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The University of Southern Mississippi

NOBODY'S BOY

by

Linda Maria Mobley

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2012

ABSTRACT

Nobody's Boy

by Linda Maria Mobley

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"Village literature." literature that is written for and about the tribe, or community, has been a long standing tradition among African American writers such as Toni Morrison. These stories follow that tradition in that they are largely reflective of the African American Experience particularly South Alabama during the sixties. The decade that was marked by such violence and bloodshed is reflected here through the stories of a family experiencing it firsthand, yet who are not fully aware that they are living in a historically significant period of history. It is only through the retrospective lens of a child in that family that this fact is realized.

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2012

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Submitted to the Graduate School
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December 2012

To my husband, Michael L. Fantroy
Thank you for giving me back my dream

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INTRODUCTION

My ideas about what a short story is and what it should do have changed through the years, but they now reveal a timeline that reflects various stages in my life and in my career as a writer and reader. Early on, my requirements were simple; I wanted to read stories that were interesting and little else mattered. From a historical novel like Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, to the book of Revelation, if I found it interesting, I could not put it down. Needless to say, keeping it interesting later became one of my guiding principles as a writer and has led to the elimination of many characters and scenes from my stories.

I have always believed that a short story or any story should take the reader into a world that may be either hauntingly familiar, or radically different from his own, yet be equally compelling to that reader. It should capture moment of time, or a slice of life that is immediate and urgent in which something important, something irrevocable has occurred. The moment of change whether very subtle or blatantly obvious is the most vital element of a short story. The intensity and focus of a short story, if done well, should make a reader care about the characters, yet resolve in a way that's satisfying to that reader. In his essay, "The Art of Fiction," Henry James writes that the novelist must write from his experience, that his "characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life." Having grown up on the standard fare of fairy tales, Nancy Drew Mysteries, and later, trashy romance novels, it stands to reason therefore that in my formative years, I was captivated by the discovery of writers such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Marita Golden, and Toni Cade Bambara. These writers encoded their works with all the secrets of the African American cultural experience. In

stories like "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," "Salvation," Sula, and "The Lesson," I received a most precious and life-changing gift. For the first time, I could see myself and my own experiences validated in print. When I started writing, this experience became the influence for another guiding principle; to paraphrase James, basically, a short story must 'keep it real'.

My initiation into the world of 'village' literature was epiphanic to say the least. I refer, of course to remarks made by Toni Morrison in Theodore Mason's article, "The Novelist as Conservator" in which she claims to write 'village' literature, that is, fiction that is deeply entrenched in her own Black folk roots and the community in which she grew up. Moreover, her text is informed by her mother's stories, her tribe, and her ancestors-African and African-American. Morrison's interest in depicting, and thereby preserving and perpetuating, the cultural practices of black communities made her one of my strongest influences; through her work, I came to understand the mysterious call of writing and connection between the writer and his or her community. As Mason states, her work displays a commitment to the capacity of fiction to provide ways of maintaining and communicating important cultural values which otherwise might be lost. Through novels like "The Bluest Eye" which takes an unflinching look at the cultural 'secret' of intraracial discrimination and its evil twin, racial self hatred, Morrison also displays a fearless determination to tell the whole story, not just the pretty parts; this is what I strive to do in my own writing.

Like Morrison and other writers, my stories are also informed by my mother's stories, but it was her storytelling that I believe had the most profound influence on me. For example, my favorite of all time was the one she told about an old man who died

sitting in his rocking chair. The man lived alone so it was several days before concerned neighbors found his body still sitting erect in his rocking chair. Apparently rigor mortis had set in and try as he might, the back alley undertaker could not get the man's stiffened body to lie supine. He eventually gave up and simply secured the body in the casket with strategically placed ropes that kept the knees and torso straight by tying them to a board. Halfway through the old man's funeral, one of the ropes snapped and his body sprang abruptly into a sitting position. There was a woman sitting in a wheelchair up front who had not walked in twenty years. She led the stampede out of that funeral home.

When I think of this story, what I remember most is the enthralled look on our listening faces, the dramatic dips and trills in her voice as she spoke, and the cadence of her laughter as she reached the punch line. No one could tell a story like my mother; it was a completely interactive experience. Each time I sit down to write, I am essentially trying to re-capture the interactive act of storytelling through the solitary act of writing.

In 1987 my sister gave birth to a beautiful baby boy whom she named Daniel. At seven months of age, Daniel contracted a virus which attacked his heart and within weeks the child died of heart failure. As I witnessed my sister's courageous struggle to deal with the death of her infant I wondered how one does that. What is it in a human's DNA that enables him or her to emerge from the depths of mind numbing sorrow and despair time after time, usually stronger, wiser and better for the experience? Why does the pain of life not utterly destroy us? How do we survive? These questions preoccupied me to the point that I was compelled to write my first short story, "Song of Daniel". Although the first draft of that story as written over twenty-five years ago, as I look over my body of work, I realize that I am still preoccupied by the phenomenon of human suffering and

it is a subject that appears again and again in my stories. I realize that publishers abhor dead babies; indeed, I have been told many times that the story is too sad. Nonetheless, if the story chooses me to write it, then write it I must.

James writes that for many people art means rose-coloured windows; “They will tell you glibly that artistic considerations have nothing to do with the disagreeable, with the ugly. . . that it must not touch the painful.” It has always been my contention that pain is as much a part of life as joy and deserves an equal place in art and literature and must not be shunned for those ‘rose coloured windows’ of which James speaks in his essay. I believe that the correct treatment for the inclusion of pain and suffering in art is that it should do something other than simply exist. For me the “Song of Daniel” was not about the baby, it was about my sister. Her response to the pain of grief showed the remarkable resilience of the human spirit and that is what I set out to capture; nevertheless, I am learning to avoid the heavy sentiment that clouded my earlier efforts.

In writing on the subject of human suffering I have found it difficult if not impossible to circumvent the preachy tone of other writers on such subjects; I admit that at times I have failed miserably. This hardly seems reconcilable with the fact that my writing philosophy particularly as it pertains to didacticism in fiction is grounded partly in the ideas present in Richard Lynch’s essay, “Evelyn Waugh's Early Novels: The Limits of Fiction.” Speaking of Waugh’s subject matter, the foibles of English society between the wars, which contained little in the way of overt philosophical content, Lynch writes, “we still demand a message from fiction, and Waugh seems to deny us one.” Lynch further contends that in his first six novels, in fact, Waugh was writing to a considerable extent about fiction’s limited ability to imitate "reality" in the sense that

conventional realistic and naturalistic narratives attempt to do. If fiction is limited in its ability to imitate reality and should not be overtly instructive or moral, what then should a story do? I have found that in sticking to my guiding principles, there is no need to ponder such a question. A story does not do, it simply is. If there is a glimpse of reality, a moral, or a lesson in any story, if it is a good story, then does not the work of gleaning these belong to the reader? A story, once written, takes on a life of its own and may convey or imply meaning that may or may not have been the original intent of the writer. In this situation, in the words of D.H. Lawrence the reader must "trust the tale, not the teller." The tale usually has a way of speaking to the reader in a way that the teller can and must not.

One of the reasons that I write is to testify and witness to what I have seen and experienced. Having the ability to view life through a writer's lens can be a blessing and a curse. To look on a dying face and smile at the beauty of its contours, or be moved to tears by a flock of ducks crossing the road is an amazing gift and so is having the ability to capture these images with the written word. But when that lens is turned inward with an eye of judgment, anger, or self-doubt, it can be a curse; no one is harder on a writer than the writer himself. If a normal person gives in to an impulse and does something foolish, after a reasonable amount of time he or she is able to move past it. This is true of a writer as well if six months to a year is added to that reasonable amount of time. Writing about personal experiences may expose more than a writer intends and like Pandora's box, once it's opened, it's open.

For example, judging by the number of times sexual abuse shows up in my stories, one can easily tell that it is a subject with which I am intimately familiar. Since

my personal experience with sexual assault came at the hands of a trusted acquaintance and didn't happen in an alley, I had no idea how to process it. Only as I was writing "Secret Pal" did I come to understand that I had been raped. The realization presented me with another dilemma; what to do with the delayed rage. When I had finished an early draft of the story I found that the process of writing it was cathartic enough so that there was no anger or rage. I simply needed to say to someone that I had been raped. This is how the process of writing works for me and why I can never not write. Writing helps me to understand and process those things that I see and experience.

Early on, I naively avoided the subject of race in my writing and made a conscious effort to write color blind stories like "Snowflake," and "Mr. Morris," which I thought would appeal to any reader. I was not confident in my ability depict the black experience in my stories in a positive, respectful manner, and I was put off by the notion that I was supposed to so I avoided it altogether. However, as an African American writer, I eventually came to understand my obligation as a cultural conservator, and it gave me the freedom to finally embrace this issue in my writing. The only requirements I placed upon myself in writing about race were to make it interesting, and keep it real.

Although I was just a child in the sixties, this time period shows up repeatedly in my stories. It is difficult to have come of age during the civil rights movement, the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK, and to realize as an adult that you missed out on the significance of such an important time in history. My effort to connect my memories of what was happening, to the actual historical events of that time are shown in stories like "Womanchild" where the protagonist gets her period on the day of MLK's

assassination, and in ‘Nobody’s Boy’ based on the whispered conversations about a voter registration drive that I overheard between my parents.

Today, I have gone from being afraid to write about race to ponderings about life in so-called post racial America; the supposedly color-blind 21st century America where racism is thought of as a thing of the past because overt acts of intolerance like burning crosses, white robes, and lynchings are rare. I am consumed with the question of how a child who, until a certain age, hates nothing more than naps and vegetables, learns to hate others. More importantly, I wonder why dark skin is still such a curse even in this enlightened post-racial era. These questions along with the experience of raising a very dark skinned child and a very light skinned child are what led me to write the final story in this selection, “Skin.” Unlike the unfortunate Breedlove family, the protagonist Johnny has no conviction of ugliness; he knows his own beauty and worth, yet this knowledge does not have the power to shield him from the reality that others cannot look past his dark skin to see it.

I am often asked if my stories are autobiographical. The question always throws me because while I do write as a witness to the things I have seen and experienced, all of my stories do not necessarily reflect my own experiences. While the first rule of writing is to write what one knows, I believe that it is not necessary to have an experience such as the death of a child to effectively write about it. It is the mysterious gift of the writer to be able to capture such an experience in a realistic, convincing manner. In the end however, I must confess that I can trace a very personal journey in this body of work; hopefully, so will the reader.

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REGAN'S PRIDE

“Regan, would you care to share your views on the subject?”

Heavy eyelids and an erratically bobbing head indicated a losing battle with fatigue and drowsiness. She snapped to attention at the sound of her name and sat straight up in her seat.

'Shoot, why does he always pick on me?' she thought, vainly attempting to remember what aspect of Abnormal Psychology he'd been discussing.

"Well, although I would need to study this subject a bit more closely in order to present an informed opinion, I do tend to agree with the general consensus" she replied, grinning sheepishly at the wave of snickers that went through the room. Biddle was not amused. Taking pleasure in her uneasiness he towered over Regan's desk staring directly into her face.

"And what, pray tell, might that 'general consensus' be?"

Feeling like a lab specimen under the glare of his thick glasses Regan squirmed in her seat, struggling to come up with an answer that wouldn't make her look like a total idiot. Just when she was sure she would die of humiliation Biddle's grad assistant Troy poked his head in the door and beckoned him outside. Stealing a glance at the clock she saw that the class time was up. She nearly fainted with relief at the familiar sound of books closing and desks scraping as the students prepared to leave.

"Want to borrow a Depend?" someone whispered , producing an uproar of laughter as the door closed behind the professor's ample rump.

Driving home she thought about the incident and resolved to be more prepared for class. Dr. Biddle was a scholar who took his work very seriously. She was certain that her

inattentiveness gave him the false impression that she was not committed to her studies, which annoyed and insulted him. But she'd rather have him think she was a goof-off than

know the truth about all the problems she was having. He would only try to encourage her to drop the class until things got better. She'd worked much too hard to finish her B.S. to take that kind of setback now. She'd had enough bad breaks. Besides, the huge difference in her salary as an LPN and the RN pay she'd be getting when she finished her degree was now badly needed.

She gripped the steering wheel of the beat-up little Accord she'd had since her son Jason, now eleven, was born, fighting back her tears as she thought about all the misfortune she'd had through the years. Sickness, domestic violence, divorce, and most devastating of all the death of her beloved father had seemed too much to bear. And now it appeared a second divorce was looming on the horizon.

Still, this was no time to be giving in to self-pity. Yes, she'd had some bad breaks, and yes, her life seemed to be one crisis after the other. But she had two children to feed and a degree to obtain. There was hardly enough hours in the day. Self-pity was a luxury she could not afford. She'd played the pitiful victim for a lot of years during her disastrous marriage to Demetrius and it had nearly cost her her life. She'd learned to fight back and stand on her own two feet. Of that she was immensely proud.

"End of pity party," she said aloud, switching on the radio.

Regan had stormed out of the house six months ago after her husband Mark had refused to tell her who the female was that answered the phone in his hotel room during one of his business trips. She had long suspected him of being unfaithful but never had anything

on which to base her suspicions. Despite the fact that she'd overcome a lot of issues about herself image and self esteem she still sometimes felt unattractive and unworthy of the attention of someone as smart and handsome as Mark. She blamed her suspicions about Mark on these insecurities rather than anything else and tried to put them out of her mind until that fateful evening.

Retrospectively, she thought she'd seen real pain in Mark's eyes when he had angrily accused her of not trusting him.

"Regan, I am not Demetrius," he told her. I have never mistreated or cheated on you and I refuse to be interrogated like a criminal!" But ii he was so innocent why couldn't he just explain the situation? Why had he just let her leave? And why, if he 'loved his family ' so much hadn't he paid her any support? She'd be damned if she was going to beg him for anything, he could go to hell!

She had paid for this decision with a radical change in lifestyle. Unable to make the payment on their Lexus, she'd gladly let him take it. Her little Honda wasn't much to look at but at least it was paid for. Jason had nearly failed math so she'd put him in an expensive private school. For this reason she could not pay the high rent of the more upscale apartment complexes or keep up the house payments. She'd moved from their spacious three bedroom home in West Mobile into a tiny but cozy older apartment in the middle of town. Her snobbish older sister Cheryl said the place was a dump, but it was clean, affordable and in a fairly decent area. She flatly refused Cheryl's offer of financial help to find a more expensive, albeit safer place. Cheryl and her husband Reginald were both retired from the military and now worked at the post office. They were very secure financially. Even though they were able and willing to help out, Regan was determined to

make it on her own. Admittedly, she was sometimes taunted by the idea of Demetrius still living a very comfortable lifestyle on his salary as a pharmaceutical salesman, especially with another woman. But Regan was going to take care of herself and her children whether he chose to help her or not. Her best friend Ivon tried to make her see the folly in this.

"Why should you and your children suffer because of his infidelity and lack of responsibility" she'd hotly demanded, "take his ass to court!"

The thought made Regan bristle with anger as she steered the noisy vehicle into the narrow driveway that fed to her flat. The complex was an older one of red brick consisting of four building that housed four two bedroom units each. All of the buildings were fronted by a neat patch of grass that served as a yard. She smiled as she remembered the incredulous looks her kids had given her when they first saw it. Their 2000 square feet house sat on nearly an acre of gently sloping land surrounded by fruit trees and azalea bushes. There'd been plenty of room for Jason's basketball goal and Jennifer's jungle gym. They couldn't even ride their bikes here!

She slowed abruptly in front of her parking space. Her night vision wasn't all that great and she was wary of hitting the curb. This had already cost her one tire. Suddenly there was a loud thump as someone landed on her hood and rolled off.

"Oh my God!" she whispered in horror as she hastily threw the car into park and jumped out. A woman lying on the ground convulsed wildly for a few seconds then went limp. Another woman huddled over the motionless body wailed plaintively.

"You killed her!" You killed my only sister!"

"You know, you two have serious problems" she said recognizing her two cousins Brittany and Courtney who lived next door.

"You should really say no to drugs!" They were still howling with laughter as she stomped off.

"That mess ain't funny," she muttered, "Y'all scared the hell out of me."

She resisted slamming the door behind her as she entered the apartment and stood momentarily surveying her new home. The entire place could be set in the den of the house she'd left behind. Classic Queen Anne furniture crowded into the tiny living room and expensive artwork on the walls seemed pitifully out of place making it appear somewhat shabby. Books and magazines were strewn everywhere. There had not been room for the ornate bookcase and cherry roll top desk in the library Mark had built for her so she'd left most of her stuff in the house resolving to get it as soon as she finished school and bought a house of her own. But her with her voracious appetite for reading she had rapidly accumulated another impressive collection. A lone typewriter on the kitchen table was now her study.

Jennifer and Jason had been so reluctant about parting with their toys that she had given in out of guilt and allowed them to bring most of their stuff along. As a result however, one of the two bedrooms was so filled with toys and junk that there was barely room for Jason to sleep. He usually wound up sleeping on the couch or on the floor in the bedroom that Regan and Jennifer shared. She promised him that their living situation was only temporary.

Regan's baby girl of two and her big man Jason had both fallen asleep in her bed. She smiled at the picture of her little girl's head resting comfortably on her brother's back.

Jason adored his little sister and never seemed to mind her crawling all over him. The contrast in their appearance was remarkable. Jason was fair skinned like his father with sandy hair and freckles. Jennifer had inherited her mother's dark skin and long black hair. Regan now understood that her family had not lied to her about her looks. Jennifer, the image of her mother was an unusually beautiful child. She breathed a sigh of relief and softly closed the bedroom door.

"Perfect," she thought to herself. Now she would have a little quiet time to study and organize her notes. Maybe even a little time to write. Freshman comp had opened up whole new world to Regan. For it was there that she discovered a hidden talent for writing. Mark had nurtured this talent, buying her books and magazines on writing and encouraging her to try and get her poems and stories published. He'd been especially fond of the story she'd written about the death of her sister Esther's seven month old infant Daniel last year. She decided to work a little on the story after her shower. Even the temperamental air conditioner seemed to be working in her favor tonight. Sometimes it would go off without warning, often staying off for hours before abruptly switching back on. During these times the heat would become unbearable causing Jennifer to become restless and fidgety. If this happened during the night Regan would often awake to find the toddler asleep on the cool tile of the bathroom floor adjoining her bedroom, her little body drenched with sweat. She made a mental note to report this to the landlord as she let Phillip, her friend Emily's eighteen year old who baby sat for her, out the back door.

"Tell your mama I said call me," she shouted after him as he sped off in Emily's little red Corrolla. Phillip is such a good boy,' she thought taking a large Egyptian cotton

towel from the hall closet and going into the bathroom. Everyone was extremely proud of his winning that scholarship to Alabama. He'd make a fine doctor, though Regan personally thought he wasn't much of a babysitter. Most evenings Jason busied himself with homework or video games and Jennifer would fall asleep shortly after she left for class leaving Phillip free to raid her refrigerator, or talk on the phone to one of his numerous girlfriends. Still she was grateful to have someone she trusted to watch her babies while she attended class and both kids were crazy about Phillip.

She undressed, pausing to admire the slender body, and full breasts that she had once considered unattractive. It had taken her years to develop a healthy love for herself and to accept love from others. With all the support her family and friend had given her through her various crises Regan realized that she was very much loved. She involuntarily warmed at the memory of her husband's frequent declarations of love and passionate caresses then stepped into the shower turning the water on full force.

She scrubbed herself furiously, as if to wash away the intrusive thoughts of their intense lovemaking. Finally giving in to the tears she'd been holding back for six months: Regan let the soap fall from her hand and began to sob, softly at first, then crescendoing into violent heaves.

She had no idea things would be this hard. Was she really only fooling herself in thinking that she had things under control? How could she make it much longer without help from Mark? And why hadn't he so much as called to check on her or try to see the kids? They were always asking for their daddy. What kind of inconsiderate monster was he anyway? He was acting like he didn't care how they made it.

She stopped crying as she realized that Mark was probably hoping she would fall on her face and have to come running to him for help. This thought angered her but she knew she needed help desperately. Her savings were dwindling faster than she had anticipated. Jennifer's daycare and Jason's private school were eating it up. Even with this cheap apartment and no car payment it still took all of her check just to pay bills and buy groceries and gas. She had no idea how she was going to pay someone to babysit after Phillip left for school next month, or cover the cost of her own tuition and books. She prayed for a change of heart in Mark in regards to helping with the kids, but stubbornly resolved not to ask for his help.

Still exhausted, but somewhat refreshed by the cleansing shower and purgative cry she crawled wearily into bed, not bothering to wake her sleeping babies and opened her psychology book. Unable to concentrate she soon found herself staring at the ceiling and talking to God as she'd done since she was a small child. Although these talks with had been a source of comfort to her through all of her previous misfortunes, Regan couldn't help but admit that God seemed oddly distant in her present crisis.

She slammed the book shut, startled and shocked at herself for doubting God's caring presence in her life, no matter what she was going through. She had never questioned this until now. Like a pesky mosquito, the nagging doubts buzzed in her head, returning defiantly each time she waved them away. What if she really was alone? What if the benevolent, father-like God she had come to know and love did not exist? And if He did why had her daddy suffered so before finally succumbing to the cancer that had ravaged his body?

"You're not being fair," she remembered her daddy telling her when she was six years old and had angrily demanded to know why God took her puppy Spike.

"God didn't take Spike, you left the gate open and he got out. He was accidentally hit by a car, partly because of your carelessness. I'm sorry Punkin, but you can't blame God for something that was your own doing."

She eased Jennifer's fat little arms from her chest and rolled over to her side, dropping the book to the floor. Her daddy was right and she knew it. A lot of what she'd gone through had been because of the poor choices she'd made. She was focusing doubt on the one thing that had sustained her throughout the years. Her faith. Hadn't God proven Himself to her over and over in the thirty odd years she'd known him? Hadn't he performed a loaves and fish miracle with the sudden limit increase on her credit card just in time to cover this quarter's tuition? And hadn't she personally experienced his presence many times in her life, especially at her father's deathbed?

She closed her eyes remembering the night her father had died. He'd been taking ragged, shallow breaths for about five minutes. Then a final, deep inhale followed by a violent shudder bellowed from his cancerous lungs. His body went limp like a deflated balloon as the life force took its leave. The room became vividly bright for a split second before the weak grip he'd had on her hand loosened, and his long slender hand flopped onto the mattress. The grey eyes that had seconds before looked wild with pain and suffering were still wide open, their now serene gaze focused upward in the same direction as the life force had gone. Then there was an eerie hush, like she'd seen in the movies that preceded the entrance of royalty. Though she was filled with an awesome fear like the kind she experienced during a hurricane Frederick she was not afraid. She knew without a shadow

of a doubt that she had experienced a divine presence. And she knew that God was with her now. Comforted by the thought she drifted off to sleep.

A few hours later Regan was awakened by the sound of a familiar voice frantically calling her name.

"Regan! You gotta wake up, the building is on fire!!!" It was Courtney at her bedroom window. She bolted upright. The room was pitch black, smoke was everywhere. Fighting a rising wave of panic she reached down and felt Jason's warm body at her feet. Smoke was quickly filling the room and as her eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness she could see the bright orange flames licking at the bottom of the door to her children's room.

She dropped to the floor and pulled Jason, sleepily protesting to the floor with her. The heat was intense as she crawled the short distance to the window dragging him along. When she reached the window, she threw it open and shoved the child into her cousin's waiting arms. Taking a large gulp of air she turned and crawled back to the bed, feeling around for her baby. The bed was empty.

"Dear God, no!" she cried in anguish, blindly groping about the floor.

The air was so heavy with smoke, the heat so intense that Regan thought her lungs would explode. But she was not leaving without her little girl

"Regan, please! You gotta get out now!!"

"I'm not leaving without my baby."

"Momma! Momma!"

In the distance she could hear the sirens of approaching emergency vehicles. She crouched lower, sliding on her belly across the floor calling out Jennifer's name. A loud

pop, then the crackle of flames caught her attention and she turned just in time to see the door to her children's room become engulfed with flames.

Regan knew that if she was going to get out of his alive she would have to leave now. Courtney and Jason's cries appeared further off and realized she was about to lose consciousness. She was delirious with oxygen deprivation and imagined she heard her father's voice. She lay motionless on the floor staring dazedly at the burning door. Flames were now lapping at the bed where they'd been sleeping. In an instant it was ablaze. Knowing she was about to die and feeling no fear, Regan curled into a fetal position next to the window she no longer had the strength or the will to climb out of . She could almost hear her father angrily chiding her.

"Don't you dare give up now! Do you hear me child? Get up!"

The voice seemed so real that she opened her eyes. There her father stood in the midst of the flames, a crying, but unhurt Jennifer in his arms. He carefully tucked the little girl in her arms then wordlessly turned and walked back into the fire the flames not touching him.

The sound of Jennifer's crying alerted the bystanders that she was still alive. "Over here, hurry!" Courtney yelled to the firefighters now descending the bright red truck.

"I can hear the baby crying at this window!" The masked fireman shook his head. The room was in full burn. Then he saw a pair of tiny little fingers grasp the windowsill as the child's mother lifted her to the window with her last ounce of strength.

Eee!!!! Mark awoke with a start at the frantic shrill of the smoke alarm. He dashed to the kitchen, snatched the smoking saucepan from the stove, then immediately dropped it, spilling the sizzling black mass of burned sausage

to the floor as the heat of the pan handle seared through the flesh of his hand. He swore loudly, shaking the burned hand violently while using the other to turn on the cold water, then plunged it underneath the brisk flow. Briefly relieved by the cool water he held his hand up and examined it.

Giving a low whistle he shook his head, The flesh of the four fingers that had come into contact with the pot had a perfectly aligned row of deep burn marks two of which had turned white like the color of cooked chicken. The pain was excruciating, but he decided to wait until tomorrow to see if it needed medical attention. It was almost three in the morning. He wet a clean dishtowel and wrapped the hand, noting that he could hardly move the fingers without increasing the pain.

After cleaning up the mess as best he could with one hand, and clearing the house of smoke he settled, exhausted onto the oversized leather recliner in the den where he'd more or less lived since his wife and kids left. He propped his aching hand on a pillow. Damn, he missed Regan and the kids! She would be all over him now nursing his wound like an angel of mercy, and the kids would be waiting on him hand and foot like they'd done when he was sick with the flu last fall. He still could not believe what had happened.

He'd met Regan when she was an LPN student at the Medical Infirmary and he was a medical student. She'd been through all kinds of changes with that schizo ex-husband of hers and had more issues than he cared to deal with but he knew the first time he'd laid eyes on her that he was going to marry her. There was something about Regan that set her apart from every other woman he had encountered. On the surface she really seemed to have it together, a vibrant, confident woman who had the potential to be or do anything

she wanted. But somehow he could see the scared little girl underneath which brought out the rescuer in him.

She was newly divorced with a two year old son and a deranged ex-husband who had terrorized her for months before finally attempting to kill her just a few weeks after Mark's first date with her. He'd patiently waited for her to work through her problems maintaining only a casual relationship in the beginning. She was smart, beautiful, shared his love of books and possessed an old-fashioned good girl charm that was rare among the women he'd met. And she had the most luscious bosom he'd ever seen. She'd been well worth the two years he'd waited for her to develop enough faith in his love to become his wife.

The recliner creaked and groaned under the weight of his six foot frame as Mark tried in vain to find a position of comfort. His hand hurt like hell, his stomach growled its annoyance at not having been fed, and he was miserable with loneliness and sexual desire. He closed his eyes remembering their sweet lovemaking the stirring in his loins giving testimony. He wondered how two people could be more in love than he and Regan, yet find themselves on the verge of divorce.

Divorce! He could not even mouth the word. How could Regan even consider divorcing him? Why the hell was she so insecure? And what, if anything could he do about it if she wouldn't communicate with him. He didn't remember her being this way before he'd quit medical school and taken the job at Avco Pharmaceuticals. His parent's cottage in Fairhope just a few feet from Mobile Bay had been their home during those first years of their marriage. His father, Dr. Jim Robinson was a widowed pediatrician who had retired from active practice before Mark graduated high school. Although he'd been sorely

disappointed that his only son had chosen not to follow him into the medical profession, Jim was a wise and generous man. He'd offered them use of the bayfront cottage as long as they wished. Mark had taken a job as a medical technician at the Medical Infirmary working the same hours as Regan who worked the a.m. surgery unit. He remembered those years as a pleasurable blur of early morning lovemaking, stolen kisses at work, peaceful scenic drives home with Jason happily babbling in the back seat.

After work they spent their evenings walking the beach, fishing from the pier, or watching the spectacular eastern shore sunsets. Candlelit dinners, jaunts to New Orleans or Atlanta during Jason's occasional visits with his father's family, and Sunday evening dinner after church with their families rounded out their week. They rarely argued, lived frugally, but well and enjoyed a level of intimacy that was the envy of their married friends.

It wasn't until Regan had gotten pregnant three years ago and he'd taken the job at Avco that things had begun to change. The job required him to travel extensively, resulting in him being away from home for days and sometimes weeks at a time. The pay was very lucrative, however enabling them to buy a house, a luxury car and put Jason in an exclusive private school. They'd also agreed that as soon as Jennifer reached preschool age, Regan would quit work and return to school to finish her degree.

After they moved into the house Regan began complaining about his long absences. She was way out in West Mobile miles away from their friends and neighbors on the eastern shore. This was too far for casual visits from old friends, their new neighbors were snobs and she was lonely for adult company. Worst, Mark suspected that Regan's best friend Ivon, and her stuck-up sister Cheryl had begun to fill her head with ideas about the

possibility of his infidelity. He realized now that he had grown weary of trying to reassure her but after days of grueling travel, hotel food, and endless meetings he just did not want to deal with her insecurity, especially considering the source.

Retrospectively, Mark realized that this lack of patience had been his undoing. She was his wife, hell she deserved to be reassured of his love and fidelity. How could he be such a self-righteous jerk? He had to admit that were the shoe on the other foot he would demand some answers too. Yes, he was hurt by her accusations and apparent lack of trust, but if he were to be honest, he'd have to admit that they were not groundless. The hotel housekeeper that answered the phone while he was in the shower (thinking it was her supervisor returning a page) was in fact very attractive. Who's to say that they might not have wound up in bed had Regan not called?

He'd spotted the woman cleaning the ice machine on his floor while he fumbling with his door key. Her smile was an invitation he'd had no problem refusing. He'd made up his mind a long time ago that he would never cheat on his wife. Even so, he vividly recalled dreading another lonely night and wondering what harm it would do. He lingered momentarily on the thought, then dismissed it completely. Casual sex had never been his thing.

But when he'd called down later to complain about the thermostat she was the one who'd come up to check it out. "I'm sorry for your inconvenience Mr. Robinson" she told him, dialing the telephone nervously,

"I'm calling my supervisor to see about getting you a more comfortable room."

"That's fine with me" he replied, but I've had a long day, and I need a shower. Why don't you just leave the key and new room number here on the table and I'll move my things as soon as I change." She returned the phone to its cradle.

"Do you mind if I wait here for her to return my page? It should be any minute now. I'll have that information by the time you finish." She was a petite blonde with a bold stare that both unnerved and excited him. Renewed thoughts of a sexual encounter ran through his mind as he entered the bathroom and disrobed. Only this time they were not as easily dismissed with her being so close and apparently so willing. "What am I thinking?" he remembered asking himself, this woman is a complete stranger! The phone rang just as he'd stepped into the tub.

He finally gave up trying to sleep and flipped the TV back on. There was a late breaking story on the all news channel about some apartment complex fire across town, He flipped the channel in disgust. He hated how the TV crews treated victims in these situations, shoving a camera in their bewildered faces and forcing them to deal publicly with their very private losses. Besides those older complexes were notorious firetraps.

There was nothing else on but sleazy talk shows and infomercials. His thoughts soon drifted back to his absent family. How could he even think of cheating on Regan? He knew how. The absences had taken their toll on their marriage and they'd lost some of their intimacy. The loving couple who had become so close that they could finish each other's sentences had become almost like strangers. Regan didn't know anything about his new line of work and he was missing important milestones in her and his children's lives. They were growing apart and neither of them knew what to do about it. No wonder she was insecure!

But why was she being so stubborn? He'd tried to contact Regan at Cheryl's after he cooled off but her sister had answered the phone and told him that his wife did not want to see or talk to him. He'd refused to believe her telling her he'd have to hear it from Regan. After repeatedly hanging up on him the little witch had blocked his number from her line.

This more than anything had really hurt and angered him. He decided that he'd wait for his wife to call him when she was ready to talk. Except for that one time when he'd gone to her mother's house to make arrangements to see the kids, he'd stood by his decision not to contact her. On that ill-fated visit Cheryl had met him at the door refusing to allow him entry. He'd just missed Regan and the kids but he and Cheryl had gotten into such a row that he'd just given up and left at Martha's request. After her experience with the psycho her family had become overly protective of Regan.

"You've hurt them enough!" Cheryl yelled as he drove off. "Stay out of their lives.!"

Rather than sit around going crazy with loneliness, or fighting her family to gain access to Regan, Mark had taken a temporary assignment in a territory upstate for a few months. Every week he sent a letter with a check enclosed to help with expenses to her mother's address and they'd all been returned unopened. She was way too proud to accept help from her family so he wondered how she was managing. Surely the few thousand dollars in the savings account she'd had since she first started working at Medical Infirmary was not enough to sustain her and two children. Just to be safe he'd arranged large increase on her credit card in case she got into a bind.

He sat up straining his eyes to make out the red block numerals on the VCR. It was nearly four am! He had not gotten a wink of sleep. The pain in his hand had become so unbearable that he unwrapped it to take another look, and was horrified at the disfiguring blisters that had formed. His entire right hand and forearm was one throbbing mass of white hot pain. He'd have to have it taken care of if he was going to get any rest.

"Sure thing Mark, come on down. Doc Stone's on duty, he'll be glad to take a look at your hand. Sounds pretty nasty to me." The triage nurse Sheila whom he and Regan had known since they were students had deep concern in her voice. It was she who had formally introduced them and stood as a bridesmaid at their wedding. After fussing him out for waiting so long to seek medical attention for such a serious bum, she good-naturedly agreed to make sure he was promptly seen upon arrival. Although he was no longer an employee at Medical, he still enjoyed these perks.

Mark retrieved his car keys from the massive oak coffee table and grabbed the fishing hat that the kids had given him for father's day. Suddenly feeling like he'd been hit by a truck he dropped heavily back down onto the recliner, hung his head and sobbed, his lean muscular body convulsing deeply. This would be his first visit to Medical without seeing his wife.

Air! She could breathe! Then she remembered. Ripping the oxygen mask from her face Regan sat up, her heart pounding out of rhythm.

"My babies, where are my babies?" she demanded hysterically.

"Jennifer and Jason are fine" a masked face with kind eyes told her easing her back onto the pillow. "You however, were not so lucky." She recognized the gravelly

voice of Dr. Ben Fergusson one of the two emergency room physicians on staff at Medical.

"After you shoved your daughter out of the window you fell and hit your head suffering a mild concussion. The gown you were wearing melted into your skin causing a large burn across your back. That firefighter risked his life climb through that window and rescue you Regan, there must have been an angel watching over you." Only comprehending that her children were safe Regan breathed a heavy sigh of relief and gave in to the sedation drifting in and out of consciousness.

She opened her eyes to see her mother and children huddled worriedly in a corner. She felt an enormous sense of loss and depression as she thought about how foolish and selfish she had been. She'd uprooted her children from a safe, secure environment and put them all in a situation that had nearly cost them their lives. She was profoundly sorry.

"Third degree burns on your middle finger, first and second degree on the other three and your palm" was Dr. Stone's grave diagnosis.

"You'll have to come in twice a week for debridement, physical therapy, and pain management." It was uncertain if Mark would retain the use of the middle finger due to deep muscle damage and the possible thick scarring that would result.

Mark hung his head. What had he been trying to prove? That pan handle had been red hot. As if reading his thought his former med school roommate patted him on the shoulder,

"It's OK buddy, I've been there. Us guys think we're indestructible until something like this proves to us that we're not. It's taken me forty years to be able to admit when I hurt." They both laughed.

"Sheila will dress your hand and get you something for pain. I'll also write a prescription for you to take before coming to therapy. You'll have to call someone to drive you home and bring you in for treatments. " Mark thanked his pal and buried his head in the pillows trying to absorb it all.

"He has a right to know Cheryl, for God's sake they are his family! Jennifer's been crying for her daddy." Sheila spoke in a loud angry whisper, pointing her finger into the surly face of her friend's sister as they locked horns outside Mark's room.

"I don't give a damn about his rights Sheila, this is my family we're talking about. He gave up his rights when he walked out on them. That poor child has been through enough!" She turned on her heels and stormed off.

"Bitch," Sheila muttered, cracking the door to check on her patient and wondering how she was going to make this happen. She'd been horrified to learn what had happened to Regan and the kids. They'd been brought in by the paramedics right after Mark had phoned her about his hand. Regan could be hospitalized for weeks and she would need all the support she could get. Mark needed to know what was going on and she was going to make sure he found out. Regan would just have to forgive her for interfering. She poked her head in the door,

"Wake up sleepyhead, it's time to go. You father's here to drive you home. I'll get a wheelchair." Mark sat up in bed and looked at her groggily,

"No wheel chair. And who called my old man? I can drive myself!" She flitted out of the room

" Sorry hon, you know it's hospital policy. Be right back."

He gingerly maneuvered his body into the wheelchair grimacing in pain at the mere effort. Sheila adjusted the foot rest and wheeled him out into the corridor.

"Uh, Sheila. I know it's been a while since I worked here but isn't the discharge area the other way?" Mark asked her as she guided him toward the emergency waiting area where she was hoping they would run into some of Regan's family. She stammered nervously

"I.. I.. " she paused then laughed at the confused look on his face. She'd just have to spill it out.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! There's my daddy!!! The little brown girl broke away from her aunt Cheryl and ran pell-mell into her stunned father's arms, Jason on her heels He hugged them tightly searching the room.

"Where's Regan?" No one answered and he repeated the question calmly, fighting to control the panic rising in his heart,

"Where is my wife?"

Her face was swollen and disfigured against the sterile white pillow on which her head rested, which was covered with singed black hair. She'd been heavily sedated and there were tubes and machines everywhere. Her eyes flickered open momentarily revealing the frightened vulnerability that had initially attracted him to her. She did not seem to recognize him. "Sweetheart, baby, REGAN !!" His anguished cry was like the desolate howl of a wounded animal. Her eyes flew open at the sound of his voice this time looking directly into his. No one moved as their hungry eyes locked into a long, lingering glance that gave each other unspeakable joy. He took her hand and kissed it tenderly, telling her

over and over how much he loved her. Her response was freshly flowing tears that ran down her temples filling her ears and wetting the pillow.

SECRET PAL

I fell in love when I was eleven. His name was Will and he was the sixteen year old star of the varsity football team at Excelsior High so I was definitely not the only little girl crushing on him. Salane, my best friend had a bit of a crush on him too, but she did not have the privilege of his frequent visits to her house because she was an only child. My clueless parents looooved him and thought he was a good influence on my brother Xavier who was smart and talented but seemed bent on destroying his life with drugs and alcohol. They thought Will was the reason Xavier had quit smoking marijuana but actually, it was because he knew Coach Watkins would have kicked him off the team if he found out. At Excelsior, Coach knew things about his players their own parents didn't know.

When my mother discovered that she'd inherited her grandmother's green thumb, she took to gardening like a fish to water. Mother said gardening relaxed her, but it seemed like mighty hard work to me. Daddy always insisted that she spent so much time with her plants as an escape. Whatever the reason, the result was things growing from every nook and cranny in our house and yard. Neat clusters of flowering plants flanked both sides of our front porch; huge hibiscus bushes with watermelon colored blooms in the fall, blood red camellias in the winter, pink azaleas in the spring and bright yellow daylilies all summer. In addition, there were potted ferns and tropicals lining the front and back porches and a small herb garden in the kitchen window. My very favorite was the berry patch that was located in a remote corner of the yard. It straddled our property line and Mr. Boone's next door, and a rickety wooden picket fence was the only thing that separated the berry patch from the football field behind our house. The prickly branches

were always heavy with sweet juicy blackberries, and tart tangy scuppernongs grew wild along the fence.

Salane and I had an after school routine of sitting on the fence and watching either the band practice or the high school boys at football practice while we munched on blackberries and shared our secrets. We always ended up with purple tongues and fingers, and the tummy ache Daddy had warned that we'd get from eating too many berries. It was at the fence that we first revealed our crush on Will to each other.

“He has a nice body, Salane had said, but he's no ten!”

“Are you serious, I'd retorted, Will is so a ten.”Salane shrugged,

“Whatever.”

She was through with the matter but I wasn't. In the end we agreed that his braces ruled out the whole ten thing and we settled on an eight. We had gone back to discussing the more weighty subject of what we would wear on the upcoming field trip to Montgomery which all eighth graders in Alabama got to go on in order to learn about state government, when my mother called me to dinner. I walked Salane to the cut, which was what we called the opening someone had created by removing a couple of the planks in the fence. It was used as a shortcut to the next street where Laney lived. I waved goodbye and ran all the way home knowing I'd get fussed at both for being out after the street lights came on and for spoiling my dinner with those blackberries.

A flu outbreak later that spring resulted in a week out of school for Salane, and me having no one to walk home from school with no one to talk to. I was painfully shy so I had no friends. Mother and I were close, but I never even considered the possibility of

confiding in her about how lonely I was. She had to know, but neither of us ever brought up the subject. I think she was relieved geeks are not as shy with other geeks.

The season had ended and the football field was deserted, but I still would come to the berry patch in the evenings just to be alone with my thoughts. I was more than a little upset that Salane had already gotten her period and I hadn't and she was lording it over me even though I had not done that to her when I got my new training bra though she was still as flat cheated as a boy. I soon tired of thinking about it. It was no fun without her there to argue with. I suddenly noticed a young bird near the fence alternately hopping and trying to fly, but without success. He finally landed on my sneaker. I shook him off and he hopped right back on. The scuppernongs had fermented on the vines and sometimes birds and raccoons would behave erratically after eating them. This little fellow was obviously tipsy.

“You'd better fly away little birdie before Mr. Boone's cat gets you.” I picked him up and threw him in the air hoping to get him airborne. As if he had a death wish the stupid bird came right back. The cat was snoozing on the back porch just a few yards away, so I knew I had to get the bird to safety. I scooped him up in my palms and softly stroked its feathers and kissed his little head. I decided to take him back to the house. Daddy would know just what to do.

“Lucky bird.” I was glad my back was turned so he would not see that I was smiling.

“Hey Will.” I kept my eyes on the bird. “I'm trying to set him free, but he doesn't seem to want to go.” A strange heat shot through my hand and up my arm as he took the bird from me and tossed it into the air. The force must have startled the bird sober. It

flapped wildly for a few seconds then gathering momentum flew into upper branches of a chinaberry tree a few yards away. We watched in silence for a moment but the bird did not return.

I was suddenly aware of his eyes on my chest as Will turned his full attention toward me.

“You know, I don’t know why I’ve never noticed what a pretty girl you are.” His smoky brown eyes traveled slowly down my body as he spoke. There was a strange smile on his face that I had not noticed before. Even in my fantasies I had never been this close to Will or any other man for that matter; the reality was a bit unsettling. I looked around. The yard was deserted and the house suddenly seemed a mile away.

“Uh. . . . I have to go.” He yanked me closer to him and before I knew it, I was overwhelmed by taste of metal, the hot sting of tobacco, and the stench of stale alcohol on his breath as he kissed me hard on the mouth.

We both agreed that it was not rape. Rape is what happened between strangers. Will and I had known each other for years. He was my brother’s friend, and my parents loved him like he was their own son. Plus he had profusely apologized when he discovered I had been a virgin. We would keep this between us. Afterwards, I still saw him frequently at the house and he’d always say,

“How’s my little secret pal?” I’d wave and continue with whatever I was doing. I buried the experience along with my bloody panties and went on with my life.

Twenty years later I am married to a wonderful physician named Earl and we have a good life with our nine year old twin boys. Xavier finally got over his substance abuse issues and finished college. He married a beautiful dark haired Nepalese girl named Ruby whom he met on a mission trip to Kenya. They live only an hour away, so they visit

frequently. Their daughter Amanda was born just a few months after the twins. They were in town for a conference when I got the call from Daddy telling me that week ago, he'd found Mother passed out in the middle of the petunias. She had been diagnosed and had already had open heart surgery! It was only against her wishes he was finally calling and apologetically urging us to come.

“ She didn't want you to worry punkin, and I was afraid to upset her.”

Daddy thought it would lift Mother's spirits to see us and her grandchildren. Too afraid to be angry, Xavier and I caught the next flight to Alabama; Earl and the kids would follow as soon as they could make arrangements and Ruby and Amanda would make the six hour drive from Atlanta the next morning.

When I went into the cardiac care unit where Mother was recuperating and the nurse pointed out her room, I was glad that I could see her before she saw me; otherwise, I would not have had the time to compose myself after the shock of seeing her looking so frail and obviously in a great deal of pain. Mother apparently needed time too because the moment she opened her eyes at the sound of my voice, her face transformed into a picture of comfort and serenity. I kissed her hand wondering why we were always doing this dance with each other. Why was it so important that we either not know or pretend not to know when the other was in pain?

This ends now, I resolved pressing the call button.

“May I help you?” a voice blared from the intercom.

“Yes, Mrs. Henderson needs something for pain.”

Mother stared at me in surprise, then gave my hand a grateful squeeze. After the morphine had eased her a bit, she asked if I could find out what they had done with her

underwear. I promised I would. We chatted about the kids for a while then fell into a comfortable silence.

When Xavier and Daddy arrived, they found me napping with my body in a chair and my head on the bed while Mother absently stroked my hair. Without a word, Xavier came to the other side of the bed pulled up a chair, and lay his head next to Mother; she cradled his head with her free hand. As usual, at a time when she needed comfort and reassurance, she was the one giving it. Reading my thoughts, she gave me a reassuring pat in the head. I was beginning to understand why she had insisted on us not knowing. She wanted to be strong enough to mother us when we got the news. My anger no longer seemed important. I was just happy to be with my mother.

By the end of the week Mother was recuperating at home. She was still not strong enough to garden, but she loved sitting on the sunny porch in the morning and chatting with whoever took a notion to pass by. Word had gotten out about her surgery so there was a steady stream of church members, neighbors, and friends coming to visit. I was not surprised when while fixing lemonade for everyone, I had looked out the kitchen window to see Will drive up in a red Porsche. Football had been very very good to him and throughout his NFL career, he had remained close friends with Xavier even sponsoring his mission trips. Mother was always happy to see him. She also got a huge kick out of having Amanda and the boys running around the house. Amanda was trying to put Mother's long hair into a braid while the boys tried to catch grasshoppers in a jar when Will walked up. I placed the tray on the table next to mother.

“Hey Will, what's up?” I asked. His smile was a testament to the merits of braces.

“Hey there, how's my secret pal?” Amanda blushed.

“I’m fine.” she replied.

Suddenly I was staring up at the drunken bird in the chinaberry tree. I was temporarily blinded by a familiar halo of red and purple light that usually preceded one of the category five migraines I had suffered with for the last twenty years, but in my mind, I continued to fervently dig into the moist black soil as the memories of that day rushed from whatever place I had buried them. I grabbed the back of mother’s chair to steady myself, fighting to regain my composure. I would not make a scene and upset my mother.

“Are you all right Erin?” Mother knew that I wasn’t and this time she was not going to do the dance. As calmly as I could, I reassured her.

“I’m all right Mom, it’s just a migraine. I have some medication in my purse. I’ll just go and get it.” Horrified at what he knew I was thinking, Will spoke in a nervous stammer as he followed me into the house,

“Erin, it’s not what you... oh God Erin, no, I would never....Erin you have got to believe me...” When we were safely out of my mother’s earshot I stopped and turned to face him. I poked his chest firmly with each word,

“It was rape.” Suddenly my headache was gone.

“You raped me. And so help me God if you have touched my niece, I am going to the police!”

“It was rape.” He seemed relieved at the admission. I stared at him unmoved by his delayed penitence.

“But I swear to you that I have not. . . I would never. . . Oh God, Erin, I am stupid. In my past I have taken advantage of good people; including and especially people who love me. I may even have anger management issues. But I am not a child

molester! Erin we were both just kids! Listen, when I first entered the NFL, I was living such a wild life. . . . I would be a dead man if it had not been for Xavier and Ruby. When they made me Amanda's godfather, I considered it an opportunity to finally be able to do something for them. I told Amanda that I would always be there for her and that she could call me anytime she wanted. Secret Pal is the name she uses when she texts me her grades and school news from her parents' phones. They never would let me buy her one and they read every message she sends. I know it seems kind of odd to use that name but in some idiotic sort of way I felt like, I was making up for what I did to you through Amanda."

I fumbled around in my purse and retrieved the bottle of pills. My headache had returned with a vengeance. There was a longing in his smoky eyes for a forgiveness that I simply was not ready to give even though I decided I believed his story about the nickname.

"Find another nickname" I told him coldly, popping a Lortab.

SNOWFLAKE

It had been almost a year since Adrian's only daughter Morgan had died of colon cancer. An unbelievable diagnosis for a twenty three year old who was just finishing her first year of medical school. But it was over now. The months of mind numbing grief and depression that had wrapped her spirit like a cloak after Morgan's death, had finally lifted. Adrian had come to a place where the memory her beautiful girl with the big smile and even bigger heart who loved God, people, and calla lilies with almost equal passion, now warmed and comforted her and made her smile.

"Are you angry?" the therapist had asked her during one of her grief counseling sessions. She pondered the question. Who was she supposed to be angry with? Cancer? God? Morgan? Herself?

"No, I don't think so, she replied. I am hurt, I am sad, I am filled with grief. But I cannot say that anger is what I feel."

She'd discontinued therapy after that. After her son Thomas and his wife Maria and their three children had returned to their home in Birmingham, and the continual flow of concerned relatives, church members, and co-workers had ended, she had been happy to have the house to herself again. Everyone had assumed that she was lonely and wanted their company, when all she really wanted was to be left alone. It was only her ex-husband Jerome who seemed respectful of her need to be alone.. He had his own life complete with a new wife and baby, but he still checked on her occasionally. Her company most of the time in the huge Creole style house with red shutters and a wraparound porch that she and Jerome had built before the children were born, were a

few watchful neighbors and her two dogs. She had worked her way through the worst, resumed her busy life, and even begun dating.

She waved to her next door neighbor, Stephanie who was watering her azaleas and watching in amusement as Adrian tried to coax Blue, her three year old miniature collie who had cool slate blue eyes, out of the rust colored SUV she used mainly to take her dogs to the vet and chauffeur her grandchildren around on their frequent visits. The rising cost of gasoline had made it too impractical for her daily one hour commute to the post office processing plant where she worked, but she still loved its power and spaciousness. Blue hesitated; he was always a little nervous about the discrepancy between his short stubby legs and the distance from the vehicle to the ground especially after he had developed a mild form of arthritis in his left rear leg. They were just returning from the vet for his monthly treatment.

“Come on Blue,” Adrian begged, hoping she would not have to lift him and get dog hair on the black wool jacket and pencil skirt she was wearing. Finally, Blue bounded from the vehicle and raced to the backyard fence where Lady greeted him with her usual frenetic excitement. The year old fox terrier that Adrian had been keeping for a neighbor who had moved to an apartment across town had become a huge problem. Al had told her that the complex had a strict no pets policy, but that he would find one of his relatives to take her. That had been six month ago. He’d only showed up twice to drop off a few cans of dog food and assure her that he was still looking for someone to take the dog. He’d promised to reimburse her for getting the dog spayed, but before Adrian could get her to a vet, she had gone into heat and Blue had impregnated her.

Lady whimpered as Adrian opened the gate and let Blue in. He sniffed her behind curiously. She growled and snapped at him with uncharacteristic fierceness and he retreated. With a pleading look, she whimpered at Adrian, ran to the back of the tool shed, and then ran back to Adrian and whimpered again all the while growling and snapping at Blue who continually followed, sniffing at her butt. Adrian suddenly noticed that the dog was no longer pregnant.

“Oh my God, she’s had the puppies! Stephanie, come quick” Adrian yelled hurrying toward the shed. The vet had told her it should be at least two weeks before Lady delivered and the plan was to bring her inside next week and keep her there until the puppies were born. He felt that Lady was too young and immature to properly care for her litter without some assistance and supervision. Besides, even in March, the nights in Mobile sometimes went below freezing. Adrian did not know what she would find. It was almost dark, and she and Blue had been gone all day.

Two of the puppies were already dead. Their bodies lay a few feet from the shed covered with ants. Lady had managed to overturn an old empty trash can and had store her remaining three pups inside. Adrian and Stephanie kneeled to get a look at the wet shivering bundle, huddled together, blind and crying in the trashcan while their proud mother looked on. One of them was white with big gray spots. One was tan with a heart shaped white spot above its forehead. The runt of the litter was mostly gray with white spots.

“ They are adorable.” Stephanie whispered. She patted Lady’s head.

“You did good girl.”

Adrian found an old blanket in the shed and they transferred the puppies to the spot she had prepared in the corner of the sunroom. By removing the potting table and gardening supplies she had amassed in a failed attempt to develop her green thumb, and covering the floor with an old cotton rug she had created a perfect spot where the puppies would be sheltered from the elements and could be watched through the French doors that opened to the den. Lady circled the puppies, pawing at the blanket. When she found a spot to her liking, she settled down and began grooming them as they nursed.

On Stephanie's advice she decided to lock the screen door to keep Blue out until Lady became more comfortable with him around.

After Lady and the puppies were settled and her neighbor left, and she had showered and changed, Adrian returned to her car to remove the forgotten grocery items she had picked up for dinner. She found that the frozen tilapia filet and bagged salad were still cool enough to be safe to cook, so she placed the items on the countertop and took out the heavy cast iron skillet she always used for frying. Following a catfish recipe she had seen some celebrity chef use on TV, Adrian coated the fish with mustard, dipped it into a beaten egg, and coated it with flour before dropping into hot canola oil. While the fish was frying, she poured half of the bagged salad into a bowl and topped it with slices of the tomato from Stephanie's garden that had been ripening on the counter and sprinkled it liberally with a homemade vinaigrette dressing. She flipped the fish and popped a leftover slice of thick French bread under the broiler. Then she removed the fish, dripping with oil from the pan and laid it on a paper towel. When the bread was golden brown and still hot from the oven, she rubbed it with half a garlic clove and the discarded heel of the tomato. She arranged the food on a tray, poured herself a tall glass of raspberry iced tea,

and settled on the recliner in front of the television to enjoy her meal. Just before she switched on the television, she thought she heard a cat meowing. Looking through the glass door, she surveyed the yard, but saw nothing. Lady's pups were napping in the twilight under their mother's watchful eye and constant grooming.

An hour later, Stephanie knocked on her door.

"I think there is another puppy." Adrian stared at her.

"Are you serious?"

"I went out to check the mail, and I thought I heard a noise coming from your yard. I tried to investigate, but I can't see anything in the dark. I brought my flashlight so we can check it out."

Adrian grabbed a sweater and followed her into the back yard. They quickly determined that the noise was coming from the direction of a wood panel privacy fence that separated her yard from Stephanie's. Shining the flashlight on a thick patch of weeds, they saw a shiny red rock. The crying seemed to be coming from the rock. Stephanie touched it and discovered that it was a birth sac with a squirming white puppy still attached. The puppy's head was wedged between the fence panels, but it was very much alive and crying to the top of its lungs. Reaching her arm from the other side through a missing panel and pressing her thumb firmly against its forehead, Adrian freed the puppy.

"It's a girl!" Stephanie said, clamping the cord with her hair barrette.

Together they brought it onto the sunroom porch where, after cutting the cord with her manicure scissors, Adrian placed the puppy near the others on the blanket.

Lady looked at the puppy, cocking her head curiously as she watched it flail and squirm. She sniffed it briefly, and with a dismissive whine, returned to the other puppies.

Each time Adrian or Stephanie would try to place the puppy near the others, she would utter a low warning growl. She wanted nothing to do with this puppy. They were floored.

“It’s probably sick or deformed, which is why she rejected it,” the vet told her when he finally returned her frantic call.

“It most likely will not live very long.”

Adrian stroked the puppy’s pure white fur. It had been two days since she and Stephanie had rescued him and though the vet had said it would not live, she was still hanging on. She and Stephanie had made her a crib of old towels wrapped around a heating pad placed in a shoebox next to her bed so that she could feed her every two hours as the Pet Smart associate had instructed her. Stephanie had enlisted the help of another neighbor, the pastor’s wife Linda, to join in their mission of mercy, so even when the two of them were at work, someone was available to help with the feeding.

It was Linda who had named the puppy Snowflake, because of its beautiful white fur. Snowflake’s eyes were still not open, but whenever Adrian squirted a drop of formula on her lips, she would poke a thin pink sliver of tongue from her mouth and lick her lips. She did well with the syringe. The pet store associate had also taught them how to stimulate the puppy to eliminate by stroking it with warm wet paper towels to simulate the mother’s licking. It has worked like a charm, Adrian observed noting that the box needed to be cleaned again.

When Snowflake had finished her feeding, Adrian returned her to the shoebox. She noticed a tiny spot of blood on the towel, but she could not locate its source. She decided not to worry about it. Two hours later when she returned for the next feeding, the

enlarged spot on the towel was now damp with blood. The blood was coming from Angel's cord.

After reminding her of his warning that this was what would happen, the vet offered to let her bring the puppy in and have his staff 'take care' of her. Adrian hung up in his face.

We're just going to make her comfortable

She suddenly felt like throwing up, followed by an intense desire to have sex. She swung her arm over the bedside table as if striking an enemy, knocking the pictures, candles, phone, and clock to the floor. She picked up the phone, scrolled through the caller ID, then slammed it down on the table. Grabbing a square green pillow from her bed, she buried her face in it, then threw it across the room knocking a heavily framed print of Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam" from the wall. She walked over to the wall and in a fit of rage, began pounding on it with her fists with such fury that she punched a hole in the sheetrock. Exhausted, she turned her back to the wall and leaned on it for support. She felt dizzy like she would faint. She slid to the floor and looked around the room wondering what this innocent puppy had done to deserve its fate, and why she had been chosen to have it die on her watch. She had wondered the same thing as she watched her daughter; bald, vomiting, and in constant, intractable pain during the final stages of her disease begging God to let her die. For the first time, Adrian acknowledged her relief that it was finally over.

I just wish I knew for sure that she was all right.

The puppy stirred in the shoebox and Adrian realized that Snowflake had not moved from the spot where she had been left two hours ago. She picked the puppy up and tried to feed it, smiling as Snowflake smacked licked at the syringe. When the feeding ended, she

found an old sock to use as a bandage and was able to carry Snowflake without getting blood on everything. She carried her to the sun porch where Lady was dozing with the three puppies snuggled underneath her. She had finally ended Blue's banishment from the porch even though she still would not let him get too close. He was snoozing near the screen door. Neither animal stirred as Adrian took a seat in the porch swing and rocked the restless animal. It was almost midnight when a cool breeze stirred her awake and she realized that she had missed Snowflake's feeding. She looked at the puppy. It was curled into a fetal position. The serenity of an ended struggle was on its face as it slept soundly against Adrian heart. Deciding not to wake her, Adrian reinforced the sock with a towel and placed Snowflake back in the shoe box.

The next morning, Snowflake had died. Adrian covered the shoebox with its newspaper and left it in the shed. It was Sunday, so she would have to get Stephanie to help her bury it when she got back from church. As she stood in the bathroom mirror brushing her teeth, she looked at the calendar and realized that it was April 1st. It was one of those calendars that featured an over the top nature scene that reflected the changing of the seasons from month to month. There had been the typical snow and fir trees in December, ice capped mountains and ski trails in January, glades and canyons in February, and blooming Dogwood trees in March. She took the calendar down from the wall and flipped it to the new month. When she saw the picture, her jaw dropped.

April's picture was a field of beautiful white calla lilies as far as the eye could see.

NOBODY'S BOY

My father named me Mary Ruth. He was a Baptist preacher, so all of his seven girls were named after strong biblical women. Naomi is the one next to me, and then came Anna, Rachel, Leah, Sarah, and finally, baby Deborah. By the time my younger siblings finished destroying the pronunciation of my name it had morphed into Mayra. In addition to giving us our names, daddy also gave us labels that stuck like glue even into adulthood. As the eldest, I was of course the smart one, Naomi the talented one, Anna, the assertive one, Rachel the stubborn one, Leah the curious one, Sarah, the nurturing one, and Deborah was the little tomboy. As a child, I thought things were pretty normal and that all daddies were like my daddy. When I started school however, I realized that daddy was very different.

The first odd thing I remember about daddy was that in 1964 when I was in the fifth grade, he started reading my history, social studies and geography books. Daddy had only finished the third grade, but no one in his congregation knew that. He had received his education from books; hundreds of musty volumes lined the shelves in his dingy little study. Other than a homemade desk constructed from two sawhorses, and a sheet of warped plywood, a small metal oscillating fan so covered with thick sticky dust you could write your name on the blades, and an electric clock, there was nothing in daddy's study but his books. He'd sit in there perched on an upturned five gallon bucket and pore over those books for hours. One of us would always take him a glass of lemonade, or a sandwich on mama's orders, but otherwise we knew not to disturb daddy while he was in there. I needed my social studies book, so one evening, I tapped lightly on the heavy wooden door and peeked in.

“Mama say supper’s ready.” Daddy peered at me from behind a large atlas book.

“Tell her I’ll be there directly.” His tone was dismissive, but I stepped inside anyway.

“Daddy I got to study for my social studies test tomorrow.” He took the book from the pile and handed it to me. I promised to bring it back when I finished studying and went to tell mama what he’d said.

Over the next few days there were strange people in and out of the house. They came at night after we girls were in bed, but I discovered their presence one night when I got up to use the bathroom and heard voices coming from the study. When I cracked the door and peeked in, a shameless lamp illuminated the faces of three men in dark suits standing around the desk. One of them paced back and forth while the others studied the papers that were strewn all over the desk. Daddy was sitting on the stool looking nervous but not in a scared way. I had never seen my father show fear even toward white people. Unlike some of the men in our congregation, daddy was nobody’s boy.

“Rev. you can’t take any chances” the man pacing was saying, “once you take this job on, we are counting on you to finish it. Are you sure you want to be involved?”

“I wouldn’t have called yell if I wasn’t going to do it.” Daddy’s resolve was firm.

“I got to be at work by six, so with all due respect, can we get on with this? I assure you I am ready.”

I closed the door as quietly as I could and crept back to bed. As if by magic, the men were gone when I woke up, but they returned the next two nights. As far as I could tell only my mother and a few trusted neighbors knew about the visitors. I told no one what I

knew, but I had to know what was going on. Mama was shelling peas from a bushel basket and dropping them into a glass bowl when I approached her.

“Mama, who them people been coming in here every night?” She froze. Her pale yellow skin reddened. I often wondered why none of us had inherited her creamy complexion. We were all thick brown girls with gapped teeth and unruly hair. The only resemblance any of us had to mama was her deep dimples which were now appearing along with the false smile she pasted on before responding to me.

“Mayra, child you better tell me what you think you know.” Her voice was calm but her rapidly reddening face indicated that she wasn’t. When I told her what I’d seen and assured her that I had not told anyone, she made me promise not to mention it again and threatened to whip my behind if I told a soul. I didn’t.

Another odd thing about daddy was that he loved to cook especially to bake. He was always trying out new concoctions on us. Usually they turned out pretty good, but sometimes not. We were the only kids in school who had pineapple and mayonnaise sandwiches in our lunchboxes. Nobody else ever brought molasses cakes and cold homemade sausages either. He and mama were in the kitchen making sweet potato pies for a church supper when I bounded up the rickety back porch steps and flung open the screen door.

“Guess what? I made the honor roll!” I was thrilled because I was terrible at math which had always prevented me from making it before. Mama wiped her hands on her apron and took my certificate by the edge so as not to get flour on it while daddy read over her shoulder beaming with pride.

“Mary Ruth, (he was the only one who called me by my given name) I hope you have learned that if you put your mind to it you can do anything.” He patted my head.

“Keep up the good work.” For some reason, whenever one of us made a major accomplishment daddy always made us do some kind of work. For making the honor roll, I had to pick a bucket of pecans and take them to Miss Lizzie the widow who lived down the street.. Her house always smelled like pine oil and moth balls, but she made the most wonderful pecan pies.

It was Leah who found the bottle of gin in daddy’s study. She was only four and thought the half empty bottle of clear liquid was water. When she turned it up for a drink and got a taste, she threw it onto the floor and ran crying to me. The bottle was not broken so I replaced the cap and made her show me where she’d found it. After I returned it to the toolbox where it had been hidden I gave her the same admonition mama had given me. Her eyes widened with curiosity at my alarm.

“Why would daddy be mad about me bothering his nasty old water?” she asked.

“Because you know good and well we are not allowed in here anyway. Now do you want a whipping?”

“No, but...”

“Just do like I say Leah.”

“All right!” she replied. “But can I play with your paper dolls?” She was finished with the matter.

“Sure you can. Now go one and let me finish my homework.” She scooted off. She apparently forgot the incident, but I never did. I also never mentioned it to mama or anyone else.

A few weeks after the strangers' visits, we were all sitting on the porch swing when a black vehicle pulled up in front of our house. When daddy came out of the house he was dressed in his best black suit and tie. His wavy hair was slicked and his mustache neatly trimmed. He was carrying a small burgundy briefcase. He smiled and waved at mama who looked like she was afraid she would never see him again. She smiled bravely and hugged us close as we watched daddy get into the car. After a few minutes, it pulled off leaving a cloud of dust.

While daddy was gone, mama was as nervous as a cat. She tried to continue her routine but every time the phone rang, she jumped. She rarely yelled at us, and mainly left matters of discipline to daddy, but when our questions became too much for her, she snapped.

"All of you. Get somewhere and sit down right now!" Deb was so startled she began to cry. Mama was so sorry she began to cry and soon we were all crying. None of us knew exactly why.

After what seemed like hours the car finally returned. It sat parked in front of our house for a few minutes and then the door opened. Out stepped my daddy. There was a cut over his left eye which was swollen shut. Someone had hastily tried to clean it and in the process smeared his face which was now covered with dried blood. The right sleeve of his jacket hung at his elbow and his tie was missing. Everyone rushed to meet him mama leading the pack. I could not move. Then daddy did the oddest thing of all. He grinned and held up some very official looking papers. The men were all slapping him on his back and congratulating him. Someone whispered something in the driver's ear and the men hurriedly got into the car and pulled off leaving daddy standing there grinning.

When I found my voice, I could speak no louder than a whisper. I pushed through the crowd around my daddy and pulled at mama's apron.

“Mama, what's happened to daddy?” For the first time in my life both she and daddy hugged me tight. Daddy finally spoke.

“Mary Ruth, you are now the daughter of a registered voter.”

THE KISSING BOY

Mt Vernon is a one horse town just west of Mobile where the state hospital for the mentally ill is located on the crest of a dismal stretch of highway 43 which runs right through it. When my brother Jamal was first committed, you could easily pass the entrance, but they have put a light there now, so it is harder to miss. If it were not for the hospital, Mt Vernon would be one of those nondescript little towns that you pass on your way to somewhere more important. In fact, the town's name has become synonymous with 'crazy.' When we were children, if you did or said something peculiar, people would say, "They need to send you to Mt. Vernon." When someone went missing after having a breakdown, he was said to be "in Mt Vernon." It was only after Jamal became a patient that I learned the name of the place was Searcy Hospital.

I have made the trip to see Jamal so many times that I know exactly how many telephone poles and churches there are from the exit off I65 to the huge gated entrance that is always covered with ivy and climbing pink roses; thirteen telephone poles, eight churches, four service stations and an auto repair shop/service station/feed store, where a man named Fat Daddy who was paralyzed in a motorcycle accident and refused to sit in a wheelchair is propped in a standing position on a homemade dolly at the entrance. I always toot my horn at Fat Daddy when I get to the light just to be sociable. Folks in Mt. Vernon do not take kindly to unfriendly visitors. If you happen to need a flat tire fixed or a fill-up, they will quickly remind you that you didn't speak when you walked in. No one will wait on you if you don't say hello first and ask how yall doing.

I am on a first name basis with most of the staff on ward seven, and the attendant waves me around the desk without making me sign in. Katy, the head nurse and I finished

nursing school together so everyone is always nice to me. I am led to the visiting area where other patients visit with their families. The mission style furniture upholstered with dark burgundy overstuffed pillows is filled with elderly grandparents, wives, babies, and siblings visiting their loved ones.

It is often hard to tell which one is the patient unless it happens to be one as acutely schizophrenic as my brother. After thirty years, some patients are on the softer side of the disease, mumbling incoherently at times, singing, or simply staring into space for most of the day, usually harmless and manageable with minimal medication, but poor Jamal still has extended psychotic episodes.

I always know when Jamal has gone bad. My mother says we have a sixth sense about each other. The night my husband died was one of his worst episodes. He was all the way in Mt Vernon with no possible knowledge that I was having the worst day of my life, but Katy later told me that on that night, he'd walked the floor shouting obscenities and trying to stab himself and anyone who tried to stop him with one of his sketching pencils. Finally around five that morning, they had done a takedown and forcibly sedated him and placed him in solitary.

“Why you look sad?” Jamal never smiles even if it has been a long time since my last visit and I know he must be glad to see me. He simply pats me on the head and once he is satisfied that I am ok, asks if I brought cigarettes. His bursts of maniacal laughter no longer bother me, nor am I put off by the imaginary people he continually pauses to answer, argue with, or tell to shut up while we are visiting. But I miss his megawatt smile. We are only eleven months apart and during our school years, people thought we were twins. I have no idea why. He is good looking with perfect teeth, smooth tan skin,

and dark curly hair that sometimes made it difficult for strangers to determine his ethnicity especially when he was a boy. Every little girl at Washington elementary liked my brother and he liked them back. If a girl was really pretty, he would chase her around the schoolyard during recess and steal a kiss, leaving her in a heap of giggles. For most of our time in school together I was simply known as ‘ The Kissing Boy’s sister.’”

“I got something for you,” he tells me, bobbing up and down like an excited six foot tall child. I use the corner of his collar to dab away the bread crumbs on his chin hating myself for interrupting his dinner. He chuckles softly at something one of his imaginary friends has said or done, then politely pushes my hand aside and bolts down the hall to his room. He returns with an armful of pages from his sketch pad. I know without looking that they are more drawings of the starship Enterprise. His obsession with Star Trek is the only connection to reality that was not lost in the storm of schizophrenia. He sometimes does not remember the names of other family members, neighbors, or childhood friends, and he has no idea who Barack Obama is, but he is remarkably clear about all things sixties and seventies.

The grainy white pages are filled with image after image of the famous space ship. Some cover the whole page, others are as small as a postage stamp but all have the same detail down to the emblem and the American flag. His full name and the address of the house where we grew up are carefully printed on the top of the page just as he was taught to do in Miss Sim’s fifth grade class at Washington elementary where the first signs of his illness emerged.

“Thank you,” I tell him, “these are nice.” I roll them into a neat tube and stuff them in my bag to add to the ones I have been collecting for thirty years. Annoyed, he removes the tube of paper from my purse and orders me to look at all of them.

“There’s something I drew for you,” he tells me, “look at it.” I dutifully thumb through the drawings until I come upon the one I know he must be talking about. It is an exact replica of our craftsman style house.

daffodils growing along the fence is spot on. In the yard, he has drawn a picture of a little girl making a mud house around a little boy’s foot in one of our favorite childhood games “Froghouse.” He would always destroy my froghouse when he removed his foot because the sand was not wet enough to hold the shape. I was stunned.

When Jamal saw my reaction, he smiled.

MR MORRIS

Brookhaven Medical was located on the main strip of the lower west side of Mobile. It was housed inside a warehouse style building that had formerly been an A&P grocery store. The parking lot had been beautifully landscaped with sago palms and box hedges along the perimeter. There was a caduceus shaped topiary in the center of a small courtyard and a shaded seating area next to the bus stop.

It still looked like a grocery store.

A small conglomeration of doctors of varying specialties had been hired by the Brookhaven Hospital System to set up practice, so the building had been divided into several stations. Tracy Craft had worked at Brookhaven for eight years and after Dr. Jones, the kind, but elderly internist she'd worked for at station three located in the back of the building in what had been the meat department, had retired, she accepted the medical director's lucrative offer to run a new clinic for HIV patients which would have a separate private entrance for the patients. After a nationwide search they'd finally hired a new doctor from Georgia who specialized in infectious diseases.

Once the contractor had finished renovating the clinic area, Tracy was left with the job of stocking it with medical supplies and equipment while they waited for the new doctor to arrive. Her work was constantly interrupted by intercom calls which required her to go and deal with some of Dr. Jones former patients many of whom resisted being placed with other physicians. She was in the middle of trying to pry open a box of insulin syringes when Mia, the office manager buzzed her.

“Tracy I'm sorry for all the interruptions. I've instructed the front desk to refer all Dr. Jones patients to me, but Mrs. Abernathy is so confused I can't get any sense out of

her. Would you do me a huge favor and please talk to her?" Tracy pulled harder at the seams of the box which seemed to have been cemented in place.

"Sure Mia. Put her on the speakerphone and I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks girl, I owe you one. She's on line one." A gentleman in a dark suit arrived just as the conversation began. Since Tracy's back was turned, he decided not to interrupt her while she was on the phone. Tracy leaned over and spoke into the speaker of the phone.

"Hello, may I help you?"

"I.. Is this channel three?"

"This is nurse's station three Mrs. Abernathy" Tracy corrected her gently, "How are you today?" The woman gasped.

"How do you know my name? Voncille! These people know my name!"

"Mrs. Abernathy, this is the doctor's office. How can I help you?"

"This is the doctor's office? Well then this must be my sweet little nurse. Is that you Nurse Crap?"

"It's Nurse Craft," she replied tersely, trying not to sound irritated even though another pile of boxes was being delivered even as she spoke. "Mrs. Abernathy, how can I help you today?"

"I. . . I need my pills."

"Mrs. Abernathy, you are on several different medications, which one did you need?"

"I don't know, I think it's the little red ones. She seemed annoyed. "Don't you all write this stuff down?"

Taking the chart Mia had sent from medical records, and pulling up her stool, Tracy's voice was patient,

“Listen, why don't you just get the bottle and spell the name of the medication to me, and then I can call it in for you.”

“Ok. Voncille, hand me my purse. No not that one. Yes thank you baby. Here it is!”

“Good. Now read the name of the medication”

“Child, I can't see this tiny little writing”

Looking at her watch Tracy realized she had already spent eight minutes on the phone without making any headway. Tracy decided to try another tactic.

“Mrs. Abernathy, can I talk to your daughter?”

“Why? Is she sick or something?”

“I want to ask her about your medication”

“You'll have to call her in Decatur.”

“Decatur! Isn't that a long distance?”The woman paused thoughtfully,

“Yes, I reckon it's a pretty good ways off.”

“Mrs. Abernathy, I want to talk to the person with you. Isn't she your daughter?”

“Who, Voncille? Child no, Voncille is my dog!” She didn't have time for this.

“Mrs. Abernathy, you'll just have to come in and bring your bottles so that we can get you your medication. Have a nice day.” She hung up the phone.

“Mrs. Craft? Hello, I'm Edgar Marshall. The receptionist said I'd find you here.”

His smile was polite, but there was a hint of amusement in his eyes. Tracy lifted her head, pulling her long braided hair behind her ears and turned in the direction of the speaker.

She had not heard him approach and wondered how much he'd heard. When she turned to face her new boss she was momentarily startled. He was tall and much too good looking. Her heart sank even as she forced a smile and returned Edgar's firm handshake. Doctors were such whores; good looking ones were the worst. After five years at Brookhaven Medical she'd seen it time after time. She had enough to do running the new HIV Clinic without having to field calls and cover some playboy's ass while he juggled all the girlfriends, doctor groupies, and attention seeking female patients intent on selling their souls to claim an imaginary place in his world. She was impressed with his credentials however. He'd run a thriving family practice in Savannah where he'd specialized in infectious diseases. He had returned to Mobile to help take care of his ailing parents and enroll his autistic son in a state of the art facility in Baldwin county where their success in treating autism had earned them featured spot on Sixty Minutes. Based on that history, Tracy had pictured someone much older and more settled. Edgar seemed barely out of his thirties.

“It's nice to finally meet you Dr. Marshall” she said. The grant which funded the HIV clinic had not covered the cost of any additional hired help. Everything including the grunt work would have to be done by the two of them. The medical director had promised additional help from med students and volunteers, but that was pretty much it. Testing the waters, she told him

“I hope your box opening skills aren't too rusty.” She motioned toward a tower of heavy boxes containing cases of peroxide, alcohol, sodium chloride, and IV fluids.

“Step aside woman, I got this.” he replied, mocking her serious tone. Taking a box from the top and placing it on the counter he effortlessly ripped it open, and reached for another one.

“While I refresh my ‘box opening skills’, why don’t you go make coffee or something?”

She gave him a dirty look.

“ I guess I deserved that, but I assume this means you are not afraid of work.” His smile was now friendly.

“ You assume correctly. Speaking of skills, I think your phone etiquette may be a bit rusty.”

Morris had acknowledged a calling to the ministry of music when he was twelve years old. The grandmother who raised him, everyone called her Dee, was a church musician who had taught him to play in the hard gospel style favored by Baptist congregations and he was one of the most sought after organists in the city. Morris was also a gifted designer of men’s suits and ladies hats. His creations were worn by pastors and their wives in entire tri-state area of Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi. He had married Ramona, a chubby, gap toothed girl whose family lived next door to Dee, and they had a son whom they named Morris Jr. After all this, no one was surprised when Morris came out; not even Dee. Ramona would not divorce him, no church would fire him, and his hat and suit business continued to thrive. He was in a monogamous relationship with a flamboyant auto salesman from Biloxi named Al who sold him his first car. They both loved cars, antiques and the New Orleans Saints. Al also loved dressing in drag and

frequenting the gay party scene in New Orleans, both of which Morris shunned. Most of his friends and business acquaintances appeared to be straight although he sometimes let his hair down when he visited Al in Biloxi. Somehow the stigma that black gay men so fear from their family and community simply did not happen to Morris even though he was not on the down low. Morris was among the first group of patients at Brookhaven's HIV clinic

When a serial killer had been electrocuted in Alabama's electric chair years ago, an artist's rendition of the executioner placing the mask over his face had appeared on the front page of the local paper. Tracy had been haunted by the look of resigned terror in the killer's eyes. Now she saw that same look in the eyes of their patients every single day. One of the first things she noticed about Morris was that in his eyes the look was not there. She was taking a routine blood sample when he whispered

“Thank you.” She smiled and swapped him a bandage for the piece of gauze he'd been using to hold pressure on the vein.

“Morris, patients don't usually thank me for sticking them.” Edgar piped in

“Yeah man, I'm the one who ordered the bloodwork. If anybody should be thanked it's me.” Morris laughed.

“See? Tracy joked, “He's always trying to steal my shine. He's such a hater.” Morris threw his head back and laughed from his belly. Then he became solemn. “What I meant was thank you for not being afraid of me” his eyes were earnest, “So many people are and . . . I guess I don't blame them. But in here, I'm treated like a person, not a disease. I leave here every week feeling like a human being.”

After a rocky start, Tracy and Edgar grew to actually like and respect each other. They had such great chemistry patients sometimes assumed they were husband and wife. But Edgar's actual wife Renee was a force to be reckoned with. Thin and beautiful, she'd met him in college where she'd been studying fashion and design. When he began to get cold feet after she started making wedding plans, she'd gotten pregnant and threatened to abort the baby if Edgar would not go through with the wedding. He relented more out of joy over the baby than her threats. The beautiful, dark eyed little boy became the center of their lives. When he began showing signs of autism, it had become her mission to get him the best help available. Edgar admired her tenacity and loved that she loved his son. She had been married to him for ten years and working in his office had pretty much kept the women at bay although he'd managed to sneak in a minor dalliance here and there. She had been delighted to find out that Tracy was happily married to an attractive aircraft mechanic named Larry. Still, she'd pop up unannounced sometimes and make a nuisance of herself trying to 'volunteer.' Other times she would arrive wearing fur and diamonds and annoy the front desk staff until finally Edgar brought her the credit card. After she left he'd be in a foul mood for the rest of the day. She was manning the phones one afternoon while Edgar and Tracy were busy with an I&D when she learned about the financial problems Tracy and Larry were having. It seemed that Larry had developed a gambling addiction. Collection agencies had begun hounding Tracy at work and even calling her neighbors about all of his bounced checks, and unpaid paid payday loans.

“Because it's none of your business.” Tracy sat facing her boss trying hard not to lose her temper or her job. How dare he ask her about her personal life! She had the

utmost respect for him and liked him immensely, but their relationship was strictly professional. Edgar picked at an imaginary speck of dirt under his fingernail unmoved by her outrage.

“Well it is now. How much do you need?” He took out his checkbook. She was furious.

“ I don’t need your money, or your pity. You’re the one who needs pity.” she tried to sound harsh.” He looked at her.

“That was harsh. But all right fine. But you can’t have bill collectors calling here. We have strict patient confidentiality rules ” She stood up.

“ I will handle it. By the way, you might want to go over those confidentiality rules with your wife.”

They worked like dogs the rest of the day. There was simply no time for hard feelings. The health department had given free HIV tests the past weekend and they had referred a dozen new cases to Brookhaven, all requiring an initial full lab work-up and history. Devin, the Jamaican medical student who had been assigned a six week rotation through the clinic was a lifesaver. He could do the most thorough history and he seemed really interested in being helpful and learning as much as he could. Their last patient that day was a young heterosexual black male named Bobby who was accompanied by his wife and three month old baby. They were all HIV positive. When they left, Tracy rushed to the bathroom. While she threw up in the toilet, Edgar held her braids back and Devin wiped her face with a cold cloth. No one spoke. They had broken the news to ministers, lawyers, tweens, and even a few elderly men and women. It had never occurred to any of them that a whole family could be wiped out at once. Flushing the toilet Edgar regarded

Tracy's wild hair and smeared make-up as she dabbed at a vomit stain on her white scrub top.

"You know this is a really good look for you." he told her.

"Bite me." she retorted. And like that, things were normal again.

Tracy pulled up to her house. Something felt different. The light drizzle that was falling when she left the clinic had turned to a steady rain. She sat with the engine running and listened to the song of the windshield wipers. She and Larry had talked things over and he was going to enter treatment at a hospital in California. No matter what her family and friends said, she was going to help her husband. She loved him. They had been together for too long and gone through too much together. She understood that addiction was an illness ; she could not turn her back on him any more than she could have if he had cancer. She switched off the car and got out. When she entered the house, and called Larry's name she was greeted by a hollow silence. Switching on the lights she saw the reason. The house was completely empty. Every piece of furniture was gone. Even appliances had been taken. She rushed to the hall closet in a panic and was relieved to find that Larry apparently considered the old camera and equipment which her father had given her, unworthy of his thievery. She made her way to the back of the house and shoved the sticky basement door hard. It popped open and she exhaled. He'd also left her pictures and darkroom untouched. She remembered how fascinated Edgar and Renee had been with the collection of black and white nature shots lining the walls.

“You can make a camera do amazing things with light and shadows” Renee had told her. “These pictures are amazing!” She used a thick white towel to dry herself. Then she lay down on the bare wood floor in the basement and slept.

Morris was in an unusually good mood that next morning. He’d been responding well to the cocktail of drugs Edgar had prescribed and his blood work looked good. He’d begun telling Tracy that he was excited because Al had persuaded the regional manager of an upscale chain of boutiques to take a few of his hats and suits on consignment. The merchandise had sold quickly and the store had placed a huge order for more of his creations with the possibility carrying Mr. Morris Designs in all thirty-six of their stores nationwide.

“You know, life is really funny sometimes, “ he said rolling up his sleeve for her to place a blood pressure cuff.,

“ I have spent so much of my life dreaming of becoming a fashion designer, but I never had the confidence to pursue it seriously. It’s always been just a hobby. Who would have thought that at this point in my life I’d be on the verge of actually being discovered? Everybody I know who has this virus are thinking about dying, but in a way, it actually feels like I have just begun to live.” He suddenly stopped talking and looked Tracy squarely in the face.

“Nurse Craft, are you all right?” Tracy was surprised.

“Why yes, Morris. Why do you ask?” He grabbed her hand and pulled her closer.

“Honey, I don’t know if anyone has told you this, but you have on mismatched shoes and your skirt is on backwards.” She was dumbfounded. The shoes were both

standard issue white lace up nursing oxfords, but he was right. One was practically new and the other one was very obviously worn and gray. She suddenly felt dizzy and Morris helped her to a seat. When Edgar opened the door, he found her resting her head in Morris' lap with a faraway look in her eyes. The warning look on Morris' face made him think better of disturbing her. He closed the door softly and notified the medical director that she had taken ill and they were shutting down for the day.

Three weeks had passed since Tracy's 'little breakdown' as Edgar called it. She had spent a few days at a timeshare in Orange Beach owned by Morris and Al at their insistence. While she was there, a worried Edgar had come to see her every day with news, gossip, and updates on the clinic. When he surprised her and showed up at her door on that first day, she greeted him wearing one of Al's frilly robes, no make-up and her braids pulled back in a ponytail.

"I think you should know that this means we're engaged." her voice was matter-of-fact. He playfully tugged at her ponytail.

"Well in that case, what's for dinner honey?"

Sometimes they played cards or watched a movie but mostly they'd just sit on the balcony and watch the tide come in and talk about their lives. One Friday evening as they sat sipping margaritas and making small talk, he abruptly asked her,

"Tracy, why do you think people like us always make such foolish choices in matters of the heart? She looked at him like he was crazy, but he continued.

"You have no business with Larry any more than I do with Renee." Tracy nodded thoughtfully.

“You can’t choose who you love Edgar.” He sat up angrily.

“That’s bull. Love is always a choice. You and I are both with people who do not deserve us because we choose to be. And even though any real love that was ever there has long gone, we will stay with them because we choose to.” She sipped from her drink before answering him.

“You say that like it is a bad thing.” He stood up and walked to the edge of the porch where the last rays of sun cast a surreal light on his face.

“For me, maybe it’s not a bad thing. I am doing what I always wanted to do and I make a good living at it. Medicine is my passion Tracy. No matter how fucked up the rest of my life may be, I will always find a certain contentment in my work. But you’re different.” He placed a finger under her chin and lifted her face toward his.

“When I look into your eyes I see someone who is afraid to live her dreams. I don’t know what those dreams are, but I do know that that she would do anything to avoid having to pursue them. Anything.” He kissed her on the forehead before she could turn away from him.

“Well Dr. Freud, what do you suggest I do? I have these annoying habits called eating and paying bills. Dreams are for rich people with too much time on their hands.”

He grabbed his car keys.

“Get dressed.”

“Huh? Edgar its eleven P.M.!”

“Humor me Tracy. Get dressed. I want to show you something.”

Ten minutes later, after she had hastily dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, they were in Edgar’s SUV, heading up 165. He drove in silence and soon she was sleeping off the

margaritas. When she woke up it was morning, and they were in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It was the most beautiful place she had ever seen. Edgar pulled into a state park fronted by a scenic lake and helped her out of the car.

“I’ve never seen anything more beautiful in my whole life.” she said breathlessly. Edgar squeezed her hand.

“Tracy, you are always talking about how one day you wanted to see the mountains. This place is only a day's drive away from Mobile. All you ever had to do is get in your car and go, but you would probably have lived and died without ever coming here if I had not kidnapped you.” She didn’t say anything. What could she say? He was right.

They drove back leisurely stopping at roadside stands and restaurants. He let her stop to take pictures to her heart’s content. When they got back to the condo, she made him go home. Renee had taken the boy to Duluth to see yet another specialist, but it suddenly felt like he’d been spending an inappropriate amount of time with her.

Tracy was grateful to have the time away from well meaning friends and family just to be alone and sort things out and she did enjoy his visits. After taking the time to rest and regroup, she decided to let Larry have the stuff he’d taken and she went into her 401K to settle with their creditors. Al had helped her find a charming little furnished studio apartment downtown and for the first time in months she felt like things were going to be all right. When Larry decided he wanted help, she’d be there to help him; until then, he was on his own.

When she returned to work, the patients greeted her with flowers, a cake, and a colorful ‘Welcome Back’ banner. Edgar was beside himself with joy. The agency nurses had

driven him nuts. Having his nurse back in the office made his day. Tracy was touched and admittedly a little embarrassed by all the attention both from him and the patients.

Sensing her discomfort, Edgar nudged her gently,

“ Tracy for once, can you just enjoy the moment?” She paused, mentally searching for a comeback. She felt happy and blessed to be doing meaningful fulfilling work with people she genuinely loved. Taking a plastic fork and raising it ceremoniously, she yelled to the group of well wishers,

“ Who wants cake?” The celebratory mood lasted the entire day. She and Devin were wiping down the exam tables that evening when Edgar summoned her to his office. His face was ashen as he handed her a lab report. Morris had converted to full blown AIDS.

SOLDIER BOY

She never wanted to hear their stories and normally hated it when they wanted to cuddle or spoon, but something about this gawky kid in army fatigues whose kiss tasted like grape soda seemed to inspire some latent nurturing instinct in Rene and for a brief moment, she lay contentedly still under the heavily tattooed muscular arm sprawled across her chest. Iraq veterans frequently patronized The Nasty Nook and their fantasies were always over the top. One client made her hold a loaded gun to his head and threatened to shoot him if he did not please. It had only taken a few nights for Rene to figure out that the amount of crumpled bills stuffed into her costume each night was chump change compared to the huge tips she could get for giving private lap dances. If, as with this soldier, she occasionally ended up in bed with the patron she considered it more of a consensual sex thing than anything else. I am not a prostitute she told herself.

Rene had started out dancing for tips three months ago after a bad break-up had left her suddenly broke and homeless. She had walked out on her wealthy boyfriend Joseph, after his down low lover vindictively outed him on Facebook. She had been with Joe since high school, leaving college to run his busy office long before he became the golden boy of city government, insurance commissioner and well on track to becoming the next mayor. He'd had to kiss that dream goodbye in the homophobic little town where they lived. Rene had left town with the three thousand dollars in her savings account, and that had quickly run out. It was pure desperation that prompted her to answer the ad for an exotic dancer. She could only imagine what it was like for him.

Don't you dare feel sorry for him, she chided herself, rolling out of bed to answer the vibrating phone in her bra in the privacy of her bathroom knowing without looking

who the caller was. When she emerged from the bathroom, the soldier was gone and five crisp hundred dollars bills had been left on the nightstand. She folded the bills, stuffed them in her bra and went about her morning routine of eating a bowl of cereal while she leaned on the counter to read the box this time ignoring the vibrations in her bra because she knew it was either Joe or one of his many advocates including both their parents and mutual friends trying to convince her to help him save his career by marrying him. Not a single person ever asked how she was.

When she arrived at the club for her shift that evening, everyone was gathered around the small TV in the dressing room. They all agreed that it was indeed him . When she was finally able to get a look at the screen there was the official military photo of her soldier. The headline read: Decorated Iraq Vet Commits Suicide.”

SONG OF DANIEL

The familiar ‘ding’ of the elevator as it reached my fourth floor destination snapped me out of my absorption in the odd group of people who were riding with me. I had developed the habit of watching people’s shoes whenever I was alone in a crowd. It was fascinating and sometimes surprising to see which face went with which shoe. After a year of riding the city bus to the infirmary during the clinical portion of my nurse’s training, I had become somewhat of an expert.

I stepped off the elevator, congratulating myself that I had correctly matched the shiny black wing tipped oxfords with the gentleman wearing the clergyman’s collar, the strappy, patent leather sandals with the equally strappy teenager wearing too much make-up, the clean white sneakers with the lab tech, and the slightly run over low heeled pumps that looked like they were about to burst at the seams from the mass of plump feet they were straining to contain, with the heavy-set woman who was with the teenager. The only one I had missed were the scruffy Reeboks. I’d guessed the face would be that of a kid or a runner, but they belonged to a forlorn looking resident who looked like he needed a shower and a nap.

The fourth floor of the Medical Infirmary housed new babies and their mothers and the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. The front wall of the nurse’s station facing the elevator was covered with pictures of beautiful smiling infants . My favorite was an 8x10 of a little black boy sporting a Mohawk/afro and a radiant smile that showed all two of his teeth. Today there was an Asian couple admiring him.

I nodded politely as I whisked through the double doors leading into NICU where my seven month old nephew, Daniel had been hospitalized on and off for the last three

months. Cold technology appeared to be at odds with the warmth of the human touch all over the unit. While technology prevailed, the human touch defiantly persevered. The stainless steel crib was made with crisp white linen, but topped with blankets that had cute yellow duck borders. There were little teddy bear stickers on Daniel's IV pole and smiley face padding on the tiny arm board that was used to keep all the tubes from getting tangled. Stuffed animals and balloons were everywhere, including the large rocking chair next to the baby's crib. The TV was usually on that perpetual cartoon station but today Big Daniel was absently channel surfing from his seat on the tan recliner next to the rocking chair.

I was filled with dread the moment I laid eyes on Daniel. I'd taken care of enough dying patients to know that his time was getting closer. The nurses had propped him up in a little carrier and arranged all his favorite toys around him. He sat there surrounded by looking like a bored prince whose loving subjects were trying their best to amuse him. I was encouraged by the faint glimmer of recognition in his eyes when he spotted me.

"How's he doing today?" I asked his father.

"We're watching the Flintstones." he replied, not answering my question, "You just getting off?" I nodded as I lowered the side rails, rearranged the wires and tubes, and leaned over to nuzzle the baby's soft face and silky black curls.

Three months ago, Daniel had been a healthy infant who'd never had so much as a diaper rash. He was an 'old soul' as my mother called it, referring to the way he was always intently staring at something or someone. Attempts to distract him with baby talk and the like seemed to annoy him. He especially liked faces. Though he rarely smiled, when he did, it transformed his face into that of an angel, shining its innocent brilliance

on anyone lucky enough to be in its path. Having Daniel smile at you was an experience that was almost spiritual. It gave you a sense of satisfaction and a feeling of worthiness that is hard to explain

The unexpected pregnancy and birth of Daniel after the 15th birthday of their oldest son had rejuvenated the lives, marriage, and home of my sister and her husband. Esther turned her obsession with designer drapes and antique furniture to the matter of setting up a state of the art nursery. Big Daniel's hunting weekends with the boys could not compete with the lovely boy who gave freely of his precious smiles and even laughed out loud whenever his daddy sang 'Danny Boy ' to him.

Daniel's three siblings two of who were adults were, at first, repulsed by the idea of a baby in the house and made themselves scarce during the pregnancy. But they were soon smitten and most evenings at least one of them could be found hanging around his nursery or passing him from arm to arm, each assured in their own mind that they were his secret favorite.

His mother and favorite face carried him all over the house in his little swing as if to never have him out of her sight. Her maternal bond with this child was oddly different from that of her other children. She attributed this to the fact that he'd come along so late in her life at a time when she thought her childbearing days were over. Daniel was a prince and her house was his castle.

After catching what was thought to be just a little cold, Daniel had run a fever late one night that resulted in a febrile seizure. He was later diagnosed with Congestive Heart Failure. It was never determined if the heart disease had resulted from a virus or if he'd been born with it. We were told that his only hope was a heart transplant for which he

was not a good candidate because of his steadily worsening state. Since that time he'd been on and off the ventilator. He'd had good days and bad days. This was definitely not a good one.

The phone rang interrupting my reverie. It was Daniel's mother, Esther. She rarely left his side, but I had finally persuaded her to go home to rest and regroup.

"How's my baby today?" she asked.

"He's sitting here watching the Flintstones" I answered, using the same evasion tactic her husband had used on me.

"I'm on the way" she said, not missing a clue.

"Girl take your time," I chided, "Daniel is fine.:

"Ok then," she lied. I knew she was on the way.

Daniel eyed me curiously as I returned the phone to its cradle and turned my attention to him. He smelled so sweet and felt so warm. Too warm. He was burning up!

"Excuse me, are you his nurse today?" I yelled across the glass partition separating the nurse's station from the patient rooms. "He's running a temperature.

"I know," was the cold reply that I got from the young girl who was assigned to Daniel.

"He's been running a temp all day and the acetaminophen isn't touching it" Knowing I was about to lose my temper, I walked over and spoke to her through clenched teeth. I had learned assertiveness in the school of hard knocks.

"Well have you tried using a cooling blanket?" I asked her wondering why they allowed new graduates to work in critical care areas. She stared at me blankly.

“Oh yeah, that’s a good idea,” she finally said, “I’ll call down to Central Supply and order one for him.” Dangerously close to slapping her silly, I smiled sweetly.

“Why don’t you just run down and get it” I’m sure your supervisor would be glad to hear how conscientious you are.” Not missing my drift, she pushed past me and headed toward the service elevator.

Daniel started to fuss, as though he could feel the tension in the air, so I tried to calm down. His father stared at me and shook his head. He didn’t like to make waves, but I knew he was glad somebody was finally going to do something to help his dying baby. I slipped my index finger inside Daniel’s little fist and marveled at how even a sick baby was still a baby as he instantly tried to put my finger in his mouth. Daniel Sr. began humming ‘Danny Boy’ and the child evidenced his delight with a big toothless grin. It was Nirvana.

All the excitement began to take its toll on Daniel and he started to nod off to sleep. I cursed under my breath as I tried to support his little head as it bobbed. He was so hot. Where in the hell was that damned nurse with the cooling blanket? It suddenly dawned on me that she had been gone much too long. I looked over the glass partition. There was the cooling blanket shoved into a corner. Daniel’s nurse was talking on the phone in an obviously personal call! I was livid.

“Look, he’s trying to break out of those restraints, said Big Dan. turned just in time to see Daniel’s little body rise to a stiff arch that I knew was the prelude to a seizure. A surge of adrenaline coursed through my body as I screamed for help. Within minutes medical personnel began pouring from the elevators and stairwells, bringing medical equipment and supplies. The seizure had thrown Daniel into cardiac arrest and

resuscitation efforts were in full swing. Big Dan and I were unceremoniously thrown from out of the room.

I was pacing frantically back and forth in front of the elevator when the door opened and out stepped a radiant and rested Esther. She was wearing a crisp yellow linen sundress with delicate white sandals. I had never seen her look so beautiful. The brilliant smile vanished from her face the minute she saw me. I felt terrible. Here I had just gotten off the phone telling her the child was fine and now they were trying to resuscitate him. How could I tell her that?

I didn't have to. She saw it on my face. Without a word she reached for my hand and we held on to each other as we waited and prayed. After what seemed like hours, an ashen resident came out and told us Daniel was gone. Tears streamed down his face as he explained that they'd done all they could but that Daniel's heart was just too weak.

Esther stiffened as I tried to embrace her, certain that she needed my shoulder to cry on.

"Can I see him?" she asked. He nodded somberly and swung open the door to give her entry. I followed, totally unprepared for what I was about to witness.

The nurses had removed all the wires and tubes from Daniel's little body and put him on a clean white tee shirt. His mother tenderly lifted him from the bed and lay him on her breast. Then she sat down in the wooden chair and rocked him in her arms. Softly whispering his name, she covered him with tearful kisses. I stood helplessly by and watched my sister rock her dead baby. It was as picture I will take to my grave.

Losing a loved one is a heartache that only time can heal. That is why Esther's strength seemed so amazing to me in the following days. She was gracious and cordial to

all the well-meaning relatives and visitors who made condolence calls. At Daniel's funeral she spent the whole time comforting her husband and children. Big Dan was numb with grief. He simply retreated into himself speaking only if spoken to with monosyllabic mumblings. Trina, Daniel's half sister and third favorite face was devastated. Though she was only 21 and childless, I knew that to her, this was perilously close to losing her own child. Doug and Bobby, at 19, and 17, had nothing in their immediate frame of reference to equip them for the grief that ensued over the death of their baby brother. They were like two lost little boys.

Through it all Esther was the force that kept them centered in a time when their world seemed to be in utter chaos. She even smiled at the really stupid things people said to her as they filed past her at the funeral, like; "You're young, you'll get over this" and "Well at least you still have your other children." She had always been deeply spiritual and I knew that God would get her through this. I decided not to worry too much about her. She hated to be fussed over anyway.

Daniel had been dead about a month when I discovered she was sleeping with his little Pound Puppy. When I questioned her she said that the toy still had Daniel's scent and that it was comforting to her. She didn't appear defensive or inappropriate, so I didn't probe. Two Sundays later she came to church carrying a blue blanket wrapped bundle. I knew without looking that it was the toy animal. She wouldn't look at me or talk to me about what she was feeling. Alarmed, I went to her husband.

"I don't know what to make of it" he told me, "she doesn't talk crazy or act weird, except when it comes to that toy. I have even tried hiding it from her, but she went into such a panic that I gave it back. Since then she never lets it out of her sight." He didn't

like the idea of a psychiatrist until I told him that clinical depression sometimes led to suicide.

Esther flatly refused to see a psychiatrist and angrily accused us of conspiring against her. The more I tried to explain, the angrier she became.

“You think the answer to everything can be found in a medicine bottle” she shouted. “Well let me tell you one thing little sis, you will never, never understand my pain and I pray you never have to. Please, just leave me alone!!” Big Dan. shrugged helplessly as he ordered me out. I went quietly, not wanting to anger her any further, but I was now deeply concerned about her state of mind.

In the weeks that followed, she continued to carry the little bundle around, and continued not to speak to me. Finally, I could stand it no longer. It was like watching someone drown. I had to do something. I was surprised when she took my call, and even more surprised when she agreed that we should talk. We’d always been close and I’d really missed talking to her.

As I pulled into the circular driveway of their ranch style house, I could see her standing in the doorway. She seemed genuinely pleased to see me, and hugged me when I walked in. She looked a little thin, but I didn’t comment. I sat in the tastefully decorated living room while she made coffee. There were still pictures of Daniel everywhere and I was suddenly overwhelmingly sad. No wonder she was depressed.

“I know you don’t understand why I carry Daniel’s puppy all the time, she said, setting the coffee on the table in front of me, “But it is such a comfort to me. Whenever I start to really miss my baby I cuddle this little toy. It’s soft and warm, it even smells like Daniel.” She sat on the couch next to me. “A few days after we buried Daniel I started to

have this strange pain in my arms. It hurt and throbbed like a toothache or something, and nothing I tried gave me any relief. At night it would become so unbearable that I couldn't sleep. I would wander through the house while everyone else was asleep. One night I found myself standing over Daniel's crib. It was then that I realized that my arms were aching to hold him just one more time."

We were both crying as she continued.

"I never got a chance to hold Daniel after he got so sick because of all the wires and tubes. I could only touch him and talk to him. But that just wasn't enough. You will never know how much I wanted just to hold him. I hated you for being there when he died instead of me. Regan, I know this dog is not my dead baby, and I know it will never take his place. I understand and appreciate your concern, but it helps a little and right now, I need all the help I can get." She put her hand over mine and squeezed it.

"There are some things in life that you've just got to go through, alone. Just you and God. Sis, please tell me you understand."

I wish I could say that she was all right after that, but that simply was not the case. While she was better now that she had confided in me and I no longer thought she was losing it, she still grieved long and hard. I knew she was better one day when we were sitting in the waiting room of the Radiology Department where I was scheduled for a mammogram. She'd come along for moral support, Pound Puppy in tow. I was reading an article in Time, and she was playing peek-a-boo with the cute little toddler sitting next to us on his mother's lap. When the boy's mother was called to the back, she deposited him on the knee of the elderly woman who was with them. He cried inconsolably as she disappeared behind the door.

The woman, who I assumed to be the child's grandmother, tried everything to calm the wailing baby but to no avail. Finally, Esther took the little stuffed dog out of its blanket and waved it in front of the little boy. He squealed with delight and reached out to grab it with his fat little fists. The toy kept him amused until his mother returned.

As they were leaving, she handed the little dog back to Esther.

"Please, let him keep it," she told the woman, "His master would be glad to know that he'd found a good home." I squeezed her hand as they left. She returned the gesture, and we wordlessly went back to our own private thoughts.

On the way home she told me that she was pregnant with another son.

"That's not why I gave the puppy away," she answered, before I could ask. "It was just time." She laid her head on my shoulders. "Listen," she whispered, turning up the radio. "They're playing Daniel's song."

Six months later she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy who bore no resemblance to Daniel. She named him Barnabas, which means 'son of consolation.'

WOLF

The Ebenezer Baptist church children's choir had only begun the second verse of "Jesus Loves Me" before Tracy realized that she should have taken her mother's advice and skipped the second helping of orange juice she'd had at breakfast. The organ shuddered under the young musician's energetic rendition of the traditional hymn. Marcus was recently graduated from Tuskegee with a music degree and he loved putting a seventies spin on the dragging hymns he had grown up hearing. Tears welled up in Tracy's eyes as she tried in vain to catch her mother's eye for permission to go as she crossed her legs and squirmed on the back row of the choir loft. Her parents were very strict about anyone moving or walking during the worship service especially their own children. She had two choices; get a whipping or pee on herself. She decided to take her chances and dashed out of the side exit into the narrow hallway which led to the fellowship hall where the pastor's study, finance office, and bathrooms were all situated nest to each other in a semicircle behind a group of round tables covered in peach linen tablecloths which functioned as the dining hall. In her rush, she accidentally burst into the finance office. Her hands flew to her mouth,

"Uh. . . Scuse me!"

The deacons, clerk, and secretary huddled around the small table covered with stacks of bills and neatly sorted coins did not even look up as she backed out into the hallway and rushed into to bathroom next door.

It was only after she had relieved herself that it occurred to Tracy what she had seen. Her father had been pastor of Ebenezer for all of Tracy's twelve years, and she knew the routine for handling the offering. Sometimes during night service when the only church

officer who showed up was old Deacon Winchester who could not read or write, she and her sister Stacy had to fill in. The clerk would open each envelope and remove the money or check. She would count the money and pass the envelope to a deacon who would read the name and amount to the secretary whose job it was to record the information in the slender gray and burgundy ledger. After all the money was counted, it would be placed in a brown paper bag and a trustee would take it to the bank the next morning. But what she had seen was the Sister Grier, the church clerk, passing several unopened envelopes to Deacon Winehouse while everyone else had their backs turned. As she backed out of the office, Tracy saw the old man slip the envelopes into his back pocket.

Asa Walker had come to Ebenezer straight out of the Virginia Union Theological Seminary full of ideas about how to revitalize the aging congregation and rebuild its crumbling structure. In the fifteen years he had been pastor, the membership had tripled and the newly renovated church was now bustling with a pleasing mix of first wave boomers, young working couples, and school age children. He was loved and respected by most of the members, and his wife and children treated like royalty. But in the last few years, a few of the older members had become displeased with all the ‘changes.’ They hated the drums in the sanctuary. They hated the dipping and swooping movements of the choir during songs with upbeat tempos. They hated the new accounting system which took away their control of the church funds and placed it in the hands of the newly elected trustees who would not spend a dime on any major expenditure without consulting the pastor and obtaining a vote of confidence from the members. Rumors abounded of a secret campaign some were mounting to have him dismissed as pastor. But no one had ever openly challenged him and it was hard to know how much truth there

was to all the rumors. Asa pondered these things in his heart as he tried to discern which of his smiling, hugging flock were secretly working against him as he stood in the receiving line after service to greet his parishioners. He had always insisted that his family stand with him and shake hands with everyone as well, so each Sunday, his wife Dianne, twelve year old twins Tracy and Stacy, and their preschooler, Asa III whom they called Trey, would stand at the door and perform this ritual. Deacon Winehouse was always the last to go through the line because he would spend most of the service in the finance office in spite of Rev. Walker's insistence that all officers be in their seats by the time he took his text. After waving goodbye to their school friend Lisa, the twins chattered excitedly about the cute new boy from New York who talked proper, as they waited for last person to exit. Finally there was just a few ushers straightening up, and the old deacon who always made a big production of complimenting Mrs. Walker's outfit and Rev. Walker's sermon. Stacy stooped to tie the too long laces on Trey's saddle shoes, Tracy leaned against the side of the massive wooden pew yawning and stretching, the arch in her back causing her small breasts to protrude through the her thin cotton dress. When he reached Tracy, the line had disintegrated. Her father headed toward his study to change, and her mother followed. Tracy was stifling yet another yawn by covering her mouth when the old man gently pulled her gloved hand away from her mouth and shook it firmly.

“God bless you child.”

“God bless you, Deacon” she mumbled absently.

Then for no reason that anyone present could understand, she called him a name that her mother reserved only for cheaters and thieves;

“Dirty Bastard!”

Diane Walker winced painfully at each snap of her husband’s stiff leather belt as it tore into the flesh of her oldest daughter.” They could usually control the twins with a warning glare or occasionally a smack up side the head if they were giving too much backtalk. Whippings were rare, especially for the girls; she knew Asa hated giving whippings as much as his children hated getting them. And he had broken his own rule against disciplining a child out of his own anger. Stacy stared at her accusingly.

“Now Stacy, you know he gave her every chance to tell him why she would do such a thing and she would not open her mouth. What else was he supposed to do?” Finally, it was over.

“Get on in there and think about what you did. Don’t come out until you are told to do so. You hear me child?”

Tracy was too angry to cry, but the effort it took to hold back her tears was too much.

“Yes suh,” she sniffed meekly backing out of the bedroom door in case he took a notion to give her one last lick. She ran into her room and slammed the door. It would be hours before she would talk to anyone, even Stacy.

“Here, I saved you a cornbread corner and some Kool-Aid.” Stacy placed the offering on the nightstand and switched on the lamp.

“What time is it? How long have I been asleep?” Tracy sat up slowly. Her face was still puffy but much calmer. She lifted the icy glass and laid it against her cheek before taking a big swallow of the sweet red liquid.

“Just a couple of hours,” Stacy told her, “Mama wouldn’t let me wake you up.”

“ I guess daddy is still mad” Tracy muttered munching thoughtfully on the cornbread.

“What you think girl, you lucky he didn’t kill you! Why in the world did you go and cuss at deacon Winehouse like that?”

Folding her arms, she looked squarely at her sister.

“He did a nasty thing in the palm of my hand.”

Stacy’s mouth flew open,

“Dirty bastard.”

THE SEER

Just before daybreak, Trish woke with a heaviness in her chest. It bore down like something or someone sitting on her keeping her pinned to her bed. The more she struggled to move, the heavier the weight became. Panic gripped her as she tried to muster the strength to utter a call for help. Licking her parched lips, she inhaled; her lungs refused to take in air. Her heart beat hard. Fast. She felt that any minute it would explode just like her sister Nita's had done after they had taken her off life support.

Paralyzed and panicked, her thoughts traveled to the night of Nita's death. Trish remembered that she had been too afraid to look at her sister's face, so she had kept her eye on the jagged green lines of the heart monitor above the hospital bed as a respiratory technician removed the ventilator. At 39, Nita's heart was still strong and healthy. It had valiantly struggled to keep going after it was deprived of oxygen. Trish watched in awe as the rate climbed from 80 to 160. Alarms beeped and buzzed as it shot past 200 and finally after three minutes and thirty-eight seconds, came to a shuddering halt at 425. In the moment of death, Nita's eyes flew open revealing a fixed upward gaze .

So this is what it feels like, Trish thought. She stopped struggling.

“Mama, I am sooo hungry. Please get up.”The dimply three-year-old stood on her tiptoes and peered at her mother from the bedside. She pulled one of Trish's closed eyelids to expose the dilated, sleep-deprived pupil. Her voice was whiny and she was close to a tantrum.

“Wake up, shoot, I want to eat.”

Trish groggily fumbled around the bedside table, pulled the alarm clock to her face, and rolled back to her side, missing the table as she attempted to replace the clock.

“Jenna, sweetheart, Mama is very tired. Go tell your brother to fix you some cereal.”

“We’re outta milk. Besides, I want pancakes, mom, get up!”

“Five more minutes baby. Give momma five more minutes.”

“You always say that. I’m hungry now.”

Trish lifted her daughter onto the bed and made a space for her to snuggle. Then she pointed at the clock.

“Baby, do you see those two zeros on the clock?” Jenna nodded quietly.

“When the two zeros become a one and a zero, I promise, I’ll get up, okay?” The child studied her mother’s face momentarily.

“Can we have pancakes, and play dress-up then?” Trish smiled,

“It’s a deal. Now scoot.”

Jenna slid from the bed and scampered happily down the hall. Trish stared at the Elvis shaped water stain on the ceiling. Was it just a bad dream? Did last night really happen? Am I losing my mind? That’s it. I must be going crazy.”

“Panic attack,” Dr. Slone told her giving her a reassuring pat on the hand.

“I can prescribe an antianxiety agent.”

Trish stared at him in disbelief even though the term was a perfect description of what she had experienced. She half listened to his familiar monotone as he explained the causes and treatments of her malady, too glad to know that she wasn’t crazy to really care

about anything else. She did hear enough to decide that she would forgo the antianxiety drugs, at least for now. After reading the pamphlet attached to the sample bottle Dr. Sloane had given her along with a written prescription she decided that the side effects seemed a bit risky with a toddler running around the house. On her way out, she threw the bottle in the trash can near the elevator.

Early spring was a particularly beautiful season in Mobile. The azaleas were in full bloom and their pink and white blossoms could be seen up and down the busy thoroughfare where Dr. Slone's office building was located. The downtown area had seen a redevelopment in the last decade that had really brought the decaying area back to life. Deserted storefronts dotted with a few fledgling shops and stores along the main street which had been previously populated with homeless people, street preachers, and a remnant of wary shoppers were now converted to a strip of nightclubs, bars, and trendy restaurants with pretty sidewalk sculptures and outdoor dining areas.

A thin, well dressed woman with a large German Shepherd rounded the corner of the massive cathedral across the street as Trish was exiting the Medical Arts building. She pressed against the door fingering the prescription in her pocket, as she allowed them passage gawking like a kid as they passed. Only the dog's bright red harness indicated that his mistress was blind. She nodded pleasantly as the woman greeted her and headed across the street to her car.

Almost without thinking, Trish steered her car toward the Wallace Tunnel which led across the Mobile Bay to her favorite meditation spot, the Fairhope Pier. Her thoughts turned to her grandmother whom she was looking forward to seeing the next weekend at the family reunion in Clarke county. Grammy was believed to have some kind of power

that enabled her to ‘know’ things. She could also interpret dreams. Trish had always been careful to avoid her if she had anything to hide. Her grandmother had correctly predicted almost all of the births in their family and she always seemed to know if things were not quite right. She could even foresee tragic events like deaths and floods. Some people were afraid of her. But grammy always considered being a seer as a gift. She had known that Trish was pregnant with Jenna before she had even missed a period.

Trish decided then and there to put the whole anxiety thing out of her mind. She didn’t want grammy worrying about her. As far as she could see, she had no reason to be depressed or anxious. The doctor had explained that the panic attacks were probably related to the stress of her busy lifestyle. As a consulting software engineer, her husband Todd spent a lot of time traveling, so the bulk of the responsibilities related to running the household had been hers almost from day one. It had been hard at times, but things were good now. Jenna, was almost four and had already been awarded a coveted spot in Knollwood Academy in the fall. Scott, her twelve year old was now in middle school and very happy to finally be able to play sports due to an unexplained remission of his childhood asthma. She and Todd had reached a place of contentment and joy in their marriage of fifteen years.

“Remember, all stress does not come from misfortune” Dr. Slone had cautioned her, “Sometimes the family, job, or project you love can give you the most stress.” Fishermen, elderly couples, kids, walkers, and young lovers lined the half mile long pier which faced the city skyline on the adjacent shore. The cool spring breeze carried the scent of salt water mixed with drying fish guts left by careless fishermen. Trish found a quiet spot near the end and sat with her feet dangling over the edge. She loved watching

the water sparkle and ripple in the sunlight. Occasionally a glistening silver fish would erupt from the water and disappear into its murky depths. The unlucky ones were quickly picked off by one of the hundreds of seagulls circling above the water. She allowed herself to relax.

Things had not always been this good. In the year following Jenna's birth, Trish had suffered with post-partum depression. At least that's what she attributed it to after later researching her symptoms. But it was not just the 'baby blues.' Her case had been severe. She would be suddenly bombarded with intrusive, out of nowhere thoughts of something or someone harming her baby. These thoughts terrified her to the point that she became obsessed with the child's safety. The problem had escalated after her fears had almost been realized at a Wal-Mart bathroom.

She had hurriedly entered the stall carrying Jenna in her car seat and because there seemed to be no other way to handle it at the time, she placed the seat on the floor inside the stall and proceeded to use the bathroom. In a split second, a woman's scarred hand reached under the door and attempted to remove the sleeping baby. With only one free hand to hold onto the baby and the other hurriedly trying to simultaneously pull up her underwear and open the door, so she could fight off her child's would be kidnapper, Trish was at a disadvantage. Forgetting her underwear she scratched and finally bit the hand, but it was only her screams for help that made the woman release her grip on the child and retreat. In her effort to hold on to the child, however, Trish had dislocated Jenna's shoulder. Her grip had been so tight that an angry red, rapidly swelling print of her hand was ingrained into the flesh of the child's chest and upper shoulder.

The woman who was on an outing with a local group home, turned out to be so mentally disabled that she was deemed unfit for a trial and was remanded to the same institution from which she had just been released. Although the baby suffered no lasting effects from the incident, Trish kind of lost it. She was now so frightened that she became obsessed with doing things to prevent the unthinkable from ever happening again. No one was going to hurt her baby.

But things are good now she thought, shaking herself as one trying to wake from a dream. She removed the prescription from her pocket, but after thinking better of littering the water, put it back in. She hurriedly gathered her things and headed for her vehicle.

“Child, hurry up with those ribs. I’m about to starve!” Trish smiled at the old woman grinning at her from the opposite side of the makeshift buffet table. It was the first of their yearly family gathering on the former plantation in Clarke county where her grammy had been raised and one of the few times each year she got to see the woman who had raised her and Nita after their mother died of breast cancer when they were in elementary school.

“Aw grammy, you aint’ got no teeth to be chewing on these ribs. And you know they are only going to get your pressure up. Here, have some of Todd’s famous smoked chicken.” She waved a wing under grammy’s nose.

“Tastes so good, it will make you slap your mama!”

Grammy laughed.

“Girl, I am seventy nine years old, and I’ve been eating pork all of my life. The only one who’s gonna get slapped is you if you don’t put a rib on my plate.”

“ All right then,” Trish pouted, “have it your way.” She plopped a huge rib onto the flimsy paper plate and pursed her lips.

Later, as she stood on the back porch of the little cabin surveying the grassy plot of land that had belonged to her family since Reconstruction, Trish felt the bony hands of her grandmother slip around her waist.

“Now baby, you know I didn’t mean any harm.”

“I know grammy, I just miss daddy so much, and I don’t want to lose any of the rest of you.” Granny looked into her face.

“Well child, we all have to die one day.” She paused, her eyebrows arched curiously; then she leaned closer, her face beginning to smile.

“Lord have mercy.” She murmured. Trish backed away uneasily
Grammy was oddly silent about whatever it was she had seen in her granddaughter's eyes. An hour later, when Trish and Todd had sought her to inform her of their departure, she was sitting in her bedside chair as still as morning. It was not until Trish kissed her that they realized she was dead.

“Another panic attack?” Todd looked worried as he pulled his wife close. Her tossing and turning had awakened him about ten minutes before she had finally opened her eyes and reached for him. Six months had passed since grammy’s death and it was the first attack since her initial diagnosis.

“I guess so,” she sighed leaning on his chest.

“Maybe it’s time for you to think about trying medication.” Todd said patting her behind, “Where are you going?”

“To get some water, she lied, throat’s kinda dry.” She lumbered down the narrow hallway past the children’s rooms toward the kitchen where she had stashed the medication because she didn’t want to look at it every time she opened her medicine cabinet. She had no idea why she didn’t want Todd to know she had been taking the pills. Scott’s light was on. Again. She was slightly annoyed as she felt inside the wall to switch off the light. Then she caught sight of her son’s body lying prone on the floor, his feet spread at an awkward angle. He was gripping an old inhaler.

On the drive home from the hospital, Trish turned to watch her sleeping babies on the back seat. Jenna, who had not stirred though any of the chaos of paramedics and emergency room drama was snuggled against her brother, her lower body partially strapped into the booster seat and her head and torso on Scott’s lap. The ambulance ride and four hours in the emergency room had worn him out, but not enough to protest when Trish tried to remove the PSP from his hands,

“I want to finish this game,” then promptly fall back asleep after she released it.

In a moment of startling clarity Trish realized that the truth her fears had been causing her to reject could no longer be ignored. She could not make it go away with medication or by pretending it was not there. Even Grammy had recognized it before she died. And now it was the reason her son was still alive. Trish turned around and spoke to her husband. “We need to talk.”

SKIN

When they held her squirming firstborn son up for her to see, it was immediately noticeable. The rich translucent black skin with the deep reddish undertones was striking in a way that was hard to describe. It was like looking at a cup of black coffee through a clear glass cup. There was a mark on his forehead visible only to her except in photographs which illuminated his fat little face and the clear brown eyes of what her mother called an old soul. In pictures one could clearly see that the mark was in the shape of a cross; an ominous foreshadowing of the burden his beautiful skin would one day become.

Within the cocoon of a close loving family everybody loved little Joey, the long awaited first baby of the only childless couple in the Johnson family. Joseph and Maria had been married for six years before she finally conceived after much prayer. The child was mild tempered, inquisitive, and talented. His grandfather, believing the mark on the child's forehead to be a sign from God that this child was special, spent hours with the boy. Under the grandfather's influence the boy learned to fear God, and respect nature. When he was old enough for preschool, the grandfather persuaded the boy's mother not to enroll him.

“It's foolishness, I tell you. You young parents send your newborn babies to be in the care of strangers all day being exposed to God knows what, then you put them in preschool as soon as they are potty trained. Soon we will have a whole generation who have been institutionalized from birth and will not know anything about the bonds of family and community. What harm could there be in letting the boy spend an extra year with me and your mother?”

He got his extra year. The result was a child too discerning for his six years who knew how the moon changed, when was the best time to plant corn, how to treat a bee sting, and how the world was formed by the power of the spoken word.

He had the kind of wisdom which unfortunately, was useless in a kindergarten classroom. Unlike his classmates poor Joey did not know how to write his alphabet, recite the days of the week, or how to spell his first and last name. He caught on quickly but not before his classmates began teasing him. The mixed race (but mostly black) class was taught by an energetic young woman named Jill Feldman who instantly recognized that Joey was bright and took extra time to help him catch up. The extra attention incited jealousy in some of the other children, particularly a dark haired little Korean girl named Song whose beauty and smarts usually commanded center stage. Not wanting to share the spotlight with Joey. She teased him unmercifully.

“You a dummy. How come you don’t know how to write?” Having to move her pin on the behavior board from green to red for this infraction did not go over well and it taught her to save her teasing which at this point only annoyed him, for the playground and after school. When Joey eventually caught up and surpassed Kim as the highest achiever in the class things got ugly. She experimented with various techniques of harassment. She would hit him and run, but he was wise to her tricks and would not risk having to move his pin for hitting her back so he ignored her. She began ‘accidentally’ sticking her foot out when he walked by causing him to trip and fall. He began taking a different route to the desk or the bathroom to avoid contact with her. Nothing seemed move him to respond to her, or dethrone him as the line leader. Resigned to her new place, she decided to make peace and they soon became friends.

There was relative peace in the classroom after Joey and Song's truce so it was without malice that while they were sharing crayons to finish an activity sheet, she noticed his hands and asked,

“Why you so black? You real black. Don't you take a bath? Why you so black?”

He examined his hands and shrugged. It had never been brought to his attention that he was black. He was stumped.

“I don't know.”

And so it began. Joey began to notice the difference between his own ebony skin and that of his classmates, family, and pretty much everybody he came into contact with. He saw that his skin was darker than the soft brown color of both his parents, darker than his grandfather's deep brown, and pretty much darker than any other child in his class. His new baby sister Jasmine was so light skinned she could be Miss Feldman's baby.

Suddenly he did not want to be different. One morning his mother found him in her closet furiously rubbing Jasmine's baby powder into his skin. When he was sufficiently covered, he examined his arms and nodded satisfactorily.

“They can't call me black anymore,”

Mary gathered her son into her arms and held him for a long time. After she cleaned him up, she told him that she wanted to take him somewhere special after school. She dropped him off at school and went straight to her parents' house where she found her father sunning himself on the porch while her mother pulled weeds from her flowerbed. When she reached the porch, she fell into her bewildered father's arms and wept.

“Ree, sugar you gon have tell us what's wrong. You bout to give me and your daddy a heart attack.” Her mother's alarm was almost palpable.

“I’m sorry Mama, I just don’t know what to do.” Her father gently lifted her head from his lap and stared intently into her face.

“Why don’t you start by telling us what happened.” After she told them, they were silent. They did not look at their daughter, nor did they look at each other, for they were both lost in memories of their own first experience with racial self-awareness.

“Get out of my store, you black nigger!” Liza had been a sixth grader in 1962, attending a newly integrated middle school on the white side of the small Alabama town of Prichard where she grew up. The perpetrator was a middle aged white man who managed the J.C. Penney store where school children would sometimes stop for a drink of water on their way home. She stood stock still, puzzled at his anger, frightened by the unveiled hatred on his face, and certain that he would strike her. When he didn’t, she ran from the store in tears, still not fully understanding that her crime was unwittingly drinking from the “Whites Only” water fountain. It was that experience along with countless others in her sixty years that the feeling of being inherently flawed began to grow in her. As Liza held her weeping daughter she realized that she had been blindsided by this encounter in much the same way as her grandson. She had grown up in the relative protection of a close loving community of family and friends with included rare encounters with white people other than occasional visits from insurance peddlers. Any time a white person showed up in the neighborhood for any reason, her parents would call all the children into the house and warn them to stay inside until they were called. None of this had protected her and she realized that keeping him out of preschool had not protected her grandson either. She looked into her husband’s eyes and saw that lost in his own recollections, he was feeling the same sense of failure.

John Abrams Sr. had been determined to keep his family away from ‘niggers’ and the fact that he himself was black did not deter him. He’d graduated from Tuskegee Institute, got a job teaching high school math and moved his family into a white neighborhood when his son and namesake was only two. As the only black family in the neighborhood they were a novelty and after it was clear that they would not bring other blacks to the neighborhood, became an accepted part of life in the Albany Hill Subdivision. Little Johnny grew up in comfortable association with white playmates, classmates, and friends. It was clear that he thought himself white and was treated as such until sixth grade when he started liking Blanche Wheat the daughter of their next door neighbor Irving Wheat who was the branch manager of the City Bank. When Irving could not persuade his daughter to stop seeing Johnny, he took matters into his own hands. After a night of drunken Mardi Gras revelry, he and several of his lodge buddies ran into Johnny in town. The boy’s father thought it was time he started teaching him to manage money, so he had made arrangements with the band director of the high school where he worked for Johnny to earn a little money carrying the band’s banner whenever they marched in the parades. He had walked a seven mile parade route and his feet hurt. He was tired of waiting for his father to pick him up, so it did not take much convincing to get him into the car.

“It’s for your own good,” Mr. Wheat was saying as he tied the noose around Johnny’s neck.

“Niggers like you need to understand your place.” Neither the sickening stench of alcohol on his abductor’s breath, nor the hastily applied blindfold they had placed over his eyes were as disconcerting to him as being called ‘nigger.’ It was a term his father reserved for the lowliest of low, the black criminals he saw on evening newscasts, those

who lived in the Village the impoverished community where his father sometimes went to check on his elderly grandmother always making Johnny remain in the car while his cousins stared curiously at him through the window and asked why he couldn't get out and play with them. A nigger was a lazy trifling thief who loved making babies out of wedlock, using drugs, being dependent on government handouts.

"I'm not a nigger." The sting of a calloused palm across his face made him decide that silence was his best course of action.

"Come on Bill. We're just having a little fun. Don't hit him again." The voice was that of Mr. Wheat who was apparently in charge and the perpetrator quickly acquiesced. Their 'fun' consisted of tying the noose around his neck and pulling it tight enough to make him uncomfortable but not to cause any harm. This was just a demonstration they told him. This is what they used to do to niggers who tried to sleep with white women. No, they didn't mind him liking Blanche, but they wanted him to understand what troubles would follow him if some really bad people find out. There would be dire consequences. His father would lose his job. His family would be forced to move out of Albany Hill. He could be caught by some of these bad people and strung up. It was best he learn now before something bad happened.

After they all had a good laugh they slapped him on the back and told him what a credit he was to his race. If all niggers were like him and his father, then the world would be a better place. They each gave him ten dollars and by the time he and Irving pulled up to his house, he was more than anything, relieved to find out that he wasn't a nigger at least not in the sense that his father used the word. He was extremely troubled however to realize that to these men, the word referred to his race and that to them he was no

different from any other black. He was more angry at his father for misleading him than he was at the idiots who kidnapped him.

It had taken Johnny a long time to overcome all the years of his father's indoctrination of assimilation and become comfortable in his own skin. Now his beloved grandchild would have to make that same journey.

“Bring the child to me after he gets out of school” he told his daughter.

All hours of the day or night predators in shiny cars cruised the streets of the Village like sleek jungle cats. Their prey, usually a jaded crackhead, or a fallow preadolescent with too much unsupervised time on their hands, was never hard to find. Today they were out early. And so was Joe watching with hooded eyes as a black Infiniti slowed down in front of his aunt's house. The morning dew still clung to the windshield of the faded red Jetta where he slept. It was parked on the grass because a heavy rain the night before had flooded the narrow streets with murky water. Some of pools were over a foot deep and maneuvering around them without getting water inside the car or stalling was a problem avoided by simply pulling the cars into their yards and waiting for the water to go down. Joe leaped over a small puddle and approached the Infiniti where his cousin Keda was now leaning on the door talking to the driver, a middle aged white man with dark lips and a receding hairline.

“Man if you don't get the fuck away from my lil cuz! Dog, she aint but eleven, you trying to catch a case?” He and Keda simultaneously jumped back in time to avoid the spray of water created as the car sped off hitting a shallow puddle.

“Why do you do that? I’m eighteen years old.” Keda rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“Eighteen, eleven, what’s the difference? You are still too young to be tricking old white men”

“Stay the hell outta my business J. I’m warning you. Stay out of my business!”

To bring her point home, she slammed the screen door in his face as he followed her into the house. Keda was not the only one upset by J’s interference . That night he was awakened by a clicking sound. Someone had a gun to his head. He’d smoked a joint and drank a few beers a few hours earlier and was still a little buzzed, but he knew exactly who was holding the gun.

“Man Petey, won’t you quit playing. I’m trying to sleep.” The silence made him realize at once that it was not Petey. It was Big Mike. Big Mike was not happy.

“I don’t wanna have to shoot you J. But you killing my business with all this Captain Save-a-ho shit. I’m need you to gone on back to Mayberry and leave us folks in the hood alone. He pressed the gun harder into J’s temple.

“You think you can do that man?”

“Yeah Mike. I can do that.” J kept his eyes closed long after the sound of Mike’s footsteps reached a waiting car which drove off into the darkness. It was over. Knowing that Big Mike fully expected him to keep his word, he sat up, slid the seat from its reclining position started the car, and backed out into the street. He had lived in the Village long enough to know that street justice was swift and nobody including his own cousins would take his side in a dispute with Big Mike. It would never end without bloodshed and he couldn’t put his aunt through that again. He’d had enough of the thug life anyway and was tired of being afraid.

A year ago, he’d left home because he was simply tired. Tired of the names,

skillet, blue, monkeyboy, or simply 'black.' Tired of the fights that resulted from the names, tired of the suspensions and punishments that resulted from the fights, tired of the looks of derision, fear and sometimes hatred. Tired of seeing both his parents lose their patience and their temper at having to deal with his 'behavior issues.' Tired of simply feeling out of place in his own community. The final straw had been the week before spring break when he was making his rounds in the neighborhood with his lawnmower. He'd done a few yards and was getting ready to call it a day when he realized he was twenty dollars short of the one hundred he wanted to have as spending money during spring break. He noticed a yard in an adjacent subdivision that needed the hedges trimmed . The yard had been cut, but not edged. He could easily ask for twenty for that. There was no car in the yard, but he knocked anyway. A chunky blonde girl of about nine answered the door.

“Could you see if your mom wants the yard done?” He asked hesitantly. The girl shut the door and padded off. After a few minutes he muttered,

“Girls!” Thinking about how his sister Jasmine would probably do the same thing and go back to watching iCarly or something while someone was at the door, he rang the doorbell again and after a few seconds, headed back to the sidewalk where he'd left the lawnmower. As he started on his way an olive green Suburban whisked into the driveway blocking his path. A woman jumped out of the car and angrily pointed her finger in his face.

“Hold up buddy you ain't going nowhere. The police are on the way.”

The girl who was home alone had apparently called her mother who was down the street at a neighbor's, and informed her that there was a man at the door who would not go away. It had taken all of his mother's influence and thousands in legal fees to have the charge of attempted burglary thrown out but not before he'd gone through an overnight

stay at the juvenile detention center and been violated in a strip search. When he saw the look on his parents faces when they arrived to pick him up from his overnight stay in the juvenile center, he knew that they were tired too and he could not keep putting them through this.

Things had been so different when his grandfather was living. Granddaddy had taught him about his own history and culture, about ancient kings and empires, inventors, business innovators, artists, musicians. In Granddaddy's books he saw proud men from every walk of life excelling in their field of endeavor some with skin darker than his. This instilled in him an immense sense of pride and dignity; he liked what he saw in the mirror. The self love instilled and nurtured by his grandfather seemed to wither on the vine after the old man died especially within walls of that most the of cruel institutions, middle school where being different was social suicide. Yet different he was and it did not bother him at all. It bothered others however. Family and friends found it hard to understand his passion for history and astronomy, or his love of racecars and his consuming desire to be a Nascar driver; these affinities in a young black teenager living in the deep south was an anomaly.

His first few months in the Village had been good. He found acceptance and love among his cousins and aunts and nobody seemed to care about his dark skin. He felt alive and happy for the first time since his days with Granddaddy. The drugs and crime frightened him at first, but he'd gone through an initiation of sorts by stealing a candy bar from the dollar store and getting worked over by Big Mike and a few of his boys , so he soon became a part of the neighborhood.

He'd managed to avoid committing any serious crimes but he'd become quite fond of marijuana. His days were spent hustling up enough to buy a dime bag and a couple of beers and getting high. His hustles included selling blood, collecting cans, stealing copper, or sometimes running errands for Big Mike who was a functionally illiterate diabetic. J knew that eventually he and Big Mike would lock up over all the young girls being turned out. He had a really soft spot for Keda who look just like his sister Jasmine. From the first time he had seen his long lost cousin, he'd thought that Keda did not belong in the Village any more than Jasmine did. And tonight, J finally realized that he didn't belong there either.

VISION IN BLUE

It was a dark and stormy night in 1990 the first time I saw her. I was standing in my upstairs window watching the rain sway to and fro in the wind like sheets on a clothesline. On the street below nothing moved except an occasional passing vehicle. I exhaled slowly when I heard the door open and saw Kevin, my husband of three years slam it shut on his way out. The driver side door of his F150 would often stick and we would sometimes have to enter it from the passenger side. Kevin alternately yanked at the door handle and swore, oblivious to the rain. When it finally opened he made a big production of gunning the engine before driving off. Just then a bolt of lightning startled me and I instinctively moved away from the window. My mother had always been terrified of lightning, and at the first sign of it she would cover every mirror in the house, call all of her children inside, and make everyone, even my father sit quietly until the storm passed. Today, she would be horrified to see that unless it causes a power outage, my family pretty much ignores lightning. Yet her fear was so profound that I could not help being influenced by it. Kevin and the kids often tease me when I move away from a window, or jump at a thunderbolt.

I needed to clean myself up, but I wasn't about to go near water while it was storming so badly. I went into the bathroom and cautiously peered into the mirror to get a look at Kevin's latest handiwork.

It was a beauty. I was a little impressed. Kevin always fought like a girl. He scratched, dug his nails into flesh, and pulled hair resorting to punches only as a last resort. The huge shiner on my left eye and the small cut underneath it were definitely not normal for him. I leaned closer to the mirror and suddenly the lights went out. I grabbed the sink,

trying to adjust my eyes to the darkness and get my bearings. A flash of lightning illuminated the bathroom and for a split second, I saw her.

She was wearing a navy blue dress and her hair was pinned up into a neat bun. She did not speak, she just looked at me with an expression that I could not read. Other than the fact that there was a strange woman in my bathroom, the oddest thing about the whole thing is that I was not afraid of her. After all, the only thing my mother feared more than lightning was 'haints.' And she passed that fear on to me as well.

I told a few people about the apparition. Some said it was probably my mother. Others believed it was an angel. Most people seemed to think it was just my eyes playing tricks on me.

She came often during my years with Kevin. It was always the same scenario. I would be alone, usually doing nothing more important than the laundry, and often I'd be tired or stressed. Each time, she would appear out of nowhere wearing a navy blue dress and her hair in a bun. She would be looking at me, and in the blink of an eye she'd be gone.

The last time she appeared was August 31, 2000. It had been ten years since her first visit. In that time I had found the courage to leave Kevin and start a new life. Alone, I found a job at Wal-Mart, a decent apartment, and got my kids into good schools. I had also gone back to school and earned my degree. I had just come in from work, when I got a call inviting me to come in and interview for a teaching position at a local high school. The interview was only an hour away which made me all the more nervous and stressed. I had no idea what to wear, my hair was a mess, and I was worried that I would say or do something stupid. After finally throwing on one of my church dresses, and doing what I could with my hair, I drove to the school accompanied by the million butterflies in my

stomach. When I walked into the office, I was told to have a seat until I was called to the back. I sat, fidgeting for a moment, my mouth dry and my hands damp with sweat. I asked the secretary where I could find the bathroom. She pointed down the hall and told me to take my time. When I entered the tiny bathroom, I went to the mirror. I wet a paper towel and was patting my face and neck and suddenly, there she was. Wearing a navy blue dress and her hair in a bun, looking me right in the face, was the vision I had carried for ten years. The woman in the navy blue dress was me.