well that this conversation could turn ugly.

“Nobody sees God,” she said. “Well, nobody but the prophets. The rest of us, we feel Him.” She touched her heart. “Do you know how you feel when you've done something good?” I nodded.

“This is how it feels to follow God's plan. When you feel God, you feel good.”

“Is that why they're spelled similar?”

She laughed, getting up from her desk. “I guess so, Debbie. I don't know if God was to blame for Ray's drowning, but I'm sure he's in God's hands now, and he's much happier than he's ever been before.” She smiled at me. “You're missing recess.”

From then on, when I imagined Ray, I saw him between two giant palms being cradled carefully. When I looked closely, he was still wearing a little blue and white checkered western shirt, with his blond hair combed carefully to one side. He was smiling the contented smile of a child whose mother caresses his hair lightly while he's napping.
In the photograph, I am a year old, squatting in a light blue dress next to the vinyl, blow-up pool and splashing a tiny hand in the water. My mother wears a white, sleeveless turtleneck shirt and hand-made, navy pedal-pushers. Her lipstick is shocking red against pale skin, and her green eyes have dark liner across the lids. Her face is full of light and youth. She is nineteen-years-old, and it is my first birthday and my first pool party.

From here on, pool parties under the orange tree in my backyard are routine for my July birthdays. Over the years, the pools get bigger and by the time I'm eight, it's a thin metal circle about three feet tall. My guests and I drag metal fold-out chairs to the rim, so we can jump in. When Steve's mom objects, my father speaks up and says, "For crying out loud, let'em have some fun today." The neighborhood boys are here: Gene, Jesus, and Steve. We carry on the same arguments as the previous day. I've been feeling combative lately, and the tension is rising between me and my friends. The politics of pool play depend on several factors, the most important being whose yard the pool is in. Today, we're in my yard and it's my birthday.

At this party, my aunt Nelda wears a flowered, one-piece suit. She ignores my bossiness because she is four years older, and I don't try to show her whose party it is. But Jesus, Steve, and Gene are another story. I intend for them to follow my rules because I'm tired of the way they don't follow my rules on the street when we play cops and robbers or post office. I am always concerned with boundaries, preoccupied by clarifying the rules, deciding what happens if someone ties as they're reaching home base. These things, I argue, must be agreed upon, so I weigh and worry over the details. But Steve, Jesus, and Gene ignore me and start counting when I'm still trying to work it all out. They run off, and I'm unprepared when the counter yells,
“Ready or not, here I come!” So I get mad and remember that one day, I'll be in charge, it'll be my day, and they'll have to go by my rules.

At the party, Steve is jumping in the pool and I say, “Let's all jump in together on the count of three.” But while I'm counting, Steve jumps in and Jesus follows yelling, “Geronimo!” and Gene says “three” before I've said “two” and so I follow Gene, but when we come up from the water, I remind the unruly boys that it is my yard. It is enough that I'm nervous my parents won't get me the bb gun for which I've begged stubbornly over the course of two weeks, but my friends have to shirk my authority on my day, and my stomach is already in knots in the first place.

This bossiness feels like a tornado inside me. The boys are beginning to leave me out of their play because I win when we argue. Just a few days ago, I found them in the field by Gene's house huddled in a cardboard box his mama's new washing machine arrived in. Across the entrance they had scribbled “Boys Club. No Girls” in black marker. “No Girls” referred only to me. No reasoning would bring them out. When Gene said, “Go away,” I kicked the side, and I heard the squeal of laughter. I stood a moment, thinking, then I stomped home, returned with my baseball bat, and began pummeling the walls. Boys scampered out like roaches, but I kept hitting it. When they were outside, they stood watching, disbelieving that I'd do something like this. “Alright, alright,” Steve said, trying to stop me. “You can join the club, but you got to pay ten cents.” I looked at him hard, my chest heaving. I swung again, and the box collapsed.

It's been a few days since I wrecked their club, so when Steve splashes me in my eyes in my pool because he's hyper and enjoying himself, I wallop him across the face because I'm still mad about the club trick not to mention that I clearly said I don't want my face wet. While he's crying into his mother's apron, Aunt Nelda poses for the camera in front of him in her flowered one piece with an exaggerated smile that makes her eyes squint shut and for the remainder of my days, I have evidence of my early temper and urge to rule others.
After the cake and homemade vanilla ice cream, it's time to open the presents. I am anxious to get to the present from my parents. I have insisted over the last two weeks that I must have a bb gun. The thing is, Steve has a bb gun, and he won't let me play with it when I want. He lets Jesus shoot it, but tells me I have to wait my turn, and he checks with Gene before he finally lets me have a turn. So I am dying for my own bb gun, but my mother is against the idea. She says again and again that under no circumstance is she willing to get me a gun, and if I don't change my mind, I'll get body powder and bath bubbles. My father is also against the idea but for a different reason. He says I'll get tired of it, and it'll sit in a corner. He says, “It's a phase,” but I know he's a gun-loving man, and I'm gambling that somehow he'll talk sense into my mother.

Standing against my parents has required great strength, and I have this woozy feeling that they'll come through for me. I have separated the reality of my mother's objections from a magic world of possibilities that I've created and believe in. It feels like a risk worth taking, and so, on purpose, I haven't prepared for any conclusion except getting the gun. Otherwise, I could jinx the whole thing. So, I am tearing open the presents from my aunts and uncles, quickly saying thank-you's and opening the next, while friends from the street stand nearby eating second helpings of ice cream. No one knows what's at stake, and my own curiosity feels like a bubble ready to burst.

I am in the center of a circle of paper when I get to the last present. It is a Ken doll, and I tell Jesus that now he doesn't have to be a Barbie next time we play, and I show him the doll. Steve laughs because he always gets to be Ken with my old, beat-up doll and says Jesus makes a good Barbie. Everyone laughs.

I lean over and search through the wrapper. There are no more presents. Confused, I look up and see my mother holding a small, square box wrapped in pink paper. She is smiling with something like victory on her face as she hands it to me. I look away from her eyes, alarmed. My insides begin to roil. I am so unprepared for this outcome that I lower my head.
I'm afraid I'm going to cry. I let my long hair hang into my face as I turn the present over in my hands trying to understand what this means about the world. The realization that she has won hits me, and I understand that she is enjoying this, which complicates my disappointment. It seems like I have learned that if one sticks to a decision, if one has faith, things work out. Something has taught me that tenacity is rewarded, but it feels like a murky, dreamlike memory. This is not about a bb gun; but I can't name what it is about. It feels larger than me, larger than my house, my town or the country I live in. It feels deep like the darkness when I close my eyes.

Humiliation sweeps over me like a net. The humiliation is especially cruel as the boys who will not let me boss them stand watching. Drops hit the paper as I untangle tape slowly from the box. I am talking to my feelings, asking the tears to stop, panicking at the thought of everyone witnessing this crushing blow, and realizing how unprepared I am. It must be body powder even though the box is heavy. I wonder how I'll ever look into my mother's face again, and I cannot look up from this box. I tear at the paper slowly, deliberately, trying hard not to lose control.

When I drop the last piece of wrapping, I wipe my eye with the back of one hand, and Aunt Kay notices. She stops laughing and looks concerned. I can hardly get the box opened. My chest is heaving. What I really want to do is to drop it all and run into the cane fields behind the house and spend the rest of my life punishing my parents with my absence. Aunt Kay reaches forward and helps me lift the box top from the bottom. I blink, clearing the tears. I wipe the other eye. It takes a moment to recognize what I see and when I do, I'm bewildered, and I blink again, harder. It already feels like I've gone to hell, and this is too shocking. The box is full of cardboard tubes of bbs. I look up, stunned. The crowd clearly sees my red, wet face, and their smiles drop as they realize something is happening that they don't understand.

From the sewing room, my dad steps into the hallway. Behind him, the bathroom door is open and the bright July sun makes it impossible to see him clearly. We all see a silhouette of a man carrying a long, wrapped present. The wind sweeps into my lungs like a punch and I cry.
out, turning my devastation into glee as quick as a dive into the pool from a flimsy chair. Wiping strands of damp hair, I open the present with gusto to reveal a brown, shiny Daisy bb gun. I jump up and hug each parent. It feels as if I’ve been grabbed in mid-air and saved from stepping off a cliff by a large hand at the nape of my neck.

Over the next couple of weeks, I shoot tin cans from saw horses and boxes from atop the silver trash cans. I practice knocking berries out of the Chinaberry tree and point it at my sister, sometimes, because that is the one thing I’m not supposed to do. When Jesus comes over and wants a turn, I hand it over like a benevolent queen who shares the key to her city. I think I’m teaching him something. I let him shoot until he has filled each lime on the Anderson’s tree with bbs. When Steve brings his gun, we walk around the field behind my house, flanked by Jesus and Gene. Steve says, “Wanna knock the nuts out of that palm tree?” and after I survey the tree, the one of seven Royal Palms that wave like high-rises against the blue screen of the sky, I nod in agreement. Jesus and Gene step back. I raise the gun to my eye and drop it again, motioning to Gene to stand further away. Steve and I take aim and together we shoot, drop our guns, cock, aim and shoot again. We stand here, like this, until Jesus suggests we go knock some windows out of old man Rodger’s house that has been deserted all our lives and hidden behind an acre of maiden cane.

After the summer is over, the gun is left in the corner, and when I see it, I feel pangs of guilt and look away. But my dad never says, “I told you so,” and it is the most important thing in the world that I got the bb gun on the day that I was least deserving, the day my magic world triumphed. It was a gift my parents had no idea what they were giving me.
In Fourth Grade, I returned to Pahokee Elementary School. There was a boy—a big-lipped, rough, funny black boy—named Clyde who was the classroom pest and our 4th grade comic relief. He stayed constantly in trouble. Mrs. Scott was a heavy set, strong and serious white teacher who was not afraid of fourth grade boys. I remember her taking Clyde by the ear to the principal's office. I cringed inside for Clyde. We all secretly admired him, his humor and guts, and his range of smart aleck remarks. His retorts came as welcome relief to the monotonous drag of a day in fourth grade. Sometimes, even Mrs. Scott couldn't help laughing along with Clyde's remarks, his butt or armpit farts, or at the wet, clump of paste he'd pretend he didn't know was on the end of his nose.

In the lunchroom, Clyde got in trouble for eating everyone's leftovers. I remember being too shy to say no to his wanting the other half of my banana. His stomach would grow large and he'd stick it out and pat it, his outie belly button protruding like an extra digit. One day, he sat next to me making monkey faces, grunting and asking me about my mama who he had seen bringing vanilla extract for my milk into the lunchroom. I knew to laugh would only egg him on, so I tried to hide my smile in my sandwich, but he could see I was an easy audience. Mrs. Scott watched from across the room lifting her nose as if she could smell trouble. I tried not to laugh. Soon, he asked for a sip of my milk. I think he waited until he felt he had earned that sip by entertainment. His own milk was long gone. His green tray gleamed with tongue-polished pride. His carton of milk sat askew, punched in, next to a chewed straw he had mangled while talking. I said he could have the rest. I watched him slurp it down and lick the inside of the spout. His pink tongue circled his lips and the milk moustache disappeared. He burped loudly, and his table audience laughed.
One Friday afternoon, we were playing kick ball on a diamond of red dirt. The sun was blinding white especially out on the field. There was a large Ficus tree in the corner near home plate. We all stood in its shade while waiting our turns hoping not to be sent to the field. Mrs. Scott was sitting in a metal folding chair under the tree umpiring and shouting instructions.

"Your turn, Clyde," she yelled. Clyde positioned himself behind the base and waited with anticipation for the roll. He bounced on his tippy toes. Steven Hatton pitched the ball. Clyde made contact and the ball flew over the pitcher and past second base and careened into the outfield. The kick surprised Clyde because he just stood there watching it soar in his untied, black high tops. Mrs. Scott yelled, "Run boy, run!" So he took off.

When Clyde ran, he stuck his chest out first and leaned way back, his nose pointing straight up. Because it was such a strange manner of running, Mrs. Scott began to laugh. By the time Clyde rounded second base with his nose and chest held high, Mrs. Scott was falling off her chair snorting and laughing. He was leading with his lungs. The harsh afternoon sun blinded his face. It was such a delight to hear the lady who seemed constantly irritated and overburdened with our presence to surrender to such loud, guttural caterwauling as she did that day. We laughed, too, more from Mrs. Scott=s release than from Clyde=s running. When Clyde crossed home plate Mrs. Scott leapt out of her chair to congratulate him. She wrapped his head in her arms and pressed him against her waist. He wore the surprised but pleased look of a child who had finally won attention just when he wasn't trying.

This memory would not be so vivid if Monday=s news had never come. We were in class when the principal interrupted to speak to Mrs. Scott. She stepped outside while we waited curiously. Soon, we heard her shriek. Through a thin glass window that ran up from the door knob, we saw the principal catch her in his arms and walk her away. We sat still and alarmed. The principal returned and told us he had bad news. "There was a drowning this weekend," he said. "It was a boy from your class." He paused. "Clyde," he said. "I'm sorry to say this," and he left. None of us knew what this really meant. We held our breath and waited for Mrs. Scott.
When Mrs. Scott returned, she was carrying a box of tissue which she set on her desk and wept openly and heartily in front of us all. We felt sad, too. We were quiet, unsure what to say or what to do. I kept thinking about Clyde running around those bases on Friday and how much he had always made us laugh. I wondered if Mrs. Scott was crying because of how many times she had taken Clyde to the office twisting his ear and threatening him with the paddle. In between sobs, we found out Clyde had been swimming with friends and had gotten his foot stuck between two large rocks. No one noticed that he didn't come up. No one noticed for a long while.

Lake Okeechobee is a dark green lake with chunky, white, sand rocks near the shore. It happened near the breakers, by the swing sets, to where, on Saturdays, crowds of kids swarmed on bikes. They swam at their leisure without any adult supervision. I know he was wearing that same pair of black high tops. They were the only shoes I ever saw him wear. I wondered how his strong body could not break free. It seemed so simple. When his foot went in, he should have pulled it back out. But Clyde's foot was twisted. When the swimmers found him, he was floating back and forth in the current, his head just two feet from the surface. They couldn't pull him loose. They had to pry his foot loose first. Then, he slipped right out and rose up, nose first. There was no saving him.

I like to imagine that Mrs. Scott went to his funeral, that she did all the right things by his family. Certainly, she must have written them a card. The class was told nothing else. Nothing about his family, his funeral. I don't recall signing a card. The only honor paid to Clyde, for me, was Mrs. Scott's wails.

A few months after Clyde's death, I rode my bike down to the spot where it happened. I sat on some large rocks and threw pebbles where I thought his body had been found. Water circles echoed to the shore, faded across my toes. The darkness of the water ran so deep. I wondered how it felt to pull water into your lungs when you mean to pull air and what it was like to die. It must have been such a surprise.
Then, I remembered his kick on Friday, how that was a practice-surprise for him. He must have pushed off the bottom of the lake with the same might with which he had kicked the ball, imagining a laughing audience ready to embrace the wonder of his strong body. Instead, his strong feet kicked between two rocks, and the earth clamped down. Dark green water filled those mighty, leading lungs just a day after they had brought him such glory.
CHAPTER 15
FAKING IT

After the incident with Mr. Anderson, I had a natural wariness of men who wanted to play with me. I still wrestled with my father and climbed his back when he did push ups in the living room in front of the television, but when we went to the west coast of Florida, to Ft. Myers on vacation along with loads of Glades people, I refused to let family friends put me on their shoulders in the pool or throw me in by grabbing me under the arm like they did my sister. They called her “a sport,” and she was. She liked being thrown, hoisted, and flipped. I clung to deck chairs and shook my head violently no. Christa was the copper-tone kid with more energy than any grown up could expend. She never tired of rough play. I liked playing Rummy and Yahtzee inside the breezy cottages, or Horseshoe, when no one else played. I loved digging for sand dollars and starfish on the grey sand bar when the sun was setting and the gold-tinted sky was a mixture of blue and rose.

I was a skinny, freckle-faced child with stringy blond hair. I was stand-off-ish and not immediately sweet to strangers. No one looked at me and purred compliments. Dr. Poteete told my mother after each check up, Feed her more. She needs to gain weight. My mother begged me to finish my milk, to eat more. Yet, she wouldn't allow me to snack between meals because that would ruin my appetite, so I died of starvation between meals. I would cry and beg for food. I got mayonnaise sandwiches or a piece of cheese to hold me. By dinner time, my stomach had shriveled, and I could barely finish the plate. Mom took me to a special store to buy a brand of jeans called “Dittoes” for skinny girls. I thought I had a disease. I never expected a boy to think I was pretty. Compared with my sister's robust health and good-nature, I was gangly and ugly. I didn't think of boys as potential boyfriends; they were just friends. I devoted my time to competing with them and bossing them around if they let me.
In fourth grade, at Pahokee Elementary, Steve Hatton, my neighbor, changed all that. At school, we performed the play *The Pied Piper*. Outside the cafeteria, we were waiting for the signal to be called on stage. I was dressed peasant-style with a long white scarf wrapped around my head and a floor-length, cotton, green gingham dress with a white apron. The costume made me feel like collecting eggs in my apron or carrying a child on my hips. I was pretend-cooking when Steve passed me in the hallway and did a double take. “Hey,” he said, looking at me strangely and a bit scientifically. “You’re pretty,” he announced.

I hit him with my apron and denied it. “Am not,” I said, embarrassed. When he went away, I went into the bathroom and washed my hands. When I was sure no one was looking, I peeked at my image in the mirror with grave suspicion. I turned my head from left to right and squinted at my reflection, weighing Steve's comment. I thought “pretty” was the candy-like look of the beautiful ladies Rose White or Rose Red. I did not see the deliciousness of cake icing. I did not look edible, but then, I opened to the idea that I might have my nose and mouth, at least, in the right place.

While Steve thought nothing of his passing assessment, I began to be less interested in our usual play. I gave him more room to be a boy, and I decided it would feel nice to be a girl after all. Something inside changed, and it was due as much to the costume as the comment.

That year, I hung out with three other girls: Michelle Crosby, whom I had known since birth, Donna Harrington, who lived behind Michelle's grandmother's horse pasture, and Lori Bonnell, who lived in a little wooden house that had a horse pasture around her entire yard. These girls cracked good jokes, and I worked hard at being funny, too. We played jacks during recess, and, on the weekends, we rode horses. Michelle's Aunt Faith helped us put on the bridle, blankets and saddles. Donna rode on the back of Michelle's horse and Lori, well, we were lucky if we ran into Lori as she rode on her own horse where she pleased and didn't care to make plans. I rode one of Aunt Faith's other horses who reared when dogs came up.
During one of our rides, Donna, Michelle and I were walking the horses down a dirt road beside the corn field that butted up to Bacom Point. The corn was still short—only a foot high. Over the field we saw a cloud of dust coming toward us. We stopped and watched. “What the...” Michelle said, blocking the sun with her hand. It was Lori running her horse pell mell across the field. She looked like a wild girl when she pulled up next to us, bareback, pulling the reins tightly. Her horse reared a little.

“She loves it,” Lori said, breathing heavily and gleaming at us. Her tan legs and bare feet draped over the side of the horse and her loose, long hair fell around her brown, freckled face. Her short, cut off jeans frayed at the edges.

We stared at her, each of us mesmerized by something we couldn't explain.

“Isn't that uncomfortable without a saddle,” I asked.

“Nah, I'm used to it,” she said. “Genny here, she don't like no saddle.” She patted the horse's dark brown neck. The horse whinnied. “Ya'll wanna run?” Lori asked, but she didn't wait for a response. She took off, and turned back as the horse was digging into the muck for speed. “See ya'll Monday,” she yelled, and kicked the horse's ribs with both her legs.

We watched them cross the field, the horse moving with such rhythm and graceful strength, pushing its neck forward, knowing the way home with the kind of certainty that could only be found in an animal. Doubt did not exist in Lori or her horse. She looked like something out of picture books, a cross between Pocahontas and Pippy.

My relationship with these girls felt as comfortable as did my relationship with the boys on my street. We played and laughed, rarely caring if one spent the night with another. Sometimes, Donna and Michelle rode horses without me. It didn't matter.

The next year, I went back to Glades Day and played with two girls: Bee Bee Grant (short for Barbara) and Shelly Harris. They were best friends and fiercely jealous. They alternated spending the night at each other's house. When they invited me as a third wheel, I went along happily. I let them know that I didn't want a best friend. It seemed so dangerous. At
Bee Bee's, when we jumped on her trampoline without Shelly, Shelly got mad and threatened to call her mother. "The phone's free," I said, earning the silent treatment from her. It didn't last long. She didn't like Bee Bee and me jumping without her. Because she was acting so dramatic, I felt an urge to be mean pass, so I yanked her halter top string. I was behind her, so I didn't get to see. But Bee Bee blushed when the halter top flew up. Shelly got so mad, I thought she'd explode. She screamed at me, crying. She marched inside, called her mother, packed her bags and stomped out to the road. She sat on the top of her suitcase, and no amount of apologizing could get her to resume playing. Bee Bee's mother said, "Now, now girls."

Shelly was interesting to all of us fifth grade girls because she had boobs. We all wanted to see what they looked like. Our mother's breasts didn't count. They were old ladies' boobs. We knew ours would be different. We wore training bras in preparation. When they didn't grow, it was sorely disappointing. The boys in school noticed too. They gathered and snickered in low voices. They separated girls into the boards, the mole hills and the mountains. The boys on my street, however, were truly curious when I announced I got a new training bra. Jesus said, "Are you going to get boobs?"

"How should I know, Stupid?" I said back. In fact, I hadn't thought of getting boobs or not. I only thought that I needed a training bra because my friends in class had them.

"Let's stuff that thing with oranges and see what you'll look like," Steve suggested, and so that is how I came to get caught prancing around the backyard with two oranges in my training bra, tip-toeing and play-smoking a twig for effect.

When Shelly shaved her legs, we followed suit. My mom didn't think I was ready, but there was no way she could win, when Shelly, then Bee Bee, then Sissy, shaved their legs. Shelly dictated when we began to wear makeup too. We followed her because she desperately needed us to. However, there was something dark, lonely and desperate about her that frightened us. When I spent the night with her, she shared with me the story of trying to commit suicide by eating a bottle full of pills. It gave me the creeps when I tried to sleep that night, and
it made me a little mad. She seemed to have plenty of things: bunk beds, Bee Bee, boobs. I couldn't understand why she couldn't just be happy. She got plenty of attention but nothing sufficed.

Shelly and Bee Beeliked to pair boys and girls together. One day, Shelly ran up to me and said, "Bobby Griffin likes you." I was, at first, appalled. It seemed to me that one's feelings were exceedingly private. I could not imagine telling someone any such thing. I had hardly noticed Bobby--a blond, dreamy, effeminate boy. His revelation worked on me, and I began to consider Bobby Griffin. However, I waited too long because Bobby was a healthy, rebounding kind of boy; he decided to like Bee Beeinstead. For the first time in my life, new feelings stirred. I felt a little curious when Bee Beea agreed. I saw them sit together in the lunchroom. Bobby tried to carry Bee Bee's books. He even called her at night, she reported. I was amazed. After only a month, he gave her a baby blue-colored glass ring. Bobby turned out to be quite a romantic guy. Soon, my heart began to ache for Bobby; however, my sense of loyalty to Bee Beemade this my first unrequited crush.

The same story happened three times in a row; each heartbreak lasted a year. First there was Bobby, then Jason, then Nacho. Each time, when my suitor gave up and chose a friend, I began to feel free to like him. It was safer when he was taken. But female loyalty kept me from revealing my feelings. I created a sort of paradigm that I couldn't break. It took me by the throat; the only thing that shook me loose was another unrequited crush. This is how I began feeling very real, deep pain in fifth grade that only ended in eighth grade when I decided to say yes to a suitor I didn't know at all and another kind of heartbreak began.

I couldn't quite get the girlfriend stuff right either. It suited me, actually, to be Bee Beeand Shelly's third wheel. It made things less complicated. But on the last day of sixth grade, Big Gena and I both needed a partner for the field day games, so we decided to pair up. Before the potato sack race, Big Gena asked me bluntly, "Wanna be best friends?"
“Sure,” I said. It seemed like the festive thing to say. No girl had ever asked me that question. Girl friendships just seemed to happen. I agreed because I needed a partner. We got along well and called each other 'best friend' the entire last day of school, even though we had hardly played together all year. We corresponded by mail twice that summer. We signed, “your best friend,” without any real meaning behind it. That blew over soon as seventh grade began and our natural indifference emerged.

In these middle school grades, it seems we were mirroring relationships that we knew existed. We were jumping into roles and aping behaviors that made no sense to us. We wanted to love and feel loyal, but we had no pride or natural sense of ease with each other. We had no idea why grown ups did what they did, but there was no way of understanding without doing. I'm not sure a grown up could have understood or stopped us.

During the summer between sixth and seventh grade, my neighbor Jesus had a party. He came to my house shortly before and invited me. My parent's were surprised and gave me permission to go. When I walked into Jesus' house, I couldn't see anything except the lights from the stereo. I could see knees and tennis shoes, so I knew people were sitting on the couches. Jesus had organized everyone into couples, and they were french kissing. I wanted to turn around and leave immediately, but my feet froze. Jesus jumped up and said, “Oh good, you can take Scott. He doesn't have a partner.”

I couldn't see Scott, so Jesus led me to a corner of the couch and pushed me down where he wanted me to sit. The blond boy beside me, Scott, turned and said, “Ever french kiss?”

I shook my head to say no.

“It's pretty easy. Just follow me,” he said, taking my chin and turning my face toward him. His lips found mine, and we began kissing. I jumped when his tongue found mine, but then I eased into it. Soon, we leaned back on the leather couch, and mechanically kissed the night away.
In Pahokee, life began to change about 1975. Before this time, my family's unit of four had been slowly and peacefully living in a family-oriented world where we ate home-cooked meals, visited our grandparents and aunts and uncles, attended the Methodist Church, mowed and raked the yard on Saturdays, painted and repainted our rooms, changed the furniture around, wallpapered the bathroom, painted the outside of the house. Dad tinkered on the car or lawnmower on his days off. Mom sewed everyone's clothes but Dad's. She made us dresses for church and shorts outfits. She made me a matching head scarf that tied under my hair. It was terribly important to my mother to attend church altogether, especially on Easter. But Dad almost always refused. My sister and I played mostly with friends on our street.

We rarely saw movies because it meant driving an hour to West Palm. More often, we drove a couple times to Belle Glade to the drive-in when a family show played (according to Mom's standards). During the week, we ate dinner, took baths, did homework and went to bed (my sister and I thought too early). On Friday nights, the four of us watched The Brady Bunch and The Partridge Family on television. On Saturday nights, we watched HeeHaw; and once, when Mel Tillis was on the show, they saluted Pahokee, Mel's hometown, from their cornfield on stage. We all stood up and yelled, “Saaaaa lute!” and I was stunned with the thought of the name “Pahokee” zipping through households across America. I think the 60s passed us by. We went from living like the 50s during the 60s, straight into the party days of the 70s. It was a little late into that decade.
Aunt Sandra had come back from Orlando with a beautician’s license and some modeling experience, then she opened up her own business, Sandra's Style Salon in Pahokee which soon afforded Aunt Sandra the luxury of telling her husband, Uncle Denny, to hit the road after many years of borrowing my father to fetch him home from bars in the middle of the night. Uncle Denny and my father were friends from high school. So, he woke up many nights to my mother's urging, got dressed and went to a bar to find Denny, who never wanted to go home and face Aunt Sandra's wrath. Once when he got Denny home, Aunt Sandra wouldn't let him in, so Dad was stuck with trying to find him somewhere to sleep. Their marriage was rocky, to say the least, and their divorce made everyone happier, everyone, that is, but my cousin Claudia, who lost out on a Dad and had to live the lonely life of a small town celebrity's daughter.

Aunt Sandra's life was full of passion. Her physical beauty and liveliness attracted women to the shop and friends in droves. She was tall, had strong, Raquel Welch-looking cheek bones, and a beautiful smile full of white teeth. She was sassy and arrogant with a flare for fashion. She loved to laugh and made fun of herself as quickly as she made fun of others. She loved anyone who was honest, even if they were mean-honest. She was intensely loyal and demanded permission to make wisecracks from even brief social acquaintances. She'd say to sensitive types, “For Christ's sake, can't you take a joke!”

For awhile after her divorce, Aunt Sandra lived in a tiny apartment behind the Time Saver where she befriended Paul Bramlit, a sharp-witted, funny and handsome policeman who was her neighbor in the ten unit complex. Mom got to know Paul, too, because my mother kept Aunt Sandra's books for her (Mom complained that Aunt Sandra was reckless with money). This is how Mom got to know a lot of Pahokee policemen and never worried about her speed when she was scuttling around town. Paul kidded her, but he would get serious when he shook his finger and said, “I'm not going to play with you, Miss White Lighting,” because she drove a white Buick Regal. This scolding only served to humor Mom. She and Aunt Sandra both toyed with him as he blushed like a schoolboy around both women.
Mom took us to Aunt Sandra's place while they worked on books. My sister, my cousin Claudia and I would play outside on the single sidewalk that attached the units. Christa rode Claudia's tricycle up and down the walkway. There was a horse pasture straight out Aunt Sandra's front door, past the sidewalk and five feet of grass. It was surrounded by a fence we'd climb to feed the horses carrots we had begged from Aunt Sandra so that they'd come close enough to pet. Then, Mom said we'd had enough. When Paul came home, Christa asked him for carrots. I kicked her because Mom hated for a child to sneak around her. When she said no, you had to deal with it. At home, we were never allowed to ask our father something that our mother had denied us. “We can't ask you for that,” I explained to Paul, but he laughed and brought us a whole bag. He lifted Christa up, so she could feed them to the horse. I took a carrot, but preferred to feed the horse myself. When all the carrots were gone, I breathed relief.

Once, my mother was on her way to Belle Glade to visit her mother when she passed Paul in his police car sitting on a dirt side-road off Highway 715. Mom saw him and decided to give him a run. She floored the pedal and disappeared ahead of him. He pulled out, turned on his lights, and gave chase. She only had to make it five miles and through two traffic lights before she turned onto her mother's road and squealed into the yard, parked the car, ran inside and told everyone in the house to swear she'd been there for at least an hour. Paul came screeching up, jumped out and banged on the door. He began his lecture through the rolled-out porch window before Mom opened the door. Mom yelled, “But I've been here for an hour, Paul,” and she turned her face to a confused audience of Nana and Gramps and laughed.

“I can see you laughing, Miss White Lightening! It ain't funny!” he said, and took off his hat. He wiped his feet and came in. He tried to keep from grinning by getting mad again. Nana brought him some sweet tea. “I oughta handcuff your little butt and take you in,” he said, shaking his head when she put a pillow up to her face to stifle her own laughs. “Let Sandra come and bail you out.”

“She'd have to borrow some money from you,” Mom said.
“Janet!” Nana interrupted, surprised she'd talk to an officer of the law in this manner. When he left, he shook a finger at her again and said, “One of these days, I don't want to find you a greasy spot on the road.” He paused for emphasis and pointed his finger at her. “You hear me?”

Mom batted her eyes and smiled coyly, “Absolutely, sir!” Then she lifted a hand in salute, but when he didn't laugh, she stopped teasing, and said, “Ok, ok. I hear you.”

Paul didn't believe and stared hard at her with a cocked eyebrow and lowered his hand. She smiled appreciatively. Nana could see she liked him.

“Thanks for the tea, Mrs. Rhymes,” he said, tipping his hat and left.

When Mom turned back around to her mother, she was smiling like a school girl. “He's fun,” she said, but her mother eyed her suspiciously.

“He's Sandra's boyfriend?” Nana asked.

“Uh huh,” Mom said innocently.

Nana kept her eyebrows raised and stared at her daughter.

“We're just friends, Mom,” she said, turning defensive.

“He's right about your driving,” Nana complained.

Sniffing the air, Mom changed the subject abruptly, “Is that fried chicken I smell?”

“Yes, I was about to sit down to eat, and yes, you can join me.”

Outside, Paul's car engine started. Mom walked over and opened the door to wave goodbye. He saw her just as he was pulling away and put a warning finger up in the window.

The next thing we knew Aunt Sandra married Kenny McIntosh, a wealthy banker who had a big house and a room decorated in art and artifacts from Africa. It had red carpet, black leather couches, and a bar. A zebra hide stretched across the wall, and little black, wooden statues of native men with spears sat on end tables. Various masks hung on walls and laid flat on the coffee table. It was the strangest room I'd ever seen in a house in Pahokee.
Kenny was serious and blunt. “I don't like kids,” he'd say, even though he had two from a previous marriage and now, a step-daughter. Aunt Sandra ignored his grumpy attitude and encouraged him to have fun. She got a little MG convertible sports car and soon, Aunt Sandra had bigger parties, and Mom hated to miss them. Paul and some police friends came. Other families that were staples of Aunt Sandra's friends came: the Culbersons, the Popes, the Wilsons, the Cunninghams, the Branch’s, the McKinstry’s, the Hattons, and the Bradys. These were the same people that met on Friday nights at the Elks Club. By day, they were mostly in the farming business growing corn, beans, potatoes, sugar cane, or they were in the cattle ranching business. They worked hard and liked to relax at the end of the day or the weekend with a beer and a laugh.

This preoccupation with parties began slowly at first, germinating out of the salon. It helped that Uncle Kenny had a big house and liked to party himself. Sometimes Aunt Sandra drove her sports car to West Palm Beach where she knew the owner of a pub. Aunt Sandra led the group of rowdies from Pahokee who were twice as loud as the coastal folks. Pahokee men tended to be tall and thin, and they liked to shout across spaces to include more talkers. They shouted across bars, tables and the whole room. They were good-natured, but loud people. The women shouted too. Aunt Sandra’s good looks disarmed most complaints, but she didn't hesitate to tell someone to “button a lip” if they tried to ruin her mood. My mother was about thirty-one, and she had spent her life since eighteen raising children. It was an intoxicating change for her.

Sometimes, Dad went fishing with Uncle Kenny, but soon, they both tired of seeing each other so much. After awhile, the get-togethers happened during the week. This really bothered my father. It was one thing to have fun on the weekends, but he began to arrive home to an empty house after work during the week. He'd have to call Aunt Sandra's house looking for my mother. Sometimes, my sister and I were with her, sometimes, she was there by herself. He said, “I don't know why they can't have a party without you?” For Mom, their fun was contagious, and while Dad enjoyed it sometimes, it was too much for him. Dad ruined the fun.
because he had to work, because he liked his rest, because he was accustomed to having his meals ready after a hard day at the sugar mill. Aunt Sandra began to call him a “spoiled sport” and a secret war began between them over my mother. It helped my father to keep Mom home by stressing his need for her not to spend money. Aunt Sandra had more money, even though Mom had worked since Christa turned three.

After working for Dr. Poteete as his secretary and sometime-assistant, Mom got a job working at Pahokee High School as the secretary. She made new friends. The principal was Jack Redding who lived on a houseboat in the Pahokee Marina. He quickly came to depend on Mom. After a while, Mom helped her friend Connie, a young woman from Germany whom she helped with her English, to get a job there, too. Connie had married a man from Pahokee, who brought her to the States, then divorced her. She was single, frightened, and struggling to survive when my mom met her. Connie was tall, blonde and gentle. She was refined and soft-spoken.

Mom socialized with Connie at home, too. They had a third friend, Bobbie Cunningham, who, with her husband Harry, had been friends with my parents for a few years. Bobbie was a small, dark-headed, sharp-nosed, thin, wiry woman who cackled and chatted non-stop. My mother acted as the glue to this trio, serving to smooth Bobbie's rough edges and to encourage Connie to speak up and share her mind. She was more reserved than the others. Sometimes Aunt Sandra joined them, but Aunt Sandra was rough and rebellious like Bobbie. They both prided themselves on witty insults. Together these women laughed and talked loudly. Sometimes, Bobbie and Aunt Sandra argued, but Mom easily calmed them. As these women grew closer, their marriages began to crumble. They got mixed up and fought about who was better friends with whom. Bobbie was jealous and wanted my mother around her always. They constantly needed “to talk.”

For a while I thought this was what all mothers did until Aunt Shirley visited us from Orlando. Bobbie came over and tried to participate in the sisterly chat, but Aunt Shirley
remained coolly detached. “I'll leave if you need to be with your friends now,” I heard her say to Mom when Bobbie went to the restroom. When Bobbie returned, Mom made excuses to have some time alone with her sister. Aunt Shirley had three children and a solid marriage. Sitting at the dining room in the kitchen with Mom, Aunt Shirley advised her to curtail her time with friends. “Your marriage should come first,” she said. “I have a rule for my friends. They are not to call me after five p.m. That is our family time.” Mom laughed and insisted that her friends just needed her.

Dad came home, and Aunt Shirley said, “Ellis, I told Janet she ought to hang a sign out in front of the house that reads ‘THE DOCTOR IS IN.’” But it was too close to the truth to get a real laugh from him. He shot a cynical look at Mom and tried to feign amusement. Aunt Shirley caught a chill and stiffened in surprise.
I was twelve when I cut the cord. I wrote my rebellion. She was still with us then. She was at the end of an hour-long bus ride from school in Belle Glade and a leisurely walk down Parkview Court. I scribbled as I bounced along, on the left side of the bus, sitting over the tire. I wrote in blue ink on the back of a blue denim notebook. I scratched hard and repetitively, making the letters dark and clear. “I Hate My Mother,” I wrote. I was angry and wanted to be brave enough to stand up against her. I had ink-courage. When I finished writing it, I studied the words with wet eyes. They were so sinful in their effrontery, so plainly against God and nature all at once. The wind whipped my hair. I looked up from the words and out the window, letting my eyes fall on the passing houses of Bacom Point Road. My eye lids felt heavy. The sun bounced off white houses. The anger settled down to sadness. This small act of courage, betrayal, and dishonor was enough to release my pain. It was powerful, and I swooned at the enormity of my bravery. I was certain that day that I had first been denied by her, first forgotten, and first betrayed. I was standing up to her neglect. She had put her foot down to my attending a party, my first invitation to a real party. It would have exposed me to music, dancing and older teens necking in dark corners. I was too young, she said. “You don't know what kind of trouble you could get into.” But I was tired of being so alone. Tired of watching her have fun with friends. I yearned to feel liked and wanted. This party, I was sure, would be the beginning of a real life for me.

I squeezed my eyes shut. The tears cleared from the sides. I raised my chin and felt my face dry in the wind. I felt my self-regard rise and sit in my chest. It would be lonely, I imagined, to draw this line. But my duty was simple, really. I would have to love myself if she didn’t. I would not allow her to break me anymore. There seemed to be a great judge sitting in my heart that bus ride home, and her gavel clanked conclusively against my mother. She was
guilty of wrongs against me, and my pen had scribbled her punishment. Her daughter hated her. It was so much, and it was enough.

By the time I reached home, I had forgotten the inky words and all my bravery on the bus. My dog Brownie was waiting for me. I sat down on the front porch and pet him. I had dishes to wash, and homework to do before Mom got home. I had to get busy.

A few days later, on Saturday, Mom called me into her sewing room. She was on her knees cutting a pattern on the floor. I stood near and waited. She kept snipping. When I said, “Yes?” She pointed to my denim notebook lying backside up.

It took me a moment to remember what was there. Those words had become mundane over the last two days by my carrying them nonchalantly from class to class. They had become a benign shield of protection. Yet, in her light, they suddenly became contraband. I looked at them in horror and realized the gravity of the situation.

She stopped cutting and straightened her back. She was still on her knees. With complete sincerity, she looked in my eyes and said, “Pack your bags and get out.”

We stared at each other until my lower lip began to tremble. A great whoosh passed through my body. All my courage and self-regard poured through my heart and drained away. I found myself heaving for breath. “I, I, I didn't mean it,” I said stuttering and lying. The tears came fast. I stood in front of her, my body quickly diminishing in size.

Since the car ride home in the second grade when I learned she wouldn't protect me from the world, I had built a quiet resistance to her. I knew from that situation I needed to defend myself. Here, I was being reminded that even I, the girl who held the gavel, could not supercede the mother who held the gavel. How I missed the fact that her judge ruled supremely over mine, I do not know. It never occurred to me that she might be hurt; she acted too brave. “No child of mine who hates me will reside under my roof,” she said sternly, pursing her lips, and the words reverberated through my head and bounced off the walls around me. I did love her. In that very moment, I knew I loved her, and the realization of that very thing combined
with her grand rejection delivered such a blow that I could barely stand upright. Under the glare of her command, in front of her feminine strength, I wept like a child. “I really do love you,” I said, choking on the words. Then I left the room.

In my room, I pulled out my pink-flowered overnight suitcase and emptied my underwear drawer into it. I was stuffing my jeans and t-shirts in it when she came in and told me I didn't have to leave, but I did have to scratch out the message. I nodded, dispirited.

At supper, she didn't speak, and I kept my head down. I felt a little like I was living inside a bottle; I was so small and contained. At once, I yearned for her forgiveness and grieved for the spirit in me that had to die a little to live with her. I tired at the thought of never knowing the brave girl with all the self-regard who sat on the left side of the bus, over the tire, who wrote the truth and looked straight into the wind, emotionally spent, after issuing her own judgments against crimes and said, with great sadness, “It's enough.”
CHAPTER 18
THE CHASM

My seventh grade year, I took the bus to the high school in Belle Glade. My stop was in front of the Pahokee Public Library. I would walk to the end of Parkview Court, cross the four-lane, royal palm-lined, Bacom Point Road in front of my dentist's office and wait on the corner with Alberto Sierra, a kid a couple years older. My dog Brownie followed me despite my attempts to make him stay home. I'd board the bus and watch my dog through the window, on the wrong side of the four-lane, as the bus pulled away. He'd look confused for a minute, then he'd cross the road again, heading home. I'd squeeze my eyes shut and peek-watch as he darted between the passing cars.

I sat near the back of the bus and over the next few months, learned from the derelicts to taunt the tailgating cars by making faces and mouthing inane messages like "your car is crooked." Someone brought a card demonstrating sign language, and we taught each other the alphabet in order to say mean things with our hands. It ended up being quite useful when I got around to cheating on tests a few years later. When we weren't trying to communicate with the unfortunate drivers who got stuck behind us, we blew spit balls at each other. My adventurous spirit grew on the school bus; however, I knew it was all inappropriate, but we were dizzy with un-chaperoned freedom on those early morning, yellow bus rides. Our actions smacked of children ruled too tightly in the domicile. We had no experience in ruling ourselves or respecting others without a force demanding good behavior.

Glades Day School was a small, 1-A, private school. Unlike a lot of private schools, its students came from a range of economic backgrounds. Many of the fathers were in the sugar cane industry, and many were farmers. There were white Cuban families as well as white, Southern families. There was no sense of difference between the two races except the Cuban students had parents who spoke with foreign accents. Most of the Cuban families were better
educated than the white families like mine who had lived in the Glades for many generations. Their grandparents had a formal air. While my grandparents were simple, congenial people, the Cuban families had regal grandmothers who piled their hair on their head and sat extremely straight in the bleachers.

At this homogenous school, economic status didn't matter much except that a rich girl might have prettier things to wear. Rich boys were undistinguishable from other boys. A white t-shirt and a pair of worn-out blue jeans never went out of style and over-dressed, fashion-conscious people looked a little silly and too urban to us. There were always one or two girls who could razzle us with their style, but they were few. I certainly was not one of them. Perhaps it was because the school was so small that wealth mattered so little. But we did have our popular stars. They were always the ones with the loudest personalities. What mattered to us was humor. A funny person was revered. However, if you weren't funny, you could get notoriety by being crazy.

In seventh grade, I was just beginning to be aware of this aspect of the social ladder. I soon discovered a group of “crazy” eighth grade boys on the west side of the school building. In the mornings, they huddled together trying to smoke without being caught. I ventured to their side with my friend Charise, who had heard they were making each other pass out. A muscular kid named Donnie Courson lifted a tall, lanky kid named Manuel in the air from the back and squeezed his chest until he collapsed. Fainting, Manuel’s limp body fell to the ground. After he returned to consciousness, he got up and said, “Cool as shit, man.” The boys took turns until they got headaches. I stood nearby, unaware of my open mouth, quietly watching each “pass out.” I was a little afraid they’d choose me to be next.

Jeff Jones and Robbie Vandergriff were two guys from the west side who passed out a lot. One afternoon, Jeff called me on the phone and said, “Would you like Robbie?” I froze on my end of the phone. I had never actually spoken to Robbie Vandergriff. I had barely even noticed him. However, it was high school, and I had never had a boyfriend. In my moment of
silence, I naively concluded this was how relationships began in high school. It also occurred to me that I had refused three boys before, all of which I soon regretted but didn't have the courage to communicate that change of heart. So I said, “Yes,” matter-of-factly, and hung up. It felt like a bad business deal. I fell on the bed and cried. I really still loved Nacho, and this felt like treachery even if he had no idea of my feelings.

The next day I went to the west side with Charise and stood against the wall. Robbie and Jeff came over and made small talk. It happened quickly and simply. Neither mentioned the “arrangement.” Our “status” was kept a secret until we grew comfortable enough to express it. This happened over weeks and, at first, meant only standing near each other in the mornings. After a few days, he called me himself. We got to know each other on the phone. After months, he was calling me regularly. Sometimes, we would sit for hours breathing into the phone without conversing. This way of connecting through the phone quickly became addictive. Since I expected Robbie's nightly call, when it didn't come, it plagued me. I began to miss him. This is how I fell in love at twelve. It wasn't through sweet words or little gifts; it was from negligence. My first experience of love was really an experience of pain. Thus, a model was imprinted on my psyche, and for a long time, I'd never know anything different. When love came, I didn't recognize it unless it hurt.

Robbie was a short, athletic, funny guy whose deep voice matched his large adam's apple. He had brown eyes and hair and was a small, bad-boy, surfer-version of Robbie Benson (my television heart throb). Robbie Benson reminded me of Donnie Osmond whom I first loved through his song “Puppy Love” that I heard while in elementary school. Love, to me, was a series of stepping stones, from one dark-haired, brown-eyed boy to another.

Robbie Vandergriff's father had died when he was small, so he was very close to his older brother Leslie, a tenth grader, who was bossy, but too much of a malcontent to rule over anyone successfully. I gave Robbie room for bad behavior because he was fatherless. I felt sorry for him.
Robbie and I went together for two years. The first year, Robbie and I were two friends getting to know each other. Once he and Donnie Courson rode their bikes along the top of the Hoover Dike from Belle Glade to Pahokee—a ten mile trek—to visit Charise and me. We kissed that afternoon for the first time. I was secretly impressed with the physical effort of the bike trip and swooned after the kiss. When he got back home that night, he called, and we breathed on the phone for hours.

Having a boyfriend who was in 8th grade made school so much more interesting. My life began to come alive. Since Aunt Nelda was a junior that year, I also met her friends. They went to parties, and it began to dawn on me that things were happening that I was missing. I wanted to participate in more school activities, so I began to stay after school to practice for junior high cheerleading tryouts. I had to learn the jumps: the stag, the knee slap, and the toe touch. I learned a pom-pom routine and the proper way to paint a smile on your face. I tortured my inner thighs in split attempts until I could get about five inches from the floor. My skinny, clumsy body leapt ungracefully, one-arm saluting in the air and landed with a thud. My muscles lacked tone and discipline. The day of tryouts, I could not accomplish a full split. I couldn't do a toe touch. I should have gone home, but Donna Fowler, my new friend, and Charise insisted I stay. Many of the girls were just learning jumps. About thirteen girls tried out for the squad; eight made it. I wasn't one of them. When the list of names were called, the absence of my name and the cheering of my friends rang in my ears. We were girls who had been together a long time, some since kindergarten, and we were dividing. We were becoming girls who 'made it' and girls who didn't.

At home, Mom called from Bobbie's house to see if I made tryouts. I tried to say “no” with a quick, uncaring voice, but it didn't work. There was a long, silent pause. She didn't know what to say, and I could not fill the void which ensued with assuring words. I was distraught, and I didn't want to talk to her. If I spoke, I knew my voice would crack, and she'd know. She realized something in that silence. I imagined she finally understood the chasm that had
developed between us while she had been busy with her friends. My unhappiness was personal, and I didn't want to discuss it with her. It was an embarrassing moment. She came home quickly, but I continued to insist that it had not mattered. I climbed onto the roof where I could be alone and cried into my knees. Failing at tryouts felt like such a great rejection. Although the failure was modest, it awakened my heart. I grasped how much I longed for peer recognition and acceptance. Soon, my family fell away in importance as my friends, and their communication with me, rose to the forefront.

For Christmas that year, Charise and Donna told me I should get Robbie a present. This caused much side-aching worry. I had no idea what girls bought their boyfriends for the holidays. My mother had always done our shopping. I imagined this would be a huge embarrassment that I'd never outlive if something went wrong. At my school, it was customary for girls to buy their boyfriends a St. Christopher necklace. So, not knowing St. Christopher from Santa Claus, I went to a jewelry store, and Mom bought one for me to give to Robbie. It was a square, silver charm with a raised picture of a man with a staff in his hand, carrying children. It was on a silver chain. I was embarrassed having to attend to this duty with my mother, but I had no choice. I imagined everyone in the store knew I was buying a Christmas present for my first boyfriend. The store's lights shone so brightly on me. The tall shopkeeper talked too loudly, and I felt like melting into the floor.

On Christmas day, Mom took a break from the festivities at Nana's house and took me for a ride to Robbie's. I was never more relieved in my life to discover he was not home, but he had left a little gift for me. His mother met my mother, exchanged niceties, and we got back into Mom's car and drove away. I fell into the seat exhausted. I had imagined opening my gift in front of Robbie. I knew there would be a moment when either I'd have to hug him or kiss him, and what would I do in front of my mother? I couldn't even find the energy to open his gift. I did have a few worries remaining. If his gift was stupid, I'd be embarrassed in front of Mom. At home, I locked my bedroom door and unraveled the little box to find a pair of gold earrings in
the shape of a star with a little diamond-looking stone on the tip. A flood of relief washed over me. I tried them on. I turned from side to side and appreciated how they swung from the post. I stared into the little oval mirror I had nailed into the wall. The event was over, and it had turned out fine. I suddenly grew elated. My mood soared. I wore them into the kitchen and playfully showed Mom.

The exchange of Christmas presents made our relationship known by other friends at school. Aunt Nelda teased me at school for liking "the Little Shit." She asked me on the way home from school one day, "What do you see in him? He's a punk." What could I say? He asked me to like him. No one else asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

One morning, on the way to the bus stop, Brownie ran between two palm trees on his way across Bacom Point. A fast-traveling semi truck slammed on brakes in front of me. I watched Brownie tumble under the axles, howling in pain. The truck came to a screeching stop. Black skid marks lined the road. Brownie crawled out from under the truck and limped toward home, whimpering and unheeding my cries and commands. Alberto yelled from across the street that the bus was coming. Brownie ran away, yelping and limping. The choice between my injured dog and the arriving bus paralyzed me. I got on the bus shaking and couldn't say why when Donna got on at the Wilkinson's stop and noticed.

That afternoon I couldn't find Brownie anywhere. I searched and called. Finally, Steve Hatton waved me over to his house and said, "You looking for your dog? He's in the bushes. Sure is acting weird."

I had to get my dad to put the dog in the wheelbarrow and take him home. My mother put aspirin in some hamburger meat, but Brownie wouldn't eat until a couple of days had passed. Because he was laid up in the garage, I noticed a large glob sticking out of his fur. It looked like a kernel of corn. "Ew," I said, looking closer; he had ticks all over his body.

Dad wouldn't take Brownie to the vet because he didn't believe in spending money on animals unless absolutely necessary. "They should die naturally," he said.
It was Aunt Sandra who took Brownie to a vet in Belle Glade. She kept saying how it was such a shame. “You have to take care of a dog if you have one,” she told me, but I didn't understand why she was telling me this. “Sometimes, you got to take a dog to the vet,” she repeated as if she were talking to my dad, who wasn't in the car with us. Dad believed if an animal was in too much pain, you should shoot it. The vet said there wasn't really anything he could do except put the dog down, so we brought Brownie back home, and he crawled under the house, in the hole my dad had dug to fix the bathroom pipes.

When I got home from school in the afternoons, I watched the afternoon special on television until I saw Mom's white car turn into the driveway. When I spotted her, I jumped up, turned the T.V. off, and flew into the kitchen to look like I had long-ago begun doing the morning dishes. After dinner, I did homework, bathed, then called Robbie or Charise and talked on the phone until it was time to go to bed. I forgot all about Brownie.

Sometimes Charise spent the night with Donna in Belle Glade. When this happened, Robbie visited because he and Charise were good friends. One Saturday, I drove by Donna's with some friends I had spent the night with and noticed two bicycles hiding in the bushes. When I called Donna, she acted strange and got off the phone quickly. Later, I found out Robbie and Tater Head had been hanging out with them, but they had lied to me about it. It was the very first time I had ever been betrayed by friends or by a boyfriend. I yelled at Robbie because he lied, but Charise and Donna both apologized, so I only quit speaking to them for a half-day. I broke up with Robbie because he thought it was funny. Charise and Donna negotiated our make up. They insisted they had only wanted to make sure my feelings didn't get hurt.

I spent nights in my dark room after “lights out” crying into sheets, feeling sorry for myself and not knowing how to make these intense feelings abate. During those same nights that I was obsessed by a boy who was just being a boy, Brownie was below me, in his own darkness and solitude, slipping away, listening to the occasional flush, the gurgle of water
draining from the tub, and the echo of slamming shower doors. I remembered he was there when he began to stink.
In the dark living room, the blue blinking light of the television tube lit my mother’s laughing face. I sat folded up beside her, afghan-covering my knees. On the screen, a man in a red velvet suit pushed a brass bed down a city street on this late night comedy show called “Love American Style. On the bed, a writhing woman in pink lingerie pouted over the honeymoon locale. I wondered at such dumb antics. What was funny about a woman acting like a baby? The laugh track from the T.V. and puffing sounds coming from Mom’s body told me it was funny. I watched with my mouth ajar, wanting to chuckle, moving from the comical scenes to Mom’s blue-white grinning face. I withheld questions in fear of breaking the spell of friendship this show was casting between my mother and her child-on-the-edge-of-not-being-a-child. It was 1975 then. I was twelve, and that night marked an acceleration of the path toward my mother’s crash.

Dad’s dark figure interrupted and asked Mom to “come talk.” Being a rare communicator, my father had never requested a talk in all the years I had known him. Mom was equally alarmed. I caught a glimmer of worry in her eye. She lingered with me a moment, tucking her half of the afghan around me, before rising to follow him. I watched her leave and listened with suspense as voices rose in the bedroom behind the living room wall where I sat in the blinking light, listening to canned laughter, alone, feeling dumb and, now, frightened. I realized I had never heard them argue, and I had never heard my mother cry. I turned off the T.V. Mom’s voice cracked in crying shouts. It was the voice of someone trying to be understood. I imagined someone had died, so I went through the faces of my family members imagining each death—a drowning, a gator attack, a car accident or a gun shot. These were the possibilities on my radar screen. I sat for a long time in the dark listening, trying to decipher the muffled
talk and crying. I fell asleep suffering from my imagination and awoke the next morning to eerie silence.

After breakfast, Mom asked me to sit down on the couch. I wondered who she'd say had died. Aunt Karen? Aunt Sandra? Nana? Gramps? Othermama? Was it a cousin? Jimmy? Oh, no. I hope Jimmy didn't drown. I was so morbidly worried that it came as a relief to hear that my father was moving out. Temporary relief. She asked if I would please leave the house for awhile. She said, “Your father doesn't want you or your sister to see him packing his things or leaving.” I left, puzzled. This request was shocking. Suddenly, their marriage seemed like an entity in itself, and one that was beyond our circle of four. Each time I had almost deciphered the codes or grasped the rules of being in a family, something happened, and I was forced to correct my understanding.

At first, I reluctantly obeyed Mom's request and took off for a ride on my sister's unicycle. Then, I was strongly impelled back to the house. It felt too weird to be away from a crisis, so instead of disappearing down the street on my bicycle like my sister did, I went home and climbed up the antennae pole to the tarred, pebble-covered roof. I threw rocks while I waited. Soon, Dad moved his white, Chevy Luv to the back yard. I watched him load the truck with clothes. I cried freely on the roof where no one could say that I was crying for attention. When Dad left down the back alley instead of the street, I knew he was ashamed. I felt the urge to fight for him, but their decision seemed so large and fixed. I felt ashamed that I didn't overturn a table or threaten to burn something in a riotous rage. He had no idea I'd go to war for him. Impotence, pity, despair, and fierce loyalty swam violently together in my chest. Wiping tears, I watched the blurry truck roll away and down the alley dipping into and out of pot holes, swaying down the white rock road. Blue work shirts swung mournfully on a stick across the back window.
When I slid down the antennae, I was finished crying. I was ready to get to work. I figured my mom would want me to quit school and get a job. Nothing could be further from the truth. All things were to continue the same except Dad didn't come home from work every night, and Mom finished her GED at night school and got a second job there. It wasn't the kind of separation that most kids experience. I never heard them argue again. Dad slept at the Everglades Inn, where a few men, in similar situations, also slept. There was a kitchen trailer out back, and a woman cooked food for them. I imagined it was a little bit of fun, like camping or going on vacation. My dad came around periodically and ate dinner with us. When he was there, life went on as usual. My parents spoke casually of school and work. They were so congenial with each other, no one really believed they would divorce.

Life did get harder for Mom, as Dad had intended. She rushed home from work, cooked dinner, and left again to get to night school. She rushed everywhere. Christa and I fought over whose turn it was to do the dishes and what we would watch on television. When ten o'clock came around, we both scurried into bed clothes to look as if we had accomplished all our chores including our baths. I began listening to my own music, which consisted of three particular divas Aunt Nelda listened to: Helen Reddy, Liza Minnelli, and Carole King. I collected all Helen Reddy's albums and played them loudly when I was alone in the house. Doing the dishes, I would dream of a large, black car coming down the street to rescue me from the dullness of my small town life. I had completely lost interest in playing with my friends on the street. From this car, Helen would emerge with open arms, and she'd embrace me. I'd join her without grabbing a single garment or keepsake. We'd pull out of Parkview Court singing I don't know how to love him and her pain would be my pain. I'd fight for my life and my love.

One part of my father's strategy worked. Mom couldn't socialize after work any more. Instead, her friends began flocking together in the mornings. I hated these early
morning kitchen intrusions. It was an unsafe kid zone. Mom was always shushing us
away, asking us to leave the kitchen, so they could talk. I began to see their brief attempts
at conversation with me as fake, so I walked around mad. I loathed the sight of Mom's
friends arriving. On Friday nights, they did come after work. Harry, Bobbie's husband
and a large Southern man with soft pink freckles, would pass me sitting on the front
stoop where I had been banished, and he'd knuckle the top of my head. I'd growl without
apology and try to swipe his hand away. I became a grumpy twelve-year-old, and they
liked to joke about it in front of me. Bobbie laughed and called it hormones.

When Mom was alone, Christa and I were happiest. During those times, she
enjoyed us. We weren't in her way, and she talked to us. She loved music. Years ago,
Uncle Jerry, her brother, had given her a Gibson guitar. She had learned a little from
him and a little from Uncle Terry, Dad's brother, and a few others, but mostly, she
poured over "how to" books and carefully followed their instructions. For most of my
young years, she listened to country music and sang songs like "Galveston" and "Gentle
On My Mind" by Glen Campbell and "I'm so Lonesome I could cry," by Willie Nelson.
Her favorite song was "Country Roads." When she sang this song, sitting in the middle
of her bed with her guitar, my sister and I crept up quietly and watched her face. Those
moments something happened to her that we did not understand. It was like she was
communicating with the air. Her voice was so beautiful, yet it seemed so far away and so
present all at the same time. With her eyes closed, she'd sing, "I hear her voice in the
morning hour she calls me. The radio reminds me of my home far away. Driving down
the road, I get a feeling like I should have been home yesterday, yesterday. Country
roads, take me home, to the place I belong. Mountain Mama. Take me home. Country
roads." After the last note when she opened her eyes, she was surprised to see her
children staring at her. She'd smile a loving smile like "Oh yeah, I'm still here, and here
they are, the little ones."
About the time Dad moved out, Mom was discovering the soul-moving R & B music of Aretha Franklin and Diana Ross. She liked funk, too. She had an Ohio Players album and turned up the song, “Fire! When she walks, she talks. She really sets me off!” Then, she discovered Barry White, and he became the force of our mornings. Mom had a stereo system in the living room. She'd get dressed, make the lunches and move into the living room to dance. My sister and I would come out of our rooms wondering what was going on. Barry would be whispering loudly, and Mom would be in the middle of the room swaying and singing. She'd grab one of us and twirl. When friends showed up, she turned it off. They came to talk. They drank her energy like vampires.

The teachers, coaches, students and even janitors at Pahokee High School became Mom's extended family during the separation. The student body of Pahokee High was 95% African-American because when the state forced integration, the whites left public schools and formed a private school. Actually, the integration of the black and white public schools had caused much protest on both sides in the 60s. The blacks did not want to give up their home school and move to the white school, but integration forced the issue. The whites were territorial and did not want the blacks at their school. The blacks took to the streets and rioted. The new, private school in the old Everglades Hospital where I was born was christened Glades Day School. Some whites who believed in integration and those who couldn't afford private school kept their children at Pahokee High, but most left and thus, Pahokee High became a mostly black public school with a small percentage of whites.

Sometimes, Mom took us to the Friday pep rallies at Pahokee High, which were rare, awesome experiences for me. The whole school participated in long, impromptu stomp chains that snaked across the floor. Their stomps were syncopated. They did chants and calls and line stomps until the walls and the roof of the gym shook with the vibrations of voices and the rhythm of pounding feet against wood bleachers and floors.
My babysitter, Becky Bush, was a senior then and held my sister and me by the hand. The energy of the elated students was mesmerizing. I was both awakened and frightened by the ecstatic clapping and hollering.

One of Mom’s good friends was the custodian Jackie. He was funny and liked to tease her. When my sister and I were at her school, Jackie kept an eye on us. Once he took us to the cafeteria to find Mom when she was eating a late lunch in the empty cafeteria with just the workers. She began tutoring students to help them learn correct speech patterns. She tutored a young man named Ricky Jackson because he was slated to receive an athletic scholarship to Florida State University, and his coaches were worried about his academics. He got that scholarship, and at FSU, later, he became a star running back and went on to play in the NFL for the Dallas Cowboys. Mom took us to the football games where we watched Ricky play and saw Jackie selling popcorn and Connie taking tickets. We got to see Pahokee’s dancing/marching band twist and bounce on the field while playing their instruments.

Our life became more interesting, not less, when our parents separated. My father moved from the Everglades Inn into a trailer behind Bobbie and Harry Cunningham’s house, and we visited him on Saturdays. I hated the yellow shag carpet, stained vinyl floors and rust rings in the sink. He had plastic plates and cheap forks. He rented it “as is.” The owner left glasses, pots and pans for use. Even the sheets and towels came with the place. It seemed unfair that Mom kept everything, and Dad even gave her money for groceries.

Next door to Dad’s trailer was the Wilkinson’s large, stucco, two-story house, with a large, jungle-like back yard. A girl from school, Theresa Wilkinson, lived here with another girl, Donna, whom the Wilkinson’s were fostering. They were both a year older and more mature girls, who already knew about heavy metal bands, cigarettes and marijuana. Theresa had no reason to be interested in a younger, quiet girl like me who
suffered from naivety and optimism. Donna, however, was new and needed friends and did not seem to be prejudiced. After I timidly knocked on the door, Theresa invited me in, but quickly left Donna to entertain me. Donna offered to show me her room. It was upstairs, in a little room with a sloping ceiling and windows that opened out to a roof deck. When we climbed out to the roof, she pulled out a pack of cigarettes. My mother sometimes smoked around friends, and I hated the smell. When Donna held out her hand and offered me a puff, I took it, more afraid of damaging a potential friendship than in saying I didn't want one. I dragged a bit of smoke into my mouth and blew it out quickly. Mostly, I watched her smoke and she found, to her satisfaction, she had a rapt audience.

“You know why I'm here?” Donna asked, fiddling with the cigarette. I shrugged. “My dad used to like me a little too much,” she said, nervously flipping the tobacco. “Know what I mean?” I nodded my head in false affirmation and listened wide-eyed and quiet. Donna was thin and pale, but her quick brown eyes showed she was thinking of things I could not yet imagine. There was something beautiful and sick about her that made me think of a hurt bird. I didn't know how to help her except to listen. I never asked a single, inquisitive question and heard only what she wanted to tell me. Donna showed me her arm scars from when she tried to kill herself. I ran a finger over the jagged line and looked up into her face. “Sometimes I wish I had cut deeper,” she said. I could not understand what could make a person feel such pain. When she realized I pitied her, the expression in her eyes quickly changed. She got tough and laughed at my concern, “Hey, don't worry. I don't give a fuck.”

Theresa wanted to play cards. We played rummy. When Theresa got thirsty, she yelled, “Mama,” at the top of her lungs. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. When her mother came into the room, she said, “Get me some water, Mom.”
Mrs. Wilkinson said she didn't need to be rude about it, so Theresa added, “Please,” in a long, drawn out way and rolled her eyes. These girls mesmerized me. They slammed doors and had fits.

When Donna couldn't find her sweater, she yelled at Theresa to “Give it up, bitch,” in front of Mrs. Wilkinson. I turned pale.

I knew I had stayed too long, yet I couldn't pull myself away until I noticed the evening shadows on the walls. I left out the back door and crossed the grass to Dad's trailer. He was packing his truck with our bags. “Where've you been?” he asked, not looking at me.

“At the Wilkinsons’, ” I said, but it didn't sound like the right answer. I had cigarette breath and felt a little delinquent. “Your Aunt Shirley came by. She waited to see you. Got anything else?” I shook my head. “It's time to take you home.” I stood still a moment. I should have apologized, but I couldn't. I was sorry I hadn't wanted to spend time with my father. I couldn't imagine what he would have wanted me to do besides watch a movie or T.V. It made me think about how little he knew me or wanted to know me. I felt guilty inside but not wrong. I kept quiet and hung my head low the whole mile home. We drove down Bacom Point and took a right on Parkview Court. Out my window, rows of Royal Palm trees lined the side of the road and interrupted my view of the cane fields. I stared across the empty black soil and tried to imagine what could happen if a father liked you too much.

Through that year, I saw Donna on the bus, and we talked more. She and Theresa fought at home. That year, she signed my school annual in a circle. It was something I never would have thought to do. The script spiraled, beginning in the center and spun out in circles. Eventually, she moved again to another foster home, and I heard years later, before we graduated, she did it again. She cut deeper, and no one was there to save her.
CHAPTER 20
THE YELLOW ROSES

My parents' divorce was finalized in October of 1976, despite my father's attempts to stop it. He went to Belle Glade and talked to Gramps, asking if he knew what he could do. Gramps was at a loss and hated to see a family broken up. I think it was important for my father to let Mom's family know he didn't want this. In his world, divorce never happened. He blamed her friends and moved, again, from the trailer behind Bobbie's house to one in Padgett Park. The mayor Duncan Padgett had about ten trailers sitting side by side behind his home. This one, he bought from Jimmy Wilson, an old friend of Mom's. It, too, was fully furnished. It came with a lampshade on which was stuck ten beautiful butterflies with straight pins through their middle. I was drawn to the lamp like a moth, and would stare with awe and pity at the beautiful shapes and colors.

In the morning, her group of lady friends were more aware of time. They huddled around the coffee pot whispering words and shooing us away, issuing commands from the middle. "Brush your hair," Mom would say, coming up for breath. When we came back to the kitchen, she'd say, "Teeth?" and we'd leave to brush our teeth. When her friends finally left, Mom would frantically grab keys, purse and rush to work taking my sister. I'd walk to the bus stop. Her friends knew about the men in her life before we did.

The man who came into my mother's life was a tan, intelligent, nice guy named Harold Peacock. Christa and I liked him. He reminded me of a cross between Steve Austin in The Six Million Dollar Man and Charles Ingalls in Little House on the Prairie. He was easy to be around and never bossed us. His younger brother had known Mom in high school, and Harold had dated Aunt Sandra at one time. One day, he brought two, new tennis racquets for Christa and me. I was surprised. I couldn't remember a single
time I had been given a present for no reason. We weren't at all resentful toward Harold because we could see he liked Mom, and he liked us. For Christmas of 1976, he gave Mom a pair of snake-hide boots. She was excited. She was bright and happy. Our world enlarged with Harold's entrance. I felt a little guilty for liking him, but I knew no one could take my father's place. Divorce didn't seem so bad, except that my dad seemed to get the short end of the stick. Dad gave her the house and helped her buy groceries. She allowed him to take us anytime he wanted. The only time I ever heard them raise their voices or argue was the one night while watching *Love American Style*. He didn't ask about her dates; she didn't ask about his.

As Mom prepared for a date with Harold to an Elvis Presley concert on February 13, 1977, I realized Mom was high on life, but low on clothes. She asked me to help her pick out an outfit. It was the first time my mother had ever asked my opinion. A cloak of importance wrapped around me. I felt a sudden closeness to her as if she were about to recognize me as a person rather than just a daughter. Standing in front of her open closet door, I stuck a finger up to my mouth and chewed absently while purveying the situation. “We've got to do something about this,” I said decidedly, stepping back from the closet. “You don't have anything but boring work clothes.”

She laughed, but I was serious. Her lack of clothes made me feel guilty. I realized that she had always put my sister and me first when buying new clothes. I chose a beige jumpsuit. When she tried it on, it was too tight in the crotch. “Can't you just ignore it?” I asked. We agreed that a blue scarf around her neck would add color. We stared at each other in her dresser mirror. She was going to let me grow up, I decided. I thought, even, she'd like me better when I was a lady who would pull a steaming cup of coffee to my morning lips and whisper secrets about love and men. “I'll cook you some French Bread pizza,” I suggested.
“That'll be fine,” she said smiling. I turned to leave, and she stopped me.
“Listen,” she said looking a bit concerned. “Please don't fight with your sister, tonight.
Ya'll are getting too big to keep fighting.”

I shrugged and conceded, “I'll try.”

At the appointed time, Harold came, and they drove off to meet with Bobbie and Connie and other friends. They were driving to Ft. Lauderdale in someone's Winnebago to see one of Elvis' last performances. With one person responsible for driving, the rest could drink and party as much as they wanted. Before leaving Pahokee, the Winnebago came down our street. Mom jumped out and threw on some comfortable pants. She had borrowed a pretty blue shirt from Aunt Sandra. She looked much happier out of the jumpsuit. “Get the dishes done, Deb,” she said stepping up the flimsy Winnebago stairs. When she closed the light weight door, it had a little curtain that kept us from seeing inside, but we could hear the laughter of grown ups happy to see each other, elated for the night ahead with Elvis, the King of Rock N' Roll.

The next morning, I woke up and realized Christa and I were late for school. I put on a pair of pink pants. They were the closest I had to anything red. It was Valentine's Day, 1977, and the details of this day would soon be stamped in my mind. I went into Mom's room. Her bed was empty. Christa was sluggish, so I yelled at her to hurry. I figured Mom was busy and would be rushing home soon. Anyway, we were going to be late if we didn't hurry. I looked outside and damned if three of her friends weren't in our yard huddled up and talking. The sight of them irked me. I stuck my neck out the front door and yelled, “My mother isn't home,” hoping they'd leave. They told me to go back inside. I thought even when she's not here, they come anyway.

I was brushing my teeth and Christa was in Mom's room brushing her hair. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my father fly into the house and rush into Mom's room. I
looked into the bathroom mirror thinking how odd for him to be here in the morning. Silver braces gleamed in the mirror. My sister yelled, “Debbie come here.”

“I'm brushing my teeth,” I yelled over the noise of running water.

She yelled louder and stronger, “Now!”

The tone of her voice cut through all our crap. I dropped the toothbrush, rinsed and spit, leaving the water running. I found my father hunched over and my sister barely able to hold him up. “What's the matter?” I asked, helping her. “What's the matter?” I said louder. He couldn't answer me. He was shaking all over. I held him up so I could see his face. “What happened?” I screamed as I shook him.

“Your mother,” he said, crying. “She's gone.” He shook his head not believing the words himself.

“What?” I said, shaking him, thinking someone stole my mother, or she had run away.

He couldn't look up. He had to say it with his head hanging down, “She's dead.”

A silence hit me. I could barely hear the voices around me. A loud bell seemed to strike in the distance. It was as if a decree from a land far away had been issued, and I was hearing its echo. The world spun around him in a strange, slow way. It wasn't that the world began to immediately change, it was that it already had, and I was just finding out.

My rational mind took over. “What are you talking about? She can't be,” I said.

He grabbed us and held us for a long time. “She had an accident,” he said. “A car accident,” but he got choked up and couldn't talk. All we could do was dumbly hold him there, our shaking father, broken and needing us for the first time in his life.

“In the Winnebago?” I asked.
“No,” he cried, “her car.” Between sobs, he repeated, “She's dead,” and we were so struck by these words. They had no place in our lives, not in his mouth, not uttered in her room, not in association with our lively, always-in-a-hurry mother.

After a long while, I turned to Mother's dresser mirror. My father was still shaking and sobbing. Christa was confused and crying. I stared at my face as if I were looking at a stranger. I looked closely at the pink eyes staring back at me, at the wet freckles and cheeks, and at the stringy blond hair. I was thirteen. My sister was nine. I decided I would etch this moment in my memory since it marked the moment my childhood officially ended. I swept across her dresser and looked at her lipstick lying where she had last dropped it. Her brushes were full of her grey hair.

I needed to do something. I thought we should go to her. My father shook his head. “No,” he said, “there is nothing to do. She's gone.” So, I thought about how life would be.

What did I know? My mind flew over the facts. She had not yet taught me how to pay bills or how to run the washing machine. This worried me. I did know rice was two parts water to one part rice. I knew how to brown beef with a cut up onion and how to drain the grease and add stewed tomatoes, sauce and paste. I knew when you boiled noodles you added a little salt and a little oil. I could make sandwiches and I could cut up apples. I could mow the yard; I could dust the furniture with Pledge; I could vacuum; and I was best at scrubbing down a bathroom. I figured part of Dad's crying was that he didn't think we could survive. Honestly, it didn't feel real. She was just gone. She was just not coming home. It was like she vanished. It was so impossible.

People began pouring into the house before we comprehended all the facts. They wanted to hold us and cry. There was too much pity before we understood why they felt so sorry for us. I needed more information. I didn't like trusting adults over something so important.
Mr. Burroughs, the policeman at the site, came in the middle of the morning. He brought the personal items he found in the car. I was standing behind him when I heard him say, “Broke every bone in her body.” And when my father said I couldn't see her body because I wouldn't want to remember her that way, I obeyed because he was the boss, but I knew it was wrong. There are some duties a child should have toward her mother. Sometimes, duty is more healing than shocking. I should have wiped her face. I should have been the one.

Inaction seems so antithetical to the instinct of crisis. To have a seat and indulge in one's emotions seemed wrong. Had she survived for a while, we would have rushed to the hospital and kept vigil over her body. We would have seen her face and held her hand, no matter how many cuts or broken bones. In this situation, we were to do nothing, but sit and let people hug us and cry over us. It was upsetting, watching all the people who loved her wail, but it didn't make me believe she was dead. Nothing but time and my imagination allowed that.

My grandparents were inconsolable. My mother was the one who slept outside Gramps' hospital room when he was sick from liver problems. She brought Gramps to our house when Nana couldn't take his drinking. Mom determined she could do it all. Gramps loved her feisty, funny, light-heartedness. She loved his sense of humor and his down-to-earth, can't-help-it personality that caused my grandmother so many problems. Nana and Gramps lost their dependable one, the diplomat of six girls. When they arrived at the house that day, the real wailing began. Nana could not be comforted. Aunt after aunt arrived. Everyone cried at the sight of my sister and me.

By the afternoon, I was purely exhausted and needed some relief. Nelda and I went into the utility room and cracked jokes. When we stopped laughing, our mood grew serious again. “It doesn't feel real yet,” I admitted.

“I know,” she said.
When the florist arrived with a bouquet of Valentine's yellow roses, he looked confused at the sad, swollen faces lining the walls, sitting on the couch, the chairs, and the floor. He was delivering a bouquet Harold had ordered the day before. The card said, "I love you, Bo," (Harold's nickname). This wasn't a message of sympathy but one of happiness. In confusion, the florist left. No one explained. It was too ironic. I think it was my mother's first bouquet of roses. I could not remember ever seeing her receive flowers before. I don't know when Harold learned, but he didn't arrive at our house until that night. He was reticent about entering the house and stood on the front porch. My dad went outside and shook hands with him. Harold said how sorry he was. My father nodded.

I learned later that Mom was returning from taking Harold home early Monday morning; they had returned from the Elvis concert too late, and Harold slept over. She was behind schedule; she was rushing. I read in the newspaper that she passed a man driving an old white truck. He told the Everglades Observer, "Passed me like I was sitting still." "White Lightening" I thought when I read that. While passing, she lost control of the car and collided head-on with the oncoming car. She killed the man, the driver. The lady survived but never walked again, rearing nine children on her own. They were a family whose children all attended Pahokee High. Later, they sued us to help pay for her hospital costs, but the court awarded Mom's only equity, her house, awarded to her in the divorce, to my sister and me. Dad paid her bills off with her life insurance since she had left it in his name; he invested the rest.

Because I wanted to see my mother's body, my father decided to take me to see her car. It was in a salvage yard, and when we drove up, a handful of kids were standing around staring at it. Freckled-face Freddy Wayne Clemmons, was among a crowd of kids on bikes who were examining the wreckage. I was behind the window feeling resentful that these kids were gawking at my mama's demolished car. The car's front end
was bent straight up so that the bottom of the car replaced the hood. The entire front seat was smashed in; there was only a bit of room in the back seat where her body had flown. She had not worn her seatbelt. When Freddy Wayne turned his blond straggly head around and saw me, his mouth gaped open. I read his lips from inside the window, “There they are,” and the crowd turned around to see us. They had so much pity on their faces they looked as if they were looking at three dead puppies. “Let's go,” I said to Dad. We left.

The morning of the funeral, I dressed and waited on the couch. Relatives arrived. Nana was barely able to walk. Gramps and Uncle Jerry had to hold her up. The police came. When the black limo pulled up, I remembered how I had imagined a black limo coming down my street to pick me up. It was supposed to take me to a more interesting world, out of Pahokee. Helen Reddy, I imagined, would be inside because she wanted to be my friend.

I sat in the limo on the left side, by the window. We rode slowly to the United Methodist church. Mr. Burroughs led the procession. It was a rainy Wednesday. As we passed the library, I noticed the carolina jasmine was in bloom. The bright yellow buds were glowing with color against a backdrop of dreamy grey morning sky. Everything seemed as somber as I felt, yet a few colors vibrated with such intensity I was mesmerized. I kept thinking about how life was never going to be the same. It made everything surreal and time slowed. It felt like a walk to the marriage altar or to the death chamber. I stared out the window. The world seemed so alive. I noticed the cracks in the sidewalk, the broken bricks of a holding wall, the raindrops on the window near my nose, the missing letter in a store sign, a pink candy wrapper blowing across the street. How could life just go on? It was so holy to be alive.

At the church, when I turned the corner to enter the large patio outside the church, I was amazed to find it full of people who couldn't fit into the church. They had formed
two rows outside the church doors. Here, I saw the magnitude of my mother's personality and realized I did not know this woman. There were more black and white faces together in this church than I'd ever seen in one place in Pahokee. Inside the church, pews were packed. Everyone stood as we came in. The sides were lined with standing mourners. The whole town had shut down for this funeral. Pahokee High School canceled school that day. We were rushed down the center aisle to the front, and there she was--a long, brown and gold casket draped in yellow roses. Nana howled when she saw it. Throughout the service, she wailed the deep pain of a mother who had lost her baby. I was frightened she might have a heart attack. I couldn't keep my mind on the service. I was still wondering where my mother was and when she was coming home.

Outside the church, my friends came up to me and hugged me. I didn't like them feeling sorry for me. I found myself comforting them, telling them how much it was alright, but they would all have their time for mourning.

We drove out to Port Mayaca Cemetery and buried her. That was it. It was the oddest thing in the world. It seemed too weird not to be certain your own mother was in a box, but to bury it anyway. Being a child, I decided, was not a good thing when important events happen. Adults never do the right thing. Who looked into her eyes to make absolutely certain her spirit was gone? Who did this? A mortician? Have we no duty to one another? I threw dirt on her box because the preacher handed it to me.

Days later, Nana took us back to the grave so we could read the cards on the flowers and be by ourselves. I didn't like crying in front of people. Later, I never showed my father or my sister my pain. In my family, crying meant you were asking for attention. So each night, I climbed inside the tub, let the water run and stared at the reflection of my disfigured torso in the spigot and let my sorrows flow. The tub became my church pew, my comfort zone. Losing my mother was a slow descent. At first, I was just shocked she had been hurt. As time passed, her absence made me understand her
death. The first three days when the community poured around, it wasn't much different than one big, sad party. Then, they went home.

The night after her funeral, I was cleaning the kitchen and stacking up bowls and tupperware that belonged to others when I found two blank Valentine Day's cards on top of the refrigerator. One was for a young teen and the other, for a little girl. I studied the card intended for me. The teen was curvy and cute with long blond hair. It wasn't me, yet. But my mother had stood in front of a rack of cards with various messages and had chosen this one. This was the girl I was becoming. She wanted to celebrate that. It felt like a long-awaited peace. There was nothing else for me to do but become that girl without her.
CHAPTER 21
THE OLDEST DAUGHTER VISITS THE SCENE

On Highway 715, two cars cut through early morning grey mist racing toward each other like magnets on a collision course. The northbound car, a white Buick Regal, passes a truck also headed north. As it passes, it runs off the west shoulder. The startled driver yanks the wheel too hard to the right and a series of events are set into play. It overcorrects and lunges across the road in front of the truck. It runs off the road on the east side. The driver yanks hard to the left. The car lunges left, heads west, crosses the yellow line. The green station wagon heading south slows and tries to pull off the road, but it cannot get far enough away. The white car is out of control. There is a brief moment when the driver of the white vehicle sees the driver of the green vehicle. In eyes locked on each other, there is a dawning, a recognition of something planned long ago, before birth, before this life, as each driver sees their last moment arriving. There is a moment before they hit that they know all their roads have led to this spot.

The cars strike each other front to front, engine to engine, like the fists of a fighter, but there is no anger. There is simply a collision of fates. Both cars collapse in and up, like an accordion, then their hoods bend upward from the bottom, like tin lids lifted from a can. The driver of the white Buick Regal is thrown forward first; the gear shift punctures her chest and rips into her. Her last breath is punched out of her. Her body is thrown backward into the back seat. Her leg is cut, her necklace is broken, her car keys are bent, her bones are broken. She bleeds from a rip across her mouth. The driver of the green station wagon dies immediately, too. His passenger is unconscious and bleeding. Her knees are crushed by the weight of the dash.

The driver of the white pickup truck pulls over. He peeks into the white car. It looks like the lady in the white car is dead. He crosses the street and looks into the green
car. He can't see the driver who is smashed up under the dashboard, but the passenger seems to be breathing. Cars slow down and stop. "Are they alive?" a driver asks. A semi truck pulls up and radios for the police. The man from the pick up waves at people to go on around. But this is the Glades. Every car that passes knows it must be someone they know.

A young policeman, Paul Bramlit, arrives. He's strong and handsome. He looks like a soldier. When he sees the white car, his knees buckle. He stops and stares. "No," he says to himself. "Don't let it be." He walks a little closer, and there it is, hanging on its side, the gold lettering of the name of this smashed up car. It's a Buick Regal. He walks back to his car and puts his hands on the hood.

The man from the pickup truck says, "We called an ambulance. There's a lady alive in the green car." He looks up and nods. The green car is smashed and smoking, next to the banana trees that line the ditch by the skating rink. All this training, he thinks to himself, and I can't do my job. He picks up his radio and calls for back up, tells the man from the white pick up, "That's a friend of mine. You sure she's dead?"

"Look's like it," he says to the bent officer, gently, with concern. "I'll keep flagging the traffic by."

The policeman sits on the bumper of his car with his head between his hands. He has never had to pull the body of a woman he has held in his arms from the scene of an accident.

The policeman's captain, William Burroughs, arrives. He's been a cop for twenty years. He knows her, too, but not so well that he can't do his job. The ambulance arrives, and the paramedics begin prying the door open of the green station wagon. They get the heavyset woman onto a stretcher and drive away, sirens blasting, attaching tubes and oxygen. She leaves, in an unsentimental rush, the body of the man whom she has slept beside for the last thirty years. She is not even aware when they pull her away from
him. She fights for her life. She makes a deal with Death. She has nine children to go home to. She has nine reasons to live.

Mr. Burroughs takes his camera and clicks photographs of the cars, the bodies inside, and the marks on the road. He asks the man in the white truck, the witness, to stay to give a report. First, he has to get the bodies out of the cars. The wrecker arrives and another ambulance without sirens.

It’s Mr. Burroughs who busts out the back window, climbs over the seat, moves a strand of hair from the woman’s mouth, focuses and clicks. They are her last photographs—ones her children will never see, although Mr. Burroughs will hold onto them in case they inquire one day. He holds on to them for twenty years and even takes them home when he retires. He will throw them away just one month before the youngest child of the woman, who becomes a nurse, visits his home-bound, sick wife and learns there were ever photos.

When Mr. Burroughs lifts the woman out of the white car, her arms and legs feel broken. He lays her body on a stretcher. The EMTs cover her with a sheet and wrap straps around her. They tighten them and slide her into the ambulance where she rides back to Pahokee, next to the man from the green station wagon who is sheeted and belted into his own stretcher.

People in cars strain when they pass the scene, surveying the wrecked vehicles, the still sizzling radiators, shaking their heads. They are so glad it isn't them.

The oldest child of the woman will not believe when the word is passed to her that her mother has died this morning. She needs proof. She needs to see her mother. When she is not allowed to see her mother’s body by well-meaning relatives, they will take her to the wrecked car as if the death’s vehicle will prove something about a woman’s life, a woman’s spirit. The oldest daughter wants to serve the body of her mother, to wash it, to brush her hair, to prepare it for burial. She realizes she has never
fed her mother when she was sick. She will not become a woman who holds her aging mother by the hand and helps her out of a car. It will soon seem as if she never had a mother, like it was all a dream, a childish memory.

The collision will become a moment the oldest daughter regrets being unable to stop. So she will write it back to life. She will imagine the scene, the details. Her mother's sisters will say she is sick to be so interested. But again and again, she will come back to the scene. She does not want her mother to die alone on the side of a road, strangers passing slowly.

She will think of how the world kept spinning even when her mother's world abruptly ended. She will be amazed to realize that a mocking bird and three crows, lifted off the power line only briefly at the sound of the collision, then settled back again, above the sizzling steam of crumpled engines and metal hubcaps rolling away, keeping their eyes posted for the movements of bugs, and how the grass that did not get unearthed by the tires of either car kept growing. She will think of how the clouds did not flinch, of how many children were taken to school that morning by their mothers and complained of their tight pig tales or their combed down do's.

The oldest child will think of the woman's children as if she were not one of them. This morning, the children sleep in their beds, unaware of the events or just how drastically their lives had changed. It will take years before the oldest child can leave the mother’s life alone. First, she will have to make it come alive again, on the page. She will sift through the facts, remember what was hers, inquire of others, and imagine the in-between.

It will require a lifetime of not forgetting. She will begin years later, after she has given birth, after she has become a mother. When she begins, her mother's life is reawakened. The daughter writes her mother back to life. It is the only act she can do, the only way she can save her.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Deborah Hall returned to Florida State University to complete an undergraduate degree in International Affairs in 1992 after living in New York, NY for five years where she worked in the field of publishing as an assistant editor, as a photostylist for print and video, and as a bookkeeper and personal assistant to a celebrity couple. She followed her undergraduate Bachelor of Science degree with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in French. During this time, she began to volunteer at *International Quarterly* as an art editor under the tutelage of poet and editor Van K. Brock who encouraged further study in writing poetry. She ended her undergraduate degree in 1994 with a first place award in the John MacKay Shaw Academy of American Poets competition, and placement in the Cody Harris Award for Creative Writing and the Richard Eberhart Prize in Poetry. In 1994, she began the master’s degree in poetry and became marketing director and volunteer coordinator, as well as continuing as art editor for *International Quarterly*. During her master’s degree work, Deborah earned two prizes for her poetry in national competitions and published several environmental articles and one book review. In 1996, she began the Ph.D program at Florida State University in Creative Writing and thus began her teaching career. She volunteered as poetry, fiction, and art editor for *Sun Dog: The Southeast Literary Review* over the course of three years. Deborah’s preliminary exams focused primarily on the field of “Women’s Literature” and the minor area of “Memoir.” She graduated in Spring of 2004. Presently, Deborah lives in Sopchoppy, Florida, works in Tallahassee, but often writes about her native town of Pahokee, in the Glades area of South Florida. Her daughter, Arielle, is fourteen.